Rolf Bremmer
jan '92

Old English Runes and their Continental Background

edited by

ALFRED BAMMESBERGER

HEIDELBERG 1991

CARL WINTER · UNIVERSITÄTSVERLAG

Hermes-Mercury and Woden-Odin as Inventors of Alphabets: A Neglected Parallel*

Rolf H. Bremmer Jr.

The episode in which Odin hangs himself from a tree is one of the obscurest parts in the Eddic poem *Hávamál*. Pierced by a spear, a gruesome sacrifice to himself, the hanging results in his grasping deeper knowledge:[1]

Veit ec, at ec hecc vindgameiði á
nætr allar nío,
geiri undaðr oc gefinn Óðni,
siálfr siálfom mér,
á þeim meiði, er mangi veit,
hvers hann af rótom renn.

Við hleifi mic sældo né við hornigi,
nýsta ec niðr;
nam ec upp rúnar, œpandi nam,
fell ec aptr þaðan. (stanzas 138–139)

[I know that I hung on a windswept tree for nine whole days,
wounded by a spear and given to Odin, myself given to myself,
on the tree of which no one knows from which roots it grows.
I was given neither bread nor drink from a horn, I peered down;
I took up runes, shouting I took them, I fell down afterwards.]

The curious action which Odin here undertook has been given sometimes diametrically opposed explanations. Frazer saw in it the ultimate sacrifice. Odin, after all, was variously nicknamed Lord of the Gallows or God of

*My thanks are due to Jan Bremmer and Patrick Stiles for their comments on a draft of this article.

[1]Gustaf Neckel and Hans Kuhn, eds., *Edda. Die Lieder des Codes Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern. I: Text*, 5th edn. (Heidelberg, 1983), p. 40, stanzas 138–139.

the Hanged, and there is ample evidence of people strung up a tree or gallows and subsequently pierced by a spear and devoted to him.[2] Others, notably Sophus Bugge,[3] have seen in Odin's sacrifice an imitation of Christ's redemptory act on the cross. The reasons for such an interpretation are evident. In the Middle Ages, the cross is often depicted as a tree, for just as Adam, and through him mankind, fell into sin because of a tree, so the second Adam redeemed mankind on a tree.

The Old English *The Dream of the Rood*[4] is one of the most lively specimens of a literary treatment of the tree = cross topos. In this poem the cross is referred to as *syllicre trēow* 'a very marvellous tree' (4), *bēama beorhtost* 'the brightest of trees' (6), *sigebēam* 'victorious tree' (13, 127) — this word otherwise occurs only in *Elene* —, *wuldres trēow* 'tree of glory' (14), *Hælendes trēow* 'the Saviour's tree' (25), *wudu sēlesta* 'the best tree' (27), *wuldres bēam* 'tree of glory' (97), and simply *bēam* 'tree' (122).

Moreover, in the same poem, the cross is also referred to as 'gallows': *gealga* (10b, 40b), *gealgtrēow* (146a), while the word *rōd* 'cross' (44a), to which the poem owes its title, occurs elsewhere compounded with *wearh*, 'criminal', meaning 'gallows'.[5] In this connection it may be useful to point out that in Old Frisian the simplex *rōd(e)* itself meant 'gallows, gibbet'. The word occurs in a number of *Fine Registers* in a definition of the various degrees of unlawful fettering:[6]

[2] J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough. A Study in Magic and Religion. Part IV. Adonis, Attis, Osiris: Studies in the History of Oriental Religion*, vol. 1, 3rd edn. (London, 1922), p. 290.

[3] Sophus Bugge, *Studien über die Entstehung der nordischen Göter- und Heldensagen* (München, 1889), "Odin am Galgen", pp. 317–420. Cf. Wolfgang Golther, *Handbuch der germanischen mythologie* (Leipzig, 1895), pp. 348–50, according to whom Odin's selfsacrifice "ist nur als Nachbildung christlicher Vorstellungen verständlich" (p. 350).

[4] Michael Swanton, ed., *The Dream of the Rood* (Manchester, 1970; repr. with minor corrections and supplementary bibliography, 1978).

[5] S. v. *weargrōd*, in: Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford, 1989); T. N. Toller, *Supplement* (Oxford, 1920); Alistair Campbell, *Corrections and Additions* (Oxford, 1972), henceforth Bosworth-Toller.

[6] Wybren Jan Buma and Wilhelm Ebel, eds., *Das Emsiger Recht*. Altfriesische Rechtsquellen, 3 (Göttingen, 1967), p. 80: A VII, 142. Cf. p. 82: A VII, 162; p. 130: B III, 194; p. 190: C I, 231–5. Incidentally, it would appear that the meaning 'gallows' for *rōd* is recorded only for Old English and Old Frisian. Besides *rōd(e)* and *galga*, Old Frisian also knew *trē*, originally 'tree', but it acquired the restricted meaning of 'gallows', and as such is always preceded in the texts by *northalde* 'directed towards the north'. The common word for 'tree' in Old Frisian is *bām*.

> Tha hagesta bende: huam sa ma en sim umbe sin haud sleith, and sine honda ur bec bint, and ma enne doc ur sinne agne bint and ma hine to there *rode* leth: theth forme is soghen schillingar to bote, thet othere eluuene schillingar, <thet thredde fiftene schillingar>, theth fiarde <ac> fiftene schillingar.
> [The highest degree of fettering: whenever people throw someone a rope around his head, and bind his hands behind his back, and bind a bandage before his eyes and lead him to the gallows: (the fine for) the first fettering is seven shillings, the second eleven shillings, the third fifteen shillings, the fourth is also fifteen shillings.]

Bugge[7] has already pointed out that the early medieval (6th c.) author Venantius Fortunatus in his hymn *Vexilla regis prodeunt* depicts Christ as *suspensus in patibulo* 'suspended from the gibbet'.[8]

Yet, the parallels between tree and gallows for Christ and Odin do not stop there. Just as Christ, Odin was wounded by a spear. And just as Christ shouted on the cross, so did Odin on the tree. Thirst is a prominent feature in the suffering of both Christ and Odin. There are obvious differences, too.[9] Christ's sacrifice was vicarious, Odin's was a self-sacrifice. Christ suffered for three hours and died on the Cross, Odin suffered for nine days and survived.

Van Hamel, followed by Jan de Vries and others, interpreted the episode as a kind of shamanistic experience through which Odin gained knowledge from beyond.[10]

[7] *Studien*, p. 321.

[8] Fridericus Leo, ed., *Venantii Honori Clementiani Fortunati ... Opera Poetica*. MHG Auct. Ant. 4,1 (Berlin, 1881), p. 34/4. In a different context Rosemary Woolf, "Doctrinal Influences on the *Dream of the Rood*", *Medium Ævum*, 27 (1958), 137–53, at 149, has drawn attention to a late Roman, pseudo-Augustinian sermon, in which Christ is said to be *justus in patibulo* 'righteous on the gibbet' (*PL* 47, col. 1155D). Swanton, *Dream*, is ignorant of this in his notes on *gealga* and *gealgtreow*, on pp. 104–5 and 134, respectively. For further early evidence of the idea of Christ on the gallows, see Michael J. B. Allen and Daniel G. Calder, transls., *Sources and Analogues of Old English Poetry. The Major Latin Texts in Translation* (Cambridge, 1976) pp. 51–8.

[9] See for further counter-arguments Hugo Gehring and Barend Sijmons, *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, vol. 1, (Halle/S, 1927), pp. 146–7.

[10] A. G. van Hamel, "Oðinn hanging on the Tree", *Acta Philologica Scandinavica*, 7 (1932), 260–88; Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, II, 2nd edn (Berlin, 1957), §392, p. 75; Peter Buchholz, *Schamanistische Züge in der altisländischen Überlieferungen*, diss. Münster, 1968, pp. 76–7. For a recent discussion of the contents of stanzas 138–139, see also David A. H. Evans, ed., *Hávamál* (London, 1986), pp. 29–34.

Whichever explanation is correct, it is clear from stanza 139 that, as a result of his suffering, Odin perceived runes on the ground which he picked up. He is the god to have "discovered", or invented, the Germanic alphabet or *futhark*, named after its first six letters. There is indeed abundant evidence from Scandinavian sources that Odin is connected with runes. West Germanic sources, on the other hand, are well-nigh silent on this characteristic of Odin. What meagre evidence has been adduced, derives from Anglo-Saxon sources.

However, is the evidence really as clear as we have been led to believe? Often quoted in this respect is a passage from the *Nine Herbs Charm*, a long incantation in which the virtues of nine herbs are enumerated, interspersed with usually obscure references to even obscurer events:[11]

> Wyrm com snican, toslat he man;
> ða genam Woden VIIII wuldortanas,
> sloh ða þa næddran, þæt heo on VIIII tofleah. (31–3)
> [A snake came crawling, it bit a man; then Woden took nine glorious twigs, then struck the adder, so that it flew into nine pieces.]

In what is still the most detailed study of Anglo-Saxon charms, Storms explains the above passage as follows:[12]

> [Woden] takes nine glory-twigs, *by which are meant nine runes* [italics mine, R. H. B.], that is nine twigs with the initial letters in runes of the plants representing the power inherent in them, and using them as weapons he smites the serpent with them. Thanks to their magical power they pierce its skin and cut it into nine pieces.

OE *wuldortān* 'glorious twig' is a hapax, and neither the text nor the context suggests that we should interpret the *wuldortānas* as runes, or twigs engraved with runes. If these twigs have magical powers, why should Woden strike (or even kill by force, for that is a common meaning for *slēan*) the snake? The magic nature of the twigs is an interesting speculation, but no more than that.

[11] Elliott V. K. Dobbie, ed., *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*. Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records, 6 (New York-London, 1942), pp. 119–20.

[12] Godfrid Storms, *Anglo-Saxon Magic* (The Hague, 1948), p. 195; cf. Ralph W. V. Elliott, *Runes: An Introduction* (Manchester, 1959), pp. 68–9.

It is in this respect perhaps instructive to consider the meaning of *tān* and its compounds. First of all, Bosworth-Toller give as the primary meaning of *tān* 'twig, sprout, shoot, branch' (cf. ModDu *teen*, ModFris *tien*).[13] More specialized is its second meaning, viz. 'twig used in casting lots, lot; share that is determined by lot'. Bosworth-Toller provide plenty of examples, predominantly from wholly Christian (con)texts, to substantiate this sense.

The compounds with *tān* fall into two groups. The one group refers to twigs of a specific tree, viz. *āctān* 'oaktwig', *ellentān* 'eldertwig',[14] and *misteltān* 'mistletoe'. The other group indicates the effect or purpose of the twig, and these compounds are used metaphorically, and therefore require more detailed attention.

In the poetic paraphrase of *Genesis*, immediately following Cain's murder of Abel, the poet, in an elaborate vegetation image of the tree of sin, remarks:[15]

> Of ðam twige siððan
> ludon laðwende leng swa swiðor
> reðe wæstme. Ræhton wide
> geond werþeoda wrohtes telgan,
> hrinon *hearmtanas* hearde and sare
> drihta bearnum, (doð gieta swa),
> of þam brad blado bealwa gehwilces
> sprytan ongunnon. (*Genesis A* 988–95)

> [From the twig grew up the longer the more hateful and cruel fruit. Springs of evil reached far among mankind, harmful twigs

[13] See also Peter Bierbaumer, *Der botanische Wortschatz im Altenglischen. 3. Teil: Der botanische Wortschatz in altenglischen Glossen* (Frankfurt/M, 1979), pp. 226–7.

[14] To my surprise *āctānas* and *ellentānas*, as they appear in a medicinal compound for elephantiasis in the *Læceboc* (O. Cockayne, ed., *Leechdoms, Wortcunning and Starcraft of Early England*, vol. 2 (London, 1865), p. 322/19), have no separate entry in Antonette diPaolo Healy and Richard L. Venezky, *A Microfiche Concordance of Old English*, vol. 1 (Toronto, 1980), but appear under *tānas* as if they were not compounds. These words have apparently never yielded problems, as they are not mentioned in Angus Cameron, Allison Kingsmill and Ashley Crandell Amos, *Old English Word Studies: A Preliminary Author and Word Index* (Toronto, 1983). Peter Bierbaumer, *Der botanische Wortschatz des Altenglischen. 1. Teil: Das Læcebōc* (Frankfurt/M, 1975), p. 132, only remarks with respect to the element *-tān* that no distinction in meaning with *twig* can be established for the *Læceboc*.

[15] A. N. Doane, ed., *Genesis A. A New Edition* (Madison, 1978); cf. his commentary on p. 247 where he points out possible sources.

struck hard and painfully the children of men, (as they still do), from these began to sprout numerous branches of each kind of evil.]

From these lines it becomes clear that *tānas* could be used to designate instruments for inflicting pain. A similar association with wounds occurs in *Beowulf* in a context which has presented difficulties of interpretation. Of Unferth's sword Hrunting 'unique among ancient treasures' it is said that:[16]

ecg wæs iren, atertanum fah,
ahyrded heaþoswate. (*Beow* 1459–60a)

[its edge was iron, bright with poisonous twigs, tempered with battle-blood.]

The crux is, of course, how to interpret these twigs in connection with a sword. According to some it refers to the damascene patterns on the edge. In that case the poison then refers to the acid which was used in etching the paterning into the blade. Others are of the opinion that it describes the interlace patterning of the blade or the hilt through association with osier baskets. There is even a possibility that reference is made here to the actual use of a poisoned weapon.[17]

So far it has not been noted that in Old Icelandic the cognate *teinn* is also used in connection with swords. Hatto has drawn attention to the word *eggteinn* 'edge-rim', i. e. one of the two rims running along the ancient swords, with a hollow between them.[18] Apart from this instance there are the kennings *sárteinn*, 'sore-twig', *undateinn*, 'wound-twig', and *lævateinn*

[16] Frederick Klaeber, ed., *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd edn. (Boston, 1950).

[17] Carolyn Brady, " 'Weapons' in *Beowulf*: An Analysis of the Nominal Compound and an Evaluation of the Poet's Use of them", *Anglo-Saxon England*, 8 (1979), 79–142, at 101–02. A. T. Hatto, "Snake-swords and Boar-helms in *Beowulf*", *English Studies*, 38 (1957), 145–60, at 148–51; for earlier discussions, see e. g. Johannes Hoops, *Kommentar zum Beowulf* (Heidelberg, 1932), pp. 172–3; Klaeber, *Beowulf*, p. 185. Pieter J. Cosijn, *Aanteekeningen op den Beowulf* (Leiden, 1892), p. 24, pointed out the use of poisoned arrows in *Andreas* 1331; cf. Pieter J. Cosijn, *Notes on The 'Beowulf'*, introduced, translated and annotated by Rolf H. Bremmer Jr., Jan van den Berg and David F. Johnson. Leeds Texts and Monographs, N. S. 12 (Leeds, 1991).

[18] Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2nd edn, with a Supplement by William A. Craigie (Oxford, 1957), s. v. *eggteinn*.

'treacherous twig', all indicating a sword.[19] Finally, *Mistilteinn*, 'mistletoe', is also used as a poetical word for, or even the name of, a sword.[20]

With respect to *wuldortān* it will have become clear that the second element should rather make us think of an actual weapon. Whether this weapon is a rod, or, by extension, a sword, must remain undecided. The explanation of *wuldortānas* as magical twigs, whether engraved with runes or not, and however attractive to speculative minds, is unwarranted.[21]

If the one piece of Anglo-Saxon evidence for a connection between Woden and runes is of no real value, what about the remaining one? It is the often quoted passage from the prose dialogue between Solomon and Saturn, a kind of contest in knowledge between Solomon, as a representative of Christian wisdom, and Saturn as a representative of heathendom. One of the questions concern the origin of writing:[22]

Saga me hwa ærost bocstafas sette.
Ic þe secge, Mercurius se gygand. (57)
[Tell me who first made letters. I tell you, Mercurius the giant.]

With a small variation in the question, but with the same answer, it also occurs in the dialogue between Adrian and Ritheus, a text similar to the *Prose Solomon and Saturn*:[23]

Saga me hwa wrat [i. e. wrote] bocstafas ærest.

The presence of Mercury here has often induced scholars to refer to Odin's invention of the runes. The logical step is obvious. Mercury is

[19] For *sárteinn* and *undateinn*, see Cleasby-Vigfusson, s. v. *teinn*; for *lævateinn*, see Johan Fritzner, *Ordbog over det gamle norske Sprog*, vol. 4, *Rettelser og Tillegg* by Finn Hødnebø (Oslo, 1972), s. v. Only *gambanteinn* 'magic wand' is linked with supernatural powers. On this word see A. G. van Hamel, "Gambanteinn", *Neophilologus*, 17 (1932), 136–43, and 234–9.

[20] Cf. Alexander Jóhannesson, *Isländisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Bern, 1956), pp. 470–1; Jan De Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, vol. 2, 2nd edn. (Berlin, 1957), §482, would link the name of the sword with the Baldr myth.

[21] I wholly agree with Ray I. Page, *An Introduction to English Runes* (London, 1973), p. 113, who writes with respect to evidence of rune magic in the *Nine Herbs Charm* that it is "inconclusive at best and misleading at worst". It therefore surprises me that the otherwise common-sensical Peter Bierbaumer has glossed the word with 'Zauberzweig, Wunderzweig, o. ä.' in his *Der botanische Wortschatz des Altenglischen. 2. Teil: Lacnunga, Herbarium Apulei, Peri Didaxeon* (Frankfurt/M, 1976), p. 135.

[22] James E. Cross and Thomas D. Hill, eds., *The 'Prose Solomon and Saturn' and 'Adrian and Ritheus' Edited from the British Library Manuscripts with Commentary* (Toronto, 1982), p. 34.

[23] *op. cit.*, p. 36.

the *interpretatio Romana* of Woden,[24] ergo: Mercury in this passage is Woden, and consequently we also have West Germanic evidence for the link between Woden and runes. The conclusion is sometimes drawn unconditionally, sometimes with hesitation, but has never to my knowledge been contradicted. Richard Jente suggests that the author of the *Prose Solomon and Saturn* had Woden in mind when he wrote the passage.[25] Philippson writes:[26] "Woden hat die Runen erfunden. *Mercurius se gygand* hat die Buchstaben zuerst gebraucht", clearly leaving the conclusion that Woden = Mercury here to us. Jan de Vries, puzzled by the fact that in the runic poems no rune has specifically been attributed to Woden-Odin, remarks:[27]

> "Nicht unwichtig scheint mir bei der Beurteilung dieser Frage [i. e. the absence of Woden] die §370 angeführte Stelle aus den ae. Gedicht Salomo and Saturn, wo die *bocstafas* dem Gygant Mercurius zugeschrieben werden; damit ist doch wohl der germanische Gott gemeint, und dann haben auch die Angelsachsen die Erfindung der Buchstaben mit ihm verbunden.

Two remarks are in order here. First, De Vries probably did not look up the passage himself, otherwise he would never have called the *Prose Solomon and Saturn* a poem.[28] Secondly, and more seriously, it appears that the temptation to find evidence for a preconceived idea proved to have been irresistible to De Vries, for in §370 he had written more soberly:[29]

> "Wenn in dem Gedichte Salomo and Saturn gesagt wird [he quotes the passage], so bleibt es unsicher, ob hier wirklich der germanische Gott gemeint ist".

[24] The equation was well-known to the Anglo-Saxons, cf. Ernst A. Philippson, *Germanisches Heidentum bei den Angelsachsen* (Leipzig, 1929), pp. 148–9.

[25] *Die mythologischen Ausdrücke im altenglischen Wortschatz. Eine kulturgeschichtliche-etymologische Untersuchung* (Heidelberg, 1921), p. 77.

[26] *Germanisches Heidentum*, p. 216.

[27] *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, vol. 2, §392, pp. 74–5. His opinion had not changed since the first edition of 1937. For a review of the interpretations of the ᚨ rune, *ōs*, as either to be derived from Gmc **ansuz* 'god; hence Woden' or to be taken as 'mouth' through interference with knowledge of Latin, see Maureen Halsall, ed., *The Old English 'Rune Poem': A Critical Edition* (Toronto, 1981), pp. 109–11.

[28] There is of course the poetic *Solomon and Saturn* (Elliott V. K. Dobbie, ed, *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*. ASPR VI (New York/London, 1942), pp. 31–48), but this does not include a question on the origin of letters.

[29] *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, vol. 2, §370, p. 39.

Also more recently, scholars have expressed similar opinions on the basis of the *Prose Solomon and Saturn*. Ryan[30] thinks it possible that the Anglo-Saxons regarded Woden as the inventor of the runic alphabet. Ellis Davidson,[31] relying here as elsewhere on De Vries, also refers to the 'poem' *Solomon and Saturn* for her evidence. Turville-Petre is of the same opinion, but seems to regret that memory of Woden's discovery of the runes had faded by the time that the *Prose Solomon and Saturn* was written down, and that Mercury appears instead.[32] Further representatives are Ström[33] and, most recently, Owen.[34]

It seems daring to contradict such an old tradition with such illustrious representatives. Yet, in their excellent and learned commentary, Cross and Hill have clearly adduced evidence that the Mercury in the *Prose Solomon and Saturn* and *Adrian and Ritheus* has nothing to do with Woden, but everything with Mercury-Hermes, or more specifically, with Hermes Trismegistus. They adduce passages from the pagan Roman author Quintillian (ca. 30–96 AD) and the Christian Tertullian (ca. 155–ca. 225 AD) in which it is stated that Mercury is the originator of letters.[35] The tradition, however, was older and more widespread than appears from their quotations.

For the scope of this note it would be out of place to sketch the development and spread of the cult of Hermes Trismegistus.[36] Suffice it to say that it had its origin in the Hellenistic world and was based on the equation of the Greek god Hermes with the Egyptian god Thot. In the Western world we already find mention made of Mercury's invention of letters by Cicero (106–43 BC) in his *De Natura Deorum*.[37] It is interesting to note in this respect

[30] J. S. Ryan, "Othin in England: Evidence from the Poetry for a Cult of Woden in Anglo-Saxon England", *Folklore*, 73–74 (1962–63), 460–80, at 476.

[31] H. R. Ellis Davidson, *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (Harmondsworth, 1964), p. 141.

[32] E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North* (London, 1964), p. 71.

[33] Åke V. Ström and Haralds Biezas, *Germanische und Baltische Religion* (Stuttgart, 1975), p. 99.

[34] Gale R. Owen, *Rites and Religions of the Anglo-Saxons* (London, 1980), pp. 11–2: "The identification made between Woden and Mercury already explains the Roman name, but the knowledge of letters mentioned in the text belongs to Woden's mythology".

[35] *The 'Prose Solomon and Saturn'*, pp. 122–3.

[36] This has thourougly been done by Garth Fowden, *The Egyptian Hermes: A Historical Approach to the Late Pagan Mind* (Cambridge, 1986).

[37] Arthur S. Pease, ed., *M. Tulli Ciceronis De Natura Deorum*, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass., 1955–58), p. 1112. On Hermes-Mercury's invention of the alphabet Pease gives a very long and informative note (pp. 1112–4), enumerating a large number of passages from Classical and early Christian authors.

that Julius Caesar (ca. 101–44 BC), when describing the Celtic pantheon in *De Bello Gallico* VI, 17, 1, says that the Celts regard Mercury amongst other things as *omnium inventorem artium* 'the inventor of all arts'. Here he must have had his own god Hermes-Mercury in mind to whom all sorts of inventions were ascribed.[38]

Not only were the Greeks and the Romans inspired by the Egyptian god, even the Hellenistic Jewish romancer Artapanus (2nd century BC) saw an opportunity to equate Moses with Hermes, and consequently this man of God was attributed the invention of writing. As a matter of fact, Moses was the first one in the Old Testament who is assumed to be able to write (Ex. 17,4).[39] As such it is perhaps not surprising that Jewish scholars saw similarities between him and Thot-Hermes Trismegistus, and increased his record with numerous (apocryphal) activities and inventions, a faint echo of which can be heard in The Acts of the Apostles 7, 22: "And Moses was learned in all the wisdom of the Egyptians, and was mighty in words and deeds."[40]

If Jews, Greeks and Romans could extend the record of their gods or national heroes, it seems legitimate to attribute the same activity to the Germanic peoples. We have seen that there are good grounds for assuming that Odin's sacrifice on the tree was influenced by Christian ideas. Could not Odin's discovery of the runes have likewise been influenced by Mediterranean notions? Transference of this notion could have been brought about directly through pagan Roman influence. De Vries discusses a number of votive stones dedicated to Mercury with a clearly Germanic association, found on or near the Limes.[41] On the other hand, we also know of Christian Germans active in the late Roman and early medieval Mediterranean world. A good example in case is a man like Cassiodorus (ca. 485–580 AD), secretary

[38] Mercury's fame as an inventor lived on in the Middle Ages. To the Frisians, for example, he was known as having found and established law amongst the Egyptians, see the legal catechism *Haet is Riocht?* in Wybren Jan Buma and Wilhelm Ebel, with Martina Tragter-Schubert, eds., *Jus Municipale Frisonum*, vol. 1, Altfriesische Rechtsquellen 6/1 (Göttingen, 1977), §2a, p. 60, cf. Pieter Gerbenzon, "Bijdrage tot het bronnenonderzoek van *Haet is Riocht*", *Us Wurk*, 20 (1971), pp. 1–18, at 3–5.

[39] Cf. Hrabanus Maurus who attributes the invention of the Hebrew characters to Moses in his treatise *De Inventione Linguarum*, as edited by René Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta: The English Tradition* (Gent, 1954), pp. 349–40, §1, A, B, H.

[40] Cf. Gerard Mussies, "The Interpretatio Judaica of Thot-Hermes", in: M. Heerma van Voss, *et al.*, eds., *Studies in Egyptian Religion dedicated to professor Jan Zandee* (Leiden, 1982), pp. 89–120, esp. at 99–100.

[41] *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, vol. 2, §§362–5.

to Theodoric the Great, tutor to his son Athalric, and an influential statesman himself before he decided to become a monk. In a letter to the poet Arator he makes mention of Mercury's invention of the alphabet.[42] Could such knowledge have passed from Theodoric's Christian court to still pagan Germanic cultural centres? Whichever of the two channels is more likely, whether pagan Roman or early Germanic Christian, must remain undecided. The implication of my argument, though, is clear: while it is already an accepted fact that the Germanic alphabet has its roots in the Mediterranean world,[43] the conclusion lies at hand that the origin of the myth of Woden-Odin having invented the runes must be sought there, too. An additional argument underpinning this conclusion can be found in the fact that the invention of writing is demonstrably later than the common Indo-European period from which Woden-Odin derived many of the characteristics which he shared with other gods such as Hermes-Mercury.[44] Therefore, derivation must be relatively recent and is another witness of the uninterrupted cultural influences from the Roman (or Romanized) world on Germania.[45]

[42] Å. J. Fridh, ed., *Magni Aurelii Cassiodori Variarum Libri XII.* CCSL XCVI (Turnhout, 1973), Bk. VII, xii, 4–5; cf. J. J. van den Besselaar, *Cassiodorus Senator en zijn 'Variae'. De hoveling; de diplomatieke oorkonden der Variae, de rhetor* (Nijmegen, 1945), pp. 150–1 and fn. 2, and p. 159.

[43] See most recently Richard L. Morris, *Runic and Mediterranean Epigraphy* (Odense, 1988).

[44] For a convenient survey, see Hermann Collitz, "Wodan, Hermes und Pushan", in: *Festskrift tillägnad Hugo Pipping på hans sextioårsdag* [no editor given] (Helsingfors, 1924), pp. 574–87.

[45] Cf. *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte*, II, §565, p. 348.