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Lat. *scrībere* in Germanic

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Abstract

The present article deals with the reflexes of Lat. *scrībere* in Germanic. It is proposed that the word was borrowed into Germanic at quite an early stage (1st century AD) as a result of contacts between West-Germanic-speaking populations and the Romans. Special stress is put on the importance of the Roman military in introducing the practice of writing among those that served in the army. Special attention is given to the North Germanic reflexes of Lat. *scrībere* in order to tentatively explain the morphological difference found in that branch of Germanic, where the verb is found both in the first class of strong verbs and in the second class of weak verbs. It is proposed that the former conjugation is primary, and that the rise of the latter is due to later developments such as lexical analogical processes and language-external causes. Furthermore, the present study confirms from a different perspective that English influence on writing is primary in the Old-West-Norse-speaking area. Finally, Schulte's (2015) proposal is re-read in the light of terminological evidence from England and Scandinavia.

1. Introduction¹

While PGmc **wrīta-* was used to denote the act of carving runes, for writing on parchment many Germanic vernaculars had recourse to a Latin borrowing, i.e. Lat. *scrībere*.²

¹ I wish to thank several scholars who contributed with different insights to the shaping of this article: my mentor and PhD supervisor Jyn Axel Harparson (University of Iceland), Rolf Bremmer (Leiden University), Fabrizio D. Raschella (University of Siena), and Seðn Vrieland (University of Copenhagen). Moreover, I wish to thank Rory McTurk (University of Leeds) for revising my English, and Stephen Laker and the two anonymous peer-reviewers for their additional helpful suggestions. Any remaining errors are responsibility of the author.

² Also PGmc **rīsta-* was used to denote the act of carving runes. In Scandinavian runic inscriptions, **wrīta-* and **rīsta-* appear to have a clear geographical distribution. Whereas the former is used in the west (Norway,

Two remarkable exceptions to this are on the one hand Gothic, which uses the verb *mēljan*,³ and on the other Old English, in which the native verb *writan* seems never to have been challenged by a foreign lexical competitor.⁴ OE *scrīfan* shows in fact only secondary meanings of the Latin verb, namely ‘to decree, appoint, judge, doom’, and the ecclesiastical technical meanings ‘to shrive, impose Church penance (after confession)’ (cf. furthermore *ASD*: s.v. *scrīfan*). The aim of this article is to account for the borrowing process that led from Lat. *scrībere* to its reflexes in the Germanic languages, and to shed light on the morphological differences that exist in North Germanic.

As noted by Green (1998: 263–264), the West Germanic languages seem to show a clear divide with respect to the acquisition and use of Lat. *scrībere*: on the one hand there is the abovementioned OE *scrīfan* ‘to decree, appoint, judge, doom, shrive, impose Church penance (after confession)’, while on the other there are OLF *skrīvan* and OHG *skrīban* ‘to write’. Old Frisian constitutes a middle zone by showing both meanings, with the legal and religious ones being clearly of Old English provenance.⁵

The semantics of the verb in North Germanic seems to show calquing on Old High German, for OWN *skrifa*,⁶ ODan. *skriuæ*, OSw. *skriva*, and OGu. *skrifa* all mean ‘to write’.⁷

England), in the east (Denmark, Sweden and Gotland) the latter is found (cf. *Samnordisk runtext databas*). Moreover, whereas Old Icelandic preserves both verbs (*rítalrita* and *rístalrista*), in neither Old Danish nor Old Swedish are there reflexes of inherited PGmc **writa-*, for Sw. *rita* is in all probability a Low German loan (cf. *SAOB*: s.v. *rita*).

³ With regard to the etymology of Got. *mēljan*, Lehmann (1986: s.v.) compares the verb to its Germanic cognates, namely OIce. *mæla* ‘to paint, portray’, OE *gemælan* ‘to mark, stain’, OFris. *mēlia* ‘to paint’, OS and OHG *malōn* ‘to paint’. Writing as painting is the idea conveyed by the Gothic verb, as also by e.g. the runic inscriptions from Vetteland, Einang, and Rū (cf. Antonsen 1975, inscr. num. 18, 20, and 26 respectively), where PGmc **faihidōn* is used.

⁴ Cf. by contrast the situation in Old West Nordic, where both *ríta* (I cl. st.) and *rita* (II cl. wk) are used alongside *skrifa*.

⁵ Green (1998: 264) says that Old Saxon also showed semantic agreement with both Old High German and Old English. However, I am not able to find any instance of the Old Saxon verb in the technical meaning of OE *scrīfan*. A parallel can possibly be traced to OS *biskrīban* ‘to be reserved, care’.

⁶ The terminology used throughout this article with reference to North Germanic is that of Ottosson (2002). Old Nordic (abbr. ON) thus covers all the North Germanic vernaculars, whereas Old West Nordic (abbr. OWN) is opposed to Old East Nordic in that it covers only the western vernaculars. In order to avoid confusion between a narrow and a broad use of the term “Norse”, the term “Nordic” has been adopted.

⁷ Note that Þsgeir Blühdal Magnússon (2008: s.v. *skrifa*) lists two obsolete meanings for the verb, namely ‘to paint’ and ‘to forbid, prohibit’. Whereas there is copious evidence for the former (cf. *ONP*: s.v.), the latter, evidence for which could possibly point to a connection between the Old West Nordic verb and OE *scrīfan*, is not otherwise recorded. I have personally checked Þsgeir Blühdal Magnússon’s dictionary slips at the

Whereas West Germanic shows division with respect to the semantics of the verb, North Germanic does so with respect to its morphology. In West Nordic and Elfdalian the verb is in fact inflected according to the second class of the weak conjugation (OWN *skrifa*, Ice. *skrifa*, Nyn. *skriva*, Far. *skriva*, Elfd. *skrieva*). In Old Danish, on the other hand, the verb is inflected according to the first class of the strong conjugation. Old Swedish shows a transitional phase in that it shows both weak and strong conjugation forms for this verb, as does Old Gutnish, where the strong conjugation is attested from the 15th century (cf. Snjrdal 2002: 221).

The outline of this article is as follows: In Section 2, a critical account is given of earlier etymological discussions of the reflexes of this verb in Germanic. Subsequently (Section 3), the issues of age and path of borrowing for this verb are addressed. Following Rosenfeld (1952), it is proposed that the verb entered Germanic at a very early stage, namely in the period when Germanic soldiers started to be enlisted in the Roman army, and that it subsequently spread northwards during Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, not least as a result of Christian missions. The discussion will then (Section 4) focus on the morphological differences between the forms of the verb as borrowed in North Germanic. In conclusion (Section 5), the main points of the discussion will be summed up and two observations made on the writing traditions of Iceland, Norway, and England.

2. Earlier etymologies: A survey and critical account

Etymological research on the verb for ‘to write’ in Germanic is rooted in 19th-century historical linguistics. Whereas the reflexes of PGmc **wrīta-* originally denoted the act of carving runes, only in English is it the only possible option for conveying the basic meaning ‘to write’. In Continental West Germanic and North Germanic another verb, which is ultimately related to PIE **skreibh-* ‘to scratch, carve’ (cf. LIV²: 562), has been adopted (Ger. *schreiben*, Du. *schrijven*, Dan. *skrive*, Sw. *skriva*, Elfd. *skrieva*, Ice. *skrifa*, Far. *skriva*, Nyn. *skriva*).

The dictionaries and other lexical studies which treat the latter verb have always been divided into two schools of thought. One camp saw the verb as necessarily, or at least with all probability, native to Germanic, mainly because it shows the strong verb inflection; the other

Department of Lexicography of the Ærni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies, together with Þsgeir Magnússon’s main sources, but I was unable to find any reference to the source of such a meaning. Moreover, an obscure *hapax legomenon*, OIce. *skrifnask*, appears in the skaldic lexicon, namely in a *lausavisa* by the 11th-century skald Sigvatr Þyrrparson. Two interpretations exist for this verb: 1) Cleasby/Vigfússon (s.v. *skrifnask*) ascribe to it the meaning ‘it is imposed (of penance)’; 2) Judith Jesch (2014) interprets the verb as meaning ‘it is written to’. In his edition of the skaldic corpus, Finnur Jynsson (1912–1915: B I, p. 253) deems the passage too obscure to allow for an interpretation.

conceded instead that the verb was a borrowing from Lat. *scribere*. Of the former opinion (1) have been scholars such as Kluge (1889), W. de Vries (1921), Trier (1951), and J. de Vries (1971). The latter camp (2) has instead obtained the favour of the majority of scholars from the late 19th century to this day (e.g. Zimmer (1892), Grimm (1854–1961), Schröder (1924), Franck/van Wijk (1936), Falk/Torp (1960), Hellquist (1966), Seebold (1970), Pfeifer (1989), Philippa *et al.* (2003–2009), and Durkin (2015)). Table 1 provides a concise synopsis of the surveyed studies along with their key features.

Group	Source	Key features
1	Kluge (1889: s.v. <i>schreiben</i>)	Postulates the existence of PGmc <i>*skrib-/skrib-</i> ‘to impose a punishment’. The stem was then adopted by the Church as a technical term, hence OE <i>scrīfan</i> and related terms, e.g. OE <i>scrift</i> ‘what is prescribed as a punishment, a penalty’, OWN <i>skrift</i> ‘confession, shrift, penance, penalty’ (an Old English loan, N/A), and OFris. <i>skrīva</i> ‘to write, impose Church penance’. The meaning ‘to write’ would have been derived secondarily from Lat. <i>scribere</i> following the acquisition of literacy. ⁸
	W. de Vries (1921: 94)	Argues that the meaning ‘to write’ has arisen in Gmc due to semantic influence from Lat. <i>scribere</i> much in the same way as did Du. <i>lezen</i> (= Ger. <i>lesen</i> , Dan. <i>læse</i> , Sw. <i>läsa</i> , Ice. <i>lesa</i> etc.) from Lat. <i>legere</i> .
	Trier (1951: 73–75)	Maintains that the verb is native to Gmc. He draws a parallel with the reflexes of PIE <i>*skreib^h-</i> in Baltic.
	J. de Vries (1971: s.v. <i>schrijven</i>)	Considers the meaning ‘to write’ to have been acquired via Lat. <i>scribere</i> . The peculiar semantic development of Old English influenced Old Frisian and Old Saxon.
2	Zimmer (1892)	The primary meaning of the word is ‘to write’. He explains OE <i>scrīfan</i> ‘to shrive’ as a verb used in that sense by the Old English Church, but which nevertheless had its roots in writing practices. Its meaning would then have spread with English missionary activity to northern Germany, the Netherlands, and Scandinavia, leaving southern Germany unaffected, as there is no trace of such a meaning in the OHG linguistic area.

⁸ Kluge/Seebold (2002: s.v. *schreiben*) treat the word primarily as a loan from Lat. *scribere* but still mention the possibility of Ger. *schreiben* being native to Germanic.

Grimm (1854–1961: s.v. <i>schreiben</i>)	Critical of Zimmer’s line of reasoning. Grimms’ dictionary argues that the direction of semantic change could not have been from the specialised religious meaning to a generalised legal meaning but rather the opposite. A double borrowing process is considered most likely: firstly by West Germanic populations through contact with the Romans, and more specifically from the expression <i>scribere milites</i> ‘to enlist soldiers’; hence the specific meanings that developed along the centuries in OE, OFris., and OS (and also for OHG <i>furiskrīban</i> ‘prescribe’); and secondly, the meaning ‘to write’ would have been acquired with the introduction of literacy and manuscript writing in the 8th century.
Schröder (1924: 57–58)	PGmc * <i>wrīta-</i> has only been retained by the Anglo-Saxons, who gave it a new meaning, i.e. ‘to write’ (as opposed to ‘to carve’). The Latin loanword was introduced to German differently, namely via the Merovingian chancery in the 8th century, whence it came to compete with the native synonym. ⁹
Franck/van Wijk (1936: s.v. <i>schrijven</i>)	Consider the verb to have been borrowed together with parchment writing. OE <i>scrīfan</i> is thought to have developed a specific juridical meaning in Anglo-Frisian and, furthermore, a peculiar religious meaning in England.
Falk/Torp (1960: s.v. <i>skrive</i>)	Consider the Old English meaning as secondary. S.v. <i>skrift</i> it is proposed that the semantic development in OE had been from ‘to prescribe, decide’ (Lat. <i>praescribere</i>) to ‘to impose (Church) penance’.
Hellquist (1966: s.v. <i>skriva</i>)	Considers the verb to have been borrowed in connection with the introduction of literacy and suggests that the North Germanic verb has been at least partially borrowed from neighbouring languages.
Seebold (1970: s.v. <i>skreib-a-</i>)	Argues that the Old English meaning of the verb stems from Latin usage.
Pfeifer (1989: s.v. <i>schreiben</i>)	Envisages a double borrowing process from Latin: 1) with the meanings ‘to order, decide’, hence OE <i>scrīfan</i> but also OS <i>biskrīðan</i> ‘to be reserved, care’; 2) with the meaning ‘to write’.
Philippa <i>et al.</i> (2003–2009: s.v. <i>schrijven</i>)	Early borrowing from Lat. due to the influence exerted by Roman culture.
Durkin (2015: 141–142)	Early Latin loan in Continental Germanic. The meaning ‘to write’ is probably primary, whereas those of OE <i>scrīfan</i> derive from it but are nevertheless already present in Latin.

Table 1. A synopsis of earlier etymological studies.

Some recurring points emerge from this survey. Firstly, while scholars have had different opinions about the origin of the word, i.e. whether it is a native lexeme or a

⁹ This coexistence and competition is preserved in the *Heliand* (Old Saxon, 9th c.), whereas in the same century in Otfrid (Rhine Franconian) the two verbs appear to be semantically polarised: *skrīban* ‘to write’: *rīzan* ‘to inscribe’ (cf. also Sonderegger 2003: 180–182).

loanword, the latter option seems to have received more serious attention, while the former view has possibly been compromised by linguistic prejudice in certain socio-cultural milieux. Secondly, there is the question of how Lat. *scribere* was acquired by the Germanic languages. This is closely bound up with another question namely, how best to account for OE *scrīfan* ‘to decree, appoint, judge, doom, shrive’ in the light of the other reflexes of Lat. *scribere* in Germanic. As to the word’s origin, those etymologies that have taken it under scrutiny form three groups, namely those in which ‘to write’ is considered the primary meaning (A), those in which this meaning is considered to be secondary (B), and those which envisage a double borrowing process most likely (C). Groups A and B reflect the aforementioned two schools of thought: under Group A fall those etymologists who consider the verb to be a Latin loanword (Zimmer, Schröder, Franck/van Wijk, Hellquist, Seebold, Philippa *et al.*, and Durkin), whereas under Group B are those for whom the verb is native to the Germanic lexicon (Kluge 1889, W. de Vries, and J. de Vries). While still maintaining that the verb is a loan from Latin, the etymologists in Group C (Grimm and Pfeifer) are unique in considering the meaning ‘to write’ as secondary, i.e. acquired with the introduction of literacy and manuscript writing: the primary meaning for them was ‘to order, decide’, which arose together with the borrowing itself at an early stage, i.e. through contact with the Romans.

The peculiar meanings of OE *scrīfan* as opposed to Continental West Germanic and North Germanic pose a key problem of etymology which not all the etymologists reviewed above have addressed. As it is, the answers offered boil down to two: the meanings shown by OE *scrīfan* are either primary, or they are a secondary semantic development. The former option is taken up only by Kluge (1889), whereas Zimmer, Grimm, Schröder, Franck/van Wijk, Falk/Torp, and Pfeifer consider the Old English meanings to be peculiar to that language. Finally, Durkin does not take a clear position but hints at the fact that the Old English meanings are secondary, thus derived from ‘to write’, even though they were also partially present already in Latin.

3. Lat. *scribere* in Germanic: Age and path of borrowing

Determining the age and path of the borrowing of Lat. *scribere* into Germanic amounts to tracing the history of writing (with Latin letters) among the Germanic populations. It is thus a potential milestone that could shed light on the interrelations between Latin and Germanic cultures. The issue to be addressed is as follows: when did Latin writing become sufficiently known among the Germanic-speaking peoples to merit borrowing of Lat. *scribere*? An obvious way towards answering this would be to consider the borrowing of the verb as having

gone hand in hand with the flourishing of vernacular literature, i.e. in the wake of Christianisation and as a consequence of the socio-cultural implications of Christianity. Such a hypothesis would imply that Lat. *scribere* had been borrowed into Germanic from about the 6th century. However, this hypothesis has a major historical drawback, namely that it completely disregards earlier and substantial contacts between Latin speakers and Germanic tribes. From a linguistic point of view, it is known that the phonological opposition between long and short vowels was not preserved in Latin after the 3rd century (Vilijanen 2006: 31). Thereafter, long and short vowels still existed only at the phonetic level, their length being dependent on syllable structure. Thus, in theory, Lat. *scribere* could still have been borrowed at a later time with a long root vowel. In the present article, another hypothesis is favoured, however, namely that Lat. *scribere* entered Germanic as a result of earlier contacts between Germanic tribes and the Romans. This hypothesis needs to fulfil the following minimum requirements:

1. That such contacts actually took place over a considerable period of time.
2. That such contacts were of a kind in which writing was involved.
3. That Germanic/Latin bilingualism is documented in the period during which Lat. *scribere* was borrowed.

Point 1: We know that the earliest documented close contacts between Romans and Germanic populations first occurred following Caesar's conquest of Gaul (50 BC) and the establishment of the Rhine as a frontier (Adams 2003: 274). These contacts were primarily military and commercial and lasted at least until the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 AD.

Point 2: If we consider only the military and commercial aspects of these contacts, these two types of contact naturally involved a certain degree of fluency in both spoken and written Latin. With regard to the military aspect, the relationship between the Roman and Germanic populations was close, as members of the Germanic tribes were constantly enrolled in the Roman army (Carroll 2001: 102–103). It is moreover known that there was a certain degree of intermingling between Germanic peoples and the Romans, especially along the frontier (cf. Carroll 2001: 104–108). Also, there are numerous Latin anecdotal accounts about the Latin fluency of certain members of the Germanic tribes, e.g. Arminius (18 BC–19 AD, cf. furthermore Adams 2003: 20–21 and 275–279). Moreover, to belong to the Roman army certainly involved fluency in both spoken and written Latin, at least for some of the soldiers, for writing was an integral part of military organisation (see Rieger 1998: 357–360). Indeed, a number of Germanic soldiers adopted Roman names, e.g. Gaius Julius Civilis, the leader of the Batavian revolt in 69 AD (cf. furthermore Kluge 1913: § 7 and also Birley 2000). Fluency

in written Latin is best seen in surviving military correspondence, i.e. writing tablets such as those found at Vindolanda, a fort along Hadrian's Wall garrisoned by Batavian soldiers. Fluency in spoken Latin, on the other hand, can be assumed as a consequence of the Roman-Germanic interactions along the *limes* in particular.

Point 3: From the points listed above it also follows that a certain degree of bilingualism was present at least among the speakers of one or other variety of Germanic, particularly among those in the army. Germanic/Latin bilingualism is moreover documented by Latin authors such as, among others, Tacitus (for a complete account see Adams 2003: 275–279).

The minimum requirements listed under 1–3 above are all met by the present hypothesis. It can thus be suggested that Lat. *scrĭbere* was borrowed into Germanic at a very early stage (1st century AD),¹⁰ following close military as well as commercial contacts between the Romans and the populations native to the newly conquered territories extending north of the Alps to the west bank of the Rhine. It is unfortunately impossible to get any closer to where the loanword first entered Germanic. It can however be proposed that this is likely to have happened in one of the important centres along the Rhine, maybe Cologne, Mainz, or Trier, although this can be no more than speculation.

Given the phonological structure of the root of the Latin verb, i.e. /skrĭb-/ , the primary morphological adaptation of the loanword in such an early period would naturally have been to the first class of strong verbs, whose root vowel in the present tense was also /ĭ/. Moreover, it may be supposed that, at least in some cases, the Latin and West Germanic verbs would have sounded alike (cf. Lat. *scrĭbō*, *scrĭbis*, *scrĭbit* : WGmc **skrĭbū*, **skrĭbis/z(i)*, *skrĭbĭp/d(i)*), thus facilitating the borrowing process. It should, however, be borne in mind that the verb denoted a practice proper to Latin culture and administration, and it would not be surprising if the Germanic peoples, whenever they started to carve runes (probably not much later than the acquisition of Lat. *scrĭbere*, cf. also Tacitus' (1962: Ch. 10) account of divination in his *De origine et situ Germanorum*), had used a native verb to denote such a practice.

The distribution of the historically attested forms in the Germanic language family tends to suggest that the borrowing is of some age, at least for West Germanic (but see also below §4). The fact that PGmc **skrĭba-* is a strong verb has compelled some scholars to

¹⁰ Lat. *scrĭbere* is of course not the only early Latin loanword in Germanic. Other examples of early Latin loans are Lat. *aureus* 'aureus (kind of Roman gold coin)' > OIce. *eyrir*, ODan. *øre*, OSw. *öre*; Lat. *cellārium* 'food storage' > OHG *kellari*, OS *kelleri* 'cellar', OIce. *kjallari*; Lat. *vĭnum* 'wine' > Got. *wein*, OE *wĭn*, OHG and OS *wĭn* 'wine', and many others (cf. furthermore Kluge 1913: § 8–12, Scardigli 1995: 561–562, and Green 1998: 201–218).

consider the word as native to the Germanic lexicon, as shown above.

A last word must be said on OE *scrīfan*, which seems to elude the otherwise well-attested semantics of this verb in Germanic. As seen in Section 2 above, the Old English reflex of Lat. *scrībere* shows very specific legal and religious meanings, the religious meaning ‘to impose penance’ being also shared by Old Frisian, possibly due to Old English influence. As pointed out by Durkin (2015: 141–142), the legal and religious meanings displayed by OE *scrīfan* are both derivable from ‘to write’, i.e. they imply the act of writing, and are in part already present in the semantics of Lat. *scrībere*. Within the framework of the present hypothesis, Durkin’s remark stimulates a reflection on whether it is possible to ascribe an otherwise unattested meaning ‘to write’ to the alleged precursor of the Old English verb, or whether conversely, it can be said that pre-Old English did not know the verb. The fact that Old English has neither semantically polarised nor established a synonymic relationship between PGmc **writa-* and the reflex of Lat. *scrībere*, as happened elsewhere in Germanic, strongly suggests that the loanword had not spread early on in the variety of Germanic spoken by the Anglo-Saxons, since if it had done so a more obvious reorganisation of the lexicon would have been expected. Moreover, in line with the principle followed by Dekker (2002: 30–31), the presence of the meaning ‘to write’ in Old Frisian demonstrates that the religious meaning of the verb is secondary and due to influence from Old English. This can only mean that the verb, with its meaning ‘to write’, was adopted in Frisia after the departure of the Anglo-Saxons, possibly from Old Low Franconian. The rise of OE *scrīfan* with its legal and religious meanings is thus to be ascribed to a phase in which Old English was receptive to Latin loans in the semantic sphere in which OE *scrīfan* is found.¹¹ Finally, the special position that Old English holds in this respect is further confirmed by the absence of an otherwise common Germanic semantic loan for ‘to read’. OE *lesan* means in fact ‘to lease, gather, collect’, whereas for the practice of reading one observes a semantic development of the native verb *rēdan*, which also belonged, like OE *writan*, to runic literacy.

4. Lat. *scrībere* in North Germanic: Strong vs. weak conjugation

The reflexes of Lat. *scrībere* in North Germanic show both strong and weak conjugation. Whereas Danish consistently inflects the verb according to the first class of strong verbs, West Nordic (Old Icelandic, Old Norwegian, and Faroese) and Elfdalian nativise the verb as a member of the second class of the weak conjugation. Old Swedish and Old Gutnish show both

¹¹ Older Scots also testifies to this state of things, as it in fact shows two different reflexes of Lat. *scrībere*. On the one hand there is OSc. *schrive*, which corresponds to OE *scrīfan*, while on the other there is OSc. *scrieve* ‘to write (copiously)’ which is undoubtedly a Scandinavian loan (*DSL*: s.v. *schrive* and *scrieve*).

weak and strong paradigms.

In Old Swedish (*skriva*), runic evidence bears witness to the coexistence of the two forms, though it must be admitted that the word is not copiously attested. On a rune-stone from the latter part of the 12th century (Sm 81) the strong form **skref** is observable. On the other hand, the first attestation of the weak form in runic Swedish is on Sm 23B, which has been dated to 1250–1300. Both strong and weak paradigms continue to coexist well into the 15th century according to Söderwall's dictionary (see *Sö*: s.v. *skriva*). It is, moreover, worth mentioning that Middle Swedish forms like *skreuadher* and *skrefuadher* clearly show that the verb could also have a short stem vowel, i.e. /e/ < /i/ (cf. Noreen 1904: § 115, 1).

In Old Gutnish (*skrifa*), the strong conjugation starts to oust the weak in the 15th century (Snjrdal 2002: 221). Both paradigms are found in a Gutnish inscription (G 55) from 1459.¹² In *Guta lag* (Vrieland 2017), the verb is found only in its second class weak conjugation. Snjrdal believes that the emergence of the strong paradigm in Old Gutnish is due to Danish influence and thus considers the weak conjugation as primary.

Elfdalian consistently inflects the verb (*skrieva*) according to the second class of weak verbs. The diphthong /ie/ bears witness to the fact that the word entered Elfdalian with a long stem vowel, i.e. /i̯e/. The only source for such a borrowing is Middle Swedish, where /e/ in open syllable could yield /i̯e/ (cf. Noreen 1904: § 115,1).

In West Nordic, i.e. Old Norwegian and Old Icelandic (*skrifa*),¹³ the verb is consistently inflected according to the second class of weak verbs. However, Modern Norwegian, in both Bokmål and Nynorsk, mainly inflects the verb strong, although the weak inflection is attested in a number of dialects, often coexisting with the strong paradigm (cf. Venes 1967: 42–43). OWN *skrifa* is first recorded in the oldest manuscripts in both Norway and Iceland, where it competes with the endogenous synonyms *ríta* (I cl. st.) and *rita* (II cl. wk). According to the oldest written manuscripts (Larsson 1891 for Old Icelandic, Holtsmark 1955 for Old Norwegian, see Table 2 and 3), however, the loanword was little used, especially in comparison with its endogenous counterpart. Whereas in the oldest written sources Icelandic attests only the endogenous verb in the strong conjugation, in Norway a transitional period in which both strong and weak conjugations coexist is observable from ca. 1200. Such a coexistence also appears in Icelandic but approximately half a century later than in Norway (cf. *ONP*: s.vv. *ríta* and *rita*).

¹² **ta en : iak uar · skrivaþ** [...] **betar · aukar-sarfa · han skr-if mik** ‘When I was written [...] Þítar of Ocksarve, he wrote me’.

¹³ Faroese, where the verb is inflected according to the second class of weak verbs, can be safely left out of the present discussion, as it developed late and is sparsely attested.

	Total	Rb	H	Ph III	645	EI
<i>skrifa</i>	4	ϣ	1	1	1	1
<i>rita</i>	43	1	20	ϣ	3	19

Table 2. *Skrifa* vs. *rita* in the oldest Icelandic manuscripts (Larsson 1891)*

*Rb = *Rimbegla* in GKS 1812 4to (from 1192); H = Stock. perg. 15 4to (*Icelandic Homily Book*, ca. 1200); Ph III = AM 673 a II 4to (*Physiologus*, ca. 1200); 645 = AM 645 4to (1225–1250); EI = AM 674 a 4to (*Elucidarius*, 1150–1200).

	Total	Hom I	Hom II	Hom III	Ra 81 B	OT
<i>skrifa</i>	3	2	ϣ	1	ϣ	ϣ
<i>rita</i>	4	ϣ	4	ϣ	ϣ	ϣ
<i>rita</i>	12	3	6	ϣ	1	2

Table 3. *Skrifa* vs. *rita* and *rita* in the oldest Norwegian manuscripts (Holtmark 1955)**

**Hom I–III = AM 619 4to (*The Norwegian Homily Book*, ca. 1200, the Roman numbers refer to different hands); Ra 81 B = NRA 1 b, ca. 1200; OT = DG 4, the last two folia of *Ólafs saga Tryggvasonar* of Oddr Snorrason.

In seeking to understand the double nature of the loanword in North Germanic, we may briefly turn to the historical background of the word's adoption.

In Roman times, Scandinavia was largely on the periphery of the main commercial routes which helped shape continental Europe before the fall of the Empire. However, historical sources as well as archaeological finds (e.g. Storgaard 2001, Imer 2004 and 2010) indicate that southern Scandinavia was far from being an entirely isolated community. After all, the emergence of runic script in Scandinavia must be seen in the context of cultural contacts at least among Germanic tribes if not to some extent also involving Roman literacy (cf. Imer 2010 and Spurkland 2010). At any rate, the adoption of Lat. *scribere* in Scandinavia must be viewed as a relatively late acquisition, since the opposite hypothesis fails to fulfil the points set out above. Thus, it is here that the borrowing took place in the wake of Christianity (from the 8th c.), which was undoubtedly followed by the introduction of parchment writing. According to palaeographic studies (notably Brøndum-Nielsen 1944 and Seip 1954), this innovation was introduced to Scandinavia via continental Europe and the British Isles. As far as the present subject of study is concerned, only the former source comes into play, as in England the reflex of Lat. *scribere* belonged to an altogether different semantic sphere. In continental Europe there are two areas of interest: namely a Romance-speaking area (i.e. France) and a Germanic-speaking area (i.e. Northern Germany). From a theoretical perspective, both areas could have been the source of the loan in Scandinavia, and it is indeed

possible that they both were. In France as well as Germany learned men undoubtedly spoke Latin to each other, and Latin was the language in which their instruction took place. On the other hand, a certain degree of mutual intelligibility surely existed among the varieties of Germanic spoken in Northern Germany and Scandinavia, a factor which could have helped in the process of borrowing: the case of Old Danish is especially relevant here.¹⁴ Thus, the possibility that Lat. *scribere* entered the Scandinavian languages directly from the Latin used in learned circles cannot be entirely ruled out.

We may now attempt to explain the difference in the morphological adaptation of the verb in North Germanic. As mentioned above, the weak inflection was widespread in Scandinavia and occurs in Old Swedish, Old Gutnish, Old Norwegian, and Old Icelandic, together with the late-attested Faroese and Elfdalian. On the other hand, we note that in Old Swedish, Old Gutnish, and Norwegian the verb also shows inflectional forms of the first class of strong verbs. If we make a comparison – taking into consideration that certain areas do not show the strong inflection while others, mostly dialectal, show remnants of the weak inflection – we may conclude that Lat. *scribere* was borrowed for the most part as a weak verb and subsequently underwent a change in inflectional class. In Sweden, Norway, Iceland, and on Gotland, the primary form in which the verb has been borrowed must thus have been the weak. In Denmark, by contrast, it is possible that the verb never inflected weak.¹⁵

Elfd. *skrieva*, a loan from Middle Swedish, bears witness to the fact that the verb had been borrowed with a long stem vowel in that language, i.e. /i:/, which subsequently underwent diphthongisation. The Old Swedish form from which Elfd. *skrieva* ultimately derives thus had /i/, and we can postulate that, after having been initially assigned to the second class of weak verbs, it shifted to the first class of strong verbs by language-internal causes, i.e. analogy (cf. OSw. *driva*, *riva* etc.). In the case of Old Gutnish by contrast, language-external factors such as language contact have been proposed (Snjrdal 2002: 221). In all likelihood, the verb had also been originally borrowed with /i/ in Old West Nordic. Here, however, in contrast to Old Swedish and Old Gutnish, the verb never shifted inflectional class. Conversely, it is conceivable that its weak inflection influenced its endogenous counterpart *ríta*, which switched to the second class of weak verbs, first in Norway and subsequently in Iceland.

¹⁴ Veturlipi Yskarsson (2003: 150 and 172–174) is inclined to ascribe the loan in Icelandic to Old Saxon or possibly Middle Low German.

¹⁵ Strik (2015: 40, 218) rightly points out that a late analogical change must have occurred in Swedish but assumes that, since the verb is already attested with strong inflection at an early stage in the Germanic languages, it must have undergone an analogical change from weak to strong inflection. Unlike the present article, Strik does not entertain the possibility that Lat. *scribere* entered one branch of Germanic as a strong verb and another primarily as a weak verb.

One tentative way of explaining why the verb never had strong inflection in Old West Nordic, at least as far as is known, is that it was a late loan (late 11th–12th c.),¹⁶ and was thus assigned a productive inflectional class (as was also initially the case in Swedish and Gutnish). It would not have been possible to classify it as a class I strong verb because of the phonological opposition still extant in Old West Nordic between /i/ and /□/.

5. Conclusions

This article has attempted to demonstrate on the one hand the age and the borrowing path of Lat. *scribere* in Germanic, and on the other the causes for the borrowed verb being assigned to the first class of the strong conjugation and the second class of the weak conjugation in North Germanic. In order to account for the regular adaptation of the loan in West Germanic, it is necessary to consider that the verb was borrowed directly from Latin at an early stage (1st century AD) thanks to the close military and commercial contacts of the Romans with the Germanic tribes absorbed into the Roman state. Evidence for this is suggested by the fact that, in line with the historically attested Old West Germanic languages, the Germanic loan calqued the phonemic structure of the Latin word, thus giving PGmc **skrība-*. A likely place for this borrowing to have taken place could have been one of the main centres along the Rhine: Cologne, Mainz, or Trier, but in view of the impossibility of pinpointing precisely the place and time of the borrowing, this must remain pure speculation.

As regards the expansion of such a term northwards, a *terminus a quo* has been established, namely the departure of the Anglo-Saxons from continental Europe. This appears to be substantiated both by the peculiar semantics of the Old English verb (which knows nothing of ‘to write’) and by the attestation of the meaning ‘to write’ in Old Frisian, alongside the religious meaning (but not all the meanings) also found in Old English.

With regard to the double nature of this verb in North Germanic, the possibility that it could have reached Scandinavia thanks to contacts with the Romans has been ruled out, as these contacts were not continuous and did not necessarily involve any writing, least of all

¹⁶ Albeit preserved in much later manuscripts, the *First Grammatical Treatise* (1130–1140, AM 242 fol. from ca. 1350) and *Íslendingabók* (beginning of the 12th c., AM 113 b fol. from ca. 1650) may provide evidence of the spread and use of OIce. *skrifu* vs. *ritu*. In the *First Grammatical Treatise*, the former verb is never used, and there is no reason to take account of the possibility that its occurrences were changed by later scribes. On the other hand, the use of *ritu* is such that the former occurs 19 times whereas the latter occurs 12 times. The overall occurrence of *ritu* is 41 times, i.e. if occurrences are taken into account where it is not possible to determine to which inflectional class the verb belongs. In *Íslendingabók*, on the other hand, *skrifu* is used 4 times, whereas *ritu* is used only once (<ritio>, AM 113 b fol., f. 1v13). OIce. *ritu* does not occur.

writing in Latin, although it seems, admittedly, that Roman writing was not unknown in the 1st century AD in Scandinavia (cf. furthermore Storgaard 2001, Imer 2004 and 2010, and Spurkland 2010). It has thus been suggested that the loan must be a relatively late borrowing into North Germanic, probably not arriving on the scene before the advent of Christianity (from the 8th c.). In order to account for the differences in conjugation in the various North Germanic languages it has been proposed that: 1) the verb entered North Germanic with /i/ as the root vowel; 2) Old Saxon or Middle Low German might have influenced the retention in Old Danish of only the strong conjugation; 3) the verb had otherwise entered other North Germanic languages as a second class weak verb; and 4) its shifting to the first class of strong verbs is possibly due to a synergy of lexical analogical processes and language-external causes. In Old West Nordic, the verb probably never shifted inflectional class partly because it is a late loan, partly because of the phonological opposition still extant between /i/ and /i̥/. In Old West Nordic, moreover, the verb possibly influenced a shift in inflectional class in its native counterpart *ríta*.

As for the writing tradition in Norway and Iceland on the one hand and in England on the other, the present study allows for two considerations. Firstly, palaeographic studies (Seip 1954 and Hreinn Benediktsson 1965) demonstrate that parchment writing in both Norway and Iceland was influenced to varying degrees by the insular, i.e. English, tradition. Nevertheless, these same studies also concede that the continental tradition left its mark on Icelandic as well as Norwegian script. Given that Lat. *scribere* cannot have reached Norway, and hence Iceland, from England, it must have done so via a continental source. On the other hand, the widespread use of the endogenous terms *ríta* and *rita* in the earliest Norwegian and Icelandic written documents suggests that the source for the meaning ‘to write’ comes from England, i.e. *wrītan* (cf. furthermore Hreinn Benediktsson 1965: 40). In this respect, the witness of the *First Grammatical Treatise* is crucial. In fact, the lack of OIce. *skrifa* in the entire treatise might be interpreted as a conscious intention by its author to establish and consolidate a native term on the model of the English tradition, which he is known to have followed.

Secondly, Schulte (2015) has suggested that “the extension of the *fupark* in the Anglo-Frisian setting is due to close contact with the Christian Church, including manuscript culture and Classical grammatical schooling, whereas these factors were almost entirely absent in pre-Viking-Age Scandinavia”. It could thus be suggested that, if Schulte’s theory is valid (at least with regard to the Anglo-Saxons),¹⁷ then it would be substantiated by the fact that Old English uses exclusively native verbs for activities such as those of writing and reading, whereas in

¹⁷ Schulte’s theory is developed in his 2012 article, where he focuses on the relationship between epigraphic literacy and Christianity, in particular in the light of the Byggen runic find. See especially pp. 157–159.

Scandinavia the very same terminology has strong foreign traits. One has to think here not just of the verb for ‘to write’, but also of the verb for ‘to read’, the history of which might well have been comparable to that of Lat. *scribere*.¹⁸

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¹⁸ There are several examples in Old Icelandic of the verb *ráða* ‘to read’ (see Hreinn Benediktsson 1965: 17, footnote 2, and *ONP*: s.v. *ráða rit*) alongside those of *lesa* in the same meaning. According to Hreinn Benediktsson (1972: 53, footnote 2), the verb undoubtedly derives from runic terminology. At any rate, the use of *ráða* is to be linked to the English tradition in much the same way as we have seen for *ríta/rita*. On the other hand, the use of *lesa* is to be linked to the German tradition, as is that of *skrifa*.

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