The First Writing

Script Invention as History and Process

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To Anders Bliss Houston and Hannah McCrea Houston
First in all things, and in my heart

9 Reasons for runes

HENRIK WILLIAMS

Compared to ancient classical scripts, the old Germanic runes are a young and unsophisticated relative from a remote corner of the world. Runes may be called young, since, at the time when they first appear, almost all major writing systems in the world were already invented. The runic script may also be thought unsophisticated or uncomplicated in several respects. First, it is alphabetic and thus does not include the large sign lists and heavy logographic component of other scripts discussed in this volume. Yet, even here, runic writing is a somewhat unrefined member of its class. It does not, for example, fully utilize the inherent abilities of alphabetic systems. There is no doubling of graphemes to denote long phonemes, and features such as word division and marking of nasals before homorganic consonants are optional. Second, even the execution of runic inscriptions is often inelegant: letters are incised with a broad range of tools in almost any kind of material, some of which are less than ideal media for writing, such as metal and stone. The texts are short, often only a word or two in length, and sometimes uninterpretable even by readers of that time. Even worse is that there are so irritatingly few runic inscriptions, only a couple of hundred from the first half-millennium of our era, even if we count generously. Third, runic inscriptions are not associated with a group of people otherwise renowned for cultural achievements. The Germanic tribes in southern Scandinavia and the northern part of the European continent are not, for good reasons, counted among the classical civilizations, at least not if we demand impressive buildings, extensive written texts, and a central organized society as evidence of a culture with claims to be great.

The number and shapes of the runic letters are well established (Table 9.1). This chapter will explore the setting for the invention and first use of the runes. It elaborates on thoughts in two earlier articles of mine (H. Williams 1996, 1997). The issues I want to address are: (1) where were the runes first used? (2) when were the runes invented? (3) from which alphabet were the runes derived? (4) how was the derivation made? (5) to what uses were the runes put? and (6) why were the runes invented?

Table 9.1 The oldest runic letters (*c.* AD 150–800). Number, shape, order, and the division into three groups are evidenced by fifth-century inscriptions of the rune-row (the futhark). The names (designations), their meaning, and the sound value of the individual runes are derived from ninth-century and later manuscripts. The derivations from Roman letters (third column) are found in H. Williams (1996).

Number	Rune	(From Roman letter)	Phonemic value	Germanic name (reconstructed)	Translation
1	ᚠ	(F)	f	*fehu*	cattle
2	ᚢ, ᚤ	(V)	u	*uruz*	ox
3	ᚦ	(D)	θ (th)	*þurisaz*	giant
4	ᚨ	(A)	a	*ansuz*	god
5	ᚱ	(R)	r	*raido*	riding
6	ᚲ	(C)	k	*kaunan*	ulcer
7	ᚷ	(X)	g	*gebo*	gift
8	ᚹ	(P)	w	*wunjo*	joy
9	ᚺ	(H)	h	*hagalaz*	hail (stone)
10	ᚾ	(N)	n	*naudiz*	need
11	ᛁ	(I)	i	*isaz*	ice
12	ᛃ	(G)	j	*jeran*	year
13	ᛇ	(Z)	ç (ch)?	*ihwaz*	yew
14	ᛈ	(K)	p	*perþo*?	?
15	ᛉ	(Y)	z	*algiz*	elk
16	ᛋ, ᛋᚳ	(S)	s	*sowilo*	sun
17	ᛏ	(T)	t	*tiwaz*	the god Týr
18	ᛒ	(B)	b	*berkanan*	birch twig
19	ᛖ, ᛗ	(M)	e	*ehwaz*	horse
20	ᛗ	(E)	m	*mannaz*	human
21	ᛚ	(L)	l	*laguz*	liquid
22	ᛜ	(O)	ŋ (ng)	*ingwaz*	the god Ing
23 or 24	ᛟ	(Q)	o	*oþalan*	inherited land
24 or 23	ᛞ	Innovation	d	*dagaz*	day

Where were the runes first used?

The oldest dated artifact with an undoubted runic inscription is the bone comb from Vimose on the Danish Island of Funen (Fig. 9.1). The object probably dates to the second half of the second century AD. Other early inscriptions have been found on old Danish territory from Schleswig in present-day northern Germany to Scania, now in southern Sweden. But

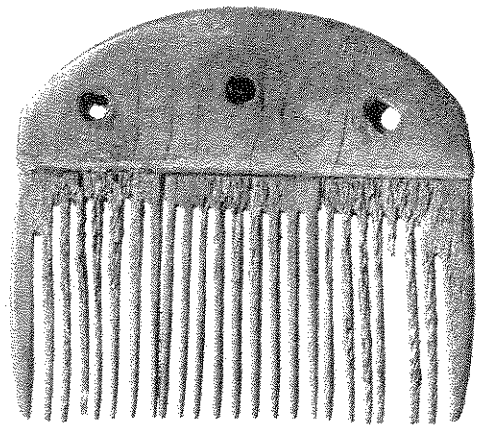

Fig. 9.1 Bone comb from Vimose, Denmark. The inscription reads **harja**, a personal name. (Picture: Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen.)

there are also a number of early, rune-inscribed spearheads with eastern Germanic provenance from the early third century. From this we may draw the conclusion that the runes had to be invented no later than *c.* AD 150. The fact that a not-so-small number of roughly contemporary inscriptions appear in a rather large area is very suggestive and will be discussed more fully below.

When were the runes invented?

The answer to this question is that we simply do not know. Many scholars have tried to pinpoint the time when the runes were invented by establishing the literary culture from which they were borrowed. Different answers may be offered depending on which writing system is posited as the source of the runes. Very much hinges on the time span allowed between the invention itself and the oldest known examples of the runic script in use. Those allowing a long period between the actual invention of the runes and their first recorded usage may posit an older Mediterranean area as the source of runes. In this vein the archaic Greco-Roman alphabet has been proposed as a plausible donor (see most recently Antonsen [1989:144–155]). Few runologists have been convinced by this proposal, and most scholars tend to narrow the gap between invention and recorded usage. The effect has been to favor either the Roman alphabet as the source of the runes or the late North Italic (sometimes called Etruscan) alphabets used by Celtic tribes in the Alpine region. The Roman origin tends to be favored by Scandinavians

whereas German- and English-speaking scholars often lean toward a North Italic source. My personal feeling is that this question should really be saved for last; it is, after all, the solution to the entire complex of problems and should pivot on how the other questions are answered.

From which alphabet were the runes derived?

Again, this question can really only be answered after many other problems are resolved. However, I want to point out that attempts have been made to approach the problem from two directions, that is cultural and alphabet-historical. The culture "on top" at the time when runes began to spread was, of course, Roman. A number of scholars, myself included, have argued for the probability that Roman influence was strong long before and after the runes started to appear, and that the runic source alphabet therefore most likely is the same as the one used for writing Latin. There is no real consensus, however, regarding exactly which kind of Latin writing was a pattern for the runes or at what exact time and place the invention occurred. Most (but not all) scholars agree that if only we could show that runes came from the Roman letters the problem would have been solved, but most (yet again not all) declare that it is not possible to find a perfect fit between letters and runes. One example should suffice: the rune ᚹ looks like a Latin <P> but actually represents /w/, whereas the rune for /p/, ᛈ, does not look like any Latin letter.

For this reason people have gone shopping for another classical script, one that is easier to reconcile with the actual shapes of the runic symbols. Hence the derivation from Greek and and North Italic alphabets. Chronological problems do arise, however, and there has been no greater success at proving a convincing absolute correspondence between individual runes and letters in these possible source alphabets. There has been an inevitable tendency toward explaining deviations by various ad hoc developments. And, of course, the greater the time span allowed between the invention of the runes and the oldest extant inscriptions, the greater the possibility for changes to occur in the shapes of the runes.

These difficulties have led most level-headed runologists to refrain from supporting one theory over another. Indeed, the problem has very little significance for the kind of runic philology most of us practice in the field. Not even when interpreting the earliest runic inscriptions does it seem important whether the runic symbols themselves are ultimately derived from one alphabet or another. When discussing the history and culture of the Germanic tribes, however, the origin of the runes is of utmost importance and must

be addressed by scholars from all disciplines. It should go without saying that runologists cannot abstain from participating in this work.

I have tried to make my own contribution to the search for the runic origins. I accept the commonly held view that one cannot ignore Roman influence in Germania during the first few centuries AD. I find that one cannot dismiss the Roman alphabet as the most likely source of the runes, although it is still an open question which version of Latin script we are dealing with. It is known for a fact that men from the Germanic tribes were held hostage in the Roman empire and served in the Roman armies, which must have given plenty of opportunity for contact with writing. Roman soldiers (presumably also those with Germanic roots) were taught writing, and it is also likely that people in the Germanic provinces had some more-or-less peaceful experience with the script of the occupying Roman army. These possible influences would most likely establish the cursive or provincial forms of Roman letters as the origin of runes (see Rausing 1992 and Quak 1996, respectively). The runes do not give a cursive impression at all, however. Problems even arise when using provincial forms in the derivations. Runes certainly look exceedingly epigraphic (i.e., cut rather than painted) and immediately strike one as more like monumental Roman letters used epigraphically than any cursive or provincial writing. This is why I follow other scholars in using the full 23-character alphabet of the classical Latin script as the sole source for the 24 runic graphemes.

How was the derivation made?

There is a proverb which I like tremendously: "If it walks like a duck and talks like a duck, it is probably a duck." Unfortunately, one cannot use this common-sense approach when deciding on the origin of the runes, at least not all of then. If we return to our runic ᚹ we find that it does indeed walk like a duck, that is, it *looks* like a Roman <P>, but it does not talk like a duck, since it does not have the phonemic value /p/. This is the reason why this rune has been given all kinds of fanciful derivations, and consequently the search for the origin of the runes veers off on a wild goose (or duck!) chase. I, on the other hand, was the first to argue that even if ᚹ does not fully behave as a duck, it most definitely does not behave like any other known bird. Therefore we seem obliged to be satisfied with only the first part of the famous saying: "If it walks like a duck, it probably *is* a duck."

I follow the principle that if a rune looks identical or very close to a Roman letter, it is most likely derived from that same letter. In judging likeness one has to take into account certain graphemic rules which are evident from

how the runes were formed.[1] The rules are simple and absolute and may untechnically be summarized in five points:

(1) A runic grapheme is made up of a full-length vertical line and/or lines of various length that are neither vertical nor horizontal, but diagonal.
(2) The diagonal lines may not proceed further up nor lower down than the verticals.
(3) The diagonal lines never issue exclusively from the bottom of the verticals, but are applied starting from the top, cf. ᛚ (*l*) and ᚢ (*u*).
(4) Two diagonal lines may be combined to form angles, which may be vertical or horizontal; three joined diagonal lines form a diagonal "crook."
(5) Runes made up of angles only reach full height if stacked on top of each other, cf. ᚲ (*k*), ᛃ (*j*), ᛜ (*ŋ*), and ᛋ (*s*), respectively.

These rules deriving runes from letters leave us with only two more or less problematic cases: ᚠ and ᛞ.[2] The first of these may be shown to be a derivative of <E> (see H. Williams 1996:214f.). Thereby all 23 Roman letters are exhausted as donor signs. Since the inventor of the runes felt the need for 24 graphemes, one had to be made up: ᛞ. The process is rather straightforward and presents no insurmountable problems. Of course, the result bears only a poor resemblance to the known sound values of the runes; at least eight runic graphemes do *not* represent the phoneme they should have done if my model were correct. By studying what happened to the Roman letters in the process, however, one may discover something interesting. All five of what we may call "unnecessary" letters in the Roman alphabet were used for phonemes or phoneme clusters with no equivalents in Latin; that is <K>, <Q>, <X>, <Y>, and <Z> were used for /w/, /ŋ/, /j/, /ç/, and /z/, respectively, as was the invented rune for /d/. Why the extant runes do not show this state of affairs, but rather a state where these very graphemes plus ᛗ and ᛜ have been switched, was not within my power to discover. My suggestion (see H. Williams 1996:217) has been that the "mix-up" took place separately after the creation of the runes, albeit very early, when the runic writing system had to survive independently of any reference to its Roman parent. I did write: "Although this mix-up might be unintentional, I have tried to show that it is by no means arbitrary" (H. Williams 1996:217). I should have realized that if the switching process were non-arbitrary, it must have taken place simultaneously with the process of creating the runes as we know them. Whoever was responsible for the "mix-up" obviously knew very well which runes corresponded to unnecessary letters in the Roman alphabet, and the subsequent switch must therefore have been intentional in spite of what I claimed. It took someone

better linguistically initiated than myself to sort out the possibilities. I refer to a joint article by John Robertson and myself, where he proposes what I consider to be a brilliant solution to the final stage of this problem, namely, the devising of new signs according to a linguistic process of analogy.

To what uses were the runes put?

Most of the early runic inscriptions appear on high-prestige artifacts such as the spearheads mentioned earlier, but also commonly on women's brooches (Fig. 9.2). It is interesting to note that the inscriptions, as such, do not seem to have had a very public function at first. The brooches were all inscribed in places where the runes would be hidden from everyone when the ornament was used, and only a person handling the item itself could read its text. On the other hand, one could not claim that the inscriptions were intentionally hidden on brooches; the best surfaces for inscribing are the non-ornamental ones, facing the back of the brooch or the plain sides, which were less visible than the decorated fronts. It could be argued that on a spearhead the inscription was displayed more openly, perhaps not to the enemy who at most beheld it briefly before it was plunged into a tender part of his body, but probably to fellow warriors when comparing weapons or when exhibiting them at other occasions.

That runic inscriptions were not intentionally hidden is also borne out by comparing the spearheads with inscribed shafts of various kinds, chapes, shieldbosses, buckles, and other details of equipment, as well as the odd comb and wooden box which have been found. This lack of seemingly secretive purposes accords well with the absence of any evidently occult inscriptions in the earliest material. One gets the impression that any difficulties encountered when trying to decipher an inscription are due more to incompetence on the part of the rune writer than to any conscious desire to mislead the reader or challenge her or his wits.

The impression of openness is strengthened by a look at the contents of the earliest runic texts. It is very common to find only one word, usually a name. In most cases the name probably denotes the owner of the inscribed artifact or the writer of the runes, possibly identical with the donor. There are many possible explanations for why a person's name appears on an item, but if it is the owner's name, one reason might well be the sheer delight in having one's name in writing. On spearheads the names seem to refer to the weapon itself: *Prober, Router, Goal-pursuer, Whiner.* However, three spearheads with the same name, *Wagnijo* ("the mover"), probably bear the name of the spearmaker. Simple makers' formulae do occur. Sometimes an

Fig. 9.2 Woman's fibula (brooch) from Himlingøje, Denmark. The inscription reads **hariso**, a personal name. (Picture: Nationalmuseet, Copenhagen.)

epithet of some kind is added to the name: for example *W. the well known.* There are a very few texts of more than two words, but they are always obscure, not least because of damage to the object.

I have lingered a while on the nature of the earliest inscriptions for the reason that many scholars have advocated and some still advocate a wholly different approach. Dennis H. Green, før example, claims that "instead of transmitting a communication the runes appear to have been used to conceal it, to wrap it up in mystery and magic" (1994:35). Neither Green nor any earlier scholar has presented any real evidence that runes were used for such concealment. I believe much of the reason for the fixation with the putatively esoteric side of runes depends on old interpretations of the inscriptions that

were riddled with the spirit of magic. Another contributing factor is the word *rune* itself, which is still universally considered to be full of occult meaning. Lately, however, this view has been challenged, very convincingly so, in my opinion, by Christine Fell in a most important work (1991). She demonstrates that the cognates of the word *rune* did not carry a pagan meaning for the Anglo-Saxon Christians. The connection with "magic, incantation, charm, superstition, pagan belief, etc." was actually imported with the Scandinavian invasions in the ninth century onwards. Influence from the Continent must also be taken into account (Fell 1991:228). We are still waiting for a similar study to be carried out on Scandinavian material, but it seems clear that the runes themselves were considered as a gift from the gods in that region, at least around the year 500, since the Swedish runestone from Noleby talks about "divine rune" with the same words as were in the Old Norse Poetic Edda from the thirteenth century (but used roots from pagan times [Jansson 1987:9]). Even so, however, there is nothing that directly connects divine origin with magic, nor is there any evidence of how runes were viewed during the first couple of centuries of their use, other than that they were utilized as a perfectly plain and serviceable means of writing.

For obvious reasons it is very difficult to come to any conclusions about the social and cultural context of these earliest inscriptions, the purpose of the runic texts, or the status of writing in Germanic society. Yet the *lack* of certain kinds of texts is most illuminating. By studying what runic writing was *not*, we may get hints of what it *was*. We may thus note the complete absence of any inscriptions dealing with cult, administration, literature, law, and so on. Later on, there are a few inscriptions which may have to do with cult and literature, but even counting these poor remnants one cannot escape the conclusion that Germanic culture was oral in principle, and that whatever purpose writing served it was not anything remotely similar to Latin literacy of the time. On this point I concur with Bengt Odenstedt (1990:173), the author of the latest monograph on this topic, who ends his book with the conclusion: "The art of writing was a luxury which Germanic people had seen Romans practise and which they no doubt envied and tried to imitate, with very little success."

This vacuum of sophisticated or lengthy inscriptions cannot be due to chance. As Anders Bæksted (1952:134) has shown, the extant inscriptions must be representative of the whole corpus, even though it cannot make up more than a fraction of what was originally produced. One should also note that the nature of the inscriptions seems to remain unchanged for approximately two centuries. If the datings are at all correct, we do not enter

a new stage until around the year AD 400, when an era of changes in language, contents, medium, and style is inaugurated. This later stage, however, need not concern us here. Suffice it to say that the earliest inscriptions appear toward the end of the second century, in the form of an explosion around the year AD 200, and that the inscriptions are quite simple at first with no great variation as to their content.

Why were the runes invented?

We may now start speculating on possible reasons behind the creation of the runes. It has been noted that runic inscriptions spring up almost simultaneously in southern Scandinavia and northern Germany and Poland. It can be suggested that "strongly Roman-influenced" (Stoklund 1996:114) centers in southern Scandinavia, with a possible hub on the Danish main island of Zealand, were responsible for the spread of the runes, if not necessarily the invention of the runes themselves. I have earlier leaned toward the view that the runes were created some time during the first century AD. I did point out a couple of extremely short first-century inscriptions which could represent the proto-runic stage I assumed reigned for a short time (H. Williams 1997:191). As it turns out, one of these inscriptions does not contain a positive rune-like symbol, as was first believed (Dietz, Marold, and Jöns 1996:184f.), which leaves us with very slender evidence indeed, and evidence pointing to Germanic experimentation with Roman letters that does not necessarily constitute a proto-runic stage. The final nail in the coffin of a first-century origin for runes may prove to be an observation in a yet-unpublished work by the Swedish settlement historian Stefan Brink.[3] He suggests that the runes were invented in one of two periods, either the first half of the first century or the century spanning the year AD 200. He observes that "many objects with runic inscriptions occur in wealthy graves around ca. AD 200. If runes were known and used before this time, one would expect to find some prestigious objects with similar runic inscriptions in graves from the Early Roman Iron Age (especially AD 1–50) . . . , but there are non[e]." Following Stoklund he discusses the power centers of Denmark at the end of the second century. If we accept the hypothesis that runes were spread from romanized centers in northern Germania, it would explain the distribution and chronology of the earliest finds. A later parallel might be the bracteates that start to appear in the fifth century AD. These are imitations of Roman medallions, some of which were given to Germanic chieftains. Gradually the bracteates become more and more Germanicized in iconographic style, and runes also soon replaced letters. If we return to the

earliest stage, I will venture the speculation that some differences between runes and Roman letters may be due to a conscious Germanic desire to make something separate of their script and not just to mimic the Latin writing system. We cannot prove any degree of conscious striving in this direction, unless it be the deviations from the Latin letter values discussed above. Many of the objective differences between runes and letters may have practical reasons only, but one cannot help but wonder at other alternatives. The unique and non-alphabetical order of the runes is one point of interest; the use of meaningful names for the runes is another (Table 9.1; see also H. Williams 1997:181–183).

The question of why the runes were invented must be answered by studying how they were used, and I have tried to show that it was not for very advanced purposes. The Germanic tribes were under Roman influence for centuries and more or less directly exposed to the art of writing. In my opinion the most likely theory is that someone invented the runes in the first half of the second century AD and that this invention was soon embraced and possibly adapted by the highest class in Germanic society. This class chose to mark various objects with runes, often to manifest ownership or donorship. There were, however, other aims at play as well. Spearheads were given names and marked accordingly, and markers' formulae are also well represented. A tentative division of the types of artifacts carrying runic inscriptions might be one that separates owned/given objects such as brooches, named objects such as weapons, and, lastly, manufactured objects such as equipment details and utensils. Of these, only the second group lends itself easily to interpretations beyond the mundane. If a spearhead is named *Prober* it may certainly be done so with magical functions in mind. We need to voice two reservations, though, before accepting this possibility with all its implications. Objects may be given names for other purposes; that is, just because a boat is called *Speedy* does not prove that its owner believes in the power of magic. Moreover, even if there is a magical intent behind the name as such, this fact proves nothing about the magic of the text itself or the graphemes used to write it. All scripts may certainly be employed for supernatural purposes without inherently imbuing the textual medium with such properties.

All in all, I cannot escape the impression that runes were used for very limited purposes. I believe that Anders Bæksted came very close to the truth when he stated that runes really did not have any practical function (1952:134, 137). Perhaps their function as a concrete manifestation of visible speech was all that mattered. Even the act of writing gibberish is very powerful. Just having your own name on an object, or the name of whoever

fashioned it or gave it to you, is intrinsically satisfying for social and psychological reasons. Owning or giving away such items must have been an efficient means of marking alliances and group membership.

With the view of the earliest runic inscriptions that I have outlined in the latter part of this chapter, there follows a shift in attitude toward the nature of runic origins. There are originally neither magical nor practical inducements for inventing or using runes. This should come as no surprise, since the same is true for some other scripts as well. Rex Wallace (1989:123) observes: "Precisely how and for what purpose(s) Latins first learned the art of writing remain something of a mystery." He also finds evidence to suggest "that writing was acquired by the wealthiest families as a symbol of prestige" (Wallace 1989:123).

A "symbol of prestige" is a good enough reason for runes, also.

Notes

1. The best graphemic analysis of the older runes is found in Antonsen (1978).
2. In my original presentation I described the derivation of ᛕ from K as problematic, since I could not explain why this shape failed to be maintained as *K. At the Sundance symposium a student at Brigham Young University, Christy Barber, was kind enough to point out that my own graphemic rules would forbid such a development. A rune *K would contain a full-length vertical line, |, plus a vertical angle, ⟨, but single angles are never allowed to be of full height. Therefore the rune had to consist of a full-length vertical line plus two horizontal angles, i.e. $| + {}^{\vee} + \wedge$. I wish to thank Ms. Barber for her sharp insight.
3. The following extracts are from an e-mail message sent by Dr. Brink to the author, March 2000, and quoted with his permission.

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N.b.: Chinese archaeological journals cited in text by title: *Huaxia kaogu, Kaogu, Kaogu xuebao, Wenbo, Wenwu, Zhongguo wenwu bao.*

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