

Runes in changing contexts: Viking Age and medieval writing traditions

Magnus Källström

The topic of Viking Age and medieval writing traditions is a huge subject which is impossible to cover in a short speech during a conference. For that reason I will not try to give a full description of how the runic alphabet was used and developed in different parts of Scandinavia in this period. Instead, I have chosen to focus on a few selected cases, which I hope can shed some light on a couple of interesting issues connected to the long history of the runic script. The development must naturally be seen in a Scandinavian perspective, but since I am most familiar with the runic material from Sweden many of the examples will be taken from this area. Hopefully some of these observations may also contribute to the discussion of the development of the runic script in other parts of Scandinavia.

The emergence of the Viking Age runes

It is not possible to talk about Viking Age and medieval writing traditions without mentioning anything about the transition from the twenty-four-character futhork to the Viking Age variant with only sixteen signs. As is well known, it is disputed whether the latter emerged as a gradual development of the older system or if it was created in some kind of reform (see e.g. Schulte 2009, Stoklund 2010). Personally I adhere to the idea that it all started as developments within the older futhork, but that the last step, the reduction to sixteen characters, was taken by a single person or a small group of literate people with the ability to spread these new ideas (cf. Grønvik 2001: 61-83, Knirk 2010: 188-189). Where and when it all took place is not known, but it seems reasonable to believe that the rune-inscribed scull from Ribe now dated to *c.* 725-760 is not too distant neither in space or time (cf. Grønvik 2001: 80-81; the new dating according to Stoklund 2010: 240). After this time the older futhork seems to have gone out of use. Single older rune-forms might turn up later, but they are then adopted for special purposes as cipher (as on the Rök stone, Ög 136), ideographs (e.g. the **D**-rune of older type in the Ingelstad rock carving, Ög 43) or possibly also as magical signs (the Hovgården amulet?). Some of the more complicated rune-forms of the older type (as **A**, **H**, **M**) were kept for a time in one of the variants of the younger futhork—the long-branch runes of the Helnæs type—but were later replaced by simpler forms (as on the Gørlev stone).

Long-branch vs. short-twig runes

To judge from the preserved material, the Viking Age runic alphabet was originally divided into two different variants, which in modern time have been coined ‘long-branch’ and ‘short-twig’ runes. In the early Viking Age the first variant is principally found in Denmark, while the latter is characteristic for Sweden and Norway. There are also a few inscriptions that appears to use a mixture of the two variants as e.g. the Sparlösa stone in Västergötland (Vg 119). Whether this division into two discrete variants was also a reality for the literate Vikings is disputed, and it has been suggested that we should rather reckon with a runic continuum with simpler and more elaborated rune-forms from which the carvers could make their choices (Barnes 2006). At the same time it must be stressed that the geographical distribution of the alleged variants has stayed the same for at least a hundred years and that the new finds of runic inscriptions from early Viking Age seem to strengthen rather than weaken the opposition between the two.

Runic inscriptions from the first two centuries of the Viking Age—the 9th and the 10th century—are not very common. From present-day Sweden there are only about forty inscriptions in short-twig runes. Some thirty of these are cut in stone while the remaining occurs on portable objects. The find spots cover almost the whole country from Scania in the south to Hälsingland in the north. In some regions, such as Östergötland, Gotland and Uppland, the examples are bit more numerous than elsewhere. In Östergötland—where the famous Rök stone stands—all of these inscriptions are cut in stone and they reveal a rather even distribu-

tion in the district. From Gotland, where about a third of all inscriptions with short-twig runes in Sweden are found, these inscriptions occur chiefly on erected stones (many of them picture stones), but they are also found on a couple of metal objects. In Uppland these early rune-finds are concentrated to the town of Birka in lake Mälaren, where there are examples of rune-stones as well as several runic inscriptions on portable objects.

Forty runic items are not many, but the examples of long-branch runes on Swedish territory are even fewer. Besides the Sparlösa stone, which can be classified as some kind of mixed inscription, we have only one single rune-stone fragment, from Skederid parish in Uppland (with runes resembling of the Helnæs group in Denmark), and some scattered inscriptions on portable objects. Maybe the stone from Roes on Gotland (G 40) should also be included in this group. The impression is that the long-branch runes played a very marginal role in Sweden prior to the end of the 10th century.

During the late 10th century the whole situation changed. At any rate, the custom of setting up rune-inscribed stones in memory of deceased relatives became suddenly very popular. The trend seems to have started in Denmark, and the custom was subsequently spread to Sweden (and Norway?). In the southern part of Sweden up to lake Mälaren runes of the so called long-branch type now dominate the inscriptions, and in most regions it looks like the short-twig runes were totally forgotten. In the areas north of lake Mälaren the situation was somewhat different. In the earliest larger group of rune-stones in Uppland from the beginning of the 11th century (the so called unornamented rune-stones) the long-branch runes are exclusive adopted, but many later inscriptions contain a mixture of long-branch and short-twig types. This kind of mixed systems is also typical for the provinces in Norrland and the island of Öland. In Gotland, on the other hand, runes of the short-twig type are rather rare in the 11th century, which is bit of a surprise considering the situation in the early Viking Age.

The writing tradition in Norrland, as it is documented on the rune-stones in the provinces of Hälsingland, Medelpad and Jämtland, offers probably the most interesting examples. The runes are normally a mix of long-branch and short-twig rune-types, where **a**, **n**, **t** and **s** belong to the latter system. The inscriptions contain at the same time several archaic features as e.g. a sparse adoption of word dividers or in some cases a total lack of word separation. It seems unlikely that these features were introduced in the area from the outside along with the new rune-stone custom. A more convincing explanation is that this variant of the futhark was developed locally at an earlier point in time. It not impossible that the writing conventions connected to this variant originally covered a much wider area, but this cannot be proved due to the shortage of runic inscriptions in central Sweden prior to the year 1000.

An innovation in the younger futhark: the h-rune as designation for fricative g

During the Viking Age many changes took place inside the system of the sixteen-character futhark. The **o**-rune was e.g. abandoned as designation for nasalized [ã] and was subsequently taken into service for /o/ (Williams 1990). The two *r*-sounds merged into /r/ in the West Scandinavian languages and the superfluous **R**-rune was in this area adopted as designation for /y/. The same happened also somewhat later in the East Scandinavian languages, but the **R**-rune was only used sporadically to denote vocals as /i/, /e/ and /æ/, but never as a designation for /y/ during the Viking Age (Larsson 2002: 155-156). As a third innovation we can reckon the development of the principles for dotted runes (Lagman 1990). The dotted runes were not included as individual signs in the Viking Age futhark, but from the end of the 10th century dotting was available as device for a more nuanced rendering of some of the speech sounds.

Since these three changes have been studied at length by others, I would like to focus on a less familiar innovation in the runic alphabet: the adoption of the rune **h** as designation for the so called fricative g, i.e. [ɣ]. In the Viking Age Scandinavian language this sound was an allophone of /g/ in certain positions. The designation **h** for the latter sound is only recorded in Viking Age runic inscriptions dated after the year 1000, and with one exception only in Sweden.

The adoption of the **h**-rune for [ɣ] is interpreted in different ways. In older literature it is often connected to the **j**-rune in the Anglo-Saxon futhork, which in a few Anglo-Saxon runic

inscriptions also seems to denote [ɣ]. The scholar Otto von Friesen (1933: 209–210) conceived the feature as an import from England mediated by the Upplandic rune-carver Åsmund Kåresson, who at that time was identified with a missionary bishop of English origin, Osmundus. This explanation was scrutinized and totally rejected by Claiborne W. Thompson (1975: 161-167). The adoption of the rune **h** for fricative *g* has also been construed as an indigenous development. Terje Spurkland (1991: 214-216) has connected this orthographical feature with the major changes in the consonant system in the transitional period between Proto-Nordic and Old Norse. One result of these changes was that the fricative [ɣ] happened to occur in complementary distribution not only with the stop [g] but also with /h/. This is a very attractive explanation of the new usage, but it is difficult to understand why there are no instances of the rune **h** denoting [ɣ] until the beginning of the 11th century. It must also be stressed that the innovation at this point in time was actually unnecessary, since the dotted rune **g** must have done the same job within the system. I can think of at least two possible explanations: either the designation of [ɣ] with the rune **h** was established before the evolvment of the dotted runes, or this orthographic rule was first established in a region where the dotted runes were not used or probably not even known.

The instances of **h** denoting [ɣ] in Viking Age runic inscriptions show a very peculiar distribution. Most of the records are found in the Mälars region, especially in Uppland, but there are also examples in remote districts as Medelpad, Västergötland and Småland. Many of these inscriptions seem to be contemporary with the earliest examples in Uppland, which make it very difficult to determine a possible center for the innovation. One possibility is that the idea originated in the North of Sweden since the dotted runes seem to have been totally unknown in Hälsingland and Medelpad during the 11th century (Lagman 1990: 135). For that reason the adopting of the **h**-rune for [ɣ] would not have been an unnecessary innovation. On the other hand, such assumption does not explain the early occurrences in regions as Västergötland and Småland. Maybe the scattered distribution is best understood as the result of an orthographic rule established in the writing tradition at a much earlier state, but not visible in the preserved material until the beginning of the 11th century. This explanation seems more attractive, but it is difficult to understand why the carvers of the inscriptions in short-twig runes in the 9th and 10th centuries always adopted the **k**-rune for the fricative variant of /g/ and never the rune **h**, if that was really an option.

Finally, it must be stressed that the adoption of **h** for [ɣ] subsequently turned out to be a success within system of the younger futhark. In the Middle Ages this orthographic feature became globally accepted and we find it in runic inscriptions everywhere in Scandinavia including Greenland, Orkney and the Faeroe Islands.

The origin of the medieval runes

No one can deny that there must be a close connection between what we today recognize as medieval runes and use of the Roman script in the period. At the same time it looks like the influence on the indigenous writing system varied in different parts of Scandinavia.

One salient feature of the medieval runes is the adoption of dotting to increase the number of available letters. As well recognized, this is nothing new for the medieval runes, but something that emerged in the later part of the preceding period (see Knirk 2010). The Viking Age rune-carvers normally restricted their use of dotted runes to **e**, **g** and **y**, but there are also some rather early examples of **d** from Uppland, Öland and Bornholm. From a rune-stone in Västergötland we find the first occurrence of the dotted rune **p**. Both **d** and **p** as well as **ð** are also attested in the coinage of the Danish king Sven Estridson in Lund 1065–76 (Stoklund 2006: 371-373.).

In the medieval period the use of dotted runes increased and some new variants such as **v**, and special designations for **c** and **z** were developed, which subsequently led to an almost total runic representation of the letters in the Roman alphabet. Whether the original idea behind the dotted runes should be sought in the Christian book culture or if it is an indigenous innovation within the runic system in the late Viking Age still needs to be explored.

Another feature typical for the medieval runes is the differentiation between **a** and **æ** by adopting the short-twig rune for /a/ and the long-branch variant for /æ/. This was later followed by a split of the variants of the **o**-rune to denote /o/ and /ø/, respectively. In this case it seems more likely that the original idea came from a milieu where the Roman script was in

wide use. Magnus Olsen (1933: 98 ff.) tried to find examples of the differentiation **a** : **æ** in Norwegian inscriptions from the 11th century, but as Jan Ragnar Hagland (1994) and later Terje Spurkland (1995: 11-12) have shown, the use was not established until the beginning of the 12th century. This corresponds with the earliest datable example from Swedish territory, a rune-inscribed animal bone from Lödöse in Västergötland (Svärdström 1982: 22, 50). In Denmark there are no unquestionable examples before the second part of the 12th century. This speaks in favor for the idea that the differentiation **a** : **æ** was developed on West Scandinavian territory and later spread from there to other parts of Scandinavia.

Some local developments: Uppland and Västergötland

It looks like what we today conceive as a medieval runic tradition was something that was gradually established in different parts of Scandinavia. To give an illustration of local developments I have chosen to scrutinize the runic tradition in the districts around lake Mälaren during the early Middle Ages. This is an area with an immense runic activity in the late Viking Age, where the custom of erecting rune-stones reached its peak. In Uppland rune-stones of the traditional type were probably put up as late as about 1130. It might seem strange that none of these inscriptions offers any clear examples of features typical for the medieval runes as e.g. the differentiation between **a** and **æ**. On the contrary, the rune-forms as well as the orthography are very similar to what can be found on somewhat older rune-stones in the area.

Runic literacy in Uppland during the Middle Ages can chiefly be studied on the finds of rune-inscribed objects from medieval towns as Sigtuna, Uppsala and—to a lesser extent—Enköping and Stockholm. There are also a few scattered finds from other places as e.g. Gamla Uppsala or the hamlet Mälby in Tillinge parish close to Enköping. Grave-monuments of stone are on the other hand very rare, which comes as a surprise considering the wealth of runic monuments in the preceding period. Less than ten such monuments are recorded from the whole region, all of them in the shape of horizontal slabs. What is especially interesting is that the rune-forms and orthographic features in several of the inscriptions correspond to what can be found on many the Viking Age rune-stones. Even if these grave-monuments are dated to the 12th century, the rune-carvers seem to belong to the same writing tradition as their Viking predecessors.

These observations from the rune-inscribed grave-monuments in Uppland also correspond to what can be deduced from the runic inscriptions on portable objects unearthed in Sigtuna. Up to now the site has produced more than a hundred inscriptions and the material covers a period from c. 990 up to the 13th century. The rune-carvers in Sigtuna were of course familiar with the dotted runes **e**, **g** and **y** and they often adopted **a**- and **n**-runes with branches only on one side of the main stave, but there are no traces of later developments as e.g. the differentiation **a** : **æ** in this material until the 13th century. The impression is that the rune-carvers have followed something that look like Viking Age writing conventions as late as the second half of the 12th century.

It might be fruitful to compare these observations with how runic script was used in Västergötland in south-west Sweden in the same period. In this region there are no counterparts to the late rune-stone custom found in Uppland, but rune-inscribed stone-coffins were probably erected at the churches as early as the mid-11th century. These were later succeeded by horizontal grave-slabs inscribed with runes. The inscriptions on the erected grave-coffins all adhere to the Viking spelling tradition, while the inscriptions on the grave-slabs show an abundance of medieval features as e.g. long-branch runes for **æ** and **ø**, dotted runes as **d**, **ð**, **p** and **v**, designations for geminated consonants, bind-runes and so on. The grave-monuments in the latter group are dated from the second half of the 12th century to the beginning of the 13th century, and they are thus contemporary with the late runic material from Sigtuna and several of the grave-monuments in Uppland.

The question is how to explain the differences between the two regions. Probably the medieval rune-carvers in Västergötland were more closely connected to the church and to the Christian book culture than their contemporaries in Central Sweden. This is also indicated by several instances of texts with Roman letters—sometimes even in Latin language—on many of the rune-inscribed grave-slabs from Västergötland. In Uppland, on the other hand, there was probably a vivid writing tradition that had its roots in the Viking Age and was based on

simpler conventions. This tradition obviously flourished in the town of Sigtuna in the 12th century, but it was probably also present in other parts of Uppland, even if rune-finds are still sparse. Since medieval monuments with runes are infrequent in area, other materials than stone must have been used to transmit this knowledge. This might therefore be an indirect evidence for the runic alphabet being adopted for other purposes than just memorial inscriptions.

Bibliography

- Barnes, M. P. 2006. "Standardised futharks: a useful tool or a delusion?" In Stoklund et al. 2006: 11–29.
- Friesen, Otto von, 1933a: "De svenska runinskrifterna". In v. Friesen 1933b, 145-248.
- , ed., 1933b: *Runorna*. Nordisk kultur 6. Stockholm/Olso/København.
- G = *Gotlands runinskrifter*, by Sven B. F. Jansson, Elias Wessén and Elisabeth Svärdström. 2 vols. to date = *Sveriges runinskrifter* 11-12. Stockholm 1962-1978.
- Grønvik, Ottar, 2001: *Über die Bildung des älteren und des jüngeren Runenalphabets*. Osloer Beiträge zur Germanistik 29. Frankfurt am Main.
- Hagland, Jan Ragnar, 1994: "Runer frå bygrunnen i Trondheim og mangelen på daterte innskrifter frå ca. 1050–1150." In *Proceedings of the Third International Symposium on Runes and Runic Inscriptions*, ed. James E. Knirk, 253-267. Runrön 9. Uppsala.
- Knirk, James E., 2010: "Dotted runes: where did they come from?" In *The Viking Age Ireland and the west: Proceedings of the Fifteenth Viking Congress, Cork, 18-27 August 2005*, eds. John Sheehan and Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 188-198. Dublin.
- Lagman, Svante, 1990: *De stungna runorna: användning och ljudvärden i runsvenska steninskrifter*. Runrön 4. Uppsala.
- Larsson, Patrik, 2002: *Yrrunan: användning och ljudvärde i nordiska steninskrifter*. Runrön 17. Uppsala.
- Olsen, Magnus, 1933: "De norrøne runeinnskrifter." In v. Friesen 1933b, 83-113.
- Schulte, Michael, 2009: "Neue Überlegungen zum Aufkommen des jüngeren Futharks." In *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 131, 229-251.
- Snædal, Thorgunn, 2002: *Medan världen vakar: studier i de gotländska runinskrifternas språk och kronologi*. Runrön 16. Uppsala.
- Spurkland, Terje, 1991: *En fonografematisk analyse av runematerialet fra Bryggen i Bergen*. Unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Oslo.
- , 1995: "Kriteriene for datering av norske runesteiner fra vikingtid og tidlig middelalder." *Maal og Minne* 1995, 1-14.
- Stoklund, Marie, 2006: "Chronology and typology of Danish runic inscriptions". In *Runes and their secrets: studies in runology*, eds. Marie Stoklund et al., 366-371. Copenhagen.
- , 2010: "The Danish inscriptions of the early Viking Age and the transition to the younger futhark." In *Zentrale Probleme bei der Erforschung der älteren Runen: Akten einer internationalen Tagung an der Norwegischen Akademie der Wissenschaften*, eds. John Ole Askedal et al., 237-252. Osloer Beiträge zur Germanistik 41. Frankfurt am Main.
- Thompson, Claiborne W., 1975: *Studies in Upplandic runography*. Ann Arbor, Michigan.
- Svärdström, Elisabeth, 1982: *Runfynden i Gamla Lödöse*. Lödöse, svensk medeltidsstad 4:5. Stockholm.
- Vg = *Västergötlands runinskrifter*, by Hugo Jungner and Elisabeth Svärdström. = *Sveriges runinskrifter* 5. Stockholm 1940-1970.
- Williams, Henrik, 1990: *Åsrunan: användning och ljudvärde i runsvenska steninskrifter*. Runrön 3. Uppsala.
- Ög = *Östergötlands runinskrifter*, by Erik Brate. = *Sveriges runinskrifter* 2. Stockholm 1911-1918.