

Recent Finds from the Continent: Problems and Perspectives of the Alamannic ‘Runic Province’

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In my paper I would like to begin by presenting some recent finds from the Continent; subsequently, I shall draw my attention to the problems and perspectives of the corpus of the Continental Germanic runic inscriptions, providing an overview of the current discussion, focusing on the archaeological debate.

Recent finds

THE BROOCH FROM LAUCHHEIM

In the cemetery of Lauchheim (Baden-Württemberg)—the largest row grave cemetery of the region, numbering more than 1,300 known burials—the grave (no. 660) of a woman with opulent grave furnishings, dating from about 600 AD, has been recently excavated. Inside archaeologists have found a couplet of bow brooches, maybe inherited goods. Two separated runic inscriptions are carved on the reverse of one of the brooches which, however, cannot be interpreted. In the first complex the runes **d** and **a** are carved—staying in a line; in the second it is more difficult to distinguish the intentional signs as runes: the first sign on the left is a clear **e** rune, a sort of **l** rune follows and then an uncertain three-stroke **s** rune (ʀ) and again a further uncertain **l** rune, touching on the bottom the supposed **s** rune. The inscription is problematic and maybe it was not meant to have any meaning at all.

For several runic records from the so called Alemannic ‘runic province’ it seems that the content of the inscription was not so important; the main thing was apparently possessing a specimen of writing, which maybe identified the bearer as a member of the “upper middle class” (cf. Düwel 1991: 285).

THE THREE BROOCHES FROM ASCHHEIM

The row grave cemetery of Aschheim-Baujwarenring (near Munich) was discovered in 1998 and until now about 450 burials in ca. 430 graves have been excavated. Among the burials, three brooches, all belonging to women, have been found. They are a disc brooch, an s-brooch and a “Nordic type” bow brooch, all of them carrying Continental runes on their reverse.

Klaus Düwel (2003, 2005) some years ago presented these inscriptions. During my recent autopsy of the pieces, I arrived at slightly divergent reading of them, which I would like to present here.

My autopsy of the silver s-brooch (grave 49, ca. 550-580) reveals that 5—instead of 4—runes are recorded on it, namely **miado**, which differs from Düwel’s interpretation **dado**. If—as Düwel assumes—the first rune from the left were in fact a **d**-rune, then it would have a very different form from the other **d** of the same inscription, more resembling the Anglo-Saxon variant (𐌆). Moreover, between the first rune from left and the **a**-rune, I can clearly detect an intentional stroke (**i**-rune?) of the same quality and dimension as the other signs. However, Robert Nedoma (in an e-mail of April 30) informed me that a form *miado* is problematic, being too early for an attestation of the OHG diphthongisation /e:²/ > /ia/.

In the double grave 166/167, two related women—probably mother and daughter—have been buried together. Remarkably they shared a couplet of bow brooches, which were placed between the thighs just above knee height. On the reverse of one of them (in grave 166) there are some runes which probably were not intended to render any meaningful text. The first complex consists of three bind runes **ddd** (which definitely are not purely ornamental), and close to the end of the brooch foot I could discern a second complex with two **o**-runes and a **d**-rune of different dimensions. Unlike the bind runes, the latter are not placed in a line and they consequently have to be read separately. Düwel saw a third **o**-rune on the lower border; I could not see any further rune, and I observed that this part of the surface is quite corroded.

MANUSCRIPT RUNES

Also in the ambit of the manuscript runes there are new finds to record: Nievergelt (2009) has recently edited some stylus glosses which he found in four different manuscripts from the St Gallen library (nos. 11, 185, 188 and 219).

Compared to the Continental runic epigraphy, these glosses document a more recent linguistic stage: whilst the runic epigraphy does not show any traces of the OHG consonant shift, the glosses from St Gallen represent the first original evidence of Old High German. Based on linguistic evidence, they can be dated to about 800 AD and hence stand at the beginning of the runic tradition in the Swiss abbey (cf. Nievergelt 2009: 190). As the epigraphical tradition in Alemannia was lost at the latest in the middle of the 7th century, the St Gallen writer chose the Anglo-Saxon runes to record OHG words. As the AS *futhorc* seems to have been known in the abbey (for example St Gallen 878), Nievergelt assumes that the writer did not have the intention to encrypt the words, but rather to show his ability and erudition.

Some of the runic items are marginal and some others are interlinear glosses. The glossed words are for the most part nouns, as one can deduce from the following few examples. On p. 144, l. 16 (St Gallen 11) we find an interlinear gloss above the Latin word *allegoriam* in the Upper German variant **keruni** (cf. OHG *girúni* 'secret'); on p. 249, l. 16 of the same manuscript, there is again an interlinear gloss consisting of two words, above Latin *et testinuit*. The gloss reads **enti kesitot** which very likely stands for the OHG conjunction *enti/endi* and the past participle of a weak verb *kesitón* 'determine'.

My last example presents a slightly different picture: on the bottom of p. 113 (St Gallen 63), there is the gloss **uuinegcaeræt**, which is not unequivocally interpretable. Nievergelt considers, merely as a hypothesis, that it could be a compound, consisting of the 3 words *uuín-* 'wine', *-egca* 'knife' *-rát* 'council', that is to say, an expression which would not render a single word, but rather summarize a whole section of the text. He also mentions the possibility of a personal name with a first noun element *wín-*, even if this name is not recorded elsewhere.

Even if all these glosses have been accurately executed, we are surely not dealing with a genuine runic tradition, but rather with a learned interest in a different kind of literacy.

Problems and Perspectives of Continental Runic Inscriptions

Runic inscriptions in the older *futhorc* are documented from the 2nd century AD until the beginning of the Viking Period from about 100 find spots. The oldest ones have been found in South Scandinavia, more precisely in the Danish bogs. Among the early inscriptions may also be counted some East Germanic finds. We do not find any early records from the Continent, the South Germanic runic province thus having an exceptional position. In this area, it seems that runic literacy developed and spread with considerable retardation and that it had no lasting impact. Thus the unexpected appearance of runic inscriptions at the beginning of the 6th century on in the Alemannia is still a matter of discussion.

If we disregard the North German inscriptions of Wremen and Liebenau, both dating from the 4th century, the corpus of the Continental runes is quite homogeneous. It amounts to some 80 inscriptions, most of them dating from the second third of the 6th century. The first inscriptions appeared about at 520 in particular in the context of Merovingian Period row grave cemeteries.

New finds from this area continue to be dug out every year. Yet the inscriptions and the objects merely confirm the known situation and have not yet provided any new supplementary information that could be relevant for dispersing the 'enigma' of this runic province.

In attempting to understand the circumstances of the sudden appearance of the runes and their just as unexpected disappearance 100 years later, it is not sufficient to consider the inscriptions merely from the philological point of view, so that runologists have to find support in archaeological facts. Regarding this question, Behrens and Thews (2009: 4) for example consider "graves" and "grave fields" as the most informative sources we have at our disposal. Yet among the archaeologists there is no consensus in the way they interpret the facts!

The actual 'problems' of the Alemannic runic corpus are the following:

1. The time limits: the runic lore appears all of a sudden at the beginning of the 6th century (about 520/30), and it disappears after about 100 years (very few inscriptions are dated to the middle of the 7th century).

2. There are no runic stones recorded, all the inscriptions are on loose objects, in particular on brooches and dress accessories as well as on weapons.

3. Hitherto, it has not been possible to identify either the mediators or a precise origin of the phenomenon.

4. The corpus basically shows an unconfident execution of the runic signs and for the most part insignificant inscriptions.

5. The known corpus is also in poor condition due to the fact that for a long time archaeologists had not expected to find runes, which meant that the reverse sides of brooches and other accessories were not restored carefully enough.

Max Martin (1977: 124) believes that the absence of runic inscriptions among the West Germanic people during the 3rd and 4th centuries is due to the fact that these *gentes* apparently wanted to distance themselves from the North and East Germanic people and therefore cultivated stronger contacts with the Roman world.

In 1904, Bernhard Salin provided an interpretation for the sudden and brief appearance of the Continental runes, stating that “die Kenntnis der Runen [ist] mit einer von Norden hervorbrechenden Strömung nach dem mittleren Europa gelangt.” According to Martin, who adopted Salin’s theory, this cultural stream could not have reached the South before the Thuringian empire had been defeated by the Franks (ca. 531). Before this time, according to Martin’s argumentation, the Thuringians formed a barrier for ideas and inspirations as well as for artefacts coming from Northern Europe. In this way he attempts to explain the isolation, in time and space, of the Continental runic inscriptions.

In the opinion of Ursula Koch (1999: 191), who basically agrees with Martin, the resettled Thuringians would have been the mediators of both the Nordic literacy and the pagan mythology shortly after 531 in the area between the rivers Neckar and Danube.

In recent years however, Martin’s theory, which was received extremely favourably among runologists, has been criticized by different archaeologists. New interpretations have been proposed instead, which consider as an alternative East Germanic people or the Langobards as possible transmitters of runic knowledge in the South. Often this line of argument has been conducted *ex negativo*, without presenting a plausible new interpretation.

Among the critics of the so-called Thuringian discourse is Frank Siegmund, who bases his opinion upon concrete facts. If an emigration of Thuringians had taken place after their defeat—as Koch suggested—we would expect a decrease of graves on the original Thuringian soil. Yet, the number of burials increased quite strongly in the 6th century. Therefore, in Siegmund’s opinion (2004: 153) the numerous Thuringian objects must be explained rather as a “vogue”.

Against a runic transmission via the Thuringians we have, moreover, the evidence that they had merely a very modest number of runic inscriptions (Weimar-Nordfriedhof grave 56/57, Beuchte 2 and a runic pearl), which, incidentally, do not seem to be older than the Alemannic finds (see Graf 2009). Behrens and Thews (2009: 83) rightly consider the few runic monuments alone as an insufficient evidence for affirming a widespread use of runic literacy by this *gens*. It seems rather that the Thuringians came into contact with runes at the same time as the Alemanni and Franks did.

Apart from the archaeological evidence, it is difficult to understand why the Thuringians should have blocked the diffusion of the Nordic culture (in form of ideas or artefacts). Moreover, in the Scandinavian burials of the Vendel Period (ca. 550-800) import goods—such as glassware and pottery—have also been found and this seems to provide an evident proof that in spite of the “Thuringian barrier”, other ways were found in the Merovingian Period to establish North-South contacts. The typology of the grave goods leads Simek (2004: 13f.) to postulate that the transmission occurred in the peaceful context of trading relationships and not through raids. In this context the Rhine probably played a decisive role, as it represents one of the major North-South connections in Central Europe, through which the Alemanni had the opportunity to come into contact with people from the North.

Koch (1999: 177) also has to admit that the oldest bracteate (IK 347, from Straubing) found in a Continental burial dates from 510-530—i.e., from before the “unlocking” of the Thuringian realm.

Alternatively, the Langobards have been proposed as possible mediators of runic literacy. A connection between the Alemannic province and the Langobards, living in Northern Italy, cannot be denied, as the grave goods attest it well (cf. Graenert 2000: 417).

But let us consider the circumstances: one may assume that intense contacts occurred during the Frankish campaign in the years 539-563. Through this the warriors could have got artefacts in the form of booty, which they took back to their homeland. Yet these objects are recorded only in Alemannia and not in the rest of the Frankish realm. If they had reached Central Europe as a result of Frankish military expeditions, they should have spread all over the realm. In this incongruity Graenert (2000: 433) sees an evidence for the emigration of Langobardic people over the Alps, where they would have transferred their belief in the after-life to their progeny, living in Alemannia.

Since this ethnic group does not provide any evidence of a distinctive runic tradition in the Italian territories, it seems, however, strange to consider the Langobards as transmitters of the runes in the Alemannic province.

Even if he does not present any counterproposal, treating the bracteate imitations from Hüfingen, Heizmann (2004: 381f.) speaks against a transmission through the Langobards and comes to the conclusion that “die Verbindung der Langobarden mit der Runenschrift eine recht dünne ist”. In almost the same manner he judges the connection of the Langobards with the bracteate tradition. In fact, neither runic inscriptions nor bracteates which could confirm such a hypothesis have ever been found in Italy. From the archaeological point of view we cannot even attribute definitely the runic finds from Pannonia to the Langobards.

Fischer (2005: 163), who argues against the Thuringian discourse, proposes a new interpretation, excluding direct contact between Alemannia and the North: The Nordic-influenced brooches and other artefacts with Scandinavian provenance would then in fact merely be imitations, copies of copies, and not import goods originating primarily from the North. At the end of his opus Fischer mentions *en passant* a “Continental Runic revival”, which I understand to mean that runic literacy had been used in this territory at a previous time or had been known before by the Alemanni. Unfortunately, the records known to date cannot support this opinion, which hence has to be considered mere speculation. In his interpretation, Fischer (2005: 176) agrees with Roth, according to which the origin of the Continental runic tradition has to be sought in the emigration of East Germanic “runic experts” from Pannonia to Alemannia after the Avaric invasion in the late 560s. They both assume that a long East Germanic runic discourse is more likely than sporadic runic contacts with Northern Europe in the 6th century. However, the first Continental inscriptions predate the Avaric invasion and consequently have to be explained otherwise.

Fischer is not the first to assume a revival of runic practice among the Alemannic people. Also Marcello Meli (1988: 211) considers the possibility that the Alemannic inscriptions are a “riaffiorare e rin vigorirsi di una tradizione mai perduta” (a revitalisation and consolidation of a tradition that was never lost), i.e. the Suebes/Alemanni, coming from the North Sea coast, took their runic know-how to the South. On this assumption he postulates knowledge of the runes among the Alemanni already in the 1st and 2nd centuries AD. However, the attested finds do not allow us any certain statements about this.

Seebold (1991: 498f.) refers to the runic forms trying to come to some conclusions. He states that the archaisms of the Continental runic inscriptions depend on the fact that in this area there was no longer a genuine runic tradition and that runes were merely an archaic *curiosum*. According to Seebold’s opinion, we can observe that the inscriptions are often executed without accuracy and that in many cases they are not interpretable.

In an article on this topic Siegmund (2004) defines the three central concepts “acculturation”, “vogue” and “influence”, in order to investigate the phenomenon of the Continental runic inscriptions. All three phenomena imply a cultural interchange between two human entities (ethnic groups, clans, etc.), but they lead to different results. In my opinion, he hits the mark when he defines the Alemannic runic inscriptions as a “vogue”. According to his definition of “vogue”, the carving runic of signs on loose objects can be considered as a fashion, namely as a short occurrence which very soon leaves the new territory again and is not always congruent. Siegmund sees in this very context also the diffusion of other Nordic artefacts, such as bracteates and the Nordic Style I and II, which all suddenly became “chic”.

Behrens and Thews (2009: 131), who basically agree with Siegmund, have recently tried to find a reason for this “vogue”: the troubled integration of Alemannia, Bavaria and Thuringia

into the Frankish realm induced these peoples to distinguish themselves from the conquerors—the Romanized and Christianised Franks—through dress, writing practice and burial customs; that is why they adopted runic literacy instead of the Latin alphabet.

Adopting a fashion does not necessarily imply that the artefacts and ideas have to be slavishly copied. Rather the opposite occurred in Alemannia: as the bracteates imitations from Hüfingen show, their dimensions and weight were modified. In the same way, runic literacy in the Alemannic province assumed some distinguishing marks, which include a **k**-rune which could be turned by 90° or stand upside-down, a double-barred **h**-rune and a **b**-rune which has clearly separated pockets.

At a second glance, however, it seems that the differences are not that striking. For the Continental **k**-rune, we can find Scandinavian parallels: in the transitional period a form \wedge (from \sphericalangle) is recorded in Danish inscriptions from the 6th century (cf. Odenstedt 1990: 41). This fact contradicts the statement by Arntz and Zeiss, asserting that this kind of form occurs only in “German” inscriptions.

As far as the **h**-rune is concerned, there is a dichotomy between single-barred **h** attested in the Scandinavian and Gothic inscriptions and double-barred **h** recorded in the Continental and Anglo-Saxon ones. Arntz and Zeiss state that the Continental variant must correspond to the original form, suggesting that there was basically a graphematic development from a complex to a simple form. Yet we cannot deny that the early runic finds attest only the single-barred variant. In the Continental corpus, double-barred **h** predominates, but there are also a few examples of \mathfrak{H} . Fischer tries to explain the development by taking into consideration that the Alemanni wanted to differentiate their own writing signs from the Roman letters (single-barred **h** too much resembling Latin H).

With regard to the particular form of the **b**-rune, Odenstedt (1990: 93f.) shows that from 400 on this allograph is also attested in the North (KJ 48 Skärkind, KJ 53 Kårstad, KJ 28 Kragehul and KJ 29 Lindholmen). That means that in this case we are again not dealing with an exclusively Continental form.

From the graphematic analysis of the typical Continental runic forms, it seems likely that runic literacy was adopted from the North in the 5th-6th century. At this time there is a great correspondence between the Continental and the Danish signs, before the younger futhork developed.

Another graphematic aspect should catch our attention: in this corpus archaic and recent forms are attested at the same time, as for example the **j**-rune that appears in the small original form (\mathfrak{J}) as well as in the recent variant with a full height (\mathfrak{H}), or the early **s**-rune with four strokes \mathfrak{S} on the silver capsule from Arlon (KJ 146). Even within the same inscription we find older and younger forms mixed together, for example, on the brooch from Charnay, where a recent **j**-rune (\mathfrak{H}) and an archaic **z**-rune (\mathfrak{Z}) stand side by side (cf. Krause and Jankuhn 1966: 21; Seebold 1991: 498).

Düwel (1991: 286) explains this status with the fact that on the Continent—unlike in Scandinavia—runic literacy was not taught and transmitted in schools, so that we are concerned with a “zufällige und unvollständige Aneignung und Beherrschung der Runenschrift”.

In a personal communication (21.04.10), Seebold confirms this opinion, arguing that the mixing of rune forms belonging to different stages of development clearly shows that Alemannic “runic experts” could not count on a strong and solid runic tradition.

As mentioned above, not only is the origin of Alemannic runic literacy still unexplained, but also its abrupt disappearance. Koch (1999: 191) states that runic literacy continued as long as contacts with Northern people existed.

Düwel (1991: 286), amongst others, explains the end of the phenomenon as being due to the modification of the burial traditions and the spread of Christianity. Thus, since not every inscription was carved shortly before the interment the disappearance of the runes due to a new kind of sepulture is not self-explanatory. As the case may be, whether they belonged to the grave inventory or not, runic inscriptions could have still existed as amulets and for other purposes for the people still alive. In order to be able to make any certain statements, it is still a *desideratum* that archaeology finds the way to determine precisely the dating of the objects and the carving of the inscriptions, for example by examining the traces of use.

In Meli’s opinion (1988: 215) it was rather a process of political and cultural assimilation

to the Franks which was connected with the Latin alphabetisation and new learning techniques that determined the end of runic literacy. Runes seem to have been connected with pagan beliefs and conceptions, so that after an initial impetuous opposition the acculturation was accepted and the Alemanni like the Thuringians and the other subjugated *gentes* took over customs and the writing practice of the Franks.

Conclusions

I hope to have showed that the Thuringian discourse cannot be accepted without further examination and that other transmitters and reasons than the defeat of the Thuringians seem to be more likely reasons for the spread of the runes in Alemannia.

The appearance of runic inscriptions is probably connected with the circulation of other Nordic artefacts, such as bracteates, spathas, the Nordic style, etc. This implies that interpersonal contacts between the North and the South took place, maybe through trading or military activities or maybe through the mediation of England. Even if we accepted the postulated “Sperrriegel”, we could not deny at these artefacts and ideas managed to penetrate deep into the Continent, as the grave finds attest. It seems quite evident that the North did not simply export goods, but also transmitted the modalities of production, so that the Alemanni began to produce in loco. Since this “vogue” did not last long enough, the imitations did not reach the quality of the original and an altered tradition arose.

On the basis of the grave-finds, one gains the impression the Alemannic people were very receptive to foreign influences, adopting vogues from the North; in addition, they show a strong assumption of Italic-Mediterranean stylistic devices, such as cloisonné disc brooches which surely have an Italic provenance.

As a further possibility of transmission, among the many that have already been suggested, one could postulate a spread of contacts along the coastline of the North Sea as well as through the Rhine. In this way, Northern *semi-literati* could have avoided the barrier and in the one or the other trading place by the river they could have talked about their own writing system, giving some general lessons on it.

However, in the last instance, all our hypotheses are based on the source material currently known, which is far too scarce to allow for any objective conclusions. The recent finds, presented at the beginning of my paper, do just confirm the *status quo* without helping to solve the ‘enigma’.

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