Runa ættir: generationes notularum

by Niels Haastrup

The origin of runes is a dangerous problem. The most recent and very inspiring treatment of this subject is the paper by Professor Kabell in Norsk Tidsskrift for Sprogvidenskap, XXI (1968), 94 ff., with the appropriate title “Periculum runicum”.

When recalling the comments in reference books on earlier attempts at solving the mystery of runes, it may be assumed that this work will also receive severe criticism. But that we will leave to runologists, and instead draw up a medieval parallel to support the theory of a graphic-genetic explanation for the division of runes into sets known as ættir. A medieval parallel which had led me to viewpoints reminiscent in many respects to those upheld by Kabell.

Divisions of letters occur in the Middle Ages that are based neither on the alphabet nor on phonetic values but on graphic-genetic grounds, viz. on generations of letters. They are found in the few surviving and sparsely recorded writing books handed down from the Middle Ages. Bernhard Bischoff and Carl Wehmer have taken a particular interest in them. The three most important sources are the following:

1. *Modus scribendi* from Stift Melk, which Bischoff dates to c. 1440 and considers to be Austrian.¹
2. *Forma discendi* by Hugo Spechtshart von Reutlingen († c. 1360). About one hundred verses at the end of this long didactic poem work through the script.²
3. A writing book from Prague, now lost, but published by H. Palm who dated it to the fifteenth century.³

³ Published in *Anzeiger für Kunde der deutschen Vorzeit*, Neue Folge XII (1865), app. 49 f. and 89 f. with corrections col. 455–56.

Mediaeval Scandinavia, I (1968), 82–84.
Underlying the themes of all three books, with varying degrees of clarity, is the theory of *litterae originales* from which other letters can be derived. It is most plainly set down in the theoretical section of the Melk Book's prose passage, page 26, which corresponds to the metrical verses 101–109. On page 26 in the edition we read:

"Prima littera origenalis est α et habet tria puncta. Primus est iste et formatur sic Ων et hoc ad simplex ut sic α α. Secundus punctus est semirotundus et formatur sic θ θ. De primo puncto semirotundo concluso nulla littera potest formari preter solum Σ. De secundo vero puncto semirotundo formantur iste sequentes litterae ut sic θ θ θ θ θ, et iste modus potest scribi per modum fractum ut sic τ ε θ θ θ θ θ.

B est secunda littera origenalis et habet tria puncta sive punctus. Primus formatur sic Γ, secundus formatur sic ι, tercius formatur ut ι reversum ut sic ι ι. De qua formantur iste litterae sequentes ι ι ι ι, cum ipsorum differenciis.

Tercia littera origenalis est Λ et formatur sic ι. De qua formantur iste sequentes litterae videlicet m / n / u ι ι. Quarta littera origenalis est ι et formantur iste litterae a tractu inferiori ultimo longo et scribatur sic ι ι ι ι ι ι ι ι ι ι ι ι ι ι ι ι ι.

Krumph gen krumph, slecht gen slecht schreib also, so tust du im recht.

Sed non in omnibus notulis tenet veritatem."

It is clear that the choice fell on precisely these letters as "origenales" because of their position in the alphabet. The choice of q is somewhat mystifying, but the choice of b for l and a for c is in accordance with the compulsory alphabetical sequence. Only the choice of i is immediately obvious. Better systems were therefore chosen by later masters – the renowned Neudörrfer for example.\(^4\) Professor Bischoff assumes that this theory was current during the Middle Ages, and presents indicia to suggest that it can be traced back to the eighth century in any event. In his introduction, page 6, to the Melk Book he writes: "Eine solche Vergleichung der Buchstaben war bestimmend für die Reihenfolge im Unterricht, der in Mittelalter stets, so weit wir es beobachten können, auf der genetischen Methode fußte". Bischoff refers here to his paper in the *Festschrift in honour of Ed. K. Rand*,\(^5\) page 12, in which he endeavours to follow this line of thought back in time: "Ein Anzeichen dafür, daß so vorgegangen wurde, ist


meines Erachtens in den häufigen Vorkommen einiger Zeilen zu sehen, die mit wenigen und relativ einfachen Zeichen gebildet sind und auffälligerweise alle mit *omnis* beginnen." After which are given a long series of these essays in penmanship with source references, and particulars of the types of script and their date. For example, Psalm 10.5 (i.e. 9B. 5): *Omnium inimicorum suorum (dominabitur)*, the earliest examples of which are taken from eighth century Irish and Anglo-Saxon manuscripts. As Bischoff does not explicitly state whether he has attempted to pursue these thoughts still further back in time, I have tried to find examples from late antiquity, but unfortunately without success.

If we venture the thought that a similar pedagogical principle of writing was adopted in antiquity, when runes originated, we would obviously not expect to find exactly the same original letters then, as those considered suitable in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. For although the alphabet was in principle the same, the script type differed and was based on other distinctive features. Neither should we arbitrarily dismiss the thought on the grounds that master scribes employed four generations of letters as opposed to the three *ættir* of the runic writers.

The crucial evidence would be to find this principle practised not only in runic and Ogham writing but also in ordinary alphabetic scripts. Yet, as already mentioned, nothing could be found in general reference books to show whether this principle existed in antiquity. But proof of antique schooling may one day come to light in support of Kabell’s theory – and perhaps even enable the archetypes of the runes to be determined more closely.7

*University of Copenhagen*

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