What is runology and where does it stand today?

Michael P. Barnes

Introduction

In recent years several scholars have presented critical examinations of the state of runology. They have offered varying views of the subject and suggested different ways forward. Most recently James Knirk sought funding for a project (*Lesning og tolkning av runeinnskrifter: runologiens teori og metode* 'The reading and interpretation of runic inscriptions: the theory and method of runology') whose principal objectives were (i) to define runology as a subject or field of research, (ii) establish the theoretical (philological) basis for runological research, (iii) evaluate and develop the subject's methodological tools. The most important outcome of the project was to be a *Handbook of Runology*. Such a work would differ from previous introductions to the subject. Rather than offer a general survey of runes and runic inscriptions, it would lay down a methodological basis for the study of runic script and the examination, reading and interpretation of inscriptions.

The study of runic writing in all its aspects is certainly in need of critical reappraisal. Those working with runes require at the very least (i) a definition of the subject, (ii) a statement of accepted methodological procedures, (iii) a series of constraints within which they can work.

These matters are broached in the critical examinations of runology I mention above – specifically: Claiborne Thompson's "On transcribing runic inscriptions" (1981); Terje Spurkland's "Runologi – arkeologi, historie eller språkvitenskap?" (1987); Judith Jesch's "Runic inscriptions and social history: some problems of method" (1994); Lena Peterson's "Runologi: försök till ett aktuellt signalement" (1995); Elmer Antonsen's "What kind of science is runology?" (1995); Michael Lerche Nielsen's "Runologien mellem sprogvidenskaben og arkæologien – med et sideblik på de forskellige tolkninger af Glavendrupindskriften" (1997); Kurt Braunmüller's "Methodische Probleme in der Runologie – einige Überlegungen aus linguistischer Sicht" (1998); Karin Seim's "Runologi" (2004); Klaus Düwel's "Runic" (2004); Ray Page's "Seeing and observing" (2005); and Düwel's chapter "Vom Fund zur Deutung" in *Runenkunde* (2008). I also keep in mind my own two contributions to the debate: "On types of argumentation in runic studies" (1994) and "Mål og metode i runeforskningen" (forthcoming).

A definition of "runology"

This proves to be very difficult. A wide definition might include elements of linguistics, philology, palaeography, archaeology, cultural, religious, legal, literary and art history, mythology, cryptology, and occultism. But how can one define a discipline that comprises so many disparate elements? And if a discipline cannot be defined, is it meaningful to treat it as such? Should runology constitute a discipline in its own right? Ogam script does not seem to have called forth generations of ogamologists.

Runes are an alphabetical system of writing, and for the most part they are used to record language. An independent runological discipline, if it is to be established, must therefore deal with the runic symbols themselves, individually and as systems, with their development, and their use to record language. Runic inscriptions are sequences of runes placed on an object, and these the runologist will attempt first to read and then to interpret. Reading will involve examination of the inscription itself, since photographs are subject to tricks of the light and drawings will always contain an element of subjectivity. Interpretation will often require help from and some knowledge of other disciplines, notably archaeology. But archaeology is not runology, any more than are art history, mythology, or occultism.

Core aspects of the discipline thus seem to me to be: the origin of the runic alphabet; the change from the older *fuþark* to the Anglo-Saxon *fuþorc* and the younger Scandinavian *fuþark*; the development of the additional runic characters of the Scandinavian Middle Ages and their status; runes as graphemic systems; the distinction between graphs, graph types,

graphemes and units of the *fuþark*; the principles and practice of transliteration. I would also suggest that the reading of runic inscriptions is more central to runology than their interpretation. The reading must be done first and must be undertaken by someone with experience in the field. Thereafter come attempts at interpretation, which may in some circumstances be made by historians, archaeologists and others – provided they possess the requisite linguistic knowledge, understand how the reading was arrived at, and have a proper grasp of all the caveats and reservations the reader has expressed.

Runological theory

To begin with, we need to agree what "theory" means. Much in runic research that goes under this heading would be better called "idea", "suggestion" or "claim". If, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests, and linguistic science endorses, a theory should be a statement of general laws or principles and have explanatory power, it is not easy to see where the theoretical basis of runology might lie.

Theory has played its part in runic research. I have myself appealed to phonemics and graphemics, and criticised those who write as though "speech sound" and "phoneme" were interchangeable concepts. But these are well-established linguistic theories used by certain runologists. They are not runological theories.

Many problems in runology, naturally enough, are not susceptible to explanation by theory. The bulk of the Manx runic crosses are confidently placed in the tenth or early eleventh century by art historians. This conclusion is based on observation and comparison. Some runologists (e.g. Holman 1998) have pointed out that certain rune-forms on the crosses as well as aspects of their language hint at a later date. That conclusion likewise derives from empirical knowledge. In a paper from 1998 Hagland and Page suggest that the practice of dotting in runic writing may have arisen in the British Isles. Knirk has recently argued against that view (2010). Neither party to the debate appeals to theory, and with good reason. What we suffer from both here and in the case of the Manx crosses is lack of data, not lack of theory.

Runological methodology

Methodology is considerably easier than theory to get to grips with. There has nevertheless been a general lack of thought about runological method and procedure – what might be deemed acceptable and what unacceptable, for example.

Methods will of course vary, depending on the object of study. Field runologists examine inscriptions with a view to reading and interpreting them. It is of course an essential part of runological methodology to distinguish between reading and interpretation. Guidelines for the reading of inscriptions can, I think, be established. Methodological guidelines for interpretation have largely been conspicuous by their absence, and it is certain much detailed work needs to be done in this area.

Consider by way of illustration the Reistad inscription from Vest-Agder, Norway (KJ 74, to be dated probably some time before A.D. 500). The inscription is in three lines and is normally read:

> **iuþingaz**
> **ekwakraz:unnam**
> **wraita**

The sequences **iuþingaz** and **wakraz** are interpreted as personal names (of disputed mean-ing); **ek** is almost certainly the pronoun 'I'. So far there is some agreement. Antonsen (2000: 5) reads **idringaz** rather than **iuþingaz**, but still recognises a personal name here (which he translates 'of memorable lineage'). **unnam wraita**, on the other hand, has been taken in two completely different ways: by many as (1) *undnam wraita*, meaning something like 'under-took the writing'; by Thórhallur Eythórsson (1999) as (2) 'took Wraitaz', where **wraita** (acc. sg.) is an earlier form of Old Norse *reit* 'marked-out space', and is the name given to a farm (cf. the *Rei-* in modern Reistad). **unnam** has also been read **unnamz** (Antonsen 2000: 6-7),

whereupon it metamorphoses from a verb to an adjective qualifying **wakraz**, and **wraita** becomes a 1st person sg. past tense strong verb: 'I Wakraz, the untakeable, wrote [this]'. The only point the three interpretations of this part of the inscription agree on is that the sequence **nam** is somehow to be connected with a verb meaning 'take'.

One area of disagreement in this case concerns the reading. Before embarking on an interpretation the runologist must be confident s/he can recognise the runic graphs. I have not examined the Reistad stone myself and so can offer no opinion on its runes. But as a general rule, uncertainty about what is actually carved on an object should give pause for thought. The problem with **unnam** as a verb form, as Antonsen recognises (2000: 6-7), is that **un** is a highly unlikely runic spelling of *und-* at the relevant period (an assimilation /und-/ > /un:/, as envisaged by Thórhallur, 1999: 191, is not to be expected so early). **wraita** 'writing' suffers from an absence of comparative evidence from later Scandinavian or other Germanic languages. And as a past tense verb form it has been criticised as archaic. As a noun meaning something like 'marked-out piece of land', it turns the Reistad stone into a statement of ownership, for which there seem to be no parallels among the inscriptions in the older *fuþark*. Reistad thus becomes typologically odd.

The problem here, as commonly where runic inscriptions are subject to rival interpretations, is to identify grounds for preferring one interpretation to another. Is it possible to establish some "hierarchy of doubt"? Can the lack of parallels to putative **wraita** 'writing' be said to weigh more heavily than the dearth of older-*fuþark* rune-stones documenting claims to land? Is it as certain as some assert that a North-West Germanic or Scandinavian strong past tense verb form would have lost its final vowel by the fifth or sixth century? And is the conviction that '(I) wrote' could have taken the form /wraita/ at this period more, or less, surely grounded than the claim that /nd/ in *und-* could have assimilated to /n:/? On the evidence so far adduced I do not see how we are to rank these rival interpretations and assertions in terms of plausibility, and my conclusion would therefore be that the sense of the Reistad stone still eludes us.

My overall view is that the interpretation procedures we are looking for may prove hard or well-nigh impossible to establish. Scarcity of data will often be an insurmountable obstacle.

Theory and method – graphemics and transliteration practice

I now turn to an area in which linguistic theory and runological methodology meet. My aim is to show how a well-established theory from a related discipline can inform and guide runological procedures. I first present a highly simplified sketch of the theory.

Graphemics is a branch of linguistics that seeks to identify the contrastive units in the writing system of a language – just as phonemics aims to establish the contrastive units of a sound system. Both are identified by function. The contrastive units of a writing system are called graphemes. Like phonemes, these are an abstraction. You cannot see a grapheme any more than you can hear a phoneme. What you see are graphs, which are the individual realisations of graphemes. Take ↑, ↑, ↑. Each of these runic characters may vary in a multitude of ways: the vertical may be of different lengths, it may be absolutely upright, slightly or notably slanting, or it may curve, for example. But if you place any variant of ↑, ↑, ↑ between þ| and ⏌ you have the word *þetta* 'this [n. nom./acc. sg.]'. If instead you substitute ⊦ for ↑, ↑, or ↑, you have *þenna* 'this [m. acc. sg.]'. ↑, ↑, ↑ with all their varieties of form can thus be classified as realisations of a single grapheme, whereas a rune with a descending right-hand branch extending from roughly midway on the vertical is a different grapheme. Substitution tests of this kind would show that ⊬, a rune with a descending crossing branch about midway on the vertical, is a variant of ⊦. Variants of a grapheme are called allographs, on the model of allophones, which are variants of phonemes. ↑, ↑, ↑ are thus allographs of a runic grapheme we can portray as **t**, while ⊦, ⊬ are allographs of **n**. The choice of roman transliterations to represent runic graphemes means we are able to bring a degree of abstraction to the process, which accords with the abstract status of the grapheme: we do not have to make an arbitrary selection from among the myriad of realisations of each rune. It is possible, of course, to use runes to denote runic graphemes, but they must then be marked in some way: we could, for example, place the chosen symbol between angular brackets, as <↑>, <⊦>.

The difference between ↑, ↑, and ↑ is often considered to be of a different order from that between, say, ↑ and variants thereof with slanting, curved or wiggly verticals. In recognition

of this, the concept "graph-type" is used. A graph-type is a variant of a grapheme clearly distinguishable from other variants by one or more features. Unlike a grapheme, however, it is not an abstract concept: it is classified on the basis of observation, not function. This leaves a great deal of discretion to the observer, and the classification of graphs into graph-types can therefore vary according to the judgements of the investigator and the purposes for which the classification is made.

Some writing carries no linguistic message. Runic inscriptions recording partial or complete *fuþark*s are examples of such. These cannot be used to establish graphemic oppositions since there is no linguistic function that would make a substitution test possible. What we have in the *fuþark* is not a graphemic inventory, but rather the raw material from which a graphemic inventory can be built. A clear distinction has thus to be made between a runic grapheme and a unit of the *fuþark* (cf. Dyvik 1996: 13).

The upshot of these considerations is that a rune can be analysed in four different ways: as a graph (an individual realisation), a graph-type, a grapheme and a *fuþark* unit.

So much for the theory. What of its implications for runological methodology? As a general point, I would argue for a heightened awareness of precisely what we have in mind when we write about runic characters. As a concrete example, I take the matter of transliteration.

The conversion of the characters of one script into those of another is not a simple process, and there can be differing views on how it should be undertaken. It is to say the least surprising that Thompson's paper on transliteration given to the First International Symposium on Runes and Runic Inscriptions does not consider the process at all, but is concerned solely with "the establishment of a unified system of notation for transcribing runic inscriptions" (1981: 89). When transliterating from runic to roman we ought at least to be able to agree that we cannot invoke sound value: if speech sound were to be the guiding principle the end result would be a phonetic transcription rather than a transliteration. The alternative is a system based on shape – the form of the written symbols. But are the roman equivalents of the runic characters to represent graphs, graph-types, graphemes or *fuþark* units – or some combination? Graphs, as will readily be acknowledged, are wholly unsuited to the purpose. The accuracy of observation required would be beyond the reach of mere mortals and the complexity of the roman equivalents mind-boggling – with no practical gain at the end of the process. Much the same can be said of transliteration by graph-type. Even if one could find a satisfactory basis for determining which features were typologically significant, it would be difficult to build a system of transliteration on the result that was easier to read than the runes themselves (cf. Barnes 2000: 148-49). Transliteration based on graphemes presupposes a graphemic analysis, which requires a clearly identifiable system of writing. In spite of the considerable complexities involved, this does seem to offer a feasible way forward. Transliteration according to position in the *fuþark* also presents possibilities, but is hampered by the fact that additional medieval characters one might want to distinguish – on the grounds that they have, or can have, contrastive function – appear not to have been regarded by rune-writers as part of the row.

Transliteration practice has up to now seldom reflected the theoretical and methodological considerations I have outlined here. Shape has been the chief determinant, though there has also been phonological input. Because transliteration serves a practical purpose, roman equivalents have been chosen that will suggest to the reader the approximate sounds different runes (however conceived) are thought to have denoted. There is no harm in this, but the tendency can be taken too far, as when � is transliterated now ø, now ǫ, or ᛘ now ᚱ, now ᴇ, depending on the phonetic value attributed to the character in different contexts (NIyR 3: 155; DR Text: 952, 968-71). Such a procedure introduces uncertainty, because the transliteration suggests the existence of two distinct runic characters, whereas only one is in fact involved. Phonetic considerations aside, what most transliterators of runes have done is to reproduce in roman what they considered to be the distinctive units of a given system of runic writing – however they came to that conception.

Some might argue that the transliteration of runes to roman hitherto has not encountered major problems, even if it has mostly lacked an explicit theoretical basis. There are, though, many oddities to be found. The fourth rune appears in several different guises (ᚨ, ᚫ, ᚬ, for example); it is also transliterated in different ways (**a**, **ã**, **o**). However, although shape is for most transliterators the guiding principle, there is no correlation in this case between shape and roman equivalent; rather it is presumed phonetic value that determines whether **a**, **ã** or **o**

is used. To add to the uncertainty, ᛅ may in some contexts also be transliterated **b**. A way around these problems lies in the positing of discrete systems of runic writing, for which different systems of transliteration are employed. Awareness of this as a possible expedient appears – as indicated above – to underlie some of the varying transliteration practices we find, though few have attempted to make explicit the processes they followed.

More serious difficulties affect the transliteration of the additional characters of medieval Scandinavian runic writing. Traditionally, for example, ᛦ has been transliterated **y**, ᚷ **g**, ᛂ **e**. As a purely practical device this is perhaps acceptable: when we come across **e**, we know that the runic character concerned is a dotted ᛁ, and so on. However, the impression can easily be gained that **e** is an "*e*-rune", whereas in reality ᛂ (in the tenth and eleventh century, at least) is a marked form of ᛁ, which may denote [e(:)] but can also stand for other sounds, notably [æ(:)], and sometimes even [i(:)] (cf. Lagman 1990: 78). There are two problems here, a practical and a theoretical. The practical problem is: how does one transliterate dotted characters in a way that alerts the reader to their status? Before a solution can be proposed, however, that status must first be elucidated, which is a theoretical problem.

Dotted runic characters can hardly be classified as units of the *fuþark*, because they are very seldom included in *fuþark* inscriptions, and when they are, appear to be randomly selected and ordered. They might be considered graph-types – clearly recognisable variants of particular graphemes. Yet the pair ᛁ/ᛂ, for example, differ from the trio ᚻ, ᚼ, ᚿ in that ᛂ often has a different function from ᛁ. This suggests graphemic status, but the fact that ᛁ and ᛂ are not always clearly distinguished by function renders that a slightly tricky analysis. In the Middle Ages, where ᛂ is very often used to denote [e(:)], and ᛂ does not normally denote other sounds, it is perhaps unproblematic to analyse it as a grapheme. But in the late Viking Age, where dotting seems to be used "för att markera ett ljudvärde som ristarna fann det angeläget att markera i förhållande till andra ljud som den ostungna runan kunde stå för" 'to mark a sound value which the carvers considered it important to mark relative to other sounds which the undotted rune could stand for' (Lagman 1990: 153), the graphemic status of ᛂ and other dotted runes is less clear. At what point does a variant marked for an indeterminate function turn into a grapheme?

Whatever else, these theoretical deliberations have made clear that ᛂ in its initial incarnation is not an "*e*-rune", nor is ᛦ a "*y*-rune" or ᚷ a "*g*-rune". A soundly based system of transliteration, it seems to me, should try to capture what it can of the essence of the dotted runes (and the other additional characters of medieval Scandinavian runic writing). In *The Runic Inscriptions of Viking Age Dublin* (1997) and *The Scandinavian Runic Inscriptions of Britain* (2006) my co-author(s) and I sought to put this desideratum into practice by making the transliterations of dotted runes approximate as closely as possible to the runic characters themselves. To render ᛂ, for example, we applied diacritic dots to roman **i**, giving **ï** – a variant of **i** distinguished by dotting. Dots above consonant letters present typographical obstacles, but these can be overcome. An alternative is to use small capitals, thus ɪ for ᛂ, but that divorces the transliteration equivalent further from actual runic practice. From a more purely theoretical perspective, we reasoned, **ï** for ᛂ takes account of the fact that the character is neither a free variant of **i** (if it were we would transliterate it **i**) nor – in its early life, at least – an independent grapheme (in which case some other letter than **i** would be appropriate), but rather a variant – dotted to distinguish it for one purpose or another from its undotted counterpart. Here, it seems to me, consideration of the theoretical basis of transliteration has pointed the way to a principled and practical solution.

Further considerations

In the final section of my paper I will examine additional questions. These concern chiefly aspects of methodology and interpretation, but also runes and magic. By way of a summary, I will offer six broad conclusions for my fellow runologists (if that is what we are) to consider.

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