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An Inscribed Fibula from Basel-Kleinhüningen?

Juliana Roost (University of Basel)

In his 2004 article “Kontinentalgermanische Runeninschriften und ‘almanische Runenprovinz’ aus archäologischer Sicht”, Max Martin mentions an inscribed bow-fibula from grave 115 of Basel-Kleinhüningen, citing it as one of only five examples of runic inscriptions on a typical early Merovingian fibula with semi-circular head plate and rectangular foot. This type is very well attested and dates to the last quarter of the sixth century (Martin 2004, 178). All other fibulas with runic inscriptions show so-called Nordic influence and feature rectangular head plates and a foot shaped as an oval or an animal head (Martin 2004, 178 f.).

The other four inscriptions on the same type of bow-fibula are on a pair from München-Aubing grave 303, as well as on one fibula each from Pleidelsheim grave 20 and Hohenstadt. All four have been discussed in runological literature but two have only illegible or uninterpretable inscriptions (cf. e.g. Waldspühl 2013, 286 f., 278, 301; concerning Pleidelsheim see the new reading and interpretation in Nedoma 2015, 312, no. 57).

The Basel-Kleinhüningen fibula, however, has not been mentioned in any runological literature of which I am aware other than Martin’s article. This lacks further information on the runes and cites no literature beyond the catalogue of the graveyard in question (Giesler-Müller, 1992), which was edited by him. In this catalogue the fibula is described as having “eingravierte, teilweise sich kreuzende Linien” (engraved, partially crossing lines, p. 106) on the back of the fibula; these are not referred to as runes or any other type of writing in the catalogue. Nor is it made clear whether the scratches are deemed to be intentional, originating from later wear or tear, or perhaps even of modern origin.

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Fig. 1. Reverse of the bow-fibula from grave 115 of Basel-Leinhüningen showing traces of a cleaning process as clear scratches. © Historisches Museum Basel.

The fibula is kept at the Historisches Museum Basel, the curator of which, Pia Kamber, kindly allowed me to examine the object.¹ While the scratches mentioned in the catalogue can easily be seen on a photograph (cf. fig. 1), this is not enough to determine their nature. Personal inspection makes it immediately apparent that the fibula was rigorously cleaned, presumably shortly after its excavation in the 1930s: the traces

¹ I would like to thank Pia Kamber and her conservation team at the Historisches Museum Basel for their hospitality and their valuable feedback.

of this cleaning process can be seen in the form of thin lines on both the front and back of the buttons, and wider lines on the inside of the bow and the foot. The back of the head plate is scratched all over with lines of various depths and widths. The lines on the head plate are the only ones that could feasibly be taken to represent intentional carvings.

The scratches are all of similar width, which suggests they were produced by the same instrument. The depth varies, however, indicating the application of uneven degrees of pressure. The majority of the lines are straight, alongside a few curved ones which tend to be shallower. The lines on the head plate are radially arranged around the semi-circle and crossed by a few straight and curved lines. It is striking that many lines do not appear to have a distinct and intentional end point. This lack of clear intent, as well as the radial arrangement, indicates that we are dealing with the marks of overenthusiastic cleaning rather than intentional writing. This is further corroborated by the pattern of wear and corrosion. The front of the fibula is rubbed nearly smooth at the bow, indicating not only heavy use but also that any corrosion would have occurred later. Since there is a higher concentration of lines in areas where the corrosion remains, with the scratches on top, they cannot date from the period of use. It can be concluded that this fibula is not inscribed and should not be considered a member of the aforementioned group of fibulas with semi-circular head plate, rectangular foot and runic inscription, which should consist of only four fibulas from three different graves.

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