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The Non-Representation of Nasals before Obstruents

Spelling Convention or Phonetic Analysis?

One common orthographic practice in runic script, known from inscriptions in both the older and the younger *fuparks*, is the omission of an **m** or **n** as representation of a nasal in front of certain consonants. For the sake of convenience, this custom is here referred to as "the omission of an **m** or **n** before obstruents". The phenomenon itself has received little attention even though its existence has been pointed out frequently. Early runographers were already conscious of the usage (e.g., Liljegren 1832: 77 with note 1). It is clear from the material that the omission of an **m** or **n** occurs only in front of homorganic consonants (/b/, /p/; /d/, /t/, /s/; /g/, /k/). Originally this must have been phonologically motivated: a nasal before a homorganic consonant was not perceived to be an independent consonantal unit, but part of the preceding vowel, which then must have been nasalized (cf. Haugen 1982: 30). The process has not been further analyzed, nor has it been determined when the nasalized vowels were denasalized. That nasalization of the preceding vowel must be the explanation for the non-representation of nasal consonants even in the earliest inscriptions has not been challenged, although Richard Morris (1988: 125–27) also mentions the possibility that the phenomenon might be inherited from Greek orthography—from which, according to him, runic orthography may stem (pp. 150–58).

The orthographic practice of non-representation of nasals in inscriptions with the older *fuþark* is continued in inscriptions with the younger runes. The continuation of this usage has, mostly *in silentio*, been taken as nothing but a spelling habit or "norm"—but never has its motivation been explained nor how such a "norm" was defined or passed on. It is not in fact unusual for runic spelling practices to be explained as "traditional", but I have found cause to question the validity of this concept (Williams 1990: 11). The matter receives fuller treatment in the quoted work, but I want to recapitulate a few points that are of interest in this discussion.

The idea of a traditional orthography is based on a number of anachronistic or faulty assumptions, of which the most important are that runecarvers learned to spell, that there was a spelling norm and that there

existed a codified written language—in a society that lacked any formal system of education. Apparently erroneous runic orthography is usually due to a number of causes that have little to do with proper writing errors (Lagman 1989: 29–35). Runic writing is in general remarkably "correct" and deserves to be viewed as an appropriate representation of the language of its author.

The question to be answered here is whether the non-representation of nasals before obstruents is to be considered a case of traditional spelling or rather of phonetic analysis. If in inscriptions with the Viking Age *fuþark*—with which I will henceforth be concerned—this should turn out to be a case of phonetic analysis, it would be on a par with other orthographic practices.

There are three problems that need to be solved before we can find the answer to our question. First we must decide if vocalic nasality did indeed exist during the period when non-representation of nasals occurs. Secondly we must study whether the non-representation of nasals shows any pattern that would indicate either traditional spelling or phonetic analysis. Thirdly we must see if there is anything else that might indicate that nasalized vowels were represented graphemically in the Viking Age (except by the *os*-rune, of course).

The first problem is easily solved. In older scholarship it was taken for granted that nasal vowels were gradually denasalized in the Viking Age (see Williams 1990: 40, 86–87). The changed value of the *os*-rune from /ã/ to /ǫ/ or /o/ has been taken as evidence of this.[1] But as Karl Martin Nielsen has stated (1960: 3–6), there is little reason to believe that a denasalization process took place in this period. On the contrary, there are indications of a growing nasalization of vowels towards the end of the Viking Age, at least in Runic Swedish (Williams 1990: 87). Therefore, there is every reason to presume that the non-representation of nasals before homorganic obstruents does in fact indicate that the preceding vowel was nasalized.

It is important to point out that the vocalic nasality marked by the *os*-rune (and nasal vowels as phonemic members of a vowel system) does not necessarily have anything to do with nasalized vowels before nasal consonants. That a vowel is nasalized in the latter position is only allophonic since a complementary distribution is shown vis-à-vis oral vowels in other positions. The marking of such nasalized vowels on the graphemic level is strictly optional, and may appear or not rather arbitrarily in different periods (cf. Nielsen 1960: 3–6).

[1] Since vowel quantity is of no importance in this context, I have chosen to let, for instance, /a/ stand for both /a/ and /a:/. In phonemic transcriptions later in the paper V stands for any vowel, C for any consonant, N for any nasal and $\widetilde{V}$ for any nasalized vowel.

If the non-representation of nasals before homorganic obstruents is due to a spelling habit, a few questions must be answered. As in other cases where runic orthography is supposedly influenced by traditional spelling, one must ask for consistency, in this case why an **m** or **n** is sometimes written, sometimes not. If there was a "rule" stating that nasals did not have to be represented in this position, how was it formulated? It would have been an easy rule to apply if non-representation had been made mandatory. Since it was only optional, we would expect the omission of the nasal to be about equally common regardless of the place of articulation of the following consonant: nasals should be omitted at the same rate before labial, dental and velar consonants. That this is not the case is, in my opinion, a strong argument against the assumption that the non-representation of nasals before homorganic obstruents is due to a spelling habit. I have examined the Runic Swedish records that are of interest in this context. The combinations of a vowel plus *ng/nk*, *mb/mp*, *nd/nt* and *ns* have been excerpted from the Runic Swedish computerized text database compiled by the project "De vikingatida runinskrifternas kronologi" at the Department of Scandinavian Languages, Uppsala University (see Lagman and Williams 1989).

Table 1. Representation of /VN/ before homorganic obstruent.

	ng/nk	mb/mp	nd/nt	ns	
+ **m/n**	138 (31%)	16 (36%)	626 (75%)	458 (82%)	
- **m/n**	308 (69%)	29 (64%)	210 (25%)	98 (18%)	
Σ	446	45	836	556	=1883

Note that one word, *kumbl*, constitutes fourteen of the sixteen occurrences of the cluster **mb** and twenty-four of the corresponding twenty-nine instances of non-representation of the nasal in this combination. Likewise, seventy-five percent of the instances of non-representation of /n/ before /s/ concern *þennsi*, *þennsa* or *þannsi*.

When there were more than 200 occurrences, the records were not examined individually except for a superficial check to ensure that no factors seriously distort the result. The sheer volume of data should mean that a dozen examples one way or the other has no significant effect.

The phonotax is sometimes noteworthy: the clusters /ing/, /and/ and /und/ are very common. It can be observed that according to Table 1 nasals are represented more often before /nd(t)/ and /ns/ than before /ng(k)/ or /mb(p)/. The combination /Vmb(p)/ is so rare (almost restricted to one word) that no conclusions should be drawn about this cluster. It is likewise difficult to draw conclusions concerning /Vns/, since the domination of the pronoun *þennsi* etc. complicates the issue (cf. Massengale 1972). It must also be noted that the cluster /NC[-voice]/ could be assimilated to /CC[-voice]/, and thus

an unmarked nasal before a voiceless consonant could reflect this assimilation. The distinction between voiced and voiceless consonant after nasals in these clusters does not seem to be of significance, however; besides, the cluster /NC[-voice]/ is somewhat rare.

How could a spelling rule of optional non-representation of nasals before obstruents lead to this result? An analysis of Table 1 seems to invite the conclusion that the vowel in the cluster /VNC/ was most easily nasalized if the obstruent was palatal or velar (/g/ or /k/, or possibly labial, /b/ or /p/) than if it was dental or alveolar (/d/ or /t/ and possibly /s/).

The occurrences of /n/ before /g(k)/ and /d(t)/ are so many and so varied that they have been compared and examined more closely. I have studied the variation in the representation of /n/ after different vowels.

Table 2. Representation of /VN/ before homorganic consonant according to the quality of the vowel.

	/a/	/e/	/i/	/o/	/u/	/y/	/æ/	/ø/	Σ
ng/nk	6	–	116	–	6	–	10	–	138
+ **n**	4%	–	84%	–	4%	–	7%	–	
ng/nk	19	–	194	–	20	–	75	–	308
- **n**	6%	–	63%	–	6%	–	24%	–	
nd/nt	280	–	17	91	213	7	17	1	626
+ **n**	44%	–	3%	15%	34%	1%	3%	0%	
nd/nt	87	–	6	33	54	10	19	1	210
- **n**	41%	–	3%	16%	27%	5%	9%	0%	
Σ	392	–	333	124	293	17	121	2	1 282

Note that for /ing/, personal names consisting of or beginning with the element *Ing(i)-* constitute fully eighty percent of the occurrences with representation of the nasal and slightly less than seventy percent of those without. Concerning /æng/, proper names beginning with *Æng-* and forms of the appellative *dræng-* constitute more than ninety percent of the instances of non-representation of the nasal.

It is interesting to observe that nasals are marked or unmarked with the same frequency. My interpretation is that no vowel is nasalized more easily than any other.

It is also important to establish whether the *os*-rune is used especially often to represent /VN/ when an **m** or **n** is omitted. I have therefore studied /a/ and /æ/ plus nasal consonant before /b/, /d/, /g/, /k/, /p/, /s/ or /t/ when the vowel is represented by the *os*-rune or **ą**. Naturally, records with *os*-rune are chosen from inscriptions where this rune represents nasal vowels. Records with **ą**, however, are taken from the entire corpus.

Table 3. Representation of /a(æ)N/ before homorganic obstruent when the vowel is written with an *os*-rune or **ɑ**.

	os-rune	ɑ	
+ **m** or **n**	50 (30%)	134 (33%)	
- **m** or **n**	118 (70%)	469 (67%)	
Σ	168	603	=771

The figures are strikingly similar: in approximately two-thirds of the cases the **m** or **n** is omitted irrespective of whether an *os*-rune or **ɑ** is used to represent the vowel. The *os*-rune does not seem to play any special role in this context, contrary to what one might have expected.

Now it is time to see whether there are any indications elsewhere that the existence or non-existence of nasalization of vowels correlates with the omission or inclusion of homorganic nasal characters. In a few contexts where the *os*-rune does not seem to be used as a marker of vocalic nasality, there is a tendency not to omit nasals before homorganic obstruents. (As I have pointed out above, however, the two phenomena are not necessarily related.) This is the case within the production of the rune-carver Þōrfastr. There is reason to believe that even though Þōrfastr did sometimes use the *os*-rune in a potentially nasalized environment, his speech did not contain nasal vowels (see Williams 1990: 82, 151–52). It is then noteworthy that he never omits an **m** or **n** before a homorganic obstruent.

Runic inscriptions that use the *os*-rune for oral /a/, as a rule, never omit an **m** or **n** before a homorganic obstruent (Williams 1990: 61–62, 81–83).

Finally, there is, as far as I know, no example of a nasal consonant being omitted in the Anglo-Saxon runic inscriptions. Vocalic nasality did exist in early Anglo-Saxon times since /a/ before /N/ became /o(:)/ (and /a:/ became /o:/). It is possible that when this rule had run its course and there were no more instances of /a(:)/ before a nasal, vocalic nasality disappeared in Anglo-Saxon, and this explains why nasals always are marked before obstruents.

In conclusion: The practice of omitting an **m** or **n** before **b**, **k**, **t** or **s** where a nasal occurs before a homorganic consonant in Viking Age (at least Swedish) inscriptions does not appear to be due to traditional spelling or scribal conservatism, but rather to phonetic analysis. The cluster /VNC/ could be analyzed as [$\widetilde{\text{V}}$NC] or as [$\widetilde{\text{V}}$C]. This means that the nasal element could be perceived as a consonant, and thus be marked with an **m** or **n**, or be understood exclusively as nasality in the vowel, and therefore not necessarily marked at all.

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