Runic writing and Latin literacy at the end of the Middle Ages: A case study

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One important aspect of the history of runic writing highlighted in the present volume of articles is its confrontation with what is termed Latin literacy and the process of Christianization. In a Scandinavian context this, of course, takes us back to the beginning of the millennium that we have just left behind us or to the beginning of what in Scandinavian runology is usually termed the Middle Ages. As we all know, the introduction of the Roman alphabet in these northern parts of Europe created a digraphic situation that seems to have existed at a certain level of literacy throughout the Middle Ages. In the present contribution I want to take a closer look at some remarkable evidence of runic writing juxtaposed to, or mixed with, Latin literacy at the other end of the scale, as it were, that is to say the 1540s – approximately the time of transition from the Middle Ages to Early Modern times. Most of the material I want to discuss is published in scholarly editions but has nonetheless not received much attention by runologists. All of the preserved material can be attributed to the Danish court official Bent Bille (1509–55), although the major part of it was earlier incorrectly thought to have been written by Bille’s cousin, admiral Mogens Gyldenstierne (1485–1569, cf. Thorsen 1877, p. 87f.; Bæksted 1939, p. 117f.).

The digraphic manuscripts date from c.1544 to c.1551, which is to say well before editions displaying the relevant type of runes and runic script began to appear in print. The mss. are as follows (listed in chronological order):
a. A collection of log-book notes from 1543/44 kept in the Danish National Archives (DRA Privatarkiv 5143 G (Bent Bille), previously N. Saml. Afd. I, fasc. 7c. No 157b) printed in DN XVI as nos 609 and 610 (cf. Fig. 1).

![Fig. 1.](image)

b. Documents from 1545 kept in The Royal Library, Copenhagen, the runic part printed and published in facsimile by Thorsen (1877, pp. 92–3) (cf. Fig. 2).

![Fig. 2.](image)

c. Documents from 1547 kept in the Danish National Archives (DRA Privatarkiv 5143 F (Bent Bille), previously Saml. til den danske Adels Hist., Fasc. 4). The runic part is printed and published in facsimile by Thorsen 1877, pp. 92 and 95 and by Sejdelin 1854, pp. 209f. (cf. Fig. 3).
d. Documents from 1547 kept in DRA Privatarkiv 5143 G (Bent Bille), previously Geheimark. topogr. Saml., the runic part referred to in Thorsen 1877, p. 98 (cf. Fig. 4).
The runic parts of mss. b–e are all limited to relatively few runes, the most extensive of these parts being the one in ms. b. The runes here are used in a list of contents on the cover of a pack of documents and consist of 94 runes. Ms. c has 70 runes used for a similar purpose. The last two mss. (d and e) contain even less of runic script than this. Thus only a contains parts written in runes extensive enough to justify the use of the term ‘runic manuscript’. The text of this collection of log-book notes covers twenty-three handwritten pages [c. 26 x 18 cm]. Approximately one third of the text is written in runes. The present contribution will concentrate on this one manuscript alone. The remaining four are simply cited to document Bent Bille’s use of runic script over a period of some years. These runic forms, to which we shall return later, have the same diagnostic features throughout – a fact which in itself makes this material attributable to one hand (see Fig. 6 below).

It is, indeed, of some importance to underline the fact that all the runic sources listed above are written by the same hand. Contrary to what P.G. Thorsen (1877, pp. 89–91) believed, only Bent Bille can be singled out as a digraphic writer in the real sense of the term in manuscripts from the period which occupies us here. Thorsen, having attributed document a to Mogens Gyl-
1 Thorsen’s attribution of ms. a to Mogens Gyldenstierne did, however, cause earlier biographers to believe that Bent Bille studied runic script together with his cousin Mogens G., thus creating an undocumented impression of a specific runic interest/competence in this family (cf. DBL1 II, p. 212).

2 “Om Runernes Brug til Skrift udenfor det monumentale”.

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The preserved evidence of runic usage in manuscripts does not exclude knowledge of runic writing at a certain level of literacy in this period (cf. also Bæksted 1939, p. 117; Stoklund 1997, p. 152). Evidence of a comprehensive epistolary use of runes in conjunction with Roman letters is, however, confined to one person: Bent Bille. We have, for instance, no evidence to show that Mogens Gyldenstierne used runic writing at all.1

So, rather than constructing the image of a frequent and widespread runic literacy among writers of manuscripts in the first half of the 16th century on the basis of very scattered and restricted evidence, I want here to study in greater detail the one hand that has left us with ample and comprehensive evidence of a digraphic practice in order to see how far this will take us. That is to say: What general conclusions is it possible to draw on the basis of a qualitative analysis of this evidence about runic writing and Latin literacy at the very close of the Middle Ages? This is the methodologically difficult question that the present contribution will attempt to address.

Thorsen (1877) commented upon the material that concerns us here in the context of a survey of ‘the use of runic writing other than epigraphic’.2 For obvious reasons he was not acquainted with the extensive use of medieval runic writing on small portable objects that we are so familiar with today. The assumptions he made about late medieval non-epigraphic use of runes had to be based on the material of runic writing that was to be found in manuscripts. How was this usage of manuscript runes to be explained? In Thorsen’s opinion, the
usage he was able to observe from the first half of the 16th century was not to be explained away as expressions of the accidental whims of eccentric persons. In order to make sense of the phenomenon that he had observed, he almost had to resort to metaphysical explanations – the use of runes is seen as a tradition that had been alive among “the people” throughout the Middle Ages so that, at least in the later part of this period, runic script was allegedly used for all sorts of personal notes etc.3 Even so Thorsen was surprised to see how familiar Bent Bille must have been with runic writing and how easily he seems to have exercised his digraphic competence (Thorsen 1877, p. 98). Hardly any attempt is made, however, to go beyond the mere description of the phenomenon.

Seen from a contemporary point of view, it is, of course, of great interest to see whether functional patterns of any kind can be observed in the change from one script to the other and if such a pattern or patterns can reveal anything about how the two scripts related to one another in the usage of one writer from the mid 16th century. It seems equally to be important for the history of runic writing to look more closely at these late runes from a typological point of view than it was possible for Thorsen to do in the 1870s. In addition there are some interesting orthographic features to be considered.

**Functional aspects of the two scripts**

The collection of log-book notes from 1543–44 consists of thirty-two pages, nine of which (pp. 7–8 and 21–27) are blank. A major part of the manuscript (pp. 9–20) consists of a copy of thirty-two articles or orders issued in German by King Christian III on 8th August 1543 to marines and soldiers under the command of Mogens Gyldenstierne in connection with the newly declared war

3 “Det kan heller ikke være et Tilfælde, at forskjellige – saa omtrent samtidig – ligesom vare foldne paa at skaffe sig paa en eller anden Maade nogen Kundskab til Runer for at udøve eller anvende denne for sig selv. Grunden ligger dybere, i det Grunden kun kan være den, at Runerne, som altid havde levet i Folket, ogsaa vare blevne brugte – i hvert Fald i den senere Middelalder – til allehaende personlige Optegnelser, (hvorom der gives Vink allerede i de nys omhandlede vilkaarlige Anbringelser af Runer i Haandskrifter med sædvanlig Skrift)” (Thorsen 1877, p. 84ff.).
against the German emperor Charles V. This section contains no runes. It is printed as an independant document in DN (XVI no 609). The remaining part of the manuscript (pp. 1–6 and 28–32) contains a collection of scattered notes written by Bent Bille – a substantial part of these in runes. This part, then, is printed as no 610 in DN XVI.

The first section (pp. 1–6) of this remaining part consists of notes written, as it appears at face value, on board the man-of-war *Michel*, captained by Bent Bille while on an expedition in the North Sea and Skagerak along the southern coasts of Norway and Båhuslen in August-September 1543. The *Michel* was in a fleet of forty ships under the command of admiral Mogens Gyldenstierne, hence the existence of the king’s articles in the bundle of manuscripts. The political circumstances that formed the background for this expedition and the outcome of it are well accounted for in the history books and need not be expanded upon here. Judging from the content of the notes, the *Michel* left Copenhagen on 5th August and returned there on 22nd September.

The second section (pp. 28–32) also consists of notes referring to matters concerning the expedition on board the *Michel* in August-September, in part also to matters related to a mission in the Kattegat area in December 1543 and January 1544, as it would seem.

All these notes convey random information about the *Michel*’s itinerary, incidents at sea, including dangerously rough weather conditions, inventories of food supplies, listings of individual members of the crew, and finally ‘some notes of a totally private character’, as it is discreetly phrased by the editor of DN XVI (p. 773).4 The notes are written primarily in runes – in the second section, however, also in Bent Bille’s ordinary 16th-century business hand.

Before going further into the question of what parts of these contents are written in which of the two scripts, it seems relevant once again to underline the provisional and unofficial character of the preserved manuscript. It is in consequence uncertain what its status was at the time it was written and there is every

4 “nogle helt private Notitser”.

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reason to share Thorsen’s doubt as to whether any of its contents were ever reported to the government.5

The part of the manuscript which corresponds to the printed edition in DN XVI, 610 does not seem to be the original version of the preserved written text or texts. The manuscript seems to have been copied from a written exemplar or written exemplars, as the case may be. This applies to the text in both scripts. Quite frequently parts of the text are erased apparently because they anticipated something which belonged further on in the written exemplar. This comes very close to what in philological terms elsewhere is termed ‘saut du même-au-même’. A small section of the runic part of the manuscript (p. 4) may serve to illustrate the point. The runic text reads as follows in transliteration (corrected text is crossed out, Roman letters are marked by italics):

*Item* nar hand skider skudt tha骷ulle ui oc uinker med hans fannicke tha skulle ui drafue til hannum oc tale med hannum.6

Moreover the notes referring to different dates during the expedition do not follow in strict chronological order. The dates seem to be entered *post hoc* in the manuscript in Roman letters in the following order: 26th September, 24th August, 10th August, 20th August, ? August (erased), 18th September, and 22nd September. It seems, in consequence, that the manuscript in its preserved state is, at least in part, a transcript of scattered notes collected into something which has the appearance of a draft. The draft seems to have been composed in retrospect after the recorded events. The manuscript in its preserved state thus seems to have been written some time shortly after the latest date entered in the notes – 16th January 1544. Whether or not there ever was a final version of this draft, we shall probably never know. The king’s articles in this unfinished document

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5 “det var værdt at vide, om noget af denne Beretning indgaves til Regjeringen” (Thorsen 1877, p. 87).

6 In Modern Danish “Item når han affyrer skud og vinker med sin fane, da skal vi sejle hen til ham og tale med ham.” (“Item when he fires shots and flags his pennant, we should approach him and communicate with him”).

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appear, however, to have been copied fair in the preserved state of the manuscript, as only very minor corrections exist in that part.

The first six pages of the manuscript relate, as we have already seen, to the expedition on board the *Michel* in August-September 1543. With the exception of individual words and numerals, together with a section of four written lines on p. 1, this section is written entirely in runes. The four lines in ordinary handwriting are erased and thus obviously not meant to be part of the text at this point, as the erased part is repeated in runes on p. 4 of the manuscript. It contains information about how signals from the flotilla leader were to be responded to by other ships in the fleet.

If we look closer, then, into the real content of the notes written in runes on these six first pages it is to be expected that the information they convey would have been quite sensitive at the time. The ship’s itinerary itself was something which would be of military importance. Furthermore, there are notes giving details about casualties in encounters at sea such as the report on the loss of eight or ten men after an attack by a Dutch ship on 24th August 1543. This kind of classified information is mixed up with private or semi-private matters such as Bille’s personal debts and money owing to him and possibly even more delicate matters, for example a note stating that Bent Bille on 26th September 1543 (i.e. after the return to Copenhagen) had transferred a considerable amount of gunpowder from the supplies of the *Michel* to the disposal of the viceregent and diplomat Eske Bille. In the unquiet international situation that existed until the peace treaty at Speier on 23rd May 1544, it seems natural that information such as this should be kept at as secret a level as possible. The use of runic script in a situation like this may then well have served the purpose of cryptography.

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7 This fact is not revealed in the printed edition in DN. It may indicate that the notes from which the preserved drafts are taken, were not written in runes, although this is difficult to prove. Similarly on p. 32 six lines of text in ordinary handwriting are crossed out being a repetition of the first half of p. 31, also in ordinary handwriting. Both the section of the text on p. 31 and its crossed out duplicate on p. 32 are printed in DN without any indication being given. On the bottom of p. 31 (not on p. 32 as stated in DN) between the two last runic sections of the text, the sentence *nosce te ipsum* is written in ordinary handwriting together with two lines later erased and no longer legible.
The content of the remaining part of the manuscript (pp. 28–32) is probably less sensitive judged by military standards. It contains a report on the status of the provisions on board the *Michel* at the close of the expedition in August-September 1543, along with an inventory of new provisions acquired at Marstrand in Båhuslen, presumably during the same expedition, part of which in exchange for food of substandard quality, such as rancid pork. Then there is a list naming the shipmasters, mates and gunners on board the *Michel* on the last leg of the expedition. All these sections of the text are in Bent Bille’s ordinary handwriting. The two last pages only contain sections written in runes – three sections in all. The first of these three sections opens with a short disrupted note, starting in ordinary handwriting but ending in runes, recording that a small ship (a *pincke*) had escaped to Holland after having “taken that silver”. Then there is a reference to a combat between *Christoffer Trunsen* and the enemy in a harbour indicated only by inference. Finally there is a report on complaints from the poor (*ten fattige folc*) about not being protected either by Christoffer (Tronsen) or by his officers.

It is possible and even likely that the enigmatic and incomplete reference to the plundering of silver is in fact the same incident as is alluded to by Arild Huitfeldt (1595, p. Qqiii, verso) who chronicles Mogens Gyldenstierne’s campaign and Christoffer Tronsen’s unsuccessful attack on the dikes of Holland. In retribution for this attack, Huitfeldt says, Dutch ships captured a ship from Gyldenstierne’s fleet. This happened off the coast of Norway and the captured ship carried silver and valuables according to Huitfeldt. The reference to this episode in Bent Bille’s collection of notes together with the somewhat cryptic reference to Christoffer Tronsen’s contact with the enemy and the brief report on unrest among the common people, all seem to be information which, for political reasons, ought not to have been too easily accessible, we may assume.

This accessability, at least judged by present-day standards, seems to be reduced to one single person as far as the two remaining sections of runic writing

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8 Christoffer Tronsen Rustung (†1565) next in command of the expedition commanded by Mogens Gyldenstierne in the Autumn of 1543 (cf. DBL 12, p. 480).

9 “... oc til met under Norge tagit it andit hans Skib som var noget Sølff oc Clenodie paa” (*loc. cit.*)
are concerned: that is to say to Bent Bille himself. The two sections record the crude details of his sexual affairs with two girls, named Anne and Karine respectively. The dates for each sexual encounter are carefully recorded in case, as the notes say “something might ensue”.10 For Anne the dates 26th September – the night between Cypriani and the following day – and 7 December are recorded.11 For Karine the 16th January is entered in a similar way. Why he thought it necessary also to record also the squalidness and tristesse of these infamous affairs one can only wonder – one encounter having taken place in the galley up against the work table (op til retter bencken), another in a churchyard (sancte nildues kirgor). There is every reason to believe that the facts of this pathetic conduct were to be kept secret. The mere existence of these furtively encoded notes are, in consequence, remarkable. They are there, it seems, to reflect a timid and abject attitude towards any consequence which might ensue from the affairs.

Seen from a functional point of view, there can be little doubt that at least the private notes were intentionally coded so as to be accessible to the encoder alone. This obvious fact also sheds light on the sensitive character of the content of the runic sections of the manuscript seen as a whole. The runic sections were obviously not intended to be understood by anybody who could otherwise read what was written in ordinary handwriting. Similar functional aspects, even if less dramatic, can also be observed in Bent Bille’s use of runes in documents from the years after 1544 (see above).

Where does this take us when runic literacy at the end of the Middle Ages is concerned? Although there is some slight and scattered evidence of knowledge about runes and runic writing among literate people (in the normal sense of the word) in the first half of the 16th century, the case of Bent Bille and his use of runic script quite clearly demonstrates, in my opinion, that knowledge

10 “om det kommer andet efter”.
11 He seems to have been in some confusion about the latest of these two dates. First the date 8th then 7th December is written, both spelt out in runes. Then the two dates are erased and corrected to vii written as Roman numerals. A third date should possibly be added to this entry as the December date seems to be equated or mixed up with geonefa day 1543. This must be Genovefa day which, however, according to Missale Hafniense from 1510 was 27th November (KLN M 8, col. 146).
about runes and a functional runic literacy at this period were restricted to the esoteric few. How many or how few we cannot tell from the present case. But when a script so clearly can serve the purpose of cryptography, its ordinary functions as a means of communication must, of course, have been phased out. Runic writing had acquired the status of a secret script – a function which seems to have stayed alive in various parts of Scandinavia for several centuries to come (cf. e.g. Hagland 1989).

**Some typological aspects of the manuscript runes from the 1540s**

The type of runes used by Bent Bille is clearly connected with the medieval tradition of runic writing of which our knowledge has accumulated over the recent decades. Thus Bille’s runes are also linked with what we may call the calligraphic type of manuscript runes that we know from the relatively young *Codex Runicus* (CR). But, as indicated also by Thorsen, compared to this tradition the runes with which we are dealing here, have innovations, if not as many as he seems to think. In Thorsen’s opinion several of the old runic characters are ‘malformed’, although current at the time.12

Bent Bille seems to a certain extent to abide by the same orthographic principles or practices when writing in the two scripts. In consequence, the runic texts can to the same extent be thought of as transliterations of the texts as conceived in the alternative script, that is to say what we have above termed ‘ordinary handwriting’. Thus it is not easy in a case like this always to distinguish clearly and consistently between orthography and runic typology. In order to obtain an overview of the types of runes used by Bent Bille, a plotting of the runes against the Roman alphabet seems, therefore, to be a practical solution here. Thus the alphabetical units paralleled by Bille’s runes are as follows:

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12 “at der – foruden selvfølgelig den udvidede Runerække for Ex. i Codex Runicus – er brugt nogle ny Tegn (som dog have været gængs), og at adskillige af de gamle Runebogstaver ere misdannede.” (Thorsen 1877, p. 89).
It should be added that Bille’s runic texts are written in what may be called a cursive runic writing.\textsuperscript{13} This performative aspect of his writing naturally generated more allographs than usual in runic writing. For the present purpose, however, no further description of this is needed than the forms displayed in fig. 6.

Seen from a typological point of view, then, only the graph introduced to equal the letter x, the $\Phi$, is new compared to the variants we know in the medieval expanded futhark. Although it occurs only once (p. 32\textsuperscript{9}), this new graph seems not to be an \textit{ad hoc} invention by Bille. It is obvious that by his time it had acquired a commonly accepted status, as it is also represented in the ‘Alphabeticum Gothicum’ published by Johannes and Olaus Magnus in 1554/55 (cf. Haugen 1980, p. 36). We have no certain chronology for the development of this particular graph in runic writing but we have positive evidence that it lived on as long as well into the 19th century in Norway (\textit{op.cit}. p. 35f).

Variation such as dotted runes as opposed to non-dotted, $\breve{B}$ : $\breve{B}$, and barred as opposed to non-barred, $\acute{I}$ : $\acute{I}$, is well attested in the medieval runic corpus as a whole. The variation between $\Upsilon$ and $\Phi$ for m, which is elsewhere typologically

\textsuperscript{13} Cf. also Thorsen (1877, p. 88) who describes this runic writing as “(en) løbende Hurtig-skript”. 

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|l|}
\hline
a & \textdagger \\
\hline
b & $\breve{B}$ \\
\hline
c & $\breve{I}$ \\
\hline
d & $\breve{I}$ \\
\hline
e & \textdagger \\
\hline
f & $\psi$ \\
\hline
g/k & $\breve{\gamma}$ & $\breve{\gamma}$ & $\breve{\gamma}$ \\
\hline
h & $\ast$ \\
\hline
i/j & \textdagger \\
\hline
l & \textdagger \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\end{table}

\textit{Fig. 6}.
significant, is in the present case most certainly due to the cursive nature of the writing. The variant with the branches making a full circle only occurs twice in the manuscript (p. 26 and 14). The remaining peculiarities of Bille’s runes appear more to belong to orthography than to be typologically significant features.

**Orthographic features**

Two very distinct features of orthography can be observed in Bille’s runic writing: the representation of phonemes /l/ and /t/ respectively. The former of the two is represented consistently by the rune تخطيط, the latter by the rune تخطيط thus making the rune تخطيط redundant in the set of runes used. This feature has caused editors some trouble as to how to represent the rune تخطيط when transliterating Bille’s runic texts. By consistently transcribing تخطيط as <th> Sejdelin (1854, p. 209f.) obviously interprets it as a rendering of the 16th-century orthographic custom of writing <th> for /t/ rather than <t> in any position. The same applies to Thorsen (1877, 92), whereas DN XVI: 610 consistently transcribes تخطيط as <t>. The problem is not easily solved, as the runic orthography with respect to this particular point seems to reflect the instability of 16th-century orthographic practices in general. Examples like تخطيط تخطيط (then tid) “at that time” (213) versus تخطيط تخطيط (ten libesge amerall) “the admiral from Lübeck” (214) may serve to illustrate the inconsistent spellings. A comparison of the crossed out text written in ordinary handwriting on p. 2 with the corresponding text in runes on p. 4 (cf. above) reveals that spellings like تخطيط تخطيط and تخطيط تخطيط are rendered as تخطيط تخطيط (tu sgudte) “two shots” (420) and تخطيط تخطيط (tha skulle) “then [we/it/they] should” (422) in the runic text and so on. In spite of inconsistencies like this, the solution chosen by DN should be adhered to. That is to say that تخطيط in all cases should be transcribed by تخطيط only.

A similar problem is caused by the apparently free variation of dotted/barred and undotted/unbarred تخطيط. The solution adopted by the editor of DN XVI is to transliterate in accordance with the expected orthography in ordinary handwriting of the period so as to transliterate sequences like تخطيط تخطيط […] as ligge […] langs “lie … alongside” (63) and تخطيط تخطيط as skider tv skudt
“[he] fires two shots” (423). In neutral positions after /s/ and unvoiced positions before /s/, as illustrated by examples such as these, the runic orthography may reflect a real difficulty of phonemic identification. If so, the runic script should, at least to some extent, be seen as a script in its own right, representing directly the writer’s spoken language and not being a mere transliteration of texts as conceived in his alternative script. In consequence, a more transparent solution would be to transliterate all cases of dotted and barred ʰ as ʰ, the undotted and unbarred one by ʰ. The dotted and undotted b, ð and /Dk, are usually kept distinctively and consequently apart, the dotted rune almost consistently representing the unvoiced consonant /p/, the undotted one its voiced equivalent /b/, in good accordance with traditional medieval usage. However, as it is not unusual in medieval runic writing also, there are some very few instances of confusion on this particular point. Even so, the transliteration should not ‘correct’ such obviously accidental mistakes. The transliteration of ʰ should also be transcribed consistently e.g. by ʰ rather than by trying to implement the variation between <u> and <v> (and even <w>) in accordance with orthographic practices of ordinary handwriting, as the editor of DN XVI has chosen to do.¹⁴

The various forms of the ʰ-rune, alternating between single-sided (ʰ) and double sided graphs (ʰ and ʰ), might be taken to represent the opposition between umlauted and not umlauted vowels /ø/ and /o/ respectively – a distinction well known in medieval runic inscriptions. In Bille’s runic writing, however, the two graphs seem to be variants of the same runic grapheme as it were. Spellings such as ʰʰʰʰ (œen) and ʰʰʰ (œen) (3¹⁶ and 17) both representing Modern Danish pen “the island” are clear enough evidence that there is no particular rune to represent the phoneme of /ø/. The most frequent orthographic representation of the phoneme is œ, œ, much in accordance with the orthographic conventions in the alternative script.

In Bille’s runic orthography bindrunes are very infrequent in spite of the cursive character of his script. Only two bindrunes occur in manuscript a, in which the combinations ʰʳ and ʰʳ are used (4⁷ and 10). In the later texts a few more bindrunes can be observed, e.g. ʰʰ, ʰʰ, ʰʳ in c, and ʰʰ and ʰʳ in e. In

¹⁴ Also because of other inconsistencies and misunderstandings the text printed in DN XVI: 610 is poor seen from a runological point of view and needs reediting.
some few instances, however, nasal strokes are used to represent the nasal con-
sonant /n/ – a feature which is doubtless adopted from the alternative script. 
Hence hollad and mad with nasal stroke over the a to represent holland “hol-
land (the Netherlands)” (301) and mand (either “a man” or the pronoun “one”) 
(414) respectively. To a certain degree even the variant of ∑ (m), the tvímaðr, X, 
may be taken to represent an intended bindrune, in some cases obviously used 
to represent the equivalent of <mm> in the ordinary orthography – sometimes 
even capital <m>. This usage is not in any way consistent, however.

Conclusion

Even if the overall impression of a 16th-century writer such as Bent Bille is that 
his writing competence is dominated by what is here called his ‘ordinary hand-
writing’, his writing in the second script, the runes, is not a case of a one-to-one 
transliteration from the dominant script. As indicated above, the writer’s fre-
quent and apparent problems with identifying phonemes in neutral and unvoiced 
positions are there to indicate that he processes written texts on the basis of a 
runic writing competence per se. That is to say a writing competence which im-
plies the ability to transform the distinctive units of the spoken language directly 
into runes without using the dominant writing competence as an intermediate 
stage.

At the present state of research we know very little, if anything at all, about 
how this competence was attained. All we can tell is that it is performed in a 
fluent and easy way – a feature of the runic script which supports the impression 
of a genuinely digraphic runic writer at the very end of the Middle Ages. The 
functional aspects of the mid-16th-century texts written in runes suggest that this 
kinds of digraphic competence was restricted to the select few. On the other hand, 
Bille’s use of an alternative script seems to represent an early stage of what was 
in later times to be a very distinct aspect of runic writing: a secret script for a 
few initiates.
Bibliography

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