In research on Scandinavian medieval inscriptions, runologists agree that “[r]unes were first and foremost letters used for writing. As such, like letters in any other script, they could be used for magical purposes, but without any discussion or argument, magic cannot be assumed as the major purpose of any or all runic inscriptions” (Knirk 1994, 180). If runes are seen as letters used for writing, it is reasonable to apply to runic inscriptions the same theories as in research on other writing, for example in an investigation of the literacy they reveal. A literacy approach can be concerned with the proficiency of the writers, the development of their literacy skills, or with the function of writing as a technique in society – rather than primarily with what is written. Such questions have, in recent years, been posed in research on the medieval runic inscriptions of Scandinavia (e.g. Söderberg & Larsson 1993, Lindell (ed.) 1994, Nyström (ed.) 1997, Palm 1997). However, as to the south Germanic runic inscriptions, there are up to now no investigations that do not just look at one inscription but try to see the specific culture of writing behind a group of inscriptions. This is all the more surprising because the role of writing in society usually gives important clues for the interpretation of a text originating from a remote culture. What is more, in all the editions of the south Germanic runic inscriptions available today (Krause & Jankuhn 1966, Opitz 1979, Meli 1988), it is common practice to complete and correct the transliterated runes according to principles hardly ever acknowledged, the main goal being to achieve a pleasing interpretation. As the principles of completion and correction have to be justified in the end, the interpretation tends to include a covering up of the inscriptions’ meaning for magic or religious reasons. Here, I want to argue that such a phenomenon is highly unlikely for the culture of writing that produced the south Germanic runic inscriptions, as this technique is quite alien to early literacy.
Instead, I want to present a new frame for future interpretation by arguing that south Germanic runic inscriptions show features typical of people starting to write both in the types of texts that are produced and in the way those texts are written down.

The transliterations of the inscriptions presented here are all taken from the aforementioned editions, including Katalog, Nytt om Runer, and occasional articles on newer inscriptions. Not having examined the objects myself, I will neither present new readings, nor new interpretations, nor comments on the technical skills of the writer (which latter of course would be interesting for a literacy-oriented approach). However, it is my conviction that new readings are unlikely to substantially influence the general observations presented here, as I base them on what can be deduced looking at the largest part of the south Germanic inscriptions, and not on the reading of singular inscriptions, or even single runes. My goal is to establish a part of the cultural background, the particular features of writing in a stage of early literacy, in order to provide a frame for future interpretation. To make a common cultural background concerning writing as plausible as possible, I excluded from the corpus of south Germanic runic inscriptions the inscriptions from geographically marginal areas,1 as well as every instance of writing found on import objects and probably made in the area of origin (Mediterranean objects with Latin inscriptions (Düwel 1994, 294), Scandinavian bracteates, Donzdorf fibula (Katalog no. 7)).

Import finds with Latin inscriptions indicate that people were in contact with cultures who used script. Yet although Latin writing might have been used in the area as early as the 2nd and 3rd century A.D. by members of the aristocracy in their correspondence with the Roman empire (Rüger 1998, 368), the knowledge of writing seems not to have continued after the Romans gave up the area. At least, there are only few instances of Latin writing (Düwel 1991, 284) mostly in places christianized in Roman times. In the area considered here, no Latin

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1 In this way, the inscriptions of Arlon, Charnay, Chéhéry, Beuchte, Bezenye, Breza, Liebenau, Meldorf, Soest, Weimar, Wremen and Szabadbattyan were excluded, as well as all east Germanic inscriptions and all inscriptions whose authenticity is at least doubtful (Argüel, Kärlich, Kleines Schulerloch, Rubring, Trier).
2 Although Düwel 1994 and Düwel 1996 list some objects with Latin and runic script at the same time, it is in all but one of these examples doubtful whether the signs are indeed runes or just imitations of either Latin or runic writing. The only object known as having runic and Latin inscriptions at the same time is the Chéhéry fibula, which was found outside the area considered here.

3 Christlein (1978, 8) points to the fact that only cemeteries, but hardly ever settlements from the period have been excavated, as settlement sites often were used continuously and are therefore hidden under today’s villages and towns. What people left in graves might differ considerably from the way script was used in everyday culture. Moreover, even in south Germania, runes might most often have been written on perishable material as was the case in Bergen (Roth 1998, 180).

An inscription is known from the places where runes have been found. Runes were the only script used, and they were used very rarely. The figure of 65 inscriptions considered here has to be seen against a background of 11 000 actually excavated graves (Riemer 1997, 225) from the same period of roughly 200 years, and in the case of Nordendorf, for example, two inscriptions were found among 443 graves (Christlein 1978, Register “Nordendorf”). Of course, the possibility of new finds that might change this picture can never wholly be excluded. The very scarcity of runic writing implies that there were not many occasions where people came in contact with writing, and perhaps even less had the possibility of learning to read or write them. Moreover, the lack of practice and the rarity of contact with runic writing would lead one to expect typical learner features in runic writing. If a whole culture is just entering literacy, all of its texts are likely to be similar to texts of individuals beginning to write. As more proficient text models are lacking, such texts might show more learner features. Information on the early writing stages of individuals is most often found in research on children’s acquisition of writing and script. A comparison between the early writing of preschool children and runic inscriptions has already been suggested by Söderberg & Larsson (1993, 67f.). They present two basic assumptions in order to legitimize such a comparison, namely that (1) runes were learnt in informal contexts without organized schooling, and (2) informal learning in children and adults will produce similar results. An important similarity of preschool children and early medieval adults is that they take writing into use voluntarily and on their own initiative (cf. Hagland & Lorentzen 1997, 47). Therefore, the early writing of children might present an
even better basis to observe early literacy than the writing of illiterate adults in writing education programs.

If literacy is taken to mean the degree to which a person is already acquainted with the technique of writing and its possibilities, stages of literacy can be detected in the specific text types that learners produce. Showing that they are aware of writing, children produce small signs in rows and thus imitate writing in a first stage (Günther 1995, 99, Hagland & Lorentzen 1997, 55). Even in this first stage, the signs produced have certain similarities to the letter forms used in the corresponding writing culture. In a second stage, children manage to produce a few letters in their conventional form, and they arbitrarily “write” words with the letters they already know (May 1990, 248, with examples like <mrüt> for German <Mund>). To adults, this writing merely appears as a row of letters and signs, but the child can of course explain what she or he has written. After having noticed the correspondence between the sounds of language and writing (discovering the alphabetic code), children usually produce as the first correctly spelled word their own name or the names of people they are close to (Günther 1995, 104, May 1990, 248).

Seen as written in a script like any other, many of the runic inscriptions of southern Germany are very similar to the text types produced by today’s learners. One can find writing imitations containing rune-like signs or the occasional conventional rune, inscriptions that could be classified under “rows of signs” (arbitrary writing), and, finally, name inscriptions. Writing imitations have only recently come to be noticed by runologists (here as well, medieval Scandinavian runology precedes older futhark runology: Knirk 1994, 200 even presents under-classifications for such imitations). For a long time, writing imitations did not appear in publications on the older futhark inscriptions, as they were either read as runes (with major difficulties and uncertainties), or dismissed as not important.4 Revealing that there has been a contact with writing and a consequent desire to write, they are however interesting for those interested in the status of

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4 For a reading as runes see the interpretations of the Hohenstadt fibula or Hailfingen sax in the editions of Meli (4.23, 4.28) and Opitz (no. 21, no. 26) – both have more recently been considered imitations (see Katalog no. 15, 17). For a dismissal see Düwel (1994, 276.) A rare but largely unnoticed example of a collection of writing imitations as such is Meli’s appendix (1988, 161f).
Only five inscriptions contain singular words other than names, and in most cases, their meaning is disputed. Hüfingen I and II alu and ota (if one accepts the latter to mean South Germanic runic inscriptions as testimonies of early literacy and written texts. Sometimes, the problem is to distinguish writing imitations from ornaments. The latter normally consist of regularly repeated patterns, |N|N|N|, while more irregular writing imitations usually occur in similar environments, on similar media and with similar technique as instances of writing in the same culture. Thus, inscriptions containing just a Ú or a X might not even be writing imitations. A single rune is read on the Bopfingen ring g (Opitz no. 7a, Meli 4.8), Heilbronn-Böckingen mount gx (Opitz no. 24) and gj? (Meli 4.26), Tannheim ?jd? (Meli 4.48) and d (Opitz no. 44), or the München-Aubing disc brooch C g (Opitz no. 30, Meli 4.32). Those singular “runes” are well known ornaments in other cultures, X, Ú, and their similarity to a conventional rune might be purely accidental. Inscriptions which contain two or more conventional runes, however, belong to a “rows of letters” category. They only make sense linguistically if one takes the pains to correct and complete them. As to them, it is clear that the rune writer must have known runes (but not necessarily their sound value!) to some extent. Tempting to be seen in this context are the inscriptions of Nordendorf II birljioelk (Meli 4.37), gif-joel (Opitz no. 34), Herbrechtingen fpae (Meli 4.27 and Opitz no. 25) and Halbfingen fibula //đaannl (Opitz no. 22), \[[\]adaannl (Meli 4.24). Comparing such inscriptions to the apparently meaningless rows of signs produced by the child Renate, Hagland & Lorentzen (1997, 57) observe: “I det store og hele kan ein sei at det Renate har skrive, ikkje betyr noko, men det er det at ho har skrive, som her betyr noko! Ho har vist for seg sjølv og andre at ho også er medlem av dei skrivandes klubb og stig med det i eigne og andres auge”. While writing imitations indicate that writing has a certain status, those instances of apparently meaningless writing proclaim the writer as a literate person, as a person with a difficult and prestigious skill, perhaps more than expressing a literal content. The writing of one’s name is among the first things one learns to write, and the parallel of learners’ writing today and medieval runic inscriptions has been noticed before (Hagland & Lorentzen 1997, 51, Knirk 1994, 189). In south Germania, about a third of the interpretable inscriptions contain personal names as the only interpretable sequence (e.g. Aalen noru (Katalog no. 1),
Balingen [...]amjuk (Opitz no. 3, Meli 4.3), Bopfingen fibula mauo (Opitz no. 7, Meli 4.7), Büllach [...]fridil [...] (Opitz no. 9, Meli 4.10), Friedberg puruñphild (Opitz no. 17, Meli 4.19), Gammertingen ado [...] (Opitz no. 18, Meli 4.20), Griesheim A kolo: agilanprup (Opitz no. 20, Meli 4.22), Kirchheim disc brooch arugis (NyR 11 (1996), 13), München bow brooch A sigila segalo (Opitz no. 28, in reversed order Meli 4.30), Steindorf husiñald--- (Opitz no. 42, husiñald[----] Meli 4.46), Wurmlingen dorih (Meli 4.60, Opitz no. 56). Even in the ten inscriptions containing more than one interpretable word which can be read without corrections, names figure prominently: Bad Ems (Madali, umbada, see Schwab 1998b for the meaning of (um)bada), Nordendorf I (logañore, Wodan, Wigiponar, Awa, Leubwini), Pforzen buckle (Aigil and AñRun, gasokun), Schretzheim case (AñRun, leuba dedun, Aroñis), Schretzheim fibula (sín, wagandin, Leubo). Even Osthofen, the illegible runes of which can easily be reconstructed to god fura dih deofile has been interpreted as containing the name Teofil (Meli 1988, 140). In the remaining four, the process of writing is visibly stressed in connection with a personal name: Freilaubersheim (Boso wraet runa), Neudingen wooden staff (Bliñgunñ wrait runa), Pforzen ivory edging (Aodlinñ wrait runa), and Weingarten A (Alirgunñ [...] writ). Most of all, these inscriptions point to the fact that writing was an extraordinary skill in society, and that to establish oneself as a writer was a primary concern of the rune writers just as it is for today’s children (cf. Hagland & Lorentzen 1997, 48 with an example of a Scandinavian older futhark inscription). To sum up, a survey of a large part of the south Germanic inscriptions shows exactly the text types that can be expected for a situation of early literacy: writing imitations, uninterpretable rows of runes and name inscriptions, some presenting just one or two names, some of them in addition to a name stressing the writing itself.

'terror'!) might have been copied from Scandinavian bracteates (Fingerlin et al. 1998, 812ff.) without access to their meaning. The word bada [...] (Opitz no. 27, Meli 4.29) appears on the Kirchheim fibula, but is unknown outside the runic corpus, where it has a parallel instance in Bad Ems [...]ubada (Meli 4.16, Opitz no. 14). Its meaning is still disputed (Schwab 1998b). On the Neudingen fibula we find [...]midu [...] 'in the middle' (Katalog no. 33), while on the Oberflacht silver spoon [...]dulp [...] (Opitz no. 35, Meli 4.38) 'celebration' has been read.
Consequently, a lot of typical learner features can be expected in the individual inscription, mirroring the fact that examples of written texts were rare, and that the skills of writing (and reading) were seldom practised. From the writing of children, a lot of such learner difficulties are known. At the beginning, the direction of writing seems not yet to be fixed (Söderberg & Larsson 1993, 73), and even if it is, letters are often written in their reversed form (Juna 1989, 23ff.). Schneider et al. (1995, 20) mention some features regarding the shapes of letters: they are often changed, as children tend to emphasize certain striking features (e.g. <E> with four or more horizontal branches). That children pay particular attention to striking features sometimes results in the wrong analysis of letters (what belongs to a previous letter is seen as a feature of the following letter), and signs that are similar as to certain features are often mixed up. In written words, children moreover tend to leave out signs that do not strike the eye, reverse or repeat letters inside the word and add other signs in places where they should not be (Günther 1995, 104). Sometimes, the writing of children therefore almost makes an anagrammatical impression.

As to the writing direction, it is well known from other cultures just entering literacy that the writing direction is unfixed at the beginning (cf. Morris 1988, 136 on early Greek epigraphy and 1988, 104 on the oldest Latin inscriptions). In the area investigated here, there are – of all the cases where a direction can be made out at all – five inscriptions running right to left (Balingen, Dischingen B, Gräfelfing (if this is not rather a writing imitation), Heilbronn-Böckingen belt fitting, Hüfingen I). In the inscription of the Neudingen fibula, the sequence midu also appears as udim in reversed form – as u is the only rune where a direction can be made out at all – five inscriptions running right to left (Balingen, Dischingen B, Gräfelfing (if this is not rather a writing imitation), Heilbronn-Böckingen belt fitting, Hüfingen I). In the inscription of the Neudingen fibula, the sequence midu also appears as udim in reversed form – as u is the only rune where a direction can be made out, it could easily be a right to left sequence. More often, not whole words, but just singular runes are reversed. Particularly often, this seems to be the case with n, an interesting fact considering that even today’s children have their particular problems with N (and S, cf. Derolez 1990, 408). This is probably due to the fact that these characters are oriented in two dimensions in Latin as well as in runic script. In any case, the fact that it is always the same runes that appear in their reverse form strongly speaks against an interpretation of the reversed runes as indicating a second meaning.

The emphasis which learners put on striking features of runes might in turn be responsible for the six-stroke-s that appears on the Schretzheim case and
Schretzheim fibula (Meli 4.42 and 4.43), while the possibility that signs are analysed in the wrong way might support the reading of the beginning of the second line on the Pforzen buckle as *elahu[...] instead of *ltahu[...] (cf. Schwab 1999, 59, who also presents examples of similar mistakes on bracteates). As Tineke Looijenga suggests (1999, 84), even the otherwise rarely found ḷ-rune in this inscription could be seen as a scribal error due to wrong analysis (stave of the rune wrongly analyzed as a feature of the preceding ḳ and consequently linked to it, ḷ intended (cf. aigil in the same inscription), but l written because i was not striking enough and I followed immediately).

Unfortunately, a defective writing of words can only be spotted in the runic corpus where the intended meaning is clear. While a child can always be consulted on his or her intentions, we can ask the rune writers no longer, and our corrections are always hypothetical even when they are based on the most frequent mistakes of learners. A plausible parallel to a child mistaking certain signs for others, however, has been proposed by Ute Schwab, who observed that the word imuba, ḲMNB on the Neudingen staff might be misspelled for ḲMNB, leuba, a word which is known from the inscription on the Schretzheim case (1998a, 416). Signs that are left out, too, can only be spotted if the interpretation is otherwise obvious. Such examples are probably winka for Winika (Dischingen A, Opitz no. 11, Meli 4.12: probably, n would have been omitted before k if winka would have been intended), ṭk for ṭt (Freilaubersheim, Katalog no. 11), and [...]brg for a woman’s name ending in -birg (Oettingen, Katalog no. 38). In all of these cases, the reason for leaving the letter i might have been the fact that this letter has no striking features, rather than a habitude in runic writing to omit short vowels (Meli 1988, 120 claims a “consuetudine della grafia runica di omettere vocali brevi”). The repetition of signs on the other hand is clearly visible even if there is no interpretation (with repetition following immediately: Hailfingen fibula //daan̄ (Opitz no. 22); repetition not following immediately: Niederstotzingen strap-end [...]udd--eu (Opitz no. 32, Meli 4.35)). The examples of Bülach ḷrifridil [...] (Opitz no. 9, Meli 4.10) and Gammertingen ado a-o (Opitz no. 18, Meli 4.20) where parts of the whole inscription are repeated are typical for learning to write, too (for Gammertingen, this has been suggested already by Opitz 1979, 172). In the case of Stetten afmélkud (Pieper et al. 1991, 303ff.), which is commonly interpreted as the
6 The case of Lauchheim aonofada could be included here if one accepts *Aunofada as a woman’s name (cf. Bammesberger 1999, 203f.). Maybe leub and leob are not names but adjectives or nouns like leuba on the Schretzheim case.

South Germanic runic inscriptions as testimonies of early literacy

As a matter of fact, only 15 inscriptions (out of the 65 considered here) have been read completely without any corrections or omission of disturbing signs. Most of them are names (Aalen noru (Katalog no. 1), Bopfingen fibula mauo (Meli 4.7), Engers leub (Opitz no. 15), Friedberg puruphild (Opitz no. 17), Griesheim A kolo: agilaprup (Meli no. 4.22), Kirchheim disc brooch arugis (NyR 11 (1996), 13), München-Aubing A sigila segalo (Katalog no. 26), Steindorf husibold (Meli 4.46), Schwangau leob (Katalog no. 41), Weingarten fibula B dado (Meli 4.59), Wurmlingen dorih (Meli 4.60)). Two of them are single appellativa possibly copied without access to their meaning (alu and ota on the Hüfingen bracteates, Fingerlin et al. 1998, 812ff.), and two of them are longer, sentence-like statements (Nordendorf I cf. Katalog no. 35; Schretzheim fibula cf. Opitz no. 39). In all other inscriptions, something can be read, while other signs do not make sense without correction. This again is what can be expected given the few instances of writing and the fact that the technique of writing was relatively new to this culture.

All the learner features in writing discussed above are well known, although they are usually presented as techniques of Arkanisierung (deliberate covering up of meaning, cf. Düwel’s list of some techniques he claims to have been used in older futhark inscriptions 1997, 34f). The problem with this thesis of deliberate covering up is that the models for such assumptions always originate from cultures that have been used to the written word for centuries (e.g. Jewish cabbalistic writing in the 13th century, magic papyri in 4th century A.D. Egypt), and not from cultures just entering literacy like the culture producing the south Germanic inscriptions. In cultures where meaning is covered up in sophisticated ways, however, writers cannot afford to struggle with writing what they want to
write, even more so if the covering up is done for supernatural reasons. In magic contexts, a spelling mistake can have highly unlucky consequences. Thus it is no wonder that, in cultures where Arkanisierung is practised, writers usually undergo careful and organized training in schools. For south Germania, the fact that there are only few instances of writing in general and that there obviously are writing imitations, sometimes as the sole indicator of contact with writing in a place, make organized training for rune writers unlikely. Comparing the inscriptions with other writing at an early stage of literacy must lead to the conclusion that many inscriptions still show the problems people had with writing rather than a sophisticated use of runes for magic or religious reasons.

Writing always has a touch of the magic, but not in the sense of enabling contact with the supernatural. Rather, it is the power and strength of the written word to make visible and endurable which distinguishes it from the spoken word: “Men magien ligg [...] aller mest i at skrifta har ei makt og ein styrke andre uttrykk ikkje har i enkelte livssamanhenger” (Hagland & Lorentzen 1997, 51f). As the many personal names indicate, inscriptions from an early literacy environment reveal the fascination of the beginner with writing as a powerful technique in itself, even without noticing the possibility that writing, in a second step, also could be used to conceal written words. The power of making visible alone is sufficient to give writing a prestigious status, which possibly induces not only children to become writers (Hagland & Lorentzen 1997, 55). A similar prestige function of writing might be at the back of the south Germanic inscriptions. The armed brooches, on which many of the south Germanic inscriptions appear, belong to the jewelry that only about 3 to 5% of the population could afford (Christlein 1978, 82). A prestige function of the objects on which a large part of the inscriptions appear is therefore almost doubtless. This must not in itself imply a prestige function of the writing on these objects. However, prestige objects with inscriptions were perhaps the very reason for people coming into contact with writing (import objects from the Mediterranean with Latin inscriptions). It is not unlikely that the prestige attached to those objects (and, possibly, the writing on them) was transferred to any object with an inscription and trig-
That the inscriptions appear mostly on the back side need not necessarily speak against this hypothesis. Moreover, a model of the combination of prestige and writing might have been provided by the Frankish administration or the clerics, who came to the area more and more often. They might have used the written word as an instrument of power and legitimation – an instrument unknown to oral Germanic culture.

In any case, an investigation of the south Germanic runic inscriptions from the viewpoints of orality and literacy can provide acceptable principles for reconstruction and a frame for the future interpretation of such inscriptions. The probability of learner mistakes should lead to a certain mistrust in what we find in runic inscriptions, as we can neither assume that the writers were able to write what they intended to write nor that they were always aware of the relation between the rune they wrote and the corresponding sound value. While a reconstruction of possible meaning on the hypothesis that unpractised writers have made mistakes remains as difficult as it has been on the hypothesis that the runes were covered up for magic purposes, the principles of reconstruction are now motivated by parallels to learner mistakes in other early writing. The horizon for possible meaning of the texts consequently shifts from the magic towards the interests of people just starting to discover the possibilities of the written word.

That the inscriptions appear mostly on the back side need not necessarily speak against this hypothesis. According to Christlein 1978, 78ff, the fibulae were not used to hold clothes anymore by the time the first inscriptions appear. They rather seem to have hung from the waist on strings (Martin 1997, 352), until they lost even this function by the end of the 6th century (Christlein 1978, 81).
Bibliography

1. Editions
NyR = Nytt om Runer 1ff. (1986–).

2. References


