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Richard L. Morris

RUNIC AND MEDITERRANEAN EPIGRAPHY

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0. INTRODUCTION

Since the 19th century, when scholars seriously began debating the origin of the runes, many theses have been put forward and remain to this day the subject of often heated debate. The opinions on the runes' origin, as well as on the time of their inception, differ widely. Already in the last century, Wimmer (1887:11) wrote:

Die frage nach dem alter und dem ursprung der runen ist so oft aufgeworfen und auf so viele verschieden weisen beantwortet worden, dass man fast versucht sein könnte zu sagen, dass alle möglichen, denkbaren und undenkbaren an- sichten zu worte gekommen sind. Man hat auf der einen seite die runen so alt gemacht wie die sündflut, auf der andern seite jünger als die einführung des christentums im norden; man hat sie sich von den nordischen völkern selbst ohne das vorbild irgend eines fremden alphabetes erfunden gedacht, und man hat sie von einer menge älterer und jüngerer alphabete abzuleiten gesucht. Es ist eine sehr grosse literatur, die hier vorliegt; aber die qualität steht leider im ungekehrten verhältnis zur quantität.

My purpose here shall not be to add yet another theory to the list of already existing ones. I hope to point out throughout the course of this investigation that we simply do not know with certainty where the runes come from and that we should keep an open mind concerning investigations which reevaluate the data and come to conclusions which do not agree with presently or formerly held beliefs. To assume a priori that the runes cannot be older than the birth of Christ, is not only based on insufficient evidence, but it also leads to fallacious interpretations of the inscriptions themselves.
0. Introduction

I intend to discuss the epigraphic features of the older runic inscriptions, not only to establish a runic tradition, but also to bring to light the many striking similarities which the runic tradition shares with the Mediterranean epigraphic traditions. I propose, however, to accomplish this by examining the Greek and Latin traditions in their preclassical stages, for this is the period in which a source for the runic tradition must be sought. Similarities between the runic writing system and the archaic Latin and Greek systems have heretofore been ignored or explained away as being the result of imperfect attempts by a primitive Germanic people to master epigraphic writing, because scholars sought to compare the runic tradition with the highly refined classical traditions of Imperial Rome and Hellenistic Greece. Strikingly different results are obtained when the runic tradition is juxtaposed to the Mediterranean traditions in their earlier stages of development. The aspects of epigraphy to be examined are the alphabets themselves, the phonological values of the letters, the direction of writing, the use of ligatures, interpunction, the vocabulary of writing, writing techniques, types of inscriptions, and spelling conventions.

0.1. On alphabet borrowing

Isaac Gelb (1963:201) believes that the development of writing in all cultures is subject to the principle of unidirectional development. He writes: 'What this principle means in the history of writing is that in reaching its ultimate development writing, whatever its forerunners may be, must pass through the stages of logography, syllabography, and alphabetography in this, and no other order. Therefore, no writing can start with a syllabic or alphabetic stage unless it is borrowed, directly or indirectly, from a system which has gone through all the previous stages'. The runes do comprise an alphabet. Of this there is no doubt. In light of Gelb's statement, then we must assume that the runes were borrowed from somewhere.

With the exception of the more radical German scholars in the
Third Reich (see now Hunger 1984), all serious modern students of the runes have recognized the fact that runic writing is derived from the great Mediterranean writing tradition. Their greatest efforts have been directed toward the identification of a particular Mediterranean alphabet as the source from which the runes were borrowed. Because this search for the mother alphabet has not resulted in definitive identification, recent research, particularly by Erik Moltke (following Fritz Askeberg), has sought to overcome the most obvious obstacles to an equation of the runic alphabet with the Latin alphabet by assuming that the borrowing was 'indirect', that runic writing was inspired by the Latin alphabet but was developed with considerable independence in a place (i.e. Denmark) remote enough from the Roman limes to make such an independent development plausible. With very few exceptions, the search for the origin of the runes has concentrated on establishing a one-to-one correspondence between the graphs of the supposed lending and receiving alphabets, sometimes with little or no attention given to the phonological values of these graphs and their phonological-orthographic fit in the different alphabets. Recent research has almost never taken into consideration the much broader question of the writing systems as a whole, which must include much more than the borrowing and adaptation of the individual graphs. Early attempts in the 19th century to consider this broader question were squelched by Ludvig Wimmer's contention that the striking similarities between the runic and archaic Mediterranean inscriptions are merely coincidental, conditioned by the primitive nature of both scripts. Wimmer's view seemed to be supported by the prevailing assumption concerning the date of the borrowing (or adaptation of the runic alphabet, usually placed in the early centuries after the birth of Christ.

An analogy might be drawn here between learning a foreign language and learning a foreign system. When a person learns a foreign language, he does not simply learn the lexicon. For his use of that foreign language to be effective, he must learn the entire system, not only the lexicon but also the syntax, the morphology, and the phonology. In addition to borrowing the individual letters of a foreign alphabet, the
original user(s) of the runes surely also borrowed such other features as direction of writing, the interpuncts, ligatures, and other orthographic conventions that were part-and-parcel of the lending writing tradition. The borrowing process might not result in a perfect replica of the original, but we should expect to find traces of more than one feature from the lending tradition in the borrowing one. To this end, I will examine the runic writing system in light of the archaic Latin and Greek systems for traces of features which have not been pointed out in previous scholarship or which have been ignored.

Leonard Bloomfield (1933:201) makes the observation:

The transfer of writing to a new language occurs, apparently, in this way, that some bilingual person who knows writing in one language, hits upon the notion of using the alphabet also for his other language. He may retain whatever defects the alphabet had in the first language and he may retain letters that are necessary in the first language but superfluous in the new one, and he may fail to devise new letters for additional phonemes of the new language. On the other hand, he or his successors may be clever enough to mend these defects, either by inventing new characters or by putting superfluous characters to good use, or by semiphonetic devices, such as using combinations of letters for a single phoneme.

The adoption of the Semitic alphabet by the Greeks provides an example for what Bloomfield has said. The Greeks derived their vowel letters from Semitic consonantal letters which were of little use to the Greeks in their Semitic values. Classicists apply this axiom without further ado. Few handbooks on the Greek alphabet fail to mention that Semitic aleph began with a glottal stop. Since this glottal stop was not phonemic in Greek, the Greeks adopted aleph with a vocalic value, hence alpha. Classical epigraphists, such as Lillian Jeffery (1961), assume that the Greeks who adopted the Semitic alphabet to the Greek language must have known how to speak and write a Semitic language.
0.1. On alphabet borrowing

Similarly, we must assume then that at least one Germanic-speaking person knew how to speak and to write the language of the people from whom he was borrowing the alphabet. If he, as well as other Germanic people, knew a foreign language, we can assume contact between the two language groups (see Lehman 1977). Archeological evidence of trading contacts between Scandinavia and the Mediterranean world exists already for the Bronze Age. I refer here to the amber trade routes (see Navarro 1925; Spekke 1957; Rice 1980).

No one in runic studies, to my knowledge, has ever explicitly pointed out that in order to adopt someone else's alphabet, directly or indirectly, the native learner must be able to communicate with the foreign teacher. I assume that the learner was a native speaker of Germanic because the runic alphabet fits the Germanic phonological system so well (see 4.3).

At this point, I drew on de Saussure's famous distinction between *langue* and *parole* and their interplay. The linguistic sign, *signum*, is understood because it is transmitted by speech, *signans*, and perceived by the listener, *signatum*. Once the listener has perceived the sign, he interprets it in his own mind and, in the best of all possible worlds, understands it as it was meant to be understood by the speaker. In order for the listener to understand the speaker, the listener must know the system of signs the speaker is using. A speaker of German and a speaker of English cannot communicate with each other unless one knows the sign system, i.e. language, of the other. If we extrapolate and say that the sign, in the case of alphabet borrowings, is an individual graph, which represents a phone, and apply this statement to the situation of the runes—remembering that writing is a secondary linguistic device—then we must try to imagine how a speaker of Germanic analyzed the sounds he heard when he was attempting to learn to write his own language. If person X of language Z said [ö] but the Germanic person did not have [ö] in his phoneme inventory, we must ask how the Germanic person analyzed [ö] in terms of his own language. If the graph § is associated with [ö] in language Z, then whatever value the Germanic person assigns to [ö] in his own inventory will be associated with the graph §.
0. Introduction

This analytic process necessarily implies that a Germanic speaker must have known how to speak and write a Mediterranean language before he could make the association between a Mediterranean graph and a sound in the Mediterranean language. Being able to write also implies that a person can analyze and separate sound sequences into distinctive segments and then graphically reproduce them. Judging from the phonemic character of the older fupark (4.3), this Germanic speaker must have analyzed his language in the same fashion in which he learned to associate a particular sound in (for example) Greek with a particular Greek letter. This process is of course extremely complex and much more involved than simply seeing that someone else wrote and deciding that it would be a good idea to do the same for one's own language.

The situation is comparable to a field linguist attempting to devise a writing system for a language that has none. Before he can devise an alphabet system for a language, he must first be aware of the graphic-phonological correspondence indispensable for alphabet writing. This awareness presupposes that he knows how to write. Then he must make an analysis of the language to determine which phonological items require representation in order to produce an effective written image of the target language.

0.2. Exclusion of the Etruscan alphabet

I have excluded the Etruscan alphabets from consideration for phonological reasons. While the Etruscan alphabets may optically resemble the runes, the runes maintain the distinction between voiced and voiceless obstruents all too carefully. The Etruscan language had no voiced stops nor did the Etruscans employ the Greek graphs for those stops, although beta, gamma, and delta were retained in the Etruscan alphabet (Pfiffig 1969:26, 36-8). The same is true of /o/ in Etruscan (Pfiffig 1969:28-9). If the Etruscans had mediated an alphabet to the Germanic peoples, we would expect some confusion in the use of voiced versus voiceless stops
in the runic inscriptions similar to the use of Lat. Ć for both c and g (3.1, 3.2).

0.3. Goals

This investigation will attempt to show that the questions, 'Where did the runes come from?', has not yet been answered because the features of the archaic Greek and Latin alphabets have not been given their due weight. In fact, this question, in all probability, can never be answered beyond a shadow of a doubt. The intercultural relationships in preclassical Europe were complex, which in turn makes the detection of cultural influences or exchanges complex. The purpose of this investigation is to demonstrate that a connection between the older runic alphabet and the archaic Greek and Latin alphabets cannot be excluded because of their age. The similarities are there and they must be dealt with accordingly. An additional purpose is to corroborate the linguistic evidence of the older runic inscriptions which suggests a greater age for these inscriptions, e.g. the value of the 13th rune Ꞝ and the spelling ai for dative o-stems (4.3). This evidence cannot be ignored because of some foregone assumption that the runes came into being after the birth of Christ. The undeniable relationship between the runic writing system and the archaic Greek and Latin systems only serves to support, and not contradict, the linguistic evidence.

Aage Kabell was only too well aware of the pitfalls and problems of searching for the origin of the runes when he entitled his article on that subject 'Periculum runicum'. It is with his skepticism toward the ad hoc postulates of mainstream runic scholarship and convinced of the soundness of Antonsen's linguistic approach to the problem that I proceed.