

# Maturus Fecit – Unwod Made

## Runic Inscriptions on Fibulae in the Late Roman Iron Age

BY LISBETH M. IMER

### Abstract

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This paper is an analysis of runic inscriptions on Late Roman Iron Age fibulae. When discussing the meaning and function of the inscriptions, it is suggested that we use a contextual approach referring to the Roman use of writing instead of discussing the function on the basis of each individual inscription, especially when the fibulae are very alike. It is concluded that the fibulae inscriptions are most likely craftsman's inscriptions added to the fibula as a kind of quality mark, just as is the case on much of the military equipment from the same period and fibulae from the Roman Empire. Finally, the tradition of writing in the Late Roman Iron Age is discussed in a broader perspective, including other inscriptions from the period.

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Runic writing was invented at the beginning of the first millennium AD. This happened in a non-literary society, where oral communication or signs and gesticulations were the only means of passing on messages. The root in the word 'rune' can be traced back to the Indo-European \**rūH-*, which means 'make a sound', 'mumble' or 'mutter', and it may also be connected to Latin *rumor*, which originally meant 'noise' or 'mumbling'. This is exactly what the runes were: sounds in writing. The Greek and Latin alphabets served as models for the construction of the runes, and the runic alphabet – the futhork – consisted of 24 characters, just like the Mediterranean alphabets, and was adapted to the Nordic language in the Iron Age. In principle, the development of the writing system could have taken place anywhere, but it would involve a person with a good sense of the sounds in his own language and of the sounds and the

writing system(s) that served as model(s) for the runes (*cf.* Stoklund 2003, p. 172). Literate persons were very scarce in the alphabetic Nordic society, and no doubt the development took place in one of the chiefdoms that appeared on the verge of the Late Roman Iron Age. It seems that there was a fundamental wish to develop a writing system of their own to emphasize the power of the chieftain in an attempt to imitate the much coveted Roman lifestyle.

The oldest known runic inscription **harja** is on a little two-layer comb from the weapon deposit in Vimose, Funen. Here **harja** is interpreted as a short form of a man's name, deriving from *Hari-*, 'Army-', just like the name **harija** 'Warrior' on the stone from Skåäng in Sweden (Krause 1966, pp. 191 f.; Stoklund 1995, p. 333). The comb is dated to the 2nd century AD (Pauli Jensen 2008, p. 237), *i.e.* at the transition from the Early Roman Iron

Age to the Late Roman Iron Age. It was a time when changes took place in the village structure and in the farming; the farm units grew larger, and the cultivation of crops intensified. At the same time, the rotary mill replaced the hand mill – supposedly a technological leap adopted from the Romans – so that it became possible to produce larger amounts of flour in a shorter space of time. In this period, wealthy sites such as Himlingøje, Gudme, and Sorte Muld prospered, and contacts with the Roman Empire were very strong. At trading sites like Gudme, trade was the primary profession, not farming, and on sites like these the first specialized craftsmen in the Iron Age appear (Storgaard 2003, pp. 108 ff.). It was in this period that most of the Danish and South Swedish weapon depositions were sacrificed. This custom began in the Early Roman Iron Age, and it contrasted with the Pre-Roman depositions consisting of humans and smaller deposits of assorted war equipment. The weapon depositions in the Roman Iron Age, especially in the Late Roman Iron Age, reflect a highly standardized and specialized army structure, where weapons were produced at central smithies or even factories (Pauli Jensen *et al.* 2003, pp. 314 ff.).

In order to understand the background to the development of runic writing and the function of the runic inscriptions in the North,

it is important information that the runes were developed in the North at a time in history when Europe was strongly influenced by the Roman Empire and Roman tradition. In some cases, areas under direct Roman dominance, the Provinces, were totally Romanized, and Roman villas, amphitheatres, and cities with Roman administration, infrastructure, and military installations were built. Outside the Provinces, in Germania, the influence was very strong. Roman luxury goods such as bronze vessels and glass reached far ends of Scandinavia just like the lively traffic of Roman weapons. In the Germanic armies, they used Roman swords, imported in great numbers as blades without handles and knobs, and in richly furnished graves we find glass, bronze vessels, and Samian ware. In addition to this, thousands of Roman coins are found in Scandinavia (Horsnæs 2009, p. 34).

During the first four centuries AD, Scandinavia was in contact with Roman and Greek writing, in the form of craftsmen's imprints, owner's inscriptions, and weight depictions that were imported into Scandinavia with the Roman luxury goods, weapons and coins. The oldest known are the Hoby cups that were produced in Rome or Campania around the time of the birth of Christ by the Greek craftsman Cheirisiphos (Fig. 1). They were buried in the Hoby grave together with the



Fig. 1. The silver beakers from Hoby. Photo: The National Museum.

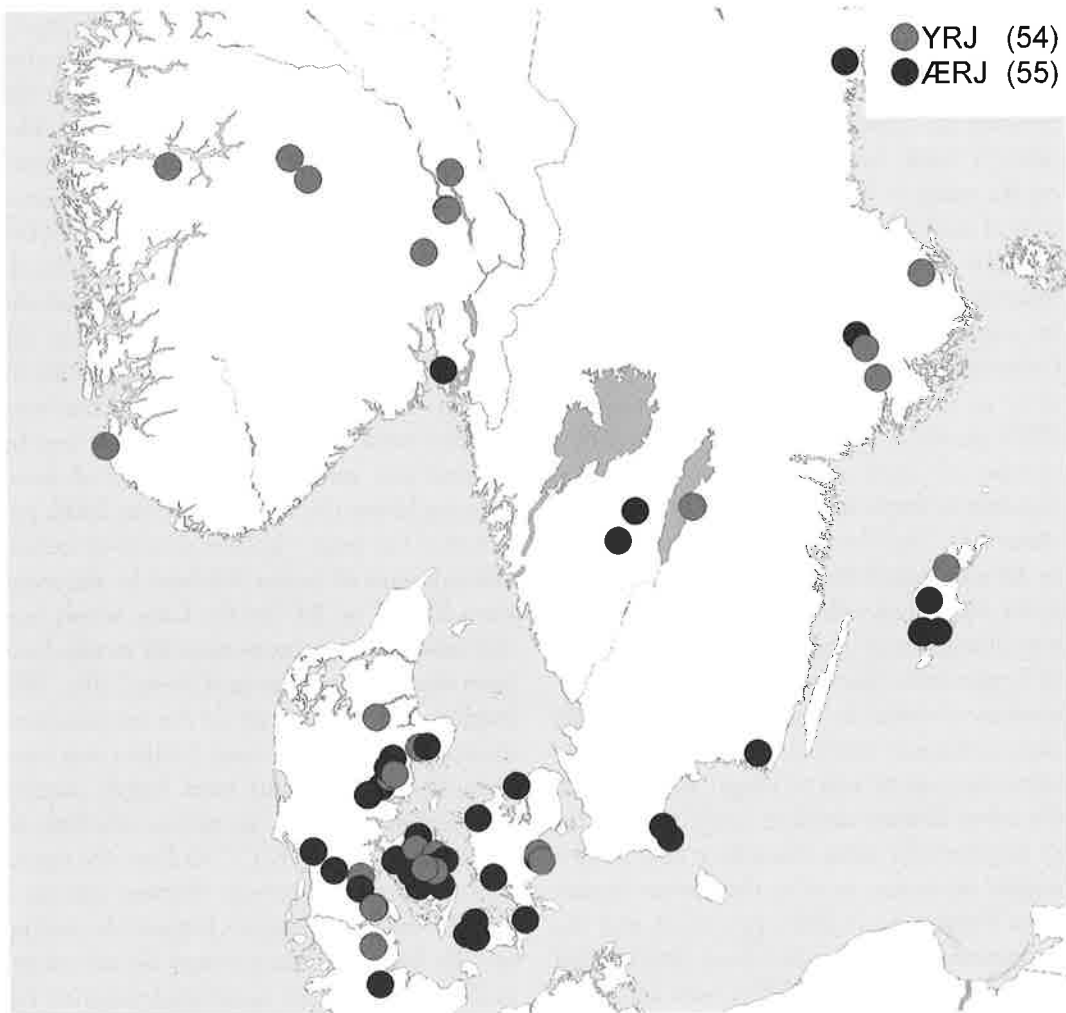
magnate or prince around the middle of the first century AD. On the sides of these silver cups, scenes from the *Iliad* are depicted, and between the friezes Cheirisiphos punched his master's mark, on one cup in Greek letters, on the other in Latin letters. Under the bottom of each cup, the Roman name 'Silius' is carved in Latin letters (Werner 1966, pp. 7 f.). Silius is probably the former owner of the silver cups, and presumably we are dealing with Caius Silius, who was the leader of the Roman army in Trier from 14 to 21 AD (Storgaard 2003, p. 112). These cups are the first of a number of Greek and Latin inscriptions and imprints to reach Scandinavia in the first centuries AD. The Greek and Latin inscriptions by far outnumber the runic inscriptions. There are more than a hundred swords with Roman manufactory imprints, and the number of Roman coins reaches almost 5,000 in Denmark as a whole; in Gudme there are 1,200 alone (Horsnæs 2009, p. 34). Of course, the coins carry some sort of script, and many of the other Roman artefacts carry manufactory imprints. In some cases they also carry a weight depiction, as with the bronze bucket from Valløby (Imer 2007, pp. 68 f.), and the fragmented Kolbe armlet from Boltinggård (Henriksen & Horsnæs 2004; Imer 2007, pp. 67 f.). Greek inscriptions are not as common as the Latin ones. They are placed on imported luxury goods and consist primarily of inscriptions for luck like the glass beakers from Vorning Mark, Denmark and Tubakken, Norway, where the inscriptions read 'Drink, and you will live well' (Imer 2007, p. 70).

Apart from the Roman coins, these Latin and Greek imprints and inscriptions make up more than a hundred copies in the Roman Iron Age (Map 1), and they are a significant and direct source for understanding the earliest runic writing in Scandinavia (Imer 2007).

In the Late Roman Iron Age, large numbers of Roman swords were imported into the

Germanic areas from Roman factories, legally or illegally. The majority of the swords that carry manufactory imprints are found in the weapon deposits at Illerup Ådal, Vimose, Hedelisker, Illemose, Ejsbøl, and Nydam; more than 90 swords with letter imprints derive from these sites (Biborski and Ilkjær 2006, pp. 296 ff.). Manufactory imprints on swords are mostly placed on the shoulder of the sword, or on the tang. This means that the imprint in many cases has been invisible or only partly visible, when the sword has been finished with a handle. The imprints can be divided into seven categories, four of them carrying letters (Biborski and Ilkjær 2006, pp. 296 ff.). The letter imprints consist of names, abbreviations of names followed by abbreviations like 'F' or 'M' for the Latin words *fecit* and *manu*. So far, more than 80 names have been demonstrated, most of them Celtic. This implies that a large part of the weapon production took place in Gaul. Only in two cases have identical imprints been found, namely the imprint DORVSF on two swords from Illerup Ådal, and BORICCVS-F on the sword from the Gullen grave in Norway and on a sword from Hedelisker in Jutland. According to Ulla Rald, the many names do not necessarily reflect different specialized factories. Instead, different craftsmen could work on the same factories, using their individual imprints (Rald 1994, pp. 231 f.).

Putting quality marks on objects from the weapon factories was a custom that the Scandinavian weapon smiths adopted. In an earlier article, I have argued that the inscriptions on the lance heads from Vimose and Illerup Ådal, together with the inscriptions on the shield boss from Thorsbjerg, the shield boss fragment from Gudme, and the knife from Møllegårdsmarken, are to be interpreted as fabrication marks, due to the outline of the inscriptions, their position on the objects, and the function of the objects (Imer 2007, pp. 76 ff.). In this article I shall concentrate on



Map 1. The distribution of the Roman Iron Age Greek and Latin inscriptions in the North (apart from the thousands of Roman coins). Illustration: The author.

the inscriptions on the precious fibulae from the Late Roman Iron Age, and I will argue that these are to be interpreted as fabrication marks as well.

Seven fibulae with runic inscriptions have hitherto been dated to the Late Roman Iron Age: a crossbow fibula, a bow fibula of Mackeprang's type IX, and five rosette fibulae. The bow fibula from Himlingøje grave 1835–1 is dated to C1b–C2. This grave was unearthed unprofessionally in 1835, and it is uncertain how many and what artefacts be-

long to the grave (Lund Hansen *et al.* 1995, p. 477). The crossbow fibula from Gårdlösa in Scania is dated to C1b and derives from a woman's grave, no. 2, which is a richly furnished grave by Scanian standards (Stjernquist 1951, pp. 159 ff.). The rosette fibulae make up a group of monstrous fibulae, characteristic of phase C1b (Lund Hansen *et al.* 1995, p. 213). In Denmark 60 copies have been registered, whereas Norway and Sweden have only seven and nine copies respectively (Skjødt 2009, p. 155). The runic inscriptions are found on the



Map 2. The distribution of the Late Roman Iron Age runic inscriptions in the North. Grey dots: Grave finds or bog finds; Black dots: Runestones; Black stars: Fibulae (also deriving from graves). Illustration: The author.

Danish copies only (Map 2). The five rosette fibulae are regarded as a special group in C1b, with the exception that Næsbjerg from the western part of Jutland belongs to a Jutlandic workshop (*cf.* Ethelberg 2000, pp. 51 ff.). In her master's thesis from 2006 (published posthumously in 2009), Annagrete Skjødt made it clear that rosette fibulae were produced in three superior groups of workshops, two in Jutland and one in Zealand, the latter having distributed fibulae to the northern part

of Jutland as well. Næsbjerg belongs to the south-western workshop in Jutland, whereas the four remaining ones – Himlingøje, Skovgårde, Værløse, and Lundegårde – all belong to the workshops in Zealand (Skjødt 2009, p. 169 f.).

The fibulae carry runic inscriptions on the pin-casing, except for Himlingøje 1, where the inscription, naturally, is placed on the back of the foot plate. Apparently, it was of no significance on which side of the pin-casing

NAME	TYPE	TRANSLITERATION	TRANSLATION
Himlingøje 2	Rosette fibula	(...) (w)iduhudaR	(...) WīduhundaR
Skovgårde	Rosette fibula	lamo : talgida	Lamō cut
Værløse	Rosette fibula	alugod	Alugōd
Lundegårde	Rosette fibula	bidawarijaR talgidai	BindawarijaR cut
Næsbjerg	Rosette fibula	1. -ara--(is)- 2. -ara- -- bi-/ -ara -- bi--	...
Himlingøje 1	Bow fibula	hariso	Harisō
Gårdlösa	Crossbow fibula	ek unwod (w)	I Unwōd (made/wrote)(?)

Table 1. Runic inscriptions on fibulae from the Late Roman Iron Age; transliteration and translation.

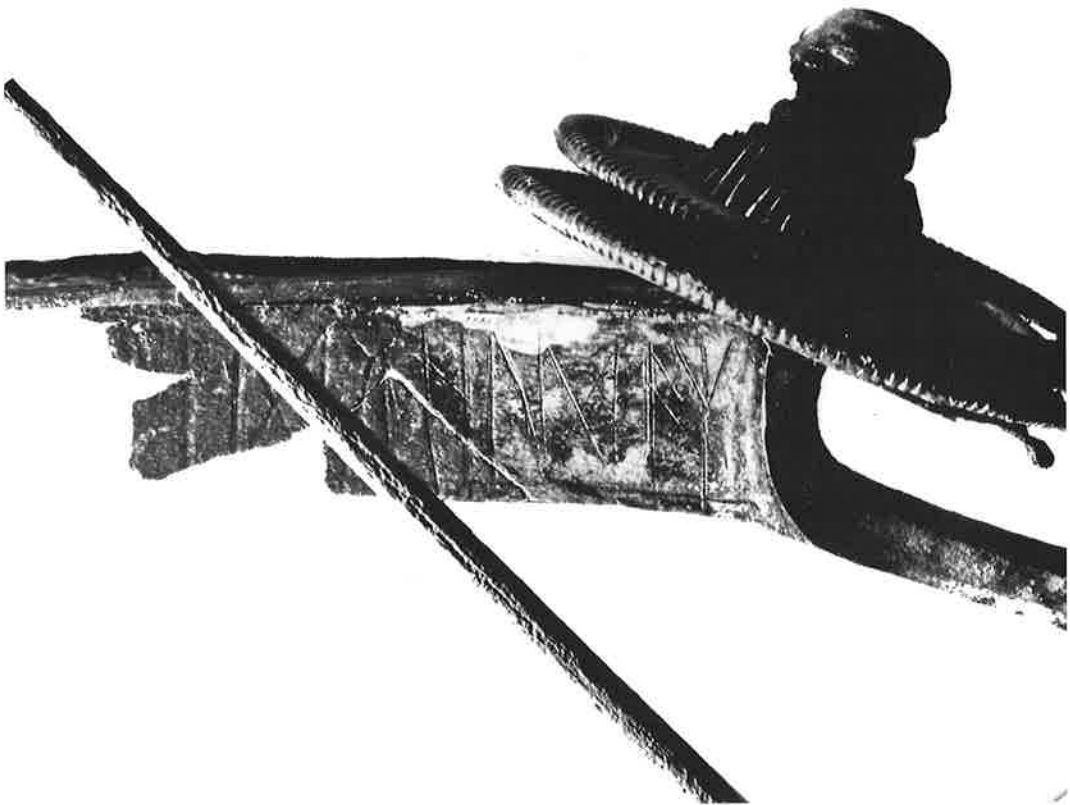


Fig. 2. The rosette fibula from Himlingøje with the inscription (...) (w)iduhudaR. Photo: The National Museum.

the inscriptions were placed. The inscriptions on Værløse and Lundegårde are carved on the outside of the pin-casing, whereas the inscriptions on Himlingøje 2, Næsbjerg, Skovgårde, and Gårdlösa are carved on the inside. The inscriptions on Himlingøje 2, Næsbjerg, and Gårdlösa are badly worn, as a consequence of the pin being pushed up and down inside the casing. This is an observation of significance for the reading of the inscriptions. The inscription on Skovgårde is very clear and does not seem to have been worn at all, but we must bear in mind that it was buried with a 20-year-old woman (Ethelberg 2000, pp. 287 ff.) and has not been exposed to as much wear as the others.

In connection with my PhD project 2004–2007, I investigated the fibulae Værløse, Lundegårde, Næsbjerg, Himlingøje 1, and Gårdlösa, using a microscope. The fibula from Skovgårde, with the very explicit inscription, I have not examined, and Himlingøje is fastened to the grave of its owner, the rich woman from Himlingøje, grave 1949–2. However, close-up photographs have been at my disposal. Following these inspections, I have corrected the readings for Næsbjerg and Gårdlösa, and I agree with Krause & Jankuhn and Moltke in their transliteration of Himlingøje 2. The pin-casing of this fibula is so destroyed that we cannot decide whether there have been runes on the first part (cf. Krause & Jankuhn 1966, p. 32; Moltke 1985, p. 122); in fact, regarding the proposed length of the pin-casing and the position of the inscription, it seems to have been longer (see Table 1, Fig. 2).

Since the discovery of the first fibula in 1835 (Himlingøje 1), the interpretations of the inscriptions have been discussed. Generally, the inscriptions have not been interpreted as a complete group of inscriptions. On the contrary, the discussion has typically proceeded from the individual inscription, or rather the textual content of the individual inscrip-

tion. Marie Stoklund states explicitly that there is not much evidence that the carving of the runes was based in a craftsman's tradition, and she cannot support Moltke's theory that most metal inscriptions were carried out by non-literate craftsmen on the model of a literate one (Stoklund 1995, p. 320). Hence, the interpretations of the fibula inscriptions are very different, as they are carried out with the single fibula as a point of departure. However, since five of the fibulae are rosette fibulae – four of them even from the same workshop – it seems adequate to analyse them as a complete group in order to investigate what the purpose of the inscriptions might have been.

The earliest interpretations are characterized by the fact that names with **o**-endings were not supposed to be masculine (cf. Antonsen 2002, p. 262). Hence, Himlingøje 1, with the inscription **hariso** (Fig. 3), was first interpreted as a woman's name, the name of the owner (e.g. Wimmer 1867, p. 55; Krause & Jankuhn 1966, p. 31; Düwel 1992, p. 47). Stoklund, who presented the runic inscriptions from the Late Roman Iron Age in connection with the publication of Himlingøje – Sjælland – Europe, did not decide whether

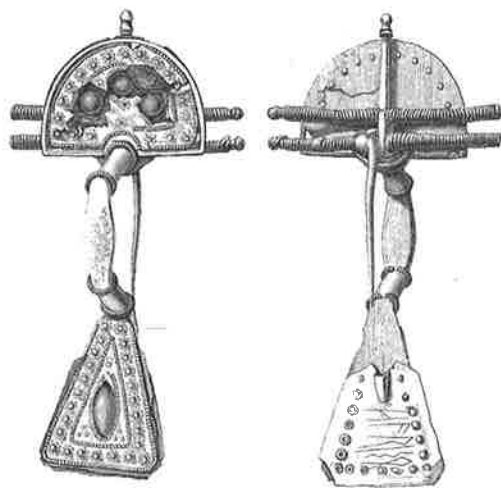


Fig. 3. The bow fibula from Himlingøje with the inscription **hariso**. Photo: The National Museum.

the inscription was a male or a female name (Stoklund 1995, p. 319). On the contrary, Elmer Antonsen thought that the name *Harisō* could be translated as ‘warrior’ and that it was a man’s name (Antonsen 2002, pp. 262 f., p. 271).

Like Himlingøje 1, the inscription on Værløse, **alugod**, was first interpreted as the owner’s name, actually **alugodo**, which the silversmith had tried to write, but did not achieve because of the lack of space (Fig. 4) (Moltke 1985, p. 126, cf. Imer 2010, pp. 112 f.). Krause regarded the inscription as a man’s name in the vocative (Krause & Jankuhn 1966, p. 34), and Antonsen thought that the name was a West Germanic nominative form because of the lack of an ending (Antonsen 2002, pp. 273 ff.).

Generally, researchers agree that the name on Himlingøje 2, **(w)iduhudaR**, is a man’s name meaning ‘Wood hound’ or ‘Forest dog’, and it has been interpreted either as the donor’s or the craftsman’s name (Stoklund 1995, p. 322). According to Klaus Düwel, the

name can be paraphrased as ‘Wolf’, and this may represent the rune master himself (Düwel 1992, p. 47). In this interpretation he agrees with Krause, who writes that this must be the rune magician’s naming of himself, suggesting his dangerous, magical powers (Krause & Jankuhn 1966, p. 33). If we really are dealing with a magical inscription on Himlingøje 2, it seems odd, though, that the rune magician would name himself on the fibula and not put his magical powers on the amulet which the woman was wearing in death. Besides, we need an explanation why this magician should put his name on this particular piece of jewellery.

According to Krause, the inscription on the Gårdlösa fibula is also the rune magician’s depiction of himself, the name meaning ‘the un-raging’ (ibid., p. 35). Below, I shall return to the inscription and its reading.

To my mind, the inscription on the fibula from Næsbjerg is so worn that it cannot be read and interpreted (Fig. 5). It should be transliterated **-ara--(is)-** (see Krause & Jan-



Fig. 4. The rosette fibula from Værløse with the inscription **alugod**. Photo: The National Museum.



kuhn 1966, p. 36), if we are not dealing with an inscription to be read partly from the left to the right, partly from the right to the left just like the inscription on Skovgårde. In this case, the inscription should be read **-ara--bi-**, alternatively **-ara--bi--**. The inscription is carried out in wiggle-engraving technique and is disrupted by a number of vertical lines and a hatched pattern. Several other readings and interpretations have been put forward (see Stoklund 1995, pp. 325 ff. for further references); Stoklund has suggested the reading **-ara(f)n(i)s-**, but she underlines that this reading is so uncertain that it does not provide a linguistic interpretation (*ibid.*, p. 326).

In the inscriptions on Skovgårde **lamo : talgida** ‘Lamo (the paralysed one) cut’ and Lundegårde **bidawarijaR talgidai** ‘Binda-/BidawarijaR cut’, the names are followed by the verb *\*talgijan* in the 3rd pers. sing. pret. (Stoklund 1995, pp. 322 f.). **Binda-/BidawarijaR** is not easily translated. The first part might have something to do with either ‘oath’ (Antonsen 2002, p. 10) or ‘wish’ (Moltke

1964, p. 38; Krause & Jankuhn 1966, p. 38), and the last part is translated as **-warijaR** ‘defender’ (Moltke 1964, p. 38; Antonsen 2002, p. 10). This part is also known from runestones in Norway and Sweden: the Törvika stone with **ladawarijaR** and the Rö stone with the inscription **stainawarijaR** (Krause & Jankuhn 1966, p. 38). Grønvik interprets the two verbs as nouns meaning ‘the rune carver’ (Grønvik 1994, pp. 51 ff.). Stoklund thinks that the inscription on Skovgårde could either be the woman’s name or that of the donor/carver, as the **o**-ending could be both male and female. Further, she thinks that it is semantically unlikely that the verb *\*talgijan* would take the fibula as its object, like the verb *\*taujan* ‘to make’ (Stoklund 1995, p. 323). Grønvik thought that the inscriptions on both Skovgårde and Lundegårde were produced just before the inhumation, as he assumed that runes were primarily used in the contact with gods and deceased. *Lamö*, he thought, was a man’s name (Grønvik 1994, p. 48). In contrast to this, Düwel believes that the inscrip-



Fig. 5. The rosette fibula from Næsbjerg with the illegible inscription **-ara--(is)-** or **-ara--bi-**, alternatively **-ara--bi--**. Photo: The National Museum.

tion on Lundegårde is a donor's inscription or a carver's formula (Düwel 1992, pp. 48 f.).

From the examination above, we can deduce that the fibula inscriptions from the Late Roman Iron Age have been interpreted very differently as craftsmen's inscriptions, owner's inscriptions, donor's inscriptions, inscriptions carved by the rune magician (whoever he is), and inscriptions of religious character, added to the fibulae just before the inhumation. Especially the names and their meaning together with the verb *\*talgijan* have been significant for the different interpretations.

The confusion concerning the interpretation of the names as being either masculine or feminine has caused the above-mentioned interpretations of the inscriptions as owner's inscriptions. There has never been any doubt that the names on Himlingøje 2 (**w**)**iduhudaR** and Lundegårde **bidawarijaR** are male names (e.g. Krause & Jankuhn 1966, p. 38; Moltke 1985, p. 129; Stoklund 1995, p. 321, p. 323). The problems concerning the interpretations of the names have arisen from the fact that names in **-o** can be interpreted as feminine, if Proto-Nordic, or masculine, if West Germanic (Krause & Jankuhn 1966, p. 31). In recent years, researchers broadly agree that names in **-o** must be masculine, especially with the finds from Illerup Ådal, where these names appear on equipment belonging to the male sphere; *Wagnijō* on the lance heads and *Nipijō* on the shield handle fitting (Stoklund 1995, p. 335; 2004, p. 726; Andersson 2006, p. 560). From this, other names in **-o** have been interpreted as masculine, e.g. *Lamō* (Skovgårde) and *Leprō* (Strårup) (Grønvik 1987, p. 180, Antonsen 2002, pp. 267 ff.). Grønvik suggested that names in **-o** could be a relic of an older group of masculine names (Grønvik 1987, p. 180), and Antonsen argued that they could be masculine with feminine forms and compares this to other languages like Latin (Antonsen 2002, p. 263 ff.). These are important observations in that

it makes it possible for the names in **-o** on the fibulae, *i.e.* *Harisō* in Himlingøje 1 and *Lamō* in Skovgårde, to be masculine.

It is widely disputed how to interpret the inscription on the Værløse fibula **alugod** linguistically. The first part **alu** is known mainly from bracteate inscriptions from the Migration Period, but the word is also known from inscriptions on gravestones in Norway, dated to either the Late Roman Iron Age or the Migration Period, from the Lindholmen amulet (Migration Period) in Scania and from an axe shaft from Nydam bog, dated to the Late Roman Iron Age. According to Wolfgang Krause, the word could have the meaning 'rage, ecstasy' or 'protection, defence' (Krause & Jankuhn 1966, p. 239). Others believe it could mean 'sanctuary' or 'temple', and that it can be traced in place-names in *Al-* (cf. Brink 1992, pp. 107 ff.). A prevalent interpretation of the word is that it should be translated with 'ale', ON *ól* (Høst Heyerdahl 1991, pp. 188 ff.), because this is the most logical development of the word, linguistically speaking. However, this linguistic interpretation seems to fit very poorly with the contextual use, as the word appears on bracteates, gravestones, amulets and weapons. In addition to this, we do not know when 'ale' was introduced as a drink in Prehistoric times – maybe it was at late stage, and we have no direct evidence of a link between the drink and the word. It might well be that the word **alu** would have developed into *ql* 'ale', if it had lived in a younger stage of the language. Therefore, I think the arguments for interpreting it as a kind of word of protection are better. Regardless of these linguistic circumstances, the inscription on the Værløse fibula can be interpreted as a man's name, ON *Qgodr*, 'Algod' or 'Ølgod'. Krause thought that **alugod** could be a man's name in the vocative because of the lack of an ending (Krause & Jankuhn 1966, p. 34), while Antonsen thought that it was a typical West Germanic inscription with a man's name

without an ending (Antonsen 2002, pp. 278 f.). To my mind, Antonsen's explanation seems most likely, as the inscription on Værløse has a direct parallel on Gårdlösa.

Hitherto, the Gårdlösa inscription has been transliterated as either **ek unwod(R)** and thereby compared to the name **gaupR** on the strike-a-light from Illerup Ådal (Stoklund 1995, p. 324; 2003, p. 175) or as **ek unwodi=R** (Krause & Jankuhn 1966, p. 35, Moltke 1985, p. 127) where the last two runes are the ligature **i=R**. First, the problem with these transliterations is that the left branch is clearly missing on the last rune, and we have to presuppose that it has been forgotten in order to read **Y**, *i.e.* **R**. Secondly, the inscription lacks an 'i' in order to interpret it as the name *UnwōdiR*, but this lack has been ascribed the lack of space on the pin-casing (Krause & Jankuhn 1966, p. 35). Ligatures containing the graph 'i' are always problematic, since the 'i', which is only a vertical line, can be part of any connection, in principle. Therefore, the interpretation of a text where 'i' is part of a ligature, can always be used as a quite simple way of explaining a text or a word that does not make any linguistic sense at first sight. Marstrander, on the other hand, read the last rune as a **w**, thereby interpreting the inscription *ek Unwodagar wunju* 'I, Unwodag bring joy' (Marstrander 1952, p. 110), where the last **w** was interpreted as a single rune, representing its name *\*wunju*.

Marstrander's reading has never gained a footing in the literature, and this is a pity, since his reading, to my mind, seems the most plausible, inasmuch as it does not presuppose a ligature with an 'i' or a botch in a most meaningful inscription. The problem with reading the last rune as **Þ w** is that the upper part of the pocket is missing so that the rune resembles a Viking Age **k** **Y** (Fig. 6). However, there is a very logical explanation for this. When examining the fibula, it was very clear to me that the top of the slightly curved edge of the

pin-casing was much more worn than the rest of the flat part of the casing. This was a result of the pin being pushed back and forth when the fibula was in use. For example, the top branch of the **e**-rune has almost vanished, and clearly the upper right corner of the **d**-rune is also very worn (Fig. 7). Hence, there is reason to believe that the last rune has had another branch at the top, and thereby Marstrander's reading is a possibility. The inscription should be transliterated **ek unwod (w)**, and, as I have stated above, the reading of the name **unwod** without an ending does not seem to be a problem, as it corresponds to the inscription on Værløse. Therefore it is possible that *Unwōd* is a masculine name without an ending (cf. Antonsen 2002, pp. 278 f.).

However, I do not agree with Marstrander's interpretation of the inscription on Gårdlösa. Presumably, it has been constructed from the idea of the use of single runes in the Iron Age, *i.e.* runes that are not transliterated on the grounds of their sound values, but in using their rune names, *e.g.* the **f**-rune for *\*fehu* or

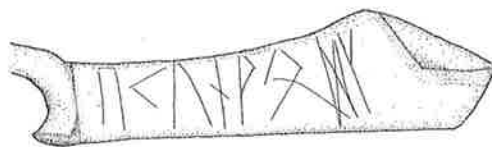


Fig. 6. The crossbow fibula from Gårdlösa with the inscription **ek unwod (w)**. Drawing: The author.



Fig. 7. Close-up of the very worn section of the pin-casing on the Gårdlösa fibula. Photo: The author.

the **o**-rune for *oðal* (Düwel 1976, pp. 150 f.). The names of the runes are known from medieval manuscripts from Iceland and the British Isles; a thorough investigation has been carried out by Wilhelm Heizmann (1998). The names of the runes were documented quite late, but there is much in favour of the fact that these rune names originate from the oldest futhark (Looijenga 2003, p. 6), and researchers believe that single runes were sometimes used in the meaning of their names in the oldest inscriptions (Krause & Jankuhn 1966, p. 5 f.; Düwel 1976, p. 151, Stoklund 2003, p. 173). To my mind, it is questionable if single runes were used to denote their names in the runic inscriptions from the Late Roman Iron Age at all, as the single runes can be interpreted in a more natural way, considering the Roman fabrication marks that enter Germania Libera in the course of the first centuries AD (Imer 2007, pp. 76 ff.).

If you hold this more chronological view of the earliest runic inscriptions, the interpretation *ek Unwōd w(or<sup>a</sup>htō)* ‘I Unwōd made’ or *ek Unwōd w(ritu)*, ‘I Unwōd wrote’ seems to fit into the textual content of other inscriptions from the same period. In most inscriptions, the actual act is important, *i.e.* putting oneself as rune carver in connection with the inscriptions or, more likely, putting oneself as a craftsman in connection with the object. The shield handle from Illerup Ådal *Niþijō ta-wide* and the rosette fibulae from Skovgårde *Lamō talgida* and Lundegårde *Bida-/BindawarijaR talgidai* are good examples of this.

From this outline of the inscriptions on fibulae it is clear that there is only weak evidence of interpreting the names as feminine, which means that most likely the inscriptions on the fibulae are not owner’s inscriptions. This means that the inscriptions are to be interpreted as donor’s inscriptions or craftsman’s inscriptions.

If the inscriptions on fibulae are to be interpreted as donor’s inscriptions – *e.g.* from a

husband to his wife, or from a father to his daughter – it makes sense if the inscriptions on Skovgårde and Lundegårde are to be translated ‘Bida-/BindawarijaR cut (the runes)’ and ‘Lamō cut (the runes)’, the verb *\*talgijan* taking ‘the runes’ as the object, as suggested by Stoklund (1995, p. 323). But how can we be sure that the verb *\*talgijan* takes ‘the runes’ as the object instead of the object itself? *\*talgijan* develops into ON *telgja* which, if you look at the semantic content of the word, means ‘to cut out, to carve, to plane, to give the intended form’ (Fritzner 1896, pp. 682 f.). The word has no parallel in Gothic but in Indo-European the verb is connected to the root *\*del-/dol-* with the meaning ‘make skilfully’. Nothing points in the direction that the verb demands a connection with writing. On the contrary, when referring to runic writing in the Proto-Nordic texts, words like *\*fabijan* ‘to paint’ or *\*writan* ‘to write’ are used. The word *\*talgijan* is probably used as a noun **talijo** on the contemporary plane from Vimose, and here it is translated as ‘plane’ (Krause & Jankuhn 1966, p. 62; Stoklund 1995, pp. 332 f.). This particular plane is a specialized one for the manufacturing of lance and spear shafts.

Turning to the rosette fibulae, one might wonder how they were produced. In her analyses, Skjødtt has shown that a rosette fibula consists of many different elements (Fig. 8). The basic element is a bow which is cast alone or with the pin-casing, and then a lot of spirals, rivets and rosettes, and a plate for the back with decorated fittings is added. All these individual elements were cut out of sheet metal and not cast together with the basic elements of the fibula (Skjødtt 2009, pp. 156 ff.).

If we assume that the verb *\*talgijan* means ‘to cut out, to carve, to plane, to give the intended form’ and that the verb might take the piece of jewellery as its object, there is a possibility to interpret the inscriptions on the rosette fibulae Skovgårde and Lundegårde as the craftsman’s inscriptions. This interpretation

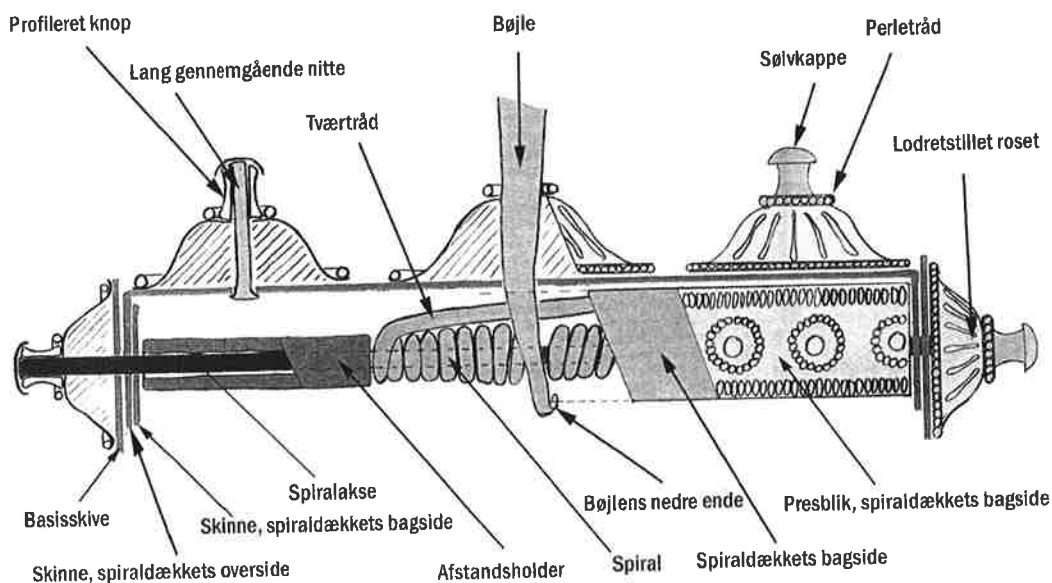


Fig. 8. Standardized sketch showing the complexity of a rosette fibula. From A. Skjødt 2009, p. 157.

corresponds very well with the fibulae that we know from the Roman Empire (*cf.* Behrens 1950, pp. 1 ff.), where fibulae with craftsman's inscriptions and imprints are common.

As mentioned above, the four rosette fibulae from Himlingøje 2, Værløse, Skovgårde, and Lundegårde all belong to the same circle of workshops in Zealand, and two of them, Himlingøje 2 and Skovgårde, are so alike that they could have been produced at the same workshop. The only difference is the position of the die-stamped plaque on the back of the spiral cover (*cf.* Lund Hansen *et al.* 1995, p. 213). There is no reason to conclude that the two fibulae were produced by the same person, which I have previously taken as a fact (Imer 2003, p. 66), but one could imagine that the craftsmen within this group of workshops had good contact with each other and were inspired by each other to put their fabrication marks on the precious fibulae they produced, just like the weapon smiths in the Roman provincial workshops (*cf.* Rald 1994, pp. 231 f.).

In this respect, it is remarkable that the inscription on the rosette fibula from Næsbjerg has quite a different character from the fibulae produced in Zealand, as the inscription has been carried out in wobble engraving. This underlines the fact that this particular fibula belongs to a different group of workshops.

Some might protest that if the verb *\*tal-gijan* was to take the fibula as an object, you would expect to find the same verb on the fibula from Gårdlösa. But this fibula is not cut out of sheet metal like the rosette fibulae; on the contrary, it is cast in one piece like cross-bow fibulae in general. Therefore, it is only to be expected to find the abbreviation for another verb (probably) *\*wurkian* ON *yrkja*, which means 'to work'. In addition, you could argue that it is unlikely that the craftsmen were allowed to 'deface' the precious fibulae by putting their names on the pin-casing, but this is a thought grounded in pure speculation about what Iron Age people believed to be pretty and prestige. Almost half of the rosette fibulae in Denmark carry ornamentation in

the form of either hatching or wiggle engraving on the pin-casing (Skjødts 2009, p. 164), and it is very likely that the presence of runes was thought to be some kind of decoration that emphasized the uniqueness of the fibula.

The runic inscriptions on fibulae in the Late Roman Iron Age are an important contribution to drawing a picture of the tradition or writing where writing was used by the elite and the craftsmen, in principle. Almost half of the roughly 50 runic inscriptions of the period (Map 2) can be interpreted as craftsmen's inscriptions where the craftsman put his mark of quality on the object before distributing it. In one case we might even see the same craftsman on two objects of very different kinds, namely, the necklace from Strårup and the shield boss fitting from Gudme (Imer 2006a, pp. 11 f.).

Many other inscriptions from the period can be interpreted as owner's inscriptions, *e.g.* on the sword equipment like the sheath, the chape, the bandoleer, *etc.*, and maybe we see the rest of a god's name on the back of the little statuette from Køng (Fig. 9) which can be compared to the Roman *lares* (Imer 2006b).

Practice inscriptions, *i.e.* inscriptions where the rune carver has practised writing, or where the master has taught the student, are totally absent in the runic material. Not a single bone or a piece of wood with inscriptions pointing to this very important process in learning to write has been retrieved, but they must have existed. No accounts of trade, cattle or household are found in the material, just as writing connected to administration, legislation *etc.* is absent. In fact, it seems that runic writing was developed exclusively to imitate the part of Roman traditions of writing that the Norsemen knew, namely the writing that appeared on luxury goods imported into the Nordic areas. Apparently, writing was not developed out of a practical need for administration or written legislation, and writing was very rare, often connected to craftsmen.

More than half of the 50 inscriptions preserved in a period of about 350 years, *c.* 160 – *c.* 400 AD, derive from a single generation, namely phase C1b. Among these are the fibulae and most of the military equipment discussed above. This means that between 20 and 30 inscriptions derive from a period of more than 200 years, and it is evident that this number of inscriptions is not enough for keeping a tradition alive. The knowledge and the technique must be kept in use, and you have to make sure that knowledge is passed on to students. Therefore, we must assume that the inscriptions preserved make up only a small percentage of the whole tradition of writing, which must have existed in the Late Roman Iron Age. One must also bear in mind that the present picture of the tradition of writing might change radically if the right conditions of preservation allow new finds of runic inscriptions, such as the numerous wooden letters that were found in the Roman fortress of Vindolanda in the north of England (Bowman 1994). These are the terms when working with the earliest tradition of writing in the North, where so relatively scanty material is at hand.

Still, we can elaborate on the function of writing when referring to the fact that writing is connected to a rather limited circle of people; writing is found on precious objects, *e.g.* the women's rosette fibulae and the parade equipment of silver in the male sphere. Runic inscriptions are almost only present on silver fibulae (the fibulae from Næsbjerg being an exception), and if we turn to the male sphere, the inscriptions appear on silver and bronze shield bosses, normally connected to the upper levels of the armies (Carnap-Bornheim and Ilkjær 1996, p. 481); no inscription has ever been found on shield bosses of iron, although the preservation conditions in the bogs would allow them to be preserved. This indicates that the elite had the need for and access to the new means of communication, runic

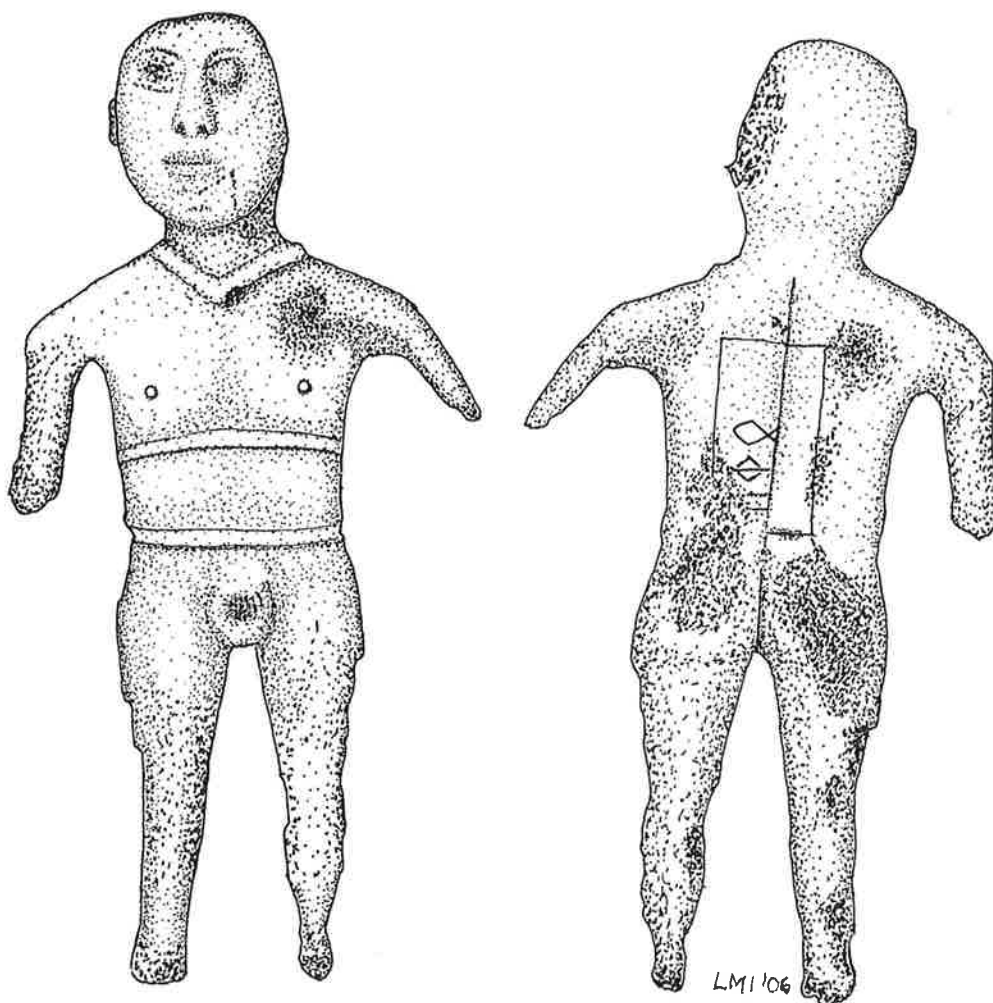


Fig. 9. The statuette from Køng. Drawing: The author.

writing, whereas, to a great extent, the craftsmen had the knowledge to use it. Perhaps the tradition was kept alive among the craftsmen?

When looking at the relationship between runic inscriptions and inscriptions written with Greek and Latin letters, there is another detail worth mentioning. Runic inscriptions are characterized by the fact that they appear on objects belonging to the elite and on military parade equipment produced in the North. On the other hand, if we turn to the male graves from the period, we find the Latin and Greek inscriptions on the Roman import

that followed the magnate or the prince into his grave. Here the magnate is presented as a diplomat with grand foreign relations, showing his wealth and status by the exclusive Roman imports. On the other hand, if he was to present himself as a Germanic warrior and show his strength towards his Nordic neighbours, he presented himself with the domestically produced warrior equipment, the runic inscriptions underlining his importance as a Germanic warrior. To a high extent, writing was used to underline the status that was so important for presenting the elite, and in the

Late Roman Iron Age it was very convenient to choose between different systems of writing, depending on the image a person wanted to present.

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