

The Simple Truth About Runes

by Gary Waidson

There are literally dozens of books about Runes and hundreds more that have a section dealing with the subject. Why do we need more information? Regrettably I can count on less than ten fingers the ones I have read that convey a real understanding of them.

Why the confusion? The problem is that the Runic script (for want of a better name) was in use for over a thousand years and during this time it evolved and changed with the languages of the people that used it.

There are basically three types of book out there that examine the runes:

1. Academic studies, these books have most of the information in the right order but can be heavy reading unless you have an interest in the subject.
2. General books about the Vikings and Saxons, these often distil some of the information from the academic studies but often over simplify.
3. "New Age" almanacs, books about magic and divination with the runes. I have no problem with divination and such beliefs but I do wish the authors of these books would leave history out of it.

Let's deal with the magic side of things first. In the "Havamal", an Old Norse poem, there is a reference to Odin learning the runes and performing magic with them and in "Egil's Saga" the hero is described performing a charm using runes. There is also a reference from Tacitus that mentions "notae" marked on sticks being used by the "Germani" for divination, these could be runes or they could be any other kind of mark used for identification. There is however no continuous tradition surviving that passes such arcane knowledge down to us today. All the books I have seen that say they have such information are making it up from some early learning poems designed to teach the pronunciation of the rune sounds. In a superstitious world there is little doubt that runes would have been used in the performance of "magic" and charms but the same can equally be said of Latin, Greek and a host of other scripts too numerous to mention. A rune is no more magical in it's self than the letters on this screen. Now, you might think these letters are pretty magical and I wouldn't necessarily disagree, isn't technology marvellous, but there lies the point. The ability to write in a largely illiterate society must have seemed magical and when the runes first started to be used that is how they may have appeared.

As far as we can tell the runes were first used around 200AD and took the form of what is now called the "Elder Futhark" of 24 runes.



It is important to understand that each rune represents a sound and for convenience we usually represent that sound with a "Latin" letter. We arrange our letters in an order that we call the alphabet named after the first two "Greek" letters, Alpha and Beta. In the same way there seems to be a traditional order that the Runes were placed in and we call that the Futhark or later the Futhork after the first 6 sounds of this order. The quick thinking among you may have noticed I just wrote 6 sounds but Futhork is 7 letters, that is because "th" represents the sound of just one rune.

The people using the runes in the second century were the people the Roman writer, Tacitus referred to as Germani. These are the common ancestors of the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Vikings and Normans. In 200AD they all spoke a language that was similar but the dialects were very different across the region. As time progressed these dialects became more pronounced and with the separation of the Anglo-Saxons in England and the Northern peoples who would become the Vikings the languages become quite separate in sound.

With these different sounding languages it is not surprising that the use of the runes changed as well. The Anglo-Saxon tongue developed towards the language we now call English with it's wide variations

f u t h o r c g w h n i j i p x s t b e m l n g œ d a æ y ea ġ k k̄

f u t h a r k h n i a s t b m l R > h s t m R < » e g d p «
 (> Variation sometimes called "short twig runes" < » Late additions «)

Possibly one reason so few runic inscriptions are found today is not just the fact that wood does not survive well in the earth, but the simple fact that a stick with an inscription on it that you have read is now just a useful bit of firewood.

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Using Viking Runes in the Classroom

Because Runes lack the full sound range of our modern alphabet they can be used to increase a child's awareness of spelling and phonetics. For example look at the simple joke below,

Knock Knock: Who's there? King Knut. Well dry your feet when you come in then.

In the Late Viking Age "Younger Runes" this might look like:

(nok nok. hus theR. king knut. uel dri uR fet uen u kom in then)

The spelling is very different from Modern English but the sound values are close enough to be understandable.

In case you are wondering about the joke, Knut is often translated as Canute and in the popular story he is the foolish King who told the sea not to come in and got his feet wet. In reality Knut was one of the first Christian Kings of the Vikings, and ruler of England, Denmark, Norway and Sweden by 1030 AD. The story goes that Knut was so fed up with his courtiers, who thought there was nothing beyond the King's power, that he did indeed go to the beach and order the tide to stop. When the sea rose and soaked the feet of the king and his courtiers, he then explained that there was a king even more powerful than him, and that was the King of Heaven.

The story above is a good example of how stories get confused and misunderstood with the passage of time.

The Work Sheet contains the 20 Rune, Late Viking Futhork and asks the children to notice which sounds are missing (cjqvwxyz) and which sounds are extra (th, R) {"r" is the sound at the beginning of "river" and "R" is the sound at the end}. You can then discuss which sounds could be used to replace the missing sounds in some cases (k-c or s-c, u-w, i-y, s-z, ks-x or gs-x for "egsample"). This helps to reinforce knowledge of the alphabet, spelling and phonetics.

The children are asked to translate the "knock knock" joke above. This means they have to work out or vocalise the sounds to understand the phrase.

You could then tell both versions of the Knut / Canute story and discuss how stories change with time and how some often have elements of truth in them.

Next ask the children to write their own name and address in runes using the knowledge they have gained so far.

Lastly get the Children to compare runes with modern writing. What do they notice about the Runes themselves? (straight lines and dots. always up and down or at an angle, never horizontal). This is an opportunity to explain that runes were used to scratch on wood and how horizontal lines might be confused with the wood grain. Modern letters are for use with a pen or pencil on paper and curved lines work much better with such media.

Viking Runes

F N Þ F R Y * † ‡ § T B Y T A † ‡ † K
f u (th) o r k h n i a s t b m l R e g d p

The Vikings used different letters to us when they were writing.
They called their letters runes. Look at the runes and find out
which letters from our alphabet are missing?

Each rune had a sound, like our letters.
Which sounds are missing from the runes?

The Vikings could write cat in runes F††
Could any of the Viking runes be used to make the other missing
sounds?

Can you work out what this message says? The (:) is like our full stop.
† F Y † F Y : † N S † I A : Y † Y † N T : N T † R I N A F † N † N F Y † † †

Now write your name and address in runes.

How are runes different from the letters we use today?