

Essays on the Early Franks

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Two runic finds from The Netherlands – both with a Frankish connection

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It is unexpected and extremely rare for runes to turn up in the Netherlands south of the *terp* area of Friesland and Groningen. However, two runic objects are found outside that area, and both have a Frankish/Merovingian context. After their places of discovery, the finds are called Bergakker (on the right bank of the river Waal, near Tiel) and Borgharen (on the right bank of the river Maas north of Maastricht). It seemed suitable to present here those two objects, since their owners and the runographers may have been 'early Franks'.

The find at Bergakker dates from the early 5th century¹ and can be regarded as the oldest known Frankish runic object. The Borgharen object dates from the late 6th century. Both objects exhibit runes from the older futhork, and clearly belong to the Continental runic tradition such as is found in the Rhineland, Alamannia and Bavaria. There are no Anglo-Frisian runic features. It is interesting that both Bergakker and Borgharen lie in the Rhine and Maas delta. These rivers were important communication links between the hinterland and the North Sea.

The Bergakker and Borgharen finds are in themselves not enough proof for the existence of a Frankish runic tradition in the Rhine and Maas estuaries. But they emphasize the possibility of such a tradition among the Franks living in the downstream area of those two rivers. These finds may be regarded as indications for a Merovingian runic tradition, when the finds from Belgium and France are also taken into account. Runic finds which may have a Frankish/Merovingian connection come from Arlon and Chéhéry (both Ardennes) in Belgium, and from Charnay (Burgundy) in France. Other

¹ Bosman & Looijenga 1996.

'nearby' locations of runic discoveries are in the German Rhineland. From a geographical point of view, the Borgharen and Bergakker finds may be regarded as stepping stones, linking the runic landscapes of the Ardennes (Belgica I), the Maas/Rhine delta with the Rhineland (Germania I and II) and Alamannia with the runic traditions in Frisia and across the Channel, in south and east England.

1 Borgharen (province of Limburg)

In September 1999, a bronze belt buckle bearing a runic inscription was found in a man's grave near Maastricht, in the Dutch province of Limburg.² The buckle was found at the man's feet. The grave was in a small Merovingian cemetery, which clustered around the hypocaust (heating system) of a bath-building belonging to a former Roman villa. The site lies on the east bank of the river Maas, north of Maastricht, between the villages of Borgharen and Itteren. The graves were all dug in a gravel deposit, laid out in rows, and oriented NE-SW (head in SW). The runic inscription was first recognized by Paul Rossèl, a restaurateur in the same department. In November 1999 the present author confirmed the authenticity of the runes and the reading: **bobo**.

The individual buried with the belt buckle bearing runes was a man of between 50 and 60. He was buried in a wooden coffin and generously endowed with grave goods. An earlier grave of a young woman aged between 15 and 20 was disturbed and damaged by the man's burial.

Among the grave gifts were a long iron sword (*spatha*) with an iron buckle, a short iron sword (*scramasax*), an iron spear, an iron axe, an iron shield boss (*umbo*), two iron arrowheads, a fire-iron, a huge green glass bottle, a green glass plate, a small blue glass goblet, bronze belt buckles and belt fittings plated with tin, bronze strips from a wooden bucket, and a bronze coin plated with gold, which probably served as an *obolus*. Wooden bucket and *obolus* are regarded as typical Frankish gifts to the deceased. The coin was found at the man's feet, but it is uncertain whether it belongs to him or to the woman whose grave was disturbed.

The buckle has a triangular fitting with three round rivets. A row of triangular notches runs along the edges. A parallel is known from grave 25,

² Dijkman, this volume (burial 7).

Normée, La Tempête, dep. Marne, France.³ Also in Belgium and the Rhineland more or less similar buckles have been found. Siegmund shows the development of the buckle fashion is shown schematically; the type from Borgharen came into use from the third quarter of the 6th century AD onwards.⁴

The coin can be dated between 550 and 585, and thus gives a *terminus post quem* for the male burial. For almost all weapons and glass objects a date between 575 and 625 can be proposed. The owner of the belt buckle with the inscription **bobō** was buried around 600 AD in an existing cemetery, where members of his family had already been committed to the earth before him.

The runic legend

The runes are clearly legible and read, from left to right, **bobō**, 'o' is **ođilan*. Bobo may be regarded as the name of the owner and the runes may be labelled 'continental' because of the older fupark form of the **ođilan*, X ; and especially because of the form of the 'b' runes, which have their pockets far apart, such as can be found in inscriptions from Bavaria (for instance the Schwangau S fibula) and Alamannia (for instance the wooden stave of Neudingen), the Engers bow fibula (Rheinland-Pfalz), and the Weimar bronze belt buckle (Thüringen). The 'o' rune also shows typical 'Continental' carving features: the runographer first carved the 'cross', X , and then the 'roof', \wedge ; which can be compared, for instance, with the Nordendorf I bow fibula (Bavaria) and the Weingarten S fibula (Baden-Württemberg).

The runes are carved on the visible side of the object, which is a very rare phenomenon. A comparable object is the Pforzen (Bavaria) belt buckle, which also has its inscription on the front.

When compared with runes in North Germany and Frisia, one can observe significant differences in style, ductus, and technical realisation. The runic tradition of the European continent clearly differs from those of the coastal region (North Germany, Denmark and the North of The Netherlands) and also from the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian traditions. The Borgharen inscription manifestly belongs to the so-called Continental runic tradition.

³ Menghin 1983, 263.

⁴ Siegmund 1996, 698.

The name Bobo

The name Bobo is well-known in Merovingian contexts. Bobo is listed in Hermann Reichert's *Lexikon der altgermanischen Namen*.⁵ Gregory of Tours, in *Historiae Francorum*, mentions a dux Bobo as a retainer of King Chilperic, and who possibly played a part in the murder of Clovis. This Bobo, son of Mummolinus, escorted Chilperic's daughter Rigunth on her journey to Spain, where she was to marry the King of the Visigoths. Bobo was to give away the bride.

Reichert was consulted about the name Bobo and replied: "Short names like this explode in Merovingian times among Franks, Visigoths, and later on they spread further. The fashion must have started among the Merovingian Franks".

In the inscriptions of the Continental Runic Corpus (for the most part found in Germany) we find a relatively large number of short names. Bobo reminds one of Boso (Freilaubersheim), Bubo (Weimar), Dado (Weingarten), Ado (Gammertingen), Kolo (Griesheim), Mauo (Bopfingen) and Leubo (Schretzheim).

Historical context

According to Gregory of Tours, by 491 the region around Tongres had already been captured by Clovis. This area certainly included Maastricht and part of the Maas delta. From the 6th century onwards, Frankish authority stretched eastwards from Nijmegen across the Rhine. The northern border of the Frankish realm is less easy to establish in this period. Trade became important in the deltas of the Rhine and Maas. From around 600 AD, Merovingian moneyers became active in the Maas region. In Verdun, Huy, Namur, Dinant, Liège and Maastricht coins were struck, showing the names of the moneyers, among whom were a Bobo and a Boso.⁶ Also a moneyer named Bobo is known from Saarburg.⁷ In the same period, the North Eastern region, known as Austrasia, increased in power. Families such as the Arnulfingians and Pippinides became the leaders in this part of the world. Control of the waterways especially would have been of the utmost importance.

⁵ Reichert 1987–90, vol. 1, 144.

⁶ Pol 1995.

⁷ Gilles 1996, 513.

Although in Maastricht Christianity probably continued without interruption from the Roman period onwards, graves at the site near Borgharen do not show Christian influence, since their orientation is SW-NE instead of W-E. However, according to Rouche,⁸ the last heathens were baptised in the region of Liège and Tongres around 720/740 AD, more than 200 years after Clovis' voluntary baptism in Reims.

Conclusion

Because of the location (Maastricht is close to Herstal, one of the centres of Merovingian power), the sumptuous grave gifts, and the name Bobo, we may conclude that the deceased was a Frankish *miles*. Since he was buried in his family's cemetery, he apparently was settled in the region. Supposedly he knew runes, although very few runic inscriptions are known from Merovingian regions, if these are confined to Francia proper (formerly Gaul). It is a striking observation that when the Franks extended their power into parts of Alamannia after 500, coincidentally or not, this date corresponds with the occurrence of the first runic objects in the South and South West of present-day Germany. It is still unknown exactly when and how runes became known among the Merovingian Franks. Whatever the case, Venantius Fortunatus, the 6th-century bishop of Tours, knew about runes, considering his often-quoted line: *barbara fraxineis pingatur rhuna tabellis, quodque papyrus agit virgula plana valet* – “the foreign rune may be painted on ashen tablets, what is done on paper can be done on a smooth piece of wood”. And the Frankish king Chilperic († 584) added four letters to the Roman alphabet, one of which was modelled on a rune, ƿ, described *uui*, to represent the sound ‘w’.

2 Bergakker (Gelderland)

In 1996 a silver-gilt scabbard mount with a runic inscription was found with a metal detector, in Bergakker near Tiel in the Betuwe. It dates from around 425 AD and is kept in the Museum Het Valkhof (collection Museum Kam), at Nijmegen.⁹

⁸ Rouche 1996, 197.

⁹ Bosman & Looijenga 1996; Looijenga 1999, 141–51.

Bergakker lies in the former *habitat* of the *Batavi*, which is situated on the estuary of the Rhine and Meuse. Since runic finds usually turn up in the *terp* area in the north of the Netherlands, it was a surprise when this beautiful and special object was found. In addition, a valuable object like this, bearing a sumptuous runic inscription, is a very rare phenomenon.

The mount had been ornamented in a way also found in the Lower and Middle Rhine area, North Gallia, and North Germany.¹⁰ Other examples of this type of decoration can be found on late Roman girdle mounts such as one from Gennepe (province of Limburg), dating from the second half of the 4th century AD. Gennepe was a 5th century Germanic immigrant settlement on the river Niers, a tributary of the Meuse, south of Nijmegen.¹¹ The Gennepe finds are said to have been produced in Lower Germany.

Description of the find

The front of the mount is decorated with half circles and points, ridges and grooves. Parallels are hard to find. In general, late Roman weapons are rare and only small parts have been found in fortresses. Weapons have very rarely been found in cemeteries. In fact, this object is the first weapon part with a runic inscription found in the Netherlands.¹² Judging from the nature of the inscription, Bergakker is a clear parallel to any other inscriptions on metal. As to the category of runic objects, it is reminiscent of Continental and English traditions, which both contain rune-inscribed silver scabbard mounts. The Bergakker object plus inscription can be regarded as a link in the chain of military high-class objects that connects the Rhineland, North Germany, and England.

In general, according to the type and ornamentation, the Bergakker scabbard mount can be linked with a group of swords from North Gallia, the lower Rhineland of Germany, and the Netherlands. The runes could have been added anywhere, but that is not likely to have happened outside the area mentioned above. Otherwise, one has to assume that the object has been inscribed somewhere else (where and why?), and subsequently been brought back to its area of origin.

¹⁰ Cf. Werner 1958, 387, 390, 392.

¹¹ Heidinga & Offenbergh 1992, 52ff; Bosman & Looijenga 1996, 9f.

¹² Bosman & Looijenga 1996.

The runic inscription

The runes are of the older fupark-type; one character is anomalous and hitherto unattested. It is the oldest known runic find from the Netherlands, and it has no typical Anglo-Frisian runic features. There is only one other early 5th-century runic object known from the *terp*-area (the Kantens comb, which exhibits only two runes *li*). The Betuwe did not belong to Frisian territory. The area was controlled by a Romanized population, possibly Franks, which encourages new views on the spread of runic knowledge in the early 5th century.

The inscription may be interpreted as follows: "of Haleþewaz, he grants the sword-fighters swords".¹³ It is possible that a weapon smith wrote this text on the scabbard mount as a sort of promotion for his work. Or else the text refers to a warlord, who bestows certain precious swords on his *comitatus*.¹⁴

Sanctuary or settlement site?

A Roman altar stone was found at the same site when part of the field was excavated in the 1950s. The stone, from the second half of the 2nd or first half of the 3rd century AD, was dedicated to the indigenous (Batavian) goddess *Hurstrga*. The toponym 'Bergakker' suggests that the site is higher than its surroundings. This may have been caused by riverine deposits. The site may have functioned as a ritual centre during the Roman period. A parallel can be found at the temple site of Empel (province of North Brabant), which was dedicated to the Batavian god *Hercules Magusanus*. According to Markey,¹⁵ the semantic features of *hurst* are (1) elevation, and (2) undergrowth, usually on a sandy mound. The goddess *Hurstrga* may be regarded as a special goddess who was venerated in a grove on a small hill. Markey suggests that the name *hurst* may be connected with the cult places of fertility goddesses.¹⁶ At Empel a temple was erected in an oak grove on a *donk*, which is a sandy mound and characteristic of the riverine landscape of the

¹³ Looijenga 1999, 150.

¹⁴ As usual with runic inscriptions, the text can be interpreted in different ways. For a list of suggestions I refer to Bammesberger and Waxenberger 1999, Part III, 141–88. Five other proposals appear here.

¹⁵ Markey 1972, 372f.

¹⁶ Markey 1972, 373.

Betuwe.¹⁷ The sanctuary of Hurstrga at Bergakker may have been situated on such a *donk*. An interesting feature of Empel was the occurrence of oaks, whereas elsewhere the area was dominated by willows.

The context

Together with the runic scabbard mount, a great number of metal objects were found, among which were many coins, fibulae, all sorts of bronze fragments, and two objects that may be characteristic of cult places, namely a small silver votive plate showing three *matrones* and a silver box for a stamp. The latter kind of object has often been found in Gallo-Roman sanctuaries.¹⁸ Therefore, the find complex to which the runic scabbard mount belonged may have been connected with the sanctuary (of Hurstrga or an unknown divine successor). The objects should then be interpreted as votive gifts. Otherwise, one may think of the complex as being the stock of a local metal smith.

To get a proper understanding of the scabbard's context, I shall list the other objects below. Most finds date from the Roman period, from the 1st century to the 5th; other objects date from the early Medieval Period (400–600).

Small silver votive plate showing three *matrones*

Silver box for a stamp

Coins: 5 silver, 20 copper, 1 bronze, 1 lead.

Fibulae: 28 bronze, 1 silver. They are often broken or in fragments.

Bronze fragments (64 pieces), including kettle rims and handles, as well as plates.

Twenty-eight pieces of bronze waste and 2 pieces of silver, probably products of a melting process.

One bronze clock or bell.

An iron weight.

The handle of a *patera*.

A piece of bronze sculpture with some engravings.

Two bronze rings.

¹⁷ Derks 1996, 115.

¹⁸ Derks 1996, 186.

Two bronze buckles. One bronze sheath-mount, belonging to a sword (*gladius*, type Mainz).

One bronze part of a shield, perhaps the brim.

Some bronze equipment belonging to furniture.

A bronze hairpin.

A bronze *stylus*.

A bronze armring.

A bronze pair of tweezers.

A bronze medical instrument (fragment of a saw).

Conclusion

What is really surprising is the apparent knowledge of runic writing in this area. The Betuwe and the south of the Netherlands had never before yielded objects with runes, and were certainly not expected to do so. The region was situated south of the *limes* until about 400 AD, when the Romans withdrew. In the turbulence that followed, the region was overrun by several Germanic tribes, such as the Chatti, Franks, Saxons and Frisians. Of these tribes, the Frisians evidently used runes, but the Bergakker and Borgharen inscriptions are rather different from the known Frisian ones. The language of the Bergakker inscription does not seem to be in Old Frisian, although one may wonder how far the dialects of the Frisians, Chaucii, Franks, Amsivarii and other Germanic tribes differed from one another in the early 5th century.

It remains a mystery why so few objects bearing runes have survived. Perhaps runic writing was confined to limited use and rare occasions. It is a fact that most runic finds turn up in Alamannia and Bavaria, literally on the periphery of the Merovingian realm.

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Figures

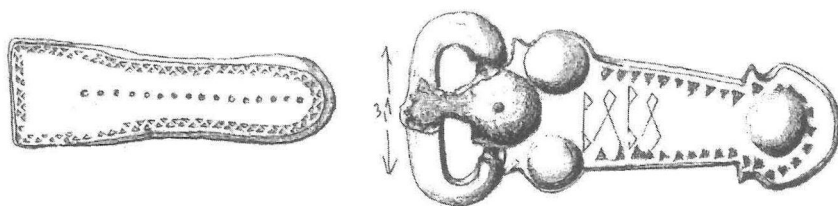


Fig. 1. The buckle with the runes from burial 7
 (~ Fig. 8 M in the contribution by Wim Dijkman, this volume)