

LITTLE-KNOWN DOCUMENTS

Las runas y *Beowulf* / Runes and *Beowulf*

JORGE LUIS BORGES

INTRODUCTION AND TRANSLATION
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Introduction

A few years ago Joe Stadolnik published an essay by Jorge Luis Borges entitled “Thorkelin y el *Beowulf*” (“Thorkelin and *Beowulf*”) in *PMLA*. The essay was taken from a notebook kept at the University of Texas, Austin, that Catherine E. Wall calls “the later red Avon notebook” (158). The notebook is overwhelmingly in the hand of Borges’s mother, Leonor Acevedo, who acted as amanuensis for him as his eyesight diminished from the 1950s on. Another item from that notebook, “Las runas y *Beowulf*” (“Runes and *Beowulf*”), is presented for the first time in print here. Wall believes that the notebook was written between 1955 and 1960, but another of the texts found in the notebook, “Lugones, Herrera, Cartago,” first appeared in print in 1955. It may therefore be reasonable to shift the dating of the notebook back, either to slightly before 1955 (for at least some of the contents) or in any case closer to 1955 than to 1960.

Whatever the specific date of composition, it is clear that Borges was at the time concerned with *Beowulf*. The red Avon notebook has thirty-seven leaves with “Thorkelin y el *Beowulf*” appearing unambiguously on the first eleven. “Las runas y *Beowulf*” is more difficult to locate because it appears on nonconsecutive leaves in both blue and black pen. The first part appears on folios 13r–15v, after which another text intervenes. “Las runas y *Beowulf*” picks up again on folio 21r and ends on 22v. It thus seems that Leonor Acevedo was filling in the gaps between preexisting notes, and so we might infer that “Las runas y *Beowulf*” is a later addition. It is perhaps because of this awkward, disjointed arrangement within the notebook that previous scholars have failed to recognize the unity of this piece as an essay in its own right.

Once demarcated, however, the essay has a neat structure, starting with a discussion of runes, moving on to a brief discussion of *Beowulf*, and ending with some observations concerning a connection between these two topics.

The section on runes is the longest of the three. It is well established that Borges had a particular interest in Germanic literature, a passion

most obvious in his *Antiguas literaturas germánicas* (with Delia Ingenieros, 1951 [*Ancient Germanic Literatures*]; later reworked as *Literaturas germánicas medievales* [*Medieval Germanic Literatures*] with María Esther Vázquez, 1978). Runes surface repeatedly in both these works. The overlap of “Runes and *Beowulf*” with Borges’s other writings is, however, only partial. For example, his descriptions of rune stones in the essay are all found elsewhere in his oeuvre, but the allusions to a rune-inscribed knife and to Olof Rudbeck’s theories about runes are found only here.¹

Borges’s sources for this information can, however, be traced. The first paragraph, after introducing a knife found in the Thames in 1857, moves on to references from Tacitus’s *Germania* and the Scandinavian god Odin’s account of sacrificing himself for runic knowledge taken from the *Poetic Edda*. The knife is the so-called Seax of Beagnoth, and Borges’s knowledge of it as well as his references to the other texts can be traced back to Edmund Gosse’s article on runes in the *Encyclopedia Britannica*. Many Borges notebooks explicitly acknowledge the debt he owed to the encyclopedia (Lavender 39), and although no references are given in “Runes and *Beowulf*,” Gosse’s mention of a runic alphabet preserved “on a knife, found in the Thames in 1857” (852) linked to Tacitus and Odin’s sacrifice as mentioned in the *Poetic Edda* (852–53) is too similar to be coincidental.

Also forming part of the essay’s first section, on runes, is a passage concerning Olof Rudbeck, a large part of which consists of a quotation from Edward Gibbon’s *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Borges was an enthusiastic reader of this work and included it in his *Biblioteca personal* (*A Personal Anthology*; Borges 50–57). As Anthony Grafton observes, Gibbon was not impressed with Rudbeck’s theories, and “contempt oozes from every sentence of this paraphrase” (183). Borges, however, does not seem to share Gibbon’s contempt; Rudbeck seems rather to fit in among the gallery of eccentric and ambiguous scholars who fascinated him throughout his career.

The second section introduces *Beowulf* as an object of comparison. Very little appears in this section that is not mentioned elsewhere by Borges:

the main point is to contrast Ernest Renan’s misunderstanding of the poem as a product of a barbarous culture with Charles Kennedy’s recognition that it draws on the high culture of Virgil’s *Aeneid*.

The third and final section brings together the two preceding parts, developing a resonance already prefigured in Borges’s image in the opening sentence of a skillfully crafted artifact—the Seax of Beagnoth—being drawn up from the mud. Gosse’s encyclopedia entry does not mention mud but simply says that the knife was “found in the Thames” (852); Borges has tweaked the description to link it to the repurposing of *Aeneid* material said to be identifiable in the “barro caótico” (“chaotic mud”) of *Beowulf*’s poetry.

At the end of the essay numerous sentences in the notebook have been struck through, revealing Borges’s struggle to find the right words to convey the sense of interconnectedness that these examples evoke. After rejecting definitions of the universe as “nothing other than a living and delicate organism in which each part permanently implies the others” and “a vast organism where the parts are living mirrors of the entirety,” Borges seems to have settled on “an inextricable and vertiginous network of effects and causes.” Whether he chose not to publish the essay because he remained unhappy with this final formulation must remain open to speculation.

NOTE

1. On Borges’s adaptation of Philpotts’s translations of the rune stones, see Brljak.

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Las runas y *Beowulf*

[13r] En 1857 se descubrió en el barro del Támesis un cuchillo de hierro, en cuya hoja estaban grabadas las letras angulares que componen el alfabeto rúnico. Runa, en la lengua gótica significó secreto, cosa escondida; el hecho de que las palabras, que se oyen, puedan comunicarse por unas pocas marcas, que se ven, debió de parecer misterioso a las gentes germánicas, como sin duda lo es. El X capítulo de la *Germania*, habla de marcas que el augur grababa en las astillas de una rama para la adivinación del futuro; el dios Odin, en la Edda Mayor, misteriosamente refiere: "Sé que durante nueve noches pendí del árbol que el viento sacudía; herido de lanza, sacrificado a Odin, yo mismo a mí mismo, en aquel árbol, cuyas raíces nadie conoce. No me dieron un cuerno para beber, no me dieron pan. Miré hacia abajo, recogí las runas, gimiendo las recogí, caí al suelo." [13v] Hubo quien imaginó que las runas conseguidas del dios y las marcas de los augures eran las letras de la escritura que se ha llamado rúnica.

Piedras rúnicas dispersas por la faz de la tierra conmemoran las dilatadas andanzas de los escandinavos. Dos mil quinientos perduran en el territorio de Suecia, quinientos en Noruega, doscientos cincuenta en Dinamarca, cincuenta en Inglaterra, cuarenta y tantas en Islandia, unas pocas en las costas de América. En una isla del Mar Negro hay una que dice: "Grani erigió este túmulo en memoria de Karl su compañero." Otra casi borrada hay en un león de mármol que adornó el puerto del Pireo y que ahora está en Venecia: "Guerreros grabaron las runas . . . hombres de Suecia las dejaron en el

león." En otra que está en Gripsholm se lee: "Tola hizo [14r] levantar esta piedra en memoria de su hijo Harald, hermano de Ingvar. Valerosamente partieron en busca de oro, y saciaron al águila en el Oriente: perecieron en el sur, en Arabia." En otra: "Que Dios se apiade de sus almas, pero sus cuerpos yacen en Londres."

En Groenlandia hay una inscripción con runas secretas. Las letras suelen ordenarse verticalmente o de derecha a izquierda o con sinuosidades y rodeos de criptografía. Los textos más antiguos, que bien pueden datar del siglo III, son indescifrables; se conjetura que no tienen sentido, que fueron ejecutadas con el solo fin de proteger las sepulturas con signos mágicos. El alfabeto grabado en el cuchillo tendría un propósito análogo. Cynewulf, poeta anglosajón del siglo VIII, intercaló las letras rúnicas de su nombre en sus composiciones religiosas a manera de firma, incluida en el texto, tal vez para que los lectores rogaran por su alma.

Jordanes, al promediar el siglo VI, afirmó que la isla de Escandinavia (los antiguos [14v] la tuvieron por tal) era el taller o fábrica de las naciones; en el siglo XVII, estas palabras fueron leídas en Upsala por el enciclopédico Olof Rudbeck, a la luz de las batallas de Gustavo Adolfo y de la política de Oxenstjerna. De su pluma salieron cuatro voluminosas infolios en sueco y en latín, titulados *Atlant* y destinados a demostrar que no sólo la población de Europa sino la cultura procedían de las tierras setentrionales. Bajo Carlos XI Suecia era un reino poderoso; Rudbeck consagró su genio a dotarla de

un pasado condigno. Observa Gibbon, en el IX capítulo de su *Historia*:

El siglo pasado abundó en anticuarios de profunda erudición y de fácil [15r] fe, que a la incierta luz de leyendas y tradiciones, de etimologías y conjeturas, condujeron los biznietos de Noé desde la torre de Babel hasta los confines del globo. De estos juiciosos críticos, uno de los más amenos fue Rudbeck, profesor de la universidad de Upsala. Cuanto la historia o la fábula han celebrado, este celoso patriota lo atribuye a su país. De Suecia (que formó una parte considerable de la antigua Germania) los mismos griegos derivaron su alfabeto, su astronomía y su religión. De esa deleitable región (por que así la veían los ojos de un nativo) la Atlántida de Platón, la tierra de los Hiperbóreos, los jardines de las Hespérides, las islas Afortunadas, y aún los Campos Elíseos, no eran sino imperfectas y débiles transcripciones. Una región [15v] tan profusamente dotada por la naturaleza no podía mantenerse desierta después del diluvio; el docto Rudbeck concede a la familia de Noé unos pocos años para multiplicarse de ocho personas en veinte mil. Luego las dispersa en pequeñas colonias para repoblar la tierra y propagar el género humano. El contingente sueco (que avanzó, si no me equivoco, bajo el mando de Ashkenaz, hijo de Gomer, hijo de Japhet) se distinguió por su excepcional diligencia en el cumplimiento de esa gran obra. La colmena boreal lanzó sus enjambres sobre la mayor parte de Europa, de África, y Asia, y (para usar la metáfora del autor) la sangre circuló de las extremidades al corazón.

Para los germanistas de nuestro tiempo, las misteriosas runas que, según Rudbeck, enseñaron a escribir a la antigüedad son una derivación epigráfica de caracteres latinos o griegos, que habían sido revelados a las gentes del [21r] Báltico en monedas traídas por los fenicios. En cuanto a aquellas “runas” por las que una divinidad se sacrificó, eran meras figuras mágicas, ajenas de sentido alfabético.

Consideramos otro caso análogo, el de *Beowulf*. En esta epopeya, la más antigua de las literaturas

germánicas, Renan, hacia 1859, sintió “el horror de la barbarie goteando sangre, la embriaguez de la carnicería, el placer desinteresado, por así decirlo, de la destrucción y de la muerte.” Otros críticos deploraron o veneraron esta rudeza, hasta que un hecho de apariencia trivial vino a modificar y aún a transformar la visión del poema. [21v] En su caótico barro se descubrió un verso de la *Eneida*, un verso de aquel sexto libro que prefigura el viaje de Dante y en el que Warburton creyó oír una descripción de los escénicos terrores de Eleusis. Otros hallazgos descartaron la hipótesis de una interpolación y Charles Kennedy (*The Earliest English Poetry*, Oxford, 1943) ha indicado un largo pasaje en el que se funden tres imágenes virgilianas. [22r] En lugar del rapsoda que imaginaron los primeros críticos del poema, tendríamos a un hombre de letras que retoma y domestica una materia bárbara, a la manera de Racine o de Pope.

¿Qué pensar de estas cosas, qué concluir de tales reflejos y reverberaciones de Roma en la gesta de un rey que da muerte a un monstruo y en un cuchillo escandinavo del Támesis? Hay dos contestaciones posibles. Una, evidente, es que los hechos indicados confirman la conocida tesis de Ker, que enseña que las gentes del Norte siempre estuvieron de algún modo bajo el influjo de las civilizaciones del Sur. Otra, más preciosa y más vaga, es que esas conexiones de hechos distantes nos permiten sentir [22v] el vasto universo como una red inextricable y vertiginosa de efectos y causas.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Copyright © Maria Kodama Estate, used by permission of The Wylie Agency, LLC. Text that is struck out is not included here. I have standardized accents and the use of quotation marks and corrected minor errors in spelling and punctuation. Brackets in the text mark folio numbers of the notebook.

Runes and *Beowulf*

In 1857 in the mud of the River Thames an iron knife was discovered, on the blade of which were carved the angular letters that make up the runic alphabet. *Rune*, in the Gothic language, means “secret,” “hidden thing.” The fact that words, which are heard, can be communicated through a few marks, which are seen, must have seemed mysterious to the Germanic peoples, as it undoubtedly is. Chapter 10 of *Germania* talks of marks that the augur carved into the fragments of a branch for the purposes of divining the future; the god Odin, in the *Poetic Edda*, mysteriously confides, “I know that for nine nights I hung from the tree which the wind shook, wounded by a lance, sacrificed to Odin, I myself to myself, upon that tree, whose roots reach beyond anybody’s knowledge. They did not give me a horn to drink from, they did not give me bread. I looked down, gathered the runes, gathered them howling, I fell to the ground.”¹ There were those who imagined that the runes obtained by the god and the marks of the augurs were the letters of that style of writing that has been called runic.

Rune stones scattered across the face of the earth commemorate the drawn-out wanderings of the Scandinavians. Two thousand five hundred remain in the territory of Sweden, five hundred in Norway, two hundred fifty in Denmark, fifty in England, forty-something in Iceland, a few on the coasts of America. On an island in the Black Sea there is one that says, “Grani raised this mound in memory of Karl, his companion.” Another, almost erased, is on a marble lion that adorned the port of Piraeus and is now in Venice: “Warriors carved the runes . . . men of Sweden left them on the lion.” On another, which is in Gripsholm, one can read, “Tola raised this stone in memory of a son, Harald, brother of Ingvar. They bravely departed in search of gold and sated the eagle in the east: they died in the south, in Arabia.” On another: “May God have mercy on their souls, but their bodies lie in London.”

In Greenland there is an inscription with secret runes. The letters tend to be arranged vertically or from right to left or with cryptographic windings and swerves. The most ancient texts, which could well date back to the third century, are indecipherable. It has been conjectured that they are nonsense, that they were produced with the sole aim of protecting tombs by means of magic signs. The alphabet carved into the knife might serve a similar function. Cynewulf, the Anglo-Saxon poet of the eighth century, interspersed the runic letters of his name within his religious compositions as a kind of signature, embedded in the text, perhaps so that readers might pray for his soul.

Jordanes, in the middle of the sixth century, stated that the island of Scandinavia (for that was what the ancients considered it to be) was the workshop or factory of nations. In the seventeenth century, these words were read in Uppsala by the polymath Olof Rudbeck, in the light of the battles of Gustavus Adolphus and of the politics of Oxenstierna. From his pen came four hefty folio volumes in Swedish and Latin, bearing the title *Atlant* and destined to demonstrate that not only the population of Europe but also its culture originated in the septentrional lands. Sweden, under Charles XI, was a powerful kingdom. Rudbeck dedicated his genius to equipping it with a past of equal dignity. Gibbon observes, in the ninth chapter of his *History*:

The last century abounded with antiquarians of profound learning and easy faith, who, by the dim light of legends and traditions, of conjectures and etymologies, led the great-grandchildren of Noah from the Tower of Babel to the extremities of the globe. Of these judicious critics, one of the most entertaining was Olaus Rudbeck, professor in the university of Upsal. Whatever is celebrated either in history or fable, this zealous patriot ascribes to his country. From Sweden (which formed so considerable a part of ancient Germany) the Greeks themselves derived their alphabetical characters, their astronomy, and

their religion. Of that delightful region (for such it appeared to the eyes of a native) the Atlantis of Plato, the country of the Hyperboreans, the gardens of the Hesperides, the Fortunate Islands, and even the Elysian Fields, were all but faint and imperfect transcripts. A clime so profusely favoured by Nature, could not long remain desert after the Flood. The learned Rudbeck allows the family of Noah a few years to multiply from eight people to about twenty thousand persons. He then disperses them into small colonies to replenish the earth, and to propagate the human species. The German or Swedish detachment (which marched, if I am not mistaken, under the command of Askenaz the son of Gomer, the son of Japhet) distinguished itself by a more than common diligence in the prosecution of this great work.² The northern hive cast its swarms over the greatest part of Europe, Africa, and Asia; and (to use the author's metaphor) the blood circulated back from the extremities to the heart.³

For the Germanicists of our times, the mysterious runes that, according to Rudbeck, taught Antiquity to write are an epigraphic derivation of Latin or Greek characters, which had been revealed to the peoples around the Baltic Sea on coins brought by the Phoenicians. As far as those "runes" for which a deity sacrificed himself are concerned, they were mere magical figures devoid of any alphabetic meaning.

Let us consider another analogous case, that of *Beowulf*. In this most ancient epic of the Germanic literatures, Renan, around 1859, perceived "the horror of blood-dripping barbarity, the inebriation of slaughter, the disinterested pleasure, so to speak, of destruction and death." Other critics deplored or venerated this roughness, until a seemingly trivial fact happened to modify and even to transform our view of the poem. In its chaotic mud a verse from the *Aeneid* was discovered, a verse from the sixth book, which prefigures Dante's journey and in which

Warburton believed he heard a description of the scenic Eleusinian Mysteries. Other findings excluded the hypothesis that it was an interpolation and Charles Kennedy (*The Earliest English Poetry*, Oxford, 1943) has indicated a long passage in which three Virgilian images are fused. In place of the rhapsode whom the first critics of the poem imagined, we seem to have a man of letters who takes up and domesticates a barbarous subject, in the manner of Racine or Pope.

What to make of these things, what to conclude on the basis of such reflections and reverberations of Rome in the epic deeds of a king who kills a monster and a Scandinavian knife in the Thames? There are two possible answers. One, which is obvious, is that these facts confirm Ker's well-known thesis, which holds that the peoples of the North were always in some way under the influence of the civilizations of the South. Another, more beautiful and more vague, is that these connections between distant facts allow us to perceive the vast universe as an inextricable and vertiginous network of effects and causes.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTES

1. For extracts from sources not originally in English, I have followed the translations in Borges.
2. The translation in Borges's notebook mentions only the Swedish detachment, omitting the German one.
3. Gibbon 221.

TRANSLATOR'S WORK CITED

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