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RUNIC INSCRIPTIONS FROM THE MIGRATION AGE AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR PROTO-GERMANIC WORD ORDER

In our paper we analysed a corpus of runic inscriptions that belong to the first period. The runic inscriptions that we chose for our analysis are basically full sentences that contain the elements we were interested in, namely, the verb and the object. The main purpose of this analysis was to find some implications as to Proto-Germanic word order. The data obtained during our analysis suggest that the Proto-Germanic word order was VO due to the fact that there is a strong tendency to place nominal objects after the inflected verb in main clauses. However, on the basis of the data concerning the word order in compound NPs, one could rather regard Proto-Germanic as an OV language. However, if one regards the position of the nominal object with respect to the inflected verb as the basic criterion for classifying a given language either as VO or OV, and treats this level as being independent of other linguistic levels, like for example word compounds, one will arrive at the conclusion that it is necessary to classify Proto-Germanic as an VO language.

0. Introduction

Runic inscriptions are not any larger pieces of prose writing that could equal to Old English, Gothic or OHG texts. They are generally based upon the fixed pattern 'somebody did something' that recurs most of the time. However, as Lehmann (1972: 243) points out, 'Although they are stylized statements, the early runic inscriptions because of their antiquity provide the best sources for our conclusions about the syntax of Proto-Germanic.' According to Moltke (1985: 24), three runic periods have been distinguished, and each of these periods has its own variant of the futhark. The first period covers the years from the birth of Christ up to AD 600–700. In other words, this period covers the late Roman and the Germanic Iron Age and has often been called the Migration Age. The type of futhark used in this period is the first and the oldest known runic alphabet, that is, the West-Germanic futhark that consists of 24 characters. The Anglo-Saxon

futhark, which was presumably developed around AD 500, was based on the West-Germanic 24-character futhark and added seven new symbols. The second runic period covers the years from around 650 AD until 1025/50, but it is sometimes confined to c. 800–1000, and is called the Viking Age. In the Viking Age, the old 24-character futhark was reduced to sixteen characters, as towards the end of the first period it underwent a process of decay. Finally, the third runic period covers the years c. 1050–1400 that is the Middle Ages. In this period, as Moltke (1985: 30) remarks, 'we are fully justified in speaking of a runic alphabet instead of a futhark.' Although the original order of the runes, that is, that of the earliest futhark, is preserved in the Middle Ages, many new runic characters were created due to the influence of the Latin alphabet, and in order to take stock of the inventory, the runes must be put into alphabetical order. It should, however, be mentioned that the division into the three periods is somewhat artificial, as there are no clear-cut boundaries between them and they often overlap. For example, there is some disagreement between scholars as to when Period I ends and when Period II starts.

1. Position of the object with respect to the verb

We gathered 64 runic inscriptions from the first runic period and we did not make any distinction according to the region they were found in, be it on the continent, in Norway, in Sweden or somewhere else. What we stressed here was basically the age of the inscriptions. The analysed runic inscriptions are simple sentences, which are generally main sentences with no accompanying dependent clauses, and therefore we have only data for main clauses. It would be interesting to see what the word order in dependent clauses was but unfortunately we were not able to find any of them. Furthermore, there are no past participles, present participles or infinitives whatsoever in the analysed inscriptions and in some of them the object also is missing; the complexity of the sentences, however, increases in later periods.

According to our calculations, in the main clauses of the runic inscriptions that come from the first period there are 79.31% of VO word order configurations, whereas the OV word order configurations constitute 20.68%, the objects being both nominal and pronominal. Let us have a look at the table below that illustrates that:

Table 1. Runic Period I – all main clause objects: pronominal together with nominal

word order configurations	number of objects	percentage
total of VO	23	79.31%
total of OV	6	20.68%
total:	29	100%

If we divide the objects into nominal and pronominal, we will see that the picture looks slightly different. Let us first have a look at the behaviour of main clause nominal objects only. In the table below we present the data that we obtained:

Table 2. Runic Period I – main clause nominal objects

word order configurations	number of objects	percentage
total of VO:	23	82.14%
total of OV:	5	17.85%
total:	28	100%

It can be seen that the nominal objects that occur after the verb constitute 82.14%, whereas the ones that precede the verb constitute 17.85%. Now let us turn to the position of pronominal objects only. We found only one word order configuration with a pronominal object preceding the verb, but we did not find any configurations where the pronominal object followed the verb. The object was found in the Freilaubersheim runic inscription from Germany. It is a Frankish inscription on a gilt-silver bow-fibula that dates to the period between the third and the sixth century. The upper row of the inscription reads *boso : wraet runa* "Boso wrote (the) runes", whereas the lower row reads *Þ(i)k-da?iijna : golida* "DaÞina greeted you" (Looijenga 1997: 138/139). It can be seen that in the lower row the prepositional direct object *Þ(i)k* is placed in front of the subject and the object. Therefore, the only pronominal object that precedes the verb consequently constitutes 100%. Such a situation certainly does not reflect the true state of things because on the basis of the position of one pronominal object no objective percentages can be expected. However, the implication here is perhaps that there was a stronger tendency to place pronominal objects before the verb in main clauses rather that after it. Naturally, due to the restricted resources that we had at our disposal, our corpus is not big enough to present all of the possible configurations, so at this point we cannot say much about the behaviour of pronominal objects. Moreover, many runic inscriptions which could perhaps offer a much more varied picture of word order configurations in the inscriptions of the first period have never been found.

If we now compare the behaviour of both nominal and pronominal main clause objects in the runic inscriptions of Period I, we will obtain the following picture:

Table 3. Runic Period I – comparison of nominal and pronominal main clause objects

word order	nom. obj.	percentage	word order	pron. obj.	percentage
VO	23	82.14%	VO	0	0%
OV	5	17.85%	OV	1	100%
total:	28	100%		1	100%

Generally speaking, in the analysed runic inscriptions there is a strong tendency towards VO word order. This tendency has important implications for Proto-Germanic word order. Additionally, in the corpus we found only one sentence where the verb is in the imperative mood and it precedes the object; in imperative constructions the verb usually, but not always, tends to be placed at the beginning of the clause. If we had found more imperative constructions, then it would be arguable if the tendency in the first period of runic inscriptions was towards VO, but since the overwhelming majority of the runic inscriptions are neutral statements, the obtained data seem to be quite objective. Moreover, the fact that most of the runic inscriptions are based on an established pattern, 'someone did something', producing many sentences of a similar structure, cannot be in any way disregarded, because if the Proto-Germanic language had a strong reverse word order tendency, that is towards OV, then the sentences would accordingly be built on the basis of the pattern 'someone something did', which is not the case. This fact, therefore, would also strongly imply that Proto-Germanic word order was VO.[1]

2. Word order within the NP

Let us now turn to the ordering of elements within compound NPs in the runic inscriptions. Bradshaw (1976: 8) points out that 'if a language has the word order VSO or SVO in the sentences, then it will have the order specified-specifier in its nominal compounds; if a language has the word order SOV in its sentences, then it will have the order specifier-specified in its nominal compounds.' According to Bean (1983: 48/49) in the earlier period of the runic inscriptions the compound order indicates that the compound NP had a modifier-head (XV) ordering. He gives a number of examples to illustrate that some proper nouns had in fact internal OV order in the North West Germanic inscriptions:

1. *bida-warijaz* (c. 200) (proper noun) (A: 4)
   oath protector
2. *widu-hudaz* (c. 200) (proper noun) (A: 5)
   wood-dog
3. *frawa-radaz* (c. 300) (proper noun) (A: 11)
   lord-adviser
4. *hadu-laikaz* (c. 450) (proper noun) (A: 38)
   battle-dancer

[1] Nevertheless, contrary to our findings, Smith (1971: 291) suggests that 'verb final order was the primary unmarked order in both the oldest Germanic runic inscriptions of the older fuÞark and in Gothic... .' He continues that 'This verb final unmarked order was inherited from Proto-Indo-European.'

Nevertheless, he observes that some compounds in fact did manifest VO internal order, as can be seen in 5 below, but they are not as numerous as the compounds with OV internal order:

5. *witada-halaiban* (c. 400) (common noun)
watch-bread
'lord'

The latter view, namely, that noun compounds manifested VO internal word order, is supported by Smith's (1971) observation that the original order within the NP was head + modifier, except the genitive which manifested a variable position, namely, either pre- or post-nominal order.

As can be seen, opinions as to whether runic compound NPs should be regarded as VO or OV seem to be divided among scholars. It is due to the fact that the number of runic inscriptions coming from the first period is not very large, and the runic inscriptions that are available for investigation, on the one hand, contain compound nouns with the VO internal word order, and, on the other, with the OV internal word order.

3. Conclusions

It can be observed that in the analysed runic inscriptions there is a strong tendency to place the object after the verb in main clauses. This observation applies to the position of nominal objects. As to the position of prepositional objects, our data are not very suggestive due to the fact that we found only one sentence with a prepositional object. Moreover, unfortunately we were not able to find any dependent clauses in the analysed runic inscriptions and therefore we cannot say much about the word order that they manifested. The mentioned strong tendency towards VO, therefore, stands in contrast to what has often been said with respect to the Proto-Germanic word order[2], as our findings imply that the Proto-Germanic word order, like the word order found in the first period of runic inscriptions, displayed a strong tendency towards VO, at least as far as the position of nominal objects with respect to verbs in main clauses is concerned. As regards the NPs of the earliest runic inscriptions and the word order found within them, they rather imply that Proto-Germanic was an OV language. So on the one hand the data obtained for the behaviour of nominal objects with respect to the inflected verb within main clauses suggest that Proto-Germanic was a VO language, but on the other hand, judging by the word order configurations found in compound NPs, Proto-Germanic should rather be described as an OV language. However, if we

[2] The Gallehus inscription (Jutland, c. 400 A. D.), namely, *ek hlewagastiR holtijaR horna tawido* 'I HlewagastiR, the son of Holt, made the horn', where the object *horna* 'horn' is placed before the verb *tawido* 'made', has sometimes been used by scholars to propose that the Proto-Germanic word order was OV.

regard the main clause inflected verb and the position of the nominal object with respect to it as the main criterion for classifying a given language either as being VO or OV, we will come to the conclusion that Proto-Germanic should be considered as a VO language.

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