

The Norwegian Runic Poem as a Mnemonic Device

The pictographic principle

Jonna Louis-Jensen

Introductory

The Norwegian Rune Poem (NRP) has a reputation for being “cryptical”. Perhaps for that very reason it is astonishingly popular on the internet in circles connected with neo-paganism or New Age spiritualism. Mainstream scholars, we are told on one of the websites, tend to avoid the topic entirely because of the New Age taint. Nonetheless, the NRP was the subject of a paper delivered at the Fifth International Symposium on Runes and Runic Inscriptions (Neuner 2006), and I shall pick up the thread more or less where Bernd Neuner left it.

The NRP is one of three known rune poems. The Anglo-Saxon Rune Poem is the oldest, dating from the tenth century or earlier, and the Icelandic Rune Poem probably the youngest, from the thirteenth century or later. The NRP has been tentatively dated to the early thirteenth century (Kålund 1884-91), but no medieval records of it have survived. It is known to have been written down, probably from memory, in a fourteenth-century lawbook that perished in the great fire of Copenhagen in 1728, and the three existing transcripts of it do not agree in every particular (see especially Page 2003).

The NRP consists of sixteen couplets, one for each rune of the younger futhork. All the couplets except two (6 and 15) are in the skaldic metre called *runhent*, characterized by having both alliteration and end-rhyme. The deviations from the metre in stanzas 6 and 15 are probably due to corruption at the oral stage of the tradition.

The enigma of the b-lines

The three runic poems have a good deal in common, first and foremost that each stanza starts with the name of a rune, which is followed by a kind of “definition” that may be a statement of proverbial or riddle-like character. In the first couplet of the NRP the a-line is an example of the former:

Ʊ (FÉ) vældr frænda róge. “Wealth is a source of discord among kinsmen.”

A similar definition is given in the Icelandic poem, while the Anglo-Saxon poem strikes a more positive note: Wealth is a comfort to all men. “Definitions” such as these have earned the runic poems their status as “poems of wisdom and learning”, or “catalogues of important cultural information”, and this may well have been the original point of the Anglo-Saxon Rune Poem. On the other hand, there has been general agreement that the runic poems served as some sort of mnemonic aid, helping people to remember the names and the traditional “definitions” of the runes.

The reason why the NRP has been regarded as more cryptical than the other two, is that in most of the couplets the b-lines have no thematic connection with the a-lines. As an example we may take the *maðr* couplet:

Ʒ (MAÐR) er moldar auki. “Man is an augmentation of dust.
Mikil er græip á hauki. Great is the claw of the hawk.”

Nobody has so far been able to establish a thematic connection between a human being and a hawk’s claw.

Aslak Liestøl 1948

In 1948, however, a young Norwegian runologist, Aslak Liestøl, suggested that the point of the b-lines of the NRP (or at least some of them, as he saw it) was not to illustrate or define the names of the runes, but rather their shape. His prime example was the *maðr* couplet quoted above, and he drew attention to the fact that the shape of the *m*-rune Ψ looks strikingly like a bird's claw. Liestøl himself did not coin a term for the principle behind his interpretation of the b-lines; I would like to suggest 'the pictographic principle'. The pictographic principle implies that in the b-lines of the couplets the rune in question is viewed not as an ideogram of its name (e.g. $\Psi = maðr$) but rather as a pictogram of a phenomenon in the outer world, a phenomenon associated to the shape of the rune (e.g. $\Psi = \text{hawk's claw}$).

Liestøl's two other examples of the pictographic principle, \mathfrak{h} and \mathfrak{k} are equally striking. The *s*-rune (*sól*) \mathfrak{h} if rotated 90 degrees may be seen as a pictogram of a kneeling person, and the *sól* couplet has a kneeling person in its b-line:

\mathfrak{h} (SÓL) er landa ljóme.
Lúti ek helgum dóme.

"The sun is the light of the world.
I kneel before the holy shrine."

The *h*-rune \mathfrak{k} (*hagall*) is sometimes found in Norwegian stave churches; here it was without doubt identified with the Christogram (a combination of the Greek letters chi + iota, or chi + rho), and the a-line of the *hagall* stanza alliterates with *Kristr* in the b-line:

\mathfrak{k} (HAGALL) er kaldastr korna
Kristr skóp hœiminn forna.

"Hail is the coldest of grains.
Christ created the world of old."

(That Christ is regarded as the creator of the world is probably a heritage from early Christian times, when missionaries may have simplified the doctrine of the Trinity for pedagogical purposes, see Liestøl 1948: 68).

The value of the NRP as a mnemonic aid lies first and foremost in the b-line being so closely bound up with the a-line by alliteration and rhyme that the name and the shape of the individual runes become inseparable. This means that the risk of confusing one runic character with another is minimal, with the exceptions of Ψ and \mathfrak{h} , \mathfrak{t} and \mathfrak{b} , which happen to be precisely the runes that are most often turned around or upside-down in inscriptions (Bianchi 2010: 204-05).

Aslak Liestøl did not make much of his discovery, perhaps because he received little support from Magnus Olsen (1878-1963), who was at that time the grand old man of runic studies in Norway and moreover editor of the journal *Maal og Minne* where Liestøl's article was published. Magnus Olsen expressed his disbelief in an article in the very same issue of *Maal og Minne*, where he tried to pursue the idea that the b-lines of the NRP were a kind of thematic variation of the a-lines. Even Magnus Olsen, however, had to grant that Liestøl's interpretation of the *m*-rune Ψ as a pictogram of the hawk's claw was very attractive.

Aslak Liestøl gives two partly self-contradictory reasons for not trying to generalize the idea that the b-lines of the NRP pertain to the shape of the runes. The first reason is that the metre is too difficult, and the second that our knowledge of Old Norse material culture is not sufficient to follow the associations hinted at in the b-lines. If Liestøl had pursued his idea more energetically and methodically, his hypothesis might have attracted more attention, but it seems to have had hardly any impact at all for more than half a century. Ten years ago, however, the discussion was reopened by Bernd Neuner at the Fifth International Runic Symposium (2000, published as Neuner 2006).

Bernd Neuner 2006

Neuner's main contribution to solving the question of the b-lines was, apart from an improved focus on method, three additional interpretations of pictograms (or, as Neuner calls them, *grammasticha*). Two of these, the pictograms of the *i*-rune \mathfrak{l} and the *r*-rune \mathfrak{R} , seem to me just as convincing as Liestøl's suggestions. The third, the *t*-rune \mathfrak{t} is more dubious, as I shall explain below.

The *íss* stanza in the NRP runs like this:

I (ÍS) kǫllum brú bræiða. Blindan þarf at læiða	“Ice we call a broad bridge. The blind man must be led.”
--	---

As Liestøl has shown (1948), the a-line of this stanza is the answer to a riddle which in Old Norse may have had the form *Hver er brúin bræiðust?*, the answer being: *Íss*. The pictographic interpretation of the shape of the rune according to Neuner is the stick carried by a blind person (also suggested by Bauer 2003: 151)

The *ræið* stanza implies some mythological knowledge on the part of the audience:

R (RÆIÐ) kveða rossom væsta. Reginn s[lól] sværðit bæsta.	“Riding is said to be the hardest for horses. Reginn forged the finest sword.”
--	---

Reginn belongs to the myth of Sigurd the dragon-slayer. He forged the sword Gramr for his step-son Sigurd, and Sigurd immediately proved its incomparable quality by cleaving Reginn’s anvil in two. Neuner suggests that the *r*-rune R should be seen as a pictogram of one half of an anvil, and points out that a representation of an anvil of a comparable type forms part of the famous Sigurd-carving at Ramsundsberget in Sörmland, Sweden.

The *Týr* couplet also has some affinity to Old Norse mythology:

↑ (TÝR) er ein-hændr ása. Opt værðr smiðr at blása.	“Týr is the one-handed god. Often has the smith to blow.”
--	--

Neuner suggests that the b-line alludes to the forging of Thor’s hammer Mjǫlnir according to *Skáldskaparmál*. The dwarf Brokkr had to work the bellows repeatedly, while his brother Eitri forged three treasures, the ring Draupnir, the boar Gullinbursti and the hammer Mjǫlnir.

Bernd Neuner describes the procedure applied by the poet in three steps (Neuner 2006, 41):

1. The poet composes the a-line using his stock of traditional “definitions” of the rune name.
2. He tries to find a suitable picture (pictogram) that matches the shape of the rune.
3. This picture is translated into language either directly or in the form of an allusion.

I agree with Neuner about these three steps, but I do think they should come in partly reversed order: 2–3–1. As far as I can see, the b-line is the central message of the couplet, and the poet’s chief concern must have been to convey his idea of the pictogram as graphically as possible. Apart from providing the name of the rune and building up to the b-line by means of alliteration and rhyme, the content of the a-lines seems to be mere poetic padding. I also think it more profitable to look at the NRP from the point of view of the user rather than that of the poet. I am convinced that the purpose of the poem was to enable the student of runic lore to visualize a certain rune if he knew its name, but had somehow forgotten what it looked like, or had yet to learn it. In that situation the relevant couplet of the NRP could provide a prospective rune-carver with the information he needed.

In light of this hypothesis, it may be objected that Bernd Neuner’s interpretation of the *Týr* rune as a pictogram of Thor’s hammer is not specific enough: why should the student hearing of the smith working the bellows think of Mjǫlnir in particular and not of some other artefact? It has occurred to me that ↑ might be taken as a pictogram of a pair of bellows, that is the wooden part of it, two handles and a kind of partition in the middle which is conceivably what makes it precisely a pair of bellows. The only picture of a pair of early medieval bellows that I have been able to find so far is the aforementioned Sigurd carving at Ramsundsberget, where a pair of bellows are depicted beside the anvil. It is possible to make out the outlines of a ↑ in this representation, but a real pair of bellows would of course be preferable.

Is the pictographic principle valid for all sixteen couplets?

If my interpretation of the *Týr* rune is accepted, then the pictographic principle has been found to apply with reasonable certainty to six stanzas out of the sixteen, which is hardly enough to

convince the sceptics. Personally, I think I would be satisfied if I could demonstrate that at least half of the stanzas could be explained according to the principle, and that there would be possible if not entirely satisfactory solutions to the other half. Liestøl makes a good point when he deplores our insufficient knowledge of Old Norse material culture, which blinds us from following associations which may have been quite obvious to a contemporary audience.

I shall, however, venture to suggest three additional examples of the pictographic principle, namely the runes **F** (*fé*) **Ń** (*úr*) and **B** (*bjarkan*), taken in *futhark* order.

The b-line of the *fé* couplet, the a-line of which we have already seen, is:

Fœðesk ulfr í skóge.

“The wolf lives (feeds) in the forest.”

Some scholars have thought that the wolf, being a hostile animal, must be an allusion to the discord mentioned in the a-line (cf. *ulfúð* ‘savageness’), while others have pointed out that an alternative meaning of the word *fé* is ‘cattle’ or ‘sheep’, and that the wolf may be expected to feed on such animals. But according to the pictographic principle, the rune **F** may be viewed simply as a pictogram of a tree, i.e. the student is meant to associate from the word *skógr* to the shape of the *fé* rune. The wolf is a mere ornament; almost any other one-syllabled animal would have done as well from the metrical point of view.

The text of the *úr* couplet is uncertain; I think Ole Worm’s version of the a-line makes more sense than the two other transcripts, and so would like to read the couplet as follows:

Ń (ÚR) er af eldu jarne.
Opt løypr ræinn á hjarni.

“Sparks come from red-hot iron.
A reindeer often slips on the hard-frozen snow.”

The verb in the b-line, ‘løypr’, is normally translated ‘races’ or ‘runs’, but the translation ‘slips’ agrees with Fritzner’s dictionary (definition 5). The train of thought that the poet intended his audience to follow, seems to me to be: (1) Question: “Why does the reindeer slip so often on the hard-frozen snow?” (2) Answer: “Because, unlike a horse, it is not shod”. (3) Conclusion: “The rune whose shape I need to recall looks like a horseshoe”. – One purpose of horseshoes was to prevent horses from slipping on ice, and in some regions of Scandinavia horses were shod in winter only. Medieval horseshoes come in many varieties, but some of them look like modern ones, that is, not unlike the rune **Ń**.

Finally, the *bjarkan* stanza runs like this:

B (BJARKAN) er laufgrænstr líma.
Loki bar flærðar tíma.

“Birch has the greenest leaves of any shrub.
Loki ... [for a new translation, see below].”

What does the b-line mean? It is mostly quoted as “Loki was fortunate in his deceit” (Dickins 1915, based on Finnur Jónsson 1915). Most commentators add a reference to the story of how Loki tricked the *æsir* into shooting Baldr with a mistletoe, which is supposedly alluded to by the greenery in the a-line. The translation is linguistically suspect, and it is not easy to see how such an understanding of the b-line could evoke the shape of the *bjarkan* rune. The explanation should no doubt be sought in a different direction. Loki is mentioned twice in Old Norse literature as the grammatical subject of the verb *bera*, and both times the meaning of the verb is ‘to bear, give birth to’. The object is either *börn* (*Lokasenna* 26) or *fyl* (*Gylfaginning* ch. 25 [42]). In later Icelandic, one of the meanings of the word *tími* (originally ‘term’) is ‘pregnancy’, especially in domestic animals, and it is even used about the fetus itself (*fá tíma*). I therefore interpret *flærðar tími* as ‘the breed of deceit’ (probably referring to the foal Sleipnir) and have no doubt that the association meant to be called forth by the b-line is to the silhouette of a pregnant woman as a symbol of female fertility.

Bibliography

- Bauer, Alessia, 2003: *Runengedichte: Texte, Untersuchungen und Kommentare zur gesamten Überlieferung*. *Studia Mediaevalia Septentrionalia* 9. Wien.
Bianchi, Marco, 2010: *Runor som resurs: Vikingatida skriftkultur i Uppland och Södermanland*. Runrön 20. Uppsala.

- Clunies Ross, Margaret, 1990: "The Anglo-Saxon and Norse Rune Poems: a comparative study." *Anglo-Saxon England* 19, 23-39.
- Dickins, Bruce, 1915: *Runic and heroic poems of the old Teutonic peoples*. Cambridge.
- Finnur Jónsson, 1915: *Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning*, vol. B II. København.
- Fritzner = Johan Fritzner: *Ordbog over det gamle norske sprog*. 2nd ed. Kristiania 1886-96.
- Kålund, Kristian, 1884-91: "Et gammel-norsk rune-rim og nogle islandske rune-remser." In *Småstykker 1-16*. Samfund til Udgivelse af gammel nordisk Litteratur. København.
- Liestøl, Aslak, 1948: "Det norske runediktet." *Maal og Minne* 1948, 65-71.
- (Louis-Jensen, Jonna, forthcoming: "Det norske runedigt som mnemoteknisk hjælpemiddel." *Maal og Minne*.)
- Neuner, Bernd, 2006: "Das Norwegische Runengedicht – was sich hinter den zweiten Zeilen verbirgt." In *Runes and their Secrets: Studies in runology.*, eds. Marie Stoklund, Michael Lerche Nielsen, Bente Holmberg and Gillian Fellows-Jensen, 233-45. Copenhagen.
- Olsen, Magnus, 1948: "Bemerkninger til Det norske runedikt." *Maal og Minne* 1948, 72-75.
- Page, R. I., 2003: "On the Norwegian Rune-Poem." In *Runica – Germanica – Mediaevalia*, eds. Wilhelm Heizmann and Astrid van Nahl, 553-66. Berlin/New York.