

Runes in the First Century

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One of the lacunae in the classical testimonies from antiquity that form the basis of what we know of the history of the ancient Germanic tribes is the lack of any clear reference to the use by the Germani of runes. The first reference to the runic script in a literary source is usually attributed to Venantius Fortunatus, a poet of the Merovingian period. An Italian, Fortunatus had come to Gaul to seek employment, and toward the end of the sixth century composed a mocking description presumably in reference to the use of writing among his Germanic lords (cf. Page 1999: 100-1):

*barbara fraxineis pingatur rhuna tabellis
quodque papyrus agit, virgula plana valet.*

Ashen writing-tablets might be embellished with a barbarian rune
And for what papyrus manages, a flat wand will do.

Venantius Fortunatus, *Carmina* 7, 18 (*Ad Flavium*), 19–20 = Leo 1881: 173.

Here Fortunatus jests to his friend Flavius that if he cannot manage to write to him in some civilised manner, he could try runes in the barbarian style. Thus it is hardly a reference from which we should expect to learn much of runic use in Merovingian Gaul.

There is no testimony so explicit in its reference to Germanic uses of writing from classical antiquity. Various Germanic figures we learn may indeed have been able to write, yet it is usually assumed that these references, going back as early as the first century A.D., refer to literacy in Latin letters. The references are also restricted to figures among tribes such as the Marcomanni who were in direct contact with the Roman world.

The references to Germanic literacy themselves are known exclusively from two sources: the *Annals* of Tacitus the great first-century Roman historian¹ and the *Histories* of Ammianus Marcellinus which describe the years of the late Empire.

In the first passage from Tacitus, Maroboduus the Marcomannic king writes a letter to Tiberius asking for help, and in the second it is recalled that Adgandestrius, a chief of the Chatti in the time of Arminius, had appealed in writing to the Roman senate, this time in rather more sinister circumstances. Neither passage from Tacitus mentions what form of writing is used, but it is difficult to see how it could be any other than a Latin one, presumably Old Roman Cursive, as both are requests to Rome, plainly a circumstance where Germanic language or script would have been inappropriate. Of course it is possible that both persons knew Latin and the Latin alphabet as it is clear that those who served in Roman armies had some need of alphabetism and Germanic warriors from the tribes near the borders of the Empire were already serving in the Roman army by the first century; but it is equally likely that the letters were in fact penned by notaries, perhaps slaves who may not even have been of Germanic extraction.

Maroboduo undique deserto non aliud subsidium quam misericordia Caesaris fuit. transgressus Danuvium, qua Noricam prouinciam praeffluit, scripsit Tiberio non ut profugus aut supplex, sed ex memoria prioris fortunae: nam multis nationibus clarissimum quondam regem ad se uocantibus Romanam amicitiam praetulisse. // Maroboduus, completely deserted, was obliged to appeal to the emperor's mercy. Crossing the Danube – at the point where it borders on the province of Noricum – he wrote to Tiberius. His tone was not that of a refugee or petitioner, but reminiscent of his former greatness. When he had been a powerful monarch, he said, and many nations had made approaches to him, he had preferred the friendship of Rome.

Reperio apud scriptores senatoresque eorundem temporum Adgandestrii principis Chattorum lectas in senatu litteras, quibus mortem Arminii promittesbat, si

1 Tacitus also mentions that “*litterarum secreta viri pariter ac feminae ignorant*” (“clandestine [love-]letters are unknown to both men and women alike”) in the 19th book of his *Germania* (Winterbottom & Ogilvie 1975: 47), but it is clear he is criticising a Roman practice he disdains here, rather than commenting on a lack of the knowledge of writing among the Germani (Wimmer 1887: 65–67 *pace* Grimm 1821: 30–32).

patrandae neci uenenum mitteretur ... // I find from the writings of contemporary senators that a letter was read in the Senate from a chieftain of the Chatti named Adgandestrius, offering to kill Arminius if poison were sent for the job ...

Tac., *Ann.* II, 63,1; II, 88, 1 = Borzsák 1991: 59, 67; translation Grant 1971: 107, 118–19.

Ammianus recounts four similar occurrences in his rather later continuation of Tacitus' *Histories* (Amm. Marc. XXI, 3, 4–5; XXIX, 4, 7; XXXI, 12, 8–9; XXXI, 15, 5), each of an exchange between a Roman and a Germanic leader. In one passage Ammianus even specifically mentions a notary. He also mentions a written message sent from a Germanic chief to his fellow barbarians, however, although again clearly in a Romanised context:

Bitheridum uero et Hortarium, nationis eiusdem primates, item regere milites iussit, e quibus Hortarius, proditus relatione Florenti Germaniae ducis contra rem publicam quaedam ad Macrianum scripsisse barbarosque optimates ueritate tormentis expressa conflagrauit flamma poenali. // Bitheridus, indeed, and Hortarius (chiefs of the same nation) he [i.e. the emperor Valentinian] appointed to commands in the army; but of these Hortarius was betrayed in a report of Florentius, commander in Germany, of having written certain things to the detriment of the state to Macrianus and the chiefs of the barbarians, and after the truth was wrung from him by torture he was burned to death.

Amm. Marc. XXIX, 4, 7 = Seyfarth 1978: II, 114; translation Rolfe 1935–39: III, 244–45.

It seems then that literacy in the broader sense among tribes in direct contact with the Empire was culturally, orthographically and even linguistically Latin. It comes as no surprise, then, that even in the early centuries of Roman occupation we have evidence for Germanic patrons ordering inscriptions in the Roman style placed on altars in Roman Germany (*CIL* XIII.2: nos 7776–8860 & XIII.4: nos 11981–12086; cf. Ihm 1887: 105–200; Heichelheim 1930). Mostly dedications to female divinities usually addressed as *deae*, *matres* or *matrones*, the earliest of these monuments has been dated to the late first century (Rüger 1987: 10, 12). A number of these inscriptions, most stemming from the second-third centuries, show evidence for the influence of Germanic language

in what are otherwise Latin dedications. Some show the intrusion of a Germanic dative plural formation -IMS in the place of the usual Roman -IS or (vulgar/motions femininum) -(I)ABVS (Much 1887; Ihm 1887: 34–35). Others even show what appear to be corrections, sometimes taking the form of ligatures or reduced characters imposed over normal sized letters, as if the dedicator had noted a mistake in the original and requested that the stonemason correct it (Hübner 1895: lxvii). One such modification was the addition of a minature H to a C in the name of a Germanic dedicator, no doubt in order to mark the spirant enunciation of the relevant phone more clearly:

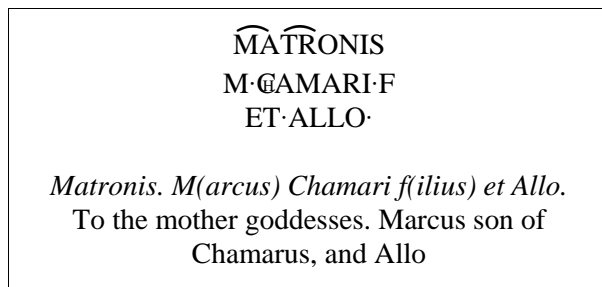


Fig. 1: Germano-Latin dedication from Enzen (Rüger 1981: no. 8).

Presumably, then, some of the Germanic-speaking dedicators read Latin letters well enough to criticise inadequate spelling.

Given such evidence for Germani literate in Latin, it comes as no surprise to witness a recent revival of the thesis most commonly associated with Ludvig Wimmer, of a Latin origin for the runic script. There is good evidence for literacy in Latin among the Germani already at the time of the first flowering of a clearly runic tradition, one which since Haakon Shetelig (1924: 14) first dated the Øvre Stabu spearhead to c. A.D. 180, has been accorded a late second century date by most archaeologists.

Nevertheless, recent advances in our knowledge of the epigraphic record of northern Europe shed new light on the question of the earliest Germanic tradition of literacy. In almost the reverse manner from what we might expect to find from the testaments of classical authors, evidence of epigraphs of Germanic authorship from the first century have appeared on a fibula of Germanic manufacture from Meldorf in the Dithmarschen (Düwel & Gebühr 1981) and on a pottery sherd, likewise of Germanic manufacture, from Osterrönhof in the district of Rendsford (Dietz et al. 1996).

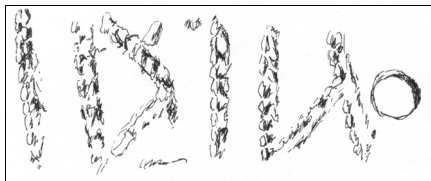


Fig. 2. The Meldorf fibula inscription (c. AD 1–50). Author's drawing.

Transliteration: **ipih**



Fig. 3. The Osterrönhof sherd inscription (c. AD 51–100). Author's drawing.

Transliteration: **r-w**

Both of these finds are from German Schleswig and though their contents are so opaque as to be of little significance linguistically, they are both outstanding in terms of the history of Germanic literacy. These finds are clear evidence that some level of literacy had penetrated the north of Germania by the first century. It also seems quite likely that even if neither of the finds are to be accepted as runic, they are at least likely to represent the forebear of what was to become runic in the next century. Indeed, although inscriptions on pottery are quite rare from later times, fibulae are one of the most typical of media for runic inscriptions during the period of the older runic tradition.

Yet these inscriptions are not the earliest examples of Germanic epigraphy that have come down to us so far. The oldest Germanic inscription, clearly in North Etruscan characters, was unearthed early in the nineteenth century, al-

though it was not recognised as Germanic in language until 1925. This inscription on an Etruscan type of helmet found in what seems to have been the remains of a Celtic sanctuary on the border of Noricum and Pannonia probably dates to the second or early first century B.C., although some have countenanced a later date, as recent as the mid first century A.D. The inscription from Ženjāk, Negova (Negau) is quite unlike the northern inscriptions because it is of interest linguistically, and can be translated. Although like a number of other epigraphs from the area, it appears to have been influenced by Rhaetic grammar, it contains the only clear example of a retained diphthongal pronunciation of IE *ei in Germanic. It is also key evidence for a North Etruscan origin of the runes (Marstrand 1925; Nedoma 1995; Markey 2001).

In the third chapter of his Germanic ethnography of A.D. 98, Tacitus mentions reports of epigraphic remains in Greek letters about the border of Rhaetia and Germania (i.e. on the German Danube) that until the 1970s could not be matched by physical evidence. Even now we have no evidence of epigraphs in stone such as Tacitus describes, but the evidence on pottery sherds from the pre-Roman settlement at Manching (Krämer 1982) prove some level of literacy among the ethnically mixed population of pre-Roman Vindelicia. One of the inscriptions, on a pottery sherd of local manufacture, is even part of the alphabet-row, which by the shape of the theta would appear to be the Greek (perhaps Gallo-Greek) one. Some of the other inscribed sherds are obviously North Etruscan, but these may represent imports from the East Alpine Fritzens-Sanzeno culture (whose epigraphic remains are Rhaetic in language). The only lexically transparent inscription appears on a locally made ceramic and reads BOIOS, a Celtic or Venetic anthroponym known from both Latin and Venetic epigraphs (*CIL* III.2: no. 5417; III, supp. 1: no. 11563; Pellegrini & Proscodimi 1967: no. Es 28). The alphabet used on this occasion could equally be Latin or North Etruscan, however, the latter option seeming increasingly credible since the recent publication of a Celtic, though obviously orthographically North Etruscan inscription from Ptuj which clearly uses B (Eichner et al. 1994). Thus there is somewhat mixed evidence from the epigraphic record of central Europe for what we might expect to represent the pre-Roman prototype upon which the runes were based. Nevertheless, there are structural and orthographical features

of the Germanic script which clearly point to a North Etruscan source, and the alphabetism at Manching appears likely to represent its immediate provenance. In fact Wolfgang Krause may have been correct to stress the evidence of the inscription on the Castaneda flagon given the many similarities between runic and the Sondrio or Camunic tradition which it is usually thought to represent (Krause 1940: 184–85; 1970: 37–39; Mees 2000).²

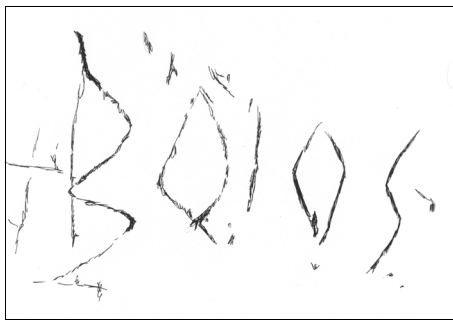


Fig. 4. An inscriptions from the oppidum of Manching (c. 150–50 BC). Author’s drawing. Transliteration: β OIOS

Camunic	\wedge	\mathbb{H}	$<$	\triangleright	\mathbb{E}	\mathbb{N}	Υ	\mathbb{H}	\mathbb{I}	$ $	\mathbb{H}	\mathbb{I}	\mathbb{M}	\mathbb{N}	\mathbb{V}
Greek Model	<i>a</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>g</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>e</i>	<i>v</i>	<i>z</i>	<i>h</i>	θ	<i>i</i>	<i>k</i>	<i>l</i>	<i>m</i>	<i>n</i>	ξ
	\bigcirc	\mathbb{C}	\mathbb{E}	\bigcirc	\mathbb{D}	\mathbb{F}	\mathbb{T}	\wedge	\otimes	\times	\mathbb{M}	\uparrow	\mathbb{I}	\mathbb{N}	\mathbb{V}
	<i>o</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>q</i>	<i>r</i>	<i>s</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>u</i>	ϕ	χ	ψ				

Fig. 5. Abecedaria from Salitz della Zurla and Piancogno, Val Camonia (perhaps 4rd–3rd centuries BC). Author’s rendition.

2 My thanks to Tom Markey for the references to the Ptuj inscription and the Camunic finds.

Although there are no clear classical references to the runes when literacy is described among the Germanic peoples by classical authors, for some time it has been conjectured that Tacitus has recorded in his ethnography of the Germanic tribes a description that may, nevertheless, apply to another sort of use of the Germanic script.

auspicia sortesque ut qui maxime observant. sortium consuetudo simplex. virgam frugiferae arbori decisam in surculos amputant eosque notis quibusdam discretos super candidam vestam temere ac fortuito spargunt. mox, si publice consultatur, sacerdos civitatis, sin privatim, ipse pater familiae, precatus deos caelumque suspiciens, ter singulos tollit, sublato secundum impressam ante notam interpretatur. // For omens and the casting of lots they have the highest regard. Their procedure in casting lots is always the same. They cut off a branch of a nut-bearing tree and slice it into strips; these they mark with different signs and throw them completely at random onto a white cloth. Then the priest of state, if the consultation is a public one, or the father of the family if it is private, offers a prayer to the gods, and looking up at the sky picks up three strips, one at a time, and reads their meaning from the signs previously scored on them.

Tac., *Germ.* 10 = Winterbottom & Ogilvie 1975: 42; translation Mattingly 1970: 109.

Modern commentaries on the *Germania* differ in their interpretations of this seminal passage. In one recent commentary Allan Lund (1991: 1893–94) relies on the opinions of the linguist Elmar Seebold (1986: 554ff.) who clearly considers that the reference is to runes. Lund is somewhat more conservative in his approach, however, in his, the most recent properly historiographical-critical edition of the *Germania* (Lund 1988: 140). Nineteenth-century classicists on the whole tended somewhat to circumspection (e.g. Orellius 1845–48: II, 345, n.). There were some such as Arthur Murphy (1807: VI, 216–15; and cf. now Rives 1999: 165–66) who attempted to link the passage with the employment of lots recounted in later, mostly medieval sources, but not ones in which *notis quibusdam ... impressam* play a part. Wilhelm Grimm (1821: 296–320), on the other hand, thought it likely that Tacitus' *notae* were runes, an opinion that was to come to prove influential among Germanists in the following years. Rochus von Liliencron & Karl Müllenhoff (1852: 26ff.; cf. Müllenhoff 1900: 223–24,

226–27) more surely linked the Tacitean *notae* not merely with the runes, but also to the question of their origin. Their seminal work launched the German *Urschrift* theory, i.e. the notion that the runes grew out of indigenous Germanic symbols such as the swastika. Despite some acceptance among German academics, this theory had mostly been relegated to the field of popularisers and mystics by the turn of the century (Losch 1889; Wilser 1895; 1905; 1912; Meyer 1896; von List 1907). Thus, in the last decade of the nineteenth century, reflecting the caution of the Latinists, Eduard Sievers (1891: 239) had not felt any more confident than to state that the possibility that the *notae* were runes could not be ruled out. The following decades saw Germanists promote a more ambitious assessment of the passage, however. The emerging *Sinnbildforschung* of the time, both amateur and academic, and the *Urschrift* thesis which was so central to it clearly depended on a link between the runes, symbols such as the swastika, Tacitus' *notae* and the notion of the indigeneity of the Germanic characters. As this notion gained more and more converts amid the growing nationalist tide in the Germany of the 1910s and 20s, a new theoretical basis developed in which the connection between *notae* and runes might be explained (cf. Mogk 1894; 1900: 400ff.; Petsch 1917; Feist 1919: 251–54; Marstrander 1928: 173; Arntz 1935: 245–50). The common understanding among non-specialists that 'rune' was a valid designation for any mysterious marking (cf. Furneaux 1894: 57, n. 3; Gerber & Greef 1903: 971) led to the development of the theory that the *notae* represented runes in the general, not specific sense. Krause (1936a; 1936b; 1938; 1939; 1943: 2–3; and cf. Arntz 1943–44), himself clearly influenced by the *Zeitgeist* of growing Germanomania, spelt this separation out clearly, attempting to pare this most extreme aspect of the by then burgeoning *Sinnbildforschung*, i.e. the notion that the runes were *uralt*, stressing the distinction *Lautrune* : *Begriffsrune* (cf. Petsch 1917 who had similarly spoken of *Schriftunten* : *Zeichenrunen*) and restricting indigeneity and primeval antiquity only to the latter. Similar sentiments are expressed in the scholarly *Germania* commentaries of the time (Fehrle 1929: 80; Reeb 1930: 29; Much 1937: 131; Anderson 1938: 79). Krause was certain the *notae* were at the very least *Begriffsrunen*, however, in marked contrast to Helmut Arntz who treated all *Sinnbildforschung* like a scourge. Nevertheless, the consensus developed among

the other continental specialists by the end of the war was that although the *notae* were clearly more than indiscriminate markings, Tacitus' description was too early for the *notae* to be runes. The thesis of a North Etruscan origin for the runes accepted by Krause and Arntz made this quite illogical. Yet many of their Germanist contemporaries, unaware of the latest developments in runology, still stressed that Tacitus must have been describing the employment of the signs from which the runes developed, the forebears of the *Begriffsrunen* – swastikas and the like – not the runes (*Lautrunen*) proper. The underlying assumption here, of course, was that if runes were as old as the Roman's description then these *notae* would have been runes; but they were not.

The description of the divination procedure in which these *notae* are mentioned may be drawn from the lost *Bella Germaniae* of the elder Pliny, an author who, unlike Tacitus himself, is known to have visited Germania. It may even be that Tacitus here has borrowed from Poseidonios' lost Germanic ethnography of the last century B.C. which was rather more clearly plagiarised by Caesar. Nevertheless, though Eduard Norden (1922: 124, n. 2) notes that the opening phrase is similar in style to that of Poseidonios, he admits there is no clear evidence to link this passage to the work of the Greek historian. It is more than likely, then, that the inscriptions from Meldorf and Osterrönfeld are either contemporary to or slightly earlier than the source used by Tacitus in the composition of his ethnography of the Germani. The inscriptions from Meldorf and Osterrönfeld intensify the doubt that an origin for the runes in the years before Roman influence becomes dominant in the material record of the North immediately brings to the argument that the *notae* are too early to have been runes. Indeed the notion that Tacitus refers here to pre-runic ideographs should probably be considered a relic only of Germanomanias past.

Without much justification the inscription on the Meldorf fibula has been dubbed "proto-runic" by some runologists. Whether it is seen as Latin or runic seems to depend more on whether the runologist in question prefers a Latin origin for the runic script than on a strict epigraphic analysis. The inscription is clearly at the very least preliminary or proto-runic because it appears on an item that is characteristic of early runic finds, i.e. a Germanic fibula, and is inscribed

in a decorative fashion typical of later runic testaments. Latin inscriptions are not found on such items or with such decoration (nor are Greek or North Etruscan inscriptions for that matter). All accounts so far have also been in agreement as to the Germanic language of the inscription (Mees 1997). The only Latin interpretation suggested by the inscription is |D|N, i.e. *D(ominus)N(oster)*, a style assumed by some Roman emperors (cf. *IK* no. 282). Yet this description was only first assumed by Hadrian, i.e. in the second century (Kneissl 1969: 95–96), and is not widely attested in epigraphs until the time of Septimius Severus (*CIL* XIII.5, p. 59). The Meldorf fibula is proof of literacy in free Germany at about the time from which the description of Tacitus stems, and presumably a linguistically Germanic literacy at that. Such letters may well have been termed *notae* by the Roman. Consequently, the main reservation that scholars have had in the past in accepting that the *notae* were runes (or more specifically “*Lautrunen*”) is no longer warranted.

Yet if the *notae* were runes we might ask why unlike Fortunatus did Tacitus not use a Latinised word of Germanic extraction. The use of a foreign term, however, would be quite unusual in his *Germania*. Contrary to the habit of some authors, Tacitus reproduced few barbarian words in his works. Instead, as an ethnographic sketch for a general audience, in the *Germania* Tacitus endeavours to make his prose as natural and unaffected as possible. His use of foreign terms is limited to the Germanic expression *framea* ‘a Germanic type of spear’, and possibly the palaeographically difficult *bar(d)itus*, if this term is not merely Latin *barritus* ‘roar (like that of an elephant)’. As both are descriptions from the martial sphere, Pliny may well be the source of these terms, as he is known to have performed armed service on the German frontier.

Tacitus clearly abstains from the use of, or was unable to provide, native terms for most of what he describes in his Germanic ethnography. It is quite commonly assumed, for example, that the *sacramentum* mentioned in the fealty ceremony of *Germ.* 13–14 is in fact an oath (a reciprocal concept perhaps not able to be translated satisfactorily into pre-Christian Latin), and the descriptions *comitatus* and *comes* seems to refer to the *trustis* and *antrustiones* of the later Frankish Salic law (Much 1937: 163; Schlesinger 1953: 235; Wenskus 1961: 357–58; Green 1965: 78, 87–89, 126ff.). Thus it is probably expecting too much

of the Roman to expect to find the word *rune* in his works. In fact the superfluous, pseudo-Greek <h> in Fortunatus' *rhuna* probably indicates that this term is a loan of the early medieval period. Nevertheless, *notae* almost seems an ideal Latin translation given the idea of signification and even the mystery that the term can also convey.

Arthur Mentz (1937) offered an updated version of the interpretation of von Liliencron & Müllenhoff explaining that Tacitus (or his source) did not observe the use of runes as phonological devices but instead as ideographs. This *Begriffsrune* argument of course fits almost too perfectly with the meaning of *nota*. It clearly means 'sign, indication, mark' (see Glare 1982: s.v. *nota* for the full range of classical uses). Tacitus is well known for his concise style and his choice of term here is probably quite wilful. Thus in Tacitus' day, rather than some nondescript marking (*pace* the blithe dismissal of Askeberg (1944: 42–43) who obviously saw himself as something of an iconoclast here), *notae* in this passage must represent some sort of indicating character as the term was clearly used to describe standard abbreviations (such as the *notae vulgares* which abbreviated common Roman terms and first names), ciphers and ideographs such as the consular sign or the mark of banishment. Roman school children who could recite the *notae vulgares* of the ABC (such as M for Marcus etc.) were even deemed *notarii* (notarians) (Bonner 1977: 168). Nonetheless, a more sophisticated philological investigation is required before such an identification might be regarded as proven.

One possible model for Tacitus' description here is surely the poet Virgil in whose *Aeneid* a sybil's divination is described using this very term. Virgil says of the sybil: "*fata canit foliisque notas et nomina mandat*" ("She foretells destiny and entrusts signs and names to leaves"). Although it is not immediately clear what Virgil means by *notae* here, a later author, Servius in his fourth-century commentary on Virgil, explains what this passage meant to him. Not only does Servius gloss *notas* by *litteras* 'letter', but he makes explicit how the *notae* are being used in the sybil's divination:

tribus modis futura praedicat: aut voce, aut scriptura aut signis // there are three ways to predict the future: either summoning, writing or by portents

id est quibusdam notis, ut in obelisco Romano videmus, velut alii dicunt notis litterarum, ut per unam litteram significet aliquid. // that is those signs such as we see in Roman epigraphs, which some call writing signs, as something can be signified by one letter.

Serv. ad *Aen.* III, 444 = Stocker & Travis 1965: 170.

Servius evidently reached a similar conclusion to that of Müllenhoff and Mentz.

A more contemporary author has left us with another similar description, an author whom Tacitus is known on occasion to have actually aped stylistically. This is how Cicero describes the method of the legend of the Praenestine oracle in his *De Divinatione* (*On Divination*):

itaque perfracto saxo sortis erupisse in robore insculptas priscarum litterarum notis. // And so when he had broken open the stone, the lots sprang forth carved on oak, in ancient characters.

Cic., *De Div.* II, 85 = Giomini 1975: 118; translation Falconer 1971: 466.

Now Tacitus should have been aware of this passage, and it does not seem likely that he has plagiarised Cicero here. In the Latin of Cicero's day *litterariae notae* clearly meant 'written characters' (Glare 1982: s.v. *nota* 6b); hence the use of *notae* seems to be established as the typical way to describe alphabetical characters of any sort employed in such a divination. But of course the question must arise as to whether the similarity of the Ciceronian passage to that in the *Germania* is more than merely similitude, or whether it does not in fact represent an ethnographical τόπος (commonplace). Many ancient ethnographical descriptions of barbarian peoples feature τόποι taken from a common stock of barbarian practices. Often these descriptions can even be traced back to the influential Scythian ethnography of Herodotus. Nevertheless, Tacitus has usually proved a reliable source whenever his claims can be checked (Jankuhn 1966). And though two descriptions of divinations with cuttings from trees do appear in Herodotus' Scythian ethnography, there is no mention of symbols or scratchings, so it does not appear likely that we are dealing with some sort of plagiaristic ethnographic *Wandermotiv*. (The Herodotean description may have inspired Tacitus to mention Germanic forms of divination, however.) Instead, in

the Ciceronian passage we again discover the use of *notae* carved in pieces of wood. Clearly then, *nota* is the expected Roman term in such a description of this period. Here, then, as Servius indicates in his commentary on Virgil, *nota* unambiguously describes alphabetical characters. Hence the *notae* of Tacitus appear likely to have been runes. Indeed, the Germanic letters probably have their origin in an archaic alphabet such as Cicero describes.

Tacitus and Cicero are clearly both describing *sortes*, a divination procedure well known in classical experience (hence *sortilege*), and one which some authors trace ultimately to a Greek origin. It is more than merely a procedure of lot-drawing, and is comparable as a category to *auspices*, *haruspices* and other forms of fortune-telling known in ancient times (Becker 1856: 103ff.; Bouché-Leclercq 1879–82: I, 195 and IV 145–59; Ehrenberg 1927). It is clearly a tradition to be associated with alphabetism, and presumably arose first among the lettered. It probably represents part of the well-attested tendency of ancient and medieval cultures to associate all manner of religious and magical beliefs to alphabetism.

Tom Markey (1999: 142–43) has recently shown that *nota* appears loaned into Old English in the expression *wæl(l)not* in *Solomon and Saturn* (158), which seems to be a calque on *wælrūn* (*Poem of Elene* 28 = ON *valrúnar*). If the *valrúnar* were in fact runes, then the association of *rune* and *nota* seems to have maintained a remarkable longevity, especially given the range of meanings over which *nota* could be applied by the Middle Ages. Yet despite the usage of *nota* in other comparable passages, it is not impossible that Tacitus' *notae* were another form of marking, much as applies to the *valrúnar*. Of course Tacitus' use of *notae* has been compared to other markings, for example those found on a collection of rectangular wooden tokens at Kitzbühel (Pittioni 1942). These markings date to the Hallstatt period, however, and although they have also been linked to the Mediterranean *sortes*, not only are they clearly not Germanic, both their meaning and employment remains obscure. Nevertheless, the use of the term *rúnar* in Old Norse for what might not have been *Lautrunen* at all may point to the earlier employment of PG **rūnoz* to represent other 'things that speak without talking' (cf. Sievers 1891: 239–40). In fact Tacitus may even be describing some sort of alphabetism or semi-alphabetism belonging to a tradi-

tion other than that of the *Lautrunen*. More evidence is needed to move beyond the likelihood that letters or some sort of substitute are being used in the divination described by Tacitus.

There is, however, some evidence of indigenous origin that seems to justify an equation of *notae* with *Lautrunen*. There are two lemmas, both of which have only recently received renewed attention, that might support an identification of the *notae* with runes.

First, according to Tacitus, the *notae* were inscribed on slips or slivers of wood cut from fruit- (or nut-) bearing trees. Many have suggested the beech owing to the usual etymology accepted for the Germanic term *book* (thus, presumably, the common translation of *frugiferae* as ‘nut-bearing’ rather than ‘fruit-bearing’). It has long been recognised that this etymology is problematic phonologically, however, as *book* is clearly a (decaying) root-consonant stem in Old English, Old Saxon and thus presumably Proto-Germanic. The root-consonant paradigm is unproductive in Germanic and clearly more archaic than vocalic-stem formations such as *beech*, though ‘book’ can hardly have been the original meaning for PG **bōks*. Instead Sievers (1891: 241–42; cf. Murray et al. 1888–1933: s.v. *book*) and more recently Seebold (1981: 289–92; in Kluge 1995: s.v. *Buch*; and cf. Ebbinghaus 1982; 1991; Peeters 1982) recognising *book* was originally an athematic stem have proffered a connection with Skt. *bhāgá-* ‘lot, fate, share’, Av. *bāga-* ‘share’ (Mayrhofer 1956–80: s.v. *bhāgaḥ*, *bhājati*; 1986ff.: s.v. *bhāga-*, *BHAJ*) which (unlike *beech*) is also attested occasionally as a root-consonant stem, specifically citing the Tacitean passage: i.e. the *surculi* when inscribed with *notis* were called *books*; ‘lot’ > ‘lot with rune carved on it’ > ‘book’. Sievers later abandoned this etymology in favour of the linkage of *book* with *beech*, swayed by Friedrich Kluge’s observation that a similar semantic development had occurred with a Sanskrit term for ‘birch’ (Kluge 1883: s.v. *Buch*; 1890; Sievers 1901: 252), and similar observations from Greek and Latin practice were adduced later by Johannes Hoops (1911–13: 338–39). Ernst Leumann (1930: 190) pointed out that Sanskrit seemed to show that a reconstruction **bhāg-* ‘lot etc.’ is probably to be associated with a lengthened-grade form of Skt. *bhāgaḥ* ‘prosperity, happiness, possession, fortune’ (see-

mingly a development of the verb *bhájati* ‘divides, distributes, receives, enjoys’) and he connected **bhāg-* ‘lot etc.’ to *beech* as reflecting a semantic evolution of **Losbaum* > ‘beech’. By this time, however, Hermann Osthoff (1905) had already put forward evidence to suggest there was a long diphthong (a lengthened-grade form with a laryngeal) in the root of the attested IE cognates of *beech* (i.e. PG **bōkō-*, Lat. *fāgus* ‘beech’, Alb. *bung* ‘oak’, Gk φηγός ‘Valonia oak’ < **bhā(u)ǵ-*; Icel. *beyki* ‘beech forest’, Russ. dial. *buziná* ‘elder’ < **bhǽuǵ-*; early NHG *bûchen*, *biuchen*, ME *bouken* ‘buck, wash in (hot) lye’, Ukr. *byže* ‘lilac’, Kurdish *būz* ‘elm’, Mysian/Lydia μυσός ‘beech’ < **bhūǵ-*; Russ. *boz*, Bulg. *bŭz*, Cz., Pol. *bez* ‘elder’ < **bhug-*). The Slavic and Kurdish cognates show clear evidence for *u*-vocalism in IE *beech*, and despite the negative assessment of George Lane (1967), the variations first examined by Osthoff might be explained by laryngeal metathesis: i.e. **bhā(u)ǵ-* < **bheH₂uǵ-*, **bhǽuǵ-* < **bhH₂uǵ-* and **bhūǵ-* < **bhuH₂ǵ-*, coupled with a shortening of **bhūǵ-* > **bhug-* in most Slavic dialects (Krogmann 1955–56; Eilers & Mayrhofer 1962; Friedrich 1970: 106–15). Noting the ablaut first delineated by Osthoff, Wilhelm Wissmann (1952: 15ff.; and in Marzell 1948–79: s.v. *Fagus silvatica*; cf. Neumann & Beck 1981) has thus proposed that IE *beech* was originally a root-consonant stem and the form that gave us *book* is merely morphologically conservative. The attested forms of *beech* in Germanic, Latin and Greek would then represent an original genitive form that developed into a feminine *o*-stem **bhāǵós* (and Albanian *bung* a singulative **bhāǵ-n-os*). But this supposition is based on an *a priori* acceptance that Germanic *book* derives from IE *beech*. The full-grade form **bhéH₂uǵs* (≈ PG **bōks*) would clearly be the nominative in the required hysterokinetic paradigm, yet the genitive would be **bhH₂uǵós* (i.e. **bhǽuǵós* or **bhūǵós*) which of course generates the wrong dialectal forms. None of the numerous cognates for *beech* shows the root-consonant forms that would support this nominal ablaut-based thesis, and the feminine *o*-stems that are attested are not reconcilable with the root-consonant form assumed to have produced *book* unless we assume some irregular (i.e. ad hoc) assimilation has taken place somewhere in the development of the beech word. In fact the proposed Germanic assignation of a novel semantic value to what is, *pace* Kluge (1890: 212), clearly also a morphologically archaic term seems even more im-

probable if, rather than to beechen *notae*, the origin of the term *book* is to be connected with the use of beechen writing tablets in the Roman style as was argued by Hoops (1911–13: 339; cf. Rosenfeld 1952; 1969; Green 1998: 258ff.). On the other hand, Stefan Zimmer has rejected Seebold’s etymology as the attested meaning ‘lot, fate’ may not be any more than an Indic development of an earlier Indo-European root **bhag-* ‘share’. If Zimmer is correct when he dismisses the evidence of Tocharian A *pāk*, B *pāke* ‘part’ as loans from Middle Iranian, the lengthened-grade forms of the Indo-Iranian terms may not be of Indo-European antiquity either. Nevertheless, his explanation for the development of the Slavic cognates represented by OCS *bogŭ* ‘god’ (contrasting with OCS *bogatŭ* ‘rich’, *ubogŭ* ‘poor’, *nebogŭ* ‘pitiful’) as influenced by an early Iranian form such as OPer. *baga-* ‘god’ < ‘share’ is rather ad hoc; the Slavic evidence might be better explained by accepting an Indo-European development of a secondary religious meaning of ‘lot, fate’ (preserved both in the Indic full-grade and the typically more conservative lengthened-grade forms too) from the root **bhag-* ‘share’ which further developed to a connotation of deity in Iranian and Slavic independently (Zimmer 1984: 196; 207–8; 210, n. 13; 215, n. 58). This interpretation would also support a Germanic development of **bhag-* ‘share’ to *book*, one which Zimmer dismisses perhaps too readily. Although both derivations remain somewhat problematic, there are two possible IE models for Germanic *book*; and if the relationship of *book* to the Indic terms for ‘lot, fate, share’ can be maintained, this would probably underscore the identification suggested here between Tacitus’ *notae* and the runes.

The linkage of the *beech* etymology for *book* with the Tacitean passage has been used by some commentators as evidence for a broader, cultic connection of writing with the beech tree (Gamkrelidze & Ivanov 1984: 623–24 = 1995: I, 533–35). Nevertheless, Tacitus’ description would tend to favour other trees such as the ash, the rowan, or as in the passage from Cicero, the oak; and we might have expected the historian to have used the term *fagus* if there were a specific connection between the beech and the *notae*. Indeed, this description is not at all at odds with the ashen tablets or wands described by Fortunatus some five centuries later. A special Germanic connection between writing and the beech, then, seems to be a rather flimsy philological construction. Tacitus’ men-

tion of a white cloth and a state priest clearly indicates a developed religious service: a divination known to the Mediterraneans as *sortes*, divination with letters. Nevertheless, there does not seem to be any specific connection in this tradition with regard to the type of surface used to record the alphabetical characters. The drawing of lots is also ascribed to the Cimbri and the Suebi (Plutarch, *Marius* 15, 4; Caesar, *B.G.* 1, 50), but no mention is made of how these were selected, and so it is unclear where these ceremonies stand in relation to that recounted by Tacitus.³ It is clear that Tacitus is not merely describing the drawing of lots with straws or small sticks as occurs in some later Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon sources. Instead he seems to recount *sortes*, a divination whose fundamental descriptive feature was the employment of written characters.

The second lemma is the pairing system that underlies the order of the rune-row. First delineated by Erik Brate (1920; cf. von der Leyen 1930; Seebold 1986: 541–48; 1993: 415–21; Mees 1999: 146–47; 2000: 70–79), it is clearly based in sequences that are known to stem from ancient letter learning. Pupils in the ancient world were not only drilled in memorising the alphabet in its usual order but also in variant orders based around pairs (Bonner 1977: 165–68). There are a number of Greek and many more Roman examples of one of these systems, the so-called boustrophedon-paired abecedaria. Other pairings based on other principles are also known, albeit in somewhat lesser numbers; one such poorly attested arrangement known only from two ancient testaments using the Greek alphabet is based around first separating the alphabet into six parts instead of two.

3 Hans Kuhn (1938: 62–63; cf. Arntz 1944: 293; Green 1998: 264–65) also proposed a connection to Tacitus' ceremony might be found in OHG *lesan* 'to gather, to read': this development is peculiar to OHG, however, and might represent an influence of the semantically similar Latin *legere* 'to gather, to read'.

α	β	γ	δ	ε	ζ	η	θ	ι	κ	λ	μ	ν	ξ	ο	π								
ω	ψ	φ	χ	υ	τ	σ	ρ	π	ο	+	ν	μ	λ	κ	ι	θ	η	ζ	ε	δ	γ		
α	ω	β	ψ	γ	χ	δ	φ	ε	υ	ζ	τ	η	σ	θ	ρ	ι	π	κ	ο	λ	ξ	μ	ν

Fig. 6. Greek boustrophedon sequence from Egypt (Boak 1921: 189–94).

A	X	B	V	C	T	D	S	E	R	F	Q	G	P	H	O	I	N
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Fig. 7. Pompeian boustrophedon inscription (*CIL* IV, 5472 et al.)

[α]	ε	I	N	P	Φ
B	Z	K	Ξ	C	X
Γ	H	Λ	O	T	Ψ
Δ	Θ	M	Π	Υ	Ω

Fig. 8. Inscription from Sparta featuring sextile pairs (*IG* V, 365).

Ɱ	αε	ιν	ρφ	βζ
	κξ	σχ	γη	λο
	τψ	δθ	μπ	υω
Ɱ	αω	βψ	γχ	δφ
	ευ	ζτ	ησ	θρ
		Ɱ		
	ιφ	κο	λξ	μν

Fig. 9. Both sextile and boustrophedon pairs in a Greek schoolbook (P. Vindob. G 29274, pp. 13–14 = Van Haelst 1979: no. 136.).

Such pairings are also known to have readily taken on religious or mystical meanings. They are mentioned in Jewish cryptography and alphabet mysticism, in Gnostic belief and ancient astrology (Irenaeus I, 14, 3; *Talmud, Shab.* 104a; Dornseiff 1925: 17–20, 126–33, 137–38). From the North Etruscan sphere there is even a bilingual bronze inscribed in Latin and Venetic (i.e. orthographically North Etruscan) letters: two such paired sequences are found where the accompanying dedications clearly show that the sequences are meant as a dedication to the Venetic goddess Reitia by a certain Voltionmnos.

The clearly legible section of the scrambled Latin abecedarium,

---]RF[q]GPHOINKM[---

consists of pairs grouped from the centre of the Latin abecedarium: F, G, H, I and K are paired with Q, P, O, N and M. The method of this ordering is part of a boustrophedon-pair arrangement of the Latin abecedarium. The accompanying Venetic sequence is also a set of paired letters:

---]NRNPRΦRŚLŚNTR[--- | ---]KNMNMLSRSLΦLXRX[---

They form a section of an ordering commonly found on such tablets at Este (though here in a somewhat irregular arrangement) that has been shown by Michel Lejeune to derive from a patterned arrangement of the cultic Venetic consonantal abecedarium, the VZA. For these two sequences the accompanying dedications make quite clear the context of such inscriptions as are found at Este. The Latin dedication is

---]O[---] DEDIT LIBENS MERITO

‘... given willingly and deservedly’, a common Latin votive formula. The Venetic inscription, however, is even more specific:

[vza.]N[.] VO.L.T[.iio.n.]MNO.S. [zo]NA.S.TO KE
LA.X[.sto ša.i.]NATE.I. RE.I.TIIA.I[.] O.P. [vo.]L.TIIO [l]E[no]

‘This abecedarium Voltionmnos offers and dedicates to Šainate Reitia, willingly and deservedly’ (Lejeune 1953: 75–78, 1970: 190–97; Pellegrini & Prosdocimi 1967: Es 27; Fogolari & Prosdocimi 1988: 271–74, Marinetti 1990: 112–18).

Many of the other North Etruscan epigraphs from Este appear to be offerings made with the hope of receiving succor from the (local) goddess Reitia. Thus it seems that lucky or divine letter sequences were known to the peoples who employed scripts related to that which found its way north in the last centuries B.C. to become the Germanic runes. The order of the rune-row clearly stems from such an arrangement, and this pairing was first noticed in an investigation of the names of the futhark. Yet as the pairing may have been determined by an orthographic superstition, and the use of *notae* in divination is attested by Tacitus, it seems that this confluence of alphabetic superstition is more than accidental. Similar pairs found on Greek pottery sherds have been interpreted as the product of divinations and the biblical *’ūrūm* and *tunmīm* used for divination in the Old Testament may well have been alphabetical pairs of this type (Hieron., *In Jerem.* 25, 26; idem, *Epist. ad Laetam* 107, 4; Heinevetter 1911: 33ff.; Robertson 1964). Given what we know of the Mediterranean tradition of *sortes*, it is hard to see how Tacitus can be speaking of anything other than runes, especially if Germanic *book* is related to Indo-Iranian terms for ‘fate’. We may prefer to disdain magical interpretations on the *a priori* grounds that too much in past runology has been ascribed to magic, and indeed the more macabre dalliances of the racist runic mysticists of the early twentieth century might again give us pause here. But if the pairing of the runes derives from a mundane alphabetic exercise gone somewhat awry, the rune names with their pairs of oppositions and complements surely suggest a cultic or cosmological context, one if not ultimately derived from divinatory practice, then one that could easily be put to that purpose.

The continuation of the tradition of the grouping of staves into three *ættir* (first attested in the Vadstena rune-row) into the medieval manuscripts and as the fundamental principle in the formation of cryptic runes is probably the last remembrance of the mechanical process employed in this binary system. The selection of staves to be omitted in the reduction of the older to the younger futhark also appears to have been governed by the principle of pairing. Yet the

transference of the elder **R** to the third *ætt* as if to address the subsequent imbalance caused in the relative sizes of the *ættir* seems to indicate that the principle that first governed this pairing must have only been a dim memory by the eighth century. Some commentators have supposed that the wide range of meanings of the rune names well represent the world experienced by the ancient Germani (von der Leyen 1938: 98; Polomé 1991), perhaps here notably in contrast to letter names in traditions such as Ogham. The pairs also often represent oppositions and complements that could easily be employed in a divinatory system. The system of merism and metaphor exhibited by many of the pairs may have been the only stylistic expression available in the construction of the earliest of the runic poems given that alliteration would have been a hindrance to a poem based around acrophonic names. Yet the resulting system of paired names would have readily been employed in any magical or mystical practice that became associated with the Germanic letters. The alliterative *naudir niþe* and *þoss ðrettan* (Flowers 1986: 266) of later rune magic clearly developed in such a manner. Evidently, the paedagogical principle was primary and the less mundane associations merely accretions to the developing Germanic alphabetical tradition.

Tacitus clearly mentions that three signs were drawn to be interpreted and many have suggested that this number is reflected in the three *ættir* which has led to an overly ambitious attempt to read semantic spheres into the *ættir* as well. Their origin remains obscure, but is perhaps not implausibly to be linked with the stanzaic features of the original runic poems: two names to a line, four lines to a stanza. Nonetheless, it is not surprising given the many points of comparison between runic and Irish Ogham practice to discover four selections employed in an Irish divination using Oghams, as the Irish orthography was separated into four *aicmi* (a term which also signifies ‘family’).

In his exposition of the North Etruscan thesis for the origin of the runes, Carl Marstrand indicated a number of similarities between runic and the Irish Ogham letters. These parallels he explained as evidence for a Celtic North Etruscan source for the runes. Indeed his contemporary, the Ogham epigraphist Stewart Macalister, also had sought the origin of the Irish orthography in a

North Italic alphabet, independently from Marstrander (Marstrander 1928: 130ff.; Macalister 1937: 18–29, 1945: iv-ix). Thus another strikingly similar passage from an early Irish source, the recension of *Tochmarc Étaíne* (*The Wooing of Étaín*) in the *Lebor na hUidri* (*Book of the Dun Cow*), may not merely derive from coincidence:

Ba tromm immorro laisin druid dicheilt Étainiu fair fri se bliadna, co ndernai iarsin .iiii. flescca ibuir, ocus scripuidh oghumm inntib 7 foillsigthir dó triana eochraib écsi 7 triana oghumm Etain do bith i Sith Breg Leith iarna breth do Midir inn. // Now it seemed grievous to the wizard that Étaín should be hidden from him for six years, so then he made four rods of yew, and he writes an ogham thereon; and by his keys of knowledge, and by his ogham, it is revealed to him that Étaín is in the Fairy Mound of Breg Leith, having been carried into it by Midir.

Tochmarc Étaíne 18 = Windisch 1880: 129; translation Stokes 1891: 440–41, n. 12.

Joseph Loth (1895; cf. Grimm 1821: 307–10; Seebold 1981: 291) has shown that a number of Insular Celtic terms for ‘fate’ derive from a meaning of ‘casting wood’, and similar references in Irish literature including terms for sorcery such as *fidlanna* (literally ‘wood-planes’) have been assembled by Joseph Vendryes (1948: 107–11). In fact the Germanic vocabulary similarly gives us Goth. *tains*, OHG *zein*, OE *tan*, ON *teinn* ‘lot, slip of wood’ and, as we have seen, arguably *book* as well. It is perhaps not surprising then to find here in a medieval Irish divination that Ogham letters appear in the place where in Cicero and Tacitus we have *notae*. In all three passages, characters seem to be inscribed on wooden staves; and in all three passages the characters on the staves are read for their divinatory meaning. None describe words, merely characters. There is, it seems, a common Western Indo-European connection between sticks or slivers or slips and writing. The use of mysterious or archaic letters in *sortes* recorded in Cicero, Tacitus and the Irish *Wooing* may not be directly linked, but it does seem likely that they are speaking of alphabetic characters employed in a similar manner.

We know other beliefs were grafted on to the Germanic alphabetic tradition: from the healing lore of the *rúnatál* stanzas of the Eddic *Sigrdrífumál* in which Markey finds an ultimately Indo-European model, to the alliterating nine needs of late sources such as the early modern *Galdrabók*; witness even the modern mystical tradition established by Guido (von) List. We should not, then, be surprised to find the Mediterranean custom of *sortes* reflected in early Germanic practice. Obviously, the names of the runes were remembered as something much more than mere mnemonic devices. Although they are treated as curious toys in the medieval monastic tradition, the grouping in the rune-row inscriptions and the ideographic use of runes point to a former more serious recognition of the superstitious uses of letters. In fact the Roman account that describes the first employment of ideographic signs by the Germani appears to make quite clear how important they were judged in pre-Christian times: in the tenth chapter of his ethnography of the Germanic tribes, Tacitus seems to describe the inscription of runes on specially created slips or slivers of wood which were randomly interpreted for their ideographic meanings in order to predict future events.

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