

Magnus Källström:

### **The origin of the staveless runes**

The so-called staveless runes show the most radical development of the 16 character Viking Age *futhark* and consist mainly of short strokes and bows placed in different angles and heights on the writing surface. These runes are foremost known from five runestones in Hälsingland in Northern Sweden. The stones in question are exclusively written with this system, but shorter sequences with staveless runes appear also on some runestones in Södermanland and on a few portable objects unearthed in the town of Sigtuna in Uppland. In addition, there are a couple of runes from the staveless system documented on several runestones in the province of Medelpad north from Hälsingland. Outside present-day Sweden, a staveless *futhark* on wood has been found in an early medieval context in Bergen in Norway.

These peculiar runes were spotted on the runestones in Hälsingland by Johannes Bureus as early as in the year 1600, but he was unable to decipher them. This problem was solved in 1675 by the mathematician Magnus Celsius, who added vertical lines to the small strokes and bows, and could then read normal memorial texts on the runestones in question (Jansson 1983). The staveless runes are normally construed as a shorthand system created for casual inscriptions in the daily life (Wessén 1957 p. 17), but except the portable objects from Sigtuna and Bergen, the main stock of inscriptions is carved in stone.

The staveless runes are normally seen as a simplification of the short-twig variant of the Viking Age rune row, but some years ago Staffan Fridell (2000, 2011) presented an alternative theory claiming that most of the rune forms are more likely to be based on the characters found in the long-branch variant of the same alphabet. He also questioned the common view of the staveless runes as a writing system created for practical needs and sees them more as a result of an experiment, which was more or less a failure since the runes were so difficult to read.

To test the two competitive theories on the origin of the staveless runes, I have tried to make a derivation of every single rune form in this system from the closest counterpart without paying any attention to a specific model alphabet. This results in a rune row not attested anywhere in the runic corpus, but which is very similar to the runes used in inscriptions on the Isle of Man! This is a rather unexpected finding since no examples of staveless runes has so far been found in the British Isles, and the only known example from the West-Scandinavian sphere is dated to the early medieval period.

It seems, however, to be some kind of link between the British Isles and the areas in Sweden where the staveless system was used. Among the runestones in Södermanland, where this kind of runes has been adopted, five mentions travels to abroad and in no less than four cases in the western direction.

In my contribution I will not only try to locate the area the staveless runic system might have emerged, but also discuss the purpose of this variant of the Viking Age *futhark*. Was it a functioning system for rapid writing created for the every-day life or was it just – as Fridell's suggestion implies – a play with runes?

### **References**

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