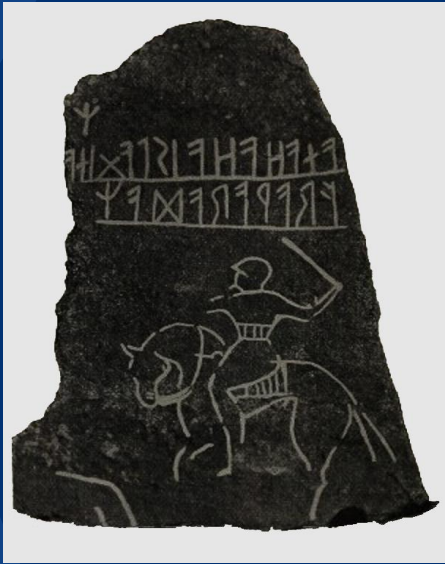


Viking Runes

- A brief history of the Younger Futhark

By Tina Gordon



Viking Runes: A brief history of the Younger Futhark

Who were the Vikings?

Fierce Warriors?



War ships?



To understand Viking Runes, we must first understand Vikings. When people think of the Vikings, they often get images in their minds of rugged fierce warriors with horned helmets taking their long boat style war ships to go and destroy villages.

Community farmers



In actual fact, the Vikings started out primarily as peaceful farmers, working together as a community to raise their families.

A gift from Odin



The Viking people began as an oral culture society. Events were marked through the telling of stories. The Norse mythology story titled “Havamal”, or “Stories of the Old One”, (Terry, 1990) tells of how the runes were found by the Viking god Odin and delivered to the people.

HAVAMAL

Odin said:

I know that I hung on a high windy tree

for nine long nights;

pierced by a spear -Odin's pledge-

given myself to myself.

No one can tell about that tree,

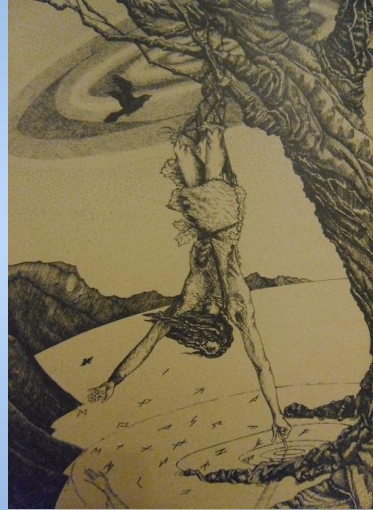
from what deep roots it rises.

They brought me no bread, no horn to drink from,

I gazed toward the ground.

Crying aloud, I caught up the runes;

finally I fell.



In the story, Odin had spent nine days and nights hanging upside down from the tree of life in a self-sacrificing ritual. On the ninth night, with no food or water, he began to see the shapes of the runes which then they fell into his hands. According to Havamal, *Odin said:*

I know that I hung on a high windy tree for nine long nights; pierced by a spear -Odin's pledge- given myself to myself. No one can tell about that tree, from what deep roots it rises. They brought me no bread, no horn to drink from, I gazed toward the ground. Crying aloud, I caught up the runes; finally I fell. (Terry, 1990)

Elder Futhark



In actual fact, the runes were around long before the Viking Age. The earliest known Runes date back to the Roman Iron age, of 150-700 C.E.. These 24 characters are known as the Elder Futhark. The name FUTHARK is derived from the first 6 runic symbols, Fehu, Uruz, Thurisaz, Ansuz, Raidho, and Kenaz. The Elder Futhark was a very private written language, restricted to the literate elite during a time of oral cultural dominance. While it was used primarily for pagan rituals, Elder futhark inscriptions have been found on rune stones, jewellery, amulets, and other artificats. (Moltke, 1985) Since the Elder Futhark existed during the time of the Romans, it seeped its way throughout Europe through the trade routes. It is possible that this is actually how it first made its way to the Vikings of Scandanavia.



However, people accepted the story of Odin and a simplified version of the Futhark was introduced. This became simply known as the Younger Futhark. It was a runic writing system that was no longer limited to the elite. Odin had delivered written language into the hands of the common folk, the Norse Vikings.

Younger Futhark: 800 - 1200 C.E.

Danish	ƒ	u	þ	á	ǫ	ȝ	h	n	i	á	s	t	b	m	l	ᚱ
Swedish-Norwegian	ƒ	u	þ	á	ǫ	ȝ	h	n	i	á	s	t	b	m	l	ᚱ
translit.	f	u	th	a	r	k	h	n	i	a	s	t	b	m	l	R

The Younger Futhark is a simplified version of the Elder Futhark and contains only 16 characters. Denmark and Sweden developed different variations of the Younger Futhark over a 400 year period, from 800 to 1200 C.E. (Moltke, 1985).

Character meanings

1st Ætt:



fé
f
cattle, gold,
money



úr
u/o/ó/v
drizzle, rain,
slag, aurochs



thurs
th/dh
thurs, giant



áss
a
god, Odin



reidh
r
ride, riding,
thunderclap



kaun
k/g/ng
sore

2nd Ætt:



hagall
h
hail



naudh
n
need, fetters,
bondage



íss
i/e
ice



ár
a
harvest,
good year



sól
s
sun

3rd Ætt:



týr
t/d/nd
Týr



bjarkan
b/p/mb
birch,
goddess



madhr
m
man, human



lögr
l
sea, water,
waterfall



ýr
-r
yew, yew bow

A closer look at the Younger Futhark reveals that each of the 16 characters actually has many meanings. Characters could represent individual sounds, similar to our alphabet, or they could represent an entire word, such as thunderclap, harvest, sun, or waterfall.

Viking Runes: Character Formation



Walter Ong (2002) in *Orality and Literacy*, describes writing as a technology. It uses tools and other equipment. A closer look at the characters on viking runes depicts that the Younger Futhark was made up of straight lines. This is consistent with the tools and materials of use at the time. Hammers, chisels, and knives were available to mark rune letters into stone, metal, wood, and leather. Straight lines were the most efficient markings for these types of tools. By studying the formation of the runic characters, cultural anthropologists have been able to gain a better understanding of the culture, tools, and technology of the Viking Age. (Moltke, 1985)

Viking Runes: Style

- left to right
- right to left
- backwards
- curved

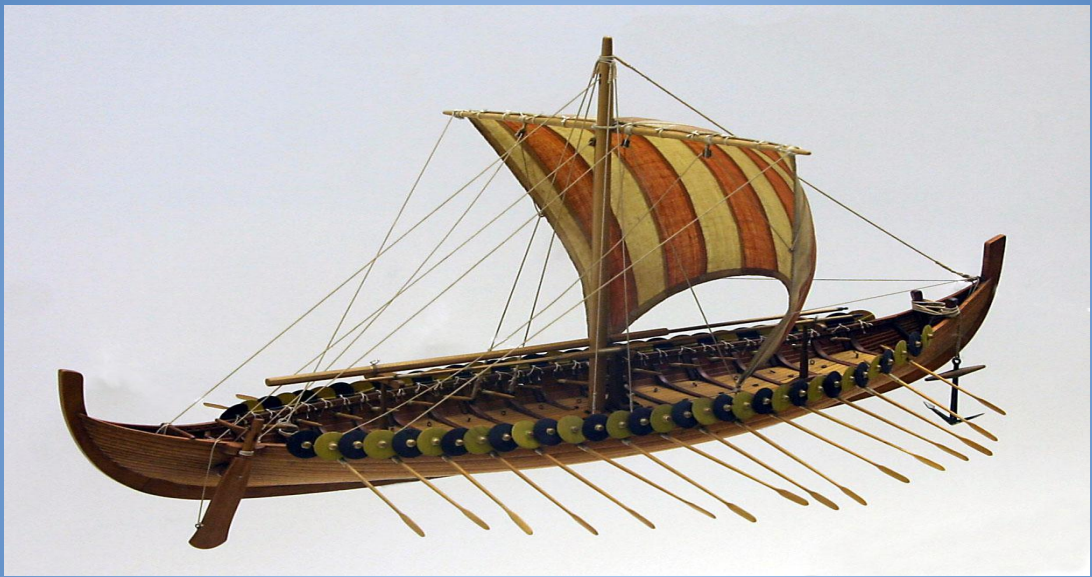


The rune script was written in a continuous manner. There were no breaks between words and no punctuation. Generally, runes were read left to right. However, they were sometimes written right to left, backwards, or even in a curved pattern, following the flow of the material or other embellishments. (Moltke, 1985).

Viking Age: 790 to 1066



Scandinavia had been a predominantly pagan society. During the years of the Younger Futhark, Christianity was trying to make its way into Scandinavia. This brought conflict to the pagan Viking communities. The once peaceful farmers began to expand their realm. From 790 to 1066 CE, the Vikings expanded their realm to include much of modern day Europe, Iceland, Greenland, and even North America. This was known as the “Viking Age”. One way historians have been able to verify these conquests is through the discovery of Viking Rune Stones found in all of these places. Through exploration, the Vikings introduced their writing system to much of Europe, Scandinavia, and the edges of North America. (Moltke, 1985)



Long Boats

Exploration during this time in world history was challenging. But the Viking communities had originated on the waterways of Scandanavia. Rugged terrain had made travel on land difficult. Therefore, the Viking people had developed light weight long boats so that they could take advantage of the water as a primary means of travel.



The shallow hull enabled the longboats to be portaged when necessary. The shallow draft enabled them to travel up rivers where other boats could not go. A combination of oars and sail meant that the light craft to travel with efficient speed. Being double ended meant that either end of the boat could become the bow, thus ensuring that the boat could reverse direction at any moment.



Combined with shields and other weaponry, the Viking long boat was able to easily defend itself. As a result, the Vikings became very effective early explorers, expanding their reign and bringing their system of runic writing to the world.



As the Vikings explored and expanded their realm, they carved runes into the stones, recording events and forever marking their place in history. These are known as the “viking runes”.



As the Viking expansion grew, so did their runic alphabet. In new areas, the people had different pronunciations in their languages. In response, the Vikings expanded their own runic alphabet by creating new symbols to incorporate and represent these new linguistic sounds. (Moltke, 1985)

Viking Runes

- recording history



The Viking rune stone did more than simply indicate that the vikings had been there. These stones also recorded the history of increased struggle and change in Scandinavia, away from paganism and towards Christianity. While the Viking age came to an end the runes continue to live on.

Medieval Futhark: 1200 - 1850

†	B	±	‡	†	ƿ	ƿ	*		ƿ	Γ	Υ	†	‡	B	ƿ
a	b	c	d	e	f, v	g	h, x	i, j	k	l	m	n	o	p	kw
R	4	1	þ	ŋ	hA	±	†	≠							
r	s	t	θ, ð	u, w	y	z	æ	ø							

By the middle ages the Viking Era was over. However, the Younger Futhark had already evolved to include symbols for each of the 25 different phonemes. With these changes, Medieval futhark had been born. By this time, Christianity had taken over much of Europe. (Moltke, 1985)



While the clergy brought Latin to the educated people, it was Futhark that continued to be used by Norse common folk, carving runes into wood and stones, often using them for ceremonial purposes.



The Vikings brought a system of writing to many parts of the world. Not only used for ceremonial purposes, the Viking runes recorded the lives of individuals as well as historic events. It was an early system of writing for the common folk, simple to understand and to recreate. A thousand years later, rune stones continue to be used by many people, eager to connect to the magic and mystery of past.

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