

LANGUAGE CHANGE IN THE RUNIC INSCRIPTIONS OF DENMARK BETWEEN 500 AND 700

by
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Up to around AD 700, the runic inscriptions of Denmark and Scandinavia were carved by means of the 24-letter futhork, which in the course of the early Viking age was replaced by a 16-letter runic alphabet. On several previous occasions I have argued in favour of the basic linguistic unity of the Scandinavian inscriptions up to approximately AD 500, and this is presumably why the organizers of the symposium* where this paper was first presented, kindly asked me to lecture on language change in the runic 24-letter material deriving from the period 500-700, with special reference to the inscriptions attested in Denmark, which in those days encompassed not just present-day Denmark but Slesvig and Skåne, Halland and Blekinge as well.

Fortunately, the bracteate legends are not relevant to my presentation on this occasion, even though they may have been produced for up to fifty years after 500. My sense of relief springs not just from numerical considerations – among the over 200 known bracteates carrying runic legends, almost half were discovered in medieval Denmark – but also from the degree of difficulty with which their interpretation is normally associated. I think that Moltke (1985:112-14) is justified in saying that among the Danish runic bracteates only five or six legends are 'intelligible'. The main reason, however, why the runic bracteates are not relevant to our present purposes is that their language is the same as that of the inscriptions from before 500. The grammatical endings of bracteate forms such as, for example, nsm. **laukaz** 'leek' (Års 2), **uiniz** 'friend' (Sønder Rind) and asn. **auja** 'luck' (Skodborg) are identical to those characteristic of the runic language recorded between AD 200 and 500, cf. nsm. **erilaz** (Lindholmen amulet), **hlewagastiz** (Gallehus gold horn) and asn.

horna (Gallehus gold horn). This is not to say that the runic bracteates show no features anticipating Norse developments. Examples are the monophthongization of *ai* to long *a* /a:/ before *h* seen in **fahide** '(he) painted' (Halskov), **fahi** '(I) paint' (Åsum) and the assimilation of *ht* to *tt* in **wurte** '(I) wrought' (Tjurkö), cf. **faihido** '(I) painted' (Vetteland stone) and **worahto** '(I) worked' (Tune stone). But such developments are likely to have arisen in the spoken chain (at the *parole* level) and do not change the overall picture, namely that the bracteate language was an Early Runic idiom (in the sense used in my 2000 book) and not a Norse one.

If the bracteate material thus is to be left aside, what runic evidence do we have for the language situation in Denmark between 500 and 700? Runic items that can be assigned to this period on archaeological grounds are virtually non-existent, as pointed out by Birkmann (1995:6). Barnes (1998:450-51, 457) therefore resorts to typological arguments, stating that legends which combine \mathfrak{J} /a/ (formerly /j/, cf. below) with \mathfrak{g} **g** or \mathfrak{d} **d** can be classified as transitional. Among the eleven runic inscriptions from Scandinavia fulfilling the requirements of Barnes's typology, four stem from medieval Denmark, namely the following stones from Blekinge: Björketorp, Gummarp, Istaby and Stentofte. Although not archaeologically datable, the four stones are also regarded by Birkmann (1995:114) as belonging to 'unsere[n] wichtigsten Quellen für die postulierte späturnordische Sprachstufe' ['our most important sources for the purported late Proto-Norse language stage']. Consequently, we shall focus primarily on the Blekinge stones in our attempt to identify language change in Denmark pertaining to what may be called the transitional period because it spans the gap between the Early Runic era and the Viking age (500-700).

From a linguistic point of view, the Blekinge inscriptions are well suited for analysis. They are substantial and three of them, Gummarp, Istaby and Stentofte, stem from the same period (early 7th century) and from the same geographical location, namely the Sölvesborg area of Blekinge. For linguistic and runological reasons, the fourth stone, from Björketorp, about 55 kilometres to the east of Sölvesborg, is

thought to be slightly later (ca. 675, cf. Krause 1966:217). The four stones clearly belong to the same social stratum, perhaps even to the same family as the personal names carved on the Gummarp, Istaby and Stentofthen stones suggest.

I have already intimated that the runic alphabet used in the Blekinge inscriptions is the old 24-letter futhark, but in reality only 21 runes are employed. The most significant feature, however, is the fact that the Blekinge descendants of j **j** (the **jāra*-rune), S (Istaby) and J (Björketorp, Gummarp and Stentofthen), have come to denote (non-nasalized) *a* (**A**). This shows that the Norse loss of initial **j-* had occurred by this time, cf. the acrophonic principle (Early Runic **jāra-* > ON *ár* 'year'). There are several instances of J with the sound value *a* (**A**) elsewhere in Scandinavia, but the loss of initial *j-* is not likely to have taken place much earlier than AD 600. The change is not evidenced in the bracteates, and the earliest archaeologically datable find to exhibit J *a* (**A**) is the Vallentuna die from ca. 600 (Gustavsson 1989:44-5). As for the Istaby variant S , this rune is closer to the original shape of the old **jāra*-rune (j **j**). Note, for example, that the Kragehul spearshaft legend (early 6th century) had j with the sound value *j*.

In view of this evidence, it is somewhat surprising that another semi-vowel, *w-*, was retained in initial position (before back rounded vowels) in the Blekinge material, cf. the anthroponymic elements **-wolafa** (Gummarp), **-wolafz** (Stentofthen) and **-wulafa**, etc. (Istaby). The earliest attestations of the loss of initial *w-* in Denmark are the forms **uþin** 'Woden' and **unin** pp. 'won' on the Ribe cranium, which is archaeologically datable to ca. 725. The 8th-century Sölvesborg stone also exhibits loss of *w-*, cf. **urti** 'wrought' vs. **wurte** on the Tjurkö bracteate. The earliest instance of initial *w-* loss in Scandinavia may be the form **orte** 'wrought' on the (6th-century) By stone from Norway. But uncertainty attaches itself to the correct reading of the second rune, which Grønvik (1996:126) transliterates as **u** (**oute**).

As for the obstruents, the Blekinge stones exhibit essentially the same system as that of the Early Runic corpus, which is identical also to that reconstructed for Proto-Germanic. In, e.g., Gummarp

hAþuwolafa, Stentofte **hAþuwolafz** (personal name) and Björketorp **uþArABA** 'harmful', the reflexes of Gmc. **f* and **þ* (< IE (pre-Gmc.) **p* and **t*) are clearly preserved in medial voiced surroundings, whereas Gummarp **stABA** 'staves', Stentofte **hAþorumz** 'he-goats', **hedera**, Björketorp **hAidz** 'brightness' are likely to have had voiced fricative allophones of /b/ and /d/ (< IE **bb* and **db*). The split of, e.g., the [ð] allophone from Gmc. */d/ and merger with /þ/ may thus not have been completed until the eighth century when forms such as **uiþz** 'against' (cf. ON *víðr*, OE *wíðer*) and **uþin** *Óðinn* (cf. OE *Wōden*) carved on the Ribe cranium testify to the restructuring of the obstruent system. But there may be an adumbration of the change to come in Björketorp **welAdAude**, if this form is taken as a noun, as done by Antonsen 1975:87-8 ('insidious death') and Krause 1966:216; here **þ** and not **d** is the rune to be expected, cf. OE *dēap*, OHG *tōd* 'death' vs. the (vernerized) final obstruent of the adjective, cf. OE *dēad*, OHG *tōt* 'dead'. The confusion here may be interpreted as a coalescence between [ð] and /þ/ in medial position, cf. ON *dauði* 'death', *dauðr* 'dead'.

By the end of the early Viking age the reflex of Gmc. **-z* (y) had coalesced with *r* (R) as evidenced by, e.g., the etymologically 'incorrect' uses of **-r** and **-z** in **raknhiltr sustiz** 'Ragnhild's sister' in the Tryggevælde inscription. On the Blekinge stones (and elsewhere in Scandinavia at this time), y **z** and R **r** were used with remarkable etymological consistency except for **Afatz** 'after' in the Istaby legend. In my view, the Istaby rune **-z** may well represent an orthographic error, but perhaps Antonsen (1994:63, 1975:17) is right in thinking that /-z/ had become /-r/ 'only after apicals', and that it was only in this position that a neutralization of the phonemic contrast had taken place. By and large, the consistent use of y seems to have continued in the eighth century, cf. the Flemløse 1 stone (Fyn) which has **-z** after **t** in **stätz** 'stands' (cf. Björketorp **þArutz** 'breaks'; cf. also **sitiz** on the Rök stone from Östergötland). But on the Ribe cranium, **-z** has replaced **-r** in **uiþz** 'against' (cf. Gothic *wipra*), although this may well be the only inaccurate use of **-z** (or **-r**) in this particular inscription (Stoklund 1996:204-6). By way of conclusion, we may say that the coalescence of

/-z/ with /-r/ is not likely to have been among the earliest Norse developments.

With regard to the vowels, *a* was syncopated in final unaccented syllables following long syllables, cf. nsm. *a*-stem forms such as Stentofte **-wolaFz**, Istaby **-wulafz** 'wolf' and Björketorp **-lausz** 'loose'. In the Stentofte counterpart to the last-mentioned form, the unaccented vowel had apparently been retained, cf. **-lasaz**, and after a short syllable *a* has survived in Stentofte 1 pers. pron. sg. **-eka**. In the earliest Danish Viking-age inscriptions, *a*-syncope is also well attested, for example in nsm. *a*-st. **uþin Óðinn** (Ribe cranium) and **[st]Ain** 'stone' (Flemløse 1 stone), both forms exhibiting also consonant assimilation ($-nn < *n\z < *na\z$). The earliest instances of *i*-syncope to occur in Scandinavia are found in the Björketorp legend, which has **haidz** (< Gmc. **haidi\z*) 'brightness' and **barutz** 'breaks', where in both cases the unaccented vowel was retained in the corresponding Stentofte forms, cf. **hidez** and **bariutip**. The Stentofte evidence with *a*-syncope in nsm. *a*-st. **-wolaFz**, but no loss of *i* in **bariutip** would seem to suggest that *a*-syncope antedated *i*-syncope. Unaccented *u* seems to have vanished after a long syllable in Björketorp **sba** (< **spahu-*, cf. ON *spo≡ŕ*) 'prophecy'. In the early Viking-age inscriptions from Sölvesborg and Helnæs, *u* disappeared after long syllables, but was retained after short ones, cf. asm. **a\smu(n)t** and **kupumu(n)t**, but **sunu** 'son' and **brupursunu** 'brother's son'. Chronologically, *i*- and *u*-syncope would appear to have lagged behind *a*-syncope in Denmark.

The runic inscriptions of Scandinavia from before AD 700 give no hints of the implementation of the *i*-mutation of back vowels. But the loss of the conditioning factor through *i*-syncope in, e.g., Björketorp **barutz** 'breaks' with its *i*-mutated ON counterpart *brytr* suggests that the phonemicisation of *i*-umlaut must have occurred prior to, or at the same time as, the syncope of *i*. In general, the younger futhark inscriptions of the early Viking age do not render the new *i*-mutated vowels graphemically, but in the legend on the Ribe cranium the digraph **ia** (for *æ*) in the noun dsm. **uiarki** *værki* 'pain' (< Gmc. **warki-*, cf. ON *verkr*) is nevertheless likely to denote the *i*-mutated reflex of *a*

(Stoklund 1996:206). We conclude that *i*-umlaut cannot have been initiated later than the syncope of the conditioning vowel.

The earliest Danish and Scandinavian attestations of breaking of *e* before unaccented *a* and *u* are probably Björketorp **hAerAmA-** (ON **hjarm-*) 'rest' and Istaby **hAeru-** (ON *hjo7r-*) 'sword'. A somewhat later example of breaking before *u* is the nsf. form **hiAlb** (< Gmc. **helpō-*) 'help' on the Ribe cranium. Traditionally, the dating of the phonemicisation of breaking has been linked to the syncope of *a* and *u* (Brøndum-Nielsen I 1950: § 93 Anm. 1), an explanation which would seem to be at variance with the survival of unaccented *-a-* (**-A-**) and *-u-* (**-u-**) in the two Blekinge forms. A different hypothesis, which does not presuppose *a-* and *u-*syncope for explaining early Norse breaking, has been offered by Steblin-Kamenskij (1957:90-91). He sees the phonemicisation process as dependent on already existing phoneme clusters such as /iū, iō/, the initial segment of which (/i/) provided a model for the onset of the diphthongal allophone of short /e/ [e^a], which consequently developed into a phoneme cluster /ia/, etc. In Steblin-Kamenskij's explanation, the inception of breaking may thus have preceded syncope as well as the phonemicisation of *i*-umlaut. On the other hand, there can be no doubt that breaking was a specifically early Norse process, which occurred independently of, e.g., breaking and back mutation in Old English, as I have shown elsewhere (Nielsen 1984).

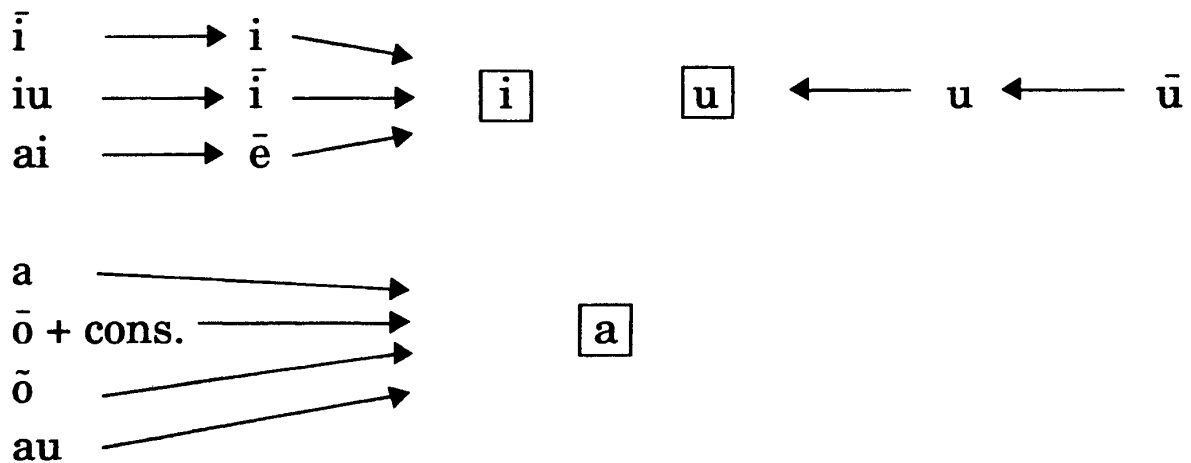
Before discussing the vowels of the unaccented syllables in more detail, it might be useful to have a look at some of the major changes that affected the inflectional endings of the Blekinge idiom. In the nouns, the apm. *a*-st. form **stAbA** 'staves' in the Gummarp legend has reached the stage of reduction evidenced by Old Norse, cf. apm. *steina* 'stones' with *-a* as compared with Gothic *-ans*. No npm. *a*-st. forms are attested in the Blekinge inscriptions, but a good guess would be that they would have had endings similar to that of **stainAZ** on the eighth-century Rävsaal stone (Bohuslän), cf. ON *steinar*, **-AZ**, *-ar* being presumably developed from Gmc. **-ōz̥*. In nsm. *a*-st. **-wulAfz** 'wolf' (Istaby), unaccented *a* had disappeared through *a*-syncope, and the

same fate is likely to have applied to the accusative singular, although such forms are evidenced only elsewhere, cf. Eggja asm. **stAin** vs. Early Runic **staina**. The nom. and acc. sg. and pl. masc. *a*-st. endings of the transitional period had thus acquired specifically Norse characteristics, but when did this take place? We have already discussed the syncope of *-a(-)*. As for the reduction of **o** /o:/ to **a** /a/, it is significant that the Stentofthen legend has apf. *ō*-st. **ronoz** 'runes', whereas Björketorp and Istaby have **runAz**, both **-oz** and **-Az** being reflexes of Gmc. **-ōz̥*, – to which may be added that the regular ON descendant is apf. *rúnar*. In other words, we have a direct parallel to the npm. *a*-st. ending (< Gmc. **-ōz̥*). One interpretation of the Blekinge variants to suggest itself is that the shift from **o** /o:/ to **a** /a/ was an ongoing process, a question to which we shall return shortly. In the meantime, we shall consider a significant inflectional development affecting the verbs.

In Björketorp **baRutz** 'breaks' the inherited 3 pr.sg.ind. ending seen in Stentofthen **baRiutiþ** has been replaced. This change is likely to have been triggered by the syncope of unaccented *-i-*, which brought the fricative of the ending in direct contact with the final consonant of the verbal stem. The fricative would have been exposed to (assimilatory) changes involving manner and place of articulation as well as phonation in accordance with the consonant cluster 'rules' characteristic of the Gmc. languages. Although syncope of *-i-* did not at first occur after short syllables in Norse (cf. Rök **sitiz** 'sits'), the uncertainty ensuing from the first wave of *i*-syncope may well have created a sufficient need for a new ending to replace what had become an alveolar stop or zero ending, alternating with the fricative as markers of 3 pr.sg.ind. forms. It has been proposed that an actual sound shift of *-ð* to *-z̥* (*-R*) underlay the new 3 pr.sg. suffix (cf. Haugen 1976:158 and Brøndum-Nielsen VIII 1973:§782,1 with further references), but traditionally the change has been seen as a transfer of the 2 pr.sg. ending into the third person. From a semantic viewpoint, the third person is more indefinite ('the party spoken about', cf. Arlotto 1972:156) than the first and second persons, who are participants in the speech act, a situation which fits in with the typological observation that most languages in the world have

unmarked third person forms (Arlotto 1972:154). In semantic and formal terms, the Norse present singular has changed from a three-way model to a two-way one with marking of the first person (the speaker) and the second/third person (the others). This situation is comparable to that found in Modern Dutch, where the 2 and 3 pr.sg.ind. forms both end in *-t*, cf. the relevant forms of *blijven* 'to stay': *jij/hij blijft* vs. *ik blijf*. Whatever the explanation of the introduction of *-z* into the third singular may be, little doubt attaches itself to the chronology of the change, which happens before our very eyes in the language of the Blekinge inscriptions.

An important aspect of my 2000 book was that in Old and Viking-age Norse a triangular system of unaccented vowels had superseded the unaccented system of Early Runic with four long and three short vowels (Syrett 1994:257-78), and that, without any problems, the Norse system could be derived from the Early Runic system (Nielsen 2000:83-4, 98-103). The main sources of the three ON unaccented vowel phonemes are:

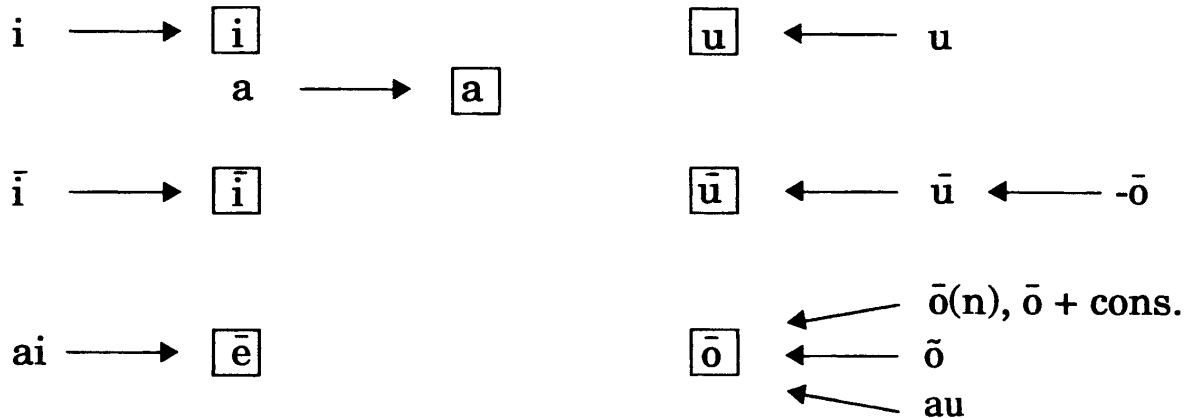


Examples: nsm. *hirðir* < **hirðiz* < Gmc. **herðiaz* 'herdsman', dsm. *syni* < **sunī* < **suniu* < *Gmc. **suneu* 'son', dsm. *armi* < Gmc. **armai* 'arm'; apm. *daga* < Gmc. **dagans* 'days', nsf. *tunga* (< Gmc. **-ōn*) 'tongue', gpm. *daga* (< IE **-ōm*) 'days', gsm. *sunar* < Gmc. **sunauz* 'son's'; apm. *sunu* <

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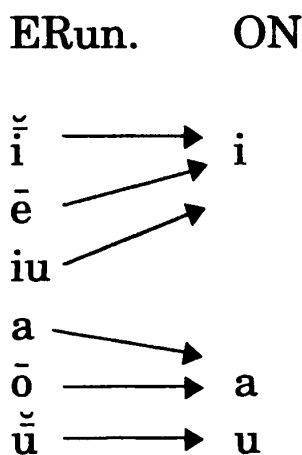
Gmc. **sununs* 'sons', gsf. *tungu* < **tungūn(n)* < **tungōn(n)*, cf. OHG gsf. *zungūn*, Goth. *tuggōns* and Noreen 1970:§151,4.

And the main sources of the Early Runic long and short unaccented subsystems are:



Examples: nsm. **-gastiz** 'guest'; asm. **staina** 'stone'; **magu** 'son' (< Gmc. **-iǰ*; **-an*; **-un*); 3 pr.sg.subj. **ligi** (*-ī* < **-jē* < Gmc. **-jai(-)*) 'lies'; dsm. **woduride** 'furious rider', **hahai** 'steed' (< Gmc. **-ai*); 1 pt.sg.ind. wk. vb. **tawido** (< Gmc. **-ōn*) '(I) made', gp. **arbijano** (< IE **-ōm*) 'heirs', gsm. **magoz** (< Gmc. **-auǰ*) 'son's'; the woman's name **aluko** (*-ū-* ?), nsf. **lapu** (< Gmc. **-ō*) 'invitation'; dsm. **kunimu(n)diu** (< Gmc. **eu*), a personal name.

The relationship between the Early Runic and Old Norse unaccented vowel systems can therefore be depicted like this:



The questions we must now ask ourselves are the following: Where is the place of the Danish inscriptions of the transitional period in all this? Do the unaccented vowels of the Blekinge idiom go with Early Runic or have they already become Norse?

Unaccented *-a* occurs in Gummarp apm. **stAbA** 'staves' (ON *stafa*, < **-an(n)* < Gmc. **-anz*) and is seen also in Istaby and Björketorp apf. **runAZ** 'runes' (< Gmc. **runōz*), but not in Stentofen **ronoz**, to judge from the ending. Taking the syncope processes and other losses and reductions into account, the long vowel in **-ōz* may well have been shortened, being identified with the short vowel in the unaccented subsystem phonetically closest at hand, viz. *a*. That this is indeed a time of transition (and consequently of variation) is suggested by gpf. **runo** in Stentofen as well as Björketorp, the former inscription having **o** in both the genitive and accusative plural, whereas Björketorp has respectively **o** and **A**, cf. also ON gpf. *rúna*, apf. *rúnar*.

Another vowel that may have been long in Early Runic is **e**. We have **e**-spellings in 3 pt.sg.ind. **sAte** 'set' (Gummarp), dpm. **hagestumz** 'stallions' (Stentofen) and **welAdAude** (Björketorp), the final **-e** of which Antonsen (1975:87-8) interprets as a dsm. *a*-st. ending, taking the word to mean 'insidious death'. The dsm. *a*-st. suffix was of course **-ai* in Germanic, a diphthong which was monophthongized to *-ē* in Early Runic. Cf. also dsm. ON *daudi*, OE *dēaðe*, OHG *tōde*, etc. But does **-e** represent a long vowel (*-ē*) here as in Early Runic, or has the quantity been reduced? If we go back to **sAte**, the suffix of this weak pt. form corresponds to that of **tawide** (Illerup and Garbølle). As the same form should undoubtedly be read with *-tt-*, cf. EN *satti*, OIcel. *setti* and 1 pt.sg.ind. **satido** '(I) set' (Rö), the vowel quantity may well have been reduced. But in **hagestumz** (Stentofen) there can be no doubt that **e** represents *i*, cf. Gmc. nsm. **hanhistaz* 'horse', **hangistaz* 'stallion', cf. Santesson 1989:226-8.

It is therefore tempting to conclude that **e** in unaccented syllables had come to represent a vowel that had merged with short unaccented *i* in the Blekinge language of the late seventh century. If in addition long *ī* and *ū* had been shortened – cf. Istaby nsm. **hAeruwulafiz** whose

ending represents a contraction of Gmc. **-ijaʒ*, presumably by way of **-iʒ* – and the reflexes of Early Runic **o** had coalesced with short *a*, a system with only the three unaccented vowels *i*, *a* and *u* characteristic of later Norse would have evolved directly from the Early Runic language. And the reflex of the dsm. *a*-st. suffix Gmc. **-ai* would have merged with *i* as in Old Norse, but there is no direct evidence as yet in the Blekinge inscriptions that gpf. **-o** (< **-ōm*) had reached the ON stage of *-a*. It is noteworthy, however, that the Norwegian Eggja inscription from ca. 700 has gpm. **gotnA** 'men', the ending of which should be seen as a reflex of Early Runic **-o**. The Eggja vowel is likely to have been both unrounded and shortened (*-a*).

When the younger, 16-letter futhark was established in the Viking age, **i**, **a** and **u** were the only vocalic runes to be retained, a fact which by Haugen (1969:55-6) is attributed to the significant information conveyed by the three unaccented vowels /*i*, *a*, *u*/, cf. e.g. ON inf. *hirða* 'care for' whose *-a* contrasts with 3 pt.sg. *-i* and 3 pt.pl. *-u*. Also Rischel (1967:9-11) draws attention to the tripartite unaccented subsystem as a factor that may have contributed towards the selection of **i**, **a**, **u** as the only runes to denote vowels in the younger futhark. As for the Blekinge idiom, there are suggestions that it may well have developed a triangular unaccented vowel system, or that at least it was very close to having developed one. But the futhark by which the Blekinge inscriptions were rendered, had not yet been exposed to a reduction in the number of vocalic runes employed: the **e** **e** and **o** **o** runes were still in use. (See also Moltke 1985:170-83 and Birkmann 1995:187-226.)

This brings me to my concluding remarks. From the material surveyed it is quite clear that significant, specifically Norse innovations were introduced in the Danish (and other Scandinavian) runic inscriptions after AD 500. Nevertheless, Scandinavian scholars in particular have availed themselves of a terminology which gives the uninitiated the impression that the idiom rendered by the older-futhark runes between the second and eighth centuries AD in Scandinavia could be regarded as one language labelled *urnordisk*, German *urnordisch* and English *Proto-Norse*, *Primitive Norse*, *Proto-Scandinavian* or *Proto-Nordic*.

Skautrup (1944:80) is completely right in stressing that 'Sproget er i periodens sidste århundreder undergået ændringer i karakter og omfang som aldrig siden ...' ['During the last centuries of the period the language underwent changes of a nature and on a scale without later parallel ...']. But like many of his colleagues he makes a distinction only between 'ældre og yngre urnordisk' ['older and younger Proto-Norse'] instead of choosing a more radical terminology which stresses the linguistic rupture after AD 500.

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Note

- * 'The Futhark and the Fur Trade' was the theme of the symposium in question, which was held on 14-15 September 2005 at Umeå University.

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