

RUNES AND RUNIC INSCRIPTIONS

The older runes (from around birth of Christ to the 600s)

Runes are an alphabet writing system just like the Roman alphabet. Each runic sign represents a sound and put together they are used to write words. Runes must have been created sometime around the birth of Christ, and from the beginning they were apparently shared by all the Germanic tribes. During the Germanic tribal migrations (c. 400-600 A.D.), they were in use across Europe from the Black Sea in the southeast to Norway and England in the northwest.

The runic alphabet consisted of twenty-four runes in the beginning. They were most likely developed from roman letters. Each letter had a name and a fixed place in the rather peculiar order of the alphabet. The first six runes have given the name "futhark" to this alphabet. The third rune, transcribed **þ**, represents a sound like *th* in the English words *thing* and *that*. The older runic alphabet is as follows (in a normalized form; there is variation):

ƿ ʀ ʁ ʕ ʔ ʕ ʔ ʕ ʔ ʕ ʔ ʕ ʔ ʕ ʔ ʕ ʔ ʕ ʔ ʕ ʔ ʕ ʔ ʕ ʔ

f u þ a r k g w h n i j p ë R s t b e m l ŋ d o

Very few remain of the oldest runic inscriptions. A number of metal objects with runes have been recovered, in addition to rune-stones. Inscriptions on stones are frequently memorial and usually concern a deceased relative. On jewelry and weapons one generally finds names, probably of the owner or of the person who fabricated the object. Many runic inscriptions are found on bracteates, small coin-shaped pendants stamped in thin gold.

Runes in England and Frisia (400s to 1000s)

In continental Europe runic writing disappeared relatively early, after, however, serving the Church in the earliest missionary times. Books and the Roman alphabet came in the wake of Christianity to the Germanic tribes there. Runic writing in England continued a bit longer, until about 1000 A.D., and the Anglo-Saxon runic alphabet was expanded by addition of new letters until it finally contained over thirty runic signs. We also have a number of runic inscriptions preserved from Frisia (in today's Netherlands), and the alphabet resembles greatly the Anglo-Saxon runic alphabet.

The younger runes in Scandinavia (Viking Age and Middle Ages, 700s to 1400s)

The runic alphabet was used longest in Scandinavia, and here too it was modified, probably mainly as a response to the tremendous changes in the Scandinavian language in the transition from Proto Norse to Old Norse. In the early Viking Age, the number of runes was reduced from twenty-four to sixteen. One letter then had to represent several

sounds: *b* and *p* had the same sign, and the same was true of *t* and *d* and of *k* and *g*. The **u**-rune stood for *u* and *v* (and for a while also *o* and *y*), the **i**-rune was used for *i* and *j*, and also *e*, etc.; the Old Norse word for ‘young warrior’ for example, *dreng-*, would be spelled **trik** (it was unnecessary to write **n** before various other consonants). The shapes of the runes were also simplified, such that many signs took less space and were easier to write. Memorial stones predominate in the rich runic material of from the later Viking Age, especially in Sweden. The messages are often quite stereotyped, consisting of the following formula: “X erected this stone after Y, his son/father/brother/etc.” and sometimes with an addition like: “he was a good warrior”.

The younger runic alphabet in use in Norway during the 1000s could have this form:

ƿ	ᚢ	ᚦ	ᚱ	ᚷ	ᚹ	ᚻ	ᚾ	ᚿ	ᛀ	ᛁ	ᛂ	ᛃ	ᛄ	ᛅ	ᛆ	ᛇ	ᛈ	ᛉ	ᛊ
f	u	p	a	r	k	h	n	i	a	s	t	b	m	l	R				y

Additional runes in the Middle Ages

During the Middle Ages new signs were created, partially by the addition of dots to a few of the standard signs. Some of the new runes were:

ᛇ	ᛆ	ᛁ	ᛂ	ᛃ	ᛄ	ᛅ	ᛆ	ᛇ	ᛈ
e	g	d	p	æ	ø	å	c/z		

In the Middle Ages runes were employed on many levels of society. They were used when someone wanted to write their name on objects—and also as graffiti on church walls! Letters and messages were often written on sticks whittled flat on four sides, whereas merchants tagged their wares with flat pieces of wood and a short note like “Arne owns”. Runes were still used for memorial inscriptions, including on horizontal grave slabs in church graveyards.

Runes generally went out of use in the late Middle Ages. In the 1600s and later, learned books about runes led to the reappearance of runic inscriptions in some communities but these inscriptions are generally not considered a part of the runic tradition.

Runes and magic

Runes were not specifically magic. Like most other alphabetic writing systems runes were ordinary alphabetic signs primarily created for writing plain texts and could be used for various purposes, including magical. In the pre-Christian period there are some runic inscriptions that clearly demonstrate magic or religious conceptions. On the other hand runes were frequently used for writing Christian prayers and Christian charms after the introduction of the new faith. This proves that runes were not considered as inherently pre-Christian magical symbols.