Phasing and Functionality in Anglo-Saxon Runic Literacy

Recent finds of runic inscriptions on sheet lead plaques have led to the definition of a hitherto unseen and unsuspected phase of ‘Late’ Anglo-Saxon runic literacy in the 10th–11th centuries AD. This continued use of the form of the runic script that had developed in England from the 5th–9th centuries and its particular applications was contemporary with but largely separate from the use of Scandinavian Younger Fuþark runes for Norse inscriptions both in England and elsewhere in Britain. The new evidence has enabled us to chart a robust three-phase periodization of the whole Anglo-Saxon runic history in stages corresponding closely to archaeology’s Early, Middle and Late Anglo-Saxon Periods. This cultural-historical scheme characterizes the differential nature of the three phases in precisely the terms this conference focuses upon: types of text, conceived both grammatically and in terms of genre, and — fully integrated with the typological variance — the changing role of literacy in a script tradition that at the same comprehensively maps the evolution of cultural circumstances from oral to literate over a period of six centuries.

While this chronologically schematic map of Anglo-Saxon runic practice is both significant and valid, it is important not to over-schematize our representation and perception of what the whole corpus of available evidence shows. Transitions between phases were invariably gradual, and the idiosyncratic use of runes was always possible. Nonetheless, the evidence as a whole strongly enhances a view of the practical tenacity and indeed the relatively high familiarity of runic writing in what was nearly constantly a digraphic and polyglottic Anglo-Saxon England. In a broader perspective, the emergence of a Late Anglo-Saxon phase of runic literacy that is substantial and structured rather than ephemeral also creates the conditions for effective and informative comparative analysis and interpretation recombining the English and the Scandinavian evidence of the 10th and 11th centuries, where previously the former, along with the Frisian corpus, had appeared simply to branch off in the 5th century and to follow a divergent direction that had for practical purposes terminated in the 9th century.