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PAGANISM TAMED

Abstract

The runic alphabet (*futhark*) is often associated with paganism, since its use in Scandinavia predates the conversion to Christianity. An analysis of the runic inscriptions carved on stones shows, however, that most of them can be classified as Christian on either linguistic grounds (prayer formulas) or ornamental ones (crosses). It seems that the original writing system of Scandinavia was adapted to the needs of the new religion, and rather than being a pagan tool it has become a witness of the conversion to Christianity.

Key words: runic alphabet, futhark, Christianisation of Scandinavia, runic inscriptions.

Słowa kluczowe: alfabet runiczny, futhark, chrystianizacja Skandynawii, inskrypcje runiczne.

Modern popular culture associates runes and runic inscriptions mainly with paganism and esoterics, with secrets and codes. The fascination of a writing system to be deciphered, of the mystery of the inscriptions, originates with the 16th century works of the great Swedish linguist and antiquarian, Johannes Bure. However, for its active users and contemporaries, the runic alphabet, the *futhark*, was a writing system whose purpose was similar to that of any other writing system: to document and communicate. Through runic inscriptions we learn of historical events, inheritance customs and laws, the structure of society and the conversion from the pagan cults to Christianity.¹ The inscriptions bear witness to the spread of the new religion and of the gradual evolution of the view of the society and of individuals following it. In the context of the conversion from the old religion to the new, they are an exceptional source, as they are original

¹ B. Sawyer, *The Viking-Age Rune-Stones*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.

documentation and not translations of religious prose or documents prepared by foreign missionaries.²

Futhark was in use from approximately 200 CE to the 18th century (in the Swedish province of Dalecarlia), but the most numerous inscriptions date from 10th - 11th centuries, the time of transition between pagan customs and Christianity, which first reaches Scandinavia in about 800 CE. At that time, Scandinavia was a region with a more or less uniform language, supported by a writing system common to the North Germanic people and not used beyond Scandinavia by anyone other than the travelling Scandinavians. Based on or inspired by the Mediterranean alphabets, Latin, Greek and possibly Etruscan varieties, it is different in its organisation of the symbols (hence its name is *futhark* and not *alphabet*), their number, names and also the shape of some of them. The runes are used to write on stone, metal and wood, and the preserved inscriptions preserved give testimony to the practices and history of these times. It is from the inscriptions that we learn the names of the kings (e.g. of the Jelling dynasty, inscription DR 42,³ parts A and B) as well as their role in the conversion from pagan cults to Christianity (DR 42, part C):

A haraltr kunukR þaþ kaurua kubl þausi aft kurm faþur sin auk aft þourui muþur sina sa haraltr ias soR uan tanmaurk

A Harald king asked carve monument this after Gorm father his and after Þyrvé, mother his, this Harald which himself won Denmark

B ala auk nuruiak

B all and Norway

C auk t(a)ni (k)(a)(r)(þ)(i) kristno

C and Danes made Christian

(DR 42)

The Jelling inscription DR 42 gives a direct account of the fact that the conversion took place: a nation was “made” Christian by its king. Other, similar accounts can be found, of lords converting their subjects to the new faith, such as J RS1928:66, which documents the conversion of the Swedish province of Jämtland.

The evidence of conversions found in runic inscriptions may be direct not only in their wording as in the examples above, but also in the ornaments placed

² H. Williams, “Runstenstexternas teologi”, [in:] B. Nilsson (ed.), *Kristnandet i Sverige. Gamla källor och nya perspektiv*. Projektet Sveriges kristnande publikationer 5, Uppsala, 1996, pp. 291–313.

³ The abbreviations used are taken from the Rundatabasen, the online corpus of runic inscriptions. The first part stands for province (in Sweden, e.g. U for Uppland) or country (DR for Denmark).

on the stones. On the Jelling stone (DR 42), a man's figure is carved, with the man holding his arms widely spread as if he was hanging on a cross. Crosses in different variants can be found on almost 60% of the Swedish runic stones (compare with only 6% and 16% in Norway and Denmark respectively, Lager 2002:95f.). In a sense, the message coded by the inscription is of a twofold nature: overt in either the verbal or the ornamental formulation. Although crosses are symbols (and geometrical constructions) that have been known in the whole world without connections to Christianity, the crosses found on the runic inscriptions are undoubtedly to be connected with Christianity. At least two inscriptions bear the legend under the cross-form: **krus** (Sö 227) and **kus** (Sö 340) – “cross”, or perhaps “this is [a] cross.”⁴ Even depictions of mythological scenes need not necessarily be connected with paganism, since at least some of them were reinterpreted as Christian, e.g. the slaying of the dragon Fafnir by Sigurd (where Fafnir symbolizes Evil and Sigurd Christ triumphing over it),⁵ some are also found in churches. According to some authors, *interpretatio christiana* may even incorporate the famous masks, most often associated with Odin, in interpreting them as depictions of Christ.⁶ Such mixture of old and new most likely served as a means of introducing the new religion by making it less foreign.⁷

A yet more indirect testimony is the formulations in the inscriptions documenting the passage from the old “theology” to the new. The inscriptions show, more or less unwittingly, the development of a new mentality, in which the concepts of the individual and society, the gods and the afterlife, changed. The formation of this new mentality is particularly clear in the abundant runic material from the Swedish province of Uppland dating from the 10th and 11th centuries. From that time and area come numerous stones that commemorate the dead.

The tradition to raise the stones to the memory of a dead relative is documented in Scandinavia at least since the Rök stone, where a father commemorates his slain son. However, it is in the 10th and 11th centuries that the custom of raising these stones became so popular that today we know of approximately 3000 inscriptions, more than half from Uppland (incidentally, the area of the most potent pagan cult, with its sacrifices described in the chronicle of Adam of Bremen and alluded on the Stentofte inscription). The custom of raising stones

⁴ L. Lager, *Den synliga tron. Runstensors som en spegling av kristnandet i Sverige*. Institutionen för arkeologi och antik historia, Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2002.

⁵ G. Danbolt, “Hva bilder kan fortelle om møtet mellom hedenskap og kristendom”, [in:] A. Andrén (ed.) *Medeltidens fødselse. Symposier på Krappertups borg* I, Lund 1989, pp. 233–260; T. Lindqvist, “Saga, arv och guld i 1000-talets Södermanland”, [in:] J. Backlund et al. (eds.), *Historiska etyder: en vänbok till Stellan Dahlgren*, Uppsala 1997, pp. 139–147; B. Sawyer, *op.cit.*

⁶ A. Hultgård, “Religiös förändring, kontinuitet och ackulturation/synkretism i vikingatidens och medeltidens skandinaviska religion”, [in:] B. Nilsson (ed.), *Kontinuitet i kult och tro från vikingatid till medeltid*. Projektet Sveriges kristnande publikationer 4, Uppsala 1992, pp. 49–103.

⁷ G. Danbolt, *op.cit.*, pp. 233–260.

itself still lacks convincing explanation, but at least three hypotheses are found in literature:

1. The stones were raised to secure an inheritance. The formulaic inscriptions name both the deceased and those who commissioned the stone, most probably to be seen as the nearest of kin and heirs.⁸
2. The stones were raised purely “in memory of”, and are to be connected with burial ceremonies; at the same time, they served as a proclamation of the new faith.
3. The stones were raised “for the soul of the deceased” in the literal meaning of an indulgence (remission of punishment for sins).⁹

A typical example of runic inscription from that period is U 25, naming the deceased and his widow, who commissioned the stone, ending in a prayer for his soul:

humfriþr lit ris- stn þinsa ifa-- haur bunta sin kuþ hialbi i ot hans

Holmfriðr let raise stone this after Haur, husband hers. God may help spirit his.

U 25

The need for prayer for the soul of the deceased was certainly a new concept in medieval Scandinavia. Norse mythology includes images of future glory in Valhalla, but the concept of paradise was foreign until introduced by Christian missionaries, which is best witnessed by the fact that it required a new term (*paradis*, a direct loan from Latin):

akyti lit rita st n þino yfti tumoistr lati kumo ot tumo i lus yk baratysi yk i þon em besta kristnum

Agne let raise this stone after (for) Tumme (..). Christ may let Tummes soul come into light and paradise and the best world for Christians.

U 719

The change also concerned the rules of entrance: while Valhall was reserved for brave warriors and the road to it led through war and strife, paradise could only be entered through the grace of God and forgiveness of sins.

iystin auk iuruntr auk biurn þiR [byryþr risþu]stin trums f[apur] sin kuþ ihlbi ons ont auk selu fur kifi onum sakaR auk sutiR hi (..)

⁸ K. Carlqvist, Vad säger runstenarna, *Meddelanden från arkivet för folkets historia* 5:4, 1977, pp. 8–21; B. Sawyer, Det vikingatida runstensresandet i Skandinavien, *Scandia* 55, 1989, pp. 185–202 and 327–328.

⁹ H. Williams, *op.cit.*, pp. 291–313.

Östen and Jorund and Björn, these brothers raised [this stone for] their father. May God help spirit his and soul, forgive him sins.

U 323

In the inscriptions, there is a clear awareness of the inability to enter paradise on one's own merits and the need for grace, as witnessed by inscription U 539:

**A tiarfR uki urika uk uiki uk iukiR uk kiRialmR þiR bryþr aliR litu risa
B stin þina iftiR suin brupur sin saR uarþ tuþr a iut(l)ati on skulti
C fara til iklanþs kuþ ialbi (o)ns at uk salu uk kus muþiR betr þan an karþi ti**

Djärv and Örökja and Víge and Jager and Gerhjälrm,
all these brothers let raise this stone after Sven, brother their.
He was killed on Jylland. He should travel to England.
God and God's mother may help his spirit and soul
better than he deserved.

U 539 (Husby Lyhundra church)

Since future happiness was not entirely a matter of one's own virtue, the protection of others was called for. The usual helpers were the Virgin Mary and St Michael, whose portrayal as the commander of the army of God against forces of evil on the one hand predestined him to the role of the protector and on the other hand certainly appealed to people whose eschatological thinking included a final war during Ragnarök.

**-mekr : lakþi : stin : þ(a)nsi * RftiR : stinbiurn : s... .. : halbi : ut : hans : auk : su : hlka
: sata * maria**

[He]mingr layed stone this after Steinbjörn, s[on ... God] may help spirit his and the holy Saint Mary.

Vg 105

**estriþ let reisa s(t)ein þensa eftiR iuar bota sin auk ikuar auk ikifastr eftiR faþur sin mihel
kati at hans**

Ástriðr let raise stone this after Jóar/Ívar, husband hers, and Ingvarr and Ingifastr after father their.
Mikael may protect spirit his.

U 478

It may be said that practically all religious matters raised in the runic material concern the afterlife. As Henrik Williams puts it:

...missionstidens teologi i första hand verkar ha rört eskatologiska problem (...). Allt religiöst språk-gods i inskrifterna rör ett och endast ett område, nämligen liver efter detta¹⁰.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 307.

The theology of the missiontime seems to have mainly concerned eschatological problems. All religious material in the inscriptions deals with one and only one domain, namely the afterlife.

If indeed the main purpose of raising a stone was to secure salvation for the deceased, it may also become more clear why so many inscriptions are careful to name the circumstances of the deceased's demise, often resulting in lack of the body and lack of burial.¹¹ This concerns cases where the deceased lost his/her life while abroad or drowned at home and the body was probably never retrieved. Interestingly enough, the prospect of losing one's life away from home and relatives who could take care of the burial, could also prompt individuals to raise a stone for themselves, just to be on the safe side, as in U 605, whose commissioner let it be raised before her planned pilgrimage to Jerusalem:

iskirun harþiR totiR lit risti runiR ati sik sialfan hn uil austr fara auk ut til iursala fair risti runiR

Ingirún(?) Harðr's daughter, had the runes carved in memory of herself. She wants to travel to the east and abroad to Jerusalem. Fótr(?) carved the runes.

U 605

The prayer in the runic inscription (as "may God help his/her soul") was one way of helping the salvation of the soul, possibly even the act of raising the stone itself could have been a way of obtaining absolution.¹² If that was the case, we may better understand why some of the inscriptions do not contain the prayer formula, like U 964. Apparently, the stone itself was a prayer:

kitilfríþr lit sitia stin for ot suins bunt

Ketilfríðr had the stone placed for the spirit of Sveinn, (her) husband

U 964

Another indulgence securing activity was raising bridges, a custom also mentioned in a number of inscriptions¹³.

hulmi let ka[ra bro ift]R þurkut fnþr sia

Holmi had the bridge made in memory of Þorgautr, his father.

Sm 73

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 309.

¹² E.g. Wessén, SRI *Sveriges runinskrifter*. Utg. av Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien 1-. (Stockholm 1900), 104; L. Peterson, "Gæra bro fyrir sial. En semantisk studie över en runstensfras", [in:] G. Alhaug et al. (eds.) *Heidersskrift til Nils Hallan på 65-årsdagen 13. desember 1991*, Oslo 1991, pp. 347 ff.

¹³ Kinander, SRI *Sveriges runinskrifter*. Utg. av Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien 1, Stockholm 1900, p. 4; L. Peterson, *op.cit.*; H. Williams, *op.cit.*

It is striking that the notions of an afterlife crave new terms previously unknown in the which were therefore borrowed from Latin (alongside with some other natural loans for concepts relating to the religion like *biskop*). The notion of individual salvation and the individual soul seems so different from the original Nordic view as to import two new terms for it: *sial* and *ande*, both describing the inner being, the part of self that is to survive the demise of flesh:

själ (*sial*) – ags. *sáwol* (soul) got. *saiwala*, possibly connected with slav. *sila* (power) or Greek *aiólos* moving

ande: (breathe), lat. *anima* (breath)

The creation of new terms for the concept of the immortal part of a human being is not due to the fact that such concepts were foreign to the Germanic peoples before their Christianisation. Rather, the concepts that were there did not correspond to the Christian view of soul. The terms are reminiscent of 'mind' rather than 'soul'.

hugher (= mind) origin unknown, also used as 'memory'

fylgia, impression, also used to denote a spiritual being following every human, unique to this human (~ guardian angel)

This more individualistic view of a person was part of a wider conceptual change in the view of the society. The social order of the time was built on clans – a person was always seen as part of a family, the approach to all matters was collective. Any disruption of the order resulted in revenge – a picture well-known from the Icelandic sagas. The death or loss of a person was the matter of the collective, the clan, not just his or her individual tragedy. Interestingly enough, revenge is also pledged on Christian runic stones. However, there is a new factor in the revenge:

**roþvisl auk roþalf þau litu raisa staina eftir sy-... .. þria þina eftir roþfos han siku blakumen
i utfaru kuþ hialbin sial roþfoaR kuþ suiki þa aR han suiu**

Rodvisl and Rodälv they let raise the stones after their three sons. This stone after Rodfos. He was betrayed while he was travelling. May God help Rodfas soul. May God betray those who betrayed him.

G 134

The role of the avenging clan is taken up by God himself, to whom all Christians belong. In this way, the revenge also becomes part of the afterlife, as it is deterred for the Final Judgement.

The old collective thinking gave no room to the individual aspect of salvation so important in Christianity. The prayers are for the souls of individuals, not the

welfare of the collective. On the other hand, a new collective is being formed: the church, the Christian community. This can be seen in the prayers that, apart from taking up individual cases, are also given for all Christian people (not just the family of the deceased).

suarthofpi let reisa stein þentsa eftiR onut sun sin kuþ hialbi at hans auk alum kristnum

Svarthövde (Black-headed) let raise stone this after Anund son his. God may help spirit his and all Christians

U 457

The new collective is perhaps more pronounced in still later inscriptions found in churches, as the one from Gotland given below:

gesus krist naþi haluia sil (..) huer sum asir biþi patanostu firi haluia sial (..)

Jesus Christ may grace Hallvéar soul (..) Who sees it may pray paternoster for Hallvéar soul. (..)

G 115 \$M

In it, the passer-by is encouraged to give prayers for the soul of the deceased; the assumption is made that whoever passes the inscriptions shares the new faith. The Latin name of the Lord's prayer given is not unusual in the runic material, inscriptions entirely in Latin, e.g. of the Ave Maria, sometimes combined with the *fuþark* inscription were abundant in the Middle Ages, many such have been found in Bergen (Norway).

Finally, an indirect testimony of the spread of the new religion is found in inscriptions documenting baptism, typically by naming the white clothes worn on that occasion.

[ikilaif let r]as[a st-- at bruna boanta] s[in] h(a)n (u)arþ tauþr a t[an](m)(a)rku i huita uaþum [bal]i [-r]ist...

Ingileif let raise stone for Brúna, husband hers. He was dead in Denmark in white clothes. Balli carved.

U 699 \$

The picture of the Christian theology as found in the runic inscriptions shows the deep concern for the afterlife – in terms of the individual salvation. This is hardly surprising, seeing as raising the stones was a custom connected with death (although stones for living people are also found; however, they are never raised by relatives but always commissioned by the individual in question, like the famous Jarlabanki stones). The awareness of one's shortcomings and the necessity of God's grace and forgiveness are certainly innovations in the religious landscape. But the inscriptions show even a picture of God as Christ triumphant. There, the new theology continues the old: mythological heroes are reinterpreted as Christ.

What the inscriptions do not show is a greater conflict between the old and the new religion, though it is reasonable to hypothesise that there must have been a number of tensions.¹⁴ Nor is there any reason to suspect the futhark was a tool of the pagan cults. Quite the contrary, the numerous memory-stones raised in the 10th and 11th centuries are almost a means of Christian propaganda (von Friesen 1928:75f.¹⁵).

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UJARZMIONE POGAŃSTWO

Streszczenie

Inskrypcje runiczne, spisane futharkiem, najstarszym pismem Skandynawii, stanowią dziś bezcenne źródło wiedzy o języku, historii i kulturze pierwszych mieszkańców Północy. Ryte w kamieniu, wznoszone dla upamiętnienia osób zmarłych, ilustrują też konwersję Północy z pogańskich wierzeń ku chrześcijaństwu. Wbrew potocznym opiniom pismo runiczne nie było silnie związane z kultem pogańskim. Znakomita większość inskrypcji „nekrologicznych” ma charakter chrześcijański, co zawarte jest m.in. w modlitwach, inwokacjach do Jezusa, Maryi i świętych (zwłaszcza św. Michała), wzmiankach o białych szatach noszonych przez zmarłego (tzn. stroju, w którym przyjął chrzest), wizjach życia po śmierci (raju) i warunkach uczestnictwa w życiu wiecznym (odpuszczenie grzechów). Inskrypcje, które w warstwie językowej nie dają jednoznacznego świadectwa, są ilustrowane motywem krzyża. Wraz z upowszechnieniem nowej wiary pismo runiczne znajdziemy również w kościołach, m.in. na chrzcielnicach czy płytach nagrobnych. Kamienie z inskrypcjami były używane jako budulec nowych świątyń. Wydaje się zatem, że chrześcijaństwo skutecznie zaadaptowało pierwotne pismo Skandynawii, tak skutecznie, że gdy alfabet łaciński pojawił się w powszechnym użyciu, dla runicznego zabrakło domen i został zarzucony.

¹⁴ See also L. Lager, *Den synliga tron. Runstensors som en spegling av kristnandet i Sverige*. Institutionen för arkeologi och antik historia, Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2002, pp. 202 ff.

¹⁵ O. von Friesen, *Runorna i Sverige. En kortfattad översikt*. Föreningen Urds skrifter 4, Uppsala 1928, pp. 75 f.

