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Logbook

Maxim Levada and Tineke Looijenga: A recently found belt buckle with rune-like signs from

Ukraine

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Reviewer 1

This short manuscript of some 4,000 words presents and interprets a very important find of a runic inscription on a Migration Period belt buckle of gilded and niellated silver, supposedly found in the Ukraine in 2015. The manuscript is written by two authors in two separate sections. The inscribed object definitely deserves to be published despite the lack of a proper archaeological context. But there is much to be done with this manuscript before this is possible. Both the first and the second section need major revisions, and the bibliography needs a spellcheck and many more references. The first section is written by an archaeologist who appears to have a local connection. Much of the first section is devoted to lengthy discussions of

Alani and Vandals. I fail to see how this is relevant at all. More time should be spent on the actual object, its function and relation to similar objects. What Procopius has to say regarding a given ethnic affinity is simply not important at this stage.

There are at least four things that must be added to the first section.

First, a more careful description of the object is needed. How big is it? What does it weigh? Where is it kept now? Has it been worn or repaired? All such questions must be answered. The very high-quality niellated engraving of vine-leaves separates the buckle from other less opulent buckles pertaining to the Sösdala and Untersiebenbrunn horizons.

While the craftsmanship is in many ways superior to other belt buckles of related types, the buckle still needs to be situated in an intermediate position in the range from a more central workshop belonging to the Late Roman army down to a replica made to order from a Provincial Roman or Barbarian goldsmith.

Second, there is no detailed map of the possible find place in the Ukraine, nor are there any illustrations of other finds from this area. The brief mention of a denarius hoard, for instance, is a dubious reference given how many illegal metal detector finds of denarius hoards from the Ukraine that are currently sold on internet after having been cleansed of imitations and bronze coinage.

Third, the larger distribution map ought to match the many references to the most important sites mentioned throughout the text in some form of coherent order. The purported find spot has been given number 18, rather than a separate symbol that would distinguish it from all other dots on the map. As it is, there is no distinction between finds of belt buckles or runic inscriptions. It is not clear why both Airan and Chéhéry in France belong on the map when the latter site does not appear in the text at all. One cannot claim that the inscribed object is proof of a connection between the Black Sea and Scandinavia without presenting a supra-regional map with meaningful symbols in favour of this argumentation.

Fourth, while the first section identifies some important parallels to the belt buckle, it would also be relevant to add the belt buckle from Barshalder, Gotland with its important find combination of a clipped C-bracteate to the corpus, see attached illustration.

The second section is written by a runologist. Much like the first section, the second section of the manuscript appears to have been produced in great haste. The second author has never held the inscribed object in his/her own hands. When presenting a new discovery of a runic inscription in a new publication, it is generally assumed that the runologist in question should have conducted a proper examination of the actual object. It is also generally assumed that in the very first publication of a runic inscription, all graphemes must be accurately measured in length and width and also numerated in the transliteration. The absence of such normative descriptive data is quite unfortunate, because the inscription just as the belt buckle in general merits a far more detailed first presentation.

Still, the reading and identification of the individual runic graphemes by the second author are largely unproblematic. The second author is clearly familiar with many different runic inscriptions on portable objects. However, much recent runological literature is missing. The second section is “Stand der Forschung im Jahre 2004”, which is quite unacceptable in 2018. In particular, one may note the absence of any reference to the Friestedt comb from Thuringia, an important recent discovery of a 4th century continental inscription. There is no mention of the important new finds of 3-4th century runic coinage discovered in Poland. And what about the new 4th-5th century finds from Nydam published by Andreas Rau and Robert Nedoma only a few years ago?

These lacunae show that the second author clearly knows how to read runes but is unfamiliar with runological scholarship from the last decade and a half. It therefore not surprising that the fundamental problem of the second section is the interpretation of the find. There is no evidence that “the context, then, is Hunnic”, especially when the abstract and first section of the article makes it perfectly clear that there is no proper archaeological context at all: “the buckle has no known context”. It certainly does not follow that the graphemes that may read as olwukiso represent a Hunnic name. Here, it cannot go unnoticed that the recent debate between Lotte Hedeager and Ulf Näsman on what is Hunnic influence or not in the Scandinavian Migration

Period is missing in the text, as is any reference to current linguistic scholarship on Hunnic language.

In conclusion, this manuscript seems to have been written in order to present something important before anyone else gets the chance to do so. The historiography of the other belt buckles and the many references to Jordanes and Hydatius cannot make up for the fact that most of the normative descriptions of the object are missing. Both authors also need to take the Sösdala publication into more serious consideration. This rather than the second author adding a reference to this work as an afterthought (with a footnote thanking someone else for pointing it out!).

There is still time to turn this manuscript into a proper descriptive text, avoiding unsubstantiated speculation and digressions into various Migration Period chronicles. I wish the two authors best of luck in this endeavour.

Reviewer 2 (Sigmund Oehrl)

Peer-Review about ‘A recently found buckle with runes from Ukraine and its relations’

The carvings on a belt buckle from Ukraine presented in the manuscript are highly interesting and should indeed be investigated runologically and published adequately. The corpus of early runic inscriptions from Eastern Europe is relatively small, there is only one Elder Futhark inscription from today's Ukraine known so far, thus, the recent find of a possible runic inscription from Sukhodil/Shydlyvtsy in Western Ukraine is quite special and promising. The author is cautious with his assessment, describes carefully and makes good observations. However, in my opinion, the runological part of the paper in its current form needs some improvement.

SUGGESTION I: First of all, I want to stress that the author's runological reading of the carved signs is only based on photos. Was there really no chance of examining the find? It is hard to decide whether certain lines on the surface belong to the carving or have to be considered as scratches, and in which chronological order the lines were carved. The author is well aware of these problems and describes his observations very carefully. Nevertheless, they remain tentative and cannot be verified in detail. A future investigation of the original should be envisaged, at least some efforts should be planned to get access to it – and these plans should be mentioned in the paper, I suggest. Ultimately, because the buckle is a single find without context and dug out illegally, even the authenticity of the inscription could be questioned. The author should make clear that future investigations are intended. Otherwise, the publication and interpretation of the carvings could be regarded as careless.

SUGGESTION II: The author takes for granted that the carvings are runic. In my opinion, this is far from certain. Actually, there is only one character in the inscription that exactly corresponds to an Elder Futhark rune – sign No. 6 looks like an s-Rune with 7 or perhaps 8 strokes ().

Normally, this rune has only 3 () or 4 strokes (), however, s-runes with more than 4 strokes occasionally occur. Nevertheless, this character is not typical runic and not the best indicator for runicity. Ultimately, it is just a zigzag-line, which could also be regarded as 'rune-like' imitation of script. The author argues that the last sign of the inscription 'is clearly an o'. In my view, this statement is simply incorrect. There is no o-rune carved on the buckle. There seems to be an incomplete rhombic form with one, two or even three lines or scratches below, which do not perfectly fit to an o-rune. The author argues that the carver wrote the o 'in a rather sloppy or careless way'. He tries to reconstruct what the carver intended to write, not what is actually carved on the buckle. This is problematic. The first sign of the carving is interpreted as an o as well.

According to the author it was intended as the special loop form but the result was 'disfigured'. Actually, the sign looks more like a kind of clumsy Latin P. In my view, this is not a loop.

Anyway, why should the carver use the loop form at the beginning and the common form at the end of the inscription? The author's answer, there could have been two carvers, is unlikely and far-fetched, I would say. The second sign is interpreted as a bent (and therefore rather deformed) l-rune. The third sign, interpreted as a w-rune, is completely unclear. I cannot comprehend the author's reasoning. The sign looks like an upright paddle, and has no parallels in the Elder Futhark corpus, as far as I see. The fourth sign is interpreted as tent-shaped u, which is possible. The following complex is read as k and i. Actually, some lines could also be scratches, and, as the author mentions himself, a right-to-left carved w is also possible. The bottom line is: None of the signs on the buckle is clearly and typical runic. For this reason, I would suggest to put a question mark into the title of the paper or to write '...with possible runes...?'

SUGGESTION III: The author himself stresses that his reading of the 'runes' is only an attempt and 'far from certain'. My question is: Is the inscription runic at all? If the situation is so unclear, other possibilities should be considered as well. Do we really deal with runes or rather with an imitation of runic or even Latin or perhaps Greek script? Rune-like carvings, imitations of runes and similar things are wide-spread in the runic traditions of the Elder Futhark, and recent research paid particular attention to this important phenomenon.¹¹ I recommend to the author that he takes that into consideration and checks out, whether there could be any connections to Mediterranean scripts. In the case of a golden belt buckle from Keszthely-Fenékpuszta in Hungary, by the way, a rune-like inscription, which was interpreted as a Germanic personal name, turned out to be a Greek inscription and a Greek personal name.²

SUGGESTION IV: When it comes to a linguistic/onomastic interpretation, the author's final transliteration olwukiso is unsatisfactory, as he admits himself. He assumes that Olwukiso is a personal name. His arguments for this view are 1.) that personal names occur frequently on personal objects during the early runic period, and 2.) the fact that with the Nordic personal name Hariso (Himlingøje I, Zealand) and the Pre-Old High German, possibly Thuringian personal name Būriso (Beuchte, Niedersachsen) two Germanic names with the suffix -iso are recorded runologically. This sounds plausible. However, there are some serious problems and urgent questions: 1.) Apparently, there are no comparable Eastern Germanic names with -iso. 2.) Linguistically, the first part olwuk remains completely unclear. 3.) Are there any Germanic names

recorded from later periods which are comparable to Olwukiso? The author states that he has ‘not been able to propose an interpretation’ of the name. I would suggest that he asks a specialized onomast for advice.

SUGGESTION V: In my opinion, the author should more include the (linguistically) Eastern Germanic material. To me, this is a main deficit of the paper. With the lance head from Kowel (not mentioned in the manuscript), the so far only Eastern Germanic (i.e. Gothic) inscription from Western Ukraine is documented. This is an important reference. The inscription marings on the belt buckle from Szabadbattyán in Hungary – which is of the same type as the recent find from Sukhodil/Shydlyvtsy – represents most probably also an Eastern Germanic (Gothic or Gepid) name (Marings). This inscription is a strong argument for a runic interpretation of the carvings from Sukhodil/Shydlyvtsy. This should be stressed. There are even special forms of runic characters in the Eastern Germanic corpus, which can support the author’s view. On the lance head from Mos in Gotland, which has an Eastern Germanic inscription, the loop-shaped o-rune and the s-rune with 5 strokes can be seen. An s-rune with 8 strokes is depicted on the bronze buckle from Vimose (III) in Funen. This item is mentioned by the author, but he does not mention that its inscription can actually be regarded as Eastern Germanic. The Eastern Germanic (probably Burgundian) inscription on the fibula from Charnay in France has a g-Rune, which looks quite similar to the author’s u. Tent-shaped u-runes like the one the author suggests in his reading, can be seen in the Eastern Germanic inscriptions from Pietroassa, Rozwadów, and Lețcani. The author should study and involve the Eastern Germanic material more intensively and check out whether there are connections that can support his view. The material is edited and elaborately discussed by Robert Nedoma³. This important work is not mentioned by the author.

MINOR AND GENERAL SUGGESTIONS:

- In general, I would recommend to be more detailed – in particular about the reference material, its origins, language, and dating.
- It is a frequent practice to mark uncertain runic characters in the transliteration with a dot. That should be done here also.
- To my mind, the sudden switch from the archaeological part to the runological part is con-

fusing. There should be an appropriate transition.

- The idea of a Hunnic name written in runes is far-fetched. I would delete this sentence.
- Is there nothing to say about the buckle's iconography?

1 Martin Hannes Graf, Paraschriftliche Zeichen in südgermanischen Runeninschriften. Studien zur Schriftkultur des kontinentalgermanischen Runenhorizonts. Medienwandel – Medienwechsel – Medienwissen. Veröffentlichungen des Nationalen Forschungsschwerpunkts „Medienwandel – Medienwechsel – Medienwissen. Historische Perspektiven“, Bd. 12 (Zürich 2010); Martin Hannes Graf, Schrifttheoretische Überlegungen zu nicht-lexikalischen Inschriften aus dem südgermanischen Runenkörper. In: Futhark 2 (2011), 103-121; Michelle Waldispühl, Methodische Überlegungen zur Rekonstruktion der Schriftverwendung bei den südgermanischen Runeninschriften. In: Elvira Glaser / Annina Seiler / Michelle Waldispühl (Hrsg.), LautSchriftSprache. Beiträge zur vergleichenden historischen Graphematik (Zürich 2011), 31-46; Michelle Waldispühl, Schreibpraktiken und Schriftwissen in südgermanischen Runeninschriften. Zur Funktionalität epigraphischer Schriftverwendung. Medienwandel – Medienwechsel – Medienwissen 126 (Zürich 2013).

2 Róbert Müller, Ein germanisches Grab der Frühawarenzeit aus Keszthely-Fenékpuszta. In: AArch 51 (1999/2000), 342-357; Róbert Müller, Die Gräberfelder von Keszthely-Fenékpuszta, Ödenkirchen-Flur. Castellum Pannonicum Pelsonense 5 (Budapest 2014).

3 Robert Nedoma, Schrift und Sprache in den ostgermanischen Runendenkmälern. In: H. F. Nielsen/F. T. Stubbjær (eds.), The Gothic Language. A Symposium. Proceedings of the international symposium on The Gothic Language: Origins, Structure, Development. NOWELE North-Western European Language Evolution 58/59 (2010), 1-70.

Author comments

At first we like to stress that our intention was to publish the buckle and its inscription in order to attract attention of a larger audience and especially to start up a discussion about the inscription. We addressed the problem that the object is in private hands and cannot be studied. Indeed, we are quite aware of the fact that a description should be based on autopsy, but we had to do with photos, and that is not ideal. Therefore, we were very careful not to go too far in our interpretations, in order not to become entangled in speculation. As regards the nature of the inscription: the characters most probably are runic, or even runes, but it might also be script imitation. The inscription is not very unlike other doubtful runelike inscriptions in especially the Continental corpus, which is notorious for its inscriptions that might be script-imitations. We think that to the outside world in a chiefly oral culture it was not so much the correct spelling and reading of the inscription that mattered, but the fact that something was written, even when done in phantasy characters. The fact that we suspect that the inscription might offer a name, is based on the observation that names are exuberantly present in runic inscriptions in the older futhark. Of course, one cannot say anything about what language or dialect may be involved, if one cannot be sure about what is written. We have outlined the context of object and inscription and we hope that others will join us in the search for an interpretation.