

## VI.—A RUNIC FORGERY FROM CULLERCOATS

*P. J. Frankis and Richard N. Bailey*

### I

At the Cullercoats end of the Tynemouth Long Sands is a large sewer outlet pipe. Eleven metres north from the pipe and seven metres from the cliff face is a sandstone boulder carrying the runic inscription illustrated in Plate VII, 1. It was first noticed in October 1967 by a geology student who brought it to the attention of the Museum authorities in Newcastle. At that time the stone lay half buried in sand but, as a result of the scouring action of the winter tides of 1967/1968, the boulder can now be seen to lie among, and on top of, a mass of similar rocks.

The inscription is arranged in two lines running horizontally in relation to the stone's present position. The runes, which vary in height between 5·7 and 8·9 cms., are quite clear and there is no difficulty in obtaining a transcription of:

“rik rispi staina  
auja alawin þ”

There are no traces of eroded letters before “rik” on the top line nor immediately before or after “þ” on the bottom line.

The language is clearly Scandinavian. If the final letter of the text is ignored it is possible to translate:

(personal name ending in “-rik”?) raised (the) stone(s)  
good luck Alawin.

If it had been genuine this inscription would have been a very important addition to the corpus of British inscriptions using Scandinavian runes and written in the Scandina-

vian language.<sup>1</sup> It would have been the only example in Britain using the "elder *futhoric*", the earlier runic alphabet whose distinct "j", "s" and "k" runes occur on the Cullercoats stone. It would have been the only British example of a Scandinavian inscription on an unshaped boulder and virtually the only such inscription from a non-ecclesiastical context. Of *circa* ninety British inscriptions in the Scandinavian language it would have been the only one known from north-east England.

Its genuineness was immediately in doubt. In its present position the stone is below the high water mark of most tides and, like the rocks around it, has been worn smooth by sea and sand: it is difficult to envisage a combination of circumstances which would have preserved the inscription from similar weathering. It is equally difficult to accept the continued use of the elder *futhoric* at the earliest plausible date (*circa* 800 A.D.) for a genuine Scandinavian inscription in this area. A detailed linguistic analysis, summarised in II below, shows that the language of the inscription is inconsistent and that the two words in the lower line are probably copied from a well-known sixth century Danish text.

The forger's identity remains unknown, though it was no amateur rune-master who had the wit to reverse the retrograde inscription he was copying for his second line. His work now joins such fakes as those discovered near Bewcastle in the last century and the one found near Caernarvon in the present decade.<sup>2</sup> Happily, in contrast to those hoaxes, the Cullercoats inscription has involved neither academic reputations nor financial outlay.

R. N. B.

<sup>1</sup> The most accessible publication of these is by M. Olsen in (ed. H. Shetelig), *Viking Antiquities in Great Britain and Ireland*, part VI, Oslo, 1954, 153-232.

<sup>2</sup> For Bewcastle see W. S. Calverley, *Early Sculptures Crosses . . . in the Diocese of Carlisle*, Kendal, 1899, 48-53 and *PSAL.*, XVIII, 1899-1901, 88-91. For Caernarvon see *Antiquity*, XLII, 1968, 3.





1. Cullercoats: the runic forgery

*Photograph: C. M. Daniels*



2. The Skodborg bracteate

*Photograph: National Museum, Copenhagen.*

## II

The inscription uses the elder *futhork*, such as is used in Scandinavian inscriptions of pre-eighth century date; the language for the most part is as archaic as the runes, but not consistently so. The first line contains a formula (corresponding to Icelandic *reisti stein*) that is very common in later Scandinavian runic inscriptions (of the tenth and eleventh centuries), but not in the earlier period. The second line is a phrase which occurs on (and is presumably copied from) a sixth century Danish bracteate<sup>3</sup> (Plate VII, 2); it is the kind of charm against misfortune that one would expect to find on a portable object like a bracteate rather than on a boulder. Both lines thus show in different ways an imperfect attempt to recreate an ancient type of inscription.

*-rik*: if this is the end of a personal name (of the type Icelandic *Eirikr*), the absence of the nominative inflection (-*r*) shows that it cannot be the subject of the verb *risþi*.

*risþi*: the last rune could perhaps be read as *-a*, which would be the inflection that one would expect in a pre-eighth century inscription. The form *risþi* is appropriate to the later period (tenth and eleventh centuries).<sup>4</sup> Translate "raised".

*staina*: the final *-a* presumably represents the archaic accusative singular inflection, appropriate to the earlier period; if it represents the accusative plural inflection (as in Icelandic *steina*) its antiquity is more dubious, but it would not be unparalleled.<sup>5</sup> Translate "(the) stone(s)".

*auja*: a disputed word, apparently meaning "good luck".<sup>6</sup>

*alawin*: a personal name (later *Alvin*); the lack of any

<sup>3</sup> L. Jacobsen and E. Moltke, *Danmarks Runeindskrifter*, Copenhagen, 1942, BR. 8.

<sup>4</sup> A. Noreen, *Altisländische Grammatik*, 4th ed., Halle, 1923, para. 533, Anm. 2.

<sup>5</sup> Noreen, *op. cit.*, para. 356, Anm. 5-6.

<sup>6</sup> Noreen, *op. cit.*, 386, Anhang 60; W. Krause and H. Jahnkuhn, *Die Runeninschriften im älteren Futhark*, Göttingen, 1966, I, 241-2 and II, 53.

inflection could perhaps be taken as a vocative form.<sup>6</sup>

P. J. F.

### III

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