INTRODUCTION

THE RUNIC ALPHABET

The origin of the Runic alphabet, the native script of the Teutonic peoples, is still a matter of dispute. Isaac Taylor derived it from a Thracian Greek alphabet, Wimmer of Copenhagen from the Latin alphabet; but each of these theories is open to grave objections, and it is perhaps less dangerous to conclude with von Friesen of Upsala that it was taken from a mixture of the two. It is sufficient here to mention that it must have been known to all the Teutonic peoples and that the earliest records go back at least to the fourth century. It was certainly known by the Goths before their conversion; for Wulfila took several of its characters for his Gothic alphabet, and two inscriptions (Pietroassa in Wallachia and Kovel in Volhynia) have been found in lands occupied by the Goths in this period.

In its original form the Runic alphabet consisted of 24 letters, which from the absence of curved or horizontal lines were especially adapted for carving on wood. Testimony is borne by Venantius Fortunatus, whose lines

Barbara fraxineis pingatur runa tabellis
Quodque papyrus agit, virgula plana valet

contain the earliest literary reference to the Runic character; by the Icelandic sagas and by the Anglo-Saxon poem known as the Husband's Message; but from the nature of the case the lance-shaft from Kragehul (Fyn) is almost a solitary

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survivor of such inscriptions. The alphabet was divided into three sets later styled in Icelandic *Freys ætt, Hagals ætt, Týs ætt,* from their initial letters F, H, T. These names were understood as "Frey's family," etc.; but tripartite division certainly goes back to the original alphabet—it is found on the sixth century bracteate from Vadstena, Sweden—and it is more probable that *ætt* is derived from *átta,* "eight," and so originally meant "octave." Each letter, moreover, occupied a definite position; for in Codex Sangallensis 270 are to be found several varieties of Runic cypher—*Isruna, Lagoruna, Hahalruna, Stofruna*—the solution of which demands a knowledge of the exact position of each letter in the alphabet. Thus in the Latin *Corui,* the example given, the sixth letter of the first series is C, the eighth of the third O, the fifth of the first R, the second of the first U, the third of the second I[1]. A cypher similar in type to the *Hahalruna* of the St Gall MS., but adapted to the Scandinavian alphabet of the Viking Age, is to be found in the grave-chamber at Maeshowe (Orkney), and there are traces of similar characters, now for the most part illegible, in Hackness Church near Scarborough.

Among the earliest inscriptions from the North of Europe are those found in the bog-deposits of Nydam and Torsbjærg in Slesvig, Vi and Kragehul in Fyn, etc., which range in date from the third or fourth to the sixth century. They are written in a language which may be regarded as the common ancestor of English and Scandinavian; it still preserves the full inflections and is thus more primitive than the Gothic of Wulfila. The contemporary inscription from the Golden Horn of Gallehus (Jutland) may be quoted as an illustration, *Ek Hlewaȝastiz Holtingaz horna tawido.* (I Hlewagastiz Holtingaz made the horn.)

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[1] These cryptograms are possibly to be attributed to Hrabanus Maurus, Abbot of Fulda (822–856), who is known to have been interested in the Runic alphabet; cf. the *Abecedarium Nordmannicum,* p. 34 and his treatise *De Inventione Linguarum* (Migne CXII. 1582). *Coruus* is the Latin equivalent of Hraban (ON. *Hrafn*) and medieval scholars were fond of Latinizing their Teutonic names, e.g. Hrotsvith (*Clamor validus*), Aldhelm (*Vetus galea*).

To the same period belong a brooch found at Charnay in Burgundy, and probably also an inscribed spear-head from Müncheberg (Brandenburg), together with two or three smaller objects found in the north of Germany. In Germany, however, inscriptions of this character are quite rare and mostly unintelligible, the latest belonging probably to the eighth century.

There can be no reasonable doubt that the alphabet was introduced into England by the Saxon invaders in the fifth century, though the inscriptions dating from the first two centuries after the invasion are very few and fragmentary. Among them we may especially note those on a gold coin of unknown provenance in imitation of a *solidus* of Honorius and a scabbard-mount from Chessell Down in Wight. These are connected by the forms of the letters with inscribed objects from Kragehul and Lindholm (Skåne), which date in all probability from the early part of the sixth century, though the English inscriptions may be somewhat later. Runic legends also occur on a number of silver coins, some of them bearing the names *Æþil(i)ræd* (doubtless the Mercian king Aethelred, 675–704), or *Pada*, identified by some with Peada, brother of Aethelred, by others, and more probably, with his father Penda (d. 655). Runes are also found on a number of other small objects of metal or bone, the most interesting of which is the Franks Casket, generally believed to date from about 700.

The gradual disuse of the Runic alphabet is well illustrated by coins of the eighth and ninth centuries. The last king whose name appears in Runic characters is Beonna of East Anglia (c. 750), and even on this coin a Roman O is found. On coins of subsequent kings we only meet with an occasional Runic letter, usually L. In the names of moneyers, however, the Runic letters seem to have persisted somewhat longer; for there are a number of coins issued by Eanred of Northumbria (809–841 ?), on which two of his moneyers signed their names in Runic characters.

Of memorial stones there are in existence nearly a

score (principally in the North of England) bearing in-
scriptions in the English Runic character. The most notable
of these are the elaborately carved crosses at Ruthwell
(Dumfries)—with verses abridged from the *Dream of the
Cross*—and Bewcastle (Cumberland), the grave slab with
inscriptions both in Roman uncials and Runic characters
from Falstone (Northumberland), and the three stones from
Thornhill (Yorks.). Cf. Thornhill III. *Gilsuiþ arærde æfter
Berhtsuiþe becun* on *bergi. Gebiddaþ þær saule.* (Gilswith
erected to the memory of Berhtswith a monument on the
tomb. Pray for her soul.) The earliest date probably
from the seventh century; while the latest contain forms
which point to about the middle of the ninth. There
seems no reason, however, for supposing that for this
purpose the English Runic alphabet remained longer in
use than for coins. At all events there is no evidence
that it survived the great Danish invasion of 866, which
swept away the upper classes in the greater part of
Northern England. After this time we find only MS. Runic
alphabets, doubtless preserved as antiquarian curiosities,
except for the letters *wyn* and *þorn,* which had been
adopted into the Anglo-Saxon book-hand, and *eðel, dæg*
and *man,* which were occasionally used as shorthand in
the MSS.

From the sixth century, however, the alphabet had
developed on totally different lines in Scandinavia and
England. To the original 24 letters the English eventually
added six, *æsc, ac, yr, ear, calc, gar,* if not a seventh *ior.*
The Scandinavian alphabet, on the other hand, continually
reduced the number of letters, until by the ninth century
no more than sixteen were left. How incapable they were
of representing the sounds of the language can be seen from
the greater Jællinge stone set up by Harold Bluetooth, king
of Denmark (c. 940–986):

*Haraltr kunukR baþ kaurua kubl þansi aft Kurm faþur sin auk
aft þaurui muþur sina, sa Haraltr ias sąr uan Tanmaurk ala auk
Nuruiak auk Tani karþa kristną.*

(King Harold ordered this monument to be made to the

memory of Gorm his father and Thyre his mother, that Harold who conquered all Denmark and Norway and christianised the Danes.)

From the beginning of the eleventh century, however, the alphabet was supplemented by the so-called "dotted runes" (*stunginn k, i, t, b = g, e, d, p*).

The later Runic alphabet was known in Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Iceland, Greenland, the Faroes, the Orkneys, Man and England, in every part of the Scandinavian world; even in the South of Russia an inscription has been found. In Denmark there are something less than 200 inscriptions, few of which are later than 1150; in Sweden there are nearer 2000, some of which can scarcely be earlier than the fifteenth century. Scandinavian also in language and in character are the inscriptions from the Orkneys and Man. In England, too, there are a few relics of the Danish conquest, such as the sculptured stone in the library at St Paul's (c. 1030) and the *þorfastr* comb from Lincoln in the British Museum[1].

In Norway and Iceland, however, the Runic alphabet is never found on monumental stones of the Viking Age, though it was used commonly enough for other purposes. The later Norwegian inscriptions date from the period 1050–1350, the Icelandic are not earlier than the thirteenth century. Generally speaking we may say that the Runic alphabet, always connected more or less with magical practices, fell under the suspicion of witchcraft in the Scandinavian countries and perished in the great outburst of superstitious terror which followed the establishment of the reformed religion, though there is some little evidence to show that in Sweden it lingered on into the nineteenth century[2].

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[1] The Bridekirk font (Cumberland) bears a twelfth century English inscription in the Scandinavian Runic characters of that time with a few additional letters borrowed from the Anglo-Saxon book-hand.

[2] There is not much evidence for the magic use of runes in this country. Bede (*H.E.* IV. 22) tells the story of a Northumbrian noble captive to the Mercians at the battle of the Trent (679), whose chains were mysteriously loosened, whenever his brother, who thought him dead, celebrated masses for the repose of his soul. His gaoler in ignorance asked him whether he had

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THE ANGLO-SAXON RUNIC POEM.

The Anglo-Saxon Runic Poem is taken from the Cottonian MS. Otho B X, which perished in the fire of 1731. It had, however, been printed by Hickes in his *Linguarum Veterum Septentrionalium Thesaurus*, I. 135 (London, 1705), from which the present text is derived. It consists of short stanzas, 29 in all, of two to five lines each, at the beginning of which stand the Runic characters described, preceded by their equivalents in ordinary script and followed by their names. It has been suggested, however, that in Otho B X, as in the Norwegian poems, the Runic characters alone were found, the names being added from some other MSS. At any rate Hempl, *Mod. Phil.* I. 135 ff., has shown that the variant runes, etc., were taken from Domitian A IX, and some such theory is needed to account for the frequent discrepancy between the stanzas and the names which they describe. This may be due in part to the lateness of the MS., which from linguistic criteria can scarcely have been earlier than the eleventh century, e.g. v. 37, *underwreþyd* for -*od* (-*ed*), and vv. 32, 91, ðon, ðonn for ðonne. The poem must, however, be far earlier, pre-Alfredian at least (with traces perhaps of an original from which the Scandinavian poems are likewise derived); for there is not a single occurrence of the definite article, ðone in v. 70 being demonstrative. The versification is moreover quite correct. Cf. Brandl, *Grundriss der germanischen Philologie*₂, II. 964.

THE NORWEGIAN RUNIC POEM.

The Norwegian Runic poem was first printed (in Runic characters) by Olaus Wormius, *Danica Literatura Antiquissima*, p. 105 (Amsterodamiae, 1636), from a law MS. in

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litteras solutorias, de qualibus fabulae ferunt, concealed about his person. These *litterae solutoriae* are doubtless to be compared with Hávamál, CL :

þat kannk et fjórþa   ef mér fyrþar bera
    bǫnd at boglimum
Svá ek gel   at ek ganga má
    sprettr af fǫtum fjǫturr
    en af hǫndum hafi.

the University Library at Copenhagen, which perished in the fire of 1728. This version was used by Vigfússon and Powell in their *Icelandic Prose Reader* (Oxford, 1879) and *Corpus Poeticum Boreale* (Oxford, 1883), where the textual difficulties are dealt with in a very arbitrary fashion.

The MSS. had, however, been copied later in the seventeenth century by Arni Magnússon and Jón Eggertson, whose transcripts, far more accurate than Worm's, exist at Copenhagen and Stockholm. It was on these that Kålund based his text in the first critical edition, *Småstykker* (København, 1884–91), pp. 1 ff., 100 ff., in which are incorporated valuable suggestions by Sophus Bugge and B. M. Ólsen. Kålund added the names of the Runic letters, but printed the texts in their original orthography. In this edition, however, it has been thought more satisfactory to adopt the normalised Old Norwegian spelling used in the German translation of Wimmer's great work, *Die Runenschrift*, pp. 273–80 (Berlin, 1887).

The poem, which has certain affinities to the Anglo-Saxon, is ascribed to a Norwegian author of the end of the thirteenth century; *ræið* and *rossom* alliterate, which would be impossible with the Icelandic forms *reið* and *hrossum*. It is composed in six-syllabled couplets, each of which contains two semi-detached statements of a gnomic character; the first line, which has two alliterating words, is connected by end-rhyme (except in the case of 15) and enjambement with the second which has none.

THE ICELANDIC RUNIC POEM.

The Icelandic Runic Poem, which is supposed to date from the fifteenth century, is somewhat more elaborate than its Norwegian prototype. It consists of sixteen short stanzas dealing in succession with the letter names of the Scandinavian Runic alphabet. In each of these stanzas are contained three *kenningar*—the elaborate periphrases which bulked so large in the technique of the Icelandic skaldic poems. The first and second lines are connected by

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alliteration, the third has two alliterating syllables of its own.

The Icelandic Runic alphabet contained several more letters at this time; but only the sixteen current in the Viking Age are treated here. This is perhaps natural if the poem is derived from a much earlier original, though it does not seem that the later dotted U, K, I, T, B, introduced to represent O, G, E, D, P (with the possible exception of P, *plastr*), had names of their own. They were simply called *stunginn Íss, stunginn Týr*, etc.—dotted I, dotted T, etc.

The poem is taken from four MSS. in the Arnamagnaean Library at Copenhagen.

1. AM. 687, 4to, parchment of the fifteenth century and containing the Runic characters, but not the names.
2. AM. 461, 12mo, parchment of the sixteenth century, with names only.
3. AM. 749, 4to, paper of the seventeenth century, with names and letters in alphabetical order, followed by "dotted runes."
4. AM. 413, folio, pp. 130–5, 140 ff., from parchments of the sixteenth century copied in Jón Ólafsson of Grunnavík's MS. *Runologia* (1732–52),
   (*a*) with names and letters in alphabetical order,
   (*b*) with names and letters in Runic order except that *lǫgr* precedes *maðr*.

Cf. Kålund, *Småstykker*, pp. 16 ff.; Wimmer, *Die Runen- schrift*, pp. 281 ff.

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