

Runic voices from Norwegian towns in the High Middle Ages

The Bryggen inscriptions and the rise of modern pragmatic literacy

Bryggen in Bergen anno 2012



Excavations at Bryggen after the fire in 1955

7 huge fires in the Middle Ages

1170/1171

1198

1248

1332

1393

1413

1476

What kind of inscriptions do we meet in Bergen?

- fupark inscriptions (with or without a co-text)
- writing excercises
- cryptic (“encoded”) runes
- Latin texts written with runes
- name tags
- business letters and bills/invoices
- metrical texts, especially love poems
- obscenities
- pious prayers
- amulets and “magic formulas”

A selection of owner tags



What kind of runes did they use in the High Middle Ages?

ƿ ʀ þ ɹ R ʏ : * ʒ | 1 ' : 1 Ɔ ʏ ʒ ʁ

ʒ ʒ ʒ ʒ ʏ ʒ ʒ ʒ ʒ

f u þ o r k : h n i a s : t b m l y

e æ ø ɔ g d p c/z

B38 Fupark from Bryggen



Dotted runes: graphemic differentiation

l /i/ => l̇ /e/

ᛒ /b/ => ᛒ̇ /p/

ᛗ /t/ => ᛗ̇ /d/

ᚷ /k/ => ᚷ̇ /g/

A. Vowels

A.1 The Viking Age futhark: vowel runes		
	non-rounded	rounded
non-open	l /i/ + /e/	ʌ /u/ + /y/, /o/, /ø/, /ɔ/
open	nasal	oral
	ǀ /a/	ǁ /a/ + /æ/

↓ graphemic differentiation ↓

A.2 The Middle Age futhark: vowel runes				
	front		back	
	non-rounded	rounded	non-rounded	rounded
close	l /i/	h /y/		ʌ /u/
close-mid	ǃ /e/	ǂ /ø/		ǀ /o/
open	ǃ /æ/		ǀ /a/	ǀ /ɔ/ = ⟨ɔ⟩

B. Consonants (plosives)

B.1 The Viking Age fupark: consonant runes			
	bilabial	dental/alveolar	velar
plosives	ᚼ b	ᚠ t	ᚷ k

↓ Graphemic differentiation ↓

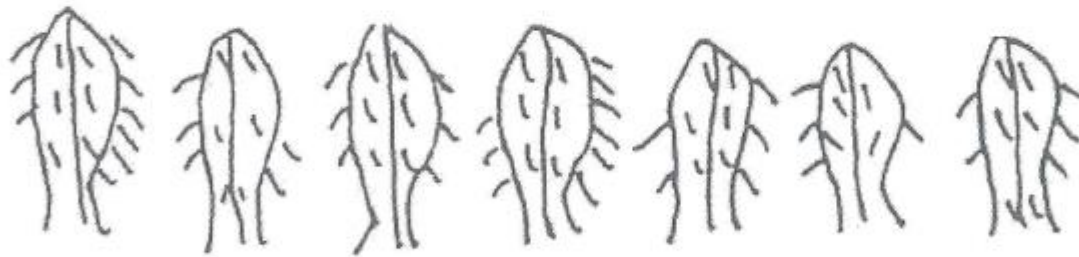
B.2 The Middle Age fupark: consonant runes			
	bilabial	Dental/alveolar	velar
plosives	ᚼ p ᚼ b	ᚠ t ᚡ d	ᚷ k ᚹ g

How do cryptic runes work?

	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>6</i>
<i>3</i>	f	u	p	o	r	k
<i>2</i>	h	n	i	a	s	
<i>1</i>	t	b	m	l	y	

Cryptic runes from Bryggen (e.g. B13)

3/6	3/2	3/3	3/6	2/3	3/1	2/3
k	u	þ	k	i	f	i



Old Norse (standardised)

Guð gefi [oss byr ok gáfu Maríu].

English translation

“May God give [us fair wind and Maria’s gift/grace].”

Bergen as a commercial centre in the pre-hanseatic period: c. 1050-1300/1350

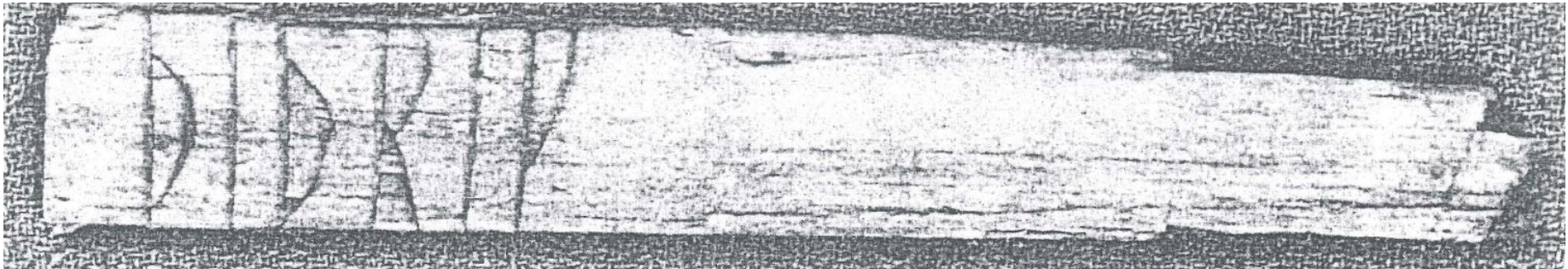


(after Herteig 1967:167)

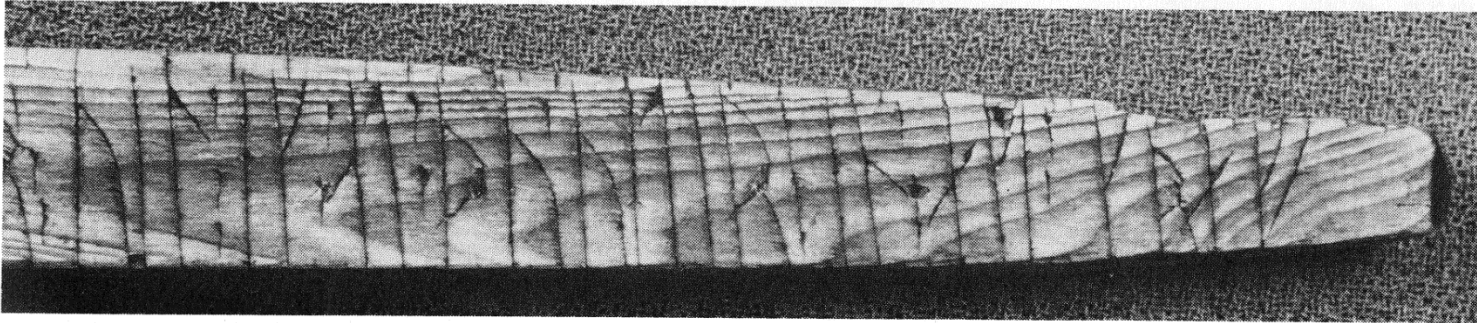
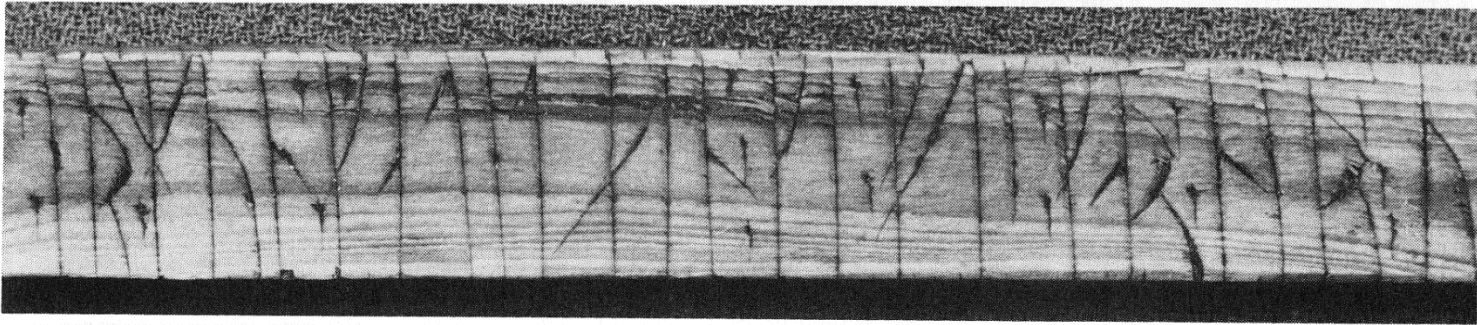
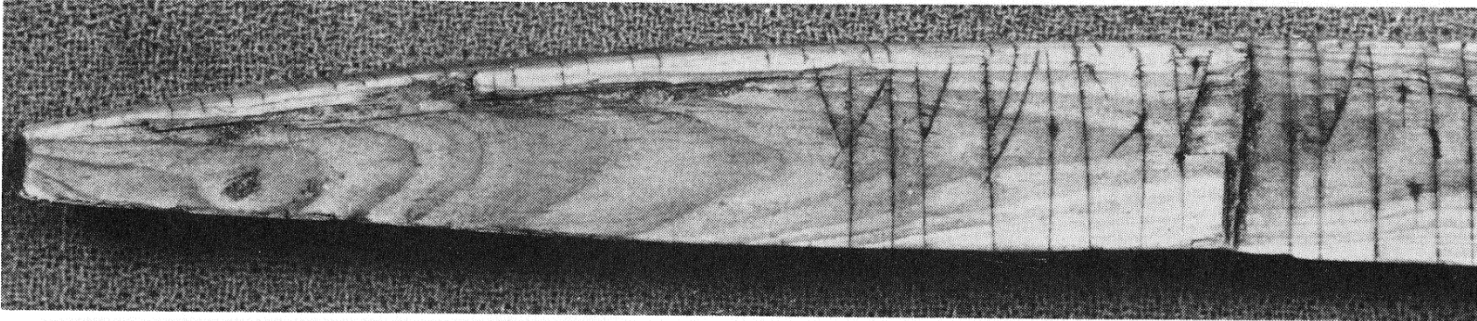
A selection of name tags



Owner tag from Bryggen N673



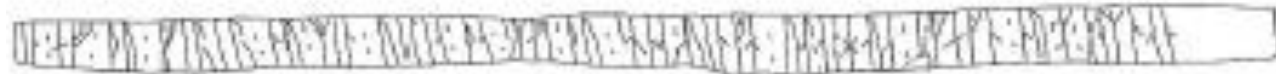
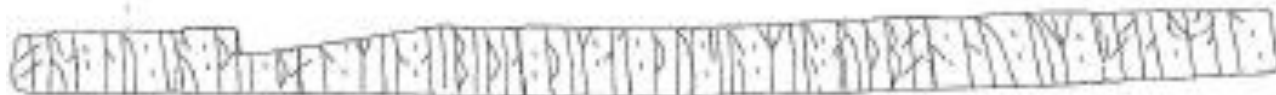
Rune stick N648



Business letter N648 (after 1300): linguistic features

1. apocope: **felag** < ON *félaga* 'business partner' (dat.sg.) line A
felag < ON *félagi* 'id.' (nom.sg.) line B
cf. **bondann** 'farmer-the' (akk.sg. + def. article) line C
2. morphological simplification: **postæin lang**
< ON *þorstein langan* 'Torstein the long' (acc.) line D
3. assimilations: **postæin** < ON *þorstein* (acc.) line D
nokkos < ON *nokkurs* 'noe' (gen.sg.) line D
senmer < *send mér* 'send me' (imperative) line D
4. vowel harmony: **haugrimi** = *Hafgrími* (dat.) line A vs. **mungatet**
(line B)
5. short forms and contractions: **flaskap** < ON *félagsskap* line A

Rune stick B448 / drawing



(after Knirk 1994:101)

Order of weapons B448 (c. 1200): linguistic features

1. vowel opening /e/ > /æ/

sændir < ON *sendir* 's/he sends' (3. pres.) line A

ær < ON *er* 'is' line B

sændi < ON *sendi* '(I) send' (1. pres.) line B

mæþ < ON *með* 'with' line B

æf < ON *ef* 'if' line D

2. no vowel reduction / no vowel harmony

sændir < ON *sendir* 's/he sends' (3. pres.) line A

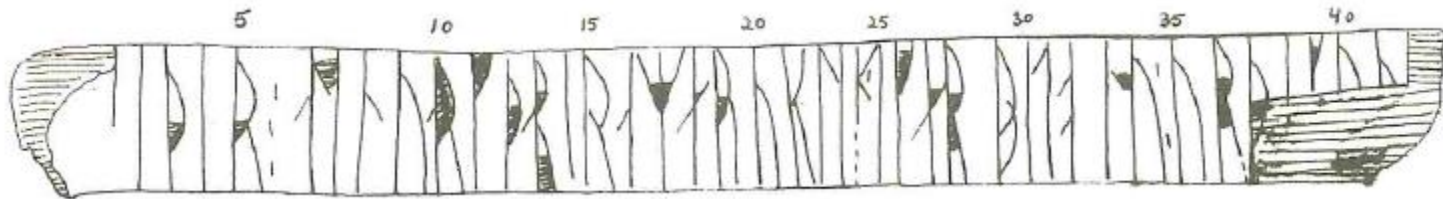
sændi < ON *sendi* '(I) send' (1. pres.) line B

alnum < ON *alnum/ǫlnum* 'ell/two feet' (dat.pl.) line B

3. intervocalic *h*-loss (hiatus)

ioani < ON *Jóhani* (dat.) 'Johan/John'

Metrical fragment B88 / drawing



(after Seim 2004:166)

Metrical fragment B88 (c. 1335): alliterative longline

[...] 'IÞIR : 1111N1RÞ1RIR1Y1R1K1111Y1RB1111N : NRÞI

Old Norwegian

... síðir. Alinn var'k þar er almar / upplendingar bendu ...

“... Fostered I was where the hinterland people bent their bows ...”

Jf. Morkinskinna: *Føddr vas ek þars alma / upplendingar bendu*

“Born I was where the hinterland people bent their bows.”

Metrical fragment B88 (c. 1335): linguistic features

1. vowel reduction

amær < ON *almar* 'bows (cf. *alma*, acc.pl. of *almr*)

uplindkær < ON *upplendingar* 'people from the hinterland'
(nom.pl.)

bito < ON *bendu* 'they bent' (preterite)

2. dialectal loss of liquid /

amær < ON *almar* pl. 'elm-bows'

cf. the first element in place names *Ám-* ~ *Alm-*

(e.g. *Ámdalir* ~ *Almdalir*, DN)

and modern place names such as *Åm-li*, *Åm-dal*, *Om-dal*

(see *Norsk stadnamnleksikon*)

Rune stick B149

gya : sæhir : atþu : gakhæim

ON tekst: *Gyða segir at þú gakk heim!*

‘Gyða says that you: go/come home!’