

Runes and metrics

On the metricity of the older runic inscriptions

By Michael Schulte

The paper argues that the metrical status of the older runic inscriptions has been partly overestimated in the research literature, and that it is more likely to account for traditions of elevated, stylized prose instead. In the present discussion, three diagnostic criteria will be assessed: 1. the syllable-count, 2. quantity-sensitivity and 3. the structural complexity of the alliterative scheme. The fine divide between style and metrics will be exemplified by inscriptions such as Noleby, Sjølland II, Tjurkö I and last but not least, the Stentofsten–Björketorp group. In conclusion, the Germanic long-line represents the only true metrical form within the older runic corpus, whereas the bulk of the Early Runic inscriptions are identified as artefacts of elevated prose style with typical features of formulaic diction.¹

1 Introduction

Although mainstream research favours assumptions about elaborate metrical forms of particular Early Runic texts, this is by no means imperative. The overemphasis of metrical structure is partly due to the reliance on Sieversian metrical grammar on a strictly measuring basis (e.g. Sievers 1893).² Frank Hübler, however, in his study of Viking-Age inscriptions, accounts for a state of metrical indeterminacy (cf. Naumann 1997), and Edith Marold

1. This article is based on the revised and enlarged version of my presentation at the conference *Greinir skáldskapar – The Branches of Poetry*, which was held at Reykholt, Iceland, 19 June 2008 (see Schulte 2009). An extended version of this paper was delivered at *Heldagsrunráð vid Uppsala universitet*, Institutionen för nordiska språk, Uppsala, 3 oktober 2008. I owe particular thanks to the audience at these two meetings and the anonymous reviewers.
2. Bernard Mees (2007, 2008), for instance, creates the impression that Early Runic ‘metrical’ inscriptions can be measured in terms of syllable-counting metres like the Old Norse skaldic *dróttkvætt*.

(1998: 668, note 4) supports this notion: “Die Entscheidung, ob eine Langzeile oder nur Alliteration in Prosa vorliegt, ist oft schwer zu treffen, vgl. den Versuch Hüblers (1996: 30–7) Kriterien dafür zu finden.” It is revealing that rune verses in the Viking Age are mostly fabricated by the rune smiths themselves rather than by ‘professional’ poets, hence the broad representation of minor poetry, or “Gelegenheitsdichtung”, with alliteration as its basic device (see in particular Wulf 2003). This implies a great deal of irregularities in performing the metres.

From the viewpoint of oral traditions, Ruth Finnegan is well aware of the complexity of the distinction between poetry and prose:

The apparent boundary between prose and poetry, recognized in some cultures’ typographical definitions, thus relates to a series of relative and elusive factors and in some cases may not be appropriate at all (for further discussion see also Tedlock 1972, 1977, Bright 1979, Hymes 1977, 1981, 1987: 18ff., Sherzer and Woodbury 1987, Finnegan 1977: 107 ff.). (Finnegan 1992: 140–41)³

In my view, the bulk of the Early Runic inscriptions is best characterized in terms of metrical indeterminacy which means elevated formulaic prose (cf. Schulte 2007: 58–60). One key issue is the syllable-count. Often metrical analyses take as their point of departure a skaldic Old Norse model on a syllable-counting basis, or a Sieversian scansion of Old English verse (e.g. *Beowulf*). The assumption of rather strict metrical patterns is favoured, for instance, by Bernard Mees (2007, 2008) whose scansions lean heavily on Sievers’ metrical types (in particular Sievers 1893). But as early as the 1920s, Andreas Heusler in *Deutsche Versgeschichte*, warned against a strict count which he regarded as an artificial game, viz. “Silbenzählerei”:

Eine Sache für sich war die verbreitete Neigung, die feste Silbensumme Versen aufzudrängen, die sich ihr erst annähern. Folgen hatte auch der Irrtum, silbenzählender Versbau sei der Inbegriff des Urtümlichen (§ 101). (Heusler 1925: 9)

The basic question therefore is whether Early Runic inscriptions testify to highly evolve metrical patterns or rather loose alliterative structures much in the sense of Gade (2002: 858). The critical stance towards the

3. Needless to say, metrical grammar is highly language-specific and hence dependent on the given parameters of the language in question.

syllable-count triggers another question which is related to quantity-based metres: Are we faced with quantity-sensitive metres in Early Runic? Thus, it will be shown that quantity-sensitivity which furnishes as a second diagnostic criterion, is unlikely to be confirmed positively by Early Runic inscriptions (see in particular § 7 on the Strøm whetstone).

Most importantly, however, the alliteration scheme provides a clue to the metrical status of individual runic legends. Alliteration is a feature of everyday speech, not a diagnostic criterion suitable to identify ‘elevated’ style. Alliteration occurs frequently in prose forms as well, and Thomas Markey (1976: 239–40) notes the presence of various complex forms of alliteration in Old Frisian legal texts, possibly reaching back to the oral legal tradition where alliteration functions as a mnemotechnical aid. These complex structures include, among other things, conjoined alliterative pairs and alliteration patterns spread over entire sentences. It will be argued that the Blekinge curse formula is comparable to this type of sentence alliteration (see § 6 below). Basic alliteration schemes (including long-distance alliteration) are therefore not enough to support the notion of ‘higher’ metrical forms.

A strong argument against ‘high’ metricity is furnished by textual variation and transmission processes modifying and extending basic alliterative formulae (see § 4 on the Tjurkø I bracteate, the Sjælland II bracteate and the Noleby stone). Another case in point is the curse formula which is extant in the two versions of Stentofthen and Björketorp (see § 6). As will be shown, the claim of ‘higher’ metrical organization has to be refuted in these cases. Finally, stylistic arguments in favour of versification have sometimes been put forward to justify the notion of ‘metrical’ inscriptions. Needless to say, this argumentation strategy is flawed by circular reasoning. The general expectation of ‘high’ style or, as Heinrich Beck (2001) puts it, “Stilisierung als ein Wesensmerkmal der Runenkunst,” is linked to assumptions about elaborate metrical forms and vice versa – this is particularly obvious in the case of the Tjurkø I and Sjælland II bracteates as well as the Noleby stone (see again § 4).

2 The long-line as the regular expression of Old Germanic verse

Early Germanic versification probably culminates in the long-line. Apart from the Gallehus gold horn (*KJ* 43), the Early Runic corpus contains

three potential candidates: the Pforzen belt buckle, the Thorsberg chape (KJ 20) and the Vimose buckle (KJ 24). Gallehus provides the earliest firm evidence (e.g. Heusler 1925: 169, Krause 1971: 148):

- (1) Gallehus (KJ 43, c. 400–450 A.D.)
ekhlewagastiz : holtijaz : horna : tawido :
 ‘I, Hlewagastiz, the son of Holt, made the horn.’

This text fulfills the demands of the Germanic long-line, which Lehmann (1956: 28–9) summarizes as follows: “(1) The line is bound together by the alliterative *h*’s. (2) These occur at the beginning of accented syllables. (3) The most important word from a metrical point of view [i.e. **horna**; M.S.] occupies the first stress of the second half-line.” Moreover, anacrusis or *Auftakt* is permitted before the first ictus.⁴ Epigraphically, this analysis is supported by the absence of a word divider (consisting of four vertical dots) between (proclitic) **ek** and the first stressed item **hlewa-gastiz**. It is noteworthy that the sequence of unstressed syllables in **hlewagastiz** (3), **holtijaz** (2), **tawido** (2) and **horna** (1) varies from three to one. This is what Andreas Heusler labels ‘Freiheit der Füllung’:

Wir sehen, wie wenig das Streben auf ebenmäßige Belastung der Verse geht. Schon die älteste germanische Zeile, die vom Goldenen Horn, verbindet An- und Avers von sehr ungleicher Schwere. (Heusler 1925: 169)

Besides, this alliteration scheme conveys a common feature of Indo-European accentuation, viz. the unaccentedness of finite verbs. Thus, the finite verb in sentence-final position (**tawido**) does not participate in the alliteration scheme. Calvert Watkins (1995: 23) argues that “[t]his convention must be related to the accentuation of the finite verb in Indic and indirectly in Greek: the finite verb in main clauses was unaccented except in verse or sentence-initial position.” Vedic accentuated texts thus indicate that the finite verb in non-initial position received no pitch accent (see e.g. Whitney 1879: 33, 216–17, also Ananthanarayana 1970). Whether a direct reflex of this rule or not, finite verbs in Early Runic such as **taw-**

4. In eddic verse, the *Auftakt* may involve more than one syllable, as in Vǫlundarkviða 37: 2: *né ek þik vilia, Vǫlundr | verr um nita*, ‘nor I, Weland, might wish worse to harm you.’

ido are typically placed in the final (non-alliterating) metrical position of the Germanic long-line (cf. Lehmann 1993: 60).⁵

Further runic evidence of this rule is furnished by the Pforzen belt buckle, with **gasokun** providing a non-alliterating ictus. This inscription belongs to a silver belt buckle found at a cemetery of Merovingian date at Pforzen in Bavaria (see Bammesberger (ed.) 1999). Apart from the sequence **elahu**, which Robert Nedoma⁶ instead reads as **ltahu**, the transliteration (under (2), based on Düwel 1999) seems unproblematic:

- (2) Pforzen (Bavaria, late 6th c.)
aigil undi ailrun | elahu gasokun
 ‘Aigil and Ailrun hunted (together) for an elk (?).’

As Düwel (1999: 51–53) mentions, alliterative name-pairs such as *Aigil* (masc.) and *Ailrūn* (fem.) are fairly frequent in runic epigraphy (see the comprehensive list in Kabell 1978: 22–4, also Marold 1996). In a dated study, Woolf (1939) highlights alliteration as a constitutional principle of Germanic name-giving. Compare for instance *Hildebrandslied* 3:

Hiltibrant enti Haðubrant || untar heriun tuēm
 ‘Hiltibrant and Haðubrant, their two hosts between.’

Such alliterative name-pairs give every indication of being very old in Germanic, cf. also the tribal names *Ingvaeones*, *Erminones*, *Istvaeones* in Tacitus’ *Germania* (see Salmons 1992: 163–65, also Marstrander 1930: 335, Genzmer 1936: 19–21). Given that the reading under (2) is correct, Pforzen must be considered an early Westgermanic attestation of the Germanic long-line at the end of the 6th century (Düwel 1994: 290–91, also Naumann 1998: 705, Nedoma 2004: 340). Moreover, this is the earliest attested (South Germanic) line featuring vowel alliteration (cf. Düwel 1999: 52–53).

5. It will not be discussed here whether this accentuation rule is a language universal or directly inherited from Indo-European. Also note that the accent in Greek and Old Indic does not impact on the metre which is basically syllable- and morae-counting. See e.g. the appendix in Apte (1970). In Germanic, the unaccentedness of the verb has far-reaching consequences on the syntactic level (e.g. Kuhn 1933).
6. Nedoma’s reading also results in an alliterative long-line with the operation of Grønvik’s rule (see note 6a below): ‘**aigil andr ailrun**’¹¹**ltahu gasokun** ‘Aigil und Ailrun kämpften/stritten stritten (zusammen) an der Ilzach’ (see Nedoma 1999: 108, 2004).

Yet another possible candidate for an early long-line is the Thorsberg chape from around 200 A.D. which reads **owlþuþewaz ni waje-mariz** (*KJ* 20).^{6a} Different semantic interpretations have been offered,⁷ but the alliterative scheme seems to represent the pattern $w x / w x = a x / a x$, which both Grønvik (1985: 188–91) and Seebold (1994: 72 note 7) concur on (but cf. more reservedly Naumann 1998: 703). Finally, brief mention must also be made of Elmar Seebold's reading of the Vimose buckle (*KJ* 24, see Seebold 1994: 64–5). But as Hans-Peter Naumann (1998: 703) rightly stresses, this is merely an 'interpretational offer' in contradistinction to the firmly established reading of the legends from Gallehus, Pforzen and Thorsberg. Due to the unrestricted use of ideographic runes (e.g. **a** = *ansuz* 'god'), Seebold's interpretation of the Vimose buckle must indeed be relegated to the sphere of speculation.

3 Inscriptions with loose alliterative patterns

Most of the other runic legends are less regular than the group discussed in section 2. What this involves is rhythmic, solemn prose rather than any metrical organization. Compare for instance the Kjølevik stone from Rogaland (*KJ* 75). Although the inscription on the Kjølevik stone has much in common with the Gallehus gold horn, its metrical status is less marked due to a loose alliteration scheme. The text reads as follows:

- (3) Kjølevik stone (*KJ* 75, c. 400–450 A.D.)
 [I] *hadulaikaz*
 [II] *ekbagusta[I]daz*
 [III] *hl(a)aiwido magu minino*
 'Hadulaikaz. I, Hagustaldaz, buried my son.'

Anacrusis occurs at the beginning of line II as in the Gallehus inscription. But the regular structure of the long-line, i.e. $a a / a x$ (or $a x / a x$ in the case of Thorsberg), is absent here. Another difference between Gallehus and Pforzen on the one hand and Kjølevik on the other is the finite verb

6a. In all probability, the sequence **wIþuþewaz** reflects the proper name *Wulþuþewaz* in accordance with Grønvik's rule (see Grønvik 1985: 186, 192, also Nedoma 2004: 350–53).

7. Problems concerning the semantic interpretation of the Thorsberg inscription will not be addressed here (see Andersson 1993: 46–49, Peterson 2004: 19).

hl(a)aiwido sharing the alliteration. On the whole, Kjølevik has an alliteration scheme with two disconnected alliterations: *badu-*, *hagu-*, *blaiwidō* and *magu mīninō*. The crucial question is how **magu minino** is included in the metrical scheme. Andreas Heusler (1925: 86, note 2) scans two disconnected short-lines *ek Hagustaldaz blaiwidō || magu mīninō* which means that the caesura (or diaeresis) is located between **hlaiwido** and **magu minino** (line III). Mees (2007: 220) suggests another scheme with recourse to the syllable-count: *ek Hagustaldaz || blawidō magu | mīninō* (5 || 5 | 3). But in view of the isolated pronoun *mīninō* (acc. sg. masc.), this scansion seems rather forced.

The ambiguity makes it likely that we are dealing with a rather loose metrical form which does not meet the requirements of the Germanic long-line. This indicates that we will probably have to tone down our metrical expectations. The Gallehus gold horn and the Pforzen belt-buckle are masterpieces of Early Runic versification, whereas the bulk of the older runic inscriptions do not share this formal structure.

Alliteration is accomplished by the Germanic principles of name-giving without involving any metricity. This applies in particular to the memorial inscriptions; cf. the Istaby stone (*KJ* 98, c. 600–650 A.D.) **Afatr hariwulafa haþuwulafir haeruwulafir warait runar þaiar**, ‘In memory of Hariwulfr, Haþuwulfr, son of Heruwulfr wrote these runes’, and the Eikeland clasp (*KJ* 17a, c. 500–600 A.D.) **ek wir wiwio writu i runo arsnī**, ‘I, WiR, for Wiwjo, write in runes [...]’. Owen (1928) thus distinguishes between what he labels ‘unintentional alliteration’ and ‘indubitable intentional alliteration’. At least to my knowledge, the claim of metricity has not been made in the above-mentioned cases.

4 Stylized inscriptions without metrical status

There is yet another non-metrical group of Early Runic inscriptions that involves stylization in terms of marked (expressive-poetic) word-order. Representatives of this group are the Tjurkö I bracteate (*IK* 185), the Sjælland II bracteate (*IK* 98) and the Noleby stone (*KJ* 67). What these inscriptions have in common is a stylized word-order and a type of ‘framing’ which Kurt Braunmüller (2004: 33) identifies as hyperbaton construction (for discussion see Schulte 2005: 164, also Sonderegger 1998: 30–31). The inscriptions in question are treated in successive order:

- (4) Tjurkø I bracteate (*IK* 185, c. 400–500 A.D.)
wurte runoz an walhakurne . . heldaz kunimudiu
 ‘(He) wrought runes on foreign grain, Heldaz for Kunimunduz.’

Several runologists adduce stylistic arguments in favour of metricity such that we end up in a neat circle. An indication of poetic use is seen in the expression **walhakurne** ‘foreign grain’, G *Welschkorn*, which is supposed to designate the golden pendant (e.g. Salberger 1956: 4–5; for a different explanation see Grønvik 1996: 150). As regards sentence structure, the finite verb *wurte* ‘wrought’ is focused in initial position, whereas the subject follows later, hence the word order: VERB–OBJECT_{DIR}–OBJECT_{PREP}–SUBJECT–OBJECT_{INDIR} (for a different scheme see Grønvik 1996: 151–152). Wolfgang Krause, in his first edition of *Runeninschriften im älteren Futhark*, put it this way:

Der erste Teil der Inschrift scheint metrisch und stabreimend zu sein. Das Verbum finitum **wurte** trägt den Stab, weil es nachdrücklich betont am Anfang steht, wie das etwa in den eddischen Gedichten häufig der Fall ist. (Krause 1937: 614)

Salberger (1956) extends Krause’s alliteration scheme towards a more intricate pattern of double alliteration (*wurte, walha-* and *-kurne, Kunimu(n)diu*). It must be emphasized, however, that this pattern is not tantamount to an intersected alliteration scheme. Elaborate patterns of cross alliteration (‘gekreuzter Stabreim’, *ab | ab*) and framing alliteration (‘umschließender Stabreim’, *ba | ab*) are well attested in Old Germanic, but not prefigured on the Tjurkø I bracteate (cf. Heusler 1925: 103).

In this regard, I do not agree with Kari Gade (2002: 858) who claims that “The alliteration section in the inscription on the Tjurkø bracteate (ca. 500 A.D.), on the other hand, seems to conform more closely to later poetic conventions.” Neither do I share Salberger’s view that Tjurkø I represents a primitive *ljóðabáttir* half-line which is rehearsed on the Nybble stone (*Sö* 213) and in the necrology of the Härlingstorp stone (Salberger 1962–63: 346). On closer inspection, the notion of a prefigured *ljóðabáttir* is used haphazardly, and Tune stands as the only candidate worthy of consideration (for detail, see Schulte 2009, cf. also § 5 below). To sum up, the alliterative structure of the Tjurkø I bracteate is entirely basic irrespective of the fact that **walhakurne** shares two alliterations.

The same is true for Sjøælland II and Noleby in spite of their word-order being stylized in terms of poetic framing (cf. Sonderegger 1998: 30–1). None of these inscriptions conveys a particular metrical structure (despite Mees 2007: 215):

- (5) Sjøælland II bracteate (*IK* 98, c. 450–550 A.D.)
h̄ariuha h̄aitika : farauisa : gibu auja :
 ‘Hariuha I am called, the travel-wise [or, the danger-wise].
 [I] give good luck.’
- (6) Noleby stone (*KJ* 67, c. 450–600 A.D.)
 [I] *runo fahi raginakudo tojeḡa*
 [II] *unapou : suhurah : susix hwatin*
 [III] *hakubo*
 ‘I paint rune(s), derived from the gods.
 I prepare delight(?). [...]’

The fact that the *rūnō raginakundō*-formula is rehearsed on the Sparlösa stone (*Vg* 119) and in *Hávamál* stanza 80 (*rúnar reginkunnar*) has given rise to diverse metrical claims. Stressing the formula’s direct transmission, Mees offers the following view:

The *Hávamál* stanza seems thematically archaic much as is the metrical form at Noleby, and suggests a model for how certain kinds of (presumably Odinic) rune-lore were transmitted from early ritual metrical use into the poetry of the Edda. (Mees 2007: 219)

However, due to the formula being resilient and versatile, its rehearsal does not corroborate any metrical claim.⁸ Extensions and modifications of basic formulae in legal texts attest to the formula being productive to some extent (see e.g. Ehrhardt 1977: 139–74 on the pair formulae in Old Norse legal traditions). On closer inspection, therefore, Noleby testifies to a rather basic alliterative pattern as compared to *Hávamál* 80. Hence I fully subscribe to Hans-Peter Naumann:

Der sich anbietende Hinweis auf *Hávamál* 80, 1–3 (*rúnar reginkunnar*) verbürgt zwar das Nachleben einer Alliterationsformel, besagt aber nichts über

8. On the notion of the flexibility and versatility of the formula, see e.g. Lord (1986), also Schulte (2008).

die Vershaftigkeit von Noleby und entfällt daher für die metrische Kontrolle.
(Naumann 1998: 703)

By way of conclusion, neither Hávamál 80 nor the Sparlösa stone (*Vg* 119, around 800 A.D.) from Västergötland can support the metrical structure of Noleby. Like the *iqrð/upphiminn*-formula, the *rūnō raginakundō*-formula provides an example as to how basic alliterative patterns are used and extended over a period of several hundred years (cf. Larsson 2005: 413–415, Schulte 2007). On the basis of a wide range of occurrences of this formula, Wulf (2003: 1002) argues “daß die Verfasser der Runenverse in germanischer Dichtungstradition standen, denn diese Formel tritt weitere zehnmal in germanischer Dichtung auf”. Alliterative sequences thus constitute basic formulaic elements, or ‘Versatzstücke’, to be adapted in eddic poetry and runic inscriptions among other things. To sum up, Noleby, Sjælland II and Tjurkö I convey the notion of metrical indeterminacy involving alliterative, stylized prose rather than any versification in the strict metrical sense.

5 The Tune inscription as a primitive *ljóðabáttr*?

The runestone from Tune in Østfold county bears the longest known inscription in classical Early Runic or “Proto-Nordic” (Knirk 2006: 332–35, with literature). Any metrical assessment, however, is hindered by the fact that the inscription contains lacunae and *hapax legomena*, such that the interpretation of various passages is still disputed (cf. Düwel 2004: 127–29). On the non-metrical status of memorial inscriptions see the general comment in section 3 (p. 51 above). In any case, alliterative organization is incontestable. The reading and translation presented under (7) is based on Grønvik (1981, 1998); see also Knirk (2006: 333).

- (7) Tune stone (*KJ* 72, c. 400–450 A.D.)
- | | | | |
|--------|-----|-----|-----------------------------------|
| Face A | I | (→) | ekwiwazafter · woduri/ |
| | II | (←) | dewitadahalaiban:worahto:? |
| Face B | I | (←) | ????(z)woduride:staina · / |
| | II | (←) | þrijozdohtrizdalidun / |
| | III | (→) | arbijasijostezarbijano |

‘I, Wiwaz, in memory of Woduridaz,
 ‘provider of bread’, wrought [the runes].
 ??? the stone to/for Woduridaz.
 Three daughters prepared the funeral celebration
 (or: carried out the inheritance),
 the most beloved/most devout/most ??? of the heirs.’

Heusler (1925: 245) identified a tripartite metrical group which he labelled ‘dreigliedrige Gruppe’: three short-lines are connected by *w*-alliteration: *ek Wiwaz after Wōdurīdē || wita(n)dahalaiban || worahtō r(ūnōz)*. James Knirk (2006: 334) assesses the metrical structure of Tune with due reservations: “Whether the text is alliterative elevated prose or alliterative poetry is more a question of definition”. Naumann (1998: 697), on the other hand, advocates an intricate scansion based on an earlier proposal by Lehmann (1956: 78; the reading is based on *KJ* 72):

*ek Wiwaz after Wōdurīdē || wita(n)dah^alaiban worahtō r[ūnōz]
 [pē]z Wōdurīdē staina || þrijōz dohtriz dālidun
 arbij(a) arjōstēz arbijanō*

This scansion yields an Early Runic precursor of the Old Norse *ljóðahátt*, hence a proto-*ljóðahátt*. As Naumann (1998: 697) notes, however, this view hinges on the assumption that the sequence *arbij(a) arjōstēz arbijanō* (or *arbij(a) āsijōstēz arbijanō* according to Grønvik 1981) forms a full-line with three ictuses. Heinz Klingenberg (1973: 163) fully consents to this metrical analysis, and so does – however reluctantly – Naumann (1998: 697, 704).

In conclusion, the presence of a ‘tripartite group’ in Heusler’s sense suggests itself, whereas the notion of a final full-line is not without problems (cf. in general Naumann 1998: 699). Also, given the *lacunae*, I find it more convenient to assume this to be merely an alliterative structure rather than a full-fledged (archaic) type of *ljóðahátt*. Besides, other proposed candidates for a primitive *ljóðahátt* such as Tjurkö I and the Stentoften–Björketorp curse formula are conjecture at best (see §§ 4 and 6 above). As addressed by Bjarne Fidjestøl (1999: 260–69), the alleged ‘syncope barrier’ around 600 A.D. is an issue of particular concern which partly cuts the Old Norse metres off from their alleged forerunners in Early Runic.

6 Curse formulae: Stentofthen and Björketorp

Stentofthen's introductory line has puzzled researchers until recently, and a general consensus is still far from being achieved. For a state-of-the-art report, see Schulte (2006: 400–4). Mainstream research supports Santesson's new interpretation as presented under (8). See Santesson (1989, 1993):

(8) Stentofthen introductory line (*KJ* 96, c. 600–650 A.D.)

I	niuhAborumR	II	niuhagestumR
III	hAþuwolAfrgafj († = <i>jāra</i>)	IV	hAriwolAfrxAXxusunhxe

‘With nine he-goats, with nine stallions,
HapuwolfR gave a good year. HariwolfR [...].’

Niels Åge Nielsen (1968: 37–38, 1983: 44) claims that Stentofthen contains “en urform af versemålet *ljóðaháttir*”, but this is not imperative. Ottar Grønvik (1996: 190) expresses reservations against this view:

Formelt og stilistisk kan innskriften karakteriseres som høyprosa, høytidelig i tone og innhold, og med stavrim og rytme, men uten å følge noe bestemt versemål (Grønvik 1996: 190).

In my opinion, there is every reason to subscribe to this view.⁹ Stylized prose is evidenced by the parallelism of the two initial lines *niuhAborumR* ‘nine he-goats’ and *niuhagestumR* ‘nine stallions’ (according to Santesson 1989, 1993). Despite the uncertain reading of line IV, it seems unlikely that Stentofthen's introductory formula is versified in terms of an archaic *ljóðaháttir* or otherwise.

The same applies to the Stentofthen-Björketorp curse formula which some scholars equated with a protoform of *ljóðaháttir*. On the whole, researchers do not agree on the metricity of these two intimately related inscriptions, compare Krause (1966: 217), Kabell (1978: 28–9) and Jansson (1987: 24). What immediately weakens any metrical claim is the fact that we are dealing with textual variation, or as Robert Nedoma (2005: 171) puts it “zwei verschiedene Formulierungsverfahren” of one and the same

9. Space prohibits me from discussing Ottar Grønvik's own interpretation of the Stentofthen inscription (Grønvik 1996).

formula (on their mutual relation, see Schulte 2006, Grønvik 1996: 155–57). Generally speaking, textual variation runs counter to the notion of rigid metrical structure. See (9.a) in relation to (9.b):

- (9) The two extant versions of the Blekinge curse formula
- a. Stenotoften stone (*KJ* 96, Sweden, Blekinge, c. 600–650 A.D.)
lines V–VI:
- V *biderRunonofelAhekaBederAginoronOR*
‘A row of brightness-runes I hide here, mighty runes.’
- VI *berAMAlASARARAgeuwelAdudsAþatBARIutiþ*
‘Restless due to baseness, he who breaks this (monument)
suffers an insidious death.’
- b. Björketorp stone (*KJ* 97, Sweden, Blekinge, c. 600–650 A.D.)
lines I–VI:
- | | | | |
|-----|-----------------------|----|------------------------|
| I | <i>bAidRRunoronu</i> | II | <i>fAlAhAkBAiderAg</i> |
| III | <i>inARunARARAgeu</i> | IV | <i>bAerAMAlAusR</i> |
| V | <i>utiARwelAdAude</i> | VI | <i>sARþatBARutr</i> |
- ‘A row of brightness-runes I hid here, mighty runes.
Restless due to baseness, he who breaks this (monument)
suffers an insidious death abroad.’

It is eminently possible to highlight features of elevated style in these two inscriptions (cf. Braunmüller 2004: 33–4), but any particular metrical status does not follow. As said earlier, the general claim that stylization signals metricity does not stand close scrutiny.

In all likelihood, we are witnessing a rhythmic formula with distance alliteration much like the Old Frisian legal texts mentioned by Markey (1976: 239–40). This implies stylized formulaic prose with alliteration across more than ten syllables (including epenthetic vowels)¹⁰ coupled with internal alliteration in compounds – cf. Stenotoften’s *runono*, *-ronoR* and *bider*, *bederA*, *berAMA*-. Alliteration in compounds has already been noticed in Tjurkö I (see § 4 above). However, this statement is not tantamount to ascribing metricity in the strict sense to these legends (cf. Grønvik 1996: 190, Naumann 1998: 704).

10. The question as to whether or not epenthetic vowels contribute to the syllable-count needs not bother us here. Incidentally, in Old Indic metrical traditions, a form such as *tvam* can surface as *tuvam* if required by the metre. However, it has already been noticed that there are no good grounds on which to ascribe a strict syllable-count to the Germanic long-line (cf. § 2 above).

Interestingly, curse formulae such as Stentofthen and Björketorp seem to arouse general expectations of ‘high’ metrical forms. Niels Åge Nielsen (1969: 112–113, 1983: 89) assesses the final curse formula of Tryggevælde as *ljóðabáttir* and adduces Stentofthen, Björketorp and Glavendrup in support of this claim. As Naumann (1998: 700) points out, however, there are insufficient grounds on which to ascribe metrical status to the whole Blekinge group, i.e. Stentofthen, Björketorp, Istaby and Gummarp.

7 Syllabic trochees: Strøm and Ällerstad

In Transitional Runic (c. 550–650), the syllabic trochee makes persistent headway in the language system due to syncope and other structural changes. The Strøm whetstone, for instance, which is generally regarded as a work-song, favours this structure.¹¹ It exhibits a regular trochaic pattern, but once again any ‘higher’ metrical organisation would seem unwarranted. As Owen argues,

The form of this and similar charms, arising as it does from the rhythmic movement of the task performed, can scarcely be classed as sophisticated, which makes it all the more improbable that the alliteration was the result of conscious art. (Owen 1928: 406–7)

The inscription reads as follows:

(9) Strøm whetstone (*KJ* 50, c. 500–600 A.D.)

[a line] **wate *h*ali *h*ino *h*orna**

‘Wet this stone, horn!’

[b line] ***h*aha skapi *h*aþu ligi**

‘Scythe, scathe! Hay, lie down!’

Antonsen remarks that “the text is clearly alliterative and consists of two Germanic ‘long-lines’, each displaying two ‘half-lines’ with two stresses each” (Antonsen 1975: 124). But Strøm does not comply with the long-line when it comes to the distribution of ictuses (cf. § 2 above). Strøm shows quantity-insensitive syllabic trochees (cf. Hayes 1995: 102). This

11. On the metrical status of Strøm, see Krause (1971: 166), Høst (1976: 29–30), Antonsen (1975: 123–32, 1986: 335–36) and Naumann (1998: 704).

judgement rests on linguistic (etymological) grounds. The form **skabi**, for instance, contains a short root, Gmc. **skab-*, while the corresponding root in **wate** is obviously long, Gmc. **wēt-* (e.g. Schulte 1998: 101–2). Conversely, **wate** exhibits final **-e** from earlier (long) *-ī*, while the final **-a** of **horna** (acc. sg. **-an*) is short and hence syncopated in Old Norse.

Another representative of this rhythmic type is the Ällerstad stone (KJ 59) which probably belongs to the ‘transitional group’ (cf. Schulte 1998: 134, 156, Barnes 1998: 450). Note that this metrical assessment involves a certain degree of uncertainty, as the end of line I is unreadable due to a fracture of the stone.¹² This legend (at least the semantically interpretable part) achieves a trochaic structure by means of hypercorrect forms, a proclitic **eka** (instead of **ek**) and a redundant clitic **-ka** (in **raisidoka**), thereby avoiding irregularities in performing the syllabic trochee. These metrical hypercorrections convey a regular rhythmic beat (cf. Schulte 2003: 398).

(10) Ällerstad [Ellerstad] stone (KJ 59, c. 600 or later)

- I (←) **eka sigimARAR Afs///**
 - IIa (←) **ka rAisidoka**
 - IIb (→) **stAinAR**
 - IIc (→) **kkkiiiiikk**
- ‘I, SigimāriR [...] raised the stone(s).’

Summing up, the structure of Strøm and Ällerstad is clearly trochaic, but a distinct metrical pattern is not conceivable.

8 Conclusion

Summing up, elaborate metrical patterns including cross alliteration and framing alliteration are entirely absent in the Early Runic corpus, and there is no clear evidence of syllable-counting metres (despite the claim made by Mees 2007, 2008). Neither is there any clear evidence of quantity-sensitive metres (cf. the Strøm whetstone). This metrical state of indeterminacy is corroborated by recent studies on Viking-Age runic inscriptions (cf. Schulte 2007: 58–60). In particular, Hübler (1996: 33)

12. Krause (1971: 146) conjectures **Afs[A]ka** ‘one found free of guilt’ which is guesswork at best.

stresses the stylistic function of alliteration in younger runic inscriptions: “Die Alliteration kann bewußt als Stilmittel in den Runeninschriften eingesetzt sein, ohne die Absicht, damit Versformen zu erzeugen”.

The bottom line is that Gallehus and Pforzen probably represent our ‘most regular’ evidence of Early Runic verse. Seebold’s suggestion concerning the Vimose buckle was considered only in passing, but the Thorsberg chape is an archaic candidate worthy of inclusion. There is a slight possibility that Tune represents a prefiguration of the *ljóðaháttur*, but this is disputable due to interpretational problems at hand and the regulations in terms of ‘Bugge’s rule’ (cf. Naumann 1998: 699, with reference to Heusler 1925: 239–40). Other suggestions concerning a primitive *ljóðaháttur* in curse formulae must be relegated to the realm of fancy speculation. In particular, the Stenotoften–Björketorp curse formula gives every indication of being stylized alliterative prose.

Noleby, Sjælland II and Tjurkö I illustrate the fine divide between style and metrics: Inscriptions can be stylized linguistically and otherwise, without being versified. ‘High’ style can be tantamount to stylized prose, whereas it does not guarantee any particular metrical status. As argued above, textual variation and different wordings may indicate that we are faced with rather loose metrical forms (cf. §§ 4 and 6 above). The rigidity of textual transmission and even verbatim recall are brought about by strict metrical rules as is the case with Vedic and skaldic verse (see Schulte 2008).¹³

In the end, we are left with a good many irregularities rather than a strict Early Runic metrics, and I fully subscribe to Gade (2002: 858) who emphasizes, that “it is doubtful whether the earliest inscriptions can [...] be regarded as representing a preliminary stage of alliterative poetry.” On the whole, the long-line is the most regular expression of Early Runic metrics.¹⁴ Due to the syncope barrier of the 600s, it remains highly uncertain whether there are any Early Runic proto-forms of eddic metres.¹⁵

13. As might be expected, exceptions to the rigid mode of textual transmission in skaldic verse do exist; see e.g. Kjartan Ottosson (2008: 192), with references.

14. As far as I can see, the present approach is compatible with Olga Smirnitskaia’s research (Smirnitskaia 1994), which is reviewed by Anatoly Liberman (1998).

15. Taking Marold (1998) as his point of departure, Hagland (2003) focuses on the interface between runic writing and eddic poetry. Not unlike Hübler (1996), he wisely confines himself to the Viking Age: “Om annan allitererande tekst i runeinnskrifter eldre enn dét [sc. the Rök stone from ca. 800 A.D.] skal sjåast i verhistorisk samanheng, har elles vore mykje diskutert og skal ikkje forfølgjast vidare her” (Hagland 2003: 223).

In any case, the skaldic *dróttkvætt* cannot be traced back in this way, and eddic metres – as attested in Viking-age runic inscriptions – are likely to have evolved *after* this barrier has been passed.

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