

82. The sources of the transitional period between Ancient Nordic and Old Nordic

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1. Preliminary remarks

Diverse and greater linguistic sources are available for the time span between the Migration Period and the end of the Viking Age than for the previous period. These varied sources, however, cannot give us a complete synchronic and diachronic picture of the language because they are weighted with uncertainties regarding both their date and interpretation. Runic inscriptions are the most important and substantial evidence for the transitional period from Ancient Nordic to Old Nordic. In addition, place-names, personal names and words used in texts written in foreign languages as well as vernacular literary texts provide information about the development of the language during the period from the 5th to the 11th century. Of these diverse groups of sources, only a few runic inscriptions and the vernacular literary documents themselves provide extensive passages of continuous text. Furthermore, one must often take into consideration substantial interference from other languages in the remaining sources.

2. Place-names

The oldest linguistic evidence from the Germanic area are place- and personal names. Names are often derived from appellatives, but in some instances continue to denote objects that no longer correspond to this appellative meaning (cf. Schütte 1976, 40). Toponymic studies have been conducted extensively in Scandinavia since the 19th century and have been, above all, historically oriented, i.e. with regard to the development of settlements. However, place-names also play a significant role in linguistics as conservative substantiations, because one can acquire information from them about linguistic development. Since place-names are geographically fixed, they can supply evidence for the distribution of certain linguistic characteristics. Scandinavian place-names have been used primarily in studies of historical phonology and inflection (Jansson 1951; Tjäder 1967; Brylla 1987). Place-names can be combined into groups of names that are formed with the same ending and which are found not only individually, due to a correspondence in terminology, but are also distributed to a varying extent over larger and smaller areas. The analysis of place-name types is thereby significant for the highly debated question of a common Northwest Germanic language area. The difficulty in chronological stratification, especially with the oldest names, is a vexing problem (Andersson 1995b). For the transitional period from AN to ON, the place-names formed with the aid of suffixes are interesting because the same suffix inventory is attestable during the first five hundred years A.D. in Scandinavia as well as on the Continent (Andersson 1995b, 4). Place-names of the -ingi-type play a key

role in the assessment of this question for they make clear a toponymic connection between Scandinavia and the Continent (Andersson 1995c, 10). The distribution of this place-name type does indeed confirm a close NW Gmc unity, but other place-names also reveal clearly that there were already early signs of the separation of W/N Gmc. This finding is confirmed from the perspective of the place-names in the British Isles (Nicolaisen 1995). There, place-name types entering not only from the Continent but also from Scandinavia were productive and thereby attest the existence of a common NW Gmc toponymy from which place-name types can be traced to the individual dialects (cf. Beck 1987). There are also a considerable number of place-names of Scandinavian origin in Norman and French (Gorog 1958). However, despite their use for historical linguistics, the limits of toponymy are clear: although the distribution of a type of name can show linguistic relations within the area of occurrence, relationships can also extend beyond this area, as the distribution of -vin-names, which cover only a part of the Nordic area, suggests (Jansson 1951; Andersson 1995c, 9).

3. Runic inscriptions

Runic inscriptions form the most extensive and important group of sources for the transition period between AN and ON. The inscriptions are original documents which record in linguistic form the events of the period in which they originated. Contrary to the earliest period of runic inscriptions, not only does the number of inscriptions increase over time, but the texts also

become more extensive and reveal linguistic changes more clearly.

3.1. Dating of inscriptions

Although the number and length of the inscriptions increases, the dating of the texts remains uncertain because only a small part of the inscriptions are found on somewhat reliably datable surfaces (on the problem of dating, see Birkmann 1995, 5 f). Linguistic changes can indeed be seen in inscriptions from the period between the end of the 5th and the end of the 9th centuries, but often a relative chronology for the individual changes can be established only with difficulty, and an absolute dating is next to impossible. Inscriptions can be dated by means of archeological, runological (i.e. in respect to the form of the runes) and historical-linguistic criteria. Even archeological dating, independent of the other criteria, often do not offer any absolute dates; instead they are usually based on a framework of relative chronology so that often different chronological systems must be reconciled. Only a few portable objects can be dated by means of archeological criteria, although runologists and philologists do not always accept this dating, even for inscriptions which may have originated much later. Because during the transition period from AN to ON runic inscriptions were carved more and more on stones, which archaeologists can rarely date, at best a relative chronology using runological or linguistic criteria is often the only one possible. Since these criteria can only be used after reading and interpretation have occurred, there is a great danger of circular reasoning. The question of the

time and place of a linguistic change remains, however, in a close relationship with the dating of the source, so that problematic dating has far-reaching consequences for linguistic research. There are only nine archeologically datable inscriptions available for 550-750 A.D., usually called the period of syncopation (Birkmann 1995, 6). During the transition period from AN to ON not only did the language change, but also the form of the runic inscriptions because elder futhark, consisting of 24 letters, was reduced to younger futhark, consisting of only 16 letters, and was used in different versions. Whether the reduction of the letters is to be seen as a consequence of phonological change or whether it is the result of other causes, e.g. developments in the alphabet, number magic or changes in the names of runes, is answered by researchers with the same lack of definitiveness as the questions of when and where this reduction occurred (Odenstedt 1992).

3.2. Distribution of the inscriptions

Chronologically and geographically, runic inscriptions are distributed very unevenly. While from the period from ca. 600 to 800 exclusively Norw. and Sw. inscriptions survive, the number of Dan. inscriptions grows rapidly from ca. 800, thus making Denmark as the epigraphical center of Scandinavia during the early Viking Period. Also, Denmark is usually considered the home of younger futhark, for it appeared there for the first time in its complete form. Inscriptions found in Denmark in younger futhark total 419, of which the Jelling inscriptions are probably the most famous. There are relatively few inscriptions from the early

Viking Period preserved in Sweden. One of their number, the Rök stone, has caused most problems for scholars (see the report of research in Birkmann 1995, 290 ff). For the later Viking Period, Sweden becomes the new center of runic inscriptions. The inscriptions in the elder futhark are almost exclusively found on loose objects like weapons (e.g. spear blades, swords), jewelry (e.g. clasps, buckles), utensils (e.g. combs, planes, knives) and bracteati. From ca. 350 A.D. the inscription of stones, which then become the major writing surface for inscriptions using younger futhark, begins in Norway and Sweden. From the first half of the 8th century the runes of younger futhark were used more and more often in Denmark and Sweden, though the older signs remained in use. Since not all of the runes changed, it is not always clear, especially with short inscriptions, whether younger futhark was used. In Sweden this reduced runic alphabet was simplified yet again to the so-called short-twig runes, which are also called Norwegian-Swedish runes or Rök-runes because of the area of their distribution. In practice however, there was no clear differentiation between the normal runes in younger futhark and short-twig and often mixtures of the two appear. The beginning of the 11th century brought about a still more extreme reduction of the runes: staveless runes. They were most likely used only in a small area, which is also referred to in their alternative name, Hälsing runes. In Denmark, the short-twig runes were first used in the 9th century, but did not gain general acceptance there. Around 900 A.D. a runic alphabet was established which then remained valid over a long period of time. It has simpler forms than

normal futhark but shows clearer distinctions than short-twig runes. On the Gørlev and Malt stones, one can find this runic alphabet in full length.

3.3. The problematic nature of the inscriptions

It is not only because of the difficulties in dating that runic inscriptions are a problematic group of sources (cf. Düwel 1975, 181). Often the condition of the inscriptions is so poor that at times it is not certain if one is looking at runes or accidental scratches. Since word dividers came into use relatively late, the continuous text of an inscription can be structured only with difficulty and therefore often offers many possibilities for interpretation. Furthermore, interpretation is dependent upon information from later stages of the language, above all with respect to inscriptions in elder futhark which often consist of a single word and therefore have neither an internal nor an external context. Although inscriptions in younger futhark contain word dividers more often and thereby allow at least suggestions of syntactic units, a new problem arises due to the reduced number of characters, because grapheme and phoneme no longer have a one-to-one correspondence. In later inscriptions there was an attempt to remedy this situation with a system of punctuation, but it was not consistently used.

4. Texts in foreign languages

Latin and Old English texts which deal with Scandinavian persons or topics often contain Nordic loanwords or place- and person-names. These works cover a time period from about the 7th century to the end of the Viking Age. The comments are sparse,

especially in such Lat. works as the *Etymologiae* by Isidore of Sevilla, *Historia Francorum* by Gregory of Tours or *Historia Lanbgoardorum* by Paulus Diaconus. The Nordic material contained therein is essentially restricted to names which normally have been latinized and therefore can offer only limited information about the stage of the Nordic language. Due to intense contact between Scandinavia and the British Isles during the Viking Age, one expects to find numerous comments in OE literature. Scandinavian topics are dealt with above all in *Beowulf* and *Widsith*. But Anglo-Saxon chronicles, laws, charters, deeds etc. also contain, again and again, Nordic loanwords (Hofmann 1955). A whole series of these documents are datable to the early Viking Age (to ca. 980), but they contain only sparse references to the Nordic language. Only in the later Viking Age, when Scandinavian people and lands are directly concerned in the contracts, does the number of Nordic loanwords used in English sources increase. Titles, deeds, charters and laws contain Scandinavian place-names and personal names in anglicized form, as well as termini from jurisprudence which now and then appear even in sources valid outside of Danelaw. The annals and chronicles are especially valuable for linguistic analysis because they cover the Viking Age rather completely and, above all, chronologically. Unfortunately, the better part of the entries exist only in later copies so that it is not always clear at which state of the language the borrowing occurred. Although a large part of *Beowulf* deals with especially Scand. themes, the AN words in this work are limited almost exclusively to names which are used in anglicized form. In addition, *Beowulf*

makes abundantly clear the problems that arise in the evaluation of loanwords in sources written in foreign languages. It is not always clear whether or not borrowing has occurred, especially when dealing with two closely related languages like OE and the Nordic languages, and if so, in which direction it occurred. While the editor of the standard edition of *Beowulf* postulated a clear Nordic influence (Klaeber 1922, CXX), more recent scholarship emphasizes the absence of Nordic loanwords in *Beowulf* as one of its characteristics (Frank 1981, 123; Bjork/Obermeier, 27). *Beowulf* survives in only a single manuscript, which can be dated, on paleographic grounds, to the end of the 10th or the beginning of the 11th century. When the work itself originated, however, remains an unanswered question. Datings vary between the 7th and the 11th centuries (cf. Bjork/Obermeier 1997; Andersson 1983; Fulk 1982). For this reason it is debatable whether the Scandinavian names have been anglicized or adopted in their authentic, i.e. Nordic, form of the 6th or 7th century (Fulk 1982, 343 f). The OE and Nordic languages were so close even during the Viking Age that many loanwords could have been borrowed without much phonetic difficulty and unusual sounds could have easily been adapted to the languages own phonetic system. Nordic words usually assimilated with oE declensions, and only in a few instances of borrowed names were foreign endings kept (Hofmann 1955, 253 ff).

5. Literary documents

Some Viking Age native literary texts from Scandinavia have also survived. The oldest Eddic

poems and Skaldic poetry are datable to the 9th century. Because these texts are much more extensive than the average runic inscription, they contain a much broader and varied vocabulary and also much more differentiated morphology and syntax. In contrast to Eddic poetry, the dating of which in many cases is highly controversial, Skaldic poetry can normally be dated rather exactly, insofar as the author is known and the authenticity of the poem or stanza is certain. The oldest remaining Skaldic poem is assumed to be the *Ragnarsdrápa* by Bragi Boddason, in which a valuable painted shield is described. Three poems about mythical and heroic prehistoric times also belong to the oldest stage of Skaldic poetry: the *Haustlǫng* by Þjóðólfr ór Hvíni, the *Húsdrápa* by Úlfr Uggason and the *Þórsdrápa* by Eilífr Goðrúnarson. In addition there are quite a few individual stanzas, the so-called *lausavísur*, which were usually composed as occasional verse and the authors of which are often unknown, so that their dating is not always certain.

Although a wealth of literary texts can supplement the mostly rather short runic inscriptions, their ability to provide evidence for linguists is limited. Not one of the poems survives as a manuscript from the Viking Age. The oldest records of Skaldic and Eddic verse date from the 12th century, excepting the few runic inscriptions which contain parts or the whole of Eddic or Skaldic stanzas. While one assumes that Skaldic poetry underwent few changes in the process of oral transmission due to the complex metrics, it is possible that works of Eddic poetry, which uses

much simpler metrics, have undergone linguistic change before coming down to us. Despite all of the problems in dating individual poems and stanzas, it is certain with regard to both Skaldic and Eddic poetry that all surviving stanzas could only have been composed after the extensive and radical linguistic changes of the period of syncopation and that their value for linguists is limited to the final centuries of the transitional period.

6. Literature (a selection)

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