

# THE RUNIC INSCRIPTION OF LETȚANI SPINDLE WHORL

BY

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The spindle whorl is kept in *Palatul Culturii* (History Museum of Moldavia), Iași, Rumania. It was found in 1969 in a graveyard, near Letȃani, in grave 36, inv.nr. 5602. Autopsion of object and inscription was carried out by the author in September 1994<sup>1</sup>.

**Context.** Only a few 'Gothic' runic inscriptions have survived the ages. The objects are found in today's Rumania and Hungary. The one to describe here is a spindle whorl found in Letȃani, which lies about 30 km west of Iași in Moldavia, Rumania. In the sixties of our century the graveyard of Letȃani was excavated. In inhumation-grave 36, a woman's grave, the spindle whorl with runes was found, dated second half of the 4th c. The spindle whorl is of earthenware; it has a conic shape and the colour is light brown to dark brown, with some darker spots. Other grave-goods of grave 36 were: another spindle whorl, four pots, an uncut bone comb, an iron knife, a necklace, and some pendants (Heather & Matthews 1991:85-6). The area around Letȃani in the fourth century was settled by Goths; archaeologically their culture is listed as Sântana de Mureș/late Černjachov-culture.

The finds from Rumanian Moldavia, and from a previously excavated graveyard of the Černjachov-culture near Kiev, appear to correspond to a high degree with contemporary finds from Denmark and North Germany, especially from Fyn, Sjælland, Bornholm and the mouth of the river Oder. This guide material consists of rosette-fibulae, certain iron combs, glassware and gold lunula-shaped and square pendants. Some of the rosette-fibulae, found in Denmark, bear runic inscriptions. This kind of brooch was either imported into the Černjachov area, or locally manufactured after Scandinavian examples. The rosette-fibula was a status symbol, and exclusively found in rich women's graves, and may be compared with *Silberblechfibulae*, characteristic of aristocratic women's graves from the later phase of the Černjachov-culture at the end of the 4th c. In grave 36 of the Letȃani graveyard such a *Silberblechfibula* has been found.

It would seem unlikely to me that the spindle whorl is an import [cf. Seebold (1994:76), referring to Stoklund (1994:108) who only points out that there were connections in the third and fourth centuries between the Black Sea area and Scandinavia, especially with the Danish Isles], because it is a simple earthenware object, albeit with a runic inscription. The runic style might ultimately originate from Denmark, especially as there may be a *Spiegelrune* in the inscription, similar to the *Spiegelrune* for w on the Illerup spearheads. I would rather see these connections as an interesting instance of the spread of runic knowledge. Since there was a lively exchange of objects, like glassware, iron combs and brooches (cf. Werner 1988), there also must have been an exchange of knowledge and people. The Goths were of Scandinavian descent; some of them (the elite?) may have wanted Scandinavians for husbands and wives.

The 4th-century coin hoard from Gudme (Fyn) originates from the East Roman empire; the rich women's graves from, for instance, Arslev and Brangstrup (Fyn) show connections with the Black Sea region; the so-called Gothic 'monstrous' brooches and the rosette fibulae from the Danish Isles are related.

<sup>1</sup> I would like to use this opportunity and express my thanks to Dr. Ion Ioniȃ, archaeologist at the Institute of Archaeology at Iași, who made the autopsion possible.

The inscription:

The runes are neatly cut (with a knife or some pointed instrument); almost all runes are legible without any doubt as to their identity. The inscription runs from left to right. The conic shape of the object allows to distinguish two parts: one inscription of four runes on the top half and one inscription consisting of nine runes on the lower half. Along the top-edge the upper part of the third rune is erased a bit, but it is still discernable. The first rune is definitely an *r*, followed by an *a*. The third rune resembles a *z* rune:  $\Upsilon$ , but under the loupe the upper part of a quadrant is still visible, so an  $\eta$  rune in the ‘lantern’ shape:  $\Phi$  is indeed there. This rune mostly is transliterated  $\eta$  or *ng*. The fourth rune is an *o*, thus we obtain *ra $\eta$ o*. When the lantern-shaped rune is taken as a *Spiegelrune* representing *w* (cf. the Illerup inscriptions with a similar rune for *w* in *wagnijo*), another reading is possible: *rawo*<sup>2</sup>.

The second, lower part of the inscription runs all around the object and ends in (or begins with) division points, so it is clear where the text starts and ends. The first rune shows a headstaff and one sidetwig to the right:  $\uparrow$ . It has been damaged so that some of the clay surface has disappeared. The upper twig of presumably an *a* rune has been vanished by some erosion of the clay surface. The following runes are quite clear: *d o n s u f*. The *s* rune has four strokes.

Since these runes take up a lot of space – they have been carved spaciously – the last two or three runes had to be pressed close together. Two runes are distinct: an *h* with one bar, followed by *e* or *m*. The runes are connected by a slanting stroke of which it is unclear whether it is a deliberate stroke and part of the inscription, or whether it is just a scratch, a damage. If the stroke should be taken as a third runic sign, the sequence may be taken for a triple bindrune: rendering *hum*, *hem* or *hee*, *hue*. I consider this not very likely, though.

The last rune has an unorthodox shape; it is carved as an *e* rune, but a horizontal stroke between the two headstaves runs straight below the bend of the *e*’s bar, touching the hook of the bend, thus rendering something that resembles an *m*:  $\mathfrak{M}$ .

There is definitely no *t* rune in this sequence, as Krause (1969:155) thought and which led him to an interpretation that cannot be held upright. Also the ingenious reading: *\*ra $\rho$ o idon sufnu(h)e*, presented by Seebold (1994:75,76), unfortunately is not correct; the last part is certainly not *nu(h)e*; neither is there an *n* nor a *u*, but the *h*, on the contrary, certainly *is* there.

Interpretations. When taking the rune with the lanternshape as representing /ng/, we may read *ra $\eta$ o rang $\bar{o}$* , Go. nsf.  $\bar{a}n$ -stem, maybe a PN, denoting the female owner of the spindle whorl or a close relative (an interpretation put forward by Krause 1969:157). But, as there may be a second name in the genitive: *adons*, Go. gsf.  $\bar{a}n$ -stem, ‘Ado’s’, in the inscription, I wondered whether *rang $\bar{o}$*  might denote something else, perhaps the very object, the spindle whorl? That would fit into a well-known type of runic texts that explicitly mentions the object or the material. For instance: *kobu*, *kabu* ‘comb’ on a comb (Oostum and Toornwerd, Groningen), *kabr* ‘comb’ on a comb from Elisenhof (Schleswig-Holstein). Furthermore there is *horn hjartar* ‘deer’s horn’ on a piece of antler, found in Dublin, and *hron $\bar{a}$ sban* ‘whale’s bone’ on Franks Casket. The Vimose (Fyn) plane has *tal[g]ijo* ‘plane’. And there is *k $\eta$ ia kingia* ‘brooch’ on the Aquincum fibula. Furthermore there is the recently found footstool of Wremen, near Cuxhaven, containing a Latin loanword, written in runes: *skamella*, NHG *Schemel* ‘footstool’.

Unfortunately there are no attestations of a *rango* in dictionaries; but as a spindle whorl has the shape of a ring, the nearest parallel to look for would be Crimean Gothic *ringo* ‘ring’, cf. ON *hringr*, OE, OFris, OS and OHG *hring* <

<sup>2</sup> A reading *ra $\rho$ o* (Seebold 1994:76) is unlikely, because the ‘lantern’ is at the top of the headstaff.

Gmc *\*hrenga-z*. The etymology is unclear, according to Kluge/Seebold, but Pokorny (1959:936) postulates IE *\*krengh-* ‘circle, belt’; Old Church Slavonic has *krŏgъ* ‘circle’ < *\*(s)kron(h)-* (Trubačev 1987:25-27). Therefore, *rango* and Crimean Gothic *ringo* may reflect the frequent IE Ablaut *e~o* (Gmc *e~a*, before nasal + consonant *i~a*).

If ‘ring’ is really meant, one would expect *\*hring-s* in a Gothic word (not attested in biblical Gothic), but apparently the /h/ has been lost in initial position before consonants, as seen in Crimean Gothic *ringo*. Yet the fourth century may be a little early for the loss of initial /h/, although this might be due to an already weakened articulation. However, who knows what the linguistic conditions were in the Black Sea region in those days for preserving specific Germanic features?

When reading *rango adons*, this might mean: ‘ring. (possession of) Ado’.

However, when taking the lantern shaped rune for *w*, we get *rawo*. OHG has *rāwa* ‘rest, peace, place to rest’; in other words ‘a grave’. That would be interesting, as the spindle whorl was a gravegift.

Thus we obtain a suitable sentence like this: **rawo adon sufhe**: in which **adon** is an oblique PN, dsf. Go. *ān*-stem ‘for Ado’, (cf. the sixth-century runic inscription **ado** on an ivory box from Gammertingen, Württemberg, Germany). Although the language of the inscription is most likely to be Gothic (cf. also Grønvik 1985:171), an OHG dat. sg. weak fem. ending *-on* is attested, but quite seldom (Braune/Eggers 1975:205). As to **sufhe** I propose, inspired by Seebold (1994:76), a 3rd sg. optative *sufhē* of the verb *\*sufa-* ‘to sleep’, cf. Modern Swedish *sova*<sup>3</sup>. When connecting this verbform in the meaning ‘may (she) sleep’ with the reading *rawo rāwo* dsf. *ō*-stem, ‘for the restingplace’ of the upper part of the inscription, I obtain a semantically acceptable phrase. This includes a runic liberty: one rune is enough for reading twice the same letter. The sequence of the text would then be: **rawo adon(s) sufhe**: ‘for the restingplace of Ado, may (she) sleep’, which would be a sort of RIP dedication.

The problem is, that one would expect an East Germanic dialect being spoken in this Gothic area, and my above interpretation of *rāwo* is according to a South Germanic (Pre-OHG) coloured dialect. Gothic has no long *ā*, except *ā* < Gmc *\*aŋ*, e.g. *fāhan*, and in loanwords.

If we should keep to East Germanic, another solution is wanted. Krause took his refuge in a somewhat artificial solution - but worth trying. In runic inscriptions it appears to be allowed to transliterate beyond any divisions in the text. In doing this, one may take the initial *r* from the upper part of the object’s inscription and consider this to belong to the text of the lower part - Krause (1969:157) read thus **her** Go. ‘here’. As we actually have no knowledge of the writing rules our runic scribe applied, we might try such a cosmetic move<sup>4</sup>, and read: **awo : adonsufher**. When divided into words we obtain: **awo : adons uf her**.

**awo** is Go. *awō* ‘grandmother’; **uf** is Go. prep. + dat./acc. ‘under’. The whole sentence is then: ‘grandmother of Ado (is) under here’; e.g. in her grave. This would just be a nice epitaph for a buried grandmother.

Now we should return to the first reading: **rango : adons uf he**. If the same cosmetic move, described above, is carried out, *plus* admitting for another runic feature: the same letter needs not to be written twice, we may read: **rango : adons uf he(r)**, which means: ‘Ado’s ring (=spindle whorl) (is) down here’. The purport of the inscription presumably is expressed with reference to the object as a gravegift: *down here*. The object and the inscription may have been made especially for Ado’s afterlife, and subsequently been deposited with her in her grave. This would make sense, since the runes have been added after the firing.

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<sup>3</sup> Seebold proposes to read *sufnu(h)e*, with (h) as *Hiattrenner*, referring to Gmc *\*suf-nō-*, ON *sofna*, an inchoative verb: ‘to go to sleep’, but a sequence *-nu-* is not there.

<sup>4</sup> There is a parallel though: the already mentioned runic inscription on the footstool from Fallward, Wremen. This exquisite wooden bench, found during excavations of a fifth-century ship burial, has been decorated with a dog chasing a

deer. The stool has a runic inscription, transliterated: *ksamella Iguskapi*, which should be read: *skamella [a]lguskapi* ‘footstool of Elkhunter’. Remarkable is, that the initial *a* of *[a]lguskapi* must be borrowed from the ultimate rune of *skamella*. The requested ‘cosmetic movement’ in the Letčani inscription is herewith not an isolated feature.

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