

Theories of the antiquity of runes

Introduction

What I intend to present here is not a contribution to runology, but rather some observations on certain themes in the history of scholarship concerning runes. These observations arise from some preliminary researches into early runology.

For the purposes of this discussion, I will define runology quite broadly as any literature which gives some account of either runic inscriptions and other runic texts; or the origins and primary uses of runes. It can also include characters which are not in fact runes but which are believed or argued to be such by the author. This definition signals two broad themes of runology. At one end of the spectrum of runological scholarship, there is runology which concerns itself with the actual study of runic inscriptions, their language and the interpretation of them. Such runology also concerns itself with the origins and uses of runes, insofar as it assists in the main goal of interpreting runic texts. At the other end of the spectrum – and the focus of this paper – there is runology which concerns itself with the origins and uses of runes as its main purpose, although often with a view to supporting some broader theory about the cultures which used runes. The interpretation of inscriptions is sometimes used as evidence for arguments of this type, but is rarely the main evidence in or motivation for such projects. I refer to this type of runology as speculative runology.

In the history of runology, there are three areas to which speculative runology pays particular attention: the use and properties of runes for magic and divination; the extent and types of uses of runes; and the age and origins of runes.

It is in the area of the magical uses of runes where speculative runology has most left its mark in the popular imagination. Indeed, today one can buy books and kits for practising runic divination. There is some medieval evidence in support of less extreme speculations in this area, although the contemporary books seem to have no medieval basis. The literature of medieval Iceland (such as *Hávamál* and *Egils saga*) provides a number of examples of runes being used for magic. The runology of the early modern period refers particularly to *Hávamál* in supporting theories regarding the use of runes for magic.

In the area of the extent and types of uses of runes, speculative runology generally argues or assumes that runes were used to record medieval Scandinavian literature, that is, the sagas and the longer poems, although this evidently was not the case. Despite the lack of evidence, scholars who argue this theory often refer to certain medieval texts in support of their thesis. This type of theory, which greatly overestimates the extent to which runes were used, I label the ubiquity theory.

Lastly, in the area of the age and origins of runes, the speculative theories tend to exaggerate or overestimate the age of runes. Frequently this is also associated with theories which place the origin of runes in the Semitic world, that is, the world of the Troy legends or early biblical history. It is with this type of theory, which I broadly label the antiquity theory, that this paper concerns itself.

Early modern runology

The middle of the sixteenth century sees the first publication of Scandinavian runes, and with it the first runology of the modern era. This begins in 1554 with the publication in Rome of the *Historia de omnibus Gothorum Sveonumque Regibus* by Johannes Magnus, Archbishop of Uppsala. Chapter 36 of book 1 includes a diagram of some runes, which is not very accurate, and also a theory of their origin:

Credendum non est ipsos Aquilonares omnino caruisse scriptoribus rerum a se magnifice gestarum, cum longe ante inventas literas Latinas ... Gothi suas literas habuerint. Cuius rei indicium praestant eximiae magnitudinis saxa veterum bustis ac specubus apud Gothos affixa: quae litterarum formis insculpta persuadere possint, quod ante universale diluvium vel paulo post gigantea virtute ibi erecta fuissent. (book 1, chapter 7: from Östlund 2000, 88)

We should not think that the northern peoples entirely lacked chroniclers of their own who described their glorious deeds, since the Goths had their own letters long before the Latin letters were invented ... This is confirmed by the extraordinarily large stones that are attached to old tombs and caverns among the Goths; they are engraved with the figures of letters and may prove that they were erected here by valiant giants before or at least shortly after the Flood. (Östlund 2000, 89)

Olaus, Johannes' brother, repeated these ideas in his very popular work, *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus*, published in 1555:

Ab antiquissimo tempore cum essent gigantes in Septentrionalibus terris, hoc est, longe ante inuentas literas Latinas, & antequam Carmenta ex Graecia ad hostia Tyberis, & Romanum solum cum Euandro perueniret, expulsisque Aboriginibus, gentem illam rudem, ac plane syluestrem mores, & literas docerent, habuerunt Aquilonaria regna suas literas. (Olaus Magnus, 57)

From a primeval age, when there were giants in the northern lands, long, that is, before the Latin letters were invented and before Carmenta reached the mouth of the Tiber from Greece and set foot with Evander on Roman soil, drove out the Aborigines, and taught manners and literacy to the ignorant and wholly rustic people, the kingdoms of the North had a script of their own. (Foote 1996, 77)

The Magnuses argued that the Swedes were directly descended from the Goths, using a controversial etymological argument to link the word 'Goth' with the region of Götaland in Western Sweden. By giving the Goths a written tradition dating back to the Flood, they also showed that Sweden shares that tradition. Another feature of this theory is that it indirectly linked runes with the East, by elsewhere showing that Sweden was settled by peoples from an early stage of biblical history, that is, Hebrew speakers. The Goths, according to this account, were early and direct descendants of Noah.

Not surprisingly, the claims of a Swedish-Gothic origin to the language, alphabet and settlement of Scandinavia caused something of a reaction in the other Scandinavian countries. Arngrímur Jónsson's 1609 work, *Crymogæa*, can be understood in this context. Generally, the early Swedish geographical works supplied derogatory and inaccurate descriptions of Iceland, and consequently the main project of *Crymogæa* is to correct these misconceptions about Iceland. What is interesting for this discussion is that Arngrímur also presents an alternative theory regarding the language and writing of Scandinavia. The third chapter of *Crymogæa* is concerned with the Icelandic language and runes, and opens with an account of the runic futhark. His material concerning runes is largely taken from the manuscript known as the Codex Wormianus (ms 242, fol., Det Arnamagnæanske Institut, Copenhagen, henceforward 'W'). W contains, among other texts, a copy of both the *Edda* of Snorri Sturluson and the *Third Grammatical Treatise* (TGT), written by Óláfr Þórðarson hvítaskáld, a nephew of Snorri Sturluson. TGT contains two chapters on runes, and is thus the earliest extant runological scholarship.

Arngrímur argued that Icelandic and Norwegian come from ancient Gothic, which only Icelanders now use uncorrupted (Arngrímur Jónsson 1609, 25). After giving this account of the origin of the Icelandic language, he then discusses the 'old letters' of the language, that is, runes (Arngrímur Jónsson 1609, 26-8).

In linking Iceland to the ancient Goths, Arngrímur clearly borrows from the Magnus brothers, insofar as their theory of the Gothic origin of Scandinavian culture could be adapted

for non-Swedish national purposes. Arngrímur's argument, however, is enhanced because he can refer to a medieval text in support of Iceland's claims to preserving uncorrupted the language and letters of their ancestors. That is, TGT provided a medieval, secondary source on runes. Although it does not in fact support Arngrímur's claim about the origins of the Icelandic language, it still represented some kind of evidence in support of such claims.

Such secondary sources are of great importance to speculative runology. Because an account of the origins and uses of runes was the primary goal of such runology, and because the interpretation of runic inscriptions was (especially in the early modern period) very difficult, speculative runologists tends to rely heavily on medieval material which could be used to support their speculation, however tenuously.

Arngrímur's work also received wide circulation in English as part of Samuel Purchas' *Pilgrimes* (vol. 13, 1626). *Crymogæa*, however, is more significant in our history mostly because of its influence on the Danish scholar, Ole Worm. Arngrímur's chapter on runes sparked Worm's interest in the field, and by supplying the Codex Wormianus (in 1628), Arngrímur provided Worm with the only scholarly work on Scandinavian runes from the Middle Ages.

Worm, like Arngrímur, wanted to claim for his country the antiquity and heritage that the Magnuses had claimed for Sweden. By this stage, theories concerning the origin of runes were very much linked with such arguments. In 1636, using TGT as his main medieval source, Worm published his *Runer seu Danica Literatura Antiquissima* (Runes, or the oldest Danish documents/literature), a work more generally known as *Literatura Runica*. Worm did not have to rely on linking the origin of runes to unsupported theories about the origin of the Scandinavian peoples. Unlike the Magnuses, he had a document that he thought, or at least he argued, showed that runes were Danish in origin.

The opening page of *Literatura Runica* states that the Danes invented runes, a clear counter-claim against those of the Swedes. Worm also claims direct Eastern links for the origin of runes. The second chapter (pp. 10-15) discusses whether the word 'rune' is Hebrew in origin. Of much greater interest to the present discussion, however, are chapters 20-21 (pp. 113-21). Chapter 20 ('De literarum Danicarum inventoribus') dispenses with a number of theories which argue for a different origin of runes, including those attributing them to Germany or the Goths. He even grudgingly accepts Olaus Magnus's claim to the age of runes, quoting the above-mentioned passage ('Tolerabilius forsán rem accuratius pensiculanti hoc videbitur', p. 116). It should be noted, however, this particular passage by Olaus Magnus as quoted makes no mention of particular Swedish claims to the origin of runes. Worm argues that runes were taken directly from Hebrew (pp. 118-19), and this claim is followed up in the subsequent chapter ('De origine literarum Danicarum', pp. 119-21) with descriptions of how a number of the runes were adapted from Hebrew. It was widely believed at the time that Hebrew was the original pre-Babel language. Consequently, by claiming a direct inheritance from Hebrew, Worm positions his country as having the original claim to runes in Scandinavia.

There is a trace of a precursor for Worm's approach in TGT itself. This occurs in the discussion of the shapes of runes, when Óláfr attributes the origin of the rune for 'y' to Hebrew: [*y*] er tekít af ebreskum stofum '[y] is taken from Hebrew letters' (Wills, 84-5). This sentence can in some ways be seen as an early trace of the antiquity theory. It would have had as much prestige for Óláfr as for Worm to link the origin of runic letters closely with Hebrew, although Óláfr does not apply this approach to anything like the extent of Worm.

Also of interest in *Literatura Runica* is Worm's dating of the *floruit* of 'Danish' (i.e. Norse-Icelandic) poetry to around the time of the birth of Christ (p. 118), based on the assumption that Norse-Icelandic poetry was originally recorded in runes. Not only was Worm responsible for the linking of poetry with runes, but also the use of these links in the dating of

the origin of runes. This was to become a frequent feature of later variants on the antiquity theory.

Perhaps Worm's biggest contribution to speculative runology was to expand the sense in which the adjective 'runic' was used. *Literatura Runica* uses the adjective to apply to the language as well as the script of early Scandinavia and gives 'Danish' a similar sense. That is, both 'Danish' and 'runic' could refer to the language, literature and writing system of both the Norse-Icelandic area and Denmark. Worm uses TGT as his support for both these usages. The use of 'runic' to refer to the language comes from the word *rúnamál*, occurring twice in TGT in W (p. 96, l. 19 and p. 97, l. 6). While out of context, this word does appear to mean something like 'runic language', in context it clearly refers to the runic alphabet or *fuðark*. However, Worm still uses this word as the main evidence for expanding the use of 'runic' to refer to the Old Norse language (Worm 1636, 32). Elsewhere, he claims that the author of TGT uses the adjectives 'Danish', 'Norwegian' and 'runic' synonymously (Worm 1636, 98). Mostly, TGT refers to Norwegian (*norræna*) as the language under discussion. However, in the passage of TGT which Worm cites, *danskr* is used instead of *norræna*, although only in W. This is what gives Worm his justification in calling 'Danish' and 'Norwegian' synonyms. As for adding 'runic' to the list, Worm is clearly recalling his interpretation of *rúnamál*.

This broad use of 'runic'/'Danish' to encompass the language and literature of Norse-Icelandic became very popular and was used well into the nineteenth century. It is a strong part of the ubiquity theory which was popular also at that time, that is, that runes were used to record Old Norse-Icelandic literature. However, it played an important role in the antiquity theory because it gave a convenient label for the cultural products of non-Swedish Scandinavia, supplying connotations of antiquity. In this way, the use of the word 'runic' provided a counterpart to the use of 'Gothic' by the Swedish antiquarians: 'Gothic' encompassed early Swedish culture, including the language, literature and runes; 'runic' did the same regarding Danish culture for the Danish antiquarians.

In 1651, the second edition of *Literatura Runica* was published, which included some additional sources such as the 'runic' material from *Hávamál* (stanzas 138-163). In 1665, P. H. Resen published both *Snorra Edda* and *Hávamál* in full (reprinted in Faulkes 1977). By this stage the runic section of *Hávamál* was thought of as a separate section (it starts with a large initial in the Codex Regius, GKS 2365 4to), simply entitled *Runa Capitule*. It continued to be influential, for example, being included in Paul-Henri Mallet's *Monumens de la mythologie et de la poésie des Celtes* (1756; 2nd ed. 1763) and its English translation by Thomas Percy, *Northern Antiquities* (1770).

Snorra Edda made its contribution to the antiquity theory in an important way. In the Prologue, Snorri articulates the theory that there was a historical figure called Óðinn who led a migration from Troy to Scandinavia which brought with it the linguistic arts, particularly poetry and rhetoric. The theory occurs twice in the Codex Wormianus of *Snorra Edda*, the second at the beginning of the second section of TGT:

Jþæssi bok ma gerla skilia, at qll ær ein listin | skald skapr sa, ær romverskir spækingar namn iathænis borg a griklandi ok | snerv siðan i latinv mal, ok sa lio[d] hátt mæða skaldskapr, ær oðinn ok aðrir asia | menn fíttv norðr higar i norðr halfv heimsins, ok kendr momum a sina tvngv | þesskonar list, sva sëm þeir höfðv skipat ok nvmít isialfv asia landi, þær sëm mest | var frögð ok rikdomr ok fröðleikr veralldarinnar. (Ólsen 1884, 60)

It may be clearly understood from this book that the art of speech which the Roman orators learnt in Athens in Greece and then transferred into the Latin language is the same as the metre or poetry which Odin and other men of Asia brought northwards when they settled the northern hemisphere, and which they taught to men in their own language, as though they had studied and devised it in Asia itself, where beauty and wealth and knowledge were the greatest in all the world. (Collings 1967, 74)

The theory also occurs in the Prologue to *Ynglinga saga* in *Heimskringla*. This work was first printed in 1594 by Jens Mortensson (ed.) and Mattis Storrson (trans.). Chapter 6 draws from *Hávamál* in its description of the skills of Óðinn: *Óðinn kunnir svá gera, at i orrustu wrðu óvinir hans blindir eða daufir eða óttafullir, en vápn þeira bitu eigi heldr en vendir* (Bjarni Aðalbjarnason, 17) ('Óðinn knew how to make his enemies blind or deaf or fearful in battle, and their weapons not bite better than wands') summarises some of the runic charms listed in *Hávamál*, especially in stanza 148.

The theory gave a Semitic and very early origin to the language, poetry and, by inference, the writing system of Scandinavia. Óðinn was believed to be in fact a historical – not mythological – figure who migrated from Asia to Scandinavia. *Hávamál* ('The sayings of the High One (Óðinn)') was then taken to be the work of this historical Óðinn and with it frequently, his claim to have originated runes and used them for magic. The link between the historical Óðinn and the Óðinn of *Hávamál* is also helped by the implicit reference to the poem in *Ynglinga saga*.

Despite the popularity of *Literatura Runica* the tradition of Swedish Gothicism continued unabated, and with it theories of the origin of runes. The most famous example is Olof Rudbeck's *Atlantica*, published over a number of years at the end of the seventeenth century. In this work, Rudbeck argues that Plato's Atlantis is in fact Sweden and that modern Swedes are the descendants of Atlantis. As part of his evidence, he argues for the antiquity of runes, and does so by an elaborate demonstration. He discovered that since the Flood, there has been a gradual build-up of topsoil uniformly over the earth, and by measuring the depth of a rune stone in the surrounding soil, one can date when the stone was erected. He travelled Sweden taking such measurements, and concluded that the majority of rune-stones were erected in the third century following the Flood, and thus about 3700 years old in the seventeenth century (Rudbeck 1679, I:125-44). Having established this dating of runes, Rudbeck also shows how various Greek and Phoenician letters derive from the runic alphabet (I:841-7).

There are obviously patriotic overtones to Rudbeck's work. Quite aside from the issue of whether it supported his theory of Atlantis, the theory and proof of the antiquity of runes was very influential in Sweden for some time. Rudbeck's argument echoes the theory of the Magnus brothers, who also dated the origin of runes to about the time of the Flood, and also suggested their original home was outside Europe.

Also of note in this period was a work known as *Runographia* by Olof Verelius (*Manuductio compendiosa ad Runographiam Scandicam antiquam*, 1675). Verelius reiterates Rudbeck's theory (at that stage unpublished) and presents a theory of his own. He goes back to *Hávamál*, using it as evidence that Óðinn was the originator of the magical use of runes. By this stage, Snorri's theory had such currency that on its basis the historical Óðinn was dated to around the beginning of the Christian era. Since runes were probably older than their particular use (that is, abuse) in magic, Verelius argues that they must be older than the Christian era (Östlund 2000, 100-1). Once again, we have the antiquity theory, supported by the material in *Hávamál* and Snorri's writings.

These theories, particularly Rudbeck's, had quite some currency for the following century or so, but by the end of the eighteenth century they were losing influence. The Swedish scholar Johan Ihre worked at length to refute the spurious claims of his predecessors as well as reinterpreting the inscriptions they used to try to support their arguments. His response Rudbeck's topsoil theory, for example, is as follows:

Quid roboris huic argumento inquit operose disquirere, eo minus e re mea esse duco, quum humus illa atra, quae antea hecatombe digna censebatur, nunc parcius venditetur, imprimis postquam alia inventa sunt monumenta runica, quorum aetas, si ex adjacente humo atra censeretur, aliquot seculis condito mundo antiquiores forent. (Östlund 2000, 94)

I do not think it is my task to make a laborious investigation of how much validity there is in this argumentation, especially now that this dark topsoil, which was earlier so highly esteemed, has lost much of its prestige, above all after the discovery of some other runic monuments which, if measured according to the surrounding nourishing soil, would be some centuries older than the planet earth itself. (Östlund 2000, 95)

However, Ihre still believed in the theory of a historical Óðinn and that he was the author of *Hávamál* (§2.7, Östlund 86-7), although he does express some scepticism regarding Snorri's account (cf. §8.27, Östlund 101-1). This was not uncommon even at this point in time. Thomas Warton (1774) for example, uses Snorri's theory of the migration of Óðinn to support his thesis that Romantic fiction in Europe came via Scandinavia from Arabia.

The extreme and speculative nature of this material should not be too much of a surprise to anyone who has looked at theories of language and writing in the seventeenth century. Eco's *The Search for the Perfect Language* contains a number of examples of seventeenth-century nationalist theories of the origin of language (Eco 1995, 95-103). However, the number of such claims in the Scandinavian region and the intense competition between them does appear to be at the extreme end of this trend in Europe. What is interesting for this discussion is the way in which the Icelandic texts are used to support the theory, and also that the theory re-emerges outside of the seventeenth century scholarly environment.

A contemporary version

Probably the best example of the antiquity theory in contemporary scholarship is very recent: a 1994 work by the Norwegian scholar Kjell Aartun. Aartun is not well received within the runological establishment, but his theories are quite popular and the Norwegian government has made him a state scholar. (It is also interesting, although not surprising to see, the extent to which national governments have sponsored the proponents of the antiquity theory.) In Aartun we see the return of the theory of the Asian origin of runes.

Aartun is a scholar of Semitic languages who turned to the study of runes. He argues that Norwegian runes are the same as the alphabets used in Semitic-speaking areas such as Trojan Asia Minor and Palestine from as early as 4000 years ago. Aartun attempts to demonstrate that the earliest Norwegian inscriptions are in a Semitic language, and that they are associated with Semitic fertility cults. My purpose here is not to examine in detail Aartun's arguments regarding the Semitic origin of runes, but rather to note the similarities they share with the antiquity theories described above.

A major similarity with earlier antiquity theories arises in Aartun's discussion of the Oriental origin of runes (pp. 13-25). He uses the Prologue to *Snorra Edda* as evidence that there was a migration to Scandinavia from Troy/Asia Minor (p. 24), and is consequently evidence for the Oriental provenance of the runic script and the language of the earliest inscriptions.

Another similarity with earlier speculative runology is that the word 'rune' is applied to the Semitic scripts which he discusses (cf. chapter 2, part A: 'Orientalske runeimskrifter', 26-47). Even if one were to accept his argument regarding the relationship between the scripts, the Semitic letters are clearly not runes in any normal sense of the word, but rather quite a distinct script. This expansion of the use of the word 'rune' has clear parallels in earlier runology, especially in Worm's writing.

There are many other similarities with early runologists: the dating of the origin of the script to about 2000 BC (p. 11), as with the Magnuses and Rudbeck; the linking of runes with Troy and Asia (p. 24), as with Snorri and others following him; the Semitic origin of the letters (the central thesis), as with Óláft, Worm and others; and the claim that the most

original runes in Scandinavia belong to his own country, Norway, as Rudbeck argued for Sweden.

Of note is the complete absence of references to any earlier antiquity theories, even though Aartun's own theory shares many similarities with them. The fact that Aartun can write 'Som historisk kilde har den tradisjonen Snorre gjengir vært lite eller overhodet ikke påaktet' ('As a historical source, the tradition Snorri represents has not received much or any attention', p. 24) reveals his ignorance of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century runology. To a certain extent, the absence of reference to other runologists is also a feature of the antiquity theory tradition. While much speculative runology is produced in reaction to other claims, it often uses the medieval 'evidence' directly rather than building on earlier theories.

Conclusions

All the theories have a number of elements in common. These include: (1) Runes greatly predate the Christian era. (2) Runes and the language of runic inscriptions originate geographically in Asia Minor and/or Palestine, often more specifically in Troy and Trojan culture. (3) Runes and the language of runic inscriptions originate linguistically in Semitic languages, often more specifically Hebrew. (4) Snorri's account of Óðinn's migration to Scandinavia supports the above account of the origin of runes and their language. (5) For a Scandinavian runologist putting forward these theories, one's own country will invariably have the oldest and most original examples of runic evidence in Scandinavia. (6) The words 'rune' and 'runic' (or if Swedish, 'Gothic') can be used to refer to related and unrelated inscriptions and languages without justification of the usage. Instances of the antiquity theory almost always incorporate all or most of these elements. Needless to say, none of these views are accepted by the mainstream of contemporary scholarship.

The medieval sources used by modern runologists give at best tenuous evidence in support of the antiquity theory. Snorri's theory that Ofinn brought poetry and other cultural forms to Scandinavia never includes runes, nor is Óláfr hvítakáld's reiteration of this theory linked to his runological material. However, by taking the migration theory at face value, and by combining it with the idea in *Hávamál* that Óðinn was the original user of runes, modern runologists are clearly influenced by a certain reading of these medieval sources. This reading however, is one that few today would acknowledge as correct.

Snorra Edda, TGT and *Hávamál* provide a common point of reference for proponents of the antiquity theory. Even when speculative runologists refer to these works independently, they derive basically the same readings. Further research is needed to establish the extent to which there is continuity in these theories of the antiquity of runes, but it is clear that the theory is recurrent if not continuous, has specific characteristics and is frequently associated with readings of a handful of medieval Icelandic texts.

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