Early Runic Metrics: A Linguistic Approach

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Recently much attention has been given to the metrical (or otherwise stylised) nature of many of the older runic inscriptions, the latest such study being that of Edith Marold (2012). Historiographically it has been linguists who have made the most lasting contributions to the study of metrics, the Neogrammarian mentor Eduard Sievers being the most fundamental contributor to the Old Germanic tradition, in particular in his *Altgermanische Metrik* (1893). It was somewhat unexpected, then, to see Michael Schulte (2009, 2010) follow Hans-Peter Naumann (1998, 2010) in choosing to use Andreas Heusler’s (1925) much more accommodative scheme of Old Germanic scansion for his two surveys of the matter as Heusler is often criticised for having been rather too adventurous and unempirical in his treatment of the Old Germanic material. It is the Sieversian approach that dominates most recent linguistic investigations of Old Germanic metrics.

Marold’s invocation of Sievers’s more explicit system of description of Old Germanic metre makes better sense to me, as can be seen from the papers I published in 2007 and 2008. Yet Marold offers no comment on the key issue that informs my contributions to the matter. So few of the older inscriptions that alliterate (relative to those which appear in the younger futhark) can reasonably be classified as metrical under a rigorous application of Sieversian scansion that I came to the conclusion several years ago that the likely reason for this was the essential anachronism inherent in applying a system of scansion developed to explain literary material from the tenth century and later to texts of a much earlier date.

One of Elmer Antonsen’s (2002, 3–13 and 129 f.) key criticisms of scholars such as Ottar Gørvik was their continual attempts to interpret the older texts so exclusively through the prism of Old Norse. Antonsen counselled that scholars should be aware of the fundamentally anachronistic nature of
such an approach, of the danger of medievalist projection back on to earlier sources. The best way of controlling for such matters has long been seen to be to admit the importance of a balancing comparative perspective—i.e. one that seeks to view early runic texts from the opposite chronological perspective as well. The controversial form *arbija* on the Tune stone, for example, seems best translated as ‘funeral feast’ from the perspective of Old Norse as this is what its direct descendant *erfi* (usually) means. From a comparative Germanic or Indo-European viewpoint, however, the term seems better glossed as ‘inheritance’, as its relationship to Greek *orphános* ‘orphan’ (and the sense of being separated from the family) has long been held to indicate (Polomé 1982, 56). That Grønvik (1982) went so far here as to challenge the usual interpretation even of the comparative evidence seems to me to underline how compelling the tendency to anachronistic projection has often been in the runological field.

The opposing perspective in the case of runic metrics, however, is the one advanced in my papers (Mees 2007 and 2008)—i.e. the comparative metrical scheme adduced by the leading comparativists Antoine Meillet (1897, 1923), Roman Jakobson (1959 = 1962–88, 4: 414–63) and Calvert Watkins (1963 = 1994, [2:] 349–404). Marold seems to misunderstand this and not to have realised why I have sought to investigate the older runic texts from this perspective, so my reasoning may warrant re-emphasis. Rather than taking a medievalist approach to much earlier materials (à la Grønvik and Marold), I have tried to assess the earliest inscriptions in light of the scheme established by comparativists at the Indo-European level that the long line attested in early Northwest Germanic sources should have replaced or from which Seiichi Suzuki (1988) has proposed it may even have directly derived. This syllable-counting scheme with its alternation of short and long lines is prominently presented in Martin West’s (2007) survey of Indo-European poetics and also appears in Benjamin Fortson’s (2010) well-received introduction to Indo-European studies, so it seems an obvious (and legitimate) approach to explore, not one to be cursorily dismissed.

Suzuki (2008, 3) writes of *fornyrðislag* as being closer in form to the common Old Germanic long line than are any of its West Germanic counterparts, but how old the long line truly is (and whether or not other forms of metre were used by Germanic speakers in earlier times) remains unclear. It seems quite possible that knowledge of such a verse form made its way to England (say) along with the story of *Beowulf*—i.e. that it was not brought over from the Continent during the Anglo-Saxon conquest—and that alliterating long lines simply became more popular at some date than earlier forms of Old Germanic metre. We just do not know how old the
Northwest Germanic alliterative tradition is or how singular (or diverse) Iron Age Germanic poetry may have been either, the lack of comparable Gothic texts making things rather unclear from a comparative Germanic perspective. Marold’s study is useful, however, in that it demonstrates clearly how medievalist projection can work. And it is perhaps her treatment of the Gallehus inscription, KJ 43, which brings out this issue best. The problem I see here is methodological, and in order to explain my reasoning it is perhaps worth detailing how I usually approach such matters from an analytical perspective. One debatable point I can excuse, two I consider cause for caution, but three seems to me to mark the boundary where a problematic interpretation crosses over into the realm of the unlikely.

There are three issues of concern in the way in which Marold approaches the Gallehus inscription, the first being her metrical assessment of dactylic Holtijaz. As Geoffrey Russom (1998, 3) indicates, this is clearly a form which is not acceptable under Sievers’s system of scansion—indeed Erik Brate (1898, 336f.) proposed that the reason that fāhi does not feature a pronominal clitic -ka (as does the form usually interpreted as tōjeka) in the Noleby inscription (KJ 67) was because of the Sieversian constraint against forms like Holtijaz appearing in the second feet of half-lines. Marold makes reference, however, to the -i- of Holtijaz being an “Übergangslaut”, citing the authority of the Germanic grammar of Krahe (1965–67, 2: 13). But what Marold is referring to here (without giving it its usually accepted linguistic name) is Sievers’s law, a morphological process in Germanic (and Indo-European) which governs the production of -i- before -j- on the grounds of the natural prosody of the languages. Sievers’s law is intrinsically linked to (natural) scansion— as Krahe explains in his Formenlehre, the metrically “long” syllable (i.e. “heavy” moraic weight) of Holt- generates the following -i-. Marold does not give examples of clearer cases of Sievers’s law vowels being ignored in Old Germanic scansion (other than making a circular reference to the Tune inscription’s equally problematic forms in -ij-) because there are none.

One such oddity does not make Marold’s approach untenable, but it surely gives some cause for concern. The second issue, though, involves a question famously studied by Hans Kuhn in 1933. It is, moreover, a matter that I raise in my earlier papers, one of which (2008) is not cited in Marold’s essay. Kuhn’s 1933 paper seeks to explain the restrictions on the employment of pronouns which obtain in Old Germanic poetry, a matter that Marold curiously fails to consider in her 2012 offering.

As Russom (1998, 3) points out, the appearance of ek on the Gallehus horn in what has usually been taken to represent anacrusis is not expected.
from the perspective of Old English. The allowance of material before the first Sieversian foot of a half-line Kuhn ascribed to the Common Germanic tendency to allow clitics and other weakly stressed (or unstressed) words to appear at the beginning (rather than in second position) of the sentence. Yet Old English *ic* ‘I’ never appears in anacrusis and the recent studies of Suzuki (2010) and Þorgeirsson (2012) suggest that anacrusis would not be expected to occur at all in the apparent on-line in the Gallehus text.

Each of the Old Germanic metrical traditions seems to have had subtly different rules concerning anacrusis and which terms may appear there. But Marold provides no examples of equivalent metrical feet featuring anacrusis in Old Norse for comparison or the appearance of *ek* in a metrically comparable environment. Forms such as Noleby’s *fāhi* and the Vimose buckle’s *wija* (KJ 24) suggest that no pronoun needs to appear in the Gallehus text; unlike Old Icelandic, early Nordic seems to have had the option of discourse-initial pro-drop—of eliding a pronoun from the beginning of a text—so why the strong form *ek* would appear on the Gallehus horn remains problematic if it is to be understood as anacrustic. Although not so obviously a problem as that concerning *Holtijaz*, it still seems reasonable to recognise here a second significant difficulty with Marold’s analysis.

The third issue relates to the inscription’s genre. Erik Moltke (1985, 83 f.) argued that a maker’s text is unlikely to be expressed poetically and that the name of the inscriber and the medium of the object it appears on could be what has led to the appearance of alliteration in the text. Marold counters this objection by stressing the extraordinary nature of the Gallehus horns, but she does not provide any typological evidence to support her claim—Moltke was surely right to observe that maker’s texts are not a genre in which we would expect to witness metricity. Marold does point to the syntax of the inscription, however (despite not invoking syntax as a criterion for metricity anywhere else in her paper), seemingly projecting the opinion of Lehmann (1993, 60) regarding the position of the verb in this inscription. As Eythórsson (2001, 2012) has shown, most of the early runic texts feature verb-second word order (much as do all of the later North Germanic languages), the Gallehus text being one of the very few older inscriptions where the verb comes after both its subject and direct object—i.e. in an analytically verb-late (rather than verb-second) position.

Why this might be considered evidence that the Gallehus text is metrical is not explained by Marold. She is presumably thinking of Lehmann’s observation that verbs in the dependent (or “bound”) clauses of Old Germanic poetry often come in last position and are typically unstressed (cf. Eythórsson 2009, 70, and Klein 1997, 269–80, regarding Lehmann’s
mischaracterisation of Sanskrit accentuation). The problem with this notion is that the verb in the Gallehus inscription does not appear in a dependent (or “bound”) clause—and the verbs of main clauses do not usually appear in verb-late positions in Old Norse poetry. Marold seems to be continuing an error made by Lehmann here in her treatment of the Gallehus inscription.

Thus there are three quite odd and unexplained features in the five-word Gallehus inscription that Marold has failed satisfactorily to explain. Given so many questionable aspects and assumptions, it is hard to trust her declaration that the inscription is metrical. It may well be, and has often been taken to be so. But I do not think that Marold has approached her evidence in a sufficiently rigorous manner in this case. As Doug Simms (Southern Illinois University Edwardsville) has suggested to me, the problem of the extra syllable in Holtijaz can be explained by allowing the metrical expansiveness characteristic of the Old Saxon Heliand to apply at Gallehus (although this might upset Suzuki’s understanding that such developments of the long line should be seen as characteristically Old Saxon and relatively late), and it may well be that the use of ek in the Gallehus text is to be explained in a similar manner. Grønvik’s (1999) argument that taujan is to be understood as a verbum donandi might also explain the stylisation of the inscription, particularly in light of Lindemann’s (2000) formal demonstration that taujan is related etymologically to forms such as Latin donare (cf. Grønvik 2005, 17f., and MacLeod and Mees 2006, 176f.). The unexpected position of the verb may also be considered poetic (much as the Vimose buckle’s wiJa also seems to appear in a verb-late position), but not in the manner suggested by Lehmann, for as a careful reading of Eythórsson’s (2001, 2012) syntactic analyses reveals, there is a tendency for early runic inscriptions which feature triple alliteration to display unexpected word orders. The Gallehus inscription may be considered metrical on grounds other than those adduced by Marold, but the problematic nature of her approach to the lost golden-horn inscription surely calls into question her assessments of the other texts surveyed in her paper, many of which seem to me to be marred by similar omissions, misunderstandings and doubtful characterisations.

I am only too aware that academic papers are rarely flawless and that the large number of contradictory interpretations of early runic experience can prove bewildering to assess—our principal aim should be to progress the runological historiography, not to focus on faultfinding. But James Knirk (2006, 334) has observed that it is how one defines “metrical” which is most crucially at stake here, and I am far from sure that the approach taken by Marold or even those (such as Schulte’s and Naumann’s) that she criticises at such length are the appropriate ones. Most of the work on Old Germanic
poetry produced by linguists in the century or more since Sievers’s metrical studies first appeared suggests that Marold’s medieval projection backwards in time is fundamentally mistaken; that her assessment does not address most of the metrical scholarship which has appeared since 1893 is more than just unfortunate. It can only be hoped that in future treatments more closely historicised and developmental perspectives (such as those afforded by Eythórsson’s syntactic analyses or even Suzuki’s rather more sophisticated Sieversian approach) may be employed in attempts to come to better understandings of (suspected) older runic metrical behaviour.

Bibliography


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