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## RUNIC INSCRIPTIONS FROM BERGEN AND BIRCH BARK INSCRIPTIONS FROM NOVGOROD. COMPARING TWO WAYS OF WRITING THE VERNACULAR

### Abstract

the paper is divided in two parts, one more general, the other investigating a specific problem. In the first part, an effort is made to do some basic comparisons between literacy *in vulgari* (done in native language and by using native ways of writing) on runic stocks from Brygge in Bergen county in Norway, and on birch bark from Novgorod in Russia. In the second part, the author demonstrates that a mention from Saxo Grammaticus about Odin wooing for Rindr proves that Scandinavians know about the Old Russian method of writing on birch bark.

**Key words:** runes, birch bark inscriptions, Brygge/Bergen, Novgorod, Odin, Rindr.

**Słowa kluczowe:** runy, gramoty na brzozowej korze, Brygge/Bergen, Novgód, Odin, Rindr.

Literacy in early Medieval Europe does not appear exclusively in countries where Latin was used.<sup>1</sup> This is true not only in case of Old Irish, Old French, Old High German and Old Norse literatures written *in vulgari*. Perhaps the most fascinating phenomenon of literacy (or rather half-literacy)<sup>2</sup> among the barbarian peoples of Europe in the Middle Ages is the appearance of alternative ways of writing in the form of runic inscriptions on sticks in Scandinavia and birch-bark inscriptions (or rather notes) in the north of the Rus', first of all in Novgorod. The runic way of writing is of course a phenomenon older than Middle Ages.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Recalling Greek in Byzantine world, Arabic in countries converted to Islam, Hebrew among Jews, Ogham etc.

<sup>2</sup> In fact, some scholars define runic literacy rather as "schriftgestützte Mündlichkeit".

<sup>3</sup> See e.g. K. Düwel, *Runenkunde*, Stuttgart 1983.

The aim of my paper is firstly to compare two collections of writings showing literary culture in Bergen (Norway) and Novgorod (Russia), which seem to be similar in many aspects. Then, I will ask if our sources include some testimony that the Russian way of writing on birch bark was known in Scandinavia.

It is worth attention that, despite the different roots of both alphabets, the different languages and different writing materials, people in the Scandinavian Bergen and the Russian began at almost the same to use in their day-to-day lives notes written in their native language in their own alphabets put down on easily accessible local material. In the case of Scandinavia, this was mostly on wooden sticks; in the case of the northern Rus', on birch bark.

Both "archives" belong to the same period (11<sup>th</sup> - 15<sup>th</sup> centuries CE), both were found during archaeological excavations investigating the large medieval towns built of wood that were, in the Middle Ages, important trade ports connected with the Hanseatic League (in both cases, however, the inscriptions appear before the Hanseatic League was firmly established). They not only include information about trade, but there are also private letters, love poems, prayers, charms, drafts of documents, testimonies of learning writing, *obscena* and some simple scrawls.

The runic inscriptions from Bergen were found in a town that in the Middle Ages hosted a Hanseatic factory in Brygga (the harbour area). During the excavations of remains of the medieval town made in late 1950s and early 1960s, a large collection of more than 600 inscriptions on wooden sticks came to light.<sup>4</sup> Runic writing is attested in many places in Scandinavia and in Scandinavian colonies, but the collection from the Brygge in Bergen is the largest we know.

Birch-bark Cyrillic inscriptions from Novgorod were first discovered for the first time in 1951 during an excavation in its Old Town. Today, about 1,000 inscriptions or their fragments have been discovered.<sup>5</sup> Apart from Novgorod birch-bark inscriptions (959 pieces or fragments), they have also been discovered

<sup>4</sup> A. Liestøl, "Runer frå Bryggen", *Viking* (27:1964), pp. 5–53; *Noregs inskrifter med de yngre runer*, A. Liestøl, Rúnarvísur frá Björgvin, Skirnir 139, 1965, pp. 27–51; monumentally published in *Norges innskrifter med de yngre runer*, vol. 6, eds. A. Liestøl, I.S. Johnsen, Oslo 1980–1990 (and in earlier volumes). Cf. L.P. Słupecki, *Inkebjorkunimerþaerekuarisþafakri. Miłość wyryta runami*, [in:] *Cor hominis. Wielkie namiętności w dziejach, źródłach i studiach nad przeszłością*, eds. S. Rosik, P. Wiszewski, "Acta Universitatis Wratislaviensis" 3049, Historia 176, Wrocław 2007, pp. 235–252; L.P. Słupecki, *Runy a literatura i znajomość pisma w półpiśmiennym społeczeństwie Skandynawii*, in: *Kultura ludów Morza Bałtyckiego*, vol. 1, *Starożytność i średniowiecze. Mare Integrans. Studia nad dziejami wybrzeży Morza Bałtyckiego*, eds. Bogacki, M. Franz, Z. Pilarczyk, Toruń 2008, pp. 18–49.

<sup>5</sup> В.Л. Янин, *Я послал тебе берёсту...*, Москва, 1998; Л.В. Черепнин, *Новгородские берестяные грамоты как исторический источник*, Москва 1969; А.А. Зализняк, *Древне-новгородский диалект*, Москва 1995; *Берестяные грамоты. 50 лет открытия и изучения*, Ed. В.Л. Янин, Москва 2003. The birch-bark inscriptions become immediately known to Polish research, cf: W. Kuraszkiewicz, *Gramoty nowogrodzkie na brzoźowej korze*, zeszyt A: Opracowanie językowe, zeszyt B: Fotografie i Przerysy, Warszawa 1957.

in Riurikovo Gorodishthe near Novgorod (1), in Stary Russa (40), Torshok (19), Pskov (8), Smolensk (15), Vitebsk (1), Mstislav (1), Tver (5), Moscow (1), Stary Ryasan (1) and Zvenigorod Halitsky (3).<sup>6</sup> The findings are clearly concentrated in the north of Russia. What's astonishing is that not one such inscription is known from Kiev, Tshernigov or any other important place in southern Russia. None from outside Russia are known either.

It seems that about 11<sup>th</sup> - 12<sup>th</sup> centuries in places such as Bergen or Novgorod, there was already a need to use the alphabet in everyday life. The most important similarities to observe are the following:

1. Language: use of local language instead of learned languages (such as Latin or Greek).
2. Intense use.
3. Similar purposes for writing: business, private life (in both cases including letters of many kinds), magic and religion (including charms and prayers), poetry, entertainment, learning – which in fact covers almost all fields in which short-form writing can be used (but there are no traces of writing in long forms such as books, chronicles, sagas, scripture, lives of saints, romances and so on; and no traces of using it in developed bookkeeping as records of debts, taxes, services, properties etc., but with some evidence suggesting some primitive forms of bookkeeping).
4. Similar, local materials for writing (stocks and wood in Scandinavia, birch bark in northern Rus’).
5. Similar social milieu: large, wooden merchant towns having close connections to Hanseatic League (Novgorod was also a place hosting a Hanseatic factory in the Middle Ages).
6. Christian background, including Christian literacy in Latin (Scandinavia) or in Old Church Slavonic (Rus’).

Some differences are also obvious:

1. Language: In both cases local; but in Bergen Old Norse, whilst in Novgorod Old Russian.
2. Different alphabets of different (although with somewhat similar origins, as both ultimately were derived from Greek/Latin, but runes had been created already in Antiquity at about the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE and Cyrillic in the 9<sup>th</sup> century CE in better-known circumstances).

The intense development of writing on birch bark in Novgorod, or rather in the north of the Rus’ (but not in the south, nor in the West Slavic merchant towns on the Southern Baltic coast such as Wolin, Kołobrzeg or Gdańsk) could be connected to multi-ethnic origins of Novgorod at the end of Viking Period with an important presence of Scandinavian people having a native tradition of

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<sup>6</sup> State from about the end of 2009, Wikipedia.

using writing in their own language and in their own alphabet. But, if so, only the core of the tradition was preserved when the language was changed to Slavic, the letters into Cyrillic (invented by Sts Kiril and Methodius precisely for the Slavs) and the shape of material into another, resembling parchment but more easily accessible and much cheaper.

Bergen and Novgorod were connected closely to the Hanseatic League, being in fact rather external members of the Hanseatic League as factories. But it is worth noting is that in both of these towns, intense writings in the local manner (runic and Cyrillic) began in fact before the Hanseatic League was established. Is this one of first signals of growing economic exchange in inter-Baltic region? As we can see, there are many points of comparison and many questions to ask. Why did local ways of writing develop so well in those two particular towns? What do we know about similar phenomena in other, similar towns in Scandinavia and in the northern Rus'? Why did nothing like this appear in similar towns and merchant factories on the southern shore of the Baltic Sea? How does it compare to the development of literacy in Western Europe? All of these questions are worth investigation and comparisons in runologic and Slavistic research.

The problem I am going to investigate in this study in detail as a kind of case study is much more limited. If birch bark inscriptions were used in northern Rus', the question is thus if this way of writing was known in Europe, or at least in Scandinavia. I would like to propose that a trace of the knowledge how the inhabitants of northern Rus' wrote in their own manner is to explore the Saxo Grammaticus story about Odin wooing Rindr in order to get a son who would avenge Balder's death. Because of a prophecy Balder's avenger could be only a son of Odin by Rindr. The Saxos version of this old myth (recorded already by early *scalds* in the 10<sup>th</sup> century) is not the oldest nor the best. In the most of the texts the name of Odin's son by Rindr and the avenger of Baldr is Vali. But according to Saxo (who evidently used a Danish version of the story), his name is Bous, what is a Latinized version of Danish name Bo.<sup>7</sup> The key motif in all versions of the story is always the same: Odin, having the ambition to be the greatest *coureur de femmes* among the gods faced big problems when dealing with Rindr. And the first records of this myth already testify that it was only

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<sup>7</sup> L.P. Słupecki, *Zakłęcia Ody na Rusi, czyli co Saxo Gramatyk (Gesta Danorum III, 4, 4) wiedział o nowogrodzkich gramotach na korze brzoźowej?* [in:] *Wolińskie Spotkania Mediewistyczne. Ekskluzywne życie – dostojny pochówek. W kręgu kultury elitarnej wieków średnich*, Ed. M. Rębkowski, Wolin 2011, pp.133–138; L.P. Słupecki, *Mitologia skandynawska w epoce wikingów*, Kraków 2003, 206; *idem*, *Wyrocznie i wróżby pogańskich Skandynawów. Studium do dziejów idei przeznaczenia u ludów indoeuropejskich*, Warszawa 1998, 77; R. Simek, *Lexicon der germanischen Mythologie*, Stuttgart 1995, p. 54.

because of his use of the very controversial *seiðr* magic that his efforts ended successfully.<sup>8</sup>

From common mythological knowledge about this episode, and perhaps also from the literary tradition, Saxo produced his own version, which is an entertaining story with an obvious parodist flavor that was quite frequently the case in 13<sup>th</sup> century (compare e.g. *Thrymskvidha* which is nothing other than burlesque).

What is important here, Saxo set his story in the Rus', as he wrote that after Balder's death Odin discovered from a Finnish sorcerer (which means a Saami shaman) called Rosthiopus (*cui Rosthiopus Phinnicus... predixit*) that he would be able to beget a son-avenger only from Rindr who, according to Saxo, was the daughter of the king of Rus' (*Ruthenorum regis filia*).<sup>9</sup> The king appears in Saxo without a name, suggesting that he is just an invention. As we know, in Saxo Grammaticus' time the Rus' was presented in *fornaldarsögur* as a kind of fairyland where the brave, old Northern heroes (and even Northern dwarves) used to go in the heroic past for fantastic adventures. Nevertheless, in reality it was not a completely unknown land!

Odin then came in disguise, as he always did, to the king of the Rus' and served firstly as a simple soldier, but the ruler quickly promoted him to the rank of army commander (*magister militium*). After he successfully conquered their enemies, he finally confessed to the king that he wished to marry his daughter. The king allowed him to meet her, but when Odin only tried to kiss Rindr, she immediately slapped him in the face (*alapam recipit*).<sup>10</sup> The next year, Odin once again offered his services to the king, but this time in the guise of a goldsmith. As such, he made many beautiful ornaments for the women of the kings' court from a big lump of gold. But, when he tried to give the most beautiful to Rindr, he again tried to kiss her and she gave him another slap (*colapho percussit*).<sup>11</sup> Saxo comments that the clever girl had already noticed that something strange was happening around her.<sup>12</sup> After some time, Odin, again in disguise, once again offered his services to the king as soldier and was again victorious.<sup>13</sup> Again, he was unable to convince Rindr. This time, Odin received from her just one slap, but it was so strong that he flew up in the air and fell down headfirst (*ita ab ea propulsus est ut mentum terrę nutabundus impingeret*).<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Kormakr Ögmundarson, *Sigurdardrapa* 3: Skj. I A, 1912, p. 79. cf. L.P. Słupecki, *Wýroczenie...*, p. 77.

<sup>9</sup> *Saxo Grammaticus*, III, 4, 1: *Gesta Danorum. Danmarkshistorien*, K. Friis-Jensen ed., vol. 1, København 2005, p. 204.

<sup>10</sup> *Saxo Grammaticus*, III, 4, 1: p. 204.

<sup>11</sup> *Saxo Grammaticus*, III, 4, 2–3: p. 206

<sup>12</sup> *Saxo Grammaticus*, III, 4, 3: p. 206.

<sup>13</sup> *Saxo Grammaticus*, III, 4, 2–3: p. 206.

<sup>14</sup> *Saxo Grammaticus*, III, 4, 4: p. 206.

At that point appears a motif I wish to analyse. Odin, after he picked himself up, touched Rindr with a piece of bark covered with written spells (*cortice carminibus adnotato*),<sup>15</sup> and disappeared while the women fell ill with what as Saxo commented was a just punishment for offending the god three times. Then Odin came to the court of the king of the Rus' for the fourth time, pretending to be a woman very experienced in healing. As such, he was acting as a female doctor giving the king's daughter medicine, so bitter however, that she refused to take it. But the king ordered her to do everything that the doctor said. In that way, Odin finally succeeded in having intercourse with Rindr<sup>16</sup>.

It is worth noting that a similar motif of efforts to get a woman appears in the Thidreks saga, where King Gunnar tries during his wedding for three subsequent nights to sleep with his new wife Brunhildr, and she treats him even worst as Rindr did Odin.<sup>17</sup>

Returning to our motif, my question is if the bark Odin used was a birch bark or just plain bark? Saxo speaks only about bark (*cortex, -is*). Perhaps he just had in mind the carving of magic runes on bark? Carving runes was in Scandinavia a normal way in such a situation. But bark of oak, pine and so on are a rather bad materials for that purpose, especially when the normal material for runic writing, i.e. stocks, is available in abundance. What's more, the runes are always carved while Saxo speaks clearly about writing (*adnotare*) what suggests a text written in normal way.

It is possible to compare this episode with a similar one from the same work by Saxo. In *Gesta Danorum* he describes in another place how some Harthgreip carved runes on a piece of wood in order to get knowledge from a dead man about the future of her lover Haddingus. Saxo writes in this case about horrible spells carved on wood that were placed under dead man tongue (*diris admodum carminibus ligno insculptis iisdem linguę defuncti... suppositis*).<sup>18</sup> The situation is, in fact, very similar, but in the terminology used by Sax only one term is the same: in both cases spells appear as *carmina*. The material to produce them is different, however: in case of Harthgreip's spells it is wood (*lignum*), so a material very typical for that purpose. What's more, the spells are in this case carved (*insculptae*) in an equally typical way. In case of Odin, the material for spells is strange, as it is a bark (*cortex*) covered with written spells – *carminibus adnotata*! It means Saxo was deliberately and consciously using a very precise terminology describing different kinds of writing in different ways in each individual case. One may also assume that he clearly knew what he was going to say and

<sup>15</sup> *Saxo Grammaticus*, III, 4, 4: p. 206.

<sup>16</sup> *Saxo Grammaticus*, III, 4, 5–8: pp. 206-208.

<sup>17</sup> *Þidreks saga 28: Saga Þidriks konungs af Bern*, C.R. Unger ed., Christiania 1853, p. 209. Thidreks saga was translated from the German into Old Norse around the mid 13<sup>th</sup> century, so it is quite possible that Saxo already knew this episode.

<sup>18</sup> *Saxo Grammaticus*, I, 6, 4: p. 108.

distinguished between two vernacular ways of writing vis-a-vis runic Old Norse and Cyrillic Old Russian. He was also speaking about writing on birch bark!

In his narrative, this episode takes place in the Rus'. As a consequence, Saxo decided to use his knowledge about the Rus' of his times (which means at the turn of 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries) to introduce a motif of spells written on birch bark, underlining – like what good film-makers do today – the local flavor of the story. In that way, he testifies that Scandinavians travelling to Novgorod noticed that the birch-bark inscriptions were there in use for similar purposes as runic inscriptions on stocks were in use in Bergen.

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INSKRYPCJE RUNICZNE Z BERGEN I GRAMOTY NA KORZE  
Z NOWOGRODU. PORÓWNANIE DWÓCH SPOSOBÓW PISANIA  
W JĘZYKU POTOCZNYM

Streszczenie

Artykuł podzielony jest na dwie części, w pierwszej dokonuje się porównania dwóch obszer-nych zespołów inskrypcji, pisanych *in vulgaris* w XI–XV wieku, jeden pochodzi z wykopalisk w Bergen, z dzielnicy portowej Brygge, drugi z Nowogrodu Wielkiego na Rusi. Pierwsze pisane są runami w języku staronordyckim (choć odkryto także pisane runami modlitwy po łacinie) na fragmentach drewna, głównie na kijach – drugie, cyrylickie, na kawałkach kory brzozonej. W obu przypadkach teksty dotyczą podobnych spraw: handlu i życia prywatnego (w tym uczuciowego), zawierają listy, fragmenty poezji, obscena, zaklęcia i modlitwy. Pojawienie się tego rodzaju świadectwa powszechnego stosowania pisma do notowania tekstów w rodzimym języku, rodzimym alfabecie, na dostępnym lokalnie materiale pisarskim dowodzi ogromnej roli piśmienności w obu tych ośrodkach i zachęca do postawienia wielu pytań badawczych. Druga część tekstu stanowi swoiste case study i pokazuje, że fragment *Gesta Danorum* Saksona Gramatyka dowodzi, iż Skandynawowie, sami używający powszechnie pisma runicznego, dobrze wiedzieli o stosowaniu na Rusi kory brzozonej jako materiału pisarskiego.

