

# Germanic: the Runes

## *Germánico: las runas*

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**Abstract:** This paper offers a survey of the oldest runic inscriptions of the northern parts of Europe. Runic writing is attested from the second century onwards to the Middle Ages, and was in use in several parts of northern Europe during different periods. The language used is formulaic, making the impression that inscriptions in runes were for special occasions and not for daily use. Germanic society was a non-literate society until Christendom arrived and with it a literate culture. Runes are applied epigraphically; only in ecclesiastical contexts they are used in manuscripts, thus offering very useful secondary information about rune-names, for instance. Runes had names for mnemonic and symbolical purposes.

**Keywords:** Fuþark. Alphabet. Germanic. Scandinavia. Runes. Runic texts.

**Resumen:** Esta contribución ofrece una aproximación a las más antiguas inscripciones rúnicas de las partes septentrionales de Europa. La escritura rúnica se atestigua desde el siglo II d. E. hasta la Edad Media y fue empleada en distintas partes de Europa durante diferentes periodos. El lenguaje empleado es formular, lo que da la impresión de que las inscripciones rúnicas fueron para ocasiones especiales y no para un uso diario. La sociedad germánica permaneció ágrafa hasta la llegada del cristianismo y con él una cultura escrita. Las runas se usaron epigráficamente; solamente en contextos eclesiásticos las runas fueron usadas en manuscritos, lo que ofrece una muy útil información secundaria, por ejemplo, sobre los nombres rúnicos. Las runas poseían nombres con propósitos memorísticos y simbólicos.

**Palabras clave:** Futhark. Alfabeto. Germánico. Escandinavia. Runas. Textos rúnicos.

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## **1. Introduction**

The indigenous ancient alphabet of *Germania*, the *futhork*, consisted of twenty-four characters named runes. Up till now, about 6500 runic objects are known totally. Inscriptions in older *futhork* runes are attested in around four hundred objects dated in the first centuries of our age (2<sup>nd</sup> - ca. 7<sup>th</sup> c.). In this paper we will focus exclusively on this older part of the runic corpus. It is assumed that the runic alphabet, commonly known as *futhork* was created sometime in the first century AD, because the oldest attestations date from around the middle of the second century. Since the *futhork* (so called after the first six letters; the order of the *futhork* is quite divergent from other archaic alphabets — a question unsolved) clearly is an alphabet, runes must have emerged from a model alphabet, in all probability a Mediterranean one. Runic writing came up in the prime-time of Roman influence in Scandinavia, so it seems appropriate to understand the runes against a Roman background. Germanic peoples came in contact with the Roman — literate — world; there was trade and war, and many Germanic soldiers served as mercenaries and auxiliaries in the Roman Imperial army. They came from an illiterate society, but in the army they learned to read and write, in Latin. It would seem natural to assign to them the creation of a Germanic writing system. For unknown reasons the Latin, or Roman, alphabet was not adapted in the North, but instead an alphabet was created that reflected Roman influence, but deviated in crucial features. History of writing in the Mediterranean area shows that there were many indigenous scripts, all somehow descending from the Phoenician mother script, but they were all replaced in ultimately the first century BC by the Roman script, the writing system of the leading culture. Although Roman influence in the North certainly was substantial, here occurred no such replacement. Probably this lack of acculturation arose from the independence of the North (the area was never occupied by the Roman Empire) and the geographical distance to Rome, but it is nevertheless striking. It may have something to do with the typical use of the runic script — in private, elitist circles — as a kind of secret script, only known and used by few, and especially aimed at capturing personal names, appellatives and some unknown, maybe cult-words. I'll return to that subject later.

Since it is still unknown why, when and where the runes were devised, the debate about the possible model is going on. Runologists assume the model must have been an archaic Italic alphabet, but how the adaptation went we don't



Interpretation of the inscriptions follow the rules of historical linguistics and are therefore often the products of reconstruction, which are marked by \*.

From the phonological, morphological and syntactic points of view, North-West Gmc only slightly diverged from Proto Germanic and can be considered the parent language not only of the later Scand., but also of the West Germanic dialects, according to Antonsen.<sup>2</sup> Early split-offs are East Germanic, West Germanic and North Germanic. South Germanic is typical for the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries inscriptions of South Germany and surrounding areas. West Germanic is typical for the 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> c. Anglo-Saxon inscriptions in Britain and Frisia on the Continent. East Germanic concern the few Gothic inscriptions, dated 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> c. North Germanic is the language of the Scandinavian inscriptions of the 2<sup>nd</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> c. The periods mentioned concern the use of the older *fupark*; in Anglo-Saxon England and in Frisia we see slight changes and the introduction of two new runes, due to changes in pronunciation. The older *fupark* in Scandinavia gave way to a gradual simplification of the 24 letter *fupark* to a 16 letter *fupark* during the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> c. This process took one or two centuries and there occurred local differences in the system.

## 1.2. Location and Chronology

The oldest known runic objects are from Scandinavia; especially Denmark and Schleswig-Holstein. This area is considered as the nucleus and starting-point of the runic tradition. Some ancient items are known from Norway, Sweden and Gotland. They are followed by a small group of objects *en route* to the south-east of Europe in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Items from the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> centuries are found in Eastern Europe: Romania (4<sup>th</sup> c.), Hungary (early 5<sup>th</sup> c.), Ukraine (early 5<sup>th</sup> c.). To the south: Baden-Württemberg (5<sup>th</sup> c.). To the west and south-west: North Sea coast of Niedersachsen (5<sup>th</sup> c.), Rhine/Meuse estuary in the Betuwe (early 5<sup>th</sup> c.), Lincolnshire (5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> c.), Norfolk (5<sup>th</sup> c.). It is to be stressed that nearly all these items are portable (apart from the early 5<sup>th</sup> c. rune-stones in Norway and Sweden), so findplace need not be identic to place of production. The geographical picture roughly presents two groups, one going south-east, to the “Gothic” area of the Çernjachov culture and one going west and south-west, the route of the Anglo-Saxons and Franks. The time-scale coincides with the downfall of the Roman Empire and the subsequent movements of Germanic tribes. In the 6<sup>th</sup> century the spread of runic

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2 Antonsen 1975, 26.

knowledge is reaching its maximum: Scandinavia, Northern Germany, Frisia, France, England, South Germany, Swiss, Bosnia, Pannonia).

During the first centuries the runic alphabet remains nearly unchanged; diachronic variants start appearing after the period of the great migrations (3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> c.); for instance in Britain when Anglo-Saxons and other migrants from the continent settle in former Celtic and Latin speaking areas. This migration is traditionally dated to the mid-5<sup>th</sup> century. Diatopic variants appear later: Anglian, Mercian, Kentish and so on. We will not deal with this aspect, since this paper presents an overview of the oldest runic inscriptions from the 2<sup>nd</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

### 1.3. Historiography and state of the art

The more or less scholarly study of runes started in Sweden and Denmark in the sixteenth century, in those days still under the influence of the then current Biblical views on history and culture. More scientific work was begun by Ole Worm (Wormius) in 1651 with his book *Runar sea Danica Literatura antiquissima, vulgo Gothica dicta*. His opus magnum was *Danicorum Monumentorum libri sex* in 1643. It concerns the runic inscriptions of Denmark, Norway and Gotland, all part of the Danish Kingdom in those days. For a long time runic studies were limited to Scandinavia until in the 19<sup>th</sup> century interest from Germany (Jacob Grimm: *Ueber deutsche Runen*) and England (George Stephens: *The Old-Northern Runic Monuments of Scandinavia and England*) speeded up scholarly interest. Now philological studies took the main course. Especially Grimm's law on the first Germanic sound shift and Verner's law (see below) were important for the understanding and interpretation of runic inscriptions. Grimm's Law: Proto-Indo-European voiceless stops change into voiceless fricatives; Proto-Indo-European voiced stops become voiceless stops; Proto-Indo-European voiced aspirated stops become voiced stops or fricatives (as allophones). This was followed by the Dane Karl Verner's law describing a historical sound change in the Proto-Germanic language whereby consonants that would usually have been the voiceless fricatives \*f, \*þ, \*s, \*h, \*h<sup>w</sup>, following an unstressed syllable, became the voiced fricatives \*β, \*ð, \*z, \*γ, \*γ<sup>w</sup>, (first published in 1877).

Runological research in Norway, Denmark and Sweden became more and more scientific, and ended up in a series on rune monuments, written by scholars such as Ludvig Wimmer, who gave runology its place in modern science. He wrote four volumes on *De danske runemindesmærker* (1893-1908). In the

20<sup>th</sup> century the Danish scholars Erik Moltke and Lis Jacobsen made once more a publication of Denmark's runic inscriptions: *Danmarks runeindskrifter*. The book — an atlas, a textbook and a register — was published in 1942. In Sweden the first volume of a long series to come was published in 1900-1906: the inscriptions of the island of Öland. The whole series is called *Sveriges Runinskrifter* and treats all Swedish inscriptions listed according to the provinces in which they were found. In Norway also a series on the Norwegian inscriptions was published: *Norges Indskrifter med de ældre Runer*, by Sophus Bugge and Magnus Olsen (1891-1924). In Germany scholarly work on runes was carried out by e. g. Helmut Arntz and Helmut Zeiss who published in 1939 their *Die einheimische Runendenkmäler des Festlandes*. In 1966 a handbook was published by Wolfgang Krause and Herbert Jankuhn: *Die Runeninschriften im älteren Futhark*. In England scholars such as Raymond Page and Michael Barnes (and several others) published extensively on runes: Page's *An Introduction to English Runes* in 1973, reprinted in 2003; and Barnes who also wrote a handbook: *Runes, a Handbook* in 2012. A DFG (*Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft*) sponsored project studies English (and Frisian) runes — this is still going on. Another DFG sponsored project concerns the publication of the so-called *Südgermanische Runeninschriften*, also still going on. At the University of Uppsala a longstanding project is executed, the *runforum* giving a platform to young researchers and for communication on new finds and new symposia. In September 2021 the ninth International Symposium on Runes and Runic Inscriptions will take place in Schleswig-Holstein.

#### 1.4. Language and alphabet

The language of the oldest *futhark* inscriptions is remarkable for its uniformity, as has been observed by many runologists. Runic script was developed “for a type of Germanic ancestor language”<sup>3</sup> and was the writing system of Common Germanic that started before several linguistic and phonological changes occurred and the differentiation into several Germanic dialects. It seems that the runes originally were designed to fit the sounds of the Germanic language (the so-called ‘Perfect Fit’); each sound was represented by one rune. No linguistic features such as Umlaut or breaking or syncope etc. are found in the oldest inscriptions. As a rule, runes are not written double (there are some exceptions), a difference is made between voiced and voiceless sounds, the nasal is often omitted before a consonant. A distinction in ‘long’ and ‘short’

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3 Barnes 2012, 1.

vowels in terms of quantity, tense or a combination of the two is impossible to determine. Although the texts are very short, there are sentences; with a syntax of subject, object and verbform (SOV) or subject and verbform. The texts are nearly almost remarkably phonetic in their spelling: one wrote as it sounded.

The phonological system of Common Germanic is as follows:

Vowels: /i/, /e/, /u/, /o/, /a/

Consonants: /p/, /t/, /k/, /b/, /d/, /g/, /f/, /þ/, /h/, /m/, /n/, [(i)ŋ(g)], /s/, /z/, /l/, /r/, /w/, /j/.

There are two runes that has caused difficulties regarding their sound value. They are the so-called *yew* rune, mostly transliterated /i/ < /\*ei/, and the *z* - rune, mostly taken as an orthographic variant of /r/ and transliterated as R. Since it corresponds to /z/ alternating with /s/ in Gothic<sup>4</sup> many runologists transliterate the rune as /z/, although others prefer /R/ to distinguish it with /r/. Interestingly enough, there is no rune representing the Gothic *h*. The presence of runes or rune-derived letters in the Gothic alphabet is greatly doubted.

### 1.5. Genres

The inscriptions contain mostly personal names, appellatives, makers' and owners' formulae, dedications and 'magic' (unknown) words. The inscriptions are often related to the objects: weapons and weapon-parts, jewellery, tools, personal equipment, amulets. Sometimes the objects show a relationship with the findplace: a grave or a cremation urn. A scraper from Fløksand, Hordaland, Norway, was found inside an urn as a grave gift. It bears the inscription: **linalaukaz**, translated as 'linen and leek'. The two runes **ka** are written together as a bindrune. Linen and leek (onion, garlic) have to do with the preservation of organical objects. One may think of a heathen fertility ritual described in the Eddica Minora 124: in a remote farm in Norway, a horse's phallus was kept preserved with the help of linen and leek. The farmer's wife used to sing a song over the object before handing it to her family, who would pass it then around.

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4 Antonsen 1975

An epitaph is found on a cremation urn from Loveden Hill, Lincolnshire, England. It has an inscription with a tentative transcription: **sīþæbæd þicþ hlaw** which may mean ‘Sīþæbæd (her) grave’.

A kind of work song might be read on a whetstone from Strøm, Sør Trondelag, Norway. It has runes on both narrow sides: **watehalihinohorna** on one side and on the other: **hahaskapihapuligi**. Bindrunes **ha** and **na**. This is translated as ‘whet this stone, horn! Scathe scythe! *Hapu* lie down!’<sup>5</sup> *Hapu* is that which is mown, probably grain.

### 1.5.1. Mythical origin and alleged ‘magic’

In some cases, like uncomprehensible letter sequences for instance, one may think of a magical intention. This concerns the ‘magic’ words, e.g. words with no apparent meaning, or a meaning lost to us. The inscriptions with a complete or abbreviated runic alphabet may also belong to this category, if one would not accept a mere profane purpose. No patronymics are recorded (such as in the Raetic Corpus of inscriptions). Remarkable are the Danish ‘erilaz’ inscriptions, in a formulaic sense: **ek erilaz asugisalas muha haite** (Kragehul spear shaft), or **ek erilaz sawilagaz hateka** (Lindholm bone piece). Here someone who names himself as “I, eril (earl?), I am called ...”. In both cases followed by a sequence of runes not clearly understood. In fact, the Old English word *run* has a meaning ‘mystery, secret’. Old High German (OHG) *runa*, *giruni* have similar meanings. Gothic *runa* is the translation of the Greek Bible word ‘mysterion’, used of the divine mysteries. Gothic *garuni* means ‘consultation, counsel’ in a context of initiates: priests and elders. This background is the reason why some runologists believe that runes were considered magical by the ancient runewriters. Most remarkable is the alleged mythical origin of the runes, handed down in a text from the Old Icelandic Edda, in The Words of the High One (Hávamál): “I know that I hung on the windswept tree for nine nights, pierced by the spear, given to Óðinn, myself given to myself, on that tree whose roots no man knows. They refreshed me neither with bread nor with drink from the horn. I peered down, I took up runes, howling I took them up, and then fell back”.<sup>6</sup>

Here the god Odin is the creator of runic writing, apparently come to him in a shamanistic way. A series of stanzas follow dealing with runes and

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5 Antonsen 1975, 54

6 Page 1995, 107.



magical spells. In other Edda poems and in several Icelandic sagas rune-magic plays a role. In Egil's saga for instance rune-magic is performed by Egill who cures a sick girl by cutting runes on a piece of wood and putting that under her pillow. She recovers at once. This kind of literary evidence, albeit from a much later period (the Edda and the sagas were written down in Iceland in the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries) served to illustrate the essential connexion between runes and magical powers. The Gothic Bible translation, though, is from the 4<sup>th</sup> century, and there is a quote from Tacitus (*ca.* AD 90) who mentions *notae* cut on sticks used for divination by the *Germani*. There is no way we can be sure these *notae* were runes. In Old English literature many references are made involving runes in a private, confidential context, perhaps secretive. There are a lot of Old English charms and spells mentioning the magic force of runes. When combined with the kind of texts — intimate messages concerning gifts between beloved people — such as extensively found in the South Germanic runic corpus — we get a picture of runes used as a kind of secret script, meant only for initiates (the few who could read and write runes). On the other hand, we have a quote from Venantius Fortunatus, bishop of Poitiers, AD 530-600/9, who urged a friend to write to him, “if necessary in barbaric runes, painted on an ash-wooden shelf” (*barbara fraxineis pingatur rhuna tabellis; quodque papyrus agit virgula plana valet*).

For a long period, runes were applied only epigraphic. In accordance with the provenance of the oldest runic objects: from the Elbe - Weser estuaries to the Kattegat area and up to Gotland, east to Poland and stretching as far as north of Oslo, runic knowledge spread in the third century over an astonishingly large area (fig. 1).

The oldest known runic objects can be associated with war and the accumulation of wealth and power. Both had to do with relations between certain families or clans. Finds from graves sometimes point to relations with Rome<sup>7</sup> because accompanying grave-gifts are of Roman origin. Material of the script-bearers: bronze, silver, gold, iron, wood, bone, antler, jet, earthenware and stone. The contexts of the finds are: bogs, graves, peat, settlements, stray finds. This evidence is of course related to archaeological digs and chance, and to the preservation of the material. This has provoked the idea that we may have a very biased picture of the kind of inscriptions, but since the bulk of texts is very much the same, this idea can be dismissed.

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7 Looijenga 2003, 185

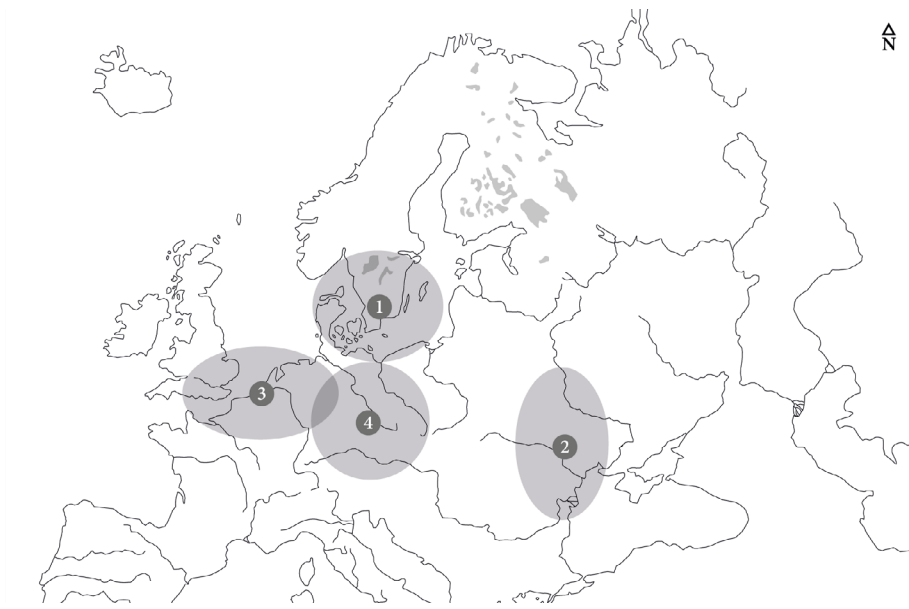


Fig. 1. Map of the spread of runic knowledge: 1. Area of the first known inscriptions, 2<sup>nd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> c.; 2. area of inscriptions from the 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> c.; 3. area of the Anglo-Frisian inscriptions 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> c.; 4. area of the South-Germanic inscriptions, 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> c.

### 1.5.2. Total number of known runic inscriptions

Sweden *ca.* 3500, Norway *ca.* 1600; Denmark *ca.* 850; Greenland over 100; England 100; Iceland *ca.* 100; Germany over 80; Isle of Man about 35; The Netherlands, Ireland, Scotland each around 20; France *ca.* 5, Eastern Europe *ca.* 10.

### 1.5.3. Characteristics of the inscriptions and texts of the oldest period

The basic features of the earliest inscriptions are the following: use of the standard older *futhorc* with local graphic variations (from the 5<sup>th</sup> c. onwards Anglo-Frisian extension with extra characters in England and Frisia); runes and texts are often difficult to read, interpret and understand; occurrence of script-imitation, runelike symbols and pseudo runes; sequences of runes without any obvious meaning; texts are mostly (very) short, though complete small sentences occur: in the SOV or SV order; occurrence of a high quantity of personal names and appellatives (owners, makers, givers, writers are mentioned, as are the objects themselves, or the material); texts belong to a private, individual, intimate and ritual sphere; and the function of runes has been thought by some runologists to have been connected with magical purposes.

In contrast, the later periods of runic writing (from the 7<sup>th</sup> c. to the Middle Ages) show the following characteristics: strong changes in the *futhorc*, independent regional developments, emergence of new runes and disappearance of redundant runes; increased legibility and literacy; monumental texts to be read by the public appear but there are still private and mysterious texts for private use, as well as obscure and enigmatic texts, cryptic runes. Last but not least, some runes are preserved in manuscripts and some Christian texts are written both with runes and Latin alphabet.

#### 1.5.4. The Blekinge inscriptions and rune-names

Runes have names for mnemonic and/or symbolic purposes. These names are not known from the beginning, but we met with them through several manuscripts, written down much later, in the 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. The use of a rune symbolizing its name is recorded on one of the Blekinge stones, reason to mention the Blekinge (South Sweden) inscriptions here.

Sometimes one rune in an inscription is to be read as its name, for instance the rune *j* symbolizes its name *\*jāra* in the Stentofen inscription: *\*jāra* means ‘good part of the year’ which should be understood as a good harvest in summer. There are four monumental Blekinge stones (named after the places where they were found: Stentofen, Björketorp, Gummarp and Istaby) with huge texts, related to each other and they show clearly the power and wealth of a family, or clan. The common part in their names is *-wulf/wolf-*, in *Hapuwolaf*, *Hariwulaf* and *Haeruwulaf*; they refer to each other in the texts. At the time these inscriptions were carved, the old *jāra* rune no longer signified /j/, but according to the change of its name into *āra*, due to the Proto-Norse loss of initial /j/, it now represents the open vowel, non-nasalized, /a/, transliterated as A, in order to avoid confusion with the old rune for /a/, the *ansuz* rune. To give an idea what a transcription looks like, I give the texts for Stentofen, Gummarp and Istaby below:

Stentofen: **niu hAborumz niu hagestumz hAþuwolAfz gAf j hAriwolAfz mA??usnuh?e hidez runono felAh ekA hederA [rA]ginoronoz her-AmAlAsAz ArAgeu welAdud sA þAt bAriutip**

“with nine he-goats, nine steeds, Hapuwolafz gave j(āra) (a good harvest, prosperity). Hariwulafz [---] (unreadable part) a clear rune row I buried (carved) here from the ruling gods. Restless and cowardly a death by treachery (for him who) breaks this”.

Gummarp: (*h*)AþuwolAfA sAte stAbA þria **fff** "Hþuwolafaz carved three staves **fff**"; or: "in memory of Hþuwolaf (somebody) carved three staves **fff**". The **f**-rune may again present its name: \*fehu 'livestock (cattle), wealth'.

Istaby: Afatz hAriwulafa Hþuwulafz hAeruwulafiz warAit runAz þAiAz

"to the memory of Hariwulaf Hþuwulaf son of Haeruwulf wrote these runes".

Here the *ansuz* rune denoting /a/ is used in all three *wulaf* nameparts, to represent a svarabhakti vowel or an unstressed ending. It may be that in the name *hAeruwulafiz* the pronunciation of A was palatal, considering the development of the breaking of e > ea > ja > j by i-mutation; rendering the later attested names Hjórolfr, and Hjórluf.<sup>8</sup>

As regards the genre, we can see that memorial texts take the lead (clearly about a family sporting their wealth and power, then texts threatening others if they want to do them (the family or the stones) harm, and one or two funerary texts. But these inscriptions are exceptional for their time, which is probably 7<sup>th</sup> century.



Fig. 2. Björketorp rune stone, Blekinge, Sweden (Photo: T. Looijenga).

The text of the Björketorp inscription (fig. 2) goes "a clear rune row I buried (carved) here, runes from the ruling gods; cowardly and restless. I foresee a needless death by treachery, far away, for him that breaks this". This

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8 Looijenga 2003, 180.

text is the only one that contains no names, but the inscription is related to the others because of the rune forms and the typical formulation of the text.

### 1.5.5. Early inscriptions; some instances. Formulaic texts

In general, the earliest inscriptions (2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> c.) are very short, consisting of names or a name and a verb, mostly meaning that somebody made or carved something; see for instance the Illerup (Jutland, Denmark) silver mount for a shield handle: **niþijo tawide** which means that someone called Niþijo ‘made’ — the handle or the inscription? A bronze sheath mount from Nydam (Jutland) has **harkilaz.ahti** which can be interpreted as ‘Harkilaz has this’.

But there are also inscriptions that puzzle us, for instance a bone piece, maybe an amulet, from Lindholm (Skåne, Sweden) which has:

**ekerilazsawilagazhateka:aaaaaaaaazzznnn?muttt:alu**

We can divide this in: ‘**ek erilaz sawilagaz hateka** (8 times **a**, 3 times **z**, 3 times **n**, **?**, 3 times **t**, **alu**’. This we understand to mean “I, erilaz, am called Sawilagaz (or: the Wilagaz)”; 8 times ‘a’ may refer to the rune’s name: \**ansuz* = ‘god’. The rune name for ‘z’ is \**algiz* = ‘elk’; the name for ‘n’ is *naud* = ‘need, needful’, and the name for ‘t’ is \**Tyr*, probably referring to the god Tyr. The last part with *alu* is in fact triggering, because this word appears rather often in the oldest inscriptions, literally meaning ‘ale’ although this meaning is contested. It is an enigmatic word, formulaic, and belongs to a group that occurs often, especially on bracteates (see below). The exact meaning still is unknown to us.<sup>9</sup> This group is: **laþu**, **laukaz**, **alu**, **auja**. The first word might mean ‘invitation’, the second means ‘onion’, ‘leek’, the last two lack a commonly accepted interpretation. **alu** may mean ‘beer’, ‘ale’, but when considered against the objects engraved with this word, one feels that that cannot have been the purport. **alu** can etymologically be related to Greek ἀλειν ‘to be beside oneself’ and Hittite \**alwanzatar-* ‘magic’. Especially the Greek word points to a state obtained by drinking an intoxicating fluid. Now beer or ale was a common and very ordinary kind of drink in the old days, used instead of water which could be contaminated. So probably, **alu** had a meaning as ‘ecstasy’ before it came to designate ‘ale’ and ‘beer’. **alu** is found as an only word engraved in a grave-stone, in the pommel of a ring-sword, in many bracteates, in a funerary urn, and in an amulet such as described above (if it is an amulet!).

9 Barnes 2012, 30-32.

Another inscription from Sweden with the mentioning of an ‘erilaz’ is the Järsberg stone (Värmland). Part of the stone is missing, and with it also a part of the inscription. The runes can be transliterated thus: **hait[ ekერი-lazrunozwaritu ]ubazhite:harabanaz**. Word division is never marked in old *futhorc* inscriptions although one or more points may occur, highlighting a name which follows it.

The meaning may be: “I am called [---] I erilaz write the runes [---]: [---]ubaz I am called; harabanaz [---]”. “I am called, I erilaz write”, is subject. **erilaz** is a rank or title; ‘rūnōz’ is object acc.pl.; **waritu** is the phonetic writing of *writu* (3<sup>rd</sup> pers. sing. of the verb *writan* “to write”). In the name **harabanaz** one may observe the use (twice) of a parasite vowel ‘a’. *Hrabnaz* means ‘raven’. *ha* and *az* are written together, so-called bindrunes. Bindrunes are a common feature in runic inscriptions. **hait** and **hite** mean probably both ‘I am called’, an ‘a’ missing in **hite**.

#### 1.5.6. Some funerary texts

A slab found in Bø, Sokndal, Rogaland, Norway, probably has served as a gravestone, according to its inscription: **hnabdashlaiwa** which means “grave of Hnabdas”.

Another gravestone from Norway was found in Kjøllevik, Rogaland, and has the text (running boustrophedon and vertically from top to bottom and back in three parts and reading from right to left): **hadulaikaz ekhagustadaz hlaaiwidomaguminino**. This can be translated as “Hadulaikaz. I, Hagusta(l) daz buried my son (magu minino)”. The first two runes in **hlaaiwido** (“I buried”) are a bindrune, and although double writing of runes is uncommon, we find two **a**-runes here, maybe indicating that the pronunciation of the vowel is long. The meaning is 1<sup>st</sup> sg. pret. ind. of Gmc. \**hlaiwijan* ‘to bury’.

#### 1.5.7. Bracteates

The “formulaic” words occur especially on bracteates: small round gold-foil medallions, stamped on one side, and made to be worn around the neck. They are imitations of Roman medallions with the portrait of the emperor. The Germanic ones show a rich variety of stamps, either showing a man’s head in profile with the royal diadem and the central imperial jewel, or a man’s figure, or a man’s head hovering over a horselike animal, often together with birds, and more or less abstract animal-like forms. Furthermore, there are initials and abbreviations based on letter sequences on Roman coins. If these

bracteates were amulets, the images and the texts may be related to the world of the supernatural. The earliest bracteates, the so-called M-types, show Roman capitalis, capital imitation, mixed with runelike signs.

The bracteates are a category that needs special interest. Next to the circa 400 runic items of the first five centuries stand the around 900 gold bracteates with runes, dated *ca.* 450-530 and spread all over North-west Europe. There is probably no other category runic objects that evokes such huge opposing opinions and such emotional convictions as bracteates and their runes. This is caused by the fact that there are so many of these precious gold objects with runes, runelike signs and unidentified illustrations of a royal head combined with animal-like creatures. It is tantalizing that we don't know what their function was. Sometimes the runes, runelike signs and capitalis imitations are difficult to decipher and as regards the pictures there is no general agreement about their meaning. Instead, the bracteates unleash sometimes fantastic argumentation, clearly showing the gap between the so-called imaginary and the sceptical runologists. It is astonishing how much criticism this qualification has evoked, indeed so as to enable us to make a clear division between runologists in the pragmatic tradition (sceptical) and those in the more romantic tradition (imaginary). This has been noticed by Ray Page a long time ago<sup>10</sup> who coined the two types 'sceptical' and 'imaginary'. More about this problem below (§ 2.2).

Many bracteates present runes; some have symbols and Latin letters together with runes, a feature also found on runic coins (copies of *solidi* and *tremisses*). The Latin lettering, also called capitalis imitations resulted probably from imitation of Roman coins and medals. The bracteates are dated in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century, but I would not exclude an earlier date for some of them. The runes have been pressed into the goldfoil mirrorlike and they are sometimes distorted as if made by illiterate craftsmen. This makes it difficult to guess what may have been the meaning (and maybe there was no legible text intended, but only writing-imitation). Bracteates are found in women's graves or as stray finds, in hoards, or as part of a (votive) deposition. Interpretations swing from women's jewellery to amulets to initiation medals for young men. The many representations of man, horse and birds have led some scholars to believe that these were figures from Germanic mythology: Odin, Balder, Tyr. But these representations are still very close to the Roman imagery on

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10 Page 1999, 12-15.

medallions so one would think rather of a ‘Germanification’ of the Roman emperor. Many bracteates figure Victorias and in one case there is an Urbs Roma with the she-wolf.

One may argue the German “king” can be a god or godlike, but in fact we do not know how the ancient Germanic people saw their rulers. We also do not find much evidence for Germanic mythology in the texts of the bracteates. Very likely there may be a link between the figures and the text, but even this is subject of conjecture. The “formulaic words” are sometimes the only texts, and sometimes accompanied by more runes, such as in **laþulaukazgakazalu** which may be divided into several words: **laþu laukaz gakaz alu**, meaning ‘invitation’, ‘leek/onion’, ‘bird’? (**gakaz**), **alu**. Since the sequence obviously makes no sense to us, we try looking for some hidden meaning. The same goes for the bracteate “word” **auja**, which, if it is not a garbled Latin for *aurea*, also occurs in longer texts: **aujaalawinaujaalawinaujaalawinjalawid** to be divided into *auja alawin*, *auja alawin*, *auja alawin*, *jalawid*. *Alawin* might be a personal name, but what is *auja* and what is *alawid*? We have another bracteate with *gibuauja* as part of the runic legend and this is taken to mean *gibu auja*, ‘I give *auja*’, whatever *auja* may be. It is a personal guess what is meant here and interpretations run from ‘I give luck’ to ‘I give protection’, depending on what the interpreter thinks a bracteate is for.



Fig. 3. The Hitsum bracteate from Frisia, with an “emperor’s head” and runes reading “**groba**”. Courtesy of the Fries Museum, Het Fries Genootschap.



The many hundreds of bracteates are meticulously described and drawn in a monumental work, called *Die Goldbrakteaten der Völkerwanderungszeit, Ikonografischer Katalog* (IK), edited by Morten Axboe *et al.* (1984-1989). The Danish archaeologist Morten Axboe confines himself to technical, stylistic and chronological analysis; the iconographic interpretation has been the work of the German scholar Karl Hauck. According to the archaeologist Catherine Hills (Cambridge) Hauck's hypothesis is that the representations on the bracteates go back to Germanic mythology.<sup>11</sup> In outline, Hauck's argument is that the image of the Roman emperor as it is found on Roman medallions has been reinterpreted on the bracteates in terms of Nordic mythology. The central image conveying power, probably both secular and divine, has become that of Odin, and a complex series of arguments links specific details of the various bracteate designs with Classical and Nordic mythology. This concept is not shared by all researchers (see e.g. Wicker 2015). This perception though has found quite some acknowledgment especially in Germany, and it cannot be denied that Hauck's background as a student and scholar in Nazi Germany at the university of Strassbourg where SS-ideology was deeply rooted played an essential role in his interpretation.<sup>12</sup> The same supposition goes for other scholars educated in Nazi Germany and working and teaching as archaeologists, linguists and runologists after the war. The question arises whether people who are so much contaminated by Nazi ideology can be taken seriously afterwards, or that we can look at their work after the war unprejudiced. The problem with humanities studies is that scholars cannot completely rule out their own convictions and views that are colored by their background and education — therefore everybody is more or less subjective.

#### 1.5.8. Instances of Continental (South-Germanic) texts from the 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries

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The third important area of preserved runic script is southern Germany, where nearly hundred attestations of runic use have been found, mainly in graves from the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries. In Bavaria and Baden-Württemberg a great many row-graves were excavated and in only a few graves runic objects were found. These are mainly women's brooches belonging to their *Tracht*, and men's gear, belonging to their equipment, such as straps, swords, belt buckles. The inscriptions are overwhelmingly personal, intimate expressions;

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11 Hills 2005, 399.

12 Bleck 2016, 137-184.

witnesses of relationships between man and wife, or between family members or friends. The older *fubark* stayed in use, although graphic varieties occur, such as an ‘h’ with two cross bars. New runes were not added. It is assumed that with the coming of Christendom and Latin writing the runic tradition stopped; after the 7<sup>th</sup> century runes do not occur anymore — except in manuscripts.

The 5<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> centuries are a transition period. After the fall of the Roman Empire new states emerge, people are on the move, whole areas are abandoned, other areas repopulated, new customs arise, cultures merge. An instance of such a merger is the early 5<sup>th</sup> century boat-grave from Fallward, north of Bremerhaven in North Germany, at the mouth of the Weser. In this boat a man was buried with his Roman paraphernalia: he had been an officer in the Roman army and had returned to his homeland. His grave-gifts were sumptuous; among them was a wooden throne and a footstool, both exquisitely carved in Kerbschnitt-style. The footstool bears a runic inscription: **ksa-mella lguskabi** which can be taken as *scamella (a)lguskabi*, meaning ‘footstool Alguskathi’. Here we find a Latin loanword *scamella* and a Germanic name together, written in runes. The man certainly knew Latin because he had been an officer in the Roman army, but he chose runes as writing system.

Another instance is a 6<sup>th</sup> c. runic silver-gilt bow fibula found as part of a hoard near the entrance to the Roman theatre of Aquincum (Hungary). Some runes are covered by the needle holder and cannot be seen. The visible part reads: ]**slaig:kingia fubarkg**<sup>13</sup> which may be taken as ]*sl aig kingia fubarkg*, the last part being a so-called *fubark* quotation, a feature that appears more often and with unclear function. The first part can be interpreted as ‘]sl owns (this) brooch’. Owner’s inscriptions are not seldom. Prior to ]*sl* might have been the name of the owner, perhaps *Gisl*.

An interesting 6<sup>th</sup> century silver-gilt bow-fibula has been found in a woman’s grave in a Merovingian row-grave field near Freilaubersheim, Germany. The runic legend reads: **boso:wraetruna þkda.ïna: golid** which means “Boso wrote (the) runes; you Da?ina greeted”. Interestingly, we find here the act of writing runes; the 3<sup>rd</sup> sg. preterite indicative form *wraet* of the verb *writan*. Boso is a male Frankish personal name. We have another inscription about the writing of runes: a wooden stave belonging to a weaving loom,

13 This is my own reading, based on a personal inspection of the item at the Museum of Budapest. The first rune has been read as ‘k’, but I saw clearly an ‘s’. The *fubark* quotation ends with a ‘g’ and I saw no ‘w’ rune there, as others claimed to see.

from Neudingen-Baar (Baden-Württemberg, Germany). It is dated 6<sup>th</sup> century and found in a woman's grave. The inscription goes: **lbi:imuba:hamale:-bliþguþ:uraitruna**.<sup>14</sup> This is transliterated as: *liubi Imuba Hamale Bliþgu(n)þ urait runa* meaning "love, Imuba for Hamal, Bliþgunþ wrote (the) runes". Two things are remarkable: a woman wrote the runes and *urait* is written with a 'u' which may reflect Latin influence. A silver-gilt S-fibula from a girl's grave at Weingarten (Baden-Württemberg, Germany) has **aerguþ:? feha:writ: ia** which may be transliterated as *Ærgu(n)þ*, "Feha writes". Also an ivory ring from a woman's grave at Pforzen (Ostallgäu, Bavaria) has a writer's inscription: **]:ne:aodliþ:urait:runa**, interpreted as *Aodli(n)þ wrote (the) runes*. From these examples it is clear that women could and would write runes, and that runes were used for simple messages, albeit in a quite private context.

### 1.5.9. Runes and literature

A silver belt-buckle with runes on the front (rather unusual) was found in a man's grave near Pforzen (Ostallgäu, Bavaria) and is dated second half of the 6th c. The runes are neatly and distinctly carved in two rows below each other, ending in ornamental lines — one checkered and one braided. The runes can easily be read: **aigil.andi.ailrun ltahu:gasokun**. Subject of the sentence are two names, "Aigil and Ailrun", a man and a woman, well-known from an Icelandic saga and the Old High German Wieland/Weland story. The sentence goes on with *ltahu gasokun*, the last word being a 3<sup>rd</sup> person plural preterite indicative of the Gothic verb *gasakan* meaning 'to quarrel, to dispute', or OHG *gasahhan* 'to condemn, to fight'. The object here is the sequence *ltahu* and this has been explained in very different ways: "A. and A. haben die Hirsche (*Hirschmaskeraden*) verflucht"; "A. and A. haben die Angiltahn gescholten"; "A. and A. vigorously fought/condemned all"; "A. und A. kämpften, stritten (zusammen) an der Ilzach"; "A. and A. search for an elk"; "A. und A. beschwichtigten, bedrohten mit Erfolg das (dämonische) Aal-(Schlangen-) Wasser".<sup>15</sup>

This small list makes it clear how many interpretations will be put forward because of one uncertainty in the inscription. I suggest that **ltahu** might originally be preceded by a vowel, in this case that should be an 'a', alliterating with the former names, Aigil and Ailrun, so one may read: *(a)l tahu gasokun*, translated as "A. and A. fought at the *Altahu!*". Taken that the object (locative)

14 In Old High German the plural of 'rune' is 'runa', the equivalent of Common Gmc 'runoz' such as it is found in the inscription of Järsberg for instance.

15 Graf 2010, 89.

of the sentence may be the name of a place or a river, say the river Alzach, the word has undergone the OHG sound shift of  $t > z$  and  $h > ch$  in Alzach. The existence of a river called Elzach is supported by a historical event recorded in a Latin source.

Important is that the name *Ægili* occurs in another runic inscription: in the so-called Franks Casket (an 8<sup>th</sup> c. whale bone box, exquisitely carved with runes and images), and that the Old Norse *Vǫlund* (Weland) story has been handed down to us telling the fairy-tale story of Egill (*Ægil*, *Aigil*) and his wife *Ǫlrún* (*Ailrun*). Egill or Aigil was a famous archer and *Ǫlrún* was one of a group of swan maidens that came flying to where Egill and his brothers were living. Egill married the swan *Ǫlrún*. On the Franks Casket he is shown defending a stronghold. The source of the tale has been put forward by the Innsbruck historian Max Siller;<sup>16</sup> he relates it to a famous antique town in North Italy, Aquileia, and he identifies the archer on Franks Casket as Egill. The woman who is pictured sitting behind him in a kind of castle with towers would be *Ǫlrún*. Siller claims that the background of the story is a historical event that eventually turned into a heroic tale. The archer who seems to be defending the castle may be the Alamannic general Agilo, serving in the Roman-Byzantine army, during the reign of Emperor Julianus. The castle on Franks Casket concerns the town Aquileia; the date is March 362, and the story is written down by historian Ammianus Marcellinus. No river Alzach is mentioned, but according to Siller there exists a river Elz, in the Middle Ages called Elzach. There is even a town called Elzach. The river flows along the Kaiserstuhl in the Black Forest. Here was an important Roman *castellum*, a capital of the *civitas* Breisgau, at a junction of several Roman roads.<sup>17</sup> This *castellum* on that crossroads would have been an ideal place for telling stories and to get these spread all over Europe. So the text of the Pforzen buckle may be a strophe from that ever famous heroic tale about the couple Aigil and Ailrun, fighting a group of soldiers. This episode is depicted on the Franks Casket, made around AD 800 in Northumbria and showing several scenes concerning biblical, mythical and heroic events. These scenes are surrounded with rune text banners. Depictions and texts are carved in the whalebone surface of all four sides and the lid. This extraordinary object is kept at the British Museum, and called after the 19<sup>th</sup> century director of the Museum, Augustus Franks,

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16 Siller 2011, 293-300.

17 Siller 2018, 148.

who bought the casket in Clermont-Ferrand. It was said to have been in the possession of a family living in Auzon, who used it as a sewing box.

### 1.5.10. Some inscriptions from England

Inscriptions found in or originating from England often show so-called Anglo-Saxon runes (§ 1.6). An instance is the 7<sup>th</sup> century composite brooch with gold and garnets, dated to *ca.* 650, which was found in a grave at Harford Farm, near Caistor-by-Norwich, Norfolk, England (fig. 4). The runes at the back read **luda:gibœtæsīgilæ**, which means: “Luda repaired the brooch”. The brooch itself is mentioned as ‘sigilæ’, a Latin loanword (*sigillum*).

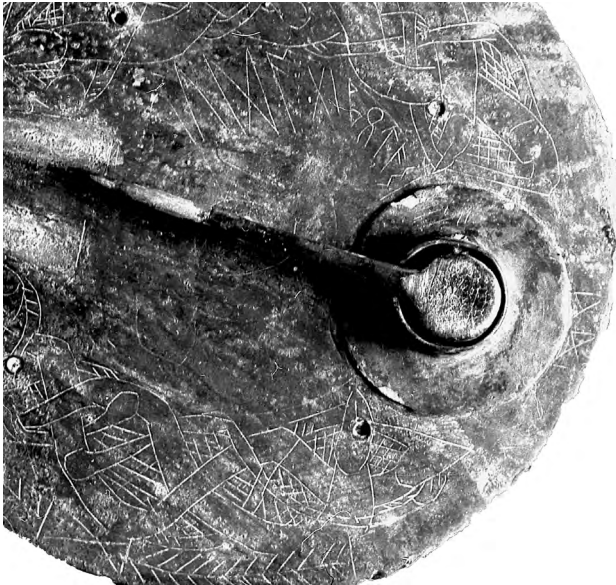


Fig. 4. Harford Farm brooch (courtesy John Hines, Cardiff).

A comb from Whitby, dated 7<sup>th</sup> century, was found in a rubbish dump of the former cloister at Whitby, and has a runic inscription: **[dæ]us mæus godaluwaludahelipæ cy[---**]. The comb is broken after the last runes — probably there was a name such as Cynewulf. The meaning is clear: “my God, God almighty, may (he) help Cy[---]”. England had been Christianized at that time, so this proves that runes were not forgotten or forbidden, but were kept in use throughout the early Middle Ages, not in the least in ecclesiastic circles such as monasteries. Another inscription from ecclesiastic circles is on the Mortain casket, a 9<sup>th</sup> c. copper reliquary, kept in the church at Mortain, Normandy.

The runic inscription reads: **+goodhelpe:æadan þiiosneciismeelgewarahtæ**, “may God help Æada, who made this casket”.

An astragalus (knucklebone) of a roedeer in an urn, dated to the 5<sup>th</sup> century, with runes, reads **raihan**, which means exactly what it is: roedeer. The urn with the knucklebone was found in Norfolk, at Caistor-By-Norwich. Knucklebones were used to play a game with; the other bones in the urn were of sheep.

Remarkable is the explicit mentioning of the object or the material the runes are carved in. Above I mentioned a sigil, a knucklebone and a casket, but there are more: combs, horns, a finger bone (*phalanx*), a footstool, whalebone (Franks Casket) and so on. This is a category of inscription bearers we should look into closer.

### 1.5.11. Combs with runes. Naming the object

There are some 50 combs with a runic inscription, an amazing amount for one category of runic objects. A remarkable part of these are inscribed with a word meaning “comb”, mainly found along the coastal areas of the North Sea, from Frisia to Ribe on the West coast of Jutland, Denmark. Combing one’s long hair may have had a special meaning since long hair was a privilege among high-standing Frankish men (think of Childeric’s signet ring with his long-haired face on it, and the famous grave-stone from Niederdollendorf at the Landesmuseum in Bonn). Writing “comb” on a comb may have meant something specific; some runologists would point to a certain kind of magic, others would just refer to modern habits such as printing “cup” on a coffee cup.

The comb from Friestedt (Germany) has a runic inscription reading **kaba**.<sup>18</sup> It was found near Erfurt, but judging from its type it may originate from a large area, from the Rhine and Meuse area to Frisia and Saxony. Two combs from Frisia (now province Groningen) have resp. **kabu** (Oostum) and **kobu** (Toornwerd) (fig. 5). A comb from Elisenhof (Schleswig-Holstein) has **kabz**. The legends thus show distinction between West Gmc. **kaba** and Old Norse **kabz**. In January 2018 a fifth comb with the legend **kabaz** was reported in an online newspaper from Ribe, written in the younger *futhoric*, dated in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. A comb from the Viking Age was found in Lincoln, England, with an inscription in younger *futhoric* runes, reading: **kamb:kopān:kiari:þorfastr**, which means ‘þorfastr made a good comb’.

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18 Schmidt, Nedoma & Düwel 2010-2011, 123-186.



Fig. 5. Comb from Toornwerd, prov. Groningen, with runes reading ‘kobu’. Courtesy of the Groninger Museum.

More combs have a runic inscription though not the word ‘comb’, for instance Kantens, Ferwerd, Hoogebeintum (all Frisia), Amay (Wallonie), Whitby (England), Vimose (Denmark), Lauchheim (Baden-Württemberg), Setre (Norway), Belgorod (Russia). One may wonder why so many combs were chosen for an inscription. Behind this unpretentious behavior of carving runes in a humble object (perhaps the writers were showing off their knowledge of writing?) may have existed a broad application of script of which nothing has survived. At this point runologists often refer to the hundreds of wooden sticks with all kinds of short messages in runes, found in 1955 in Bergen, Norway, in the debris caused by a large fire. The wooden objects were from the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century and preserved in a waterlogged layer of mud under the streets. The texts represent a broad use of common texts: “everything that could be expressed in writing”.<sup>19</sup> But, of course, this reflects runic use many centuries later and may not witness early medieval behaviour.

### 1.6. Writing systems; the emergence of different runic traditions

We saw that after the first period of Common Germanic in runic texts in Scandinavia, runic writing spread with the migrating Germanic people (fig. 1). First with the Goths and other East Germanic speaking tribes to south-eastern parts of Europe. The initial phase of runic script was notably homogeneous in the shape of the individual runes and the order in which they occur. This standard older *futhork* left traces in a large part of the Germanic

<sup>19</sup> Spurkland 2005, 173.

speaking world. It would seem that the language at that time (2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> c. AD) was also rather homogeneous.

There is some discussion whether traces of East Germanic can be observed in some runic inscriptions (e.g. names ending in -s, such as **marings** on the early 5<sup>th</sup> c. Szabadbattyán brooch from Hungary). The opinions are divided which is also due to the small number of inscriptions from eastern Europe. The older *futhorc* was commonly used and attested until the 6<sup>th</sup> c.; from that time on more and more graphic changes appear, although the typical order remains the same (see below). In one case new runes were added to the 24-characters of the older *futhorc*, in another case the rune row was reduced to 16 characters: the so-called younger *futhorc*. Reducing the amount of runes resulted in the fact that one rune had to represent several sounds, such as happened in the development of the younger, Danish, *futhorc* in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The extension of the number of runes in the older *futhorc* to 26 and ultimately to 31 characters happened in the Anglo-Saxon-Frisian *futhorc*.

An important migration and with it the spread of runic use was the one of the Anglo-Saxons (a collective epithet for several West Germanic tribes), who went in the 5<sup>th</sup> c. from the westcoast of Denmark and Schleswig-Holstein along the coast of northern Germany and Frisia across the Germanic Ocean (Northsea) to Britain. The story goes (Bede and *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*)<sup>20</sup> that they were first asked by one of the Celtic leaders of Britain, Vortigern, to come and help against the savages from the North. The Roman army had left Britain between 400 and 410, leaving the country to defend itself under the leadership of local chiefs. Tribes from the North, such as the Picts, saw their chance to invade the relative rich and highly developed former Roman province. Tradition tells us about the legendary brothers Hengest and Horsa coming from across the sea, to fight the unwelcome savages. They were succesful, and Vortigern asked them to come and stay and to take their kinsmen with them. Needless to say that in the course of the 5<sup>th</sup> century several parts of Britain were settled by Anglo-Saxons who brought their Germanic language with them, and their writing system, the runes. In Britain, the Germanic dialects of these immigrants underwent several linguistic changes, such as i-umlaut, raising, fronting, breaking, syncope. This had effects on the pronunciation of vowels and consonants, and subsequently new runes had to be added to the 24 signs of the older *futhorc*, and some runes got another value. The first expan-

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20 *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* is preserved in several manuscripts from the 9<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> c.



sion were two new runes, for ‘a’ (nr. 25) and ‘o’ (nr. 4), being graphic variants of the old ‘a’ rune (nr. 26), which got the value ‘æ’. Later additions brought the rune-row, now called *fuporc* to a total of 31 runes.

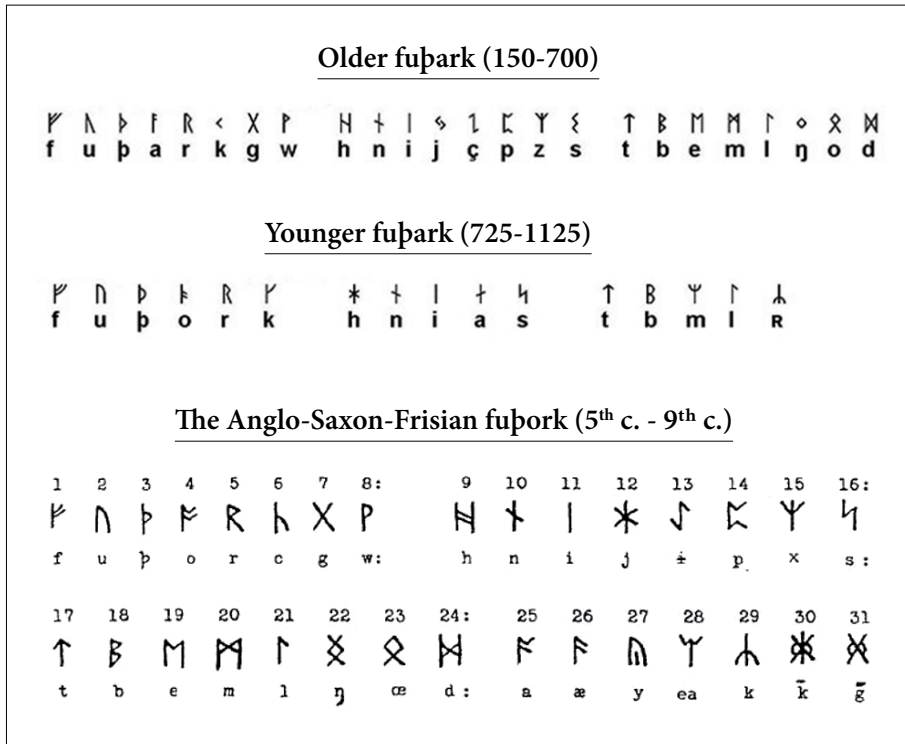


Fig. 6. Evolution of fuporc.

The development of the Anglo-Saxon *fuporc* in the 5<sup>th</sup> c. shows that a need was felt for special characters to record spoken language and dialectal varieties. Their solution was to adapt existing runes by adding an extra stroke, as if it were an accent. The Anglo-Saxon *fuporc* left some traces on the Continent, namely in Frisia, where some migrating Anglo-Saxons stayed behind and repopulated the almost deserted Frisian coast area. The Roman-time Frisians had left in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> centuries, so the area layed waste for about a century. About 20 inscriptions from the 6<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries are known from Frisia; some contain the new runes for ‘o’ and ‘a’. This means that either some of the linguistic changes must have started on the Continent, or that Frisians and Anglo-Saxons stayed in contact with each other and shared a common language and subsequent phonetic changes. The typical Anglo-Saxon-Frisian rune row remained limited to Frisia and Britain — it was not adopted by the

Merovingians, for instance, although there were many contacts across the British Channel between Anglo-Saxons and Merovingians. The Franks nevertheless knew runes, because a few 6<sup>th</sup> c. runic objects have been found, mainly ring-swords with rather worn inscriptions on the pommel: Grenay (Pas-de-Calais), Fréthun (Pas-de-Calais), St. Dizier (Champagne-Ardennes) (fig. 7); the last one featuring the only clear legible inscription, the typical runic word **alu**. Two other runic objects from Merovingian France are the brooches from Chéhéry (Ardennes) and Charnay (Saône et Loire). The square headed brooch from Charnay has a complete *fupark* and a small sentence, translated as “may Liano find Iddan”.



Fig. 7. Sword pommel from St. Dizier, featuring a runic inscription and a ring, symbol of loyalty to the king (Photo S. Culot, Inrap, courtesy Mme. dr. M.-C. Truc, Inrap).

### 1.7. Onomastic formulae

Onomastic formulae such as patronymics (personal name plus family name plus father’s name) are rare, probably because Germanic names consist of one name only. There is however that nice example from Blekinge, Sweden, where we find a family with obvious related names, including a personal name and the name of the father (see §1.5.4., the Blekinge inscriptions). Here we find one *Haþuwulaf* son of *Haeruwulf*. And there is also a related man called *Hariwulaf*. *Haþuwolaf* could write runes and he also could perform a sacrifice in order to get a good harvest. He carved runes in the Istaby stone to the memory of *Hariwulaf*, and he carved three staves *fff* in the Gummarp stone, perhaps for the sake of obtaining wealth in the sense of livestock, cattle.

Runic inscriptions featuring a name are numerous. Since often only one name is carved, it remains unclear whether this name is the name of the owner, the maker, the commissioner, or the giver of the object. Some instances are discussed above (§1.5).

## **2. Current problems and main future challenges**

### **2.1. Linguistic problems**

In the previous sections some problems and challenges have already been mentioned. In this one I will list them in order to get an overview:

- a. The main problem is the reading and interpretation of runic inscriptions: it is very difficult to obtain consensus because a common base is lacking.
- b. The lack of consistent methodology and fair treatment of the evidence is a problem. This belongs to the field of a scholarly approach to runic studies. A basic problem is that we have no idea why, where and when the runes were invented, and what their purpose was.
- c. A sound argumentation is missing. It has all to do with the lack of sufficient material. To quote Michael Barnes: “1. Claims are made based on little more than the author’s conviction. 2. There is too scanty a knowledge of other disciplines, often coupled with a lack of intellectual rigour demanded by those disciplines. 3. Conjecture is silently transformed into certainty. 4. General principles are referred to or implied in support of arguments, but the principles are not enunciated, are of questionable validity, or are contradicted by the data.”<sup>21</sup>
- d. The gap between the personal conviction of the runologist and a scientific objective attitude.
- e. The division between the pragmatic and the romantic approaches; also named the difference between the sceptical and the imaginative runologists. To quote Ray Page “...the runologist needs two contrasting qualities, imagination and scepticism. The first gives him insight into possible meanings a letter group may express: the second restrains his fancy and holds his erudition in the bonds of common sense. In practice, of course, runologists tend to lean to one side or the other, to be primarily imaginative or primarily sceptical. The imaginative runologist tends to

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21 Barnes 1994, 12- 13.

regard runic script as essentially magical, or magico-religious (Germanic paganism)... and many present-day dabblers in runes have found it profitable to adduce the mystical significance and indeed power of the script.”<sup>22</sup> The Danish scholar Erik Moltke wrote: “Runes are perfectly ordinary letters used for exactly the same purposes as the Latin characters we employ today”.<sup>23</sup>

f. From the above follows that there still is an unbridgeable gap between the believers in the magical nature of runic objects and runic texts and the runologists who prefer an objective approach — which does not exclude the notion that runic objects and texts *can* have a magical connotation. It certainly deserves further research into the notion that writing itself in a nearly completely illiterate culture may have had a ritual connotation, and that the fact that spoken words could be “frozen” in writing and thus adding value to an object, can be seen as a magical act.

All this has its effects on linguistic and epigraphic problems — runes are sometimes difficult to decipher or are damaged or eroded — and therefore subject of discussion and multi-interpretations. And since we do not know *why* runes were designed instead of adopting an existing writing system such as the Latin one, the interpretation problems will continue.

## 2.2. Epigraphic problems and foreign models

As has been described above, runes were designed after archaic Mediterranean models and when scrutinizing the shape of the runes, one may see several forerunners: the Greek alphabet, the Etruscan and the Latin. Therefore, several theories have been proposed but nowadays nearly all runologists agree on an archaic Italic forerunner, or just plainly the Roman alphabet, as can be observed in many ancient scripts as well. The runes are often written without word-divisions, from left to right, from right to left, up and down, and boustrophedon. When there are word-divisions, they are mostly marked by one or more dots, less by space. Diacritics were not used in runic writing — that is not in the older *fupark* inscriptions.

As far as the “private-public epigraphy” issue is concerned, the older runic inscriptions are generally found in small, portable objects, and the inscriptions point to a use of the text in a private, intimate sphere. Texts meant

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22 Page 1999, 12.

23 Moltke 1985, 69.

for the public (but who could read in the Dark Ages of the 2<sup>nd</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> c.?) are very sparse. The huge inscriptions found on the standing stones of the pre-Viking and Viking Age (7<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> c.) are likely meant to be seen by the public and probably read by few. The Viking Age inscriptions are often memorials put up by relatives and heirs — so they can be taken as public statements.

Regarding the dating, many objects cannot be dated precisely by lack of context or because the material of the object prevents a date (stone, for instance). Other objects can be dated according to the context (a grave with other datable objects), the style (brooches for instance), by comparison or analogy, and sometimes by rune-forms.

### 2.2.1. Interpretation of certain genres; the question of runes being a 'magical' script, or not

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Especially inscriptions of the complete or abbreviated rune-row itself splits the two camps of runologists irreconcilably. Some cannot see why in objects with no apparent connexion to anything magical, nor in context nor in text, an interpretation cannot be anything else than magical. Here circle-reasoning is at stake: if you are pre-occupied by runes representing something magical, you'll find them. I myself prefer the logic of Occam's razor: if there exist two explanations for an occurrence, the one that requires least speculation is to be preferred. The more assumptions you have to make, the more unlikely an explanation, unless there is convincing proof of something unusual that might point to there being something ritual/religious at stake. It is therefore a bit baffling to see that serious runologists can be propagators of the 'magical impact' to accuse unbelievers in alleged 'magical runic inscriptions' of being "prejudiced, unconsidered and having individual opinions."<sup>24</sup>

This fundamentally divergent attitude in runology is one of the main current problems, and one of the main future challenges. The belief that some magical meaning is involved can be related to the personal conviction of a scholar. It will be very difficult for a critical scholar to follow his colleague a long way in this belief. Even when they may agree upon meeting somewhere in the middle, like agreeing that the use of script, any script, may have had a very special meaning in an otherwise illiterate community, the step to agreeing upon magic purposes might be one too far. There is simply not enough convincing evidence, in spite of the great many articles that have been written

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24 Düwel & Heizmann 2006, 3-60.

on the subject. Runology is tempting for expanding imagination. Interpretations depending on too many uncertainties must be avoided. A quote from R. I. Page, a leading runologist in England, may illustrate this situation: “Epigraphists are often tempted to interpret as magical the inscription of which they can make little straightforward sense. This is particularly true of runologists, since they may be influenced by the theory of rune magic. The belief that there is an essential connexion between the characters of the runic alphabet and magical powers will affect one’s approach to inscriptions whose meaning is difficult to determine, may modify one’s interpretation of inscriptions whose meaning is tolerably clear, and is likely to influence one’s preference if there are several interpretations all equally possible formally. If you believe, as many scholars do, that the Germanic peoples held that the runes were in some way magical, and that each rune either had its own magical power or could cause the release of such power simply by being cut or even named, you will tend to regard all early runic inscriptions as magical, no matter what their apparent meaning.”<sup>25</sup>

One may compare this to the view of a leading runologist in Germany: “(...) erlaubt es, die Runeninschriften auf Brakteaten als den Machttaten des Brakteatengottes äquivalente Machtworte zu verstehen. Sie sind sowohl als semantisch verstehbare Wörter (*alu, laukaR, salu* etc.) realisiert — wobei neben dem ausgeschriebenen Wort auch unterschiedliche Kürzungsformen und Buchstabenumstellungen begegnen — als auch in Form von unverständliche Zeichenfolgen. Diese lassen sich gleichwohl als absichtsvoll eingesetztes Medium der Kommunikation verstehen, bei der durch bestimmte arkanisierende Operationen das göttliche Wort dem Zugriff dämonischer Mächte entzogen werden soll. Im Kontext einer der Götterfürsten Odin zugeschriebenen Kommunikationsform tritt auf Brakteaten auch die Futhark-Reihe (als ganze und in Verkürzung) auf, die mehrfach unmittelbar an die Stelle (...) wo die zauberische Kur wirken sollte, gesetzt wurde oder in direkte Nähe zum göttlichen Haupt. (...) liesse sich das Futhark als Chiffre für den potenzierten Einsatz der in der Runenreihe zusammengezwungene wirkungsmächtige (Heil(s)-Worte des Götterfürsten verstehen.”<sup>26</sup>

In translation: “(...) Makes it possible to understand the rune inscriptions on bracteates as power words equivalent to the acts of power of the bracteate god. They are realized both as semantically understandable words

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25 Page 1995, 105-126.

26 Düwel & Heizmann 2006, 44.

(*alu, laukaR, salu* etc.) — in addition to the word that is written out, different forms of abbreviations and letters are encountered — as well as in the form of incomprehensible character strings. Nonetheless, these can be understood as a deliberately used medium of communication, in which the divine word is to be withdrawn from the access of demonic powers through certain arcanizing operations. In the context of a form of communication ascribed to Odin, the prince of gods, the *Futhark* series also appears on bracteates (as a whole and in abbreviated form), which has been placed several times directly in the place (...) where the magical cure was supposed to work, or in close proximity to the divine head. (...) The *futhark* could be understood as a cipher for the potentized use of the powerful (healing) words of the prince of gods that are forced together in the rune row.”

### 2.3. Writing system

The common older *fupark* underwent several changes throughout the centuries. This has to do with geographical features (migrations) and changes in the language. In one case the alphabet was expanded with more graphs, in another case the solution was found in diminishing the current alphabet with several graphs. This has led to problems in transliteration, because one graph could be used for several phonemes. Starting point for a runologist is autopsy — personal inspection of the object and inscription. Any context needs to be scrutinized: grave, grave-field, settlement site, stray find, deposit, other objects of the same find-place, stylistic and material features, etcetera. Runology as a discipline is supported by data from palaeography, linguistics and archaeology.

#### 2.3.1. Polemic graphemes

As has been argued above, among the toughest problems in runology is the interpretation. Runologists seem never to agree with each other about a reading of a new-found item, and subsequently many runic texts have very different readings and interpretations. This is most unproductive and appears to others as unscholarly behaviour. If a runic researcher comes up with good argumentation why a certain graph should be read as so and so, and it makes sense as regards the context and the interpretation of the text as a whole, it should not be regarded as just a reason to disagree and to dismiss the reading and to present immediately something else. There seems to be as many interpretations as there are runologists. This has been observed already a long time

ago and this runic lore is stubbornly retained. Of course, one may disagree and come up with a better idea, based on solid arguments. But most of the time people come up with something that suits them or their research better, or just because they don't like each other. A good example is the disputed reading of the inscription on the early 5<sup>th</sup> c. Bergakker scabbard mount (river estuary of Rhine and Meuse, The Netherlands). It shows an unknown graph, a double Roman V, not attested anywhere else, so its value is unknown. The sequence goes: **haleþewas**, followed by dots — the word divider. From the context (the other runes in the inscription) it must represent a vowel, 'e' or 'u'. This sequence could very well be a personal name, a good Germanic name in the genitive, consisting of two parts: *Haleþewas*. There exist well-known Germanic names ending in *-þewaz* (meaning 'knight', 'servant'), also in runic inscriptions. The unknown graph which I transliterate as 'e', occurs four times: **haleþewas : ann: keşjam: loğens**. Transcription of the inscription is in bold lettering, with dots under the unknown runeforms. The second word, *ann*, is perfectly clear as a verb, 1<sup>st</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> pres. ind. of the preterite present verb *unnan*, 'grant' or 'grants'. So, the inscription consists of a subject, a personal name, a verbform, and an object consisting of two, unknown, words.

Other runologists favoured transliterating the unknown graph as 'u', comprehensible since its resemblance to Roman V. They admit that it delivered no meaningful word, but it suited the rest of their interpretation as 'u' in the two last words of the inscription. But what would *\*hapuþuwas* mean? There is no good reasoning why the unknown graph in the inscription should *not* indicate 'e', and on the contrary denounce 'u', because there is no comparison possible. So runologists should restrict to cautious attitudes and modes of expression. What is most disturbing though is that some runologists completely ignore the archaeological context — in this case the object was manufactured in north Gallia, in a Gallo-Roman workshop. The language, therefore, may mirror a mixture of languages used at that time in the former Limes area. As has been mentioned above, (§ 1.6.), there existed a runic tradition in Merovingian France, albeit modest for its few attestations — but this Bergakker object may have been made *and* inscribed in Northern France (Gallia). The Franks originated from an area near the North Sea and migrated southwards, passing through the Limes area to Gallia (Northern France) in the 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> centuries. At the moment there exists no acceptable interpretation of the inscription. As long as the question of which sound is meant by the unknown graph is not solved, it is best not to speculate.





Fig. 8. The early 5<sup>th</sup> c. Bergakker inscription with the unknown graph double V. The runes are at the back of a silver-gilt scabbard mount, part of a deposit consisting of many metal objects (Looijenga 2003, 317 ff. Photo: courtesy of the Museum Het Valkhof, Nijmegen).

#### 2.4. Edition problems

Edition problems are not really there. Transcription norms are shared by all runologists. Transliterations are commonly in boldface. The aim is to reproduce the distinctive runes of a particular rune-row in the roman alphabet, in order to make runic inscriptions more accessible to the researcher and the public. A dot below a bold-face letter means an uncertain reading. An x means that it is not possible to determine which rune was used. A ‘?’ is used in cases where it is not clear whether there is a letter or a scratch. Latin Capitalis are used to present Latin (Roman) letters, mostly found on bracteates. Interpretations are in *italics*.

#### 2.5. Publication problems

Publication problems are also not existing. Articles on runes and their interpretations are found in both linguistic and archaeological journals. Some online databases are listed below:

- The Kiel Rune Project: <http://www.runenprojekt.uni-kiel.de/>
- RuneS: <https://adw-goe.de/forschung/forschungsprojekte-akademienprogramm/runische-schriftlichkeit-in-den-germanischen-sprachen/>, <http://www.runesdb.eu/project/>
- Scandinavian Runic Text Database: <http://www.runforum.nordiska.uu.se/srd/>
- Futhark, International Journal of Runic Studies, 1-7, <http://www.futhark-journal.com/>

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