

Dalecarlian Runes

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In this paper there is a discussion of the runic writing system that occurred in the province of Dalecarlia in the 16th century and lasted a little way into the 19th century. The rise and the growing of the system are the main contents of the paper.

Background

In the Middle Ages runes unlike earlier periods in Scandinavia were used side by side with Latin writing, before they little by little were superseded by the set of Roman letters. Latin writing was the self-evident means of communication of the Church and grew stronger when the missionary process passed on to an organizational process. This process involved communication in the form of letters to the Holy See, economic agreements or charters at home and production of manuals for the divine service and liturgy. At first the new script positively affected the use of runes as writing got a stronger position and more extensive use in society. This meant that the increasing new writing system brought the runes with it and that they got a free ride of the new script. At the same time there is an increase of the set of runes by the influence from the Latin alphabet. The increase began already in the 11th century by adding a small dot to a primary rune, a dot on the rune **l** constituted a difference in **l** and **e** for example. Later on new consonant runes were invented by adding dots, a dotted **k** gave *g*, a dotted **t** gave *d* and a dotted **b** gave *p*. To correspond to the Roman letters *q*, *x* and *z* new runes were invented by scholars.

In the second half of the 14th century runes almost entirely went out of use and they came to an end about 1450. This did not mean that the use thereafter ceased completely, but it is attended by difficulty to show clearly if there is an unbroken handing down. The problem of the runes concerning the postmedieval continuity is complicated by the fact that scholars interested in writing were fascinated by runes as far back as in the Middle Ages. This scholarly interest might have kept the runic writing alive when the everyday use came to an end. According to Johannes Bureus there was in his time a small publication of runology, a teaching of runes, that originated in Olaus Petri (Schück 1888: 12). 16th century humanism led to a growing scholarly philological interest and the *futhark* and runic inscriptions were described and depicted in many printed books, for example in the part of *ALPHABETICUM GOTHICUM* in the *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus* (1555) written by Olaus Magnus. The problem, therefore, is to decide whether or not postreformational inscriptions in runes have their beginning in an unbroken tradition of medieval runes or if there was a break or disturbance of continuity. Did not runes in such inscriptions rest on public knowledge but on a scholarly one based on close acquaintance with runes in printed books?

Written information on Dalecarlian runes

How do matters stand with regard to the runes in Dalarna? Are they witnesses of an unbroken tradition from the Middle Ages or do they origin from learned literary surroundings?

We know more than 350 runic inscriptions from the Upper Dalecarlia (*Ovansiljan*). More than 90 % of them originates from the Älvdalen parish. The number is not overwhelmingly great but must be compared with the fact that in Älvdalen in 1586 there were 200 farms or households, i.e. around 1000 persons. In 1631 there were 216 farms or household, i.e. around 1100 persons. In 1762 around 3000 inhabitants were registered. A closer study of the quantity of the inscriptions shows for example that the inscriptions from the middle of the 17th century are very few. Probably the number was related with the decrease in population and at that period many parishes in Dalecarlia seem to have been deserted. Not until the middle of the 1680s. there is an increase in population, which matches the increase of inscriptions.

The earliest written information on Dalecarlian runes is found in the copperplate engraving *Runakänslanäs lärspan*, 'The first knowledge of runic learning,' (1599) by Johannes Bureus. In a column with the headline '*Nostris seculi Dalecarl(is)*' in the middle of the copperplate there are the names of 24 runes in alphabetic order, fig.1, [] and thanks to Bureus we therefore

know the name of the Dalecarlian runes in his time: *ar, birkä, knäsol, dors, er, fir, gir, hagat, is, kan, lagh, madhär, nådh, or, pir, qua, re, sol, tir, ur, äcs, års halfårs, helårs*. Some of these names we also knew from medieval runic inscriptions, for example *fir* and *ur* in the inscriptions G 306 and G 307 from Gotland. Most names of the Dalecarlian runes are orthophonic. Old ones are the runes *is, ar* and *ur*, of which *ar* and *ur* probably were normative for *er, or* and *års (halfårs, helårs)*. These runes developed to runes of independent characters from dotted ones in the Middle Ages. This is also true of Bureus' runes but one can notice that the four last names in his series of names do not correspond to their sound values in his runic alphabet, which is rendered in Latin alphabetic order.

The names of the old runes representing consonantal graphs are reflected in the names *birke, dors, hagat, kan, lag, madhär, nådh, re, sol* and *tir*. Concerning *fir, gir, pir* and *tir* probably the old name *Tyr*, and maybe *fir* and *bir(ke)*, were normative for *gir* and *pir* by association. The names *qua* and *äcs* are taken from *q* and *x* in the Latin alphabet. The name *knäsol* for dalecarlian **c** (𐌺) has a counterpart in the Icelandic *knésól* for Latin *z*.

Bureus seems to have had a wide knowledge of Dalecarlian runes. To some extent we sorry to say do not know the background of his knowledge and sometimes his information does not correspond with what we otherwise know of the Dalecarlian runes. In some cases Bureus' runes are like or similar to medieval runes, in others his runic characters are innovations, when for example the calendar runes Φ , and are used to represent Latin characters. Sometimes his Dalecarlian runes have forms which otherwise are not known. Inscriptions from the end of the 16th century shows that Bureus' **g** () is older than the postreformational **g**, the **u**-rune () is not known from Dalecarlia and the **h**-rune () does not occur in Dalecarlia in Bureus' time. Fig. 2. The Dalecarlian runes according to Bureus.

Bureus also tells us about the every day use of runes in Dalecarlia in the home setting and in the surroundings. In 1735 Carl von Linné in his *Iter dalecarlicum* describes how the peasants in the parish of Älvdalen write their names in runes. In his travel book from Dalecarlia 1757 Abraham Hølpfers mentions the use of runes and in 1768 the dean of Västerfärnebo Christopher Borg tells us about the same use. In *Dissertation de runarum in Svecia occasu* (1771) Erik Götlin discusses the use of the recently enlarged set of runes (*auctas figuris recentioribus*) by the parishioners in Älvdalen and mentions their habit to communicate private notes and messages to and fro ('*ultra citroque missis*').

Development of the Dalecarlian runes

These testimonies and the inscriptions themselves bear witness of a continuous use and a development of the Dalecarlian runes from the end of the 16th century far into the 19th century. The oldest group comprises about 30 inscriptions from the period before the two last decades of the 16th century. In a few of them the runes look medieval with the exception of **a** (𐌺), **e** (𐌺) and **o** (𐌺), fig. 3, and they are used in a phonemic way.

[Fig.3. † B D † P (P) * | Y † Y k R '1N (†=ä, N=o and *=g)
Medieval rune forms in The Upper Dalecarlia.]

The rest of this oldest group has the following appearance, fig. 4.

[Fig. 4. The oldest group of Dalecarlian runes, around 1580-1650. Less common forms are within brackets.]

It is striking that the dotted rune **u** (𐌺) as well as Φ stands for *o* – perhaps it is not a coincidence that the same dotted rune stands for *o* in some inscriptions of Livsten in Fjärdhundraland and the east part of Västmanland (Strid 1989: 17) – while the rune † stands for *å*. The next stage of development covers the two last decades of the 16th century and lasts well into the middle of the 17th century. It differs from the earlier ones owing to the principle of now for the most part being an orthographic system in which the rune corresponds to an equivalent character of the Latin alphabet. If there was no runic correspondence to the Latin character a new runic character was created. The rune 𐌺 stands for **c** and the **g**-rune has changed from to due to cursive writing – the idea that it is a complex bind-rune for **guþ** seems erraneous. The rune Φ is now more common for *o* than the dotted **u**. The rune is

more common than \mathfrak{B} for p , \mathfrak{T} stands for y and \ddot{o} and there are different forms of the rune \mathfrak{a} : \mathfrak{f} , \mathfrak{n} and \mathfrak{f} .

In the middle of the 17th century Dalecarlian runes only appear in the parishes of Älvdalen and Våmhus. Sometimes they changed in character, fig 5. [Fig. 5. Dalecarlian runes in the 1650s.]. The \mathfrak{a} -rune has almost tipped over and resembles the Latin a . The Latin c still appears but the \mathfrak{c} -rune (\mathfrak{h}) is most common. At the end of the 16th century the \mathfrak{g} -rune was usually made by means of three strokes but now it appears with two strokes. At this time the phonem /h/ had disappeared in the dialect of Älvdalen and the \mathfrak{h} -rune took on the sound value \ddot{a} , since the old name of the rune, *hagal*, earlier had been replaced by the name *hå* from the name of the Latin character h . This change led to changes in the system of the sound values of other runes and for the \ddot{a} the characters \mathfrak{f} , \mathfrak{c} , \mathfrak{h} , and \mathfrak{g} and for \ddot{u} \mathfrak{f} , \mathfrak{c} and \mathfrak{h} are used. These latter can be interpreted as intermediary forms of runic and Latin characters. The small Latin letter i with a dot used as a rune appears and the Latin Y and \ddot{O} replace the runic equivalences.

In the 1750s. the set of runes is as follows, fig. 6.

[Fig. 6. Dalecarlian runes in the middle of the 18th century].

The \mathfrak{a} - and $\mathfrak{æ}$ -runes have assumed a sloping position and appear as \mathfrak{X} and \mathfrak{Y} , probably influenced by the Latin equivalents. Perhaps the visual impression of the angels of the Latin counterparts have influenced. The \mathfrak{c} -rune is disappearing and shows differing, often reversed, forms. The lower-case letters g and h have influenced the \mathfrak{g} - and \mathfrak{h} -runes. The Latin character i has replaced the \mathfrak{i} -rune so that there is no need of a “short” \mathfrak{s} . The \mathfrak{k} -rune disappears or reversed forms appear. So does the capital L and reversed \mathfrak{T} . Besides \mathfrak{Y} and capital M the \mathfrak{X} , borrowed from the calendar runes, is used as a \mathfrak{m} -rune. There is a lot of transitional stages of the \mathfrak{o} -, \mathfrak{s} -, \mathfrak{t} - and \mathfrak{u} -runes as a result of influence from capital O , S , T and U . Also the runes \mathfrak{Y} and \mathfrak{f} for y , \mathfrak{c} for \ddot{u} and \mathfrak{h} for \ddot{o} show influences from the Latin alphabet.

In the last period of the history of the Dalecarlian runes, the 19th century, only the runic forms \mathfrak{e} , \mathfrak{n} , \mathfrak{g} and $\mathfrak{ä}$ occasionally occur and then almost entirely in the definite article *den* and in the past participle *gät* ‘(have) tended’.

There is an image of the evolution of the Dalecarlian runes originally published in the periodical *Fornvännen* 1906 on the net (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dalecarlian_runes).

The social setting of the Dalecarlina runes

The peasant culture in Upper Dalecarlia in former times is generally characterized as an old-world culture. It is said to have conserved some characteristics of North European culture and probably turned innovations away. This restraint was not due to poverty or isolation but can be explained by conscious efforts of social solidarity in a greater or less degree. The most remarkable example of this uniting force is the conservatism of traditional costume in Upper Dalecarlia.

The name Dalecarlian runes easily leads to a view that these runes were common all over Dalecarlia, which is quite misleading. In the first two periods these runes were used in the old parish of Mora for the most part, i.e. nowadays Mora, Älvdalen, Våmhus, Venjan and Sollerön. In the fourth period and a long time to come they were used in Älvdalen exclusively. The social setting meant a life in the home environment, at the mountain pasture at some distance and in the huts of the hay-makers. By their function the rune inscribed objects throw light upon the life in the village community and the social setting there. The inscriptions can be read in the walls of barns, cabins, cow-houses, huts and sheds. Some of the oldest and most interesting inscriptions are found in the wall of the log-cabins, the farmer’s most excellent and lavishly fitted out storehouse. Some ten inscriptions on pines, block stones at the herdsman’s watch-out (cf. the name *gäturunor* ‘runes of the herdsman’) and causeways of trunks illustrate the in part nomadic life of the village community in Upper Dalecarlia. This self-subsistent community accounts for the large number of inscriptions on utensils and hand tools and textile equipment of different kind. A lot of inscriptions are consequences of the village community and necessary calendric information, that is to say commanding messages in runes on wooden tablets and runic calendar staffs. Such a message from a village community summons of Åsen in the 18th century reads **plikt fölieir den som**

int gār ‘Fine goes with (affects) him who does not come’ and another in Älvdalen 1818 is summoned **i aftun blir almen bysystemma på sit wanliga stele** ‘To night there is a public summons at the usual place’. Around twenty such calendar staffs have messages in runes beside the use of the runes as dominical letters and golden numbers. These runic calendar staffs belong to the oldest Dalecarlian runic inscriptions. An example is the inscription of the very old staff that reads **...ä ionsu afä gart preimäd mu um dyrä uarfru dah** ‘(Lass)e Jonsson has made the calendar on Lady Day.’

Dalecarlian runes compared with other postreformational runes

Most Dalecarlian runic inscriptions reflect a deliberate ambition to use Standard Swedish of that kind that the writer was used to meet in his bible. Therefore you must be careful not to draw far-reaching conclusions from the inscriptions concerning the dialect of Älvdalen in Upper Dalecarlia. Sometimes linguistic features in the vocabulary and the dialect belong to the regional dialect sometimes not. The early 17th century inscription **ulåfä: afä : kart** ‘Ölof has made (this weaver-block)’ written twice illustrates a local pronunciation *Ulåve*, today pronounced *Ulåv* in the regional dialect. A more original pronunciation is reflected in the form **ulafer** in some runic calendar staffs from the early 16th century. These pronunciations indicate the loss of nominative *-r* in the dialect of Upper Dalecarlia in the end of the century. This is also true of the verb **afä**. The participle **kart** reflects the pronunciation *gart*, beside *giärt*, in the dialect, while rune sequences like **giort**, **better**, **tiid** and **gudh** illustrates written forms influenced by the bible. An interesting question is if a *phonemic study* of the runic inscriptions of Upperdalecarlia may meet with success, for example if **p** realizes /ð, p/ or /d/ in combinations such as **rp**. It will perhaps be worth a try such a study.

In the inscriptions a lot of words of course reflect the vocabulary of the sometimes very hard everyday life of the peasant society, but sometimes too they render the day of rejoicing or, with a bitter sense of : humour, the lack of these: **är gār mycyen mat på tnta bordnt vnlnt dne som adn så mycit amne**. ‘There is a lot of room for much food on this table! May the man be blessed, who had so much. Amen!’ The expression *velest* is still used in the dialect of Älvdalen corresponding to meaning of the inscription. The orthography shows influence of Latin alphabet round 1730 and the writer has used some defective runes. The inscription on a wooden milk bowl reads **...EMS AED oc : tå : uar : ett suårt : ungers : år : oc : dyr tiid gudh bettere**. ‘...1696 E(rik) M(ats)s(on) A(nna)E(rs)d(otter) och då var ett svårt hungersår och dyrtid. Gud bättre.’

Some inscriptions from old Mora parish consist of personal names or words in medieval runes hard to interpret such as the word **ärfrunir** on in the church log-cabin in Älvdalen from the 1280s and – at least with medieval runes - **birher bunt** ‘Birger bunt’ in Zorn’s Gammelgård in Mora. As mentioned above the runes in some of the about 30 oldest inscriptions from Upper Dalecarlia look medieval and such founds are still made like the runic staff from Mora registered in 2010: **ita : ristānisä : um : santä : hit ārihs : tah** ‘This (runic staff) Nisse cut on Saint Henry’s Day’. Another of these calendar inscription reads that a woman named Kerstin has written the runic staff (**bäräim**) and the runes on the Day of Saint Nicholas: **kāristin : haf skārifad · badä : bräim oh : runär : um : nikulåsärmäsutahin**. There are no traces of Latin orthography but vocal insertion and ligatured **ä** and **r**-runes. There are characteristic medieval features of the runes like the rune **ᚥ** for *g* and **ᚠ** for *ä*, the latter known from the medieval inscription on the log-cabin at the church of Älvdalen and from Lödöse in the Middle Ages.

A marked change of the alphabet of the Dalecarlian runes due to replacement by Latin characters is seen in the 1670s. At that time characters like **Ö**, **C** and **K** occasionally appear in the inscriptions. An explanation of the use of Latin **K** may be some kind of likeness between the Latin Character and the **k** rune. This change away from runes gives an impression of an almost unreflecting continuous alteration of the Dalecarlian runic forms through the influences from Latin capital letter writing. At the same time the runic forms begin to get out of hand. Simultaneously the writing of personal names in the inscriptions is changed. Before 1670 the whole name was written in runes, later on you gave the name with initials written by capital letter as in the inscription above from 1696

The Dalecarlian runes a deliberate reorganization

Since the Middle Ages there were efforts within the Church to give the members of the congregation basic education in the elements of the articles of the Creed by means of catechetical teaching in the native language. The Reformation meant an endeavour to make the bible and the catechism more available to be read and comprehended. This demanded knowledge steadily grew from the 16th century. Through the registers of the parish catechetical meetings it is possible to date the early beginnings of the ability to read and the gradual stages to reach the capacity to grasp the meaning mentally. The capacity to write was not systematically practiced until later and was restricted not least by shortage of paper.

The small number of medieval runes and the want of Viking Age runes in Dalecarlia makes it difficult to quite easily connect the Dalecarlian runes to an ancient runic tradition in the region. And they don't have any certain connecting link towards west. In fact not one equivalent tradition based on a regional Norse basis can be established. In that case, how do we characterize Dalecarlian runes in making a comparison with other post-reformational runes in Scandinavia? Such a comparison can be made from different criteria. Is the use of runes accounted for in contemporaneous sources? Are they used by a group rather than an individual? Do these runic inscriptions comprise a wide but uniform class of texts? Are the runes used as functional, orthophonic sound notations, that is as a result of an conscious or an instinctive sound analysis or simply as characters replacing Latin characters? In the latter case they reveal themselves as the orthographic norm of Latin writing makes itself felt. Is the system of runes step by step replaced by Latin characters in the course of times?

In his study of the post reformational runic inscriptions of Norway K. Jonas Nordby (2001) observed that these do not constitute an uniform group firmly rooted in a well-established practice of writing. The study of their forms do not show any distinctive features which they have followed and developed out of a medieval runic tradition. As a matter of fact they show characteristic features of the same kind as futharks found in books printed in the 16th and 17th centuries. Nordby clearly shows a breach of the runic tradition of the Middle Ages and that postreformational runes have their starting position in runes found in printed scholarly literature. Facts were of a similar kind in Sweden and Denmark. The situation in Denmark Anders Bæksted had already demonstrated in 1939, even though he placed the final stage somewhat earlier than runologists nowadays do. In Sweden there was a double-sided situation. Beside the scholarly runes postreformational peasant culture used runes derived from the Middle Ages in the island of Gotland and, above all, in Upper Dalecarlia. Information from Johannes Bureus, Carl von Linné and Abraham Hülphers clearly proves a living tradition to use Dalecarlian runes for a long period. It is quite clear that they had an important purpose in public life, made concrete for example in runic messages on wooden tablets for the village community. The material comprising round 350 inscriptions shows comprehensive groups of texts uniform in character and it is possible to observe the development of the form of the runes and the replacement of them by Latin characters in its every detail. No doubt, there is an unbroken continuity of the use of runes in the parish Älvdalen from the end of the 16th century to beginning of the 19th century. An idea of the strength of the runic tradition gives the fact that on a barn in the mountain pasture Svartbergs fäbodlar there are 17 inscriptions from the period 1667 to 1805, which consist of initials of a personal name and a date or information about a memorable day and year.

But we are still confronted with the problem whether inscriptions in Dalecarlian runes go directly back to the runes of the Middle Ages in an uninterrupted tradition or if there was a break of continuity, which means that inscriptions with such runes not are based on a public basis but have scholarly tradition. In some 30 inscriptions from the period before the end of the 16th century mentioned above, for example on Kerstin's runic staff, there is a runography of a medieval kind with runes used phonemically and of medieval form. The inventory of runes in the last decades have brought a few runic inscriptions on wooden wall-blocks, at least two of them from the 13th century. Owing to these inscriptions we know that runes were used in the Upper Dalecarlia in the Middle Ages. And quite a few of these inscriptions, for example Kerstin's, are natural continuations of medieval runes, that is to say bear witness to an unbroken tradition. And then there is a break. In the second half of the 16th century there is a deliberate reorganization of the runic system and a partial transformed set of a Dalecarlian runic system appears set out from the principle 'character to character' in relation to the Latin

alphabet. Some medieval system habits continue too, for example the use of bind-runes. In this connection it is worth mentioning inscriptions made up by runic alphabets. Out of round 30 inscriptions from the end of the 16th century or somewhat earlier five are runic alphabets dated 1575-1595 by dendrochronological method or by self-dating. It is remarkable with so many runic alphabets in such a short period. And they only appear in this period. The question is if they reflect a systematic elementary instruction to use alphabetical writing, an instruction that may explain the following increase in Dalecarlian runes.

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