

**T**homas Birkmann. *Von Ågedal bis Malt: Die skandinavischen Runeninschriften vom Ende des fünften bis Ende des neunten Jahrhunderts*. Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde 12. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1995. 475 pages.

This volume in the *Ergänzungsbände* series resembles the kind of publication formerly called *Forschungsbericht*, a species in danger of extinction since the number of new books, articles, and papers makes it increasingly difficult to keep track of all contributions in the field. This is true for academic studies in general, and certainly for a discipline as broad in scope as runology. To survey all of it single-handedly must be called courageous, even if the author confines himself to the inscriptions from the late fifth century to the late ninth century. The latter criterion is not strictly applied in this book, though, which is fortunate, because the more we look into the matter, the more obvious it becomes how shaky the foundations are on which the chronology of the oldest inscriptions traditionally rests. Birkmann may have defined his field of investigation as the period from the late fifth to the late ninth century, but as a matter of fact he also discusses the sound system of Old Germanic at the time of the earliest inscriptions, as well as the development of eleventh-century runic writing.

The book consists of an introduction (1–10), six chapters (plus an excursus on syncope and an appendix on tenth-century developments), a bibliography, and 35 plates with black-and-white images. Regrettably, there is no index. In the introduction, Birkmann discusses the various possibilities of arranging and presenting the mass of heterogeneous data that runology confronts us with, and he accounts for his own working method. A central place has been given to the linguistic and runographic changes that occurred in the second half of the first millennium, and, the author says, it is out of this interest that the structure of the book emerged. The six chapters that follow deal with various aspects of runology as a modern

discipline. Not all aspects have been addressed, though. The century-old question of how and where runic writing started, for instance, is not taken up (cf. 9), partly perhaps because the question falls outside the defined period, but mainly because the author felt *Nihil novum sub sole*. I sympathize with this point of view, but whether it justifies leaving it out completely is another matter. Likewise omitted in the book is Ènver A. Makaev's theory that the oldest inscriptions represent an archaic koiné language (*Jazyk drevnejšix runičeskix nadpisej: Lingvističeskij i istoriko-filologičeskij analiz* [Moskva: Akademia Nauk SSSR, 1965], translated as *The Language of the Oldest Runic Inscriptions: A Linguistic and Historical-Philological Analysis* by John Meredig in consultation with Elmer H. Antonsen, *Kungliga Vitterhets historie och antikvitets akademiens handlingar, Filologisk-filosofiska serien 21* [Stockholm: Kungliga Vitterhets historie och antikvitets akademien, 1996]). I do not believe Makaev was right, but I would have welcomed some discussion of his thesis. It is doubly unfortunate that Birkmann does not cite Makaev, since Makaev's goal and method — drawing on the evidence of archaeology as well as epigraphy and linguistics in order to arrive at a relative chronology — are identical with his. Moreover, although Makaev concentrates on the period before the “transitional” inscriptions, he makes detailed comments on some of them, which Birkmann has missed, and he emphasizes that they “could turn out to be crucial in solving a number of problems related to the description of the linguistic and graphic evolution of runic inscriptions, as well as their spacial stratigraphy,” though he warns explicitly against drawing hasty conclusions (Makaev 10).

The first chapter (11–38), “Schriftgeschichtliche Entwicklungen der Runenreihen” (but listed as “Alphabetgeschichtliche Entwicklungen der Runenreihen” in the table of contents, probably from an earlier draft), deals with runes as a phonemic system and discusses a number of changes in the relationship between the available graphs and the phonemic inventory. Also briefly touched upon are the changes in graphic realization. Chapter 2, “Archäolo-

gische Grundlagen und die frühesten Runeninschriften" (39–67), is concerned with archaeology as an auxiliary discipline that enables scholars to date the artifacts on which the runes were inscribed. As Birkmann remarks, runologists, not to mention philologists, are often remarkably ignorant in archaeological matters. He rightly stresses (46) that the idea of Denmark as the cradle of runic writing must be revised if some of the early Danish bog finds can be proved to stem from outside the area, as is being advocated by some archaeologists (see Jørgen Ilkjær's recent contribution "Runeindskrifter fra mosefund i Danmark — kontekst og oprindelse," in *Frisian Runes and Neighbouring Traditions: Proceedings of the First International Symposium on Frisian Runes at the Fries Museum, Leeuwarden, 26–29 January 1994*, ed. Tineke Looijenga and Arend Quak, *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik* 45 (1996): 63–75). In chapter 3, "Archäologisch datierbare Runeninschriften" (68–142), Birkmann discusses those Late Primitive Norse inscriptions which are datable by archaeological means, either through the artifact itself (clasps, bracteates, combs, etc.) or by association (grave type, grave goods). The emergence of parasitic vowels, the problematic **erilar** inscriptions, and other linguistic issues are treated in chapter 4, "Runologische Konsequenzen aus den archäologischen Datierungen" (143–66). Sandwiched in between chapter 4 and chapter 5 is an excursus of twenty pages on the occurrence of syncope, on which see below. In chapter 5, "Die Entstehung des Jüngerer Futhark, 675–750" (187–226), the author deals with the transition from the older to the younger futhark, which seems to be the center of his interest. In chapter 6, the last and largest section, entitled "Die Inschriften aus der Zeit von ca. 700 bis gegen 900" (227–390), all inscriptions which can "with some certainty" be dated to the eighth and ninth centuries are presented and discussed, the most prominent being the inscription from Rök.

Methodologically the book is not very satisfying. The underlying point of departure appears to be the conception of a near perfect fit between the phonemes of Old Germanic and the graphs of the older futhark.

As this reflects general opinion, this may seem a natural thing to do, but it is one thing to conform to consensus and another to turn it into a guiding principle, and it would probably have been better if Birkmann had discussed his premises. I would have liked to know, for instance, whether Birkmann regards runic inscriptions as a reflection of a once-spoken language. As it was Birkmann's goal to study the language changes in the North in the period 500–900 A.D., the answer can only be yes. But how does this tally, then, with the possibility, advocated by Klingenberg and acknowledged by Birkmann (cf. 20, "wohl im Dienste der [Zahlen-]Magie"), that the choice and the use of runes, and hence the spelling of words, may have served magical purposes? The question is fundamental, since the two approaches mutually exclude each other. Fortunately Birkmann does not draw up a new method of runological analysis based on premises that remain unproven. His approach is that of a true philologist and thus essentially descriptive. In large parts of the book the author summarizes the research of other scholars and comments on their findings. He thus moves from find to find, and from interpretation to interpretation, and it is this feature that gives the book its appearance of a *Forschungsbericht*. At times the author tends to become long-winded — possibly out of a wish to give all theories a fair share of attention — and the use of asides and digressions does little to ameliorate that impression. In addition the author provides us occasionally with information that is irrelevant for our understanding of the inscriptions. What purpose does it serve to know (288) that earlier this century the runic stones of Kälvesten and Sparlösa were both taken out of a church wall? Birkmann appears to have been aware of the book's diffuse, and at times chaotic, structure. In the introduction he compares and discusses the various ways of presenting runic data, and one gets the impression that before turning to his own working method, he deliberately stresses the inconsistencies and methodological shortcomings that he found in other runological handbooks. Regarding his own book, the author, after pointing out the importance of archaeology for dating runic inscriptions,

emphasizes that “alle weiteren Einordnungen von z.B. Steininschriften können nur aufgrund von runologischen und/oder sprachlichen Kriterien erfolgen” (6). It appears, then, that he intended to start with those inscriptions that can be dated archaeologically. The morphological changes reflected in these inscriptions should make it possible, theoretically at least, to arrive at a chronologically fixed scheme of subsequent changes. His next step would be to turn to those inscriptions that could not be dated archaeologically and see where they fitted in. Unfortunately, the first group, on which the method fundamentally rests, is too limited to allow any definite conclusions. As a result the whole idea never gets off the ground, and Birkmann’s use of archaeology as an auxiliary tool is neither new nor revealing. The method, in the way it is implemented, does not lead to a new and better understanding of the inscriptions, and Birkmann’s decision to discuss the archaeologically dated inscriptions in a separate chapter therefore has no obvious advantages. Some inscriptions are dealt with in chapter 3, others in chapter 6, and some in both. This feature contributes to the chaotic impression that the book makes, especially as there is no index to tell us the various places where an inscription is discussed. It certainly affects the book’s usefulness (cf. the author’s comments on Moltke’s *Runes and Their Origin* on pp. 3–4).

In his interpretation of individual inscriptions, the author generally judges cautiously. He is not reluctant, however, to take sides in scholarly issues, and his comments are mostly sound and to the point. Even in those cases where the author’s conclusion does not add much to our knowledge (e.g., 255), the extensive treatments often help to sharpen our views, if only through the questions the author raises. In spite of this, some remarks may be in order. Personally, I would have welcomed the author’s devoting a separate section to the various stages of the process between the discovery of the inscription and its rendering in a modern language: (1) find, (2) graphemic identification, (3) transliteration, (4) transcription, (5) interpretation, and (6) translation. Working out what conditions are required to proceed from one step to the other is fundamental in dealing

with runic inscriptions. The question receives scant treatment in handbooks of runology, and we cannot really blame Birkmann for not addressing it, but still he has missed a chance by not giving it proper attention. The inconsistent typographical treatment of transliteration and transcription is also unfortunate, transliterations being set in boldface type (125), in line with prevailing convention, or in roman type (121, 248, 254, etc.), and apparently even italicized (152). The readings themselves are generally reliable. Not all of Birkmann’s readings are based on personal observation, but quite a few apparently are (see the “Vorwort”), and to expect an author to check all readings of Krause/Jankuhn, Moltke/Jacobsen, etc., would be asking too much. More reason for concern is that not all relevant literature has been taken into account. A reading of Svend Aage Knudsen’s “Runestenen fra Malt sogn nu på museum,” *Mark og montre: Årbog for kunst- og kulturhistorie* (Ribe) 27 (1991): 3–23 (here 14), for instance, could have prevented him from regarding the reading **bilikikr** in the Malt inscription as being established beyond doubt (361). In the excursus on the enclitic definite article (236–38) there is no reference to Gustav Neckel, “Die Entwicklung von schwachtonigem altnordischem *u* (*o*) vor *m* aus helleren Vokalen und der altnordische Substantivartikel,” in *Festschrift, Eugen Mogk zum 70. Geburtstag, 19. Juli 1924*, ed. Elisabeth Karg-Gasterstädt (Halle an der Saale: Max Niemeyer, 1924), 387–412. Neckel’s premises may be antiquated now, but his remarks on the use of the enclitic in *Hárbarðsljóð* have lost none of their value (397–99). In his discussion of the sound value of the thirteenth rune in the same chapter (261–63), Birkmann might have directed his readers to Heinrich Beck’s brief but useful “Sprachliche Argumente zum Problem des Runenaufkommens,” *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 101 (1972): 1–13. And on p. 181 Birkmann might have referred to Finnur Jónsson and Ellen Jørgensen, “Nordiske pilegrimsnavne i Broderskabsbogen fra Reichenau,” *Aarbøger for nordisk oldkyndighed og historie* 1923, 1–36. It is only fair to stress, however, that these omissions generally do not affect the

value of the interpretation, and they are counterbalanced by the many useful references and new leads that the author presents.

Particularly enjoyable is Birkmann's clear and up-to-date treatment of the emergence of the younger futhark, an enigmatic development that has baffled generations of runologists (187–226). A proper understanding of the transition(s) has been hindered, perhaps, by the idea that the futharks emerged as clear-cut, fully developed writing systems. It is quite plausible that at some stage there was a writing reform of some kind, but we must also allow for earlier as well as later tendencies to keep up the old system by patching up its deficiencies, which must have become increasingly apparent as time went by and the language itself changed. These modifications, minor as they may have been, gradually dissolved the old system, without necessarily turning it into a completely new one. As an outdated, increasingly deficient system, it may have lingered for some time. Simultaneously, in other areas, possibly centers of trade, there must have been a need for a simplified and more efficient row of runic signs, so at a certain transitional stage, different writing systems may have been in use in different socioeconomic areas. In practice, however, when trying to understand the transition, we have to work with reconstructed writing systems, which are treated as if they represent successive and separate linguistic layers on top of each other, an unfortunate procedure that tends to make us neglect local and social diversities. Yet, in spite of this inherent weakness in method, considerable progress has been made in recent decades. Bohumil Trnka appears to have been the first to use modern linguistic tools in his analysis, and his example was followed by Einar Haugen and, in the early eighties, by scholars like Aslak Liestøl and Arend Quak. These last two contributors both see the continued and rigid appliance in Late Primitive Norse of the acrophonic principle as being instrumental in the development of the younger futhark. In addition, this period saw the loss of *voice* as a feature that on the level of phonemic identification distinguished voiced stops and spirants from their voice-

less counterparts. In the preceding period, these sounds had represented independent phonemes, but the new pattern of distribution that accompanied the loss turned them into complementarily distributed allophones, thus obviating the need to distinguish them graphically. The importance of these changes for a proper understanding of the emergence of the younger futhark is widely recognized now, though as yet no single theory has won general acceptance. Birkmann summarizes the various attempts competently, and this discussion on "Theorien zur Entstehung des Jüngerer Futhark" is one of the best in the book.

Rather unsatisfying on the other hand is the "Exkurs: Zur Synkope in den germanischen Sprachen" (167–86), a title that is somewhat misleading, since half of the excursus does not deal with syncope but with the emergence of parasitic vowels. On p. 166 we learn why Birkmann has chosen to treat these phenomena together, the main reason being that he regards them as contemporaneous and intrinsically related: syncope led to uncertainty as to the position and quality of vowels in a given word, thus to the appearance of parasitic vowels in writing. At the focus of Birkmann's attention is the runic inscription on the Ribe cranium, dating from the early eighth century. The argument is that since in all languages *ulfr* was an *a*-stem, the second *-u* in *ulfur* must be a parasitic vowel. But are we really dealing with a parasitic vowel here? This status of *-ur* is not absolutely certain, and alternative readings have been put forward. On p. 180 Birkmann dismisses the idea of a suffix *-urr*, pointing out that this would require the spelling *ulfur* (\*-rr > -rr; cf. Aage Kabell, "Die Inschrift auf dem Schädelfragment aus Ribe," *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 93 [1978]: 38–47, here 40–42). But apparently there was some confusion in the use of *r* and *ᚱ* (the carver also wrote *uiᚱr*, and not *uiᚱr*), so a transcription *Ulfurr* cannot be ruled out. Another possibility is *Ulfuðr*, with loss of /ð/ before /r/, as occasionally attested in other runic inscriptions from the early Viking Period (cf. Oseberg *sikrīr* 'Sigríðr' and Rök *mīr* 'meðr'). However, as long as the meaning of the text cannot be established with certainty, it is probably better not to emend the in-

scription. So, yes, **ulfur** seems to contain a parasitic vowel. This means, Birkmann says, that the parasitic vowel /u/ in the nom. sing. case ending, well known from later Icelandic, emerged at a much earlier stage than is generally believed. To support this thesis, Birkmann draws up two lists. In the first one (178), he presents a number of 8th-century runic words, all of them *u*-stems, in which the stem vowel seems to have been retained. Birkmann examines these apparently unsyn-copated forms, eliminates some of them, and minimizes the importance of others. But why should we eliminate the testimony of the Rök inscription simply because poetic texts, as Birkmann puts it (179), often reflect “einen älteren Sprachzustand”? And is it really acceptable to discount the frequently occurring form *sunu* (acc. of \**sonur*, Old Norse *sonr*, a *u*-stem) because words of this class frequently showed paradigmatic variation? The second list does not convince me either (181). In it Birkmann has collected evidence to support his idea of an early occurrence of the parasitic vowel. Particularly unsatisfying I find the argument that Old Icelandic scribes, when dividing a word at the end of a line, preferred to segment it CV–CV or CVC–CV. Does this scribal practice really prove the existence, in spoken language, of a parasitic vowel that remained unmarked in writing? And even if this were true, would it have any bearing on the plausibility of a parasitic vowel in **ulfur**? To Birkmann the answer is yes, and for obvious reasons. In his eyes the second *u* in **ulfur** does not merely represent a parasitic vowel, he also claims it is an early manifestation of an overall change that also induced the modern Icelandic case ending *-ur*. This conception of course leaves little room for an intermediate Old Icelandic case ending *-r* in nom. sing. masc. forms. In my opinion, this view has little to commend it. What need is there to assume a direct connection between late-thirteenth-century Icelandic case endings in *-ur* and the runic word **ulfur** from eighth-century Ribe? Is it likely that the Ribe morph **-ur** is an early manifestation of a process that also affected Icelandic? The changes may be similar, but I doubt that we are dealing with one and the same change. If there was a parasitic vowel in early Old

Norse case endings, the skalds consistently failed to take notice of it. Birkmann explains this difficulty by assuming that in case endings like that of *maðr*, the feature voice was deliberately suppressed by the skalds. Once again the characteristics of poetic language are held responsible for the incompatibility between theory and attested data. Another incongruity would be the fact that in Norway, in the period between 1050 and 1150, the parasitic vowels that sporadically occur are mostly /a/ or /æ/, seldom /e/ or /i/, but never /u/. This seems to suggest the occurrence of parallel, mutually independent processes, all of which resulted in the development of a parasitic vowel, but at different times and with different vowel qualities. If **ulfur** contains a parasitic vowel, it may reflect a development that was equally limited in time and place. Questions like these Birkmann does not address. He does not consider the possibility of geographical and/or chronological diversity, nor does he distinguish between sporadic, possibly accidental occurrences and large-scale manifestations of the phenomenon. Birkmann's main error, however, is his attempt to establish a wide chronological gap between forms with retained stem vowel (like *sunu*) and early instances of what could (but does not *have* to) be a parasitic vowel /u/. There is no such chronological gap. What Birkmann should have done is ask himself whether there could be a connection of some kind between the two phenomena. Is it conceivable that the occurrence of an etymologically false stem vowel (as in the Ribe form **ulfur**) was influenced by the existence of forms like *sunu*? The short *u*-stems were after all the declension in which the thematic vowel held out longest, and it may have been from this morphological niche that it spread, by way of analogy, to the other vocalic stems, where the original stem vowel had disappeared. Is it a coincidence that in **ulfur** the alleged parasitic vowel has the same sound value? This again, Birkmann ought to have discussed, but he does not. To complicate matters, the second *u* in **ulfur** may betray the influence of neighbouring Frisia, where *a*-stems seem to have rounded their thematic vowels to /u/ (with loss of final *z/r*). Of all early medieval centers of trade in Scandi-

navia, Ribe must have been the one most exposed to Frisian influence. Influence of this kind cannot be ruled out, especially since sociolinguistics has established the dominant role of status in processes that steer language change. All of these aspects may have contributed to the emergence of forms like **ulfur**, be it alone or in combination. This does not rule out the possibility that we could be dealing with a parasitic vowel, as advocated by the author. I have no problem with that. It is only when it comes to drawing conclusions that I find myself in disagreement with Birkmann. I leave it at this here. A critical survey of the occurrence of syncope and of the emergence of parasitic vowels is always welcome, but these are many-sided phenomena, and trying to deal with them as an excursus was probably ill advised.

I will conclude with a few comments on the interpretations of certain individual inscriptions, or parts of them, that are dealt with in chapter 6, not because the author's treatment of them is necessarily wrong, but because some additional remarks may stimulate discussion. The sequence **sibiuiauari**, found on the top of the Rök stone (cf. 302–7), may also be transcribed as *sibju viavari* 'protector of/to the clan' (cf. **ituituaki etu vettvangi** in the same inscription) and compared with *Sifjar verr*, a skaldic epithet of Þórr that is usually translated as 'Sif's husband', but that may originally have involved the stem *verja* 'defend'.

My second comment concerns the interpretation of the inscription on the runestone from Malt (361–72). Birkmann was the first to link **afr** with Old Norse *afr* 'beer', and he maintains this identification in his book. Ottar Grønvik used this meaning in both of his explanations, but in ways that practically exclude each other. As I see it, there is little basis for this meaning, since it forces us to argue away the pejorative meaning of the Old Norse word. Other parts of the inscription are even more problematic, because in spite of the runes being clear and legible, the text here seems linguistically meaningless. It is not sufficiently realized that the Malt stone displays features that are often regarded as being characteristic of illiterate carvers: the use of double runes, repetition of

sequences, the occurrence of runes ordered in accordance with the futhark, and possibly also the unusual choice of the stone itself. If the Malt inscription was indeed manufactured by a largely illiterate carver, then the phrase **uifrpur : karpi : afraftasinifaupr**, which has been much commented upon (cf. 363–65), may turn out to be no more than a poor attempt to produce something like "Véfrøðr gerði (stein) eptir fðður sinn." Since I have elsewhere interpreted **afr** as meaning *aur*, I may be pulling the rug out from under my own feet here, but to quote Jöran Sahlgren, "Vetenskapsmannen har skyldigheten att vara objektiv," and we must always keep our eyes open for alternative solutions.

To move on to the Ribe cranium, dealt with on pp. 179–80 and 230–31: it is hard to see how **hutiur** can stand for *Hotýr* 'the high god', since Germanic /au/ is spelled **au** in the inscription. An alternative transcription could be *\*hundertýr* 'mighty Týr', in which *\*hund* constitutes a magnifying prefix, but one could also think of *\*hundertýr* or *\*hund-dýr* with a pejorative first part *\*hund-* 'dog, hound'. In that case it might be tempting to regard the first line as being a renunciation formula (*renunciatio*), which would accord well with the meaning 'wolf' that Birkmann and Stoklund propose for **ulfur**, albeit as a nomen proprium. A bit doubtful I find the author's statement that **paimauiarki** can be transcribed and interpreted as *þæim(a) á-verki* 'against this wound / bodily injury' (231). The interpretation assumes the existence of a word *\*áverkr* (m.) 'wound' that finds no support in Old Norse dictionaries.

It may be true that from the point of view of methodology, *Von Ågedal bis Malt* leaves something to be desired, but on the whole it is an impressive piece of work and a real pleasure to browse through. The author does not offer answers to all the questions he raises, but his thorough knowledge of the various aspects of runological interpretation makes his comments highly stimulating.

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