Early Runic consonants and the origin of the younger futhark

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Elsewhere I have argued that all obstruents were voiceless in North-West Germanic (1988:9, 1996:54, 2000:8f.). H.F. Nielsen's comprehensive study of Early Runic (2000) now provides a welcome opportunity to compare my reconstruction with more traditional views of the early Germanic consonant systems and to specify its implications for the interpretation of the Runic evidence.

While I generally agree with the common interpretation of the Gothic consonant system (as modified by Roberge 1983), I think that it originated from an early fixation of the stress on the initial syllable which forestalled the devoicing of voiced stops and rhotacism of **z* found in the other Germanic languages. Unlike Gothic, North-West Germanic preserved the preglottalized stops which were inherited from the proto-language and later developed into preaspirated stops in northern Scandinavia and into affricates in High German (cf. Kortlandt 1988, 1996, 2000). This leads to the following comparison of my reconstruction (in square brackets) with Nielsen's interpretation (between slashes, cf. 2000:122f.) of the Early Runic consonant system:

b	/b/	[p]
d	/d/	[t]
g	/g/	[k]
p	/p/	['p]
t	/t/	['t]
k	/k/	['k]
f	/f/	[f]
þ	/þ/	[þ]
h	/h/	[h]
s	/s/	[s]
R	/z/	[R]
m	/m/	[m]
n	/n/	[n]
l	/l/	[l]
r	/r/	[r]
w	/w/	[w]
j	/j/	[j]

Nielsen assumes that the voiced stops had fricative allophones in non-initial positions. I find no evidence for this hypothesis, which cannot be separated from the common view that Grimm's law preceded Verner's law in Proto-Germanic. Elsewhere I have argued that this view is mistaken (1988:5f. and 1991:2f.). If Verner's law preceded Grimm's law, there is no reason to assume voiced fricatives for any stage of Proto-Germanic except for the allophone *z of /s/. In particular, West Germanic *d and High German *b and *g never had fricative allophones in prehistoric times. Moreover, I think that they remained voiceless lenes up to a comparatively recent stage.

In Old Norse, Nielsen's /z/ merged with /r/, e.g. *gestr* 'guest' versus Early Runic –**gastiR**. Nielsen assumes that the non-initial allophones of /f/ and /þ/ became voiced and that the alleged voiced fricative allophones of /b/ and /d/ were rephonemicized as allophones of /f/ and /þ/ (2000:125). This assumption creates several problems. First of all, 'a contrast depending on the presence and absence of voice is retained by /k/ ≠ /g/, the latter phoneme having stop as well as fricative allophones' (o.c.: 145, note 63), e.g. voiced stop in *ganga* 'to go', voiced fricative in *auga* 'eye' and acc.sg. *dag* 'day', palatal glide [j] in dat.sg. *degi*, voiceless fricative [x] in gen.sg. *dags* and neuter *heilagt* 'holy' (o.c.: 125). It remains unclear why [j] and [x] are identified as allophones of /g/, not of /j/ and /k/, respectively. It also remains unclear why the voiced fricative allophones of /b/ and /d/ should be rephonemicized as allophones of /f/ and /þ/ if this did not hold for the voiced fricative allophone of /g/. Alternatively, one could assume that the voiced allophones of /f/ and /þ/ were rephonemicized as fricative allophones of /b/ and /d/, which would bring them into conformity with the corresponding allophone of /g/.

Secondly, it remains unclear why the voiced allophone [v] of /f/, e.g. in *grafa* 'to dig', preterit *gróf* < *–*b*–, and in *nefi* 'nephew' < *–*p*– (ibidem) is not identified with /v/, e.g. in *vápn* 'weapon', instead of /f/. The separation of non-initial [j] and [v] from initial /j/ and /v/ looks like an undesirable artefact of the method.

Thirdly, Nielsen notes that 'there are no voiced allophones of /s/, not even in medial voiced surroundings, cf. *leysa*. This is surprising in view of the voiced allophones of the other fricatives in medial and final position' (o.c.: 125). Surprising indeed! It is a strong indication that there were no voiced fricatives at all at the stage under consid-

eration and that all obstruents were voiceless. Nielsen remarks that 'even the earliest Icelandic manuscripts had alternative spellings in *u* or *v*' for word-medial /f/ (o.c.: 145, note 64), but this reflects a more recent stage. 'Originally *þ* was used in all positions. When *ð* was borrowed from Norwegian, the two letters occurred in free variation until eventually *ð* was reserved for non-initial position' (ibidem, note 65). This may offer an indication for the chronology and geographical origin of the rise of voiced fricatives in Scandinavian.

Fourthly, the phonological status of long consonants remains to be specified, e.g. *leggja* 'to lay', *lykkja* 'loop', *þakka* 'to thank' (o.c.: 126). What exactly is the difference between *leggja* and dat.sg. *degi* in terms of distinctive features? Fifthly, the rhotacism is an unsolved problem. Nielsen's identification of **R** as /z/ is hard to reconcile with the fact that apart from the By stone (Norway, 6th century) it is almost or wholly limited to word-final position (o.c.: 214). In my view, **R** stands for voiceless *r* < **z* and originated from the general devoicing of obstruents in North-West Germanic as a result of Grimm's law (cf. Kortlandt 1996:54).

Now we turn to the 7th century evidence of the Blekinge and Eggja stones, which appears to be crucial for an interpretation of the Runic consonant system. Nielsen notes that initial /j/ 'must have disappeared in the language of the Blekinge inscriptions, seeing that the *jāra*-rune has come to designate **A**' (2000:126) and suggests on the basis of Istaby **AfatR** 'after', with **–R** for **–r**, that 'by this time the reflex of Gmc. **–z* had coalesced with *–r* in final position in North Germanic when following an alveolar obstruent' (o.c.:96). He thinks that the obstruent system of Early Runic was otherwise retained, to judge from examples such as Gummarp **hAþuwolAfA**, Stentoften **hAþuwolAfR** (personal name), Björketorp **uþArAbA** 'harmful', where *f* and *þ* are clearly preserved, as opposed to Gummarp **stAbA** 'staves', Stentoften **hAborumR** 'he-goats', **hederA** 'hither', Björketorp **hAidR** 'brightness', which exhibit allophones of /b/ and /d/. I find it very difficult to assume that **–z* was retained in Stentoften **–wolAfR** (2x), Istaby **–wulafR**, also Eggja **fiskR** 'fish', as in Stentoften dat.pl. **hAborumR** 'he-goats', **hagestumR** 'stallions', Eggja nom.pl. **manR** 'men', while it became *–r* in Björketorp **–lAusR** 'loose', perhaps **hAidR** 'brightness', also **bArutR** 'breaks', cf. Stentoften **–lAsAR**, **hideR**, **bAriutiþ**. This looks like paper phonetics. If **–R** was the voiceless

counterpart of *–***r**, all of these examples receive a natural explanation. The final *–r* of **aftr* was devoiced in Istaby **AfatR**, ON. *aptr*, perhaps similarly in Björketorp **hAidR** [tR], while the final *–r* of Björketorp **bArutR** ['tR], ON. *brýtr* 'breaks' developed phonetically from *–iþ*, Stentoften **bAriutiþ**, with *–iþ* from word-final **–id* with voiceless **–d* [t] < **–ti*.

Nielsen states that things may be less clear-cut in the case of Stentoften **gAf** 'gave', where he assumes devoiced /b/ in final position, cf. Sjælland bracteate 2 **gibu** '(I) give' (o.c.: 126). Interestingly, the consistent spelling of Gothic *gif*, *gaf* (beside *giban*, *gibis*, *gebum*, *gebun*) as opposed to *grob* 'dug' and *gadob* 'was fitting' (cf. Roberge 1983:129) suggests that we have a Verner alternation here. I have therefore proposed to derive the verb 'to give' from *ga–* plus **ep–*, cf. Hittite *epzi* 'seizes', Latin *apīscor* 'reach', *coēpī* 'have begun' (1992:104f.), like OHG. *gezzan* beside *ezzan* 'to eat' and MHG. *gan*, *gunnen* 'grant' beside OHG. *an*, *unnun*. The contrast between /þ/ and /d/ [t] in medial position was clearly retained in Eggja **moþA** 'tired' versus **mAde** 'rubbed off' (Nielsen 2000:127), so that the spelling of **nAkdan** 'naked' < **nakudan* represents the expected reflex of ['kt], not [kð] (as assumed by Nielsen, l.c.), similarly in final position **niþ** 'waning of the moon' beside **ob** [op] < **uba*, ON. *of* 'over'. The use of **k** and **t** instead of **g** and **d** in Eggja **fokl** 'bird' and **lat** 'land' suggests that preglottalization was lost in western Norway around 700 because it developed into preaspiration at that time. This development must evidently be connected with the rise of the younger futhark.

Elsewhere I have argued that the simplest way to account for the difference between the allomorphs of the weak preterit suffix in Old Norse, e.g. in *deilda* 'divided' < **dailidō* and *valða* 'chose' < **walidō*, is the hypothesis that intervocalic **–d–* became a fricative between the earlier and the later syncope (1988:4). If all obstruents were voiceless at that time, it follows that intervocalically *b* [p], *d* [t], *g* [k] became [f], [þ], [x] and merged with the earlier fricatives *f*, *þ*, but not *h* (which disappeared in non-initial positions). In northern Scandinavia, the loss of glottal constriction in the preglottalized stops *p*, *t*, *k* yielded preaspiration in the same way as the loss of occlusion in the non-initial lenes stops yielded fricatives. The preaspiration was often realized as devoicing of a preceding resonant and was thereby dissociated

from the following stop. Note that there were also devoiced resonants without a following stop, e.g. in Stentoften and Björketorp **welA** 'deceitful' < **wihla–*, ON. *véla* 'betray', Finnish (loanword) *vihlata* 'delude', also ON. *mǣla* 'to speak' < **–pl–*, *rǣna* 'to rob' < **–hn–*, where the weak preterit in *–ta* instead of *–da* points to a voiceless resonant, and in my view of course **–R** for voiceless *–r*, cf. also **rh–** for **hr–* in Helnæs **rhuulfR** and Vatn (Norway, 8th century) **rhoAltR** < **hrō̆þuwaldaz* (Nielsen 2000:257ff.). On the other hand, *–h–* was not written before *–t–* in Glavendrup **trutin** 'husband, lord', ON. *dróttinn*, OE. *dryhten*. These developments immediately explain the rise of the younger futhark, which does not denote voicedness because there were no voiced obstruents at that time. The choice of **b** rather than **p** is a consequence of the low frequency of the latter. Thus, we find original *þ* in Rønninge **bruþur** 'brother' beside *þ* < **d* [t] in **rauþum** 'red' and Glavendrup **faþur** 'father' (Fyn, around 900), corresponding to OE. *brō̆þor*, *rēad*, *fæder*, OHG. *bruoder*, *rōt*, *fater* (cf. o.c.: 129). The new consonant system did not arise everywhere at the same time. While it is already attested in the Ribe skull fragment (southwestern Jutland, around 725) in the form **uþin**, OE. *Wōden*, the language of the Rök stone (Östergötland, around 825) has preserved the distinction between *b* [p] and *f* in **ualraubaR** 'spoils of war' versus **–ulfaR** 'wolves' (o.c.: 145, note 71). However, note that the latter inscription has also preserved the form **sitiR** 'sits', with **–iR** < *–ip* (attested in Stentoften, 7th century) < **–id* with final [t], later Swedish **sitr** (o.c.: 260). It thus appears that the lenition was earlier word-finally after unstressed vowels.

In a similar vein, I assume that *b* represents a bilabial stop in Old Frisian **habuku** 'hawk' (Oostum comb, 8th century) and in early Old English *heben* 'heaven', *gibaen* 'given', *–hebuc* 'hawk', *halb–* 'half', *salb* 'ointment', *scribun* 'they decreed', as opposed to gen.sg. *wulfes* 'wolf' (o.c.: 135, cf. Campbell 1959:179). In North-Sea Germanic the original fricatives developed voiced allophones in medial positions before the syncope. The same may have happened in Scandinavia in the 12th century. Nielsen writes: 'It is interesting and puzzling (a) that the (Old) Norse reflex of Gmc. **s* remained voiceless in all positions, and (b) that the reflex of Gmc. **z* was not devoiced finally in the Blekinge and Eggja language, cf. the final fricative in Stentoften **gAf** vs. **hAborumz**' (o.c.: 137). I claim that all obstruents remained voiceless

throughout the Viking Age, that *–f* in **gAf** represents an original voiceless fricative from Indo-European **–p–*, and that **–R** was voiceless *–r*, not *–z*

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