Theoderic Rides On

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The Swedish Rök stone, the most impressive and enigmatic of all runic monuments, was erected in the ninth century by an unknown rune-master, Varin, in memory of his dead son Væmod.[1] Its long text contains, among other things, the oldest known poetic stanza in the Eddic metre *fornyrðislag*. The front of the stone is shown here with most of the poem appearing in the two horizontal lines at the bottom; the rest of the stanza continues in a vertical sequence of runes on the right edge. The runes containing the poem are transliterated as follows:

(first line on front side) **raiþiaurikRhinþurmuþistiliR**
(second line on front side) **flutnastrąntuhraiþmaraRsitiRnukarurą**
(third line, on right edge) **kutasinumskialtiubfatlaþRskatimarika**

Until recently most scholars agreed that the stanza should be read as follows:

Reð ÞioðrikR
hinn þormoði,
stilliR flutna,
strandu HraiðmaraR;
SitiR nu garuR
a guta sinum,
skialdi umb fatlaðR,
skati Mæringa.

This has been translated as follows:

Theoderic, the bold leader of sea-warriors, ruled over the coast of the Hreið Sea (i.e., the sea of the Hreið-Goths); now he sits on his (Gothic) horse, with the shield fastened, the prince of the Mærings. (Translation LL; cf. Wessén, 1958; Harris, 2007)

Theoderic has usually been identified as Theoderic the Great, the famous Gothic king, who was also a hero of Germanic legends and poems, well-known in several North European countries. The stanza as a whole appeared to answer two rather puzzling questions that were asked in the preceding vertical lines on the front side of the stone. The first question asked "which the two spoils (*valraubaR*) were that were twelve times taken as spoils, both together from different men." The second

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[1] For good introductions to the problems of Rök see Wessén, 1958; Gustavsson, 1991; Harris, 2007.
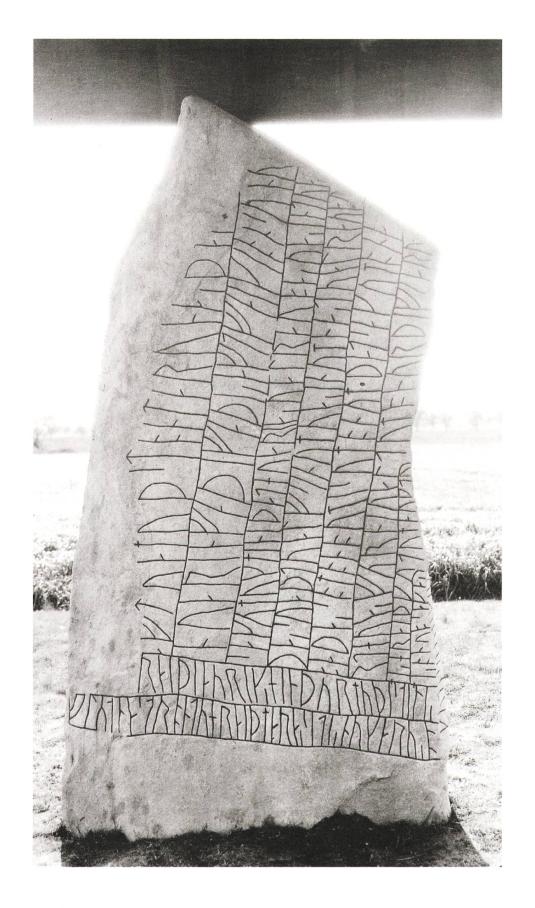
Image 1: Rök stone, front side (© ATA: Riksantikvarieämbetet)

Image 2: Rök stone, right edge and top (© ATA: Riksantikvarieämbetet)

question asked for the identity of a man "who nine ages (or generations) ago lost his life with the Hreið-Goths", a legendary people mentioned in Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon sources for the identity of a man "who nine ages (or generations) ago lost his life with the Hreið-Goths", a legendary people mentioned in Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon sources. The description appeared to fit Theoderic rather well: the two spoils could be assumed to be, for example, his horse and his shield or possibly his sword, all mentioned as great treasures in the medieval legends about him. It was also known that in ancient times a famous statue of Theoderic on horseback had been moved by Charlemagne to Aachen in the early ninth century, at roughly the time that the Rök stone was erected.

The combination of questions and a poetic answer was interpreted by myself as an early example of *greppaminni,* an old riddle game described in the twelfth century poem *Háttalykill in forni* and in Snorri Sturluson's *Edda.* This archaic form of poetic riddle was evidently used to honour great men by comparing them to famous legendary heroes of the past. According to my interpretation, the Rök inscription as a whole could be read as a succession of three different *greppaminni,* created by Varin to honour his son Væmod. The first of these concerned Theoderic (Tjodrik or Didrek af Bern as he is also called in the poetry of Northern Europe) (Lönnroth, 1977; Lönnroth, 2011).

In 2007, however, Bo Ralph published an article about the Rök stone, in which he read the poetic stanza in a way that would eliminate Theoderic altogether (Ralph, 2007). In Ralph's opinion a more correct reading of **raiþiaurikRhinþurmuþi** would result in another beginning of the poem:

*Ræið iau
rinkR hinn þormoði.*

The first half of the stanza could then be translated as follows: "The bold man, leader of sea warriors, rode his horse on the shore of the Hreið Sea."

From a linguistic point of view Bo Ralph's reading is possible and may at least on one point seem preferable to the traditional one. The runic sequence **raiþ** is closer to *Ræið* ('rode') than to the more traditional reading *Reð* ('ruled'). The runic sequence **iau** may also, although with some difficulty, be read as a dative form of a hitherto unattested Old Swedish noun **iauR,* corresponding to Old Norse *jór* ('horse'). The sequence **rikR** may also be understood as *rinkR* ('man' or 'warrior'), corresponding to Old Norse *rekkr.* And the whole context certainly makes it clear that the stanza is describing a man who is riding on a horse. What then about *ÞioðrikR* as a reading of **þiaurikR**? Linguists have accepted it, assuming that the sound *ð* has fallen off or been assimilated, but it is perhaps not altogether perfect.

Yet Ralph's new reading is awkward as poetry – the first two half lines just do not sound correct from a metrical point of view – and the reading runs into severe difficulties when compared with literary evidence from Old Norse and other early Germanic sources. There is, for example, the following close analogue from the ninth century poem *Ynglingatal,* quoted in Snorri's *Heimskringla*:

Réð Óláfr	Olaf ruled
ofsa forðum	in ancient days
víðri grund	the wide land
of Vestmari,	of Westmar,
[...]	[...]
Nú liggr gunndjarfr	Now the bold warrior
á Geirstǫðum	lies at Geirstad,
herkonungr	the king of the army,
haugi ausinn.	in his burial mound.

(Lönnroth, 2011: 307; transl. LL)

Not only is the structure here almost identical with the Rök stanza, if it is read in the traditional manner, but we also have the same contrast between the glorious past of a heroic king who died long ago (Olaf, Theoderic) and his still existing memorial in the form of a burial mound or a statue – thus a very appropriate subject for a runic monument commemorating a hero. Even if **raiþ** is read as *ræið* ('rode'), as Ralph suggests, the close similarity between *Ynglingatal* and the Rök inscription would still be obvious.

Theoderic is also needed in order to explain why the question that precedes the stanza is asking the reader to identify somebody "who nine ages (or generations) ago lost his life with the Hreið-Goths." Who could that person be if he is not Theoderic? And who could the "prince of the Mærings" (*skati Mæringa*) be if he is not that very same Theoderic who is identified in the Anglo-Saxon poem *Deor* as somebody who "for thirty years ruled Mæringa burg" (*Þeodric ahte þritig wintra Mæringa burg*) (*Beowulf*, 286)? Bo Ralph tries to explain away this literary analogue by pointing out that *mæringr* in Old Norse poetic language could mean simply an illustrious man, and that a people named 'Mærings' is not known to have existed. That may be true enough, but in *Deor* 'Mærings' must be understood as the name of a (legendary) people, and then it seems most likely that 'Mærings' in the Rök inscription also refers to that (legendary) people, once led by Theoderic.

What is the stanza about if it is not about Theoderic? According to Bo Ralph it should be read as an extremely sophisticated literary riddle of the kind that was cultivated by ingenious English monks in the early Middle Ages and found in the Anglo-Saxon *Exeter Book*. The rider on the horse is the sun travelling over heaven, Ralph thinks, and he in fact suggests that the entire Rök inscription should be interpreted along such allegorical and astronomical lines. But what, in heaven's name, has the sun to do with the Hreið-Goths? That riddle may seem difficult to answer, but one of Ralph's colleagues, Per Holmberg, has recently found an answer in *Vafþrúðnismál* 12, where Odin talks about the mythical horse Skinfaxi, which drags the day across the sky (see Holmberg, 2015):

hesta beztr   as the best of horses
þykkir hann með Hreiðgotum   he is regarded by Hreið-Goths. (Transl. LL)

Holmberg interprets this as a poetic way of saying that the sun comes from the east, where the Hreið-Goths are supposed to have lived. But that is not what Odin is saying, and there is a much simpler explanation why the Hreið-Goths are mentioned here: they were called Reið-Goths ('Riding Goths') in medieval Iceland and believed to be great horsemen. It would therefore seem natural to mention them as the kind of people that could appreciate a good horse like Skinfaxi.[2] Nothing, however, indicates that they had anything to do with the sun.

It will be interesting to see how Bo Ralph and Per Holmberg will develop their new astro-allegorical interpretation of the Rök stone. But as far as I can see at this time, Theoderic will not disappear very soon or be replaced by the sun or even fall from his horse but continue to ride on, followed by his Gothic warriors.

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[2] This is also the explanation provided in the commentary of the new scholarly edition of the *Edda* (see *Edda*, p. 358).