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The *futhark* and the fur trade: on the adaptation of an alphabet by its users

In Scandinavia the *futhark*, or runic alphabet, went through two main early forms. The Early Runic older *futhark*, a 24-letter form (AD c200-500), was replaced in Scandinavia in the Viking Period (c800-1050) by the younger *futhark*, a 16-letter form. Epitaph stones inscribed in this alphabet are particularly frequent in the Mälars region of Sweden (Jansson 1987: 187). I ask: whence their reading public?

The Mälars region lies on the *limes norrlandicus*. The limes is a climactic border which marks the boundary between deciduous and peri-arctic woodland, running from the Oslo fjord to the Mälars region of Sweden, along the southern edge of the Finnish peninsula, and across modern Russia. During the Iron Age it divided the northern hunter-gatherer economy from the southern agricultural economy. A new class of farmer-traders apparently arose at various locations along this border during the Merovingian Period (c550-800), who controlled the distribution of arctic goods such as furs, dried fish, seal-oil, etc., to southern Europe. This class, I suggest, may provide our answer: the younger *futhark* may have been developed through business correspondence, on perishable materials. Birka and Hedeby were major export centres for this trade.

The most fruitful periods for linguists are those in which plenty of linguistic and historical material is available, as in the Late Viking Period Uppland runestones. But the consonant system of the younger *futhark* must have been laid down earlier, possibly much earlier, in order for it to appear in two versions of the younger *futhark* in Sweden-Norway and Denmark, c800AD. One possibility is that the older *futhark* had been a standard written language, mastered by few, and the spoken language of trade had changed because of increased contacts with the eastern Baltic, both north and south of the Gulf of Finland, and including the Ladoga-Ilmen region of Russia. According to Mel'nikova (2001: 491):

In the ninth and tenth centuries typically Scandinavian objects with usual for Eastern Scandinavia inscriptions concentrate in the Ladoga-Ilmen region, the area of the earliest penetration and settlement of Scandinavians. Their connections with the local population produced no effects on their own cultural traditions and constant relations with the motherland as well as the appearance of newcomers supported the evolution of these traditions. It is possible that in this early period there existed special contacts not only with Gotland and the Mälaren region but with Östergötland too.

The Rus got into the fur trade by 750AD, maybe earlier (Sawyer & Sawyer 1993: 147), taking over the tributary connections of the Vepsians. Trading communities grew up at various staging posts on the routes to the west, including one in Eura in southwest Finland. The grave of a Merovingian chieftan discovered there in the 1930s contained a luxurious Scandinavian ring-sword, a Permian belt stiffened with birchbark, an Estonian-style cloak-pin, and a piece of birchbark with an incised pattern, maybe part of a purse (Lehtisalo-Hilander 2000: 183-5, 197, & pers.com.).

The community became larger and richer in the Viking Period, and the female burials include many Arabic coins, the first from the mid-eighth century (*ibid* p.214). It seems probable that leaders of trading communities such as that found in Eura, now a Finnish-speaking area, would have felt the need to keep written records and to send written messages along regularly used routes, using a *lingua franca* and script known to them. Birchbark was to hand. This could account for the invention of the short-twig runes of the Swedish-Norwegian type, as found on the Rök stone, c800AD from Östergötland, which are space-saving and easily cut with a knife on birchbark or wood. The same argument goes for the reduction of the consonant symbols of the older futhark, which would have been in keeping with the pronunciation of Finnic-speaking traders who acted as middlemen with the Uralic hunters. In the 9th century a Norwegian trader Ottar reported to King Alfred of England that he had met traders known in Old Norse as *Bjarmar* at the White Sea. The name refers to Permian, between the arctic and the upper Volga (Sawyer & Sawyer 1993: 146). Ottar's own wealth came mainly from tribute from the *Finnas*, i.e. the proto-Sami in northern Norway (*ibid*).

The short-twig runes found on the Rök stone reappear among the Russian finds described in Mel'nikova (2001). The stone refers to the *strandu HraiðmaraR*, 'shore of the nest Goths', presumably at the mouth of the Vistula (Green 1998:169-170), and to Theodoric the Great. It also refers to *Siolundi*, Sjælland, and "twenty kings" who fought and died there in the Migration Period. The same orally transmitted stories are referred to in Old English poetry, including *Beowulf*, and must have been carried by ship to England in the pre-Viking Period. The English runemasters did not reduce their runic alphabet like the Scandinavians, however, but gradually increased their symbols to as many as 31, in order to reflect changes in pronunciation (Page 1987: 18-20). Page is rather rude about the Scandinavian reductions:

The reduction of the *futhark* to sixteen runes raised problems of representing sounds, particularly as, to us, the choice of which sixteen letters to retain does not seem a sensible one. (...) It is alleged that foreigners spell better than they pronounce; but it took the Vikings a couple of centuries or so before they realised their spelling system needed improvement, and for this the script needed change and expansions. (Page 1987: 21)

Sven B.F. Jansson and Bengt Odenstedt are politer, but the message is the same:

“En språkforskare har givetvis all anledning att beklaga, att vikingatidens teckensystem icke mera noggrant återger ljudbeståndet” (Jansson 1963: 26).
“[T]he reduction to 16 runes in the younger *futhark* is difficult to explain, especially since it occurred at a time when more symbols were really required as a result of linguistic changes” (Odenstedt 2000: 18).

Why should the northern runemasters have behaved differently from the English in the crucial pre-Viking period? I suggest that they developed their script for written communication in the Baltic fur trade, in a language-contact situation. The problem seems to lie in the minds of the traditional runologists, who worked within a closed family-tree model of Germanic language history, and failed to look east.

References

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