

**Nation and race in the twentieth century scientific discourse
on Viking Age runestones**

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Abstract

The boom for researching runestone inscriptions in the early twentieth century coincided with a renewed romantic and often nationalistic interest in the Viking Age. This study investigates how a passage of the most famous runestone inscription, the Rök Runestone, was interpreted as a reference to the Ostrogoth emperor Theodoric the Great. It focuses on the work of two linguists, Otto Höfler (1901–1987) and Elias Wessén (1889–1981), who engaged in a three-decade-long debate on this issue. The analysis unfolds a discursive tension between race and nation in the legitimisation of the supposed Gothic connection.

Keywords

runestones, Scandinavian linguistics, nationalism, Nazism, imagined community

1. Introduction

The investigation of runic inscriptions from the so-called Viking Age (c. 800 AD – c. 1050) has played a special role in the construction of a Swedish national identity. These inscriptions, totalling around 3000 from what is today Sweden, are the source for the reconstruction of the first stage in the history of the Swedish language, but also important and negotiable traces of historical social practices. This study will focus on the academic efforts to interpret the most famous of these inscriptions, the Rök Runestone.

The Rök Runestone was first documented in 1624 by Johannes Bureus (1568–1652), the first head of the Swedish National Heritage Board, who visited the East Swedish province of Östergötland in his search for the glorious history of the Swedish people, which he equated to the Goths (cf. Håkansson 2014:137). Not until 1879, however, was the Rök Runestone perceived as evidence of a Swedish-Gothic connection when the possibility of reading the name of Theodoric (*Þjóðrikr*) on the frontside of the stone was proposed by Icelandic linguist Gudbrandur Vigfússon (1827–1889). This reading seemed to indicate that the Gothic emperor Theodoric the Great (454–526), ruler of Italy after the fall of the Western Roman empire, would have been commemorated in Östergötland three hundred years after his death in Ravenna. For more than a century, scholars tried to interpret the inscription on the basis of this presupposition, until, in 2007, the linguist Bo Ralph (1945–) demonstrated that the Theodoric reading is most likely a mistake (Ralph 2007; cf. also Holmberg 2016).

In this study, I will investigate how the Rök – Ravenna connection was legitimised in twentieth century research and discuss how the interpretations of the Rök Runestone inscription may be related to different ideological positions on nation and race. Special attention is paid to two central participants in the Rök Runestone debate: the Swedish linguist Elias Wessén (1889–1981), who, in 1958, published what would soon be established as the standard interpretation, and his main opponent, the Austrian linguist and folklorist Otto Höfler (1901–1987). Although Wessén and Höfler engaged in a debate that lasted almost three decades, it has not been commented on in previous research, with exception of a brief remark by Klaus Düwel (1935–), who refers to the positions of the two scholars, and makes the correct observation that Wessén’s critique is harsh and not entirely objective (1983:53).

The Rök Runestone, dated to the ninth century, would probably have anyway earned its reputation as the most famous Viking Age runestone without any supposed references to Theodoric the Great. Its more than 700 runic characters cover all five sides of an impressive bolder, which makes it to the longest inscribed runic text. There is a fairly good consensus about the meaning of the introductory stanzas: “After Vāmoð these runes stand. And Varinn coloured them, the father, after the dead son.” However, the continuation has given rise to a great variety of interpretations due to difficulties on many levels, from the lack of space between words, to the enigmatic metaphors and uncertain reading order. These interpretative

difficulties will not be discussed here, but they make up the background for the scholarly debate to be analysed.

2. Theoretical perspective and analytical focus

The study is informed by Benedict Anderson's (1936–2015) theory of nation and national identity (2006). A nation is, according to Anderson's understanding, socially constructed as an imagined community, and necessarily so, since we are not able to grasp any community larger than a small village without imagination about its members and borders. The nation is constructed, Anderson points out, through three kinds of social practices: the Map, the Census and the Museum. Although Anderson in his seminal study discusses these practices in relation to the colonial state, they can be taken as the general conditions of the nation. A nation is comprised through the Map, the representation of the borders that include citizens (and exclude non-citizens), through the Census, the recording of information about these citizens, and through the Museum, the construction of a shared history.

From this point of view, my study will analytically focus on two research questions. It will primarily pose the question how different proposals in the twentieth century scientific discourse position the Rök Runestone in the Museum, but, furthermore, it will enquire how the Rök

Runestone was thereby potentially related to the contemporary political negotiations on the Census as well as the Map.

3. Data

For the question how Höfler's and Wessén's interpretations of the Rök Runestone contributed to the Museum, a series of publications throughout the three decades are relevant: Höfler 1948, 1952, 1954, 1963, 1966, 1974, 1975; Wessén 1953, 1958, 1964, 1966, 1976, the most important being Höfler 1952 and Wessén 1958.

In order to discuss the relations between the Museum on the one hand, and the Census and the Map on the other, some important pieces of Wessén's and Höfler's more general scholarly work on language, race and nation will be discussed in the context of, respectively, contemporary Scandinavian and German linguistics: Höfler 1934, Wessén 1924, 1939. I have also included in the analysis Höfler's and Wessén's political statements and actions, such as they are documented by previous research.

4. Wessén's and Höfler's positions in the Rök Runestone debate

The academic discourse on the Rök Runestone has been dominated by

renowned scholars in the fields of historical linguistics and the history of literature. Wessén and Höfler follow the same pattern; neither of them took on the challenge before they were well-established researchers.

Wessén and Höfler both enrolled for university studies in Scandinavian as well as German linguistics – Wessén in Uppsala and Höfler in Vienna – as soon as they graduated from gymnasium, and they both finished their doctoral theses at the age of twenty-five. In fact, their dissertations treated similar issues about the close historical connections between the morphology of the Swedish and the German language: Wessén's *Zur Geschichte der germanischen n-Deklination* (1914) and Höfler's *Über das Genus der deutschen Lehnwörter im Altwestnordischen und Altschwedischen* (1926). They both started their academic career as associate professors at Uppsala University, Wessén in Scandinavian linguistics and Höfler in German, and they qualified for professorship developing their research interest in the genesis of the Germanic peoples. Wessén published studies on what he called the Swedish pagan mythology and prehistory in 1924, and Höfler finished his influential work on the Germanic *Männerbünde* in 1934. However, they never worked as colleagues, since Wessén, twelve years older than Höfler, became a professor at Stockholm University in 1928, the same year that Höfler moved to Uppsala. Höfler later became a professor at Kiel University (1935–38), Munich University (1938–45) and Vienna University (1957–71), while Wessén kept his chair at Stockholm University (1928–57).

The academic environment at Uppsala University was crucial to the establishment of different positions in the Rök Runestone research. Adolf Noreen (1854–1925), Professor in Scandinavian Linguistics 1888–1919, argued in 1886, before the breakthrough for the Theodoric reading, that the inscription mentions an otherwise unknown king named *Auríkr*, a suggestion he was later to withdraw in favour of Theodoric (Noreen 1904:490). Henrik Schück (1855–1947), Professor in the History of Literature 1898–1920, developed the idea of a reference to Theodoric the Great, and interpreted it as a claim of kinship (Schück 1908). This interpretation seems to have been widely accepted until Otto von Friesen (1870–1942), Professor in Swedish Language 1906–35, published his monograph on the Rök Runestone in 1920. Von Friesen rejected Schück’s understanding of the inscription as fragments of narratives and suggested that the carving of the stone was a part of a ritual spell on contemporary enemies. According to von Friesen, the name Theodoric referred to a now forgotten Gothic king, whom he situated much closer in both time and space than Theodoric the Great.

Höfler’s innovative idea (1952) is the suggestion that the Theodoric passage should be read against the background of a Germanic cult in which Theodoric the Great was deified as the Germanic god Wodan/Odinn. The purpose of the erection of the stone is, Höfler argues, to commemorate how the dead son has been initiated into cultic communion with Odinn (Theodoric). The passage can then be understood as a key to the cohesion of

the inscription. A peculiar reference to twenty kings on the backside of the stone can be explained as a cultic *Männerbund* which may have been engaged in a battle against Varinn, the Rök Runestone carver, who now insists that Odinn has stood, and will stand, on the side of him and his kin in this armed conflict.

According to Wessén (1958), the Theodoric passage alludes to a now forgotten oral narrative. The purpose is simply to impress the reader with great knowledge of heroic tales, one of them about Theodoric. Unfortunately, Wessén emphasises, this knowledge is lost, and it is impossible to reconstruct these tales from the brief allusions that Varinn inscribed. For Wessén, the inscription lacks any superordinate principle of cohesion, and the reference to twenty kings on the backside of the stone is yet another allusion to a now forgotten oral narrative.

Thus, Höfler and Wessén position themselves at the opposite sides of the field. Höfler elaborates von Friesen's principle idea about the stone as a ritual revenge, while Wessén essentially accepted Schück's narrative understanding of the inscription. This happens to concur well with Wessén's and Höfler's studies on the side of their specialisation in linguistics. Wessén completed his Bachelor of Arts in Uppsala with a course in the History of Literature, which he took for Schück just at the time when Schück had published his interpretation of the Rök inscription. Höfler, on his part, studied folkloristics for Rudolf Much (1832–1936), who held a chair as professor at Vienna University (1906–1932) which combined folkloristics

with linguistics (“Germanische Altertumskunde und Sprachgeschichte”). From these folkloristic studies, Höfler was indebted to Much’s emphasis on culture as practice and ritual, and he shared this inspiration from Much with von Friesen.

On a more general level, the Rök Runestone debate reveals two different ideas about the Museum. Certainly, all scholars at the time seem to presuppose a Scandinavian origin of Gothic tribes, and a reference to a Gothic king at the Rök Runestone accordingly rendered it a central place in the Museum, at least from a Swedish perspective. However, the argument concerns the epistemology of the Museum, or its basic principle of continuity. The question is if the Museum should primarily organise memories of common narratives (Schück, Wessén), or traditions of shared practices (Much, von Friesen, Höfler).

5. Wessén and Scandinavian linguistics before the Second World War

The family tree model of language origination was foundational for Scandinavian linguistics before the Second World War. All professors in Scandinavian or Swedish linguistics had written dissertations with a diachronic, comparative perspective, and the most prestigious project in the beginning of the twentieth century was to establish phonological laws. Such laws made it possible to reconstruct the Proto-Indo-European and the Proto-

Germanic languages. Scandinavian languages (Sw. *nordiska språk*) were given a technical sense that still remains. The term does not refer to the languages spoken in Scandinavia, which, of course, would include, for example, Finnish and Sami, but to the “closely related languages” spoken in this geographical area, as well as on Iceland and the Faroe Islands (Wessén 1939:1).

The linguistic tree model was mapped upon the biological family tree model of the origin of species (cf. Schleicher 1863), and offered implicitly an ideal of racial, (proto)national and linguistic unity at different temporospatial scales. Wessén contributed intensely to the grand narrative about the Germanic languages, starting with the Golden Age of Proto-Germanic, “... the time when the Goths and the other East Germanic peoples lived in Scandinavia” (Wessén 1939:4, my translation). After a long period of fragmentation in dialects, the national languages were supposed to establish something of the lost unity, even if they were not taken to give equally true testimony of Proto-Germanic, due to foreign influences (Wessén 1939:54).

Wessén accepted, like many of his contemporary scholars, the idea of Scandinavia as “*officina gentium et vagina nationum*” (‘a factory of tribes and a womb of peoples’) – a phrase used about the ancient homeland of the Goths in Jordanes’ sixth-century chronicle of the Gothic people. Not only were the Goths supposed by Wessén to have a Scandinavian origin, but a long line of peoples mentioned in other ancient chronicles, including the

Burgundians, the Herules, the Cimbri, the Teutones, the Vandals, the Harudes, etc. (Wessén 1939:5–8; cf. also Noreen 1920).

Without this background, it would be perplexing to find that Wessén's monograph on Swedish prehistory (1924) makes Theodoric the Great to one of its main characters, and that more than half the book treats the Swedish – Gothic connection. Wessén uses a complex reasoning, partly built on new findings of phonological laws, in order to re-establish “the glorious traditions of the grand Swedish nation” (ibid: 83, my translation). In fact, in this book, Wessén is inspired by the ritualist position of Much and von Friesen, and comes close to arguments he later attacked in Höfler's work (Wessén 1953), especially the deification of Gothic kings to Odinn (cf. Wessén 1924:21–25). Evidently, Wessén had elaborated ideas about the importance of placing the Goths in the Museum of the Swedish nation before he took on the task of interpreting the Rök Runestone.

A standpoint that equals Swedish history with that of Germanic/Gothic might have political consequences. There is a potential relation to the Census, since it might imply that some Swedish citizens should, on the basis of language or appearance, be assessed as less Swedish/Germanic than others. This seems to have been a standpoint of von Friesen, as he, like many other renowned scholars, supported the State Institute for Racial Biology (cf. von Friesen 1921). There is also a potential relation to the Map, since the national borders do not coincide with the linguistic. Wessén was engaged in right-wing student politics in Uppsala,

and the Student Union Chairman 1914–1915. In this role, he took an active part in the anti-parliamentary demonstrations in 1914 known as the Courtyard Crisis (Sw. *borggårdskrisen*) (Runius 1997:246). The demonstrators asked the king to intervene for higher military spending against the liberal government, and their goal was ultimately a revision of the Map with arguments from the Museum. They were hoping for an armoured cruiser in the Baltic Sea, a military coalition with Germany, war on Russia, a free Finland, and a Swedish rule over Åland – a group of islands in the Baltic Sea outside the Swedish borders with a clear majority of Swedish-speaking inhabitants (Jonas 2014:33).

In 1915 Wessén visited Berlin and defended Germany's occupation of France in a statement on behalf of the Swedish Student Union. This was strongly criticised in the Swedish press, and Wessén lost the next election for Student Union Chairman in Uppsala (Runius 1997:246). Wessén then withdrew from politics, but he unofficially took a critical stand against the Nazi regime during the German occupation of Norway (according to Seip 1946:216).

6. Höfler and the Nazi cultural policy during the Second World War

Before the Second World War, German and Austrian scholars in German and Scandinavian linguistics contributed abundantly to the narrative

sketched in the previous section about strong linguistic, cultural and racial connections between Germanic ethnic groups in Northern Europe. In this respect, Höfler's change of academy from Vienna to Uppsala did not mean any radical intellectual challenge. After the period of lecturing at Uppsala University, Höfler published his well-known investigation of the Germanic secret bonds of men: *Die Kultischen Geheimbünde der Germanen* (1934), in which he developed a new theory of the spatial and temporal continuity between Germanic tribes. The Germanic culture was maintained and reinforced, Höfler argues, by the cult of dead heroes (*Totenkult*) practiced in the secret bonds of men (*Geheimbünde* later *Männerbünde*, the term from Weiser 1927 and Wikander 1938).

Höfler was a convinced supporter of the German Nazi regime, who had entered SA (first called *Ordnertruppe*), the paramilitary wing of NSDAP, already by 1922, and his successful career as a German academic from 1935–1945 was to a great extent facilitated by the match between his research interests and the current cultural policy (Zimmermann 1995:201–221; Gajek 2005:329–333; Zernack 2005). In two internal conflicts of Nazi cultural heritage administration, Höfler was on the winning side.

The first conflict concerns the epistemology of the Museum. The two competing positions have been presented above in relation to the Rök Runestone research, and in Germany both sides had strong proponents already by the 1920s. On the one side scholars argued for narratives and myths as the strongest uniting cultural bands throughout the history of the

people, while, on the other, the ritualists stood, claiming the primacy of religious, social practices. Höfler's theses about the Germanic cult of dead heroes, and the initiation of men into *Männerbünde* are typical of the latter school of thought. The Nazi regime eventually gave priority to the ritualist interpretation of culture, due to its stronger potential for political applications (Zimmermann 1995:203).

The second conflict was between different positions regarding the temporospatial scale of the Museum. The Nazi emphasis on race as a foundation for society and culture was open to different interpretations within the administration. In the area of cultural heritage two authorities worked in parallel, without agreement on this issue. In "Kampfbund für deutsche Kultur", headed by Alfred Rosenberg (1893–1946), race was understood as the Germanic essence of the German nation. In "SS-Ahnenerbe", led by Heinrich Himmler (1900–1945), race was defined on a wider temporospatial scale as the Germanic race. The interests and operations of "SS-Ahnenerbe" therefore not only included the German and Austrian nations, but also Scandinavia and parts of Eastern Europe. The wider, Pangermanic scope of "SS-Ahnenerbe" was given political priority, not least because it had obvious advantages in the rhetorical defence of military occupation of other European nations (Nordenborg Myhre 2001:64–65).

The connections between the Museum on one hand, and, on the other, the Map and the Census, are obvious ones in Nazi politics, which

applied historical arguments about racial continuity to justify both military aggression and genocide. The city of Sevastopol was renamed Theoderikshafen during the German war on the USSR, to legitimise the German claim for *Lebensraum* (Kaliff 2012:85) – to pick just one example.

Höfler generously offered his expertise to the regime during the Second World War through his engagement in "SS-Ahnenerbe" and was hired for a great encyclopaedic project about the Germanic peoples (Zernack 2005:51–52). He was also active in the German intelligence recording political stances of Scandinavian academics, both as an associate professor in Uppsala and in reports from later visits (Gajek 2005). Early in the war Höfler was commissioned by Himmler to write a report on the state of morale in Scandinavia with the purpose of preparing for occupation. In this document, Höfler advocated the strategy to persuade Scandinavian intellectuals about the values of a Pangermanic empire (Jakubowski-Tiessen 1994:135). After the German conquest of Denmark, a German institute was established in Copenhagen with the goal of supporting research on Germanic issues, and Höfler was appointed as its head (Hausmann 2001).

Although Höfler had been dedicated to find political applications of the research on Germanic continuity, he was treated relatively leniently after the end of the war. He was classified as fellow traveller (*Mitläufer*), and, after a period of denazification, he was allowed to teach again in 1948. However, when he was re-appointed at the University of Munich, his field of teaching was initially limited to Scandinavian studies (*Skandinavistik*),

leaving aside his Germanic research interests. It was during these years he started to publish on the Rök Runestone, but the subject was not new to him, since he had given talks about the Rök Runestone when visiting Scandinavia during the war, in Copenhagen 1942 (Gajek 2005:345), and in Uppsala 1944 (Almgren 2005:153). In 1953, Höfler was reinstated in Munich as Professor in Germanic Philology and Folklore.

7. The Höfler – Wessén debate on the Rök Runestone

Höfler's first article on the Rök Runestone (1948) deals with the twenty kings, who are presented as four groups of brothers on the backside of the stone. Höfler argues that the brothers should be identified with brothers in arms, more specifically brothers in *Männerbünde*, and supports this idea both through an analysis of the names of the brothers and archaeological evidence for the layout of Viking ring castles. The article might have passed relatively unnoticed if it had not been followed up four years (1952) later by Höfler's extensive monograph on the Rök Runestone. Here, Höfler elaborates his interpretation of the inscription as a case of the cult of dead heroes, the supposed Germanic *Totenkult*. Interestingly, Höfler succeeds to specifically find on the Rök Runestone evidence for the theses he defended in his 1934 investigation about the basic rituals of the Germanic peoples. The support is principally found in German medieval tales and folklore

about Theodoric the Great.

Wessén was asked to review the book, and his review (1953) was very negative. The only credit given to the author is for arguing that the inscription refers to Theodoric the Great. The first part of the review attacks von Friesen's interpretation, especially its proposed reading order and its suggested revenge function, both important to Höfler. The second part criticises Höfler's own suggestions for being far too speculative and supported by considerable overly late evidence.

Even if it is never explicit in Wessén's critique, it seems most reasonable that he recognised in Höfler's book the world of ideas that had become a part of the Nazi ideology. Anyway, Wessén acknowledges the review as a reason for him to start working with an alternative proposal (Wessén 1964:3). This proposal, published as a brief book in 1958, came to be the standard interpretation for half a century. It is argued, as noted above, that the inscription consists of a collection of allusions to narratives that are impossible to reconstruct.

The following contributions to the debate did not lead to any substantial change of positions. Wessén continued to stress the speculative character of Höfler's proposal (Wessén 1964, 1966, 1976), and Höfler's counterpunch was to insist that Wessén lacked a sustainable idea about the function of the monument (Höfler 1954, 1963, 1966, 1974, 1975). Only the context given in the previous sections can explain the heat of the discussion. The affective tone is especially striking in Wessén's articles.

8. Conclusions

The twentieth century discourse on the Rök Runestone contains a great deal of divergent positions. In this study, I have shown how the debate between Höfler and Wessén strengthened the idea that the inscription connects Rök with Ravenna, Varinn – the runestone carver – with Theodoric the Great, Swedish prehistory with the Goths. The debate presupposed that the name Theodoric is carved at the frontside of the stone, and the different alternatives which were discussed before the introduction of this reading were almost forgotten. The same is true for other linguistic alternatives since the debaters to a great extent agreed on the level of lexicogrammar.

It is possible to agree in the main critique which was directed towards both of them. In order to save the Theodoric reading, scholars either had to introduce speculative ideas about the importance of Theodoric for the society in which the stone was erected (Höfler), or to defend an epistemology of resignation for which the monument must remain an unsolved riddle (Wessén).

Höfler's Rök Runestone interpretation is hard to completely detach from the Nazi ideology. This explains why Höfler's proposal is seldom cited, even if Höfler's engagement for a political reestablishment of suggested Germanic rites in a Nazi version should not disqualify his

interpretation.

What has not been previously noted is that the political connotations of Höfler's work also set the context for Wessén's proposal, which, sixty years later, still meets the visitors to the Rök Runestone exhibition. Wessén's interpretation may be understood as a way of preventing the Rök Runestone from becoming an argument for the borders of a race-based Pangermanic empire and the census of its inhabitants. The proposal reserves for the monument a less prominent place in the Museum of Swedish prehistory than the earlier less sceptical proposals, and Wessén leaves out his own previous speculations about Sweden as the ancient home of the Goths. However, Wessén's new scepticism makes it possible to maintain the monument in the Museum of the Swedish nation as a great piece of art which still tells something about a Gothic connection, even if it is unclear what this may be.

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