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Standardised *fuþarks*

A useful tool or a delusion?

1. Introduction

Various things I have read recently have caused me to wonder about the
role and status of standardised runic alphabets. They are discussed in
some detail in Karin Seim's doctoral thesis on the West Scandinavian
fuþark inscriptions (1998), for which I was first opponent. They were
also used by Seim as the basis for a rudimentary division of her cor-
pus into "futhark i stavløse runer" 'a *fuþark* in staveless runes' (p. 72),
"kortkvist-futharker" 'short-twig *fuþarks*' (p. 74) and "resten av de vest-
nordiske futharkene" 'the remainder of the West-Scandinavian *fuþarks*'
(p. 78). My undergraduates, too, operate with standardised runic
alphabets. Not unnaturally, it is from such they learn to read runes.
Lacking experience, however, they tend to imagine that what they see
on the printed page is a true copy of something that existed at the time
runes were in common use. They do not easily grasp that the standard-
ised runic alphabets which appear in our hand-books are abstractions
constructed for our convenience. This can lead to odd formulations.
One student opined recently of an older *fuþark* inscription: "Each sign
appears in the same form in the older *fuþark*", a statement which pre-
supposes the existence of an older *fuþark* norm with which characters
in a particular inscription can be compared. Another undergraduate

Abstract: This article deals with the standardisation of runic alphabets by modern
scholars. The purposes of standardisation are examined, as well as the uses to which
standardised *fuþarks* are put (be it for illustration or to support arguments). Conside-
ration is then given to the procedures involved in reducing the wide variation typical of
actual usage to a few mutually exclusive sets of forms, and the question asked whether
this reflects or obscures reality. Finally, on the basis of the discussion, the development
of the younger *fuþark* is re-examined.
Keywords: runic alphabets, standardisation, the development of the younger *futhark*

sounded a slightly censorious note. Observing that "the older *fuþark* ↑ is retained [in three instances]" in the Rök inscription (Ög no. 136), he went on to declare: "In the short-twig *fuþark* this *should be* 1 [my italics]." It is to be hoped the young man concerned has taken to heart my marginal warning: "Beware of demanding that rune carvers adhere to our categorisation of runic alphabets."

2. The purposes of standardised *fuþark*s

Although standardised *fuþark*s are widely used, few comment on their *raison d'être*. Perhaps this is because as runologists we have become so accustomed to their appearance in hand-books and elsewhere we accept them as an integral part of the discipline. For non-runologists they clearly have a practical purpose. Just as most learners of a foreign language will want to concentrate on a single norm, so those getting to grips with runic script for the first time are likely to find a fixed set of forms more helpful than the diversity and irregularity of the real thing. Standardised *fuþark*s are not just employed for the benefit of the uninitiated, however. They commonly accompany runologists' analyses of runic writing systems and their development. There their purpose may be largely illustrative, but sometimes they are used to bolster arguments. Wessén, for example (1957: 16), uses a standardised staveless alphabet reflecting usage on some five stones from Hälsingland and a standardised short-twig alphabet based on the Forsa inscription (Liestøl 1980), as evidence for his belief that the staveless runes were derived from the short-twig (1957: 7–8, 17). Moltke (1985: 367) presents a sanitised version of the Hedeby short-twig *fuþark* in which certain features have been altered or suppressed. In particular the **n** and **a** runes, which on the stick have crossing branches, appear in his standardised reproduction with branches on one side only. I do not know precisely how Moltke reasoned here, but it is clear from many of his pronouncements that he considered **n** and **a** with crossing branches to be members of the long-branch alphabet. He may thus have felt they had no place in a short-twig *fuþark*, and persuaded himself the carver badly overcut the single-sided branches he had intended — although there is, it must be said, little warrant for such an interpretation in the inscription itself.

   Whatever their thoughts about the status of standardised runic alphabets, Wessén and Moltke are here investing them with a reality it is improbable they can have had. To argue that one precisely deline-

ated row of runes is derived from another equally precisely deline-
ated row, implies the primacy of both as prototypes and a concomitant
belief that shapes other than the ones given are to be viewed as devia-
tions from the prototype. It is possible, I suppose, that somewhere in
Viking-Age Scandinavia there was a model short-twig alphabet that
rune carvers could consult if they felt they were straying too far from
the "correct" forms. It is perhaps further possible that such an alpha-
bet consisted either of the forms given by Wessén or of those pre-
ferred by Moltke — possible even that it was on the Wessén forms a
model staveless alphabet was based. But there is no evidence that any
of this was so, and I would class it all as improbable surmise. My view,
however, carries its own implications. Once the belief in prototypes
is challenged, it makes little sense either to amend an attested *fuþark*
inscription or to suggest that a particular selection of rune shapes gave
rise to another particular selection.

It is beyond doubt, I think, that the staveless runes of the Hälsing-
land stones are derived from other runes, but we have no way of know-
ing which these were. The dating of the inscriptions concerned, Mal-
sta, Sunnå, Hög, Hälsingtuna and Hudiksvall (Jansson 1985; Peterson
1994; Hudiksvall now only known from a drawing), is uncertain, but
few in recent times have wanted to go further back than *c.* 1050. That
seems to make the Hälsingland group roughly contemporary with or
younger than the Södermanland inscriptions with staveless runes (*Sö*
nos. 106, 137, 148, 154, 159, 164, cf. Peterson 1994: 242–3). It is thus
possible that the Hälsingland staveless types are a refinement of those
used in Södermanland (as already suggested in respect of **f** and **k** by
von Friesen (1933: 164–5)), in which case ı and ˙ (**h** and **t**) at least would
ultimately derive from what are generally considered long-branch runes
(ᚼ and ᛏ via the Södermanland forms ＊ and ˆ). But even if the Hälsing-
land shapes should be the more original, or have only a tenuous con-
nection with those in Södermanland, there are very few of them that
must go back to short-twig prototypes. ᛁ (**s**) looks to be a short-twig
form, it is true, and ˙ (**t**) to derive from one, but ˙ and ː (**m** and **ʀ**) are
most plausibly seen as modelled on ᛉ and ᛆ — both normally classed
as long-branch; seven of the Hälsingland staveless characters — ı ı ˙ ɩ
ı | ˙ (**f u þ r k i l**) — are derived from runes whose shapes do not vary
in an obviously systematic way; two — ı ˌ (**h b**) — could be based on
either short-twig or long-branch types; the final two — ˙ ˙ (**n a**) —
may be modelled on graphs with single-sided or crossing branches — a
distinction which is in fact immaterial in terms of pinpointing a source

alphabet since many inscriptions classed as short-twig — including the Hedeby *fuþark* — have the crossing-branch types. (On the derivation of the staveless runes, see most recently Fridell 2001.)

Two conclusions can be drawn from this preliminary discussion. First, while it may be hard to do away entirely with standardised *fuþarks* for the learner, they should, much as cigarettes, be accompanied by an appropriate health warning. The novice needs to be made fully aware that they are modern abstractions and that there is no evidence for their existence at any time when runes were in common use. Obviously those learning to carve runes will have followed models, but we do not have certain examples of such, and they must by their very nature have varied according to time and place; they can in no way be considered comparable to mass-produced printed *fuþarks*. Second, the use of standardised *fuþarks* to support particular views and arguments is entirely to be deprecated. It can only lead to a series of false premises — amply demonstrated by the two examples cited above.

3. The basis of standardised *fuþarks*

As Seim makes clear in her thesis (1998: 43–55), standardised *fuþarks* are the result of conscious or unconscious choices. Graphic variation in runic writing is enormous, but from this variation a few features are selected for inclusion in the standardised models and the majority rejected. In the case of conscious choice, features will be preferred that are deemed significant in distinguishing one rune from another and in some way typical of the runes thus distinguished. Where little or no thought has gone into the process of selection, the standardised *fuþark* is likely to be based on one appearing in an already existing work.

Early runologists, who could not so easily rely on established models, tended to pay more attention to graphic variation than those who followed. Wimmer (1887: 289–91), for example, presents a range of what we would now call short-twig forms from the Rök stone and the Forsa ring, notes a couple of variants on the Kälvesten stone (Ög no. 8, but there incomplete, cf. Jansson 1976: 42–4) and gives a composite (short-twig type) *fuþark* based on the characters occurring on various stones from western Norway and the Isle of Man. He does not accord the Rök forms primacy over those on Kälvesten where they differ, although he does declare firmly — apparently on grounds of assumed age rather than typology — that the Forsa runes presuppose those of Rök. The

notion of an *ur*-alphabet — an original short-twig *fuþark* from which others are descended — is not to be found here; the forms discussed are presented as related but parallel attempts to simplify the common Viking-Age alphabet, i.e., the one we nowadays call long-branch. While moved to praise Wimmer's lack of preconceptions about what is original and what secondary, I suspect it stems ultimately from an unreflecting approach to the question of runic variation. Nowhere does he explain why he choses to record certain types of variation and not others. Two forms of I are noted on the Rök stone, for example, the difference between them being whether the branch extends from the very top of the vertical or just below it, yet the same carver's fs are printed only as ᚠ, although in reality the lower branch of this character can connect with the vertical very close to the base, and both branches show a tendency to curve quite sharply. The different treatment accorded by Wimmer to Rök's fs and Is seems to reflect unconscious or at least unarticulated assumptions about the significance or otherwise of particular types of variation; there is certainly no indication of any underlying analysis.

Those writing after 1887 were equally inexplicit, but exhibited increasing rigidity in their interpretation and presentation of different varieties of Viking-Age runic alphabet. Bugge, for example (e.g. 1910: 172–3), fails to distinguish between the particular forms on the Rök stone and the generality of what he calls "die kurzzweigige Schrift". Detailing the derivation of eight short-twig characters from long-branch prototypes, he gives only the Rök variants, thereby strongly implying that these are to be seen as the original short-twig forms. Two years later von Friesen (1912a: 5) presents a wholly variationless Swedish-Norwegian (i.e. short-twig) rune row, all of whose forms can be found on Rök, and it is this row (repeated in von Friesen 1933: 146), with the odd minor modification, that finds its way into such standard works as Düwel 1983 (p. 52; in Düwel 2001: 91 the presentation is vastly improved), Elliott 1989 (p. 25), and Jansson 1976 (in Jansson's book, pp. 26–7, the standardised short-twig *fuþark* and a long-branch fellow are said to have existed as "fullt utbildade varianter" 'fully developed variants' as early as the beginning of the ninth century). Comparison of these standardised rows with the variation presented in Loman 1965 or Sanness Johnsen 1968, let alone with the actual inscriptions that underlie Loman's and Sanness Johnsen's accounts — and those that do not — shows how distorted a view the readers of the standard works are being given.

Since the uncritical use and acceptance of standardised *fuþark*s as representations of reality suggests widespread unawareness of the complexities involved in the analysis of written form, it is worth briefly considering at this point what a standardised *fuþark* is.

Helge Dyvik (1996) has done us a great service by drawing attention to the need to distinguish four levels in the analysis of runic form: individual graphs, graph types, graphemes and *fuþark*-units. Graph types are established on the basis of shape, graphemes on the basis of linguistic function, and *fuþark*-units on the basis of alphabet history. Since a *fuþark*, as Dyvik stresses (1996: 12), cannot be given a linguistic interpretation, it has no place in graphemic analysis. It is rather a collection of individual graphs, classifiable as graph types, representing the units of an alphabet. On the basis of this analysis a standardised *fuþark* should, one would think, be the result of series of choices: choice of alphabet, of graph type and finally of individual shape. None of these is unproblematic.

Runological hand-books regularly depict an older, a long-branch, a short-twig, a staveless and an "expanded" medieval *fuþark*. Whereas the first four can be related to actual alphabet inscriptions (though often this is not done), the medieval *fuþark*s are almost always modern creations, compiled by scholars on the basis of forms found in a variety of sources. Once this principle has been admitted, however, there is no obvious limit to the number of different *fuþark*s that can be displayed. The *Arild Hauge's Runes* web-site (2004), for example, presents an extensive range, classified according to modern Scandinavian country, type, and period. For Norway this yields the following alphabets: "Norwegian-Germanic runes to ca. 500 AD", "change-over versions after 500 AD", "Norwegian runes after ca. 600 AD", "Norwegian-Danish runes from the 800's", "Norwegian-Swedish Rökrunes (ca. 800–900)", "Runes from the 900's to ca. 1050 AD", "shorttwigsrunes [*sic*] from ca. 900 AD", "Norwegian runes ca. 1000–1050 AD", "Norwegian runes ca. 1050–1175 AD" and "Norwegian runes from ca. 1300–1400 AD". The lack of an alphabet covering the period 1175–1300 notwithstanding, some may feel Hauge is overdoing it. But are not the hand-books underplaying the variety? And is this for the readers' benefit or the authors'?

Once the choice has been made of which alphabets to portray, the compiler of a standardised *fuþark* has to select particular graph types for each position in the alphabet. This may be relatively straightforward, as in the case of the long-branch runes commonly found on

Danish memorial stones — though even here choices have to be made between features such as curved and straight, open and closed, top, mid- or other meeting point between branch and vertical, etc. — or it may involve a much more complex process of selection, as in the case of the short-twig or medieval runes. Informed choices between graph types can only be made on the basis of a graph-typological analysis, but as Dyvik points out (1996: 8), runology lacks a general analysis of this kind based on strictly graphic criteria. What we get, therefore, are the results of uninformed choices — in reality often the unthinking repetition of earlier scholars' uninformed choices, as I suggest above.

In the selection of the actual graphs to go into standardised *fuþarks*, neatness and abstraction are the guiding principles. Printed runes, presumably because of the nature of printing, seem always to be characterised by regularity of form; and being, as it were, common denominators, they are based not on particular graphs in particular inscriptions but chiefly on conceptions of the features that distinguish the characters to be included. Sometimes, of course, a standardised printed rune will coincide almost exactly with one in an inscription, but that is chance, not intention. Ideally, the choosing of forms that incorporate and emphasise distinctive features should rest on graphemic analysis (true, in fact, even of standardised *fuþarks*, since although a *fuþark* consists of alphabet units, as indicated above, the characters of standardised models derive largely from the occurrence of runes in meaningful inscriptions). In practice, the best that can be said of most standardised *fuþarks* is that they reflect greater or lesser awareness of distinctive features. Want of either graphic or graphemic analysis has allowed standardisers freedom of choice within certain bounds, but that it is uninformed choice is amply demonstrated by its lack of consistency and logic. Seim (1998: 52–4) draws attention to the arbitrary treatment accorded to certain features in three representative presentations of standardised *fuþarks*: branches may be curved or straight, bows round or angular, open or closed, and connections with the vertical made at different heights, but little or no attempt is made to justify the choices, and they give the impression of being the result of authorial whim. My own cursory examination of fourteen works (hand-books, corpora and lexica) revealed a similar arbitrariness, and a number of inexplicable oddities. In Arntz's short-twig row (1935: 154), for example, **f** and **b** have identical form (ᚡ), while **h** appears as ┼, and **m** is given as a vertical with a longish horizontal crossing branch at just above mid-height. Short-twig **m**, for whatever reason, is the character runologists seem to

have found most difficult to standardise. Musset's attempt (1965: 229) results in a form similar to that depicted by Arntz, the difference being that here the branch is at exactly mid-height, making the character indistinguishable from the accompanying short-twig **h**; the rune row in which the two are shown is attributed, with more faith than reason, to "la pierre de Rök". Elliott, too (1989: 24), fails to distinguish the **h** and **m** of what he calls "the Rök runes", but in his version both sport a horizontal crossing branch at upper-mid height. Liestøl (1969a: 473) chooses a short-twig **m** defined by a point at the top, as does *NIyR* (V: 238), but in both these works the rune is inexplicably made slightly shorter than its fellows. More stunted still is the short-twig **m** in *DR* (col.771), but here we are back to a horizontal crossing branch at upper-mid height. Oddest of all is the **m** in Moltke's sanitised version of the Hedeby short-twig *fuþark* (1985: 367); this appears as a vertical with a triangular blob near the base and is accompanied by the note: "'m' turned upside down". And indeed, in the inscription itself the rune seems to have a point near the top.

Examples of arbitrariness and inconsistency in the standardised *fuþarks* can be multiplied at will, but let these suffice. They represent solutions to problems that have not been properly thought through (as well, no doubt, as reflecting the vicissitudes of printing). Provided one recognises such *fuþarks* for what they are, they perhaps do no harm, but I am not sure I would go so far as to justify them as a useful tool. In the hands of the unwary, and that seems to include runologists as well as students and interested laymen, they can delude and mislead in a variety of ways.

4. Standardised *fuþarks* and the diversity of runic form

Loman's 1965 article on the graphemic system of the "Rök runes" marked a break-through in the analysis of runic writing. Not only was the approach systematic, explicit and thorough, it highlighted the extent of formal variation in the inscriptions analysed. Loman's aim was to "fastställa systemets distinktiva drag" 'establish the system's distinctive features' (p. 4), with the emphasis on "system", and like me he was critical of standardised *fuþarks*. "Handböckernas konventionella standardfuthark har uppenbarligen fixerat en föreställning om vissa normaltyper" 'the conventional standardised *fuþarks* of the hand-books have clearly created the impression of a series of normalised characters', he complains, and goes on to suggest that preconcep-

tions based on this impression are what have led certain runologists to dismiss as short-twig forms the cross-branch characters: ↑ ↑ ↑ ↑, even though from a systematic point of view they fit into the short-twig system as comfortably as their single-sided counterparts. Seim (1998: 48–9) notes perceptively that, notwithstanding his criticism, Loman is himself a prisoner of the kind of thinking induced by stand-ardised *fuþarks*. Underlying his whole analysis is the idea that there exists a short-twig system with clearly defined parameters. That is what leads him to select a particular group of inscriptions for inclusion and reject others. The data having thus been chosen with a particular aim in view, it is hardly surprising that what emerges are the funda-mentals of a highly economic short-twig system. In fact, certain of the characters occurring even in such a carefully delimited corpus have to be rejected to achieve the desired goal. If, as Seim points out by way of example, Sparlösa's ⋏ ᚺ ᛒ had been included, the system would have been different and less economical. Their exclusion is determined not by the results of the analysis (ᛒ, for example, can be described in simi-lar terms to Þ), but has clearly to do with preconceptions about what is and what is not a short-twig rune.

It is this kind of thinking, I suspect, that gave us the "Man-Jæren" and the "older Norwegian" runes. The "Man-Jæren" rune row as pre-sented in *NIyR* (V: 240–41) is indistinguishable from a common ver-sion of the standardised short-twig alphabet except for the presence of Υ. But since Υ — as most runologists seem to think — is a long-branch character, a row that contains it is deemed unsuitable to be called short-twig, and thus requires another name. The "older Norwegian" runes are said to be characterised by the use of ᚯ ᛒ Υ ⋏, and sometimes ᚺ (or variants ᚼ h), in preference to, respectively, ↑ ᚠ (or variants ᛎ ᛏ) ↑ ᛁ and ᛁ (Olsen 1933: 84; Liestøl 1969a: 475). In reality, however, things are not as simple as this. Some inscriptions defined as short-twig by Sanness Johnsen (1968: 22–31; principally her type C) exhibit ᚯ and/or Υ, which leaves only the shape of **b** or **ʀ** as possible distinguishing fac-tors. It is the former Sanness Johnsen chooses as the principal criterion of a short-twig inscription: if **b** has branches, the runes are (by and large) classed as short-twig, if bows, as non-short-twig. But **b** (like **ʀ**) is not all that common a rune, and as Liestøl points out (1969b: 177), its frequent absence means that almost exactly half the inscriptions from Norway listed by Sanness Johnsen as short-twig could equally well be characterised as "older Norwegian". Conversely, following Musset (1965: 230–31), we might consider the selection of characters dubbed

"older Norwegian" as essentially short-twig but incorporating a number of long-branch forms (cf. also Wessén 1969: 24–5).

Unlike the alphabets just discussed, the staveless and the long-branch runes do seem to constitute more or less discrete systems. Even here, though, variation can be found. I have already drawn attention to the divergent staveless forms of Södermanland, generally ignored by standardisers, while the long-branch runes of the so-called Helnæs-Flemløse group (*DR*: cols.1020–22) are different from those in most other Danish inscriptions of the Viking Age. Perhaps more importantly, it is not always possible to distinguish absolutely between either the staveless or the long-branch and other systems. Thus while ✦ and ᛉ on the Skarpåker stone (*Sö* no. 154) clearly have verticals or "staves", they may well be the only forms of these runes the carver of this long-branch and staveless inscription knew or used; that at least is a possible interpretation of their appearance towards the end of a group of staveless characters. Inscriptions from Denmark and Sweden not uncommonly exhibit a sprinkling of what are traditionally considered short-twig characters in otherwise long-branch inscriptions, single-sided **a**s and **n**s being particular favourites (*DR* nos. 2, 6, 105, 378; Moltke 1985: 375–6, 378; Wessén 1969: 26–7). Wessén (1969: 28–9) sees this phenomenon, at least in Sweden, as a parallel to the mixture of long-branch and short-twig types in Norway. More unsettling still are artefacts like the Norwegian Dynna stone (*NIyR* no. 68), whose chopping and changing between ᛁ and ᛭, ' and ᚼ and ᛁ and ᛏ seems to defy classification.

Many of the Scandinavian inscriptions in the British Isles are likewise hard to classify in terms of alphabet type. It was in part the work I did together with Jan Ragnar Hagland and Ray Page on the Dublin inscriptions that persuaded me of the futility of trying to determine the alphabet each and every inscription is written in. Take, for example, the pair of *fuþark* inscriptions IR 11. I see from our early drafts that we made tortuous and increasingly desperate attempts to allocate different parts of these *fuþark*s to the long-branch and the "older Norwegian" alphabets. In the published version we present the pair, as the other Irish inscriptions, more in terms of diagnostic forms, and speak in the introduction of "our own too-formal classification of runic graphs", suggesting that different typological groups "may represent not mutually exclusive forms but part of a stock of runic characters which the Norse rune-carver had to choose from, so that he might help himself to a quite arbitrary selection" (1997: 7). More homogeneous than the Dublin runes are those from Maeshowe, Orkney, but they are still not

easy to classify. They include the dotted forms ╽ and ╿ and incorporate
╽ ╋ ╽ ╋ and ╋ as separate graphemes, but are hardly fully "medieval"
because there is no evidence ╽ and ᛒ (or ᚴ) formed part of the system
(Barnes 1994: 48–57). These might perhaps be called "younger Nor-
wegian" runes, lending some justification to the otherwise misleading
term "older Norwegian".

Confronted with this diverse material, one is tempted to think of
Viking-Age and early medieval Scandinavian runes in terms of an
alphabet continuum. At one extreme we have the differing versions
of the staveless runes, fairly clearly but perhaps not always completely
distinct from other types; then the variety of reduced but less minimal
characters that go under the heading "short-twig", often intermixed
with what are generally taken to be long-branch forms; then the "older
Norwegian" runes — a supposedly regular intermixture of short-twig
and long-branch; then inscriptions that are more long-branch than the
"older Norwegian" but still contain forms reckoned to be short-twig;
and finally purely long-branch inscriptions. In this hypothetical con-
tinuum, it is only the forms at either end that are homogeneous enough
to be classified as distinct alphabets, and that is not certainly true
even of the staveless runes if those from Södermanland are included.
Some carvers may have chosen their characters from within a *system*,
but there are few indications outside the long-branch runes of a fixed
alphabet.

In fact, even the continuum seems too tidy a way of viewing variety
of runic form. It exudes the musty smell of the desk runologist. The
evidence, I would suggest, is more compatible with the following sce-
nario: a fair degree of local experimentation, followed by the accept-
ance of some forms and rejection of others, and the gradual but uneven
spread of more popular forms. Together with this, one has to reckon
with varying levels of knowledge and sophistication among rune carv-
ers: some will have been familiar with many variant forms, some with
few, some will have used the full range known to them purposefully,
others unthinkingly, yet others will have prized regularity and consist-
ency.

If one thinks of variation in this light rather than in terms of fixed
alphabets, the hotly-debated question of whether the short-twig or
long-branch runes were geographical or functional variants loses much
of its intensity. We need not be surprised that carvers of messages on
loose objects sometimes favoured more elaborate rune types (cf., e.g.,
the Lindholm knife-haft, the Hemdrup stick (Moltke 1985: 350, 352–

3), the Sigtuna box (von Friesen 1912b: 7–10)), nor that carvers of stone inscriptions could be content with simpler forms. We need not, in the Danish tradition, attribute every occurrence of the simpler runes in Denmark to Swedish-Norwegian influence (e.g. Moltke 1985: 367–78, especially 368, 370), nor think of the appearance of more elaborate rune types in early Viking-Age Sweden and Norway as due to Danish input (Sannes Johnsen 1968: 14 together with 73).

Let me try to flesh out my suggested scenario with a little more detail. In Denmark (using roughly the medieval boundaries) there is to begin with evidence of variety and change. Inscriptions such as the Ribe cranium (Stoklund 1996) and the Helnæs and Flemløse 1 stones (*DR* nos. 190, 192) use older forms, principally one or more of Ħ Ħ and ✳ (**ɑ**); the Snoldelev stone (*DR* no. 248) has Ħ, both ✳ and ✝ for **ɑ**, and Ī for **ã**; inscriptions on wood like the Hedeby sticks (Moltke 1985: 367–73) and stone monuments such as Elleköping (today Älleköpinge; Moltke 1985: 377) and Gunderup 2 (*DR* no. 144) use the simpler runes or a mixture of simpler and more elaborate. For a time, if our relative dating is right, the Danes tire of variety and change and adopt a homogeneous set of characters, but fresh innovations soon appear in the shape of dotting.

Viking-Age Sweden (again using roughly the medieval boundaries) is characterised by much greater variety and experimentation than Denmark: quite apart from the staveless runes, there is a wide range of simpler characters, and together with them several forms that became standard in Denmark (e.g. ✳ (**h**) ✝ ✝ Ψ). Whether these latter are to be seen as long-branch or short-twig is a question that has been little discussed, most considering them long-branch because they form part of the rune row in common use in Denmark in the tenth century (cf., however, Loman 1965: e.g. 56–9; Birkmann 1995: e.g. 23–5, 243–5). Clearly ✳ (**h**) ✝ and Ψ are simplifications in comparison with the Ħ ⸗ and Ħ of the older *fuþark*, and once the absence of evidence for prototypical or model alphabets is admitted, there is little other than usage to help the modern runologist towards classification. According to our dating of the Swedish corpus, earlier usage here contrasts with later: to begin with ✳ ✝ and Ψ mostly appear together with the simpler rune forms, later they accompany the more elaborate types. Apart from ✳ ✝ ✝ Ψ and sporadic occurrences of forms such as Ħ ↑ ⅄, there is little evidence for the use of the more elaborate runes in early Viking-Age Sweden outside Västergötland, though they are to be found in Bohuslän, Blekinge and Skåne, areas bordering on Sweden, and the Rök carver

demonstrates knowledge of a version of the older *fuþark*. Towards the end of the tenth century, again if our dating is accurate, variety and experimentation are replaced in Sweden by the homogeneous set of characters then in use in Denmark. The homogeneity, though, is never as absolute as in Denmark, and the simpler forms ᚠ ᚢ ' ᚾ ᚴ **(b)** ᛁ are found — some occasionally, some more frequently — as alternatives to their more elaborate counterparts (Wessén 1969: 25–7).

There are considerably fewer inscriptions preserved from Viking-Age Norway than from Denmark and Sweden, but enough to document the use of a wide range of runic forms, and to indicate that the homogeneity at times characteristic of the other two areas never became part of Norwegian tradition. Considerable variety of form is also found in the Scandinavian inscriptions of the British Isles (cf. above on Dublin). What is unclear is how far this reflects local usage and how far differing strands of influence from the Scandinavian homelands.

In the light of the fluidity revealed by this discussion, it is pertinent to ask how far there is need of terms like long-branch and short-twig, designating different kinds of runic alphabet. The astute reader will have noticed that I have already begun to substitute "simpler" and "more elaborate", descriptions that do not carry the associations of established terminology. Conceivably we could make do with a redefinition of the established terms. As I have been urging throughout this paper, it is the conception of the long-branch, the short-twig, the "older Norwegian", etc., as model alphabets that needs to be changed. The terms themselves do no harm, I think, provided we can conceive of them as referring to broadly defined types rather than standardised alphabets. Some may find this troublingly vague, but until we have a full graphic and graphemic analysis of runic writing, it is probably as precise as it can or should be. The effort so often expended in trying to determine the alphabet in which individual inscriptions are written can in my view safely be dispensed with. Unless the characters of an inscription conform wholly to a broadly defined type, it is more revealing to draw attention to diagnostic forms, i.e., those that vary in a systematic way. I will mention a couple of illuminating examples.

The Norwegian Valby inscription (*NIyR* no. 140) is generally deemed to be in long-branch runes (e.g. *NIyR* V: 239; Birkmann 1995: 331–2). Examination of the individual characters, however, reveals that only þ (one occurrence), a (three occurrences) and ʀ (two occurrences) are diagnostic. ʀ has the more elaborate form ᛌ, while þ sports a bow that extends almost from the top of the vertical to the base — an elaborate

enough type, but one found chiefly in company with simpler runes. **a** is ᛏ, a character, as noted above, considered by most to be long-branch; like Þ, however, it often occurs together with the simpler runes and it has been suggested (a) that it has its natural place in the graphemic system of the short-twig runes (Loman 1965: 14-28, especially 26-7), (b) that it represents the second stage in the short-twig development: ᚼ > ᛬, ᛬ > ᛏ, ᛏ > �/ᛐ (Birkmann 1995: 23–4). It is odd that Birkmann, who classes ᛏ as a "Kurzzweigrune", nevertheless has no hesitation in declaring Valby an inscription in "Normalrunen" (i.e. long-branch runes) and suggesting it "könnte … als Beleg angesehen werden für ein einheitliches Schriftsystem des jüngeren Fuþark <u>vor</u> der Ausbildung der Kurzzweigrunen in Schweden und deren Verbreitung nach Norwegen und Dänemark" (1995: 331–2). For my own part I would be content to say Valby has the diagnostic forms: Þ ᛏ ᛘ. What conclusions one could draw from that about the range of characters its carver might have known, I am frankly not sure, though dating would be an important consideration.

The Hedeby 2 (stone) inscription (*DR* no. 2) has been described, over-enthusiastically, as short-twig (e.g. Laur 1983: 13, 17; Nielsen 1983: 95), and more realistically as long-branch with an occasional short-twig character (e.g. Lund 1982: 118–19). The designation of Hedeby 2 as a "short-twig inscription" does not reflect even rudimentary analysis, merely the rarity of simplified forms in tenth-century Denmark: they stand out to such an extent that the inscription as a whole is marked down as "unusual", and then *pars pro toto* as "short-twig". What we could sensibly say of Hedeby 2 is that it exhibits the diagnostic forms ᚠ and ᛀ. These are regularly found in company with simpler characters, but also more widely, as, for example, in inscriptions termed "older Norwegian". In addition, Hedeby 2 sports an **m** roughly of the form ᛉ. This is not diagnostic in the sense I have defined the term above, since as far as I know the form is without parallel (though cf. the similar ᛉ on *DR* no. 271 Tullstorp). As in the case of Valby, conclusions seem hard to draw. It is possible that ᚠ and ᛀ, together with various pieces of non-runic evidence, could indicate Swedish influence (as has been widely maintained), but purely runologically the use of these forms suggests nothing more than a choice among available variants different from that made by most Danish rune carvers. If Hedeby 2 really were "Swedish" in the sense "written with the types of runic character apparently in vogue in early tenth-century Sweden (outside Västergötland)", we would not expect it to contain a preponderance of more elaborate characters.

5. Experimentation, change, and the development of the younger *fuþark*

The foregoing discussion, it seems to me, invites reconsideration of the development of the younger *fuþark*. In several papers, beginning in 1987, I have questioned the view — virtually axiomatic until challenged by Liestøl in 1981 — that the short-twig runes were a simplification of the long-branch. I have not claimed — as too cursory a reading of my text has suggested to some (e.g. Odenstedt 1992: 74–5) — that the short-twig runes were primary, rather that it was a question of definition: the crucial factor was what one meant by long-branch runes. At what point in the development from a twenty-four rune *fuþark* to the row found on the Gørlev stone (*DR* no. 239) did one consider the long-branch characters to have arrived? If long-branch was synonymous with the Gørlev *fuþark*, as argued, for example, by Moltke (e.g. 1986), then it was likely for both chronological and formal reasons (cf. Birkmann 1995: 22–7, 373–4) that the short-twig characters were primary. If long-branch meant something like the Helnæs-Flemløse characters, the matter was less clear. If one thought there were further, earlier stages of development between the older, twenty-four rune and the younger, sixteen-rune *fuþark*, then it was perhaps more likely the short-twig runes would be an offspring of one of these than of the older *fuþark* itself.

I am no longer happy with this scenario. I can see there is an urge to conceptualise the development of runic graphs and graphemes in terms of fixed points, even fixed alphabets, but as soon as we do this, we tend to confuse our constructs with reality. I am as guilty as anyone of this. My 1987 view of the short-twig alphabet as the outcome of "the only runic reform [of the period] for which there is any evidence" (p. 42) was based chiefly on Loman's (1965) graphemic analysis of a small and carefully selected group of inscriptions (see above). The reality is likely to have been considerably messier.

In the present state of our knowledge, I would not like to go further than the following proposal: the younger *fuþark* arose as a result of a reform that reduced the number of runes from anything between twenty-four and eighteen (Barnes 1987, especially 42) to sixteen. However and wherever this reform started, it was rapidly adopted throughout the whole of Scandinavia, and by the beginning of the Viking Age virtually all rune carvers were using the same sixteen runes — a remarkable example of unity in the apparent absence of a centralis-

ing authority to promote it. That, though, is as far as the unity went. When it came to the realisation of many of the sixteen *fuþark*-units and graphemes, a much more open policy prevailed, with results of the kind that have been discussed above.

This is anything but a radical proposal. Indeed, it may be criticised for stating the obvious and side-stepping the difficulties. I would nevertheless claim it has three advantages. First, it is in accordance with the observable facts. Second, it avoids the problem of how the simpler rune forms can be derived from the more elaborate when the simpler seem originally to have been used in areas where the more elaborate are scarcely documented and may have been largely unknown. Third, by avoiding any reference to "long-branch" and "short-twig", it frees us from conceptions of fixed alphabets and thus from the need to speculate about their mutual relationships. Since fixed alphabets appear to be at best a modern rationalisation, at worst a delusion induced by the standardised *fuþarks* of the hand-books, such freedom ought to make possible greater clarity of vision.

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