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POPULAR USAGE OF RUNIC SCRIPT IN A LOCAL  
COMMUNITY IN LATE 19<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY NORWAY –  
AN EDUCATIONAL TOOL OR JUST A PARADE OF SECRECY?

Abstract

In this paper, a case study of local runic usage in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Norway is presented, asking the question: Was this a continuation of medieval runic writing, or was it a result of learning from printed books? The answer to this question seems uncertain, but the usage under discussion reveals a kind of ‘literacy from below’, which, to a degree, complied with a need for popular cryptography. This in its turn displays a general literacy at a fairly advanced level.

**Key words:** the youngest runes, literacy, folk cryptography.

**Słowa kluczowe:** najmlodsze runy, umiejętność czytania, ludowa kryptografia.

The present contribution should be considered a case study of what might be called late pre-modern runic usage in Norway. It has as its departure point the existence of what has been called “the youngest runes” in English terminology.<sup>1</sup> In Norwegian scholarship, these runes are usually referred to as “post-reformational runes” (*etterreformatoriske runer*), the use of which can be observed in various contexts as late as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century all over Norway. Every single county (*fylke*) is represented on the distribution map. Thirty years ago, famous American linguist Einar Haugen made a call “for the scholar who will undertake to tell the tale of the youngest runes.”<sup>2</sup> This call has, to some extent at least where Norway is concerned, been answered by a master thesis in runology

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<sup>1</sup> E. Haugen, “The Youngest Runes: From Oppdal to Waukegan”, [in:] *Michigan Germanic Studies*, VII (1) (1981): pp. 148–175.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 158.

written by K. Jonas Nordby in 2001.<sup>3</sup> This study means that we have a better mental view of these late runic inscriptions and their distribution today than Einar Haugen had when he worked with a local branch of late runic tradition around 1980. Here is not the time, nor the place, to reiterate Nordby's observations. We shall, nonetheless, need them as a backdrop and a point of reference for the case to be presented here.

The question of origin and, to a certain extent, also the question of the geographical distribution of the youngest runes are important issues within the context of the present volume of essays: Are these runes a continuation of medieval runic writing in an unbroken tradition, or are they the result of learning from books? These questions have, to a certain degree, been discussed in runological scholarship over the years. There are, as we can all see, two main possibilities at stake here. On the one hand, there is the possibility of an unbroken popular tradition of runic script and runic usage from the Late Middle Ages to late pre-modern times. On the other hand, there is the possibility that the youngest runes originate from a re-established tradition based on learning from printed books that has occurred in Scandinavia from the mid sixteenth century onwards. The study of runic forms does not, as it seems, provide sufficient evidence for us to assume a continuous tradition. It is, much in consequence of this, more or less commonly accepted that the youngest runes originate in learned books, such as the works of Johannes and Olaus Magnus<sup>4</sup> and later publications on runes. Any details of this process remain, however, unknown.

Even so, it seems that the youngest runes originating from book learning were re-circulated into or readapted by popular tradition, at least in certain areas of Norway and also of Sweden.<sup>5</sup> These traditions, depending as it seems on book-literacy at the outset, resulted in a certain – modest, it should be added – level of popular runic literacy in various parts of 17<sup>th</sup> to late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup> century Norway: secondary traditions, as it were, that seem to have been self-sustainable in the sense that their transmission was taken care of by what might, even in this context, be thought of as confined scribal communities. To some extent, these facts make the question of origin less important in our context. Furthermore, the question of continuity or rupture in the transmission of runic writing from the Middle Ages onwards is blurred by the continuous use of runes for specific purposes, particularly clog almanacs. It has been maintained, however, that such almanacs should be conceived of as isolated computistic systems with

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<sup>3</sup> J.K. Nordby, *Etterreformatoriske runeinnskrifter i Norge. Opphav og Tradisjon*, unpublished MA thesis (Oslo: University of Oslo, 2001).

<sup>4</sup> J. Magnus, *Historia de omnibus gothorum sueonumque regibus*, Rome 1554; O. Magnus, *Historia de Gentibus Septentrionalibus*, Rome 1555.

<sup>5</sup> J.K. Nordby, *op.cit.*, pp. 133; H. Gustavsson, S.-G. Hallonquist, *Runor i Dalarna*, Karlstad: Riksantikvarieämbetet och Elfdalsalens hembygdsförening, 1985; T. Sköld, Edward Larsons alfabet, *DAUN-KATTA* (2003), pp. 5–6.

no relation to other kinds of runic usage.<sup>6</sup> This view is also supported in part by Einar Haugen, who points to the use of post-medieval runes to replace Roman numerals. This is not done according to the methods used in runic calendars<sup>7</sup>. Be this as it may, the important point for us to note here is that popular traditions of runic writing can be securely attested in certain areas of Norway in the period indicated above.

The usage of writing in the youngest runes to be focussed upon in more detail here can be located quite accurately to a small community at the innermost end of the Førresfjord, some 15 km east of present-day town of Haugesund, Rogaland county, in western Norway. The use of runic script among people from this community appears to have been at its peak for a couple of decades after 1850. Since then, this very local tradition seems to have been gradually on the decline, and only rudimentary remnants of it were still alive in 1933 when scholarly notes were taken and evidence for the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century usage collected. Most of this evidence has, unfortunately, been lost since 1933.<sup>8</sup> There is, nevertheless, sufficient material left to enable us to trace this particular tradition of runic writing back to two named persons – a certain Hans Knud Sørensen (29 September 1810 – 8 March 1877) and the thirty years younger Knud Johannes Knudsen (born 31 August 1840, date of death uncertain). They both used the same kind of runic forms, and there is every reason to believe that the younger of the two had learned the script from the elder, even if it cannot be definitively proved. Hans Knud Sørensen was not a bookish man. He was a craftsman, a shoemaker and an able carpenter in addition to being a capable fiddler, as the local tradition has it.<sup>9</sup> For his runic alphabet refer to the illustration [Hagland 1]. It is known from a letter written by Sørensen dated 31 December 1873.<sup>10</sup> We do not know anything about the origin of this late runic tradition or how it started, but we will return to these questions in some concluding remarks to the case presented here.

The two men just mentioned seem to have been the most prominent bearers of the local tradition, of which we now have only scattered evidence. There is, however, in the preserved material, evidence to prove that a group of people related to these men and to this particular community also mastered the art of runic writing and used runic script in certain situations or contexts. The scanty remnants of the preserved evidence contain interesting details in this respect, such as a letter *to* Hans Knud Sørensen, dated 15 June 1872, written by a tailor in a community some miles away from where the recipient of the letter lived. The letter refers to a bill for some work done by the tailor, with the following

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<sup>6</sup> J.K. Nordby, *op.cit.*, pp. 133.

<sup>7</sup> E. Haugen, “The Youngest Runes...”, pp. 153.

<sup>8</sup> cf. J.R. Hagland, “Dei yngste runene” i ein tradisjon frå Karmsund. *Festskrift til Finn Hødnebo 29. desember 1989*, ed. B. Eithun et al., Oslo: Novus forlag, 1989, pp. 91–102.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 92.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*.

addition written in runes: “Please do not let anyone see the bill, as it is twelve shilling below the usual tariff.”<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, there are notes taken from an other letter *to* Hans Knud Sørensen from the United States of America, dated 2 February 1872 in Ossian, Iowa, and signed by a certain Jonas Nødland (Nodland being one of the farms in the local community that interests us here). The content of this letter is not known, as it has now been lost. The last words, written in runes, were, however, noted by the collector in 1933: “Please do not let Mangela [a woman’s name] hear any of this!” So, we can just make guesses about the content of the letter.

The kind of runic writing brought to light by these two examples seems to belong in a wider context of such usage to which we shall return shortly. Before doing so, we shall add just a few sketches to the depiction of this small community of runic writers from around the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century and some decades onwards. The man who took notes and collected evidence for this particular tradition of runic writing in 1933, the lawyer and local historian Svein Steinsnes, also interviewed an old lady born and raised in ‘our’ local community. At the time, she was 80 years old, that is to say she was born in 1853. She could still produce a runic alphabet of the kind displayed in the illustration above, telling the local historian that she had learned how to write in runes as a child from her brothers and sisters and that the children in the community wrote to each other in runes, making fun of those who did not master the art of such writing.

Here, I may even add a note of a more personal order just to fill in the picture. My father, born in 1910, once told me that his grandmother and my great-grandmother, born in 1837, according to family tradition could “write in Old Norse” as it was phrased. This somewhat cryptic tradition must have referred to an acquired ability to write in the youngest runes, obviously learned in the same community that occupies us here. As a child, she had close contact with the local communities in that very same area and must have learned to write in runes much in the same way as related by the 80-year-old lady in 1933. Unfortunately, no evidence of my great-grandmother’s runic writing has been preserved.

So how should the fairly widespread popular use of runes in a community as late as the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century be understood? After having discussed late runic usage that in several ways resembles the case presented here, Einar Haugen makes a somewhat sweeping remark in this respect. “From having been a plaything of the learned,” he says, “the runes have become a plaything of the newly educated folk. They have changed from a folk epigraphy to a folk cryptography.”<sup>12</sup>

It is not clear what exactly he means by “the newly educated folk” in this context, but there is no doubt to the element of folk cryptography, even in the

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibidem*, p.95.

<sup>12</sup> E. Haugen, “The Youngest Runes...”, pp. 153.

case studied here. We will return to that shortly. It appears most of all that cases like the one discussed here represent something that might appropriately be thought of as a kind of literacy from below. That is to say, a runic literacy at a certain level that was not imposed by any temporal or ecclesiastical authority, but rather something that was transferred from person to person in local communities, much in the same way as any other popular tradition.

To some extent, the use of runes in a local community such as the one highlighted here seems to have functioned as a tool for educating children in the art of writing in general. It may well be that the use of runes among children, as is vaguely attested in 'our' community, was in fact instigated and encouraged by pioneers of the art such as the above-mentioned Hans Knud Sørensen. The element of secrecy or cryptography must have been a motivating factor for the children when learning this particular kind of script. At least the skill of reading and writing in runes enabled the initiated ones to make fun of those who did not master it, according to the old lady interviewed in 1933. A motivating factor indeed, one should think! Also, some of the messages encoded in letters to Hans Knud Sørensen reveal, as we have seen, a strong element of secrecy connected to the use of the youngest runes. That is to say that the use of the youngest runes, even among the initiated grown-ups, had, to a very high degree at least, a cryptographic function, probably primarily so.

Indirectly, this reveals something about the general level of literacy in the small rural community we have used as an example. The need for some kind of cryptography has in general as a necessary prerequisite that many, if not necessarily all, members of a given community know how to read the ordinary script used. In our case, that is to say the late 19<sup>th</sup> century style of handwriting. In other contexts, proficiency in reading handwriting presupposes or implies skills in writing that kind of script as well. The implication of this for 'our' 19<sup>th</sup> century community is that the level of literacy in general must have been high or at least quite high. If not, the fairly extensive use of the youngest runes of which we can see such distinct contours would have been rather pointless – a useless plaything of newly educated folk, to rephrase again the words of Einar Haugen. There was, it appears, more to it than that. The newly educated folk can be taken to represent ordinary people who had by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century acquired the skills of reading and writing. In that respect, Einar Haugen's remark can make sense. We do not, however, have very accurate or detailed information about the general level of literacy in Norway in this period. The runic writing carried out in our small scribal community constitutes, as a consequence, a source to the study of literacy at large in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Norway that has not, so far, been taken into consideration.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Cf. K.I. Vannebo, *En nasjon av skriveføre. Om utviklinga fram mot allmenn skriveferdighet på 1800-tallet* = Oslo-studier i språkvitenskap II. Oslo: Novus forlag, 1984.

Of course, the question of origin also remains open when the case focussed upon here is concerned. There are reasons to believe that ‘our’ case can be linked to a more extensive and older tradition known from the nearby Hardanger area.<sup>14</sup> The runic forms used, however, do not correspond well, leaving the question of, for instance, bookish reinforcements on ‘our’ local tradition more open. In this respect, it is probably not irrelevant to note that children in my great-grandmother’s time seem to have thought of the runes they learned as something belonging to the distant past. This must be so if it is true that the mastering of runic writing was referred to as “writing in Old Norse” (cf. above). That is to say something very different from writing in the modern language and something that could thus serve the purpose of a secret script, also among children. The most important implication of this is that our case study of late runic writing was ultimately more of a parade of secrecy than an educational tool as such.

It is, in conclusion, also interesting to note that the main bearers of the local tradition discussed here to a great extent seem to have been craftsmen. There is, as we have seen, records from a shoemaker and carpenter, and a tailor, one of whom was also a capable fiddler. That is to say much the same picture as reported on from Sweden in exactly the same period or slightly later.<sup>15</sup> Further elaboration on this particular point shall, however, have to wait for another occasion.

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POPULARNE UŻYCIĘ INSKRYPCJI RUNICZNYCH W LOKALNEJ  
SPOŁECZNOŚCI W XIX-WIECZNEJ NORWEGII  
– NARZĘDZIE EDUKACYJNE CZY TAJNY JĘZYK?

Streszczenie

W niniejszym artykule przedstawione zostało stosowanie runów w społeczności lokalnej w XIX-wiecznej Norwegii. Ten rodzaj pisma runicznego nazywany jest w Norwegii ‘postreformacyjnymi runami’ (runy po reformacji), a po angielsku ‘najmłodszymi runami’. Problem owych runów przedstawiony został wraz z analizą ich funkcji w owej społeczności. Pytanie o źródło używania runów nie jest oczywiste, natomiast ich przeznaczenie wydaje się łatwiej wyłumaczalne. Omawiane runy były przede wszystkim używane jako tajny alfabet lub ludowa kryptologia w lokalnej społeczności. Był to alfabet, który, o czym świadczą źródła, nie był rozumiany przez wszystkich członków społeczności. Potrzeba szyfrowania niektórych wiadomości świadczy natomiast o powszechnej umiejętności czytania w owej grupie społecznej. W przeciwnym przypadku taki tajny alfabet nie byłby potrzebny. Nauczanie runów odbywało się nieformalnie i oddolnie, jak się wydaje, podtrzymywali tę tradycję głównie rzemieślnicy.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. also J.K. Nordby, *op. cit.*, pp. 82–93.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. T. Sköld, Edward Larsons alfabet, *DAUN-KATTA* (2003), pp. 5–6, S. Lundmark, Skraddaren Edward Larsson 1867–1950, *DAUN-KATTA* (2003), p. 11.