AMSTERDAMER BEITRÄGE ZUR
ÄLTEREN GERMANISTIK

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Band 45 — 1996

FRISIAN RUNES AND NEIGHBOURING TRADITIONS

Proceedings of the First International Symposium on Frisian Runes at the Fries Museum, Leeuwarden 26-29 January 1994

edited by

Tineke Looijenga
and Arend Quak

Rodopi

AMSTERDAM - ATLANTA, GA 1996

THE ORIGIN OF THE RUNES*

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Even though the runes have been studied for many centuries, little is known about their origin. Inscriptions in the old runic script, usually short and frequently cryptic, are found on approximately 200 items that have been dated from the end of the second century to the eighth. The runes on these objects differ from those from viking and mediaeval times; they comprise a 24-letter alphabet, arranged in a unique order starting with **f u þ a r k g w** etc., and is therefore called the *fuþark*.

We have to take our starting point in the forms and sound values of the older runes when discussing their origin. Figure 1 presents the runes with their supposed sound values and most important early variants.

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24

ᚠ ᚢ ᚦ ᚨ ᚱ ᚲ ᚷ ᚹ ᚺ ᚾ ᛁ ᛃ ᛇ ᛈ ᛉ ᛊ ᛏ ᛒ ᛖ ᛗ ᛚ ᛜ ᛟ ᛞ

ᚴ ᛋ ᛘ

f u þ a r k g w h n i j ï? p z s t b e m l ŋ o d

Fig. 1. The older runes: their sound values and chief variants.

Please note that I have made no indication of variants that are simply turned one way or the other, or happen to be more angular or rounded than the forms I present.

The first observation one must make is that several runes are so much like the common letters that there must be a connection. Runes number 17 and 18 (ᛏ and ᛒ), for example, are exceedingly similar to T and B respectively and do also, in fact, have the same sound values. One cannot, however, easily derive the runes from the Latin alphabet, because of two complications. The first problem arises from the fact that not all runes look like the Roman letters: e.g. rune number 23 (ᛟ) rather looks like a Greek *omega* (Ω), and rune number 24 (ᛞ) looks like nothing out of any Classical alphabet at all. Our second complication is due to the deviant fit between certain runes and their expected sound value: rune number 8 (ᚦ) certainly looks like a Latin P or a Greek *rho*, P (=r), but in fact denotes *w*.

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* This article is based on a lecture at Lennart Elmevik's Scandinavian seminar (Uppsala University) in December 1993, and papers presented at Elmer Antonsen's seminar (Univ. of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) and the 84th SASS conference (Davenport, Iowa) in April 1994. This is a preview of a monographic treatment of the subject. Criticism will gratefully be accepted by the author, Seminariet för nordisk namnforskning, Box 135, S-751 04 Uppsala, SWEDEN.

Since the beginning of the 19th century there have been many theories of where, how and why the runes were invented. The Latin theory was first, not perhaps unexpectedly, since Roman culture dominates throughout the first couple of hundred years of our era. Ludvig Wimmer and Fritz Askeberg are the most prominent proponents of a Latin origin. Around the turn of the century the Greek alphabet was suggested as the source for the runes, chiefly by Otto von Friesen and Sophus Bugge, recently revived and revised by Richard Morris. The Etruscan letters, known from so-called North Italic tribes in the Alpes, were advanced as the runic inspiration by Carl Marstrander and Magnus Hammarström, and this theory is still current among some runologists (on previous scholarship see Morris 1988: 9-54, Odenstedt 1990: 145-163, and Odenstedt 1991).

At least we can be certain of one thing: it is among the three Mediterranean systems of writing that we are to look for the source of the runes. To present every single theory and arguing the merits and failures of each falls far beyond the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that none of the previous theories has succedeed in convincing a majority of runologists.

The aim of my article is twofold: to explain why, in principle, earlier theories have failed to discover the origin of the runes, and to propose a solution to that same problem.

The previous theories all have two problems in common. The first has already been alluded to: the fit between the form of a rune and its expected sound value is frequently bad and the presented theories seldom find a convincing solution to this. The second problematic factor deals with the symmetry between the runic system and the letter inventory of the supposed classical source. All runologists have been forced to accept the invention of several new runes, or sometimes with the use of one letter for two different runes. Of course, there is nothing impossible with either of these presuppositions. I think, however, that a theory which is not forced to utilize such explanatory tools should be preferred.

The enigmatic rise of the runes has long baffled the runologists. Why is it that this intricate, interesting, and important question has so long escaped its solution? I think we must go back to the first scholarly treatment of the problem, by Ludvig Wimmer in 1874. In his monograph on the origin and development of the runes he establishes a method which has since been followed by later runologists: when a rune coincides in shape and sound value with a letter in the supposed source alphabet, its origin is considered certain. When this is not the case, the runologists follow two different paths: either the rune is considered an invention, or else a letter of the supposed source alphabet, which is close in pronunciation, is designated as the original, and discrepancies in shape are given some, usually quite fanciful and unproven or even unprovable, explanation.

One example should suffice. Rune number 7, ᚷ, clearly denotes /g/. It is equally obvious that ᚷ may not be easily derived from Greek *gamma* (Γ), nor from a Latin G. The explanation usually given is that the Germanic phoneme /g/ was realized as a fricative [γ] which was not identified with the Latin or Greek stop [g]. As Elmer Antonsen (1982: 10) has pointed out, the phonemics behind this hypothesis are poor and, furthermore, the whole notion is dispelled by the fact that the Latin /b/ presented no problems to the Germanic speaking inventor of the runes, even though her or his realization of this phoneme was also fricative: [β]. Antonsen's own explanation is that Γ could not be used for the Germanic /g/ because Γ would develop into the shapes ᚴ or ᚵ, which were already in use, and that, because of this, the velar Greek *chi*, X, was used instead. Antonsen does not allow the development Γ >ᚷ, only because of the small size of the rune. Antonsen's reasoning on this last point has evoked little support, as is evident from his own student Richard Morris (1988: 154), who prefers to see runic ᚷ as a development from Greek Γ.

I have chosen this example because I think it illustrates well the *Scylla* and *Charybdis* of the problem at hand. If one does not run into one monster, one will run into another, and efforts to explain the not-so-obvious all seem very strained.

The runes might certainly be borrowed 500 years before they first occur on actually found objects. The runes might also be borrowed from an obscure, even as yet unknown, variant of the three classical alphabets. They may even be borrowed from different systems of script, picking and choosing in a leisurely fashion. But these are unnecessarily complicated assumptions.

The least forced starting point for a discussion of the origin of the runes is to assume that they were invented some time around the birth of Christ, give or take a century or so. We may also assume that the dominant culture of that time, the Roman empire, is the most likely area to search for the inspiration of the Germanic letters, if nothing makes us look elsewhere. We may finally guess that the capital letters of the Latin alphabet in its entirety is what we should use as a source candidate.

Before we start our investigation, let us have a look at the *fupark* in figure 1. The general impression of the runes will tell us something important about runic letters: they have a marked tendency to consist of one or two vertical lines with some additional strokes issuing from the vertical lines. The strokes never go above or below the vertical lines, and they also seem to avoid going horizontally (or vertically), which has been given the explanation that the runes were designed to be cut in wood, where horizontal lines, running along the grain of the wood, easily disappear. Although I personally doubt whether this is the correct explanation, the runes are indeed characterized by this "anti-horizontal" feature. Furthermore, the additional strokes never issue

exclusively from the bottom of the vertical lines, their application always seem to start from the top. There are runes without any vertical line at all. These graphs are made up of "angles", and if these are stacked on top of each other, the rune reaches full height (or the stroke goes all the way to the bottom), otherwise not. All-in-all these characteristics give the runes a needle-like impression, to choose a metaphor from the book *Rad thu* by the rune-inspired French poet Christian Désagulier.

Let us then look at the Roman alphabet in an orderly fashion, with an unprejudiced mind. I will quite soon reach the stage where previous attempts have departed from the straightforward derivation, because the discrepancies between shape and sound value seemed forbidding. I shall not follow their example, and I hereby declare my guiding principle to be: *shape alone determines the formal origin of the runes.* Furthermore, any deviations in the development from the Roman letters must be consistent with the runic characteristics outlined above.

A has to be reformed slightly to agree with the runic characteristics. The left side of the letter is straightened into a vertical line, and the other two strokes are added slanting down (since they could not reach above the vertical line), starting from the top: ᚨ. I should add that all previous runologists have accepted this derivation.

B needs no comment: ᛒ.

C was in the Latin of the time used for /k/ and quite naturally appears in the shape ᚲ.

D should, one would think, give ᛞ, but since we find a ᚦ and remember that a single angle never attains full height, there is not really any obstacle to this derivation.

E finds no obvious runic counterpart, and I would like to leave it for a while and return to it later.

F is almost always designated as the source for ᚠ; Erik Moltke even claims that there is "identity in shape". I would like to point out that a graph ᚨ corresponds more closely, but it was used for **A**, which could not really assume any other form.

G is quite easily "runified" to two interrupted angles: ᛃ.

H needs no comment: ᚺ.

I needs no comment: ᛁ.

K could not remain unchanged since strokes otherwise do not meet and angles elsewhere are turned the other way, to form a pocket, if joined to a vertical line. Thus ᚴ is a reasonable development.

L is turned upside-down: ᛚ, which everyone accepts. Remember that no strokes issued exclusively from the bottom of the vertical line.

M is mirrored by ᛗ (but see note 1).

N should, one would think, give ᚾ, not ᚾ, but perhaps this was too close to ᚺ. In any case almost nobody sees any problems in accepting that the one cross stroke marks the relationship with N well enough.

O finds its counterpart in ᛟ, two angles side-by-side.

P is mirrored by ᚹ.

Q comes close enough to ᛦ. Another possible development would have been ᛜ (which does indeed occur once or twice symbolizing ᛦ, but that is most likely a secondary development), but vertical lines originally always attained full height.

R needs no comment: ᚱ.

S is very close to ᛊ and can also give ᛋ.

T needs no comment: ᛏ.

V was used in Latin for both /v/ and /u/. Its runic counterpart has been turned upside-down, ᚢ, since the stroke had to issue from the top.

X obviously gives ᚷ.

Y had to be modified slightly in order for the vertical line to attain full height: ᛉ.

Z only needed a slanting of the additional strokes: ᛣ.

The Roman alphabet had 23 letters. I have utilized 22: only E remains.[1] Let us take a brief look at how it *could* develop into a rune. ᛓ and ᛔ are impossible, since no strokes could go above or below the vertical line. Turning the letter is permissible — compare with ᚨ and ᚢ which are both turned 180° — but ᛠ, ᛠ and ᛖ all have a horizontal stroke or do not represent the middle stroke of the E very well, since *three* vertical lines or *short* vertical strokes do not seem to be allowed (see under ᛦ above). In fact, it is quite difficult to turn Roman E into an acceptable runic graph.

One of the two runes still available is ᛗ. I think it possible under the circumstances to derive this rune from E, considering the great difficulty one is faced with in turning this letter into a rune and the possibly intentional symmetry evidenced in the shape of the runes.

There are 24 runes, presumably because the Germanic language had 24 phonemes, or, at least, felt a necessity to represent 24 phones. Since there were only 23 letters to borrow, one rune had to be invented: ᛞ, which interestingly enough may well be the final rune of the *fupark.*

This leaves us with the posited runic *ur*-alphabet in figure 2.

Roman letter : A B C D E F G H I K L M N O P Q R S T V X Y Z

Proto-rune : ᚨ ᛒ ᚲ ᚦ ᛗ ᚠ ᛃ ᚺ ᛁ ᚴ ᚾ ᛚ ᛋ ᛟ ᚹ ᛦ ᚱ ᛊ ᛏ ᚢ ᚷ ᛉ ᛣ ᛞ

Fig. 2. Hypothetical runic *ur*-alphabet.

Up to this point I feel confident that I have followed a reasonably logical course. Proceeding from this point, which is necessary to explain

[1] The runes ᛗ and ᛚ, ᛚ may be given different explanations. Influence from cursive writing would be one strong possibility, but it does not seem to be a superior alternative. Since such influence is not necessary to posit elsewhere, I see no reason at this point why it should be preferred.

the many questions that arise, is more a question of conjecture. I would not want that speculation to jeopardize the results of the first part of my theory.

The two main objections that will arise at this point are: Why do not all the attested runes represent the sounds one would expect, looking at the known *fupark* in figure 1, if indeed my formal derivations are correct? And why are the runes handed down in the peculiar order evidenced by the same *fupark*?

I believe these two questions are best answered together. But we must first make another study of the Roman letters and my proto-runes. Looking at the alphabet, we find five letters, K, Q, X, Y, and Z, that are "unnecessary", i.e. superfluous from the start or added only for the purpose of writing Greek words. In figure 3 I have marked these letters with the symbol †. The Germanic language had all the phonemes of Latin but also six other phonemes (or perceived phonemes), /w/, /ŋ/, /j/, /i/, /z/, and /þ/, that needed representation. In figure 3 I have marked these phonemes with the symbol *. According to my derivation all of the five "unnecessary" Roman letters were used to make runes for these extra Germanic phonemes; one more rune was needed for the sixth extra phoneme, and therefore invented (ᛗ, probably by doubling of D). This correspondence seems like more than a coincidence.

Fig. 3. Unnecessary Roman letters (†) and distinctively Germanic phonemes (*).

Looking at the differences between the proto-runes and the actually attested sound values of the *fupark*, it seems as if all of the proto-runes with novel, i.e. Germanic sound values have "been switched", or "traded places", or "been mixed-up". This seems to be the case with E and M, also (but cf. note 1). *Why* this has happened is yet to be explained, but *that* it happened seems to be a logical assumption.

At this moment I introduce the order of the *fupark*. That order proves something very important: the runes can no longer have been used in close contact with Roman culture. The aberrant order of the *fupark* is so striking that it must be a symptom of the whole situation in which the runes were used. *If* contact with Roman writing ceased, there would have to have been adjustments to a new context of writing.

The order and expected use of the runes did change because they were invented in contact with Roman culture, but were brought into use within the Germanic sphere. The *Überlieferung* itself of the runes took place in an atmosphere which presumably was isolated from the influence of Latin writing, otherwise the common order of the alphabet,

adhered to by all the classical scripts, could not have been altered. Whatever brought about this change must have taken place early, since we have no indication of an order other than the one of the attested *fupark*, or any certain evidence of runes having the aberrant sound values posited by me in the runic ur-alphabet.[2]

Others before me have guessed that the new order arose from the arrangement of the runes in lines of poetry, to facilitate their learning and memorizing, a necessary mnemonic tool when writing was removed from its Roman environment (see Brate 1920). It is clear that this must have happened very soon after the adaptation of the Latin letters to Germanic language, most probably within a generation or so. My guess is that whoever was responsible for the rearrangement of the letters is also likely to have confused the six sets of runes. Although this mix-up might be unintentional, I have tried to show that it is by no means arbitrary.

The solution that I have proposed may seem hard to accept, given its radical nature. But as Sherlock Holmes once wrote: "when you have eliminated all which is impossible, then whatever remains, however improbable, must be the truth." I should mention here that I have tried my method on other alphabets from different periods, without any acceptable result. In fact, I once believed in a Greek origin of the runes. I changed my mind only after having experienced the relative ease with which one may derive the runes from the Roman letters, if at the first stage form alone is considered.

To conclude: the runes may be derived from the classical Roman alphabet, of which all 23 letters can be utilized and one invented grapheme must be added to produce the 24 Germanic runes. When the traditional alphabetical order was rearranged into the *fupark* sequence, there was probably a mix-up of certain graphemes, whereby five or six sets of runes were switched *pairwise*.

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[2] The short inscription on the Meldorf fibula may prove the existence of such "proto-runes". Its ᛞ- and ᛗ-shaped letters correspond with the expected earliest forms of ᚦ and ᚾ and seem to clinch the issue by showing the posited sound value of ᛞ = /d/, provided the reading **idin** and interpretation *Idin* (dat.) 'to Id(d)a' is correct (see Odenstedt 1983 and 1989). Such a short and uncertain inscription cannot, however, carry the weight of proving any theory at all, until further contemporaneous Germanic writing is found, but at least the inscription does not disprove my theory.

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