

DOUBLE RUNES ON THE RUTHWELL CROSS

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There are two standard separate editions of the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Dream of the Rood* which also include the text of the Ruthwell Cross: Dickins and Ross's *The Dream of the Rood*, first published in 1934, and Michael Swanton's *The Dream of the Rood* (1970). Both editors refer briefly to the problem of the double runes on the cross. Dickins and Ross notice that double runes are found in the inscription where single ones would be expected: *æþpilæ*, *gistoddun*, *almettig*, *dominnæ* (they are not etymologically long consonants), whereas, on the other hand, only single runes are used for etymologically long consonants (*al men*).¹ It is difficult to explain the presence or absence of double runes in these words, but, as R. I. Page pointed out (1962), there must be more to it than what was conveyed by the bizarre statement of Dickins and Ross: "The writing of single runes for double, or vice versa, is a common habit of runic orthography." (1934:9)

Apparently no further commentary was felt to be needed. Elliott's remarks on the runes of *Ruthwell*, as I hereafter will refer to the runic inscription on the Ruthwell Cross, in his introductory book on Anglo-Saxon runes are on the same line (1959:20). Even though this book was reprinted –with minor corrections– several times (1963, 1971, 1980) and a second edition published in 1989, no convincing explanation has been given, in any of them, to the problem of the double runes in Anglo-Saxon inscriptions, in general, and on *Ruthwell* in particular. In the first edition of *Runes: An Introduction*, Elliott wrote:

Double sounds, especially consonants, are not generally indicated as such in the older Germanic runic inscriptions, although there are some exceptions. This rule applies not only medially in words, but also when one word ends and the next word begins with the same sound. (1959:20)

About the use of double consonants in such Ruthwell Cross spellings as *almettig* or *(æ)þpilæ*, Elliott argues that "most probably the common runic rule of writing single consonants for double here operates vice versa." (1959:95) Page argued against

this statement in the article mentioned above, and, in his edition of *The Dream of the Rood* (1970:28-29), M. Swanton writes:

The use of double runes on the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Crosses is of interest. It is generally believed that the earliest runic inscriptions did not employ double runes, but whatever might have been the case elsewhere, no such general conclusion seems valid for insular inscriptions. At first sight Ruthwell Cross usage seems to represent a systematic reversal of the convention –of single consonants for double ... This feature is by no means unparalleled in other Northumbrian runic inscriptions, but the assumption of a regular epigraphic convention is too facile.

It may have been because of these and some other similar comments, that in his most recent reprint of the book Elliott omits the last of his remarks on the double consonants of *Ruthwell*. He just states that: “the doubling of the ‘t-rune’ (in *almettig*), as of *p* in *æþpilæ*, *d* in *gistoddun*, and *n* in *dominnæ* does not imply that double consonants were actually pronounced ... Sometimes double consonants are represented by only one rune, at other times a single consonant is written twice” (1989:112). This does not explain the problem, but, at least, no general principle of writing “double” for “single” and “single” for “double” is invoked here.

In order to approach the problem of the double runes on *Ruthwell*, or in any other Anglo-Saxon inscriptions, I believe it is necessary to look at the runic spelling habits in Scandinavia, as both the Norse futhark and the Anglo-Saxon futhork descend from a common ancestor which the Old Norse version reflects in a more or less unaltered state, while the Old English futhork is an evolved form and had its own peculiar later development. This paper aims to show that the study of similar unexpected doublings found in the Norse corpus of runic inscriptions may be very useful when trying to give an answer to the problematic English ones.

It has been taken as a fact that we do not find double runes in the older Scandinavian inscriptions, except for a few cases here and there which have been generally attributed to magic or religious practice. If that were the case, then the Anglo-Saxon inscriptions with double runes would certainly stand apart and point to a different tradition, free from some of the conventions of the common Germanic runic alphabet from which they descend. However, a thorough examination of the Corpus of the Scandinavian older runic inscriptions reveals a few interesting examples of double rune usage. It is true that most of them seem to have a magic purpose (Lindholm and Gummarp), but in others, the repetition of a rune could have had an ornamental purpose (Svarteborg). The doubling of runes in bracteates may indicate that runes were used for decoration. Some other examples of double runes are probably abbreviations: *eerilar* (Bratsberg),² but there are also a few in which we find juncture between words (Vettelund), even though these are very early inscriptions indeed.

In fact, there is an interesting example of double runes in medial position, which is exceedingly rare in these Scandinavian older inscriptions. On the stone from Reistad, we find the word *unnam* with double *n* (Krause, 1966:171). Even though the possibility of the word deriving from **und neman* would point again to a case of juncture between words –*und* being a clear prefix– it is interesting to notice that the runemaster carved two identical runes in a medial position at this early stage.³

We should conclude that, even if some of them are difficult to interpret, there are also examples of double rune usage in the older Germanic inscriptions, although this doubling is certainly not as common as in the Anglo-Saxon ones.⁴

I shall not go through all the examples of double runes in Anglo-Saxon inscriptions since Page's excellent article is by no means outdated. It should be enough to say that, from a detailed study of those, we can conclude that the use of double runes in runic inscriptions was very common in Anglo-Saxon England, but not consistent. We find [.] *biddap* (Overchurch stone) and *gebid/dap* (Thornhill II stone) with double consonant, but *gebidas* (Great Urswick) and *gebidaþ* (Lancaster Cross) with a single *d*. We also find *setto/n* (Bewcastle Cross), *settæfter* (Thornhill I stone), with two runes in medial position, but *setæ* (Great Urswick) with just one *t* rune. There are also double runes in medial position: *hilddigyþ* (Hartlepool stone 2); we find double runes in *settææfter* (corresponding to *setta æfter*) (Great Urswick Stone), and *riicnæ*, (Ruthwell).

As it has been said, on *Ruthwell* we find examples of double runes were single ones would be expected: (*æppilæ*, *gistoddun*, *almettig*), but there are cases in which the double runes may have etymological justification, such as *fearran*⁵ and *riicnæ*. In the latter the doubling of the vowel could perhaps indicate length as this practice is found outside the field of runic inscriptions; we have instances of doubling the vowel to indicate length in Northumbrian manuscripts, occurring in both Old English and Latin, and this becomes almost characteristic of later Northumbrian texts, including the gloss to the *Gospels of Lindisfarne*: *ingaas* for L. *intrabit*, *gee* for L. *vos*, *gesiistu* for L. *vides*, *iil* for L. *ericus*, *gaast* for L. *spiritu*, to quote a few. We also find many examples in texts from other dialects *Epinal-Erfurt*, *Corpus*). It seems that doubling a vowel to indicate length was not uncommon in non-West-Saxon scribal practice in Anglo-Saxon England. Therefore, we could perhaps attribute the doublings that we find in runic inscriptions, at least to a certain extent, to the influence of scribal practice on epigraphical spelling.⁶

Some of the double runes on *Ruthwell*, however, such as *æppilæ* and the double *t* of *almettig* do not seem to have an easy explanation, if they have one at all.⁷ There might be a phonetic explanation for the "erroneous" doubling of the *d* of *gistoddun* and the *t* of *almettig*: it seems that it is more difficult 'to hear' the alveolar or dental geminates than, for example, the lateral or nasal ones, because of the influence that the latter have on the preceding vowel, like [nn] in Latin *anno* (the vowel /a/ is nasalized) or *ll* in Latin *pello* (/e/ is lengthened). This possible explanation will have to be further investigated. As Page notes (903), Campbell had observed occasional simplification of *-dd-/-tt-* between vowels in the past weak verbs of class I (1959:323). In the double runes of *almettig* and *gistoddun*, we might have a case of hypercorrection in the spelling.

Other explanations have been put forward. Swanton (1970:29) regards the double thorn in *æppilæ* as a possible "dittograph error" of the runemaster, while he admits that other factors should also be taken into account:

The Ruthwell Cross inscription is a singularly sophisticated phonetic document but, in this respect, that consistency which might indicate a distinct epigraphic spelling is lacking. Many factors other than phonetic or orthographic exigency will have affected the work of the runemaster. His medium is equally communicative and ornamental, and a fitting occupation of the space available will have been an important consideration.

It seems to me, however, that Swanton contradicts himself by asserting first that the Ruthwell Cross inscription is a very sophisticated document, and then adding that: “a distinct epigraphic spelling is lacking.”

Others point to a clear influence of Latin on runic script in a community whose literate members were familiar with both alphabets and script traditions.⁸ We should not be too surprised, then, to find these so called “errors” of the runemaster in the inscriptions. We should take them, on the contrary, as something natural for one who has received and masters two different spelling traditions, the runic tradition, on one hand, taken to England some time in the 5th century and a very well established Latin tradition on the other. The Anglo-Saxons found Roman memorials in England when they first arrived there. Page even believes that the influence of the Church extends not only to spelling practice, but also to the Anglo-Saxon tradition of raising rune-stones.⁹

The picture in Scandinavia is very different. Denmark was officially converted by Harald Blacktooth in the 10th century as the famous larger Jelling stone, Denmark’s baptismal certificate, announces to whoever can read the runes. However, the Danes continued to carve inscriptions which reflected that at least some of them still adhered to the old faith and worshipped Thor. It is interesting to notice, at this point, the almost complete absence of double runes on Danish stones following the conversion of Denmark to Christianity. From all the inscriptions that Erik Moltke (1985) assigns to the 10th-11th centuries, I have found only two examples of double runes which could be of interest here: *sattu* (191) and *manna* (202). These Danish inscriptions are the closest in time to the Anglo-Saxon runic stones, such as *Ruthwell*, but they conform much more to the old runic spelling tradition of not carving double runes.¹⁰ The reason seems clear enough: the influence of Latin script and spelling conventions comes to these countries with Christianity, and Christianity came late to Scandinavia. There is also a lack of double runes on the post-Christianization stones which contained secular in addition to Christian motifs. The only possible explanation is that the runic spelling tradition was much more deeply rooted in Scandinavia than in England, and this is why runes and runic script survived the growing influence of Latin after Christianization, as the later discoveries at Bryggen (Bergen) have shown; the finds clearly reveal that runes were used in everyday life and trade transactions right through the Late Middle Ages. That is why, I believe, it would be misleading to try to compare the runic spelling in England (8th/9th centuries Northumbria) and the semi-heathen Denmark of the 9/10th centuries.¹¹

In Anglo-Saxon England, runes and roman inscriptions are also found side by side (Falstone stone). *Ruthwell* is a very good example, and so is the inscription on the Bewcastle cross. This element is absent in the Scandinavian runic inscriptions until quite late into the Middle Ages (12th, 13th centuries), when the influence of Latin script is clearly seen. In Olsen’s *Norges Innskrifter med de yngre Runer* (1941-1960), which contains inscriptions with the younger runes from 800 to 1350, we find occasional doublings of vowels to indicate vowel length as in the case of *riicnæ* on *Ruthwell*. There are not many instances of vowel doubling, but we do find many examples of double consonants, some of which remind us of those on *Ruthwell*.¹² A very good one is a transliteration of a *Pater Noster* into runes (see appendix), where it is quite clear that the runecarver is trying to render a correct version of what he knew the roman text should look like. However, his own pronunciation of the Latin *Pater Noster* interferes with his knowledge of Latin and he deviates from the stand-

ard Latin spelling.¹³ The repetition of consonants is frequent in some words: *nosstriss*, *inndukas* (lines 6-7), and in the names of the evangelists: *iohannæss*, *mabuss* (line 8); the author of the inscription carved first *mabuss* with a single *þ*, and then he corrected himself by carving *mabþeuss* with two *þ* runes. He seems either to have been doubting the spelling or trying to give emphasis to the names of the apostles (like the *[.]ssu/s g[e]ssus kristtus* on the *Bewcastle stone*. The form *Maþþeuss* also reminds us of the form *dominnæ* on *Ruthwell*. Swanton (1970:29) finds neither parallel nor explanation for *æþþilæ* and *alme ttig* on *Ruthwell*. Could it be that the Northumbrian runecarver and the person who wrote the runes of the Scandinavian *PaterNoster* made the same “error”? Although a long period of time separates the carvings of both inscriptions, the conditions under which they were made were similar. Both are religious and Christian texts; the runecarvers knew both the roman alphabet and runes. They were bound to make mistakes. They could even have different conventions (certainly less rigid) than our own, and regard those doublings as aesthetic in certain words.

Page (907) concluded his article about double runes in Old English inscriptions stating that:

There is no reason to believe that the Old English rune-masters recognised a spelling rule that long or repeated sounds should be represented by single symbols, nor is the existence of such a rule confirmed by the material of the East Germanic and Continental West Germanic inscriptions. Consequently the existence of a rule outside the field of the Scandinavian inscriptions cannot be considered as more than a possibility.

I believe that although the existence of a rule within the field of Scandinavian runic inscriptions cannot be questioned, it was a rule not without exceptions. What is more, this rule seems to apply better to the older inscriptions than to the medieval ones. In fact, we find very few doublings in the inscriptions with the Older Scandinavian futhark, but there are quite a few examples of doublings in the later inscriptions, especially in the ones related to Latin texts, or the Latin language, religious inscriptions like the Scandinavian *Pater Noster* mentioned above. Due to the late Christianization and introduction of Latin in Scandinavia, the runic alphabet remained undisturbed for a longer time, the use of runes being widespread enough to survive the Latin influence and keep their own conventions (including the spelling conventions). On the other hand, the tenacity of the runes in Scandinavia may also have been due to lack of attempts at suppression, besides a much deeper –rooted habit of using them among the Norse.¹⁴

In England, however, the use of runes was interrupted by the coming of Christianity and the growing influence of Latin. Runes, as far as we know, were not used in England in everyday life at the time when *Ruthwell* was carved (unless new finds prove us wrong). Even at that early time (8th/possibly 9th century) runes could have been regarded as an old-fashioned script suitable for memorials and ornamentation. Therefore, it should not be surprising to find a spelling practice that differs from the old Scandinavian conventions. Such a practice would be the result of contact with Latin and influence (interference) of scribal texts, and this is probably what we find in the use of double runes, sometimes “incorrectly”, in a runic text as the one on *Ruthwell*.

In this paper, I have tried to approach the question of what has been considered up till now as the ‘erroneous use of double runes’ in the Ruthwell Cross inscription. I have argued that, in order to achieve a correct understanding of the phenomenon, we have to place it in relation to literacy and the introduction of the Latin alphabet. Within this context, a study of the development of the runic spelling practice in Scandinavia, before and after the introduction of Latin, proves very useful, as we find parallel examples of double rune usage in the Norse inscriptions of the Late Middle Ages. From the early Scandinavian runic inscriptions that have come down to us, we know that geminated consonants were not usually represented in runic spelling; in roman script, however, geminates are always written. After the introduction of the Latin alphabet, and under its influence, the runecarvers started to represent geminated consonants in runic script. As they had double consonants in their language, they would not have had any problems recognizing them as double sounds. In representing them, however, they often deviated from the Latin spelling practice, as can be seen in some of the examples presented in this paper (Scandinavian *Pater Noster*). This could have been due to interference between the old runic spelling practices and the new ones introduced with the Latin language, giving rise to cases of hypercorrection.

It is difficult to prove that runic orthography in Britain follows the Scandinavian practice in the use or avoidance of double runes. Page (898) thinks that we do not have any evidence to assume that what is valid for Scandinavian runic inscriptions as regards spelling habits is valid for the English ones. That may be so. However, as in Britain practically all our material is post-conversion, it is very difficult to prove what older runic inscriptions would have looked like from the point of view of spelling, if the influence of the Church and the roman script had not been so early and so determinant. What we do know is that in Scandinavia, where the time-span when runes are used is much wider, the use of double runes starts after the introduction of the Latin script, whereas such a practice was very restricted before Christianity. Therefore, it seems reasonable that representation of geminated consonants in Scandinavian and Anglo-Saxon runic script, for which there seems to be no etymological justification, has to do with the confusion originated with the introduction of the Latin alphabet and spelling conventions; this assumption, in my opinion and in view of the examples presented so far, makes much more sense than postulating the existence of a habit of carving “single for double and vice versa” in insular inscriptions, as opposed to a supposedly Scandinavian runic spelling rule of not representing double sounds at all.¹⁵

However, not all double runes in the inscriptions have to be necessarily attributed to an error of the runecarver (‘error’ in relation to Latin conventions, not as regards the runic ones). In *Ruthwell* we find that doublings such as the double *i* in *riicnæ* and the double *rr* in *fearran* may have etymological justification, as already stated. There might also be a phonetic explanation for the doubling of the *d* of *gistoddun* and the *t* of *almettig*. I cannot find a feasible explanation for the double *p* of *æppilæ*, unless it is a case of writing the consonant twice for emphasis, as the one we find in the Scandinavian *Pater Noster*, where the names of the apostles appear with unetymologically doubled runes.

Notas

1. The last two could be correct. Simplification of a geminate is commonly found in manuscripts (cf. Sievers-Brunner: 196).
2. The double *e* rune in *eerilar* could be taken as an abbreviation, but also as a mistake of the rune-carver, who could very well have forgotten to carve the *k* rune of the first person singular pronoun *ek*.
3. In a letter to the author (24 Sept. 1993), J. E. Knirk (Runic Archives, University of Oslo) wrote that the assimilation /nd/ > /nn/ is standard in most Norwegian dialects today, and seems to have also occurred over much of Norway during the Late Middle Ages, the first recording being from 1300s. According to Knirk, rather than a process of assimilation, it is more likely that in the combination of three consonants after one another (*und neman*) the middle one was so weakly pronounced that it was dropped: C₁ C₂ C₃ > C₁ C₃. It is uncertain whether this was a phonetic or a script development.
4. Page (1962:899) points out that several cases of double rune usage have been found in the East Germanic Inscriptions, but the interpretation of such inscriptions is, in general, obscure, so that it is difficult to draw definite conclusions from the study of these few inscriptions.
5. ON *ffarri*, Goth. *fairra*, Gmc. **ferro* (comparative formation on **fer*).
6. This, of course, would mean that runic inscriptions were carved in a period where there was a certain degree of literacy among the Anglo-Saxons. The problem of literacy and orality in Anglo-Saxon England is one of the most interesting (and most difficult) ones to study.
7. As a parallel, cf. late ME *-tt-* in words with the reflex of OE *-ht-* in late Middle English (with some examples of backspelling, eg. *perfitt*) in *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Medieval English (Appendix of Southern Forms)*. According to this, *-tt-* in *almettig* matches ME *tt*. I owe this information to Prof. Michael Benskin (University of Oslo).
8. C. Fell (1994:122) writes: When we consider questions of Anglo-Saxon practices concerning lay-out, ruling and punctuation whether they are carving roman or runic, Latin or English, and noting the differences between what we see here and what we see, for example, on Scandinavian rune-stones, we have to remember that virtually all our material is post-conversion, and that the carvers had epigraphical models ready to hand. It might be worth noticing, in this respect, that Elliott (1989) and Bammesberger (1992) support the theory that the runic text on the Franks Casket was copied from a manuscript.
9. Page (1973:35) writes: "The Church is obviously important, and indeed the Anglo-Saxon rune-stone may be the Church's invention, derived from the memorial stone or cross with Roman inscription. Certainly, Continental West Germania had no tradition of raising rune-stones, and the ones of the Viking Age north are very different from the English examples."
10. They are also very different from the English ones in their ornamentation, the layout and the formulae used in the inscriptions.
11. As I have already mentioned, it is not possible to draw any conclusions from such a comparison, because the context in which Anglo-Saxon (Northumbrian) and Danish inscriptions were carved was entirely different. Northumbria was a centre of Christian learning in the 7th century, and its monasteries must have contained a substantial number of books in Latin and Greek. The Church took over after Christianization, and the Latin alphabet replaced the runic. Runes were used, and continued to be used, in memorials, in accordance with the Church's habit of turning pagan elements into Christian. Most of the runic monuments we have in England are Christian. Page (1962:901) admits: "On St. Cuthbert's coffin runes are used in such a way as to suggest that they are a transliteration of roman characters, that in fact runes were not commonly used by the monks of Lindisfarne, but survived perhaps only in archaistic usage on funeral monuments and furniture."

12. S. Bugge in Olsen et al. (1941, I:27) writes: "Saadan Vokalfordobling er i Runeskrift sjælden."
13. In the Norwegian *Pater Noster*, the rune-carver uses þ for t at the end of a word, especially after unstressed vowels such as *sicut*, which is spelled *sicutþ*. This reflects the pronunciation of Norwegians and others speaking Latin at the time. According to J. E. Knirk (University of Oslo), to whom I owe this information, the name *Mattheus* is spelled with t, with th, with þ, and once with tþ in Norwegian runic inscriptions. All these runic spellings are also found as roman spellings in manuscripts from Medieval Norway and Iceland. It is difficult to know how the Norwegians pronounced the name of the apostle in the Middle Ages, but it is likely that there were various pronunciations.
14. There is a tremendous increase in the amount of runic inscriptions and runic writing in Scandinavia in the Late Middle Ages, for which no reason has been found so far.
15. If we compare the post conversion British runic inscriptions and the Scandinavian Christian ones, the spelling habits are much the same, and the profusion of "erroneous doublings" is as striking in the latter as in the former.

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Appendix

1. Lindholm amulet. Skåne, Sweden. 300 A.D.
 - (A) (R-L) ek erilaR sawilagaR ha(i)teka
 - (B) (R-L) aaaaaaa RRR nnn[n] bmu ttt : alu :
2. Svarteborg gold medallion. Bohuslän, Sweden. 450 A.D.
 - (R-L) ssgaduz¹
3. Gummarp stone. Blekinge, Sweden. 600 A.D.
 - (A) hAþuwolAfA
 - (B) sAte
 - (C) stAb þria
 - (D) fff
4. Bratsberg clasp. Telemark, Norway. 500 A.D.
 - ekerilaz
5. Eggja stone. Norway. 700 A.D.
 - I. ni's solu sot uk ni sAkse stAin skorin. ni x x x x
maR nAkdan isn x (x)r xxR, ni wiltiR manR lAgi x x
 - II. hin wArb nAseu maR, mAde þAim kaibA i bormoþA
huni. huwAR ob kam hArisa hi a lat gotnA?
fiskR oR f x x nAuim suwimade, folif x a x x x x x
gAlande
 - III. Alu miskuri!
6. Vettelund stone. Rogaland, Norway. 350 A.D.
 - I. flagda-faikinaR ist
 - II. magoR minas staina
 - III. daR faihido
7. Reistad stone. Vest-Agder, Norway. 450 A.D.
 - I. iuþingaR
 - II. ek wakraR : unnam
 - III. wraitha
 - (W. Krause, 1971)
8. The Ruthwell Cross inscription. Dumfries, England. 8th c.
 - East side (north-east)*
 - geredæ hinæ god *almettig*
 - þa he walde on galgu gistiga
 - (m)odig f[] *men*
 - (b)ug(a)
 - East side (south east)*

ic *riicnæ* kyni_c
 heafunæs hlafard hælda ic ni dorstæ
 bismærædu u_ket men ba ætgad(ræ) ic (wæs)
 miþ blodæ (b)istemi(d)
 bi [about forty characters lost]
 West side (south-west)
 krist wæs on rodi
 hweþræ þer fusæ *fearran* kwomu
æþpilæ til anum ic þæt al bih(eald)
 s(aræ) ic wæs mi(b) sorgum gidræ(fi)d
 h(n)ag [about eighteen characters lost]
 West side (north-west)
 miþ strelum giwundad
 alegdun hiæ hinæ limwœrignæ *gistoddun*
 himlicæs (hea)f(du)m
 (bi)hea(l)du(n) hi(æ) þe(r) [about twenty characters lost]
 M. Wakelin (1988)

9. Ulstad, Oppland, Norway. 12th c.

I. + patær nostær kui æs inn celiss: s-
 II. -anktificetur nomen tuum aþueniaþ r-
 III. -ægnum tuum fiaþ uoluntas tua sikuþ
 IV. inn celo æþ inn tærra panæm nosstrum kotid-
 V. -ianum da nobis odie æþ dimitte nobis debita nos-
 VI. -ra sikuþ æþ nos dimittimuss debitoribuss noss-
 VII. -triss æþ ne nos inndukass inn tæmtacionæm sæþ
 VIII. bera nos a malo amen + iohannæss maþ-
 IX. -uss maþþeuss markuss lukass
 M. Olsen et al. (1941-60)

Notes

1. Antonsen (1975:49) considers that the two initial symbols that have been read as two s-runes are nonrunic decoration.