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Notes on Theodoric and the Rök-Stone

by Kees Samplonius - Amsterdam

One of the most intriguing problems in runic research is certainly the interpretation of the inscription on the stone from Rök in Östergötland (Sweden). Attempts to solve this problem are not even without danger, as is shown by the long polemical strife between Elias Wessén and Otto Höfler. A relative calm now seems to have settled down on what ought to have remained a mere scholarly difference of opinion: the conception of the figure of Theodoric in popular belief at the time the stone was erected (roughly 9th century AD). Both scholars having died since, it may be time to take a fresh look at the problem, for even though research has been going on since, the issue does not seem to have been settled. The part of the inscription that concerns us most in this connection is the stanza found in lines B 9-12 (Wessén 1958: 24): **raip [þ]iaurikR hin þurmuþi stiliR flutna strantu hraiþmaraR sitiR nu karuR a kuta sinum skialti ub fatlaþR skati marika.** It was established long ago that this part of the text is composed in a metre called *kviðuhátt*, known from Nordic tradition. In normalized Old Norse it reads as follows (Von Friesen 1920: 86):

Réð þjóðrekr
hinn þormóði
stillir flotna
ströndu Hreiðmarar

sitr nú görr
á gota sínum
skildi umb fatlaðr
skati mæringa

Preceding this stanza and apparently connected with it there is a short passage in prose that appears to represent a rethoric introduction. I will come back to this introduction later. As to the poem itself, most scholars now agree that the **þiaurikR** of this stanza refers to Theodoric the Great (452-526), the famous king of the Ostrogoths, who ruled Italy from 489 AD until his death. How is this reference to be understood? As I see it, there is no need to be puzzled by the occurrence of his name in a 9th century inscription from Östergötland. It is well attested that Theodoric was a most popular ruler, a fact that even his political adversaries had to admit, although they were quick to add that this was 'from the human point of view' (cf. Procopios, 'Bellum Gothicum' I,1). Theodoric's rise to supreme power, symbolized in a

scene in the church of San Vitale, where he was depicted as being crowned by Christ himself (de Vries 1961: 327) - possibly a concession to Catholic doctrine - must have awed his Gothic compatriots. During his reign tribal and religious tensions appeared to ease, the economy flourished and a promising future appeared to lie ahead. The Italo-Gothic state, of which Theodoric was the personification, was short-lived, however, and survived its founder by only a few decades. Theodoric died in 526 AD. What followed were times of strife and war, in which the country fell victim to ruthless Byzantine ambition. After the autumn of 552 AD, when Narses defeated Teja at Mount Vesuvius, the new-founded state belonged to history. The prosperity and splendour of Theodoric's lost reign, however, were long remembered, not only in Italy, but even far beyond its borders. At the time of Ostrogothic rule in Italy, but starting well before that, there had been an impressive stream of gold coins coming to the North (Lindquist 1934: 60), mostly of western provenance, many of them struck in Italian mints. On the islands of Öland and Götland, as well as on the Swedish mainland, hundreds of these *solidi* have come to light, sometimes as stray finds, but mainly as hoards. This abundance is remarkable in itself. More interesting still, is the fresh state of preservation of most of the coins. This can only be explained by assuming that the coins were recently struck/minted when they were put into the earth. This fact indicates strongly that contacts between Italy and Scandinavia (the old homeland of the Goths), far from being broken off, had remained lively indeed (Janse 1922: 8). It is assumed (Nerman 1941:71; Werner 1949: 264) that part - if not all - of the gold stems from payments to Scandinavians serving as mercenaries in the South. The 5th century AD witnessed the appearance and development of the Gotland picture stones, the earliest decorations of which are clearly inspired by provincial Late Roman sepulchral art (Lindqvist 1968: 52). Contact with the romanized parts of Europe is further indicated by the basic structure of the 6th century round fortress at Ismantorp on Öland, which cannot be seen as anything else but an imitation of fortifications used in the Late Roman Empire (Werner 1949: 267). It is recorded by Procopios that the Heruli, after having suffered a defeat at the hands of the Langobards in 505 AD, simply returned to their Scandinavian homelands. It is even thought that the Gotlandic place name *Roma* merely reflects its Italian namesake. The flow of coins that poured into the North provided the foundation of what has been called the Scandinavian Golden Age. We have to realize that what has come down to us probably represents only a small percentage of the many coins that came to Scandinavia. Most of them seem to have been melted down (Werner 1949: 272), the gold being re-used for ornamental purposes, such as the decoration of weapons (swordgrips etc., cf. Falk 1914: 25) and helmets, amulets and jewelry, among which the famous large gold necklaces, some of them weighing several pounds (Holmqvist 1972: 10-12), deserve mention. It is no exaggeration to say that the use of

gold is one of the main characteristics of the period (Janse 1922: 8). The Golden Age came to an end, however, towards the middle of the 6th century, i.e. the same period that saw the decline and fall of the Ostrogothic state. This is probably no coincidence (Werner 1949: 278, 283). In the days of Theodoric's able rule the power and influence of his state had reached far beyond its borders, pacifying the regions of the Alps up to the Middle Danube, and enabling all trade and traffic between the South and Scandinavia to take place relatively undisturbed. After the collapse of Ostrogoth power, however, things changed rapidly. Within a short period the Langobards invaded Italy, thus allowing the Slavs and the Avars to expand their territory westward. In the turmoil of these events the old routes to the North were disrupted and finally given up, as is shown by the total disappearance of archeological finds. Moreover, after Ostrogoth power had vanished, the Byzantine subsidiary payments stopped. Instead, the money went to the Avars, who were now living in the border area. The conclusion is clear. The Scandinavian Golden Age had come to an end overnight. The contrast with the later Viking Age, where silver became the dominating precious metal, is striking. For that reason it is no surprise that this happy and prosperous time of gold in abundance was long remembered in the North. As its disappearance coincided with the collapse of the Ostrogothic state founded by Theodoric, it is only natural that long afterwards people still remembered him as the great instigator and champion of that glorious time.

The conclusion that the *þiaurikR* of the stanza refers to this Ostrogothic king was one of the few points Höfler and Wessén could agree on.¹ In almost all other aspects their interpretations differed widely. A key issue was the question how *sitiR*, which opens the second half of the stanza, should be understood. Indeed, this is one of the main problems in any interpretation. Many scholars have advocated some connection with the equestrian statue of Theodoric that Charlemagne is known to have moved from Ravenna to Aachen, where he had it erected between his palace and the church (Heinzel 1889: 16). This explanation has the advantage that it accounts for the remarkable use of the present tense *sitiR*, which, as it stands, can only refer to a situation that existed - or was believed to exist - at the time the inscription was made. This seems all the more plausible as the stanza is composed along a carefully balanced contrast between time past (first part) and time present, a composition that occurs elsewhere in Old Norse poetry as well. This solution certainly sounds attractive and it has received a warm welcome. A few scholars have expressed doubts, however, or

¹ For a different view, according to which *þiaurikr* = Theodoric, king of the Franks, cf. von See (1966: 78). Since the Goths in all likelihood originated from Gautland, the landscape of the Rök stone, and since the connections with the North remained intact during much of the 6th century, I have no problem in associating *þiaurikr* with Theodoric the Great, king of the Ostrogoths.

even utterly rejected the idea. Indeed, it is difficult to see how an equestrian statue erected at Aachen at the beginning of the 9th century can have been the source of a Swedish inscription dating from about the same time (Düwel 1968: 97), especially if we assume the stanza to be a quotation and thus to be older than the inscription itself (cf. note 2). Moreover, as stressed by von Friesen (1920: 48), the description of the statue given by Agnellus is not entirely compatible with the formula *skildi umb fatlaðr* in our stanza. Quite a different explanation was given by Otto Höfler, who believed that the description of Theodoric on horseback refers to an assumed role as leader of the Wild Hunt, which he tried to connect with the so-called *Odinsweihe*, postulated by him on the basis of his interpretation of other sources. Whatever Höfler's objective may have been, his explanation of *sitiR* was severely criticized by Wessén, who pointed out that the form seems to indicate a situation of rest, rather than a hunt. The argument is a weighty one and Höfler could not counter it effectively. Wessén himself did not altogether reject the notion that the description could have been inspired by the equestrian statue, but seemed more inclined to rely on the parallel apparently provided by 'Ynglingatal' 31:

Réð Oláfr
ofsa forðum
vífri grund
af Vestmari

Nú liggr gunndiarfr
á Geirstöðum
herkonungr
haugi ausinn

If we take these lines to be a parallel, then the words *sitr nú görr a gota sínum* must refer to the way Theodoric was thought to rest in his grave, since the second half of Yng. 31 clearly describes how the king was buried in a mound. It is, however, difficult to establish a link between the wording of the inscription and the Germanic custom to equip the dead warrior with horses and weapons (Von Friesen 1920: 49), since in those graves where the habit is attested (Almgren 1904: 316), the warrior is always laid to rest, and it is hard to see how such a position could be described as *sitr*. This explanation, therefore, is not satisfactory either. Wessén (1958: 44) must have been aware of the difficulties, and was so cautious as not to pursue the idea any further; nor does Lönnroth (1977: 27), who safely leaves both options open. We can only conclude that the use of the present tense *sitiR* confronts us with a problem for which so far no convincing explanation has been given.

The only way out of the dilemma is to assume that the poet is not thinking of Theodoric as a dead body mouldering in the grave, but as a

person who is still present somewhere. This conclusion does not rest solely on the use of the verbal form *sitiR*. It finds support in the prose text preceding the stanza, *auktumiRanubsakaR*, probably to be transcribed as Old Norse *ok dǫmir enn umb sakar*. In doing so I side with Lönnroth (1977: 28), according to whom the phrase should be translated as 'and still (yet) is ready for battle'. It has to be pointed out that *deila sakar*, the expression to which Lönnroth attaches great weight, is not quite the same as *dǫma um sakar*. A translation like 'still judges [watches, considers] the cases [appliance of justice]' is conceivable, as is 'people (vgl. germ. *man*) still speak of the verdicts/battles [of Theodoric]'. La Farge/Tucker (1992: 41) list the following possible meanings of *dǫma um sakar* 'to judge cases, settle disputes, to negotiate, make a decision; also absol. to sit in judgment, administer justice, hold court; to express or exchange opinions: to converse (of/um e-t about s.t.)'. Since this has little bearing on my theory I have decided to stick to Lönnroth's translation, which is admittedly not in all respects convincing.²

How is this remarkable text: the dead king that *dǫmir enn umb sakar* 'still ready for battle' to be understood?

In the history of Germanic kingship, we come across an apparently popular belief that a glorious king whose reign was marked by peace and prosperity, did not pass away like other mortals, but vanished while still alive (German: *lebend entrückt*). The monarch was thought to be still dwelling in some remote, inaccessible place, often inside a mountain, waiting for the moment of his return. When the need of his people is highest, he will make a glorious reappearance and the good days of old will return. This kind of belief is by no means typically Germanic. King Arthur is thought to be slumbering in a cave at Craig-

² After finishing this article I found that the alternative translation of *dǫmir um sakar* as 'people [vgl. Germ. *man*] still speak of the verdicts/battles (of Theodoric)' has already been proposed by Ottar Grønvik (1983: 114). There is a slight difference, however. I reckoned with an unspecified collective singular (*fólk, ungmenni*), whereas Grønvik holds it to be an impersonal construction "med nærmest passivisk betydning". As to its meaning, this amounts to the same thing. To support his explanation Grønvik points to alleged similar constructions such as: *svá segir í Völuspá; Hér segir frá landaskipan; þess getr í Eiríksdrápu* and OHG *Hear quihidit umbi ...* I wonder if these phrases represent true parallels, since the deictic element that introduces the finite verb is missing in our phrase *ok dǫmir enn um sakar*. Moreover, we would have two entirely different subjects - one of which impersonal - juxtaposed by the conjunction *ok*. Grønvik's explanation is attractive, however, in the sense that it would provide the following stanza with an elegant introduction. The wording *dǫmir enn um sakar* would then have a similar function as *svá segir [í Völuspá]*, which only serves to introduce a strophe quoted by Snorri. In other words, if Grønvik is right, the verb *dǫmir* must refer to the following stanza instead of to some unspecified "rettsaker eller stridigheter han var innblandet". As a consequence the stanza would be nothing but a quotation, which would constitute an argument against the Aachen Statue thesis.

y-Dinas (The Fortress Rock), surrounded by the men of the Island of the Mighty. They sleep with their steeds and their arms because a day will come when land and sky shall cower at the clamour of a host. He will drive his foes headlong into the sea, and there will be justice and peace among men for as long as the world endures (Jones 1955: 172). In short, he is a true *rex iustus rediturus* : the king that will undo all that is wrong and punish those who are responsible. As a phenomenon the belief is undoubtedly related with what may be called Messaic expectation and ultimately it all goes back to Pandora's box : hope as the one consolation that remains to the end. This archetypical feature explains the broad similarities found in the way this kind of belief manifests itself in different times and places. There are, naturally, also important differences, due to the different cultural frameworks it has to fit in with. Here we will only concern ourselves with the way the belief manifests itself on Germanic soil. We find then that the concept of the vanished just king plays an important role in Germanic tradition. From early historiography, which still clings to oral tradition, we learn that many kings, heroes and armies live on in mountains and caves. It is reported (de Vries 1956: 235) that Charlemagne rests in Odenberg, Charles V in Untersberg near Salzburg, Heinrich der Vogelsteller in Sudemerberg and Frederic Barbarossa in Kyffhäuser. The occurrence of the belief in Scandinavia cannot be doubted. The remarkable stanza 31 of 'Ynglingatal' also deals with a king whose return was speculated about. This is illustrated by a tale preserved in the 'Longer Saga of St Olaf' which describes how Olaf, when passing the burial mound of Olaf Geirstada-alf, was asked if it was true that he had been buried there once - *Seg mér, herra, ef þér váruð hér heygðir* (Flb.II, 135). Here the concept of the *rex rediturus* clearly touches upon the Old Norse motif of being *endrborinn*. One is reminded of the whispering that Hakon the Good is received with by the farmers of Thronðheim ... *at þar væri þá kominn Haraldr inn hárfagri ok orðinn ungr í annat sinn* (Hkr.I, 150). From the tale in the Longer Olafssaga one gets a feeling that to some extent the clergy was affected by the way Olaf the Saint figured in popular belief. Even so, Olaf's angry answer that he wants nothing to do with heathen belief and superstition reflects the official clerical point of view. It has to be stressed that such disapproval is conceivable only if there had actually been a popular belief to the contrary. For that reason we may safely assume with Holtsmark (1969: 97) that 'disse sagnene må lokaliseres til steder han kom fra, d.v.s. Norges østland, og i tid bør vi gå så langt tilbake at dette var et mer eller mindre uttalt hedensk område. Der kan der ennå ha vært å hedre Olav å si at han var den gode konge Olav Geirstadalv som var kommet igjen'. Among the kings mentioned above especially the figure of Frederic Barbarossa, who in popular tradition appears to have merged with his nephew Frederic II, deserves attention, not only because of the eagerness with which his return was awaited - expectations seem to have run high at times -, but also on account of a 13th century source, which

reports that Frederic, followed by a host of 5000 knights, had departed into Mount Etna, not to be seen again. (Nauman 1940: 69). This brings us back to Theodoric, who according to Gregory's 'Dialogues' (IV, 30) found his end in the very same mountain. It is slightly surprising that nobody seems to have considered the possibility of some connection between his rumoured departure and the phenomenon of the *rex iustus rediturus*, discussed above. Theodoric was after all the great king, who was remembered, not only for the prosperity and glory of his reign, but also for his justice.³ If we add to this that he was apparently thought to have been taken away alive, instead of having died, it is only natural to assume that Theodoric may belong to this select company of once and future kings, as well. The enigmatic use of the present tense of the verb *sitiR* in our inscription is easily accounted for if we take it to spring from such a belief. The idea is supported by, among other things, an inscription on a scene in *bas-relief* on the west front of the San Zeno basilica in Verona, which depicts Theodoric's ride out of life while hunting a deer (Lejeune 1966: Abb.46). Its text contains the passus: *petit infera non rediturus* (Höfler 1963: 33). The fact that Theodoric is said to have gone to hell, instead of heaven, is hardly remarkable. The Catholic clergy was ill disposed towards the memory of a king who had imprisoned and executed two of its leaders. In Northern countries kings were turned into saints in order to win popular support, in this case the Church had no choice but the opposite. What makes the text remarkable is the fact that the inscription explicitly adds *non rediturus*, which suggests that there actually was a widespread belief that Theodoric would return. In his own words, according to the 'Þiðrekssaga' *Enn apttur mun ek koma ...* (ed. Bertelsen II, 393). These and other indications have been listed by Höfler (1963) to support his notion of Theodoric as Wild Hunter. The scholarly world has taken little notice of them, but other motives may have been involved here. On the other hand, it cannot be denied that Höfler strained his sources rather when he tried to establish a 'germanische Individualweihe', which he used to support his thesis of a special religious bond between Oðinn and the *þiaurikr* of the inscription. Theodoric as the Wild Hunter, on which Höfler laid great stress, is at odds with the wording *sitiR* of the inscription. It would, however, make perfect sense if it referred to a *rex rediturus*, the just king waiting for his return. Additional evidence can be deduced from the very fact that Charlemagne had the statue of Theodoric moved from Ravenna. As the Franks had been enemies of the Goths and since the move was apparently disapproved of by the clergy (as is made clear by Walafrid Strabo), it seems a strange step - why on earth should he go to the trouble? A clue to the answer may be found in the 'Vita Caroli' (C. 29), where Einhard relates how Charlemagne had collected and had

³ As for instance in the 'Nibelungenlied', version D, where his incorruptness is stressed (Rosenfeld 1984: 426).

committed to writing the laws of the Germanic nations that acknowledged his supremacy. He then proceeds to inform us that Charlemagne "at the same time directed that the age-old narrative poems, barbarous enough, it is true, in which were celebrated the warlike deeds of the kings of ancient times, should be written out and so preserved". As has been pointed out by Norbert Voorwinden,⁴ this juxtaposition is no coincidence. In his view the collection of these ancient poems about the heroic deeds and achievements of the kings of old was not so much inspired by interest in folklore, as motivated by political considerations. It served the purpose of laying claim to all areas and peoples that in the past had been subjected to the wandering Germanic nations who now all obeyed Charlemagne's rule. Voorwinden certainly has a point here. If his thesis is right we may assume similar motives behind Charlemagne's step of having the equestrian statue moved to Aachen: in doing so he was establishing himself as Theodoric's heir to supreme authority.⁵ There may not seem to have been any need for this, since the power of the Goths had long disappeared. But again, it would make perfect sense if Theodoric was remembered in popular belief as the great king of justice. Diffuse as popular belief commonly is, some may well have believed him to be a *rex rediturus*, the great king of old to restore prosperity and justice. It is worth noticing that the concept of a new Golden Age is touched upon by Walahfrid Strabo in his poem 'De Imagine Tetrici'. Here it is said that many people are still fascinated by the figure of Theodoric, even though the poet is loath to admit it. It is even depicted how the image of Theodoric comes to life again taking a whole crowd with it. The scene must be taken metaphorically of course, but the poet's choice of Theodoric cannot be coincidental. Apparently the people were still fascinated by him in such a way that even after the death of Charlemagne he still figured prominently, even on high levels in the Carolingian political arena. The poet deplors the fact, but must content himself with criticizing the people who, like the Jews dancing around the Golden Calf, now flock around the golden effigy of Theodoric. For a new Golden Age, he argues, we don't need a heretic like Theodoric, but a leader like Moses who will smash the Golden Calf, and who will usher in the true Golden Age as depicted in the Vision of Isaiah (Herren 1991:36).

⁴ Lecture delivered at the Oudgermanistendag, Leiden 7th May 1988. Cf. Voorwinden 1991: 479 "Il est vrai qu'Eginhard n'explique pas la manie de collectionneur de Charlemagne, mais il nous paraît légitime de conclure, à partir du contexte, que Charlemagne a fait noter la poésie héroïque parce que dans ces textes son gouvernement, ou en tout cas le gouvernement d'une dynastie germanique sur certains territoires était justifié."

⁵ The idea still echoes around in the Late Middle Ages, when Maximilian had a statue erected on his grave depicting Theodoric as one of his ancestors (cf. Voorwinden 1991: 481). It is interesting to note that he had a similar statue erected of king Arthur (Rosenfeld 1984: 429).

All this suggests speaks in favor of the idea that in the 9th century AD Theodoric was indeed remembered by the Franks as the great heroic king of old. If such was the case in Carolingian territory, i.e. on former enemy soil, the reign of the king must have made an even stronger impression in Scandinavia, from where the Goths had once departed. As shown above, connections between Italy and the North remained lively up to the middle of the 6th century.

In putting forward this solution, I must say a word about the expression *á gota sínum* 'on horseback'. In most manifestations of the *rex rediturus* motif the king, though armed, is not depicted on horseback. That this can nevertheless be the case is indicated by stanza 17 of 'Grímnismál'. Here Víðarr, the god who, with his brother Váli, will reign the wonderful new world (cf. Vsp. 62 *muno ósávir akrar vaxa*) after the downfall of the old order, is described as on *mars baki* in a remote spot, where he is waiting for his time to come. Of course the parallel holds true to a certain extent only, but the interpretation itself seems supported by the name *Viðarr* probably meaning 'the one who rules far and wide' (de Vries 1962:659). It may be embarrassing to find Theodoric, a monarch, juxtaposed with *Viðarr*, one of the Ases, but in fact the difference in status is only slight, since according to Jordanes the Goths regarded their kings as demigods: *non pueros homines sed semideos id est Ansis vocaverunt* ('Getica' 13,78). Additional support may be found in the adjective *garuR* meaning 'ready' (cf. OHG. *garo*, Eddaic *görr* 'beret, fertig') as used in *Völuspá* (stanza 30) to describe the shieldmaidens readiness for battle '*görvar at riða grund*'. The parallel can be drawn further (cf. Hauck 1983: 581), but it is probably wise to stop here.⁶

If we summarize our findings we find that

1. There was a Golden Age in the North
2. It came to an end with the collapse of Ostrogoth power
3. This power was personified in the person of Theodoric
4. He was remembered for his justice and able rule : the great just king
5. It was rumoured that he did not die but had been taken away
6. There was some speculation that he might return (*rex rediturus*),
7. The removal of his statue from Ravenna to Aachen by Charlemagne shows that Theodoric was vividly remembered in the 9th century AD.
8. The present tense *sitr* and *dømir enn* may indicate that the maker of the inscription thought him to be still alive somewhere

⁶ It can be argued for instance that the occurrence of the *rex rediturus* motif reflects only a intermediary stage of a process that, were it not for the opposition of the Church, might result in the apotheosis of the great king. It is described in 'Eiríksmál' and 'Hákonarmál' how dead kings were received with great honour in Valhöll. According to the 'Vita Anskarii' the Swedes made their deceased king into one of their gods. *Viðarr* in other words might represent the divine personification of the *rex rediturus* in general. Of course, the idea is no more than mere speculation.

9. Conclusion: it is possible to consider the runic stanza of the Rök Stone as (a reflex of) an instance of the 'rex iustus rediturus' belief.

I am well aware that the solution proposed here is partly based on assumptions that are difficult to prove. As data are scarce, one cannot expect otherwise, and the same holds true for the explanations given by Wessén and Höfler. In contributing these notes I am only trying to show that the reference to Theodoric (combined with the wording **sitiR garuR**) could quite easily mean something different from what Höfler and Wessén (and Lönnroth) thought. As such, I hope that they may prove a useful point of departure for further research.

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