

RUNES: LITERACY IN THE GERMANIC IRON AGE

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FOREWORD

The focus of the book will be the adoption of literacy in the Germanic Iron Age and the social contexts in which such a process may have taken place. Given the many uncertainties which still surround the script's starting point in time and space, a number of alternative narratives will be suggested in the hope of stimulating further research.

By necessity, the book will focus on the earliest texts in Scandinavia and elsewhere. Discussion will then turn to the derivatives (or extensions) including the Anglo-Frisian and Anglo-Saxon traditions, the bracteate script and the early developments which paved the way for the Younger Futhork.

The discussion of early forms and origins will look especially to southern Scandinavia, the North Sea rim and the western Baltic. Runic practice in England and Frisia was more fluid and widespread than in contemporary Scandinavia – for reasons which will be explored in these pages – and the development of the Anglo-Saxon tradition will be examined in the context of the spread of western European literacy. Towards the end of the 'runic era' in Scandinavia, the script became a useful tool in the hands of landowners and merchants. The likelihood that such a development was stimulated by Scandinavia's close and enduring associations with literate cultures, such as Anglo-Saxon England, will be explored.

The first chapter looks at the scope of the subject and introduces some concepts which will be needed for an understanding of the following material. The next looks at the sources – the texts, the materials they appear on, the difficulties in deciding whether a series of marks can really be a runic text. Then we proceed to a consideration of the background to the script's invention and evolution. In the next chapter, the successive phases of runic usage are set out, and finally we look at the cultural context for the texts – who made them, who used them, when and for what purposes.

The second section of the book looks at the evidence for runic knowledge as part of the necessary intellectual accomplishment of the élite in the Iron Age. Initiation and empowerment were very important social and ceremonial acts which conferred a transformation in status. Strong drink and a public setting accompanied the outward aspects of the transformation, but acquisition of knowledge (including runic knowledge) formed a major part of the inner transformation which made some men and women into political and spiritual leaders. The status and specific mythic roles of initiating deities such as Óðinn, Heimdallr and Freyja are examined in the light of this theme.

For reasons of space, no attempt will be made to synthesise progressions in the runic tradition with contemporary developments in bookhand, although such a study would be both useful and intriguing.

Stephen Pollington

Essex, 2016

GLOSSARY

acrophonic principle	The assignment to a character of a name beginning with the sound for which the character stands , e.g. 'A' for apple, etc.
allograph	A variant letter form which is still understood to represent the same character, e.g. <i>Æ</i> , ᚠ and ᚱ are all acceptable and legible allographs of 'A'.
<i>AN</i>	<i>Abecedarium Nordmannicum</i>
Angles	(OE <i>Engle</i> , <i>Ængle</i>) a linguistic group, originally based in Jutland, who expanded across the North Sea and established themselves in Britain
Anglian	Language and culture of the Angles; the language shares certain features with both West and North Germanic and is sometimes assigned to the Ingvaeonic sub-group
<i>Áss</i>	(ON) One of the Norse gods, known collectively as <i>Æsir</i>
<i>Æsir</i>	(ON) Group of gods in the Norse pantheon. Óðinn and Þórr are among the more famous <i>Æsir</i>
<i>Beowulf</i>	(OE) epic poem, surviving only in a late 10 th -11 th c. manuscript, set in an imagined 6 th c. world in the North Sea and Baltic areas
boustrophedon	Writing running left-to-right and right-to-left alternately
bracteate	Thin gold or silver medallion decorated with (often religious) imagery and sometimes runic text
<i>Cantware</i>	(OE) people of Kent
Continental Germanic	Language(s) of the Germanic-speaking peoples in continental Europe (not Scandinavian or Insular Germanic); the West and South Germanic groups
cremation	Method of disposing of the dead whereby the corpse is burnt; in Anglo-Saxon tradition, the ashes and bones are often collected and placed in the ground in a specially made and decorated pot
deuterotheme	The second element in a compound word (e.g. <i>-post</i> in <i>signpost</i>)
dextrograde	Writing running left-to-right
diphthong	Two successive vowels pronounced as a glide, with a single peak of loudness
Early Runic	Language recorded in the Elder Futhork texts
<i>erilaz</i>	(PGmc) name occurring in some early runic texts, hypothetically that of a runemaster
<i>ése</i>	(OE) a group of gods (Norse <i>Æsir</i>)

<i>foedus</i>	(Latin) terms of an agreement, treaty
fupark	The Common Germanic rune-row, named from the first six characters; also called the Elder Fupark to distinguish it from the Viking Age Younger Fupark series
fuporc	The Anglo-Frisian rune-row, named from the first six characters: fuporc
<i>Germania</i>	Modern title of a literary work by the Roman writer, C. Publius Tacitus, describing the political, social and religious arrangements of the Germanic people of his day, completed in 98 AD
<i>Germania Libera</i>	Germanic territory outside the Roman Empire
grapheme	A written symbol such as a letter, numeral, punctuation mark, etc.
hypocoristic	An informal, shortened form of a personal name; a pet-name
ideogram	A visual symbol representing a concept
Ingvaeonic	Languages of a group on the southern edge of Scandinavia, sharing some features with West Germanic and others with North Germanic; sometimes called North Sea Germanic
inhumation	Method of disposing of the dead whereby the corpse is buried in the earth; in Anglo-Saxon tradition, the corpse wears indoor clothing and may be accompanied by personal possessions
Insular Germanic	Language and culture of the Germanic-speaking peoples in the British Isles (later called Anglo-Saxon)
<i>IRP</i>	<i>Icelandic Rune Poem</i>
Jutes	(OE <i>Eote</i> , <i>Iutæ</i>) a people of Jutland who settled in southern Britain
<i>koine</i>	A literary language standard used as a common means of communication among groups speaking related but not identical languages
<i>Lacnunga</i>	(OE) a medical treatise consisting of ailments and their suggested treatments
laryngeal	A class of consonants pronounced in the throat with the glottis (also called 'glottal consonants'); the commonest in modern English are 'h' /h/ and the sound heard in pronouncing words such as <i>butter</i> , with a 'glottal stop' /bʌʔə/
<i>limes</i>	(Latin) border of the Roman empire
MHG	Middle High German (language)
monophthongisation	Process by which a simple vowel results from a diphthong
North Germanic	Languages of Scandinavia, usually divided into West (Icelandic, Norwegian) and East (Danish, Swedish, Gutnish)

North Germanic	Sea	See Ingvaemonic
<i>NRP</i>		<i>Norwegian Rune Poem</i>
OE		Old English (language)
<i>OERP</i>		<i>Old English Rune Poem</i>
OFr		Old Frisian (language)
OHG		Old High German (language)
OIc		Old Icelandic (language)
ON		Old Norse (language)
onomastics		Study of proper names, including place-names and personal names
OS		Old Saxon (language)
<i>ós</i>		(OE) one of a group of gods, equivalent to Norse <i>áss</i>
palindrome		A word which reads the same backwards or forwards, e.g. <i>level</i> , <i>redivider</i>
PGmc		Proto-Germanic, hypothetical ancestor of all the Germanic languages
phoneme		A sound of speech which can convey linguistic information
PIE		Proto-Indo-European, hypothetical ancient ancestor of most of the modern languages of Europe and parts of Asia
<i>Pressbleche</i>		(German) Embossed metal plates decorated with figures and animals, interlaced patterns, etc., mostly used on high-status objects such as helmets, swords, drinking horns
prototheme		The first element in a compound word (e.g. <i>sign-</i> in <i>signpost</i>)
retrograde		Reversed, facing backwards in relation to the rest of a text
runemaster		Conventional modern name for a person actively literate in the futhorc
Saxons		(OE <i>Seaxe</i>) a people of the Elbe-Weser region of northern Germany who established themselves in and gave their name to parts of Britain (Essex, Middlesex, Sussex, Wessex)
Scandinavian		Language and culture of the Germanic-speaking peoples in the Baltic area, encompassing much of modern Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Finland
<i>scop</i>		(OE) a poet or storyteller (plural <i>scopas</i>)
semiotics		The science of signs and their relationship to linguistic and other meanings
Second Shift	Sound	Series of phonetic changes which split High German (and Langobardic) off from West Germanic

sinistrograde	Writing running right-to-left
Sutton Hoo	Site of an Anglian royal cemetery, with about 17 burial mounds and many other graves, near Woodbridge (Suffolk)
<i>tamga</i>	Any of a series of signs used by peoples of the Steppe - including Alans, Sarmatians, Scythians and others - as marks of ownership, heraldic symbols and clan badges.
West Germanic	Languages of Continental Europe, including Old High German, Old Saxon, Old Franconian; Anglian shares some similarities with this group, as well as with North Germanic
WSax	West Saxon, the 'classical' dialect of Old English

Words preceded by an asterisk denote reconstructed forms which do not appear in our texts, e.g. **þunoraz* 'thunder'. By convention, the mathematical signs '>' and '<' are used to denote evolution so that '>' means 'becomes' and '<' means 'derives from', e.g. PGmc **ansuz* > OE *ós* means that the former becomes the latter.

Transliteration of runic texts is explained below (p.28). The letters Þ, þ and Ð, ð are used interchangeably in OE texts (but not in Old Norse); they both have the sound values assigned to 'th' in English. The letter Æ, æ has the sound value 'a' in 'cat'. In transcribing OE I have used the acute accent (') rather than the standard macron (¯) for typesetting convenience.

All translations are my own unless otherwise specified. Old English words cited in this work are generally referenced in the first instance from the Bosworth & Toller (B&T) dictionary, Proto-Germanic from Orel, Gothic from Lehmann and Old Norse from Cleasby-Vigfusson.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The first law of runic studies ... 'for every inscription there shall be as many interpretations as there are runologists studying it'.

R.I. Page, *An Introduction to English Runes*

My earlier work on the subject of runes, *Rudiments of Runelore*, is still in print two decades after first publication, and is generally regarded as a good starting point for the study of Germanic runes - free from the flights of fancy and needless mysticism which bedevil so many other books on the topic. *Rudiments* remains a useful place to start studying the subject. But not everyone is content to leave runic studies there.

There are, as a glance along the shelves of any large bookshop or the pages of bookseller and similar websites will show, quite a lot of books on the subject of runes already in existence.¹ Why then do we need another one, especially as *Rudiments* is still useful? What more is there to say about the subject?

Rudiments is what it says it is: a guide to the basics of the subject. To understand the runes in more detail it is necessary to become familiar with the history of the script, the trajectory of its development in different areas and the details of linguistic change that are reflected in the various texts. As the seeress says so often in *Völuspá* “*Vituð ér enn - eða hvat?*” “Would you know more, and what?”

To my mind, there is an elementary misunderstanding in many (perhaps most) of the books on runes currently available, outside the specialist academic works. This is the treatment of “the runes” as if there were a fixed set of signs with some immutable core of “meaning” assigned to them, some changeless essence which can be captured and reduced to a key-word or two. Runes, being the product of human intellectual effort, have been subject to the same evolutionary processes as any other aspect of material or ideological culture: they have changed and grown, just as the societies which used them changed and grew. This fundamental fact appears to have been overlooked in a great deal of the popular literature. I hope to have addressed it in these pages by separating the discussion into phases, starting with the ‘pre-runic’ in which origins are discussed, and continuing through the processes of linguistic and social evolution to finish with a brief look at the mediaeval treatment of the script. It is surely a simplified model of a complex social reality, but in this way, aspects of Viking age runestone practice can be kept separate from the Anglo-Saxon epigraphic tradition, the Iron Age bog deposits and the bracteates – all subjects for discussion which benefit from being treated individually as well as in the wider historical context.

As an aside, but one which highlights this misunderstanding, I may mention that in Iceland in 2010 I saw many tourist products showing the country’s name written in the local script: **𐌿𐌺𐌿𐌸𐌰 island**. There is a major problem with this transliteration: four of the six runes belong to the earliest phase of runic activity, and were no longer in use by the West Norse

¹ Barnes, 1994, offers a survey of the many failings in argumentation found in the works of academics operating in the field. The majority of popular works show even less regard for consistent methodology or fair treatment of the evidence.

communities which founded the Icelandic state in the 9th c. An Icelander wishing to commit the name of the country to writing would probably have written *l'f'f'f'* or *l'f'f'* and might not even have been able to read the version now appearing on Icelandic t-shirts and tote-bags. While this may seem trivial in itself, it underlines the problem that in the public perception, even in Iceland, “runes” are an amorphous and undifferentiated mass.

The Phases discussed in this book comprise:

- 0 – Pre-Runic – the prehistory of the script
- I – Elder Futhark – first definitely runic texts
- II – Anglo-Frisian and bracteate texts – the first deviations
- III – Middle Anglo-Saxon texts and first Scandinavian deviations
- IV – Scandinavian Younger Futhark
- V – Scandinavian dotted and staveless runes

Furthermore, assumptions based on the practices of rune-users in the Viking period are often applied generally to all periods of runic usage, failing to take into account the highly specific cultural milieu of Scandinavia in the 8th-11th centuries. There was a distinct break in tradition between the Iron Age and the Viking period, reflected in language and societal outlook, in politics, religion, social structure and no less in the writing systems. The glamour of the Viking age, such as it is, has overshadowed both earlier and later strata of runic practice.

Since the topic of book is ‘literacy’ - i.e. the ability to encode and decode written signs, and to form linguistically meaningful texts - some discussion is necessary of the means by which reading and writing were passed on, the context of this transmission and the content of the texts themselves. This takes us into the realm of semiotics, and the use of script to convey not simply the words of the text but also the symbolic statement made by demonstrating the owner’s or user’s access to literacy. From there, we pass into texts as communication: are the intended readers conceived as contemporary human beings in the local community, successive generations of human beings, or as Otherworld powers? To be sure, the display value of runic texts does vary – there is a huge difference between a 3 metre high runestone with a bold carved inscription and a few runes scratched on the back of a brooch. These texts operate in different social and cultural milieux, yet both demonstrate access to and knowledge of writing.

Where possible, and means have allowed, I have studied runic texts at first hand (mainly through the cabinet glass in museums). This is not ideal for intensive study where magnification and good, moveable light are desirable, but it has at least offered me the opportunity to compare observations without relying solely on drawings and photographs.² Sadly, some important runic objects are no longer available for study, having been lost or destroyed. In a number of cases, the drawings have been made from study of the finds or from first-hand photographs.

² Antonsen, 2002, p.4-5 gives examples showing that mistakes are sometimes still made even when personal inspection takes place. Pieper, 2015, demonstrates the kind of results achievable with modern technology and a great deal of imagination and patience.

The scope of the book is the first millennium of runic practice, but the emphasis is on the earlier period – the ‘Iron Age’ - which in practical terms covers 100 BC to 900 AD, after which time Roman script had replaced runic in most of western Europe, and the influence of the ‘kingdom’ state model had begun to transform Scandinavian society. The main chapters centre on the earlier runic material – the Iron Age heritage and how it developed on the shores of the North Sea. In the nature of the case, I have had to use later data as evidence - for example, the complete set of rune-names is not recorded in any surviving document before the (probably 10th c.) *Old English Rune Poem*; and indeed it seems doubtful that the names were recorded there at the time of composition – they were probably added to the manuscript later. However, it is often necessary to cast the net wide in these matters if any kind of interpretation is to be offered. I have deliberately not pursued at any great length the later history of runes beyond the 10th century – short-twig, dotted and staveless – in Scandinavia for reasons of space, but there is some treatment of these topics in ch.5.

RUNOLOGY, RUNELORE AND LANGUAGE

Runes and runic texts are important because they provide direct, if limited, access to the earlier stages of some Germanic languages unmediated by foreign orthographic conventions.

The subject of runology – the study of runes and runic inscriptions – lacks a fully-fledged methodology which would allow a standardised and consistent approach to the transcription and study of the texts.³ The relationship of runology to the other disciplines with which it concerns itself most closely - archaeology, linguistics, palaeography, history – is also poorly defined. The basic methodology of the subject is still in development, despite a history of continuous research extending over more than two centuries:⁴ while there is broad agreement on transcription, interpretation is still very much open to the personal preferences of the investigator. This would matter less if there were not so much emotion and groundless speculation in the subject.

Runes existed as a set of tools available to the societies which used them, in which contemporary language could be recorded.⁵ The great benefit of a runic text is that it represents the attempt of a person to record his or her spoken language within a set of graphemic conventions. Fixed or customary spellings do not seem to have figured much in the transmission of literacy, so that it is more than probable that a runic text conveys a good deal of information about the writer’s perception of the sounds of his or her language at the time and place of writing - which need not correspond at all closely to the place of discovery.⁶ It is both encouraging and frustrating to discover that the progression of sound-changes which have appeared in text books for decades is generally borne out by the runic evidence, but there is a great deal more variation than was previously demonstrable. This helps the student of historical linguistics, but it also provides a multitude of spelling ‘anomalies’ which require explanation.

One example, which is met early in any student’s examination of the Phase I texts, is the variation in the final vowel of 3rd sing. dental preterites: -**ai** is found on the clasp from Nøvling

³ Fischer, 2005, p.48; Barnes, 2010; Barnes, 2012, p.7; Barnes, 2013

⁴ Barnes, 2013, p.9 notes that runic scripts have been studied in Scandinavia since the Renaissance.

⁵ Moltke, 1981, p.4

⁶ Findell, 2012

dating from ca. 200 AD **bidawarijaz talgidai** 'Bidawarijaz carved'; -e is found on the shield mount from Illerup Ådal 2 (again ca. 200 AD) **nīpijo tawide** 'Nīpijo made'; -a is found on the Skovgårde/Udby brooch (again ca. 200 AD) **lamo : talgida** 'Lamo (the lame one) carved'.⁷ These three texts all date from the same period and were found in the same general area, so dialectal or chronological variation should not be adducible in explanation of the differences. It is also assumed that each represents the active rather than the medio-passive form of the respective verb.

Each item is a decorative element in personal costume, very probably worn by locals and visitors alike, and thus not *necessarily* representative of the speech of the area where it was discovered and published. It is possible to suggest that

- (i) –**ai** and –**e** are both attempts to capture the quality of a final vowel which was necessarily unstressed in normal speech;
- (ii) –**a** is a shortened form of –**ai** due to space constraints (the reverse of the bow of a brooch);
- (iii) –**a** is a 1st sing. form so that **lamo talgida** means 'I, Lamo, carved (this)'.⁸

Without a fixed spelling tradition (or existing texts to copy from, since the 2nd c. AD stands at the beginning of runic literacy) each early writer must have been faced with decisions concerning the most appropriate spelling to use every time he composed a new text.

The language recorded in the earliest inscriptions is often assumed to be 'Scandinavian' (North Germanic) in character, largely due to the findspots in Denmark where a North Germanic language – Danish – is now the official medium of communication. A large part of the corpus shares both North and West Germanic features, and can be termed 'Ingvaemonic', 'North West Germanic' or 'North Sea Germanic'.⁹ The area now known as 'Denmark' came to be dominated by Danes in historical times, but many dialects of the region show strong links with the area to the south.

The fugitive nature of the texts is itself a contributory factor to the confusion surrounding the subject, since lightly incised lines are so easily overlooked or confused with random scratches and abrasion. Another factor is the use of runes as ideograms as well as graphemes for phonemes, which has to be factored into any thorough consideration of a puzzling text. A shield boss from Thorsberg (Denmark) (Fig.1)¹⁰ bears a retrograde series of runes **ansgzh** in which the second character is illustrated by Engelhardt, the excavator, as **†** /n/ but which others have interpreted as /i/ with a casual transverse scratch. The difference affects the reading of the word(s) and thus the interpretation of the text, which in any case represents a barely-pronounceable series of phonemes in need of expansion. Suggestions with /i/ have preponderated and include *aih s(i)g(i)z* 'I hold the victory' (von Grienberger); *ai s(i)giz h(libu) / h(i)* 'Sigi possesses this shield' (Bugge); *ais(a)g(aiza)z (ai)h* 'Eisgerr possesses (this)' (Noreen); *ais(i)g(a)z h(aite)* 'the raging (one) I am called', *ais(i)g(a)z, h(agla)* 'the raging hail' (Krause); *aiskz h(agla)* 'challenger of the hail (of arrows in battle)' (Antonsen). Matešić published a detailed

⁷ Looijenga, 2003, p.163; Losquiño, 2015, p.32-5; Nielsen, 2015, p.48; Nedoma, 2015, p.303; Zimmermann, 2015, p.417. Losquiño, 2015, p.43, 45 notes Herschend's suggestion that **lamo** might refer to the only lame being in the cemetery, a stallion, used as a metaphor for the rune-carver

⁸ Antonsen, 1996, p.10-1

⁹ Losquiño, 2015, p.11

¹⁰ Losquiño, 2015, p.152; Blankenfeldt, 2015; Matešić, 2015

photograph which shows the cross-stroke as very lightly incised, supporting the reading with ƿ (retrograde) rather than l as likely.¹¹ Imer accepted the reading with /n/ and proposed *ansg(aisa)z h(anda)* 'Ansg(aisa)z (made this by) hand'.¹² The wide range of published interpretations of a six-rune text show how much room there is for personal interpretation – and thus scope for professional disagreement.

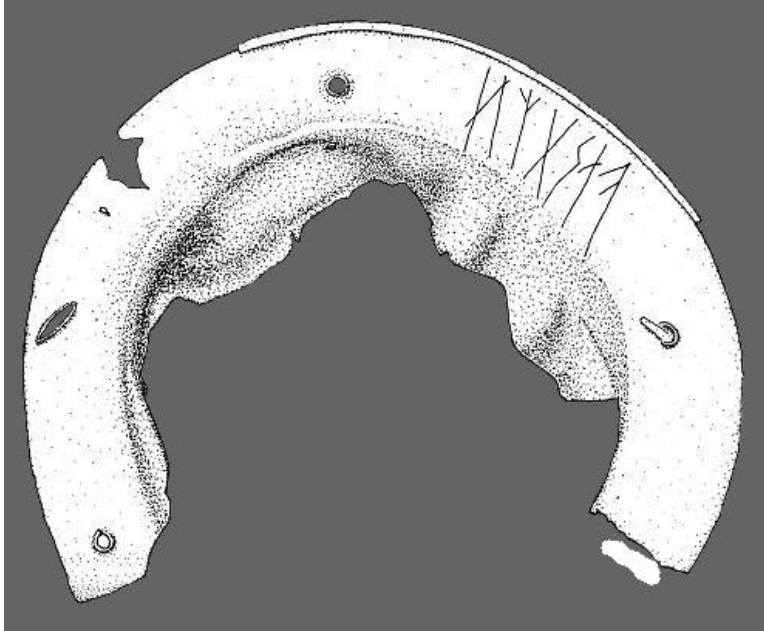


Fig.1. Thorsbjerg shield-boss with runic text incised on the flange.

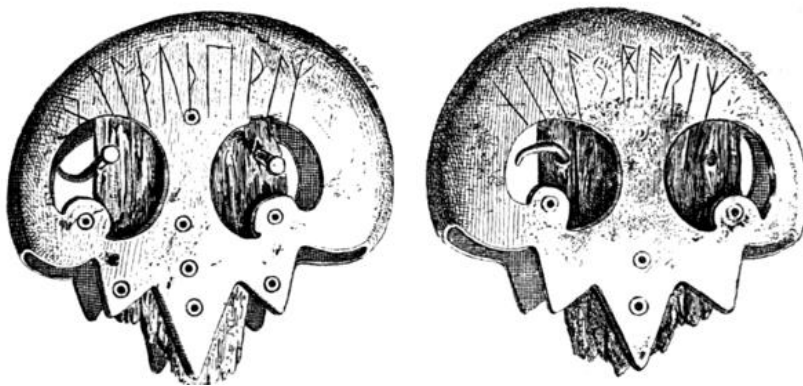


Fig.2 Thorsberg chape, obverse and reverse.

The runes appear in print today in a very tidy, idealized form. All such attempts to standardize the futhorc assume that there is an ideal shape for each runestave, but this is to some extent misleading since the variations between individual examples of every character can be quite dramatic – even fairly simple forms (e.g. ƿ) may have curved or straight branches (ƿ) which may join the staff at different heights and angles and extend to different lengths (ƿ ƿ).¹³ While this variation is inconvenient for the study of Anglo-Saxon runes, it is much more

¹¹ Matešić, 2015a, figs.5 and 6

¹² Imer, 215, p.112

¹³ Barnes, 2006

of a problem in studying later Scandinavian rune-rows where the relationships between long-branch and short-twig series can have implications for dating and interpretation.

Runes are an alphabetic script, since they rely on the principle of 'one character for one sound', as opposed to a syllabary, an ideogrammatic script or an abjad.¹⁴ Yet the character sequence does not follow the standard (ultimately Semitic) *alpha – beta* of European tradition seen in the Roman, Greek, Cyrillic and other scripts. The runes have their own unique order, discussed below (p.), which means that, while they were inspired by an alphabetic script, they are not a mere slavish copy of it but a conscious adaptation to the needs of speakers of a Germanic language.

What we know of Germanic society from the 1st c. AD onwards indicates that cultural life was dominated by the spoken word.¹⁵ Behaviour was regulated by orally transmitted laws. Agreements, contracts and marriages were formalised by the exchange of spoken oaths before witnesses. The reputations of warriors and statesmen were upheld or destroyed by the public performance of songs of praise or blame. The positions of leaders – kings, warlords, priests and others – were founded on a good reputation, transmitted orally. The adoption of writing changed that dramatically – the words of a song, law, riddle, story, agreement could now exist beyond the memory of those who heard it. But the development of a writing system was unable to topple the spoken word from its primacy – it took centuries of scribal output to make written evidence weightier than a personal account, a lawcode more powerful than native custom. To some extent, the process is not yet complete.

OLD ENGLISH 'RÚN'

The rich vocabulary of OE offers an opportunity to explore some aspects of the significance of the term 'rune'. The OE word *rún* had several meanings and derivatives, given in the Bosworth & Toller dictionary as:¹⁶

a whisper, speech not intended to be overheard, confidence, counsel, consultation. Citations include *gesittan tó rúne* 'to sit down together in consultation'; *hé ... folgeras sine rúnum arétte* 'he (Christ) told his followers of mysteries (of the kingdom of heaven)' (*Acts*, 1,3).

a mystery. Citations include *bæd him areccan hwæt séo rún bude* 'bade him tell what the mystery foretold' of a prescient dream.

a secret. *Rúne healdan* 'to keep secrets, keep one's mouth shut'.

that which is written, with the idea of mystery or magic. *Hé him bécstafas arédde and arehte hwæt séo rún bude* 'He read out the book-staves to them and told what the mystery foretold' (of enigmatic writing on a wall).

¹⁴ Spurkland, 2005, p.7

¹⁵ The term 'Germanic' here is a short-hand means of referring to the historical societies of northwest Europe using languages of the Germanic group. These societies were apparently aware of the linguistic connections between them to some degree, without assuming any political, social or emotional ties. (Roymans, 2004, p.2)

¹⁶ Cf. Fell, 1991, p.p.196-9; Page (1964), 1995, p.106; Barnes, 2013, p.25

a letter, a written sign. *Ræd sceal mon secgan, rúne wrítan, léop gesingan* ‘one must speak advice, scratch a rune, sing a lay’.

Bosworth & Toller also cite the Gothic phrase *rúna niman* ‘to take counsel’ as an example of the word’s first meaning, and Elliott cites the Wulfilan biblical phrase *runa þiudangardjos guþs* ‘the mystery of the kingdom of God’ for the second meaning.¹⁷ The meanings assigned to ON *rún* (pl. *rúnar* or *rúnir*) cover the same areas: mystery, secret knowledge, whispered conversation, magical sign, runic character.¹⁸

Orel offers four related series of Proto-Germanic forms derived from the root **rún-*.¹⁹ These are:

**rúna-stabaz* (masculine) with derived forms ON *rúnastafr* ‘runic letter’, OE *rúnstæf* ‘runic letter’, OHG *rūnstab* ‘letter, character’; a compound of **rúno* and **stabaz* (stave).

**rúnjan* (neuter) with derived forms Gothic *garuni* ‘counsel, council’, ON *rýni* ‘scrutiny, contemplation’, OE *rýne* ‘mystery’, OS *girūni* ‘mystery’, OHG *garūni* ‘mystery’. (The *-j-* causes i-mutation of the vowel /u/ to /y/ in OE and ON.)

**rúnó* (feminine) with derived forms Gothic *runa* ‘mystery, secret’, ON *rún* ‘secret, mystery, rune’, OE *rún* ‘whisper, mystery, secret, rune’, OS *rūna* ‘confidential talk, advice’, OHG *rūna* ‘mystery’.

**rúnón* (masculine) with derived forms ON *rúni* ‘counsellor, friend’, OE *gerúna* ‘counsellor’, OHG *girūno* ‘counsellor’.

Orel cites Hittite cognates *hurlaliia* ‘to chant a magical formula’ and *harwaši* ‘hidden, secret’ from the older literature, as well as noting the Celtic comparanda such as Old Irish *rún* ‘secret, mystery’, Welsh *rhin* ‘secret, mystery, charm’, Breton *rin* ‘secret, wisdom’.²⁰ A link to Greek forms such as *ἐπεῖναι* and *ἐῖποι* ‘to ask, to seek’ is also suggested.

The use of the OE word *rúnstæf* ‘rune-stave’ reminds us that there is a distinction to be drawn between the physical characters – the staves – and their conceptual content. When the OE text refers to *gesittan tó rúne* this means the ‘thoughts, concepts, ideas, advice’ without any necessary reference to the physical representation of thoughts as writing.

In Scandinavian inscriptions, the noun **runo**, a singular form, often appears to mean ‘text, writing, message’ as in the sequence **writuiruno** ‘I/we wrote [the message] in runes’ on the Eikeland (Norway) fibula.²¹

¹⁷ Elliott, 1958, p.1

¹⁸ Spurkland, 2005, p.3; Findell, 2014, p.8

¹⁹ Orel, 2003, p.310

²⁰ Matasovic, 2009; Hyllested, 2010, p.110

²¹ Antonsen, 2002, p.70-1; Looijenga, 2003, p.352; Findell, 2014, p.9; Knirk, 2015; contra Spurkland, 2005, p.25-7. The upper edge of the text is damaged in places. The text reads **ekwizwiwiowritu[]runoazsni** which presents some syntactical difficulties: the first five runes **ekwiz** may mean ‘I, Wir’ (personal name) with verb **writu** (1st sing. present active) but this might also be read as **writum** ‘we wrote’ with short root vowel; the bind-rune **az** after **runo** should indicate a nom.sing.masc. noun, but syntax requires acc.sing./pl.fem. for the object here; if the bind-rune is read **za**, i.e. **runozasni** the plural **runoz** is present, but the string **asni** is misplaced however it is construed; if **az** is syntactically part of the following sequence **sni**, the word must be written sinistrograde **insaz** contrary to the rest of the text. Other solutions have been proposed, but none completely convinces.

The OE word *rún* survived into Middle English in the verb *roun*, *round* meaning ‘to whisper, talk secretly’ with its derived noun *roun* ‘whispering, secret speech’.²² The development of forms with the spelling *-ou-* indicate that the OE word featured a long vowel /ru:n/ as did the Norse cognate form *rún*. The modern German cognate *raunen* still means ‘to whisper’ and in Swiss German *Raun* is ‘secret ballot’.²³ The modern English word ‘rune’, like the German *Runen*, is borrowed from one of the Scandinavian languages, and is not a direct descendant of the OE word.

THE ‘SECRET’ RUNE

There are a number of figurative or poetic uses of *rún* in compounds where the meaning appears to include ‘secret intention’. The classic example is *Beowulf* (1.499-505) where the hero’s arrival at *Heorot* meets with the disapproval of the king’s *þyle*, Hunferþ:

*Hunferð mæpelode, Ecglafes bearn,
þe æt fótum sæt fréan Scyldinga,
onband beadurúne – wæs him Béowulfes sið,
móðges merefaran, micel æþþunca
forþon hé ne uúþe þæt ænig óðer man
æfre mæwrða þon má middangeardes
gehedde under heofenum þonne hé sylfa:
“Eart þú se Béowulf se þe wið Breca wunne
on sídne sá ymb sundflite
ðær git for wlence wada cunnedon
ond for dolgilpe on déop wæter
aldrum néþdon? ...”*

Beowulf, l. 499–510

*Unferth spoke, the son of Ecglaf
who sat at the feet of the Scyldings’ lord,
he unbound a battle-rune – to him was Beowulf’s journey,
the brave man’s sea-trip, a great displeasure
for he would not allow that any other man
greater fame ever in middle-earth
had earnt under the heavens than he himself:
“Are you the Beowulf who fought with Breca
over the broad sea in a swimming contest,
where you both tested the waves for your pride,
and in deep water, for foolish boasting
you risked your lives? ...”*

²² Bishop, 2007

²³ Krause, 1993, p.9

The phrasing is odd – the poet does not say that Unferþ opened his mouth, or cleared his throat, or glared over his ale-horn. Instead he ‘unbound a battle-rune’ (or ‘bound on’ a battle-rune since the prefix *on-* need not stand for *un-*) before speaking.²⁴ While the context makes it clear that this act marked the beginning of an adversarial exchange between the spokesman and the honoured visitor, it is a very poetic way of stating this and it may have been a customary motif, saying that the *pyle* girded himself (‘bound on’) with a stratagem for victory, a secret of warfare, a battle-rune.

Similar phrasing occurs twice in *Elene* where (l.28) we learn that *wulf on wealde wælrúne ne mād* ‘the wolf in the woods did not hide the slaughter-rune’ (i.e. did not make a secret of his intention to kill) and (l.1097-8) *Cyriacus on caluarie hléor onhýlde, hygerúne ne mād* ‘Cyriacus on Calvary inclined his head, did not hide the thought-rune’ (i.e. did not make a secret of his heart’s intention). In *Juliana*, the heroine’s intended fate is revealed (l.609-11) *sipþan héo gehyrde hæleð eahtian inwitrúne, þæt hyre endestæf of gewindagum weorþan sceolde* ‘once she heard the champion declare a hate-rune, that for her a conclusion to the days of strife should come about’ (i.e. declared a murderous intention). In *Maxims I* (l.84-6) a noblewoman’s qualities should include being *léof mid hyre léodum, leohtmód wesan, rúne healdan, rúmheort béon* ‘dear among her folk, to be cheerful, to keep a secret, to be great-hearted’ with an obvious opposition of keeping (secrets) versus giving (being *leohtmód* and *rúmheort*). In all these cases, the sense seems to include both secrecy and internal mental processes. This notion is borne out by the *Exeter Book* riddle:

*Ic wæs be sonde, sæwealle néah,
æt merefarope, mínum gewunade
frumstapole fæst. Féa énig wæs
monna cynnes, þæt mínne þær
on anæde eard behéolde,
ac mec uhtna gehwám yð sío brúne
lagufæðme beléolc. Lyt ic wénde
þæt ic ær oþþe síð áfre sceolde
ofer meodubence múðleas sprecan,
wordum wrixlan. Ðæt is wundres dæl,
on sefan searolic þam þe swylc ne conn,
hú mec seaxes ord ond seo swíþre hond,
eorles ingeþonc ond ord somod,
þingum geþydan, þæt ic wiþ þé sceolde
for unc ánum twám árendspræce
abéodan bealdlice, swá hit beorna má
uncre wordcwidas widdor ne máenden.*

Exeter Book, Riddle 58 ‘secret message carved on wood’

*I was by the sound, near the sea-wall,
at my sea-strand I abode,*

²⁴ Page (1964), 1995, p.110

*firm in my place. There were few
 of mankind who there could see
 my dwelling in the wasteland
 but every dawn the dark wave
 locked me in its watery embrace. I little hoped
 that sooner or later I should ever
 - mouthless – speak over the bench
 share words. That is a deal of wonder
 cunning in the mind – to those who do not know
 how a knife's point and the right hand
 a man's intention and point together
 may join so that for you I might make
 a message-text for us two alone,
 boldly make it known so that other men
 might not understand our own word-speech.*

In one Continental treatise on secret messages, the term *clopfrūna* 'knock- or tap-runes' is used to denote messages sent by tapping, presumably in the manner of Morse code. There is no suggestion that the fupark played any part in this system of encryption, which took the name *-rūna* due to the element of secrecy involved.²⁵ As we shall see, notions of secrecy have clustered round the runes throughout their history.

WRITING AND SCRIBING


The action of creating text is called in English 'writing', with a different etymology from the words in most western European languages where the source is most often Latin *scribere* (French *écrire*, German *schreiben*, Italian *scrivere*, etc.). The modern English word is derived from OE *writan* 'write', originally 'cut, scratch' which agrees rather well with the process of creating runes on metal, stone, wood, etc.²⁶ The verb occurs very early in runic texts: the Phase I inscription on the Reistad stone reads **idriŋaz / ek wakraz:unnamz / wraitā** 'Idringaz (of noble descent), I, Wakraz (wakeful) the untakeable wrote [runes]'.²⁷ The Sievern bracteate bears the retrograde text **rwritu** usually read as **rúnóz writu* 'I write (the) runes'.²⁸ A Phase III text on a bone plaque from Derbyshire (England) ends **...haddaþiþiswrat** i.e. *Hadda þe þis wrát*

²⁵ Derolez, 1991, p.96-7; Ringe, 2006, p.257

²⁶ Elliott, 1958, p.19; Morris, 1988, p.144; Fischer, 2005, p.63; Barnes, 2012, p.2

²⁷ Antonsen, 1981, p.57; Antonsen, 2002, p.5-8, 27; Looijenga, 2003, p.346; Barnes, 2012, p.28 and Barnes, 2013, p.15 offers alternative readings of the text which agree only in the assignment of the sequence – **nam-** to the verbal root meaning 'take'. The presence of the unstressed –**a** ending on the 1st sing. preterite of a strong verb is unusual and possibly revealing, since vowels in this environment are not recorded in other Gmc. texts (e.g. Gothic *wrait*, OE *wrát*, etc). However the Type C bracteate from Trollhättan (IK 639, published in Axboe & Källström, 2013) bears the text **ekerilaz • mariþeubazhaite • wraitalaþo** in which the text-string **wraitalaþo** may be analysed as **wrait alaþo* 'wrote alaþo' or **wraitā laþo* 'wrote laþu'.

²⁸ Antonsen, 2002, p.216, 280-2. The PGmc verb is cited as **faihiĵanan* while Orel, 2003, cites **faixĵanan*.

‘... Hadda who wrote this’.²⁹ A tiny runic text on the triangular plaque of a bookmark from Baconsthorpe, Norfolk (Fig.3), has been read as **redę se þe cuinne bæaw þas rune awrat** ‘may he who is able read (this). Bæaw wrote these runes’ with the (almost) unique rune  for a front vowel here transcribed ‘ę’.³⁰ This form occurs in a handful of late manuscripts dealing with runic alphabets, but is otherwise unknown.

The verb also occurs on the reverse of a 6th-7th c. s-brooch at Weingarten (Germany), where the owner scratched **feha i writ la** and **alirgub**; the verbal form may be a contraction of *writit* ‘writes’ or *writu* ‘I write’.³¹



Fig.3 The Baconsthorpe fragment

A secondary activity in creating runes is colouring them,³² found in words such as **faihido** ‘I painted’ on the Vetteland and Einang (Norway) stones.³³ The Noleby stone’s text opens with the sequence **runofahi** ‘I paint a rune’.³⁴ Red, white and other pigment has been detected on some Scandinavian runestones, as well as on the runic gravestone from St. Paul’s churchyard, London. It is of course possible that the carver followed an inked or carved-bone exemplar when creating the design, and laid it out in painted lines before taking up his chisel.

Another term is **talgidai** ‘he made’ or better ‘he carved’ found on the Nøvling brooch.³⁵ A few runic objects do not have the runes carved into the surface, but are instead created by leaving

²⁹ Bammesberger, 1991a, p.131-4; McKinnell & Simek, 2004, p.110

³⁰ Hines, 2011

³¹ Looijenga, 2003, p.262-3; Schwab, 2006, p.249-52

³² Elliott, 1958, p.19; Fischer, 2005, p.63

³³ Moltke, 1981a; Morris, 1988, p.144-5; Antonsen, 2002, p.174; Looijenga, 2003, p.343; Spurkland, 2005, p.42. The term may have been extended to writing generally in some dialects, as it appears occasionally on bracteates where there is no evidence that paint would have been used.

³⁴ Antonsen, 2002, p.180-1; Looijenga, 2003, p.333

³⁵ Morris, 1988, p.144; Fischer, 2005, p.63. Antonsen, 2002, p.10-11, 48 notes that the verbal ending **ai** is unexpected, and should read **talgide**. A copying error is the usual explanation, although it may be the runemaster’s attempt to show a long vowel /e:/ in an unstressed syllable.

the runes reserved while the background is removed: the Franks Casket is a fine example of this procedure.

A fourth word is **werkjan* ‘work, create, produce through effort’ as on the Tune runestone’s **worahto** ‘I made [the stone]’.³⁶ The act of creation is implicit in the term *weorc wuldorfæder* ‘the work of the glory-father’ used to describe the divine creation of the world in *Cædmon’s Hymn*.

On the Gummarp stone, the verb used is ‘set’ (i.e. set down) in the phrase **hAþuwolAfA sAte stAbA þriA fff** ‘Hapuwulf set staves three’ followed by three instances of the *fé* rune.³⁷

A bracteate from Hitsum, Friesland (IK76) bears the retrograde text **fozo groba**.³⁸ The interpretation is disputed but it is possible that the second word is the 3rd sing. preterite of **graban* ‘dig, cut, incise’ referring to the grooves of the runes.³⁹ Although not an early text and only partly runic, the Manchester (England) gold ring bears the legend **æDRED MEC AH EAnRED MEC agROf** ‘Ædred owns me, Eanred graved me’ using the strong verb (Class VI) *grafan* ‘dig, scratch, engrave’.⁴⁰ The text is usually assigned to the 9th c. and mixes Roman with runic quite freely.

Although not really a term for writing, the verbal form **tawide** ‘made, created, prepared’ occurs on several rune-inscribed objects and may relate to the production of both artefact and text. It is found on the Gallehus horn (p.) and on the Stenmagle (Garbølle) wooden chest **hagiradaz : tawide** ‘Hagiradaz made [this]’.⁴¹

The verb **deda** ‘did’ is used in the sense ‘made, created’ on the Frisian Oostum bone in the text ***ælb*kabu* / deda * habuku ***. The parsing and sense of the text has been argued over for a long time, but most commentators agree that the second phrase contains words cognate with OE *dyde heafoc* ‘Hawk made’, with **habuku** a personal name.⁴²

The early texts often adopt the colometric principle whereby words and sense-units are marked off by colons – the Gallehus horn is a good example of this () and it is also used on bracteates.⁴³ Other runemasters adopted the stichometric principle whereby sense-units occupy separate lines of text, as on the Kjølveik (Norway) stone (see below). On some Viking period runestones, alternate words were coloured with red and black paint to mark them off from each other.

³⁶ Morris, 1988, p.144; Spurkland, 2005, p.35-40; Fischer, 2005, p.62

³⁷ Antonsen, 2002, p.184; McKinnell & Simek, 2004, p.56-8

³⁸ Losquiño, 2015, p.129ff discusses the word **fozo** as a personal name.

³⁹ Looijenga, 2003, p.208; Losquiño, 2015, p.128-32

⁴⁰ Findell, 2014, p.38

⁴¹ Antonsen, 2002, p.11; Looijenga, 2003, p.153, 164; Barnes, 2012, p.29. Fischer, 2005, p.61 objects that we do not know whether Hagiradaz made the box or carved the text, but the parallel use of the verb with a direct object **horna** at Gallehus makes it most likely that it refers to creating the object (Losquiño, 2015, p.34).

⁴² Looijenga, 2003, p.304; Barnes, 2012, p.52. Bammesberger, 1991b, p.307 suggests the meaning ‘he has bestowed’ for **deda**, which would remove this phrase from the class of ‘maker’ texts and place it as a ‘donor’ text.

⁴³ Makaev, 1996, p.49-51

Texts were generally carefully cut, but errors do occur. The Kjølevik inscription reads in retrograde:⁴⁴ **hadulaikaz / ekhagustadaz / hlaaiwidomaguminino**.⁴⁵ The first word is presumably a personal name, either *Handulaikaz or *Haþulaikaz; the latter is less likely since the omission of nasals (*had- for *hand-) is a regular phenomenon of Phase I texts while incorrect use of /d/ for /θ/ is almost unparalleled. The second line is usually amended to *ek *hagustaldaz*, the latter a common word for an unmarried warrior: OE *hægsteald*, the settler of a *hæg* or plot of land insufficient to support a family, also found in the text from Valsfjord **ek hagustaldaz þewaz godagas** ‘I (am a) young warrior, servant of Godagas’.⁴⁶ In the third line, the carver made an error by cutting **hlf** (**haa**) instead of **hla** (**hla**) and had to cover his mistake by adding a small stroke to the **h** to form a bind-rune **hl** while leaving the /a/ doubled. The text thus reads ‘Ha(n)dulaikaz / I, a young warrior / buried my son/kinsman’.

The use of runes was confined to certain Germanic-speaking communities. Many of these were later exposed to some form of Roman script. These societies then had to choose whether to abandon runes in favour of Roman script (e.g. later Merovingian Francia), to retain runes as the preferred written medium (e.g. Scandinavia) or to use both scripts side-by-side for different purposes (e.g. Anglo-Saxon England). Anderson noted the polarising tendency in early mediaeval scholarship:⁴⁷ “Some recent studies concerning early medieval Europe have suggested that Scandinavia and Francia represented two ideological poles with which other populations within the Germanic world might have intended to align themselves. While such a view sometimes may be useful, it may also over-simplify a more complex situation. Scandinavians must have recognised cultural distinctions between themselves and Christian Europeans, but may not have viewed these distinctions necessarily as emblems of opposition unless faced by a direct political or military threat. Indeed, ideological contrasts concerning the way society was structured and power was wielded may have cut across apparent ethnic boundaries.” Anderson is of course correct in the broad picture, with each polity taking its own decisions regarding the extent to which it developed its traditions in matters of political alignment, religion, commercial connections and so on. Yet the adoption or rejection of Roman script appears to have been consistent with a more general willingness or reluctance to reject traditional values of many kinds. The Anglo-Saxons stood firmly between the two extremes and benefitted from accepting aspects of post-Roman mediaeval culture while retaining strong connections to their own heritage.

GRAPHEMES AND ALLOGRAPHS

A *grapheme* is the smallest meaningful unit in a written language, corresponding in some ways to the *phoneme* of a spoken language.⁴⁸ Graphemes include alphabetic letters, numerical digits, punctuation marks and the other individual symbols of writing systems.





⁴⁴ Insley, 1991, p.326; Antonsen, 2002, p.204; Looijenga, 2003, p.344; Spurkland, 2005, p.43; Barnes, 2012, p.180-3

⁴⁵ Looijenga, 2003, p.359; Barnes, 2012, p.29









⁴⁶ Antonsen, 2002, p.227; Spurkland, 2005, p.47. Insley, 1991, p.326-7 prefers to read **hagustadaz** as a personal name.





⁴⁷ Anderson, 1999, summary

⁴⁸ Barnes, 2013, p.17

The runic tradition always featured *allographs* or ‘permissible alternatives’, variant letter-shapes which were recognised and would not compromise legibility.⁴⁹ Examples include the forms  and  which both denote the sound /s/ and the variants  and  for /e/. Likewise, there were certainly *allophones*, variant sounds which were accepted as equivalent, such as the various pronunciations of /r/ found across the English-speaking world which do not prevent communication.

The need for some means of writing allophones would only have been felt when the allophones became phonemic, i.e. pairs of words were distinguished solely by the contrast between these sounds. The words ‘beak’ and ‘peak’ are separated by the initial sounds /b/ and /p/; ‘peak’ and ‘pick’ are separated by the length of the vowel /i:/ and /i/; ‘pick’ and ‘pig’ are separated by the final sounds /k/ and /g/. (Customary spelling is not always a reliable guide here – ‘ck’ and ‘k’ represent the same sound, and ‘ea’ or ‘ee’ can be the spelling of the lengthened version of the vowel /i/.) This phenomenon is called ‘contrastive distribution’ and its allocation changes over time: few English dialects today recognise the distinction in vowel sound between ‘pour’ and ‘poor’, although this was not the case until the middle of the 20th century. Likewise the distinction between ‘wear’ (with /w/) and ‘where’ (with /#/) is only realised in a handful of conservative dialects.

Odenstedt is correct in stating that some allographs can be used to date the texts in which they are found.⁵⁰ The forms  for /e/,  and  for /j/ and  for /s/ can all be assigned to the period before circa 400 AD, and do not appear to form part of the tradition brought to Britain by the Angles. Likewise a date after circa 450 AD can be assigned to  for /j/ and  for /z/ or /R/. Odenstedt regards  for /k/ as a late form, after circa 450 AD, which is generally true, but it should be remarked that the presence of a rune with this shape with the value /s/ may also indicate an Early or Middle Saxon text, e.g. the Chessell Down sword fitting () and St. Cuthbert’s coffin.⁵¹ It is therefore important to consider context as well as form when assessing a runic text.

Since each inscription was ‘hand-made’ and executed by a technician, each was to some extent unique.⁵² Thus variations in form were unavoidable depending on the inscriber’s tools and the space available. The rune **raiðo* with the canonical form  for example, might appear elsewhere with slightly different configurations such as    etc. The only notable exception to this principle appears on Anglo-Saxon coins where a series of pre-formed punches were used to create both letters and runes, as well as the various pellets and other marks that formed the standardised design of the coin series.

A NOTE ON TRANSLITERATION

In the following, I routinely transliterate runes into Roman letters for convenience. It is important to remember that a transliterated text is not the same as the original, and represents the transliterator’s final decision as to the graphemes being presented.⁵³ Runes are marked by

⁴⁹ Barnes, 2013, p.17

⁵⁰ Odenstedt, 1990, p.9

⁵¹ Derolez, 1983, p.83; Page, 1994, p.112-3; Hines, 1996, p.56; Barnes, 2012, p.46

⁵² Odenstedt, 1990, p.15. Odenstedt is sometimes arbitrary in his choices of runes for inclusion or exclusion.

⁵³ Barnes, 2012, p.4

bold typeface retaining the original word divisions as far as possible e.g. **fiscflodu**. on the Franks Casket without separation of *fisc* from *flodu* and with a following point.⁵⁴

One deviation from standard transcription has been adopted for convenience. Bind-runes are marked with an underscore (e.g. **ga** on the Undley bracteate) rather than the superscript slur normally used. Since a bind-rune is a combination of characters, there is always some uncertainty about the order of the constituents, so that **ga** could also be read as **ag**.

Interpunction is represented by groups of dots ., :, ÷, etc. as on the Gallehus horn although many texts do not use any form of word-separator.⁵⁵

Line division is marked with slashes: **frifridil/du/ft/mik/ll** (the Bülach disc brooch).⁵⁶ Missing, obscured or indistinct runes are marked by a point for each imputed character within square brackets, e.g. **[.]ewor[.]el[.]u** (the Cramond finger ring).

When discussing the sounds for which the runes stand, I use the standard convention of putting the character within slashes e.g. /æ/ denotes the vowel 'æ', and /bæt/ denotes the pronunciation of the word 'bat' in Standard Modern English. The notation is merely phonemic and does not try to capture the subtle nuances of pronunciation in narrow phonetic transcription, which are lost to us. A colon after a vowel denotes that it is pronounced long (/a:/) whereas in Roman script this feature is often represented by a macron (ā) or an acute accent (á). The following characters need special attention:

/ã/ denotes a low back vowel with nasalisation, like the French word *an* 'year';

/æ/ denotes a low mid-front vowel, as in Modern English 'cat';

/β/ denotes a voiced labial continuant, like a /v/ pronounced with both the lips rather than the teeth on the lower lip;

/č/ denotes a palatalised /k/, as in Modern English 'chin';

/ç/ denotes a voiceless palatal continuant as in German *ich*;

/ɣ/ denotes a voiced velar continuant, like /x/ below but voiced to produce a guttural growl;

/ʒ/ denotes a voiced palatal continuant;

/ʃ/ denotes an aspirate with lip-rounding, the sound heard at the beginning of words such as 'where', 'what' and 'which' in some northern English dialects;

/j/ is a semivowel, like the 'y' in 'year';

/ŋ/ is a nasal consonant, the sound of 'ng' in 'singer', but note that some English dialects automatically include a following /g/ so that 'singer' and 'finger' rhyme; the word 'finger' would be transcribed /fiŋgə/ for Standard Modern English and 'singer' as /siŋə/;

⁵⁴ Odenstedt, 1990, p.140-1 discusses Page's (1962) attempt to re-introduce an alternative transliteration method for English texts, originally proposed by Bruce Dickens, using quotes and spacing conventions. I have not followed Page's suggestions in this book because, while potentially useful, they are too cumbersome for a work of the kind presented here and they imply that the English material is essentially different from the Scandinavian and Continental texts (which, in general, it is not). The use of two systems side-by-side seems rather pointless in a general book about the subject.

⁵⁵ Elliott, 1958, p.19; Morris, 1998, p.17

⁵⁶ Looijenga, 2003, p.234-5; Nedoma, 2006, p.135; Waldispühl, 2014

/œ/ is a lip-rounded medial vowel, as in German *ö*;

/R/ is 'palatal r', a sound which developed in Scandinavia from the PGmc phoneme /z/, probably pronounced /ž/ somewhat like the initial of the name *Zsazsa* or the French *je*;

/θ/ denotes the voiceless dental fricative, the 'th' sound in *theme*; this sound is sometimes represented by /p/ in phonetic transcriptions;

/ð/ denotes the voiced dental fricative, the 'th' sound in *them*;

/x/ denotes a voiceless velar fricative, like the 'ch' in Scottish *loch*;

/ž/ - see /R/

/ə/ denotes a central unstressed vowel, found as the last syllable in words such as 'China', 'finger', etc.

/ʔ/ denotes the 'glottal stop' heard in London English pronunciation of words such as 'utter', 'bitter', etc.

2. SCOPE OF THE ENQUIRY

Rune (n) 1a. Any of the characters in several alphabets used by ancient Germanic peoples from the 3rd to the 13th century. b. A similar character in another alphabet, sometimes believed to have magic powers. 2. A poem or incantation of mysterious significance, especially a magic charm.

American Heritage Dictionary

R.I. Page set out the principal requirements for students of runes in a wry statement:⁵⁷

...the runologist needs two contrasting qualities, imagination and scepticism. The first gives him insight into the 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.

Page was a very much in the ‘sceptical’ camp, a useful foil to the unrestricted imagination of so much commentary on the subject, especially among writers catering to the popular markets.⁵⁸ Indeed, Ebbinghaus once remarked that “Many, perhaps most, publications concerned with the Germanic runes are marred by the unbridled flights of phantasy of their respective authors.”⁵⁹ The situation has not noticeably improved in the early 21st c., and the study of runes has almost split into two separate areas of focus, one rigorous and linguistics-based, the other loose, vague, romantic and sometimes vacuous.

It hardly needs stating that every runologist must be imaginative to some degree. Runes are not mathematical symbols attached to unvarying concepts, and every attempt at a reading must bring into play a wide range of interpretive skills. The main difference lies in the relative weights the scholar is willing to give to the linguistic and cultural evidence.

It is illuminating to reflect that almost every early text has suffered from competing interpretations i.e. various scholars have offered alternative readings of the runes themselves, and different suggestions as to the meaning of the text. This indicates that the science lacks a clear and practical methodology by which inscriptions may be interpreted. However, before we condemn runologists summarily, we should recall that the texts themselves are often exceptionally difficult to work with – few have such basic aids to reading as consistent word-division markers or a consistent direction of inscription. There are also relatively few early (Phase I – III) texts for the student to analyse.

ACTIVE AND PASSIVE LITERACY

Modern western children are taught to read and to write at an early age, typically beginning around five years old. For such children, the acquisition of these skills goes hand-in-hand with the basics of arithmetic, and constitutes the fundamental objective of early learning: ‘the three

⁵⁷ Page, 1999, p.12; cf. Page (1964), 1995

⁵⁸ Düwel & Heizmann, 2006, p.32 suggest that a runologist must consider all the evidence when evaluating a text, from the fantastical to the banal.

⁵⁹ Cited in Bammesberger, 1991, p.9

Rs' (reading, writing and 'rithmetic) are often mentioned in Britain in contexts of basic education.

In fact, there are two completely different skill-sets involved in reading and writing, and it is fair to say that 'passive literacy' (the ability to read) has always been much more widespread than 'active literacy' (the ability to write). This is important in as much as it may contextualise the small numbers of surviving texts: writing was the accomplishment of the few, while reading was available, at some level, to the many.

Fischer has argued that the consumption of texts by readers automatically places them in an inferior position to that of the producers of the texts, the writers. This had consequences for the politics of text production in the Late Roman and post-Roman worlds.⁶⁰ There were four main writing systems available to Germanic-speakers in the 5th c. – Roman, Greek, Gothic and runic. The choice of using one system in preference to the others may have been determined by historical factors, but it also indicated to contemporaries the political and religious alignment of the text producers and their intended consumers.

A HEATHEN PERIL?

There can be no doubt that there was a very lively tradition of writing in runes in England at the time of the arrival of the missionaries, and that this tradition was brought to England by the Angles, Saxons and other cohorts from their continental homeland.

Antonsen, *Runes and Germanic Linguistics*

The use of runes was early associated with religious activities and what we would now term 'magic', although the Anglo-Saxons and other users of the script would probably not have recognised the distinction. There are runes on many of the gold bracteates which most scholars would agree held religious (or at least cultic) significance – runes were used in a spiritual context. The bracteates are clearly heathen (i.e. pre-Christian) and they sought to harness the power of writing for the élite and the priesthoods of the societies that used them, mainly in Scandinavia but with lesser concentrations around the North Sea coasts including England.

Most of the surviving texts are neither magical nor religious in the narrower senses.⁶¹ It is worth stressing at the outset that in all the Phase I texts - and indeed in all known runic texts predating the 6th c. - there are no certain references to gods, the main exceptions being the protothemes of personal names such as *Ansugislaz* 'hostage of the Æsir'.⁶² The texts give the personal names in a matter-of-fact manner, and there is no reason to believe that these name elements were recorded in runes for cultic purposes. There are of course a few texts which treat the runes ↑*teiwaz, †*ansuz, (and ♦*inguz?) as ideograms, which need to be taken into account since the reconstructed names for these graphemes are also the names of deities.

When the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms converted to Christianity in the 7th century, they did not abandon the use of their script. In fact, the majority of English runic texts date from the period

⁶⁰ Fischer, 2013, p.99

⁶¹ McKinnell & Simek, 2004, p.7; Barnes, 2012, p.8

⁶² Antonsen, 2002, p.14

after conversion. Christianity is above all a religion of 'the book', like the other Abrahamic traditions, and writing became the tool of a powerful élite group – but among the Anglo-Saxons it was not confined to pen and ink on vellum.⁶³ The Anglo-Saxon church embraced the use of runes as a means of spreading knowledge of their religion, just as they used richness in display and powerful imagery to exhibit control and authority to those who could not read. St. Augustine's instruction from Pope Gregory was to disturb the places of worship of the English as little as possible in order not to provoke antagonism; this policy was presumably carried over into many other aspects of daily life.⁶⁴

It is probably no coincidence that the Anglo-Saxon experience was adapted among some Scandinavians. Among the first runestones in Denmark is the one at Jellinge (stone 2, p.) on which King Hárálðr established his authority as the king who made the Danes Christian.

Evison, the noted scholar of early Anglo-Saxon metalwork, controversially suggested that runes were not introduced during the heathen period at all but rather came in alongside Roman script at the introduction of Christianity.⁶⁵ This view has been comprehensively refuted by many finds, old and more recent, and by the evidence of the runic forms, but it does demonstrate that the association of runic and Roman literacy with the Christian church was firmly established in the scholarship of the mid-20th c.

Bishop reported Fell's argument that the OE word *rún* had no non-Christian associations for the Anglo-Saxons until the Danish wars of the 9th c. and later, whereby a strict division was made between (good, Anglo-Saxon, Christian) letters and (bad, Scandinavian, pagan) runes.⁶⁶ This view accords with the work of Henrik Williams, who disputes any meaning in the runes other than their practical purpose as script.⁶⁷ Yet it misses the essential point that for a speaker of Old English, the word *rún* did not primarily mean 'writing' at all – its meaning was closer to 'mystery' or 'secret knowledge'.

Runes continued in use in Scandinavia into the 12th and 13th c. and beyond, by which time they were regularly used for Christian purposes as the new religion spread into the interior from the seats of royal power and influence.⁶⁸ However, with the Puritan impulses of the 17th c. laws were passed in Iceland against the use of runes (which implies that runes were still in use there) and some people were put to death when runes were found in their possession.⁶⁹

⁶³ Elliott, 1958, p.42; Derolez, 1983, p.72

⁶⁴ Antonsen, 2002, p.37-8

⁶⁵ Reported in Hawkes & Page, 1967, p.18; cf. *ibid.* p.24

⁶⁶ Bishop, 2007, p.3 (source not given).

⁶⁷ Williams, 2004

⁶⁸ Elliott, 1958, p.28

⁶⁹ Elliott, 1958, p.30 The rune-holders were burnt, a punishment often reserved for witches and practitioners of black magic. An official edict of 1639 outlawed the use of runes in Iceland.

