

The Inscription on the Whetstone from Strøm

Elmer H. Antonsen

The runic inscription on the Whetstone from Strøm in Norway is of particular interest because it represents the earliest attestation of a work-song in the Germanic languages. Archeologists cannot aid in the dating of this inscription, since no other objects were found with the whetstone. Previous attempts to fix a date on the basis of runic and linguistic evidence have relied on ad hoc assumptions concerning phonological developments and the relative age of certain runic variants. It is shown that the inscription can be interpreted without such ad hoc hypotheses and that the work-song must date from approximately 450-500 A.D. at the latest, rather than from the beginning of the seventh century as previously assumed.

1. In 1908 on an island at the end of the Strømfjord in Norway was found a whetstone made of fine-grained sandstone and approximately 15 cm. in length, 2 cm. wide, and 1 cm. thick. Nothing else was found with this whetstone, so that archeologists can tell us little about its age. Each of the narrow sides of the whetstone bears an inscription in the older, so-called Germanic, runes:

Side A

ᚱ ᚠ
w a t e h a l i h i n o h o r n a

Side B

ᚠ
h a h a s k a þ i h a þ u l i g i

All of the runic shapes are clear and unremarkable, except for the **s** and the **k** of Side B (see below). The inscription is of great interest to runic scholars for a number of reasons. First, we are grateful for any inscription which is beyond all doubt complete, which presents no problems in reading, and which consists of complete utterances which add to our knowledge of the vocabulary, morphology, and syntax of the language these inscriptions (dating from about 150-600 A.D.) were written in. Secondly, this inscription takes us a step further into the history of Germanic verse-form, since the text is clearly alliterative and consists of two Germanic "long-lines," each displaying two "half-lines" with two stresses each:

w á t e h á l i / h í n o h ó r n a
h á h a s k á þ i / h á þ u l í g i

The text represents the earliest attested work-song in the Germanic languages. But how old is this work-song? Since archeologists cannot help us, we must rely on the runic text for the answer. On the basis of the shapes of the runes themselves, of their phonological values, and of the analysis of morphological forms found in the inscription, most scholars agree with Krause that the whetstone is to be ascribed to the early seventh century; i.e., toward the very end of the period of inscriptions in the older runic alphabet. In my view, however, the basis for this dating is so faulty that it cannot be correct, and I shall attempt to show that the inscription must be considerably older.

2. Once an inscription has been read and transliterated, the next step is to divide it into meaningful units. Fortunately, in the case of our inscription this is no difficult task and most scholars are agreed on the word divisions given above. The next step is to identify the lexical items and their grammatical forms. If we start with the most transparent ones first, we see that the last word of Side A, **horna**, must be the neuter noun meaning "horn" found in all Germanic languages and also in the inscription on the Gold Horn from Gallehus in this very same form. Morphologically, **horna** can be either nominative or accusative singular. Proceeding



Figure 1. Side A of the Whetstone from Strøm. Photographs are through the courtesy of Universitetet i Trondheim Museet, Norway, where the whetstone is now located.

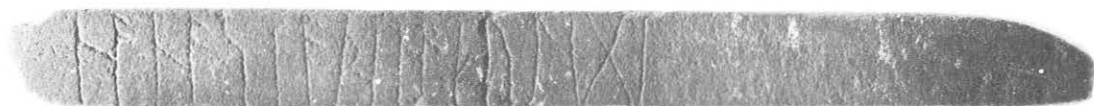


Figure 2. Side B of the Whetstone from Strøm.

backwards in the line, the word **hino** is easily recognizable as corresponding to the masculine accusative singular of the deictic pronoun found in Gothic *hina* “this” and Old English *hine* “him.” Its gender does not agree with that of **horna**, so **horna** is isolated in the sentence and must be a neuter nominative.

In runic writing there was an orthographic convention that double consonants were designated by only a single rune. Thus **hali** can be the representation for *halli*, which corresponds to the masculine nouns found in Old Icelandic *hallr*, Old English *heall* “flat stone,” Gothic *hallus* “rock,” and runic **halaz** = *hallaz* in the inscription from Stenstad. The root is clearly */hall-/, while the final **-i** of our word derives from the stem-formant of *i*-stem nouns also found in Latin *collis* “hill.” The absence of a **-z** in **hali** (corresponding to the *-s* in Latin) indicates that this word must be an accusative singular, thus agreeing with the gender, number, and case of **hino**. On Side A, then, we are left with the word **wate**, which remains to be analyzed, but can already be considered a prime candidate for the verb which requires the accusative found in *halli hinō* “this stone.” Since *halli hinō* can only refer to the whetstone itself, and since we know that such whetstones were used to sharpen agricultural instruments and were carried in a horn containing water and attached to a man’s belt, **wate** must be a verb related to the adjectives found in Old English *wæt*, Old Icelandic *vātr* “wet.” Before discussing the form of this verb, however, let us turn to the second side of the inscription.

On Side B the words **skapi** (**þ** = *th* as in *think*) and **ligi** can be related to the verbs found in English *scathe*, *lie*, and German *schaden*, *liegen*, with their Scandinavian counterparts. The two remaining words, **haha** and **hāpu**, must be nouns associated with these verbs. So far, most scholars are in agreement. Divergences in opinion arise in the identification and interpretation of **haha** and **hāpu** and in the identification of the forms of the verbs **wate**, **skapi**, **ligi**.

3. Sophus Bugge, Magnus Olsen, and Wolfgang Krause all assume that **wate** must correspond in form to Old Icelandic *vāeta* “to wet.” The ending **-e** is explained as that of the third person singular, present optative, and the whole line is interpreted to

mean “may the horn wet this stone.” This analysis presents linguistic difficulties, however, since such a form would derive from a Proto-Germanic */wæt-ij-ai/, which in the normal course of development would have produced the runic form ***watije**. In order to overcome this difficulty, Olsen attempted to explain **wate** as a late form from which the stem-formant **-ij-** of this supposed weak verb of class I had been lost. Krause accepts this explanation, but such an assumption cannot be made, since it conflicts with the evidence of the endings of all other words in the inscription, which are perfectly regular for the language of the inscriptions up to the period of the bracteates. Bracteates, modelled after Roman coins and medals, are dateable to ca. 400-550 A.D., and those with runic inscriptions show no evidence for phonological developments which would justify Olsen’s proposed loss of **-ij-**.

The verb **ligi** corresponds to Gothic *ligjan*, Old Icelandic *liggja*, Old Saxon *liggian* “to lie”-and must derive from the Proto-Germanic imperative singular */leg-ij-e/, which in the language of the inscriptions would have become *ligī*=**ligi**. Similarly, **skapi** corresponds to Gothic *skapjan*, Old Icelandic *skepja*, Old Frisian *skethia* “to scathe” and derives from */skaþ-ij-e/, producing *skapī*=**skapi**. Olsen felt that the three verbs of the inscription must represent parallel forms, and since he considered **wate** to be an optative, he sought to interpret **skapi** and **ligi** as optatives also, but was faced with the necessity of explaining the different endings of **wat-e** on the one hand and **skap-i** and **lig-i** on the other. He sought to do this by proposing still another ad hoc rule: the development of the ending was different after the long root syllable of **wate**=*wāt-e* from that after the short root syllables in **skap-i**=*skap-i* and **lig-i**=*lig-i*. Actually, the optative forms of these verbs would derive from Proto-Germanic forms with the suffixes */-(i)j-ai/, which would have produced the runic forms ***watije**, ***skapje**, and ***ligje**, or even if we were to accept the implausible loss of ***(i)j-**, then the forms would have to be ***wate**, ***skape**, and ***lige**. It is impossible, then, to consider all three verbs to be the same form of verbs of the same class, unless one is willing to posit otherwise unattested developments in order to “explain” single forms. Such a procedure is not acceptable, however, and

certainly not if the forms can be explained in keeping with otherwise attested developments.



Olsen's assumption that the three verbs represent parallel forms is undoubtedly correct, but his mistake lies in assuming that all three belong to the same class of verbs; i.e., to the weak verbs of class I and the so-called *j*-present strong verbs (which would have identical forms in the formations under discussion here). He was led into this pitfall by equating **wate** with Old Icelandic *væta*, a weak verb of class I, while overlooking the fact that adjectives and nouns can be converted into verbs of other weak classes in the Germanic languages, as seen for example in the variegated forms of the verb "to scathe": Old English *sceapian*, Old Saxon *skathon*, Old High German *skadōn* (class II), and Old High German *skadēn* (class III), in addition to forms of weak class I and *j*-present strong verbs. The runic verb **wate** is perfectly regular if we assume it to be a second person singular imperative of weak class III from Proto-Germanic **/wæt-ǣ/*, which would produce by regular development *wāt-ē* = **wate**, as v. Grienberger suggested.

Side A can therefore be translated straightforwardly as "Wet this stone, horn!" Side B then says "Scathe, . . . ! Lie, . . . !" and the logical subjects of the three verbs are all different and the nouns **haha** and **haju**, like **horna**, must be nominatives. Furthermore, **haha** must denote something which can scathe or do harm, while **haju** must be something which can lie.







4. Olsen attempted to relate the noun **haha** to Swedish *hå f.*, *håv m.* "new grass after the first mowing" and to derive it from Proto-Germanic **/hǣhwa-/*. However, as we have seen, **haha** must be the designation of something which can be sharpened and therefore "do harm"; i.e., it must be an agricultural tool. Furthermore, the derivation from a presumed **/hǣhwa-/* presupposes an ad hoc loss of */-w-/*. Etymologically, **haha** can only be assigned to a large group of derivatives from the Proto-Indo-European roots **/kēk-*, *keg-* meaning "hooked, forked, sharp" and represented in such Germanic items as Gothic *hoha*, Old High German *huoh(-ili)* "plow," Old Saxon *haco*, Old English *hōc*, Old High German *hāko* "hook," Old Icelandic *hǫkja* "crook, crutch," and probably also in older English *haugh* "hoe." Our noun would therefore be

the designation for a hooked, sharp tool, which in this inscription could only be a scythe. Whether this was the normal word for "scythe" or was used only for poetic and alliterative purposes cannot be ascertained. As to form, it must be the nominative singular of a masculine *n*-stem.

The noun **hǫpu** was explained by v. Grienberger as the reflex of a Proto-Germanic */hawip̥ʰ/, nominative singular feminine, derived from the verb */hawwan-/ "to cut down, hew" and translated as "a mowing." Once again, this derivation presupposes an ad hoc loss of */-wi-/, which finds no support in inscriptions in the older runic alphabet. Krause accepts v. Grienberger's explanation after rejecting Olsen's equation of **hǫpu** with the Germanic word for "battle," as in Old High German and Old Saxon *hathu-*, Old English *heafu-*, and Old Icelandic *hǫp*, because of "syntactic reasons." He apparently means that a word denoting "battle" would not fit into the context. However, runic **hǫpu** can very well be the reflex of a neuter *u*-stem noun from Proto-Indo-European */kot-w-m/ meaning "that which is cut down," from which the word for "battle" is also derived (cf. the modern expression "to mow down the enemy"). With such an analysis, the entire inscription reads: "Wet this stone, horn! Scythe, scathe! Hay [or grain], lie!" The whole point of the worksong is an admonition to the horn to wet the whetstone to permit it to sharpen the blade properly so that the scythe will cut the hay or grain clean and the latter will lie (i.e., not stand up again, as happens with a dull scythe). There is no evidence in the inscription for late phonological developments and there is no need to assume, as Krause does, that some forms are "feierlich archaisierende Formen" (i.e., archaic forms used on solemn occasions), while others supposedly represent more "colloquial" forms. There is no evidence in any runic inscription known to us that forces us to assume the writer ever consciously used archaic forms.

5. The other basis for a late dating of this inscription is supposedly found in the shape of two of the runes themselves, the **s**-rune =  and the **k**-rune =  on Side B. All others are perfectly normal in every respect.

It is common practice to assume that certain shapes of various runes represent older or younger stages when compared to other shapes. The method of determining the chronological ordering of the variants has been a somewhat haphazard undertaking, however. In most cases, we have no way of knowing what the "original" shape was, or indeed whether there were not various traditions which preferred one shape over another. In addition, it is well known that nondistinctive variants can be expected from one and the same writer. The distinctive features of the older runes are given in Table I. The basic shapes are those most commonly found in inscriptions of Scandinavian provenience.

In the case of the **s**-rune, the distinctive features are [- staff, 2 crooks], whereby 2 = more than one (cf. the variants  ,  ,  , etc.), whereas the **k**-rune has only one crook (see below), and the **j**-rune has two crooks which are not connected. The difference between  and  is therefore completely nondistinctive. While it is true that the shape  becomes the dominant one in inscriptions in the younger fuþark, there is no way of determining how early it could have occurred. It could have occurred from the very earliest times, since it would not have been mistaken for any other runic symbol. It therefore cannot be cited as evidence for a late dating of this inscription.



As for the **k**-rune, our inscription displays a variety with a staff =  . The development of staffs in originally staffless runes, it has been maintained, increases toward the end of the older period and into the period of the younger inscriptions. As a matter of fact, among the staffless runes, **g**, **o**, and **s** never developed forms with a staff, and the **ng**-rune with a staff =  always represents the phonological sequence /ing/, so that it is actually best regarded as a bind-rune (i.e., ligature) consisting of the **i**-rune + the **ng**-rune, rather than an **ng**-rune with a staff. If we look at the evidence presented in the inscriptions themselves, we find **k**-runes with staffs among the very oldest inscriptions known to us (e.g., on the Vimose woodplane, dated archeologically as early as

Table I. Distinctive features of the Germanic runes.

	<i>no branch</i>	<i>1 branch</i>	<i>2 branches</i>		<i>pocket</i>	<i>1 crook</i>	<i>2 crooks</i>	
			<i>unilateral</i>	<i>bilateral</i>			<i>continuous</i>	<i>interrupted</i>
<i>1 staff</i>	top	i	ƚ l	ƿ a	↑ t	ƿ w		
	center		† n	ƿ f	ƿ z	ƿ þ		
	bottom		ƚ u	ƿ p	ƿ ã	ƿ b	ƿ r	
<i>2 staffs</i>	top		ƿ e	ƿ m				
	center		ƿ h					
	bottom			ƿ d				
<i>no staff</i>			ƿ g	ƿ o	ƿ ng	ƿ k	ƿ s	ƿ j

the second century, and the Kragehul lanceshaft from about 300 A.D.). These shapes may very well have resulted from the use of bind-runes, e.g., $\mathfrak{F} = \mathfrak{F} + \mathfrak{Y} = \mathbf{az}$, and $\mathfrak{K} = \mathfrak{F} + \mathfrak{C} = \mathbf{ka}$, with a faulty reanalysis of the component parts, so that \mathfrak{K} was interpreted to be $\mathfrak{F} + \mathfrak{A}$ and \mathfrak{L} to be $\mathfrak{F} + \mathfrak{A}$. Such bind-runes also occur in the very earliest inscriptions. The difficulty is compounded by the fact that we simply do not know what the original shape of this rune was (cf. Greek κ and Latin c). In view of these uncertainties, the shape of the **k**-rune cannot be used to brand this inscription as early or late.

It will be seen from the foregoing that there is actually no evidence which would justify us in assigning the inscription on the Whetstone from Strøm to a period later than that of the runic bracteates. We can therefore be relatively certain that our work-song is a product of the fifth century, or of the beginning of the sixth century at the latest.

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