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The **s**-rune in the Viking age and after

1. Introductory

In the 16-rune (“normal”) futhark **s** occupies an exceptional place since it is the only rune that does not — normally — have a full-length mainstaff. This fact is occasionally mentioned by writers on runology but it does not seem to have been more thoroughly discussed. Quite recently Per Stille (1999, 21) drew attention to the exceptional form of the **s**-rune and suggested the awkwardness involved by the unusual shape of this rune when he says that the **s** *may* (my italics) be looked upon as consisting of three branches, the “övre, mellersta och undre” branch (ib., 22). Thompson (1975, 36) points out that **s** (and **i**) are the only runes that are not composed of a mainstaff and one or more branches.

In the present article I shall first give the sources I used and some numerical data (section 2). After a brief discussion of the old futhark in connection with mainstaves (3), I will try to give some indications that the lack of a full-length mainstaff may have worried some runographers (4). After this I will briefly comment upon a possible link between the treatment of the **s** and certain individual runographers (5). A link between the treatment of **s** and regionality will also shortly be considered (6). The **s** in the short-branched futhark will get some attention; here I will naturally have to resort to the medieval futhark (7). Finally I will describe a possible relation between the **s**-type and the material of the inscription-bearer (8).

2. Sources

I studied, as fully as possible, the **s**-runes from Viking age and medieval inscriptions, using DR, SRI and NIyR, supplemented by Moltke

(1985), the "Runfynd" and other articles in Fv and NoR, and a number of other publications. A number of inscriptions was not considered: inscriptions that have got lost; Ög and Öl (as much of their material is dated); Rök and Rö (on account of their unusual character); nonsense inscriptions (for an enumeration of these, see Thompson 1972, 523 f., n. 3); coins; **s**-runes whose legibility is dubious.

I did incorporate those **s**-runes which are an element in bind-runes.

Deviations which are so slight that they are immaterial, were ignored (e.g. 5).

I wish to draw attention to a useful survey of all (Uppland) **s**-forms in Thompson 1975, 39 and 44, and to the representation of Öpir's **s**'s in Åhlén 1997, 75.

2277 inscriptions containing one or more **s**-runes were studied (Viking age: 1674; medieval: 603). These contain 8741 **s**-runes (Viking age: 6928; medieval: 1813).

3. The "new" futhark

Within the scope of this article I do not deem it necessary to discuss the transition from the old to the new futhark. But I just want to point out that the old futhark, as regards rune forms, differs essentially from the new. In the old futhark six runes do not have a full-length vertical mainstaff (**k**, **g**, **j**, **s** (sic), **ŋ** and **o**). Besides four runes contain two vertical mainstaves (**h**, **e**, **m** and **d**). With the coming of the new futhark only one rune remains that does not have one vertical mainstaff, viz. **s**. Apart from this one exception it looks as if the innovator(s) started from the one mainstaff principle.

It may be useful here to draw attention to the outline of the development of the futhark given by Ingrid Sanness Johnsen (1968, 12). Note that the author states that in the "normal" futhark all (sic) runes get only one mainstaff, and that in the short-branched futhark the branches of some of the runes are shortened and that in the case of **s** (and **ŋ**) the mainstaves are also shortened.

4. Consequences of the exceptional character of the **s**-rune

4.1. The chair-**s**

There seem to be indications that runographers occasionally felt the lack of the mainstaff. Perhaps the most striking instance of this is the so-called “stolsruna” (chair-**s**). As early as 1944 Arntz, when mentioning the occurrence of the chair-**s**, speaks of “das Streben nach dem senkrechten Hauptstab” (1944, 98; see also *ib.*, 123).

This sub-type has a relatively high frequency: 244 of all Viking age normal runes, i.e. 3.8 % of the total number. It is remarkable that 227 of them have their full-length mainstaff on the left side (**h**, **ʰ**). They may be looked upon as variants of **h** and **ʰ** (cf. Vg, XLI). Of all **h**- and **ʰ**-runes, the **ʰ**-type comprises 14.2 %; this corresponds nicely with the percentage of 10.6 for the **ʰ**-runes as against the 89.4 % for the **h**-type.

26 inscriptions contain chair-**s**'s only. It is to be noted that 11 of these occur in the DR region and 8 in Västergötland. Here we have another instance of similarity in traits between these two regions. The form in these 26 inscriptions is in 25 cases **h** and in one case **ʰ**.

4.2. **s**-rune and mainstaff(s)

The need that runographers may have felt to provide *all* runes with a mainstaff is one of the possible ways to account for the chair-**s** phenomenon. Another possibility is that (certain) runographers first made the mainstaves (for the whole inscription at once or — which is more likely — in “stages”), after which the branches were added (cf. Meijer 1992, 52 ff.). In this case the runographer may thoughtlessly have made the mainstaves of all the runes, forgetting that there is one which lacks a mainstaff. If he should discover his mistake, this might be camouflaged when or if the inscription was painted by not painting the “wrong” part of the **s**-runes. Two inscriptions are quite interesting in this context. In both Kragsta, U 572 (r. 15 **s**) and Funbo, U 987 (r. 38 **s**) the lower part of the (left-hand) full-length mainstaff is shallower than the other elements of these runes. I suggest that the runographers may first have made “sketches” of the inscription. When carving at “full depth” they found their mistakes (for similar “sketches”, see Meijer 1992, 57 f.).

There are two related rune-form types that must be paid some

attention to, viz. **l** and **H/H**. The former type (reminiscent of Gotlandic **s**: **ʀ**) was found 10 times (DR: 2; Sm: 2; U: 2; Vg: 1; Ög: 1). In six of the inscriptions where they occur, we also find chair-**s**'s and/or the Gotlandic **s**.

The second type occurs 4 times (Sö: 2; Vg: 2). In one of these we also find chair-**s**'s.

These 14 cases may point to the need of a full-length mainstaff. Curiously enough the latter type contains two mainstaves, a phenomenon which I have not been able to account for.

4.3. The Gotlandic **s**

Although most of the Gotlandic **s**'s (**ʀ**/**ʀ**) are medieval, it may be useful to mention them in this place, since they seem to point to the need of an **s**-rune with a full-length mainstaff. In the Gotland inscriptions these runes occur 336 times (71.2 % of all **s**'s in Gotland inscriptions). It should be added that this type is found in other Swedish regions and the DR region 51 times (0.8 %).

4.4. Bind-runes

The bind-rune (?) **ī̄s** occurs twice. 1. Øster Alling, DR 109 **rīspi** (**h**) according to DR. But this might also be **rs̄pi**. The latter spelling is found in 8 (Swedish) inscriptions, as against **ris̄pi** 56 times (Peterson 1994).

Incidentally, 6, respectively 32 of these are found in Västergötland. 2. Rimsø, DR 114 **raī̄spi** (**h**) according to DR. In Sweden this spelling is found 17 times, as against **ras̄pi** twice (Peterson 1994).

As regards the bind-rune **ū̄s** in Fleräng, U 1149, we can hardly look upon the **s**-rune as a chair-**s** on account of the bend in the branch of the **u**.

4.5. Intrusion of the short-branched **s**

Short-branched runes occur fairly rarely in Viking age inscriptions. One of these runes is the **s** (**ʀ**). It would be interesting to see whether this short-branched **s** may have been the result of the need for simplification as reflected in the forms of the short-branched runes. The two short-branched runes that are most alike as regards their forms, are **s** and **ʀ** (**ʀ** and **ʀ**). Out of 16 inscriptions in which both **s** **ʀ** and **ʀ** **ʀ**

occur, 11 have the ^l combined with **ʌ**, only 5 combine ^l and **ı**. In 5 inscriptions both ^l and **ʌ** are to be found. In these only **ʌ** occurs; none contain **ı**.

There are four short-branched runes (**o**, **n**, **a** and **t**) that occur more frequently than the long-branched variety in those inscriptions in which the short-branched **s** is used. This does not seem to be based on formal similarity, but on the fact that short-branched **o**, **n**, **a** and **t** are more often used than the other short-branched runes: **h**, **b** and **m**.

Thus we can say that the use of ^l may have been caused by the wish to avoid the unusual nature of the **ʌ**.

5. Runographers and **s**-rune forms

Because a study of the **s**-rune forms might mean a very modest contribution to the question of the attribution of "anonymous" inscriptions to certain runographers, I will devote some little space to this subject. I shall limit myself to one aspect only: the numerical relation between the **ʌ** and ^l forms. As we have seen above the latter form occurs in 14.2 % of the two types. If we look at inscriptions attributed to certain runographers, we find that the ^l percentage in inscriptions attributed to Balle is 10.6; Fot 16.7; Visäte 25.9; Åsmund Kåreson 36.4; Öpir 1.9. I wish to draw attention to the strikingly low percentage in the inscriptions attributed to Öpir. A few of these are quite interesting. Ärentuna, U 1015 is generally refuted as an Öpir inscription. The three **s**-runes that occur in it are all of the ^l type, consequently very "un-Öpirish". The same may be said of Kyrsta, U 1020 (**ʌ** : 2; ^l : 2) and Burunge, U 1140 (**ʌ** : 1; ^l : 2); both are generally not accepted as Öpir inscriptions. I would be inclined also to refute Närtuna, U 501 (**ʌ** : 2; ^l : 2), in spite of the general view that the inscription was made by Öpir (cf. Axelson 1993; Åhlén 1997, 183 ff.).

It might be interesting to study more closely the inscriptions attributed to Visäte and Åsmund Kåreson because of their high ^l percentages. Note that Visäte also frequently used the short-branched **s**.

6. Regionality and **s**-rune forms

In his study on runes and regionality Rune Palm (1992) does mention rune forms when dealing with variables in connection with his subject,

but they are not incorporated in his efforts to find links between runestones and regionality. In this section I wish to briefly point out that rune forms may be an (important) factor when studying the question of regionality. I shall do so with the help of just one example: the occurrence of the chair-**s**. When we consider the number of inscriptions containing one or more chair-**s**'s in their relation to the total number of inscriptions studied and containing one or more **s**-runes, I found in the DR region 34 inscriptions containing one or more chair-**s**'s, that is 16.5 % of all the DR inscriptions containing one or more **s**-runes. The number for Västergötland is 20 (16.1 %). This looks like a striking correlation when we compare this with the number for Sweden with the exclusion of Västergötland: 77 (6.1 %). Once again we have an instance of the striking correspondence between the DR region and Västergötland.

6. The medieval futhark

In the medieval period we find the ^l forms of the **s**-rune in numerous inscriptions. I counted 887 certain instances (48.9 % of all medieval **s**-runes). It should be added that the majority is to be found in Norway. The short-branched **s**, too, is exceptional in that it does not (normally) have a full-length mainstaff, although, in the period under discussion, it shares this trait with three other runes: **c**, **x** and **z**, which are of fairly rare occurrence, though. **c** was found in 38 inscriptions (79 **c**-runes); **x**: 2 inscriptions (2 **x**-runes); **z**: 14 inscriptions (18 **z**-runes). Of all these it is only the **c**-runes that may have a full-length mainstaff: in 4 inscriptions (24 **c**-runes). I must add that this number is mainly due to the frequent occurrence (20 times) of **c** in the Blæsinge inscription.

A small number of inscriptions contains one or more short-branched **s**-runes that have a full-length mainstaff: 3 of them contain one full-length mainstaff only; 6 contain both full-length mainstaves and short **s**'s. A greater number contains one or more "almost full-length" mainstaves (21 inscriptions; 85 runes); 6 of these contain one or more short **s**'s as well. As regards this "almost full-length" category it should be added that most of the inscriptions were made in wood so that the lengthened staff may be due to a "slip of the knife" (cf. NIyR VI, 35: "kniven er ikkje stansa tidsnok"). In one instance the full-length mainstaff is thought to be due to a correction: an **i**-rune was changed into an **s**-rune by adding a dot on the mainstaff (cf. NIyR VI, 1). In the

case of Søre Engelgården, N 634 the full-length mainstaff is ascribed to the “narrowness” of the wooden surface (NIyR VI, 67). My suggestion in the case of the **h**-type runes that the lack of a full-length mainstaff was felt by some runographers is to be found back for the short-branched **s**: in the discussion of Bergen V, N 291, A, r. 17 **s** we read: “risteren var for rask til å trekke op en helstav ...” This automatic writing of a full-length mainstaff is also hinted at when it is called “uakksomhet” (NIyR V, 119, n. 2).

7.1. Iceland

Although many of the Icelandic inscriptions are quite late (1200–1681, according to Bæksted 1942, 57 f.), the special development of the **s**-rune should not be entirely ignored.

The full-length form is practically the only one that is found here (**þ/ð**, with some variations). Bæksted (ib., 51) accounts for it “af skønhedshensyn”, which I think is an important statement: the aesthetic element is no doubt one that should not be ignored.

8. The material of the inscription-bearer

Note. In what follows the percentages refer to the *number of inscriptions with* ¹. The periods which yielded too few data were left out of consideration.

In this section I wish to pay some attention to the question whether there may be some connection between the form of the **s**-rune and the material nature of the inscription-bearer. It should be remarked that this question was briefly discussed by Johnsen (1968, 18) in connection with the several forms of **þ** and **r**; the fact that this discussion referred to the old futhark runes is of no importance in the case of the two runes just mentioned.

Wood. As regards the DR region it is striking that the Viking age percentage is 62.5 as against 1.7 for the inscriptions in stone. This might point to the more difficult procedure in writing the **h**-form. We should compare these with the percentages for Norway (although they refer to the medieval period): 97.2 for inscriptions in wood as against 94.3 for those in stone. Here we should remember that ¹ was already quite common in Norway.

Metal (lead excluded). In the DR region (Viking age) no ¹ occurs (as

against 1.7 in inscriptions in stone). In the same region (medieval): 6.7 (as against 3.8 in inscriptions in stone). It looks as if making the h -form was not more or less difficult than the ' -form. In Norway (medieval) the percentages are respectively 90.9 and 94.3. For this correlation, see the section on wood, above.

Bone (ivory, horn, antlers included). DR, medieval: 10.7 % (as against 3.8 in stone). Norway, medieval: 100 % (as against 94.3 in stone). What was said about these two regions in the section on metal, seems to apply here, too. But a difference is seen in Uppland: Viking age: 25.0 % (as against 2.2 % in stone); medieval: 37.5 % (as against 20.0 % in stone). These numbers seem hard to account for.

Plaster and brick. DR, medieval: 6.2 % (as against 3.8 in stone). See above.

Lead. DR, medieval: 0.0 % (as against 3.8 in stone). See above. Norway, medieval: 100 % (as against 94.3 in stone). This is the Norwegian pattern that was to be expected.

Note. Lead was dealt with separately (not under "metal") because of the soft nature of this material.

Conclusion. Generally speaking the common form of the **s**-rune was used (either the h -type or the ' -type). There is, however, one exception: In the Viking age DR region the ' -type in inscriptions in wood occurs considerably more frequently than in the inscriptions in stone. It should be realized, though, that for this region, period and material the data are small in number: 26 **s**'s in 8 inscriptions.

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