

# THE RUNIC SYSTEM

## AS A REINTERPRETATION OF CLASSICAL INFLUENCES AND AS AN EXPRESSION OF SCANDINAVIAN CULTURAL AFFILIATION

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### 1.0 THE EARLY RUNIC SYSTEM: DATES, PLACES, & CHARACTERISTICS

The ERIA seems to have seen the rise of the chieftains supported by warrior retinues as a dominant feature of Germanic society. The same period saw the emergence one of the most complex and distinctive facets of Germanic culture: the runic writing system. The creation of the runic system almost certainly owes something to interaction between Roman and Germanic culture, though the mechanisms at work are subject to much debate.

Debate over the runic system's origins has produced an enormous body of scholarship.<sup>1</sup> The oldest commonly accepted runic inscription is found on a spearhead from Øvre Stabu (Illerup, Norway) and is dated to about AD 175.<sup>2</sup> There is a fibula from Meldorf (in Ditmarschen) dated to around AD 50 that contains what may be a runic inscription, though this is not universally agreed upon.<sup>3</sup> It is often assumed that a system of writing must have been forming for at least a century or so before the earliest surviving examples, so it might be concluded that the runic system was formulated at some point between the beginning of the RIA (c. 50 BC) and the time of the Øvre Stabu inscription. It is clear that the runic characters were inspired in part by Mediterranean writing systems—Roman, Greek, North Italic, or possibly some combination of these—but there has been no firm consensus on this point.<sup>4</sup> Certainly it seems likely that the Roman script was the writing system best known to the Germanic peoples during the period when the runic system was developed.

Accompanying discussions of the runic system's graphical origins are arguments concerning its geographical origins. Von Friesen's theory that runes derived from Greek characters looked east to the Gothic territories, while scholars arguing for North Italic

<sup>1</sup>English summaries of the debate on runic origins can be found in Haugen, *Scandinavian*, pp. 118-23; Erik Moltke, *Runes and Their Origin: Denmark and Elsewhere* (Copenhagen: Nationalmuseets Forlag, 1985), pp. 23-74 [an updated version of Erik Moltke, *Runerne i Danmark og deres Oprindelse*, (Copenhagen: Forum, 1976)]; Richard L. Morris, *Runic and Mediterranean Epigraphy*, *NOWELE: Supplement*, 4 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1988), pp. ??-??; Ralph W.V. Elliott, *Runes*, 2nd ed. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1989), pp. 1-13. See also Lucien Musset with Fernand Mossé, *Introduction à la Runologie*, *Bibliothèque de philologie germanique*, 20 (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1965), pp. 19-58.

<sup>2</sup>Krause-Jankuhn, p. 76.

<sup>3</sup>Klaus Düwell, 'The Meldorf Fibula and the Origin of Runic Writing', *Michigan Germanic Studies*, 7 (1981), pp. 8-??; Moltke, pp. 121-22.

<sup>4</sup>On derivation from Greek see E.H. Antonsen, 'Zum Ursprung und Alter des germanischen Fuþarks', in *Festschrift für Karl Schneider zum 70. Geburtstag am 18 April 1982*, ed. by Ernst S. Dick and Kurt R. Jankowsky (Amsterdam: Benjamin, 1982), 3-15; Otto von Friesen, 'De germanske, anglofrisiska och tyska runorna', in *Runorna*, ed. by Otto von Friesen, *Nordisk kultur*, 6 (Stockholm: Bonnier, 1933), ??-??, (pp. ??-??). On derivation from North Italic see C.J.S. Marstrand, 'Om runenes og runenavnens oprindelse', *Norsk Tidsskrift for Sprogvidenskap*, 1 (1928), 85-179; M. Hammerström, 'Om runskriftens härkomst', *Studier i nordisk filologi*, 20 (1930), 1-61; Otto Höfler, 'Herkunft und Ausbreitung der Runen', *Die Sprache*, 17 (1971), 134-156. On derivation from Roman see F. Askeberg, *Norden och kontinenten i gammal tid: studier i forngermansk kulturhistoria* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1944); Moltke, *Runes and their Origin*; Bengt Odenstedt, *On the Origin and Early History of the Runic Script: Typology and Graphic Variation in the Older Futhark*, *Acta Academiae Regiae Gustavi Adolphi*, 59 (Uppsala: Gustav Adolfs akademien; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1990); H. Pedersen, 'Runernes oprindelse', *Aarbøger for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie* (1923), 37-82; L. Wimmer, 'Runskriftens Oprindelse og Udvikling i Norden', *Aarbøger for nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie*, (1874), 1-270.

origins have pointed towards the Alps. Moltke, who looked to a largely Latin source for the runic characters, suggested a runic origin in Denmark. His argument may not have been wholly uninformed by patriotism, but is lent considerable weight by the fact that virtually all runic inscriptions pre-dating AD 400 are Scandinavian, with only few inscriptions found in northern Germany and the Gothic regions of eastern Europe.<sup>5</sup> Plausible though a southern Scandinavian origin during the ERIA is, it seems unlikely that questions regarding the time and place of the runic system's origins will ever be universally agreed upon.

There is a fair amount of graphic variation in the characters of the Older Futhork, yet it must be conceded that they exhibit remarkable uniformity over time considering the evident lack of any institution enforcing the maintenance of orthographic standards in the early Germanic world. When other features, such as the number and ordering of the characters, become discernible, they are also surprisingly uniform. Although the earliest surviving inscription containing the entire futhork dates to c. 400 AD, similarities between the number and ordering of the characters in later futhork inscriptions suggests these elements may be of considerable antiquity.<sup>6</sup> That such uniformity existed in the runic system has led some scholars to propose a point-origin for the Older Futhork in some creative individual,<sup>7</sup> or development by a particular group over some period of time;<sup>8</sup> in this context, if the Meldorf inscription were not truly runic, it might nevertheless represent a use of Roman characters in the early stages of development into runic characters.<sup>9</sup> Yet it seems likely that whatever process created the runic system was essentially complete by the time of the earliest inscriptions, c. AD 200.

## 2.0 RUNES AND CULTS?

It is perhaps significant that the concept of 'rune' can refer to more than simply a given character of the futhork in Old Norse. The term *rúnar/rúnir* could also refer to secret lore or mysteries, as well as to any kind of magical characters or inscriptions. Old English *rūn* could refer to a whisper, a mystery, as a secret consultation, as well as a character of the futhorc. Unfortunately, it is difficult if not impossible to tell whether the meaning 'character of the futhork' developed before or after the meanings concerning magic, mysteries, and secret whisperings.<sup>10</sup> As far as can be seen, the word 'rune' was spread throughout the Germanic languages in antiquity, and most preserve similar semantics, suggesting that the complete range of meanings may have been coeval with the runic system itself.

Many fanciful explanations have been put forth regarding the mystical associations of the rune names and their place in the runic system. Most represent speculations far in excess of what the available evidence will bear. Ralph W.V. Elliott suggested that the rune names represent a 'mirror of the Germanic world ... which reflects many of the things

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<sup>5</sup>Odenstedt, *Origin*, pp. 16, 18-23, 131.

<sup>6</sup>R. Derolez, 'The Runic System and its Cultural Context,' *Michigan Germanic Studies* 7 (1981), ??-?? (p. 19).

<sup>7</sup>Moltke, *Runes and their Origins*, p. 53.

<sup>8</sup>Pedersen, 'Runernes oprindelse', pp. 51-??.

<sup>9</sup>Odenstedt, *On the Origin*, p. 169.

<sup>10</sup>In Old English, the term *run* was fully absorbed into Christian culture, particularly to mean 'mystery'. Viking Age influence from Scandinavia may have revived any pre-Christian magico-religious connotations, while continental German influence added or strengthened the 'whisper' sense. Both the native Old English sense and the imported Scandinavian senses disappeared from Middle English *roun* and its descendants; see Christine Fell, 'Runes and Semantics', in *Old English Runes and their Continental Background*, ed. by Alfred Bammesberger (Heidelberg: Winter, 1991), 195-229 (pp. 228-229).

feared or held dear among the people who used the runes',<sup>11</sup> but this characteristic seems more a symptom of the process of assigning names which were useful mnemonic aids than it does to reveal a more mystical purpose. It is not clear, however, whether the earliest rune use was of a primarily secular or magico-religious nature—insofar as these concepts may be meaningfully distinguished for pre-Christian Germanic peoples. That the runes were created solely for magico-religious purposes seems unlikely, though at first they may have been available only to members of some élite group. Indeed, it may have been many centuries before runes entered more common use. Many early inscriptions are by and large indecipherable, and therefore often identified as magical by bewildered (or overly imaginative) runologists. Nevertheless, such evidence may indicate that most early rune-users were members of some cultic league whose practices and purposes are now lost to us.

Many scholars have attempted to identify a setting in which runes were initially developed. Erik Moltke suggested Danish merchants, while Otto Höfler suggested bands of élite warriors.<sup>12</sup> Either kind of group would have had opportunities for contact with Roman scripts, as well as the capacity to spread their knowledge swiftly over a wide area. There are some serious problems in locating runic origins among Germanic merchants, however. To begin with, there is a dearth of information concerning the activities of any Germanic merchants, whereas there is ample evidence that Germanic warriors and tribal leaders were acting in Roman service and receiving Roman education as early as the end of the first century BC. Moreover, there are no early runic inscriptions that point with any certainty towards a mercantile origin—either in their subject matter or in the nature of the objects on which they appear. On the other hand, there are numerous early inscriptions on weapons (and garment fastenings), and such inscriptions as can be interpreted with any confidence are fairly simple, apparently concerned with such things as identity, ownership, weapon names, and various obscure (possibly magico-religious) formulae.<sup>13</sup>

Whether or not the rune names were created with mystical associations, it would hardly be surprising if they acquired them shortly later. Jack Goody has argued that the introduction of literacy into a culture could well have 'encouraged the growth of magico-religious activity'.<sup>14</sup> It is, in fact, most common for a culture's script to have some kind of magico-religious function alongside its primary secular, utilitarian function. The runic system is unlikely to have been an exception.

Much has been made of the word *erilaz/erilar* which appears on a number of Older Futhork inscriptions. The word apparently designated some kind of office, perhaps even that of rune-master. Some have suggested a connection with the Eruli tribe (or tribes), implying that they were famous for their runic skills, or that they had invented runes.<sup>15</sup> The inscriptions bearing the word *erilar* date no earlier than c. 300 AD,<sup>16</sup> however, and any such identification based on these inscriptions must be exceedingly tenuous. Moreover, no classical source attributes such literary skills to the Eruli. Nevertheless, the relationship between the words *erilar* and *jarl* (see §X.X.X) is particularly interesting in light of the special runic knowledge accorded to Heimdallr's son Jarl in *Rígsþula*.<sup>17</sup> If the runic system

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<sup>11</sup> Elliott also pointed out that the rune names seem to have retained symbolic meanings long after the Christianization of their users; Elliott, *Runes*, pp. 64-65.

<sup>12</sup> Moltke, pp. 68-69; Höfler, 'Herkunft', pp. 134-156.

<sup>13</sup> Odenstedt, *Origins*, pp. 171-2.

<sup>14</sup> Jack Goody, 'Introduction,' in *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, ed. by Jack Goody (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968), pp. ??-?? (p. 16).

<sup>15</sup> Haugen, *Scandinavian*, p. 122; Elliott, *Runes*, pp. 11-12.

<sup>16</sup> Krause-Jankuhn, pp. 43-44, 64-72, 126-27, 154-72, 263-64 (nos 16, 27, 29, 56, 69, 70, 71, 128), perhaps also pp. 39-40 (no. 14); Arntz and Zeiss, pp. ??-??; K. Düwel and W.-D. Tempel, 'Knochenkämme mit Runeninschriften aus Friesland', *Palaeohistoria*, 14 (1968 [1970]), 353-91.

<sup>17</sup> *Rígsþula*, in Neckel-Kuhn, pp. 280-87 (pp. 285-286).

was created or functioning within an aristocratic setting, a connection between the terms for an aristocratic office and a rune-master would not be too surprising.

There is a respectable body of evidence suggesting that the Germanic *comitatus* could have something of the nature of a religious warrior-cult.<sup>18</sup> The possible existence of such warrior-cult groups is evidenced by contemporary observers, plastic representations, later literary sources, and of course comparable institutions in other cultures.<sup>19</sup> It is, however, important to remember that despite magico-religious attributes, such cults probably remained primarily martial in nature, composed as they were of a chieftain and his warrior retinue. The *comitatus*'s cultic nature might have been comparable to the cultic nature of modern British military regiments, steeped in their own traditions—both religious and quasi-religious—of dress, lore, superstition, and ceremony.<sup>20</sup> Amongst the early Germanic peoples, groups such as cultic leagues or *comitatus* seem to have had an important influence on everyday life in the areas in which they operated, and there may have been much cross-over between religious functions and socio-economic functions.<sup>21</sup> This study has suggested that cultic functions may have played a leading role in the establishment of early political and commercial centres in southern Scandinavia.<sup>22</sup>

### 3.0 NON-RUNIC BARBARIAN WRITING

#### 3.1 WRITING AMONG THE EARLY CELTS

In Byzantine-influenced eastern Europe during later centuries it seems to have been common practice to invent a new script in which to write a newly literate language. The Armenian and Georgian alphabets (created in the fifth century AD) and the Glagolitic alphabet (created in the ninth century AD) are examples of this approach. They were devised by Christian clergy for the purpose of rendering religious works into their respective vernaculars. As such, they make poor comparisons with the runic system, invented in the second century AD apparently by non-Christians for purposes that, although mysterious, do not seem to have included the translation or composition of Christian religious literature. The use of runes might better be compared with the practices of the early Celts, who began minting coins with vernacular legends in the second century BC.<sup>23</sup> Altogether, there are between five and six hundred known Celtic coin legends, the fragmentary nature of the evidence making an exact count difficult. Native Celtic coinage and coin legends were made until the mid-first century AD—until the time of the Meldorf inscription, and little more than a century before the Øvre Stabu inscription—ceasing with

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<sup>18</sup> Discussion of the warrior-cult in Germanic society can be found in Lily Weiser, *Altgermanische Jünglingsweihen und Männerbünde: ein Beitrag zur deutschen und nordischen Altertums- und Volkskunde*, Bausteine zur Volkskunde und Religionswissenschaft, 1 (Brühl: Konkordia, 1927); Otto Höfler, *Kultische Geheimbünde der Germanen* (Frankfurt am Main: Diesterweg, 1934-); de Vries, *Religionsgeschichte*, 1, 454-55, 499-502; Heinrich Beck, 'Einige vordelzeitliche Bilddenkmäler und die literarische Überlieferung,' *Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften, Sitzungsberichte, philosophisch-historische Klasse*, 6 (1964), 1-50.

<sup>19</sup> A. Margaret Arendt, 'The Heroic Pattern: Old Germanic Helmets, *Beowulf* and *Grettis saga*,' in *Old Norse Literature and Mythology: A Symposium*, ed. by Edgar C. Polomé (Austin: University of Texas, 1969), pp. ??-?? (p. 131).

<sup>20</sup> Keegan, *Warfare*, pp. xiv-xvi, 14-5.

<sup>21</sup> Rolf Hachmann, *Die Germanen* (Genf: Nagel, 1971), p. 106.

<sup>22</sup> See §X.X.X.

<sup>23</sup> Celtic numismatics is a sprawling and somewhat daunting discipline to the non-specialist. For the purposes of this study, however, it suffices to use the data assembled in a overview of the field, such as D.F. Allen, *The Coins of the Ancient Celts*, ed. by Daphne Nash (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1980); and Daphne Nash, *Coinage in the Celtic World* (London: Seaby, 1987).

the Roman domination of the Celtic world.<sup>24</sup> It seems fair to say that Celtic moneyers inscribed their legends in the most familiar local script, and there seems to have been virtually no interest in a pan-Celtic standard, let alone a distinctive Celtic script.<sup>25</sup>

Against this background it seems strange that the Germanic peoples did not adopt Roman script, either as it was or with slight modifications for their use. To be sure, there is no evidence that the Germanic peoples minted any coins until much later. Nevertheless, it would seem natural for the Germanic peoples to have adopted the Roman alphabet for their epigraphic purposes. Indeed, if inscriptions like the Meldorf fibula are indeed non-runic, perhaps they represent experiments in the adoption of Roman script.

### 3.2 WRITING AMONG THE GOTHIS

The Gothic alphabet, thought to have been created by bishop Wulfila in the fourth century AD (at least three hundred years after the development of the runic system), while showing some innovations of its own, is substantially a borrowing of Greek script. This is hardly surprising given that its creator (Wulfila or otherwise) was almost certainly operating within the Byzantine Christian sphere and devised Gothic script specifically in order to translate Christian religious literature. Similar situations created the Armenian and Glagolitic alphabets, but they have nothing like the close connection to Greek script that Gothic alphabet has. The order of the characters in the Gothic alphabet follows that of the Greek closely, and as many as nineteen of the Gothic alphabet's twenty-seven characters seem to have been taken directly from Greek, while a further five may suggest Latin influence. Many scholars have suggested that some of the remaining characters have runic affinities, but this cannot be convincingly demonstrated.<sup>26</sup> Essentially, the Gothic alphabet is exactly what we might expect to have been used by a Germanic-speaking community interested in putting writing to practical purposes. Like the scripts of the earlier Celtic coin legends, the Gothic alphabet is largely an adaptation of a pre-existing local script with a few minor alterations to suit the peculiarities of the Gothic language (or the whims of its scribes).<sup>27</sup>

In contrast, while it is clear that the runic characters were modelled on one or more Mediterranean alphabets, as yet a clear derivation from one or another of them has not been demonstrated. Perhaps significantly, the runic system does not preserve the character-ordering system that Mediterranean writing systems like Greek and Latin inherited from their ancient Semitic antecedents (i.e. *alpha*, *beta*, etc.). Instead the runic system employed its own separate character-ordering which bears no obvious resemblance to the Mediterranean orders. Also, while Greek alphabets provided abstract names for their letters as mnemonic aids, the Germanic runes received names which were both mnemonic aids and were themselves meaningful words—like the Semitic writing systems which stood behind Greek and Latin. The Germanic rune names do not seem to bear any clear relation to Greek (or Semitic) letter names,<sup>28</sup> and are of mysterious origin—on the other hand they

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<sup>24</sup> Allen, *Coins*, pp. 3, 109; Nash, *Coinage*, p. 142.

<sup>25</sup> Joseph F. Eska and D. Ellis Evans, 'Continental Celtic', in *The Celtic Languages*, ed. by Martin J. Ball with James Fife (London; New York: Routledge, 1993) 26-63 (pp. 27-29); Allen, *Coins*, pp. 109-15, 117-9; Nash, *Coinage*, pp. 18, 36; *Bellum Gallicum*, pp. ??-?? (Book 6, Chapters 14); *Strabo* 4.1.5.

<sup>26</sup> The most common suggestion is that Gothic  $\psi$  (*β*) was influenced by the runic character  $\beta$ , but even  $\psi$  could be derived from a form of the Greek letter *theta*. See William Bennett, *An Introduction to the Gothic Language* (New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1980), pp. 123-6.

<sup>27</sup> In this sense, the Gothic alphabet might also be compared with the Cyrillic alphabet, created in the ninth century AD and modelled on Greek uncial script.

<sup>28</sup> It might be noted that the names of the first characters of both the runic and Semitic character sets refer to cattle: runic *\*fehu* ('cattle') and Semitic *ʾelep* ('ox'). No other similar correspondances between the two systems appear to exist, so this similarity is most likely a coincidence.

bear a remarkable resemblance to the names of the letters in the Gothic alphabet.<sup>29</sup> The relationship between the runic and Gothic character names seems genuine, although the nature of their relationship is more difficult to determine. If the Gothic alphabet originated before the runic system (which seems unlikely), the rune names conceivably could stem from those of the Gothic letters. On the other hand, if the Gothic alphabet was indeed a third century AD creation, as commonly supposed, then its letter names probably stem from earlier rune names. Likewise, as the Gothic letter names are not preserved earlier than the eighth century AD, they could be an antiquarian creation of that period. In none of these cases, however, would the rune names appear to be anything other than native Germanic inventions.

#### 4.0 RUNES AS A CONSCIOUSLY NON-ROMAN SCRIPT

‘One day,’ wrote Erik Moltke, ‘a stroke of providential luck will lead us to discover a RIA bill of lading inscribed on wood—a find to match that archaeological explosion in Bergen which sent a shower of everyday runes over an astonished world—cargo, lists, merchant’s tags, love letters, magic spells, and ordinary, commonplace messages. It must have been the same in the infancy of the runes’.<sup>30</sup>

Yet if Germanic merchants needed a script for commercial purposes—or if the élite had needed a script in which to conduct diplomacy—they might have simply adopted the most familiar foreign script as the Celts had done in earlier centuries. With only minor modifications the Roman script would have served Germanic languages about as well as the runes for all practical purposes—it does so quite adequately today. Hyper-pragmatic runic origin theories, such as Moltke’s, seem to be largely the product of an over-critical backlash against the many fanciful theories that explained runes as having been devised with primarily magical functions in mind. Such Romanticism was rightly dismissed, as the evidence does not support it, but theories such as Moltke’s represent speculations scarcely better supported. There seems to have been no reason for runes to be created under the conditions Moltke described and, though a Bergen-style find from the RIA would be a most welcome prospect, the surviving inscriptions do not fit a pattern of mercantile use comfortably. Though it is clear that the extant record is incomplete in the extreme and that we cannot know how representative our sample is, it may not be wise to postulate imaginary categories of rune use from the first few centuries AD on the basis of rune use a millennium later in a radically different society.

Neither extremely imaginative nor extremely pragmatic theories of runic origins are wholly satisfactory. A somewhat simpler possibility that does not bend the evidence quite as badly was put forward by Anders Bæksted. He suggested that the runic system was created without a practical application necessarily in mind, as a imitative, perhaps somewhat playful, derivative of Roman script.<sup>31</sup> Essentially, Bæksted argued that runes were superfluous within Germanic culture, that they existed primarily so that their users could feel they owned one of the hallmarks of civilisation—a system of writing—that they knew from the Roman world.

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<sup>29</sup>Names for the runes of the Anglo-Saxon *futhorc* and Scandinavian younger *futhork* are preserved in various manuscripts dating from between the eighth and fifteenth centuries AD, but the congruences between them suggest an early common origin; Elliott, *Runes*, pp. 60-64. The names of the Gothic characters are preserved in a tenth-century manuscript, perhaps copied from an eighth-century original; see R. Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta: The English Tradition* (Brugge: De Tempel, 1954), pp. 52-??.

<sup>30</sup>Moltke, *Runes*, p. 69.

<sup>31</sup>Anders Bæksted, *Målruner og troldruner: Runemagiske Studier* (Copenhagen: Gyldendal, 1952), p. 134-40; Odenstedt, *Origins*, p. 171.

At det [runekomplekset] skete i form af et hjemmegjort alfabet, ikke simpelt hen ved de latinske bokstaver, kan muligvis find sin forklaring i en ubevidst uvilje hos runeskaberen mod herrefolkets kultur, et ønske om germansk selvstændighed.<sup>32</sup>

It may be too specific to credit the creator(s) of runic system with a consciously ‘Germanic’ product, as opposed to simply ‘non-Roman’, but thence also perhaps the desire to include distinctly native elements within the runic system, such as the characters’ names and sequence. It is quite plausible that the Germanic élite of the ERIA should have had such desires. Members of this group had ample exposure to classical culture (some were educated in Rome) but often found themselves in a state of opposition to Rome and might have wished to express a non-Roman identity. Clearly, the runes were not devised in a society that had an general aversion to things Roman, as the numerous Roman prestige goods found in Scandinavia indicate. In this context a Scandinavian origin for the runic system would take on an added element of interest. Scandinavia was far from any direct Roman pressures, and even a Roman client king in southern Scandinavia (see §2.X.X), might have enjoyed the conceit of accepting ‘tribute’ from the Romans whilst dabbling in non-Roman, indigenous expressions inspired by Roman models, such as rune use. Such a character would strongly recall Maroboduus, or even Arminius.<sup>33</sup> An élite faction opposing a pro-Roman client king might have had an equally strong motive to express a non-Roman identity.

Knowledge and display of the runic system might have served as a badge of non-Roman identity amongst the Germanic élite. It is interesting to note that runic use eventually spread more widely (but, importantly, not universally) within the Germanic world but was not adopted by any neighbouring non-Germanic groups.<sup>34</sup> Though it would be rash to make any firm statements about the origins of the runic system, the circumstances of its creation insofar as we understand them may demonstrate early evidence of cultural resistance, apparently centred in southern Scandinavia, to ideological affiliation with the Roman world.

## 5.0 SCANDINAVIAN IDENTITY AND THE RUNIC SYSTEM

Axboe has argued that, in the RIA, Roman influences had a profound impact on ‘the conceptual and cognitive world of the Scandinavians’ and that these influences ‘cannot be understood just as imports of actual objects, but ... seem to reveal a knowledge of the ideas which the Romans attached to them’.<sup>35</sup> It is commonly recognised that this long exposure to Roman goods and ideas led to experiments in imitation and synthesis, and eventually led to the creation of new native forms of expression. The first distinctly ‘Germanic’ art style, Salin’s Style I, seems to have developed from the reinterpretation of Mediterranean

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<sup>32</sup> Bæksted, *Målruner*, p. ???.

<sup>33</sup> See §2.2.2.

<sup>34</sup> One abortive exception might have been the so-called ‘alphabet of Nennius’ [...]; see Derolez, *Runica*, pp. ???-??. The so-called ‘Turkish runes’ show no obvious relationship to the Germanic runes.

<sup>35</sup> Axboe, ‘Danish Kings’, p. 225. There has been much work concerning the influence of Latin on WG dialects and Gothic, particularly as revealed in loan-words associated with warfare and commerce, as well as in the adoption of the seven-day week and planetary day-names; see especially recent discussion Green, *Language*, pp. ??-??, ??-??, ??-??. Examples such as ON *eyrir*, borrowed from Latin *aureus*, suggests that similar processes were at work in RIA Scandinavia, but the possibility of classical influences on NG dialects—or, perhaps more properly, the vocabulary of Scandinavian dialects of NwG—is seldom considered. This is partially due to a dearth of Scandinavian linguistic evidence pre-dating the medieval period, but perhaps also stems from the Romantic notion that Scandinavia represented a *Germania Germanissima*, a ‘Germanic time-capsule’ where classical and Christian impulses did not penetrate until the end of the Viking Age. Unfortunately, restrictions on space in the current study prevent the presentation of wider discussion of these issues.

elements within a native context in late-fifth-century south-western Scandinavia.<sup>36</sup> Likewise, the gold bracteates, primarily associated with EGIA Scandinavia but spreading more widely through the Germanic world, developed from such a reinterpretation of Roman imperial gold coins and medallions.<sup>37</sup> The bracteates, especially, have been associated with the interests of the Scandinavian élite and a cult of Óðinn/Woden.<sup>38</sup>

The bracteates also demonstrate that expressions of Roman influence in Scandinavia developed in a different form than they did in the Frankish world. The Frankish king Theodebert (533-547/8), who seems to have quite consciously adopted a Romanizing image,<sup>39</sup> was the first Germanic king of any people to proclaim his name and titles on gold coins in the manner of Roman and Byzantine emperors. One coin-type bore the legend *Victoria Augustorum* and featured an image of the king bearing a palm of victory in one hand and a miniature Victory in the other while trampling a barbarian beneath him, a design combining motifs from Romano-Byzantine and Italian Ostrogothic imagery.<sup>40</sup> This boldness shocked Procopius, who thought such effrontery would prevent even barbarians from daring to use such coinage in commerce.<sup>41</sup> One doubts that it did, but clearly Theodebert's coinage represented an ideology different from that expressed in the Scandinavian gold bracteates, which developed rapidly away from their Roman models.

If the creation of the runic system was a deliberate creative reinterpretation of classical writing systems, it would anticipate by several centuries similar motives in the development of gold bracteates and Style I. The appearance and spread of the gold bracteates and Style I are, however, roughly contemporaneous with the spread of the runic system beyond Scandinavia. Dating runic inscriptions is fraught with difficulties, and even suggesting a date for a given inscription that might be correct to within a century is no easy task. Even so, the general pattern of datings assigned to early runic inscriptions is likely to be broadly correct. Moreover, though most of the known early inscriptions are on highly portable objects, the overall pattern of finds makes it difficult to suggest plausible origins at any great distance from the find spots. Thus, a simple glance at the approximate dates assigned to Older Futhork runic finds from various locations suggests that for the first two centuries of the runic system's existence its use was almost entirely the provenance of Scandinavians (and, judging from a handful of finds in eastern Europe, to a lesser extent the Goths). The spread of runic use after c. 400 then represents a remarkable transformation.<sup>42</sup> Continental finds cluster most strongly around the confluence of the Rhine and Main, as well as around the headwaters of the Rhine and Danube, and across the North Sea in the Germanic territories of Britain.

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<sup>36</sup> Hasselhoff 1981, p. 174; Peter Anker and Aron Andersson, *The Art of Scandinavia*, trans. by Vivienne Menkes, 2 vols (London: Hamlyn, 1970), pp. 41-42; Salin 1904, p. 355.

<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Before his ascension Theodebert had been responsible for defeating the raid led by Scandinavian war-leader Hygelac sometime between 511 and 533; *HF*, p. 99 (Book 3, Chapter 3); *Liber Historiae Francorum*, in *Fredegarii et aliorum Chronica, Vitae sanctorum*, ed. by Bruno Krusch, MGH: SRM, 2 (Hannover, Hahn, 1888), pp. 215-328 (p. 274) (Chapter 19). Theodebert also claimed dominion over peoples called Eucii (Jutes?) and Norsavi, who might have been intended to represent Scandinavian groups; *Epistolae Austrasicae* 20, ed. W Gundlach, MGH, *Ep.* III, pp. 438-9; Gregory of Tours, *Decem Libri Historiarum*, ed. by B. Krusch and W. Levison, MGH, *SRM* (Hannover/Leipzig, 1885-1951) III, 7 (pp. 103-5).

<sup>40</sup> Collins, 'Theodebert', p. 29. Collins suggests many of Theodebert's coins may have been issued as propoganda connected with his Italian aspirations

<sup>41</sup> Procopius, *Wars*, VII xxxiii.5-6, in *Procopius* 1-5, ed. by H.B. Dewing (London: 1919-28), pp. IV, 438.

<sup>42</sup> See dates and locations in Krause-Jankuhn, for example. As for the Gothic finds, they may further attest to close cultural and economic contacts between Scandinavia and the Gothic territories (and thus also the Roman Empire) in southern and eastern Europe during the RIA.

During the EGIA, rune use was largely dominated by their employment on the bracteates, and so it is not surprising that non-Scandinavian bracteate finds often appear in roughly the same regions as non-Scandinavian rune finds. This is not because there is complete overlap between these two find groups; rather it seems that in regions which used runes the inhabitants also owned bracteates. As runes and bracteates seem likely to have been strongly associated with Scandinavia (where they appear to have originated), it may well be that use of runes and bracteates by non-Scandinavians was intended to express an affiliation with Scandinavian culture and society. This is not a very radical suggestion, as similar fashions for limited adoption of foreign cultural elements are extremely common throughout history in many societies. Scandinavians themselves seem to have been keen to display prestigious Roman goods in earlier centuries, and it should come as no surprise if some groups wished to associate themselves with the economically powerful society of Scandinavia during the EGIA. Runes, after all, would have remained a largely 'pointless' script, as it is as difficult to come up with a reason explain their continued and spread to non-Scandinavian areas as it is to explain their origins in the first place. That runes had some kind of cultural or ideological significance may be the simplest solution. Venantius Fortunatus' oft-quoted reference to runes certainly associates them with barbarians, though he does not provide a more specific identification:

barbara fraxineis pingatur rhuna tabellis  
quodque papyrus agit virgula plana valet.<sup>43</sup>

As for the runic bracteates, they have attracted both much excitement and much despair over their usually unintelligible inscriptions. Many inscriptions include characters so mangled that they cannot be readily identified, and even more reveal jumbles of characters which may or may not have meant something to someone once, but certainly no longer do. Moltke suggested such inscriptions represent work by goldsmiths of imperfect rune-literacy which could be sold to customers of even less perfect rune literacy.<sup>44</sup> Some kind of situation of this sort is eminently plausible, and would be even more so for people outside of Scandinavia. Runes, within Scandinavia or without, might have been seen as a badge of Scandinavian affiliation—perhaps like bracteates themselves—so that displaying a text which could be meaningfully interpreted might not have been nearly so important as displaying a text which looked appropriately runic. A comparable practice might be found in modern Japan, where in recent decades it has often been fashionable to display samples of 'English' text in Roman characters that convey no meaning beyond their appearance and do not necessarily even parse in English.

In a study of the evolution of individual runic characters, Bengt Odenstedt argues that the evidence indeed points to the continental and English adoption of runes from Scandinavia 'perhaps in the fourth century', and moreover that continental contacts with the continuing Scandinavian runic tradition then ceased, indicated by separate further developments in the characters from the two regions.<sup>45</sup> In fact, Odenstedt noted that the continental rune shapes had a fairly conservative later history, in comparison with Scandinavian rune shapes, suggesting a continental fossilisation of the runic tradition borrowed from Scandinavia. In contrast, he suggested that runic development in Britain was 'to some extent' influenced by later (after c. 450) Scandinavian developments, perhaps reflecting continued contacts between Germanic Britain and Germanic Scandinavia. The runic system also seems to have been subject to more innovations in England than on the continent.

The considerable wealth concentrated in southern Scandinavia in the EGIA may have given the region considerable prestige in the Germanic world, perhaps explaining such

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<sup>43</sup> Venantius Fortunatus, *Ad Flavum*, in *Venanti Honori Clementiani Fortunati presbyteri italici opera poetica*, ed. by Fridericus Leo, MGH: AA, 4 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1881), pp. 172-73.

<sup>44</sup> Moltke, *Runes*, pp. 108-21.

<sup>45</sup> Odenstedt, *Origin*, pp. 129-43.

phenomena as Jordanes' claim for Gothic origins in Scandinavia (when modern archaeology has yet to turn up evidence supporting this claim). Cultural artefacts distinctly associated with Scandinavia—the runic system, the bracteates, and Style I—would have provided a means for people outside Scandinavia to express a cultural affiliation with that sphere. A desire to do so would arise from the same motives that had lead Germanic peoples to adopt Roman cultural artefacts: an association with a particular kind of wealth, power, and prestige. It is in such processes that the emergence of a Scandinavian identity and a Scandinavian cultural pole in western Europe may be glimpsed.

In the region of modern Denmark, bracteate runes outnumber any other sort from EGIA, and runes effectively seem to disappear from Jutland and the Danish islands with the bracteates (along with most other prestige goods in the LGIA). Though runic finds continue from LGIA Sweden and Norway, they scarcely match non-Scandinavian runic finds during the same period. Moltke drew attention to four seventh-century inscriptions on stones in the sometimes Danish province of Blekinge,<sup>46</sup> but given the fact that inscriptions on stones first appeared in Sweden and Norway *c.* 300 and continued through the Viking Age makes these examples underscore the dearth of runic material from Jutland and the Danish islands during the LGIA. Two possibilities suggest themselves: 1) runic inscriptions from LGIA Jutland and the Danish islands during the LGIA were made predominantly on perishable materials and are lost, or 2) that runic use sharply declined in Jutland and the Danish islands during the LGIA. Both possibilities, however, would fit within the pattern established by the dearth of prestige goods or other monuments associated with the élite from southern Scandinavia in the LGIA. It may be that this is due to a highly stable society uninterested in such displays, but arguments against this view are presented in §6.X.X. It is only with the onset of the Viking Age that major runological activity (as well as further obvious signs of an active élite) reappears in southern Scandinavia.

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<sup>46</sup> Moltke, *Runes*, pp. 137-47.