LANGUAGE CONTACT
Substratum, Superstratum, Adstratum in Germanic Languages

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The argument of this work is that ‘runic writing in England underwent a radical change in the seventh century AD’ (p. 11). As many readers of this journal probably know, runic writing in England developed from a Continental Germanic tradition consisting of an alphabet - called Futhorc - of twenty-four runes, which had originated probably in the first century AD. This rune row is generally transcribed as: fuparkgw:hnijipzs:tbemlûdo. Because of the linguistic changes on the British Isles that eventually would lead to Old English, the sound values of some of these runes were changed and the number of runes was increased to make a Futhorc of twenty-eight characters. They are generally rendered as fuporcgw:hnijipxs: tbemlûdæ aayœa. This development took place during the 5th, 6th and 7th centuries, i.e. during the first two and a half centuries or so after the Angles, Jutes and Saxons had settled in England.

The first half of the book is taken up by an introduction (ch. 1: 11-14), a short survey of the history of the runes (ch. 2, ‘From bags to books: a brief history of runes’: 15-39), and a detailed description of the sixteen finds that make up the corpus of early Anglo-Saxon runic inscriptions, i.e. those that were written between the 5th
and the 7th centuries (ch. 3, ‘Undley and after: the early Anglo-Saxon inscriptions’: 40-75).¹

In the second half of the book, the main issue, i.e. the runic reform around 700 AD, is taken up again (ch. 4, ‘Recasting the runes: the case for reform’ [76-100]). Whereas the early Anglo-Saxon inscriptions were given much attention in the first part of the book, Parsons merely points out the number of inscriptions that were made in England during the period between 700 and 900 AD. Their total is much larger than the sixteen of the early corpus, viz. thirty-three inscriptions on stones, some twenty-five to thirty on ‘portable objects’, hundreds on coins (over 60 types), and some 88 manuscripts with runes in them, either complete alphabets (38) or incidental runes (‘nearly 50’). Obviously, treating all of these roughly 200 runic inscriptions (counting only the types in the case of the coins) in as detailed a way as the early inscriptions would result in a work of several hundred pages. Still, it is odd that these later inscriptions are hardly treated in any detail at all, save the exceptional Frank’s Casket (pp. 98-100), since these new inscriptions are equally important, if not more, to the main argument of the book than the earlier ones. It would therefore have been more fortunate if Parsons had given a little less attention to the early inscriptions, and had left some room for the later ones.

The main argument of the book in more detail is as follows: in the period between 650-700 AD a conscious reform of the runic alphabet took place, which consisted of the elimination of a number of variant forms, thus creating a more or less uniform Futhark. The new forms are: double-barred \( \text{h} \) instead of the single-barred form, \( \text{h} \) k instead of the variant forms \( \text{h} \) and \( \text{h} \) and \( \text{h} \) s instead of \( \text{h} \) or \( \text{h} \). Here, however, a new variant form arose, \( \text{v} \), probably influenced by the so-called ‘long s’ of the Roman alphabet. The reform can only be proposed on the basis of the three runes \( \text{h} \), \( \text{k} \), and \( \text{s} \), because instances of these runes are also found in the early corpus, but more runes than these three show either consistent and/or new forms: \( \text{g} \) is always \( \text{x} \), and not \( \text{f} \) or \( \text{f} \), forms that are found in inscriptions in the elder Futhark on the Continent and in Scandinavia. The old *algiz-rune, \( \text{y} \) z or \( \text{r} \), which had become obsolete, came to be used for x, e.g. in the Christ-monogram xps and in the title rex ‘king’ on coins.

A problematic rune is j, which is either \( \text{f} \) or \( \text{f} \), (but never the older forms \( \text{g} \) or \( \text{g} \) of two facing squares). It is problematic for three reasons. Firstly, because Parsons

assumes a reform by means of which a uniform Futhorc was created, with no significantly variant forms (I will come back to this later). Secondly, because it has long been assumed that both variants belonged to different subtraditions in Anglo-Saxon runic writing: variant Þ was said to occur only in manuscripts, whereas þ was said to do so only in epigraphical texts. Parsons, in my view convincingly, argues that there were no two traditions, and that a dividing line between manuscript-runes and inscription-runes cannot be drawn. A key-role in this argument is played by the so-called Brandon pin, dating from the 8th or 9th century (p. 118). It has the first sixteen runes of the Futhorc scratched on its flattened head, and shows Æ for j. Moreover, þ also occurs, in the position of the g-rune. Because /g/ was often palatalised to /j/ in Old English (and Old Frisian), it has been argued that we are in fact dealing with a variant form of g, which conveniently took over the old j, which was rather awkward because of its deviant shape. Parsons then, is right to question whether þ was regarded in England as j-rune at all (p. 125), but he fails to explain its existence in the reformed rune row. Actually, he makes no decision on this point, saying that þ ‘may conceivably have been maintained as an additional rune outside the standard futhorc’ (p. 125). Where Parsons’ entire argument for the reform around 700 AD is based on a detailed analysis of rune forms, such an ad-hoc alternative is disappointing.

Parsons also qualifies a few variant forms as insignificant. They are the d-rune in which the arms of the cross in the middle do not reach the extreme ends of the staves on both sides, and a variant of the b-rune which leaves some room on the main stave between the two bellies. Parsons omits to mention, however, the two existing variants of the r-rune, i.e. one in which the ‘tail’ of the rune does touch the main stave (like the Roman capital) and another in which this is not the case (making it susceptible of being confused with u). There is also at least one instance of a variant y-rune, which developed from the u-rune: the form on the Thames scramasax (a single-edged short sword with the Futhorc and the name beagnop inlaid with gold) has a little cross at the baseline instead of a single short stave.

Parsons offers a very interesting explanation for the forces behind the reform. He suspects that runic writing was adopted by the clergy in the course of the 7th century, and that they were responsible for the reform and the subsequent proliferation of runic writing in the centuries that followed. A second possibility given by Parsons is that certain craftsmen, most likely moneyers, were responsible for the reform. Parsons does not pursue this latter option very enthusiastically throughout the work. Because not all arguments in favour of the former option are listed systematically, I will summarize them here: 1) the fact that runes are also found extensively in manuscripts and that there is no dividing line between the runes in the manuscripts and the runes in the inscriptions, 2) the correspondence between the distribution of runic inscriptions and Roman inscriptions (Fig. 16 on p. 111), 3) the

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occurrence of inscriptions with a combination of Roman and runic characters, 4) the variant (r') of the s-rune which probably developed from Roman-script 's'.

The concluding chapter, 'Runic writing in England: a reassessment' (pp. 101-130), is rather odd. The information it contains is not well linked with the preceding part of the book, and this is to be deplored, because it offers some interesting insights. In section 5.1, the author presents a distribution map of the early inscriptions, identifying two main areas, viz. East Anglia and Kent (p. 105). Because of their distinctive connections with the Continent they probably indicate the two routes by which the runes entered England, i.e. from Schleswig-Holstein to Anglia and from the Rhineland and/or Frisia to Kent. This paragraph might better have been inserted between chapters 2 and 3, and the information it contains should certainly have been considered in the discussion of the early inscriptions.

The case for the reform is also taken up again in this chapter (5.2), and further arguments are presented, such as a distribution map of later runic inscriptions and Roman-script inscriptions, showing much overlapping. The author also shows that there are no certain traces of a continuation of the local tradition after the reform of 700 AD (p. 114-119). This conclusion is telling, because it implies that the native tradition died out.

Parsons' book presents important new finds. Unfortunately, the reader has to cull his information from the various sections of the book, whereas they could have been combined to make one strong argument. Especially the treatment of the early corpus in chapter 3 and the discussion of the distribution of the inscriptions in chapter 5.1 should have been combined. Taken together, the work raises some interesting problems and provides new insights, which might even have been taken a little further. I particularly find the role of the monasteries, the proliferation of writing, and the way in which runes were incorporated into the Christian culture (i.e. writing system) very interesting. Why did the runes disappear so suddenly on the Continent, almost immediately after the Christianisation of the Germanic peoples there, and why were they adopted by the Anglo-Saxon monastics? Is there a relation between the 'pagan' character of the runic script on the one hand, and the obsession of the Anglo-Saxon monks with exotic alphabets on the other, as illustrated by the runic manuscripts, which often contain other 'mysterious' or 'curious' forms of writing? I think it is telling, as Parsons himself hints at, that some runes were incorporated to write in the vernacular, such as p and w, whereas this was not done on the Continent (apart from Gothic).

The issues addressed in this book require a multi-disciplined approach, combining runological and archaeological insights, but also cultural-historical and anthropological ones. Research remains to be done on the foundations of monasteries and the provenance of runic manuscripts, which might make it possible for us to connect the runic reform with specific monastic centers. Runology should take care not to stay confined to inscriptions and archaeology. On the whole, however, Parsons' book is stimulating. It presents new insights and inspires the reader to take the questions he poses even a step further. I particularly subscribe to the notion that runic writing developed in waves of variation and reform, which means that it was in a constant
flux. Parsons receives the credits of being one of the first runologists to recognise this, and I hope he will develop his insights in future studies.

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