

Omniglot *a guide to written language*

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Runic alphabet Fᚠᚢᚦᚨᚱᚳ

Origin

Little is known about the origins of the Runic alphabet, which is traditionally known as *futhark* after the first six letters. In Old Norse the word *rune* means 'letter', 'text' or 'inscription'. The word also means 'mystery' or 'secret' in Old Germanic languages and runes had a important role in ritual and magic.

Here are some theories about the origins of runes:

- The alphabet was probably created independently rather than evolving from another alphabet.
- Runic writing was probably first used in southern Europe and was carried north by Germanic tribes.
- The Runic alphabet is thought to have been modelled on the [Latin](#) and/or [Etruscan](#) alphabet.

The earliest known Runic inscriptions date from the 1st century AD, but the vast majority of Runic inscriptions date from the 11th century. Runic inscriptions have been found throughout Europe from the Balkans to Germany, Scandinavia and the British Isles.

Notable features

- The direction of writing in early Runic inscriptions is variable. Later they settled down into a left to right pattern
- Word divisions were not generally recognised in Runic writing, although one or more dots were occasionally used for this function.

Types of runic inscriptions include:

- 'Kilroy was here' type inscriptions on cliff walls, large rocks and buildings
- grave stone inscriptions, often with who carved the runes and who was buried, and also who made sure the stone was raised. (Later grave slabs or stone coffins were sometimes inscribed with Christian texts carved in runes)
- religious/magic inscriptions: prayers and curses, formulas on charms, etc.
- inscriptions related to trade and politics: There are many examples of trade communication: stock orders and descriptions, excuses for not having payed on time, trade name tags for bags or cases of produce, etc. The trade inscriptions are often carved on wooden rune sticks. Political inscriptions are to do with matters of the law, historical figures state that they were somewhere hiding from the enemy, secret messages to do with the fighting of wars, etc.
- personal letters: love letters, greetings between friends, proposals, etc.
- rude messages, similar to modern graffiti or sms today

- Art and craft-signatures: Goldsmiths, blacksmiths, wood carvers, church builders, etc., often put their name on what they made. Objects also sometimes had names carved onto them – either the name of the object itself, or the name of the person who owned it.

There are a number of different versions of the Runic alphabet including:

- [Elder Futhark](#)
- [Gothic Runes](#)
- [Anglo-Saxon Futhorc](#)
- [Younger Futhark](#)
- [Hungarian Runes \(Székely Rovásírás\)](#)
- [Turkic \(Orkhon\) Runes](#)
- [Cirth \(Tolkien's Runic-like alphabet\)](#)

Elder Futhark

Elder Futhark is thought to be the oldest version of the Runic alphabet, and was used in the parts of Europe which were home to Germanic peoples, including Scandinavia. Other versions probably developed from it. The names of the letters are shown in Common Germanic, the reconstructed ancestor of all Germanic languages.

							
f	u	þ	a	r	k	g	w
fehu	ūruz	þurisaz	ansuz	raipō	kaunaz	gebō	wunjō
wealth	aurochs	giant	god	riding	ulcer	gift	joy
							
h	n	i	j	ĩ	p	z	s
hagalaz	naupiz	isa	jera	eihwaz	perþ	algiz	sōwulō
hail	need/hardship	ice	year/harvest	yew tree	luck	sedge (?)	sun
							
t	b	e	m	l	ng	d	o
teiwaz	berkana	ehwaz	mannaz	laguz	inguz	ḏagaz	ōpila
the god Tyr	birch twig	horse	man	water	the god Ing	day	inherited land

Notes

The letter k is also called *kēnaz* (torch) or *kanō* (skiff). The meaning of the letter name *per þ* is unknown.

Gothic runes

Gothic, an extinct east Germanic language, was originally written with a Runic alphabet about which little is known. One theory of the origins of runes is that they were invented by the Goths, but this is impossible to prove as very few inscriptions of writing in Gothic runes survive. These runes were replaced with a [new alphabet](#) in the 4th century AD.

											
f	u	ö	a	r	k	g	w	h	n	i	3
											
kw	p	uu	s	t	b	e	l	m	ñ	θ	o

Anglo-Saxon Futhorc

A number of extra letters were added to the Runic alphabet to write Anglo-Saxon/Old English. Runes were probably brought to Britain in the 5th century by the Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Frisians (collectively known as the Anglo-Saxons), and were used until about the 11th century.

Runic inscriptions are mostly found on jewellery, weapons, stones and other objects. Very few examples of Runic writing on manuscripts have survived.

							
feoh (cattle, weath)	ur (aurochs)	þorn (thorn)	ōs (god)	rād (journey/riding)	cen (torch)	giefu (gift)	wyn (joy)
f	u	þ	o	r	c	g[]	þ
							
hægl (hail)	nied (necessity/trouble)	is (ice)	gear (year)	ēoh (yew)	peor (?)	eolh (sedge?)	sigel (sun)
h	n	i	j	3	þ	x	s
							
tiw/tir (Tiw - a god)	beorc (birch)	eoh (horse)	man (man)	lagu (water/sea)	lng (a god)	epel (land/estate)	dæg (day)
t	b	e	m	l	ng	œ	d

Younger Futhork

Younger Futhork or "Normal Runes" gradually evolved Elder Futhork over a period of many years and stabilized by about 800 A.D., the beginning of the Viking Age. It was the main alphabet in Norway, Sweden and Denmark throughout the Viking Age, but was largely though not completely replaced by the Latin alphabet by about 1200 as a result of the conversion of most of Scandinavia to Christianity.

Three slightly different versions of the alphabet developed in Denmark, Sweden and Norway:

Danish Futhork

															
f	u	þ	ǰ	r	k	h	n	i	a	s	t	b	m	l	R

Swedish-Norwegian / Short-twig / Rök Runes

ƒ	u	þ	ǣ	r	k	h	n	i	a	s	t	b	m	l	R
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Norwegian Futhark

ƒ	u	þ	ǣ	r	k	h	n	i	a	s	t	b	m	l	R
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

Gothenburg / Bohuslän Runes

ƒ	B	<	⚔	M	ƒ	X	H	I	⚔	◇	Γ	⚔
a	b	k	d	i	f	g	h	i	j	ng	l	m
†	⚔	⚔	Υ	Σ	↑	Π	ƒ	⚔	<	⚔	þ	R
n	u	p	r	s	t	u	v	ee	oh	ur	th	R

Medieval (Latinised) Futhark

After the arrival of Christianity in Scandinavia, the Runic alphabet was Latinised and was used occasionally, mainly for decoration until 1850.

†	B	±	†	†	ƒ	ƒ	⚔	I	ƒ	Γ	Υ	†	ǣ	B	ƒ
a	b	c	d	e	f, v	g	h, x	i, j	k	l	m	n	o	p	kw
R	⚔	†	þ	Π	⚔	±	†	⚔							
r	s	t	θ, ð	u, w	y	z	æ	ø							

Thanks to Niklas Dougherty for some of the information on this page.

**Recommended books****Links**

Free Runic fonts

<http://babel.uoregon.edu/yamada/fonts/runes.html> <http://www.geocities.com/fontmaster.geo/>

The mystery of the Runic alphabet - discusses the connections between Scandinavian and Turkic runes: <http://www.antalyaonline.net/futhark>

Runes, Alphabet of Mystery - loads of information about Runes

<http://sunnyway.com/runes/>

Your name in runes

<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/vikings/runes.html>

ALPHABETUM - a Unicode font for ancient languages by Juan-José Marcos,

Professor of Classics, Plasencia, Spain.

Includes: Old Italic (Etruscan, Oscan, Umbrian, Picene, Messapic) Classical & Medieval Latin, Ancient Greek, Coptic, Linear B, Hebrew, Sanskrit, Gothic, **Runic**, Ogham, Cypriot, Phoenician, Iberic, Celtiberic, Old & Middle English, Cuneiform Scripts (Ugaritic and Old Persian) and Medieval Nordic (Old Norse and Old Icelandic). Also Includes Characters For Latin-Based European Languages, Cyrillic-Based Languages, Devanagari, Bengali, Hiragana, Katakana and Bopomofo)

Other alphabets

[Armenian](#), [Avestan](#), [Bassa \(Vah\)](#), [Beitha Kukju](#), [Coptic](#), [Cyrillic](#), [Elbsan](#), [Etruscan](#), [Fraser](#), [Georgian \(Asomtavruli & Nuskhakhucuri\)](#), [Georgian \(Mkhedruli\)](#), [Glagolitic](#), [Gothic](#), [Greek](#), [Hungarian Runes](#), [International Phonetic Alphabet \(IPA\)](#), [Irish](#), [Korean](#), [Latin](#), [Manchu](#), [Mongolian](#), [N'Ko](#), [Old Church Slavonic](#), [Ogham](#), [Old Italic](#), [Old Permic](#), [Orkhon](#), [Pollard Miao](#), [Runic](#), [Santali](#), [Somali](#), [Sutton SignWriting](#), [Tai Lue](#), [Thaana](#)

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