

# The Origin of Runes and Old English Runic Inscriptions

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## Outline

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- III. Runic writing in England
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## I. Introduction

The word ‘rune’ suggests not merely a form of writing, the angular characters of the old Germanic script long since discarded, but a whole world of mystery and magic: strange symbols scratched into ancient tools and weapon not lying idle in some museum show-case; names of warriors, secret spells, even snatches of songs, appearing on objects as diverse as minute silver coins and towering stone crosses, scattered in the unlikeliest places from Yugoslavia to Orkney, from Greenland to Greece. The word itself means ‘mystery’ and ‘secret’ in early English and its related languages. When Bishop Wulfila translated the Bible into fourth-century Gothic, he rendered St Mark’s ‘the mystery of the kingdom of God’(iv. 11) as ‘rū na þiudangardjōs guþs’. When the chieftains and wise counsellors of Anglo-Saxon England gathered in conclave, men called their secret deliberations ‘runes’, as does the poet of the Old English *Wanderer* in a line weighty with wisdom and secrecy:

Swa cwæðsnottor on mode, gesæt him sundor æt rune.  
(Thus spoke the wise man in his heart as he sat apart in secret musing.)

In *Beowulf*, the Danish nobleman *Æschere* is described as the king's *runwita*, probably as distinguished a title as our privy councillor. The German word *raunen* preserves this aura of secrecy and mystery to the present day, while to *rown* or *round* 'in the ear', that is to whisper, was common English usage until the seventeenth century, kept alive in more recent times in the work of Scott, Carlyle, Kingsley, and other writers.

The Germanic runic alphabet, or to give it its more usual name derived from the first six runes in their traditional sequence, the runic *futhork* (*f=th*), belongs to that branch of writing known as alphabetic scripts. In principle each letter represents a different sound; in practice, however, certain symbols are perforce employed for a variety of sounds, although the discrepancy between sound and symbol is not as far-reaching as, for example, in modern English.

The origin of the *futhork* remains to this day the most baffling of all its mysteries. Many theories have been advanced ranging from the fantastic to the probable. The unhealthy nationalism of the German Third Reich unfortunately swelled the ranks of the former by trying hard to find a 'pure Aryan' origin not only for the runes but for all alphabetic scripts — 'all writing, then, derives from the rune-hoard of the Stone Age ...' Such nonsense we may safely disregard.

Only three main theories concerning the origin of the *futhork* have ever merited serious consideration: those suggesting respectively Latin, Greek, and Northern Italic origin.

Wimmer's name is generally associated with the theory that runes derives from the Latin alphabet. Briefly, this theory takes as its starting-point the several obvious Latin-runic parallels — notably the Latin capitals, F, R, H, S, C, and the runic *f*, *ᚱ*, *ᚨ*, *ᚷ*, *ᚺ* — and then proceeds to derive the remaining runes from other Latin capitals. According to Wimmer, this derivation of the *futhork* was no gradual evolutionary process, but the creation of one man, much as Wulfila created the Gothic alphabet among the West Goths of the fourth century.

Another theory that seeks the origin of runes in Latin script is that of S. Agrell but, unlike Wimmer, Agrell turned to Latin cursive writing, that of the Pompeian inscriptions and its modifications found in the Roman frontier region of south-western Germany whence, as in Wimmer's view, the *futhork* travelled north towards Scandinavia. The problem, however, is that he places far too much reliance on rare and exceptional Roman letter-forms and is erratic in his research for 'original' runic forms, as he juggles to derive the twenty-four Germanic runes in this way.

The Scandinavian scholar O. v. Friesen is the chief exponent of a view that places the origin of the *futhork* among the Goths and derives it mainly from Greek

letters, either capital or cursive, while some runes, not thus derivable, are assumed to be modelled on Latin letters. According to v. Friesen, whose views have gained large currency in the English-speaking world owing to their inclusion in the Encyclopaedia Britannica (1929), Gothic mercenaries familiar with both Greek and Latin adopted and adapted letters from both to write their own tongue, the result being the *futhork*. This creation of the *futhork* is placed in the Pontic (Black Sea) region in the third century A.D., whence, it is suggested, runes were carried north, back to the Baltic homeland of the Goths, leaving both archaeological and some runic evidence *en route*.

In 1944, F. Askeberg achieved something of a compromise between the views just outlined. Believing with v. Friesen that the Goths were the first to write runes, although rather earlier (first century A.D.) than v. Friesen had assumed, he yet accepts Wimmer's suggestion of Latin origin as the most probable. An important point rightly stressed again by Askeberg is that the *futhork* must be regarded as an individual creation rather than the result of an evolutionary development.

All the theories just mentioned have been criticised on various grounds which need only be briefly indicated here. There are two points which emerge from the preceding discussion: (1) the origin of the *futhork* must fit in with the dating of our earliest known runic inscriptions in Scandinavia; and (2) certain Latin-runic parallels are too striking to be ignored, yet the Latin alphabet must be ruled out if particularly strained derivations are to be avoided and if the variable direction of runic writing is to be satisfactorily explained. But Latin writing had some close relations among the scripts in use in the Alps, descendants of the old Etruscan alphabet, itself of still obscure origin, and it is here that the origin of the *futhork* has been most profitably sought. In the meantime, the thesis of North Italic origin was elaborated almost simultaneously by C. J. S. Marstrander and M. Hammarström, and has since been accepted by many runologists, in principle at least if not in every detail.

The general basis of agreement may be summed up like this:

- (1) There is an unmistakable resemblance between many runes and letters found in the alpine inscriptions (*cf.* Table I); this is probably not fortuitous.
- (2) Some Germanic tribe must have been in touch with North Italic writing somewhere at some time.
- (3) The creation of the *futhork* must have preceded the eventual extinction of separate North Italic scripts by the Latin alphabet.
- (4) From the Alps the knowledge of the *futhork* must have been carried north to reach Scandinavia not later than the third century.

Reference to Table I will show that for three-quarters of the twenty-four common Germanic runes perfectly good parallels exist. The point is that whoever invented the *futhork* was probably familiar with the pre-runic symbols found in the rock-carvings of Germanic prehistory and that some of these symbols resemble North Italic letters and probably helped to facilitate the making of the *futhork*; perhaps they even inspired it. In a few cases, I suggest, the 'rune-maker' went directly to these symbols to fill gaps in his model (*cf.* again Table I), notably X, J, and o; M could also come from this source, or else from North Italic M s with a changed sound-value. In the cases of F and B we are probably dealing with incipient Latin influence. Finally, for o j Latin G g has been suggested, but I do not believe that our rune-maker knew the Latin alphabet.

## II. The Common Germanic *Futhork*

The older, or common Germanic, runic alphabet *futhork* consisted of twenty-four letters in an arrangement that differs markedly from the order of letters in all other alphabets (*cf.* Table II & III). However, it is fair to say that we still have absolutely no idea how this arrangement came about. To my mind, the best guess is that it had to do with the manner in which the runes were taught and learned, the result of some kind of mnemonic device that is no longer retrievable, but which may have left some slight echo in the runic poems preserved in medieval manuscripts.

The characteristic angular shape of the runes was initially due to their being inscribed on wood. The perishable nature of the material prevented large-scale survival of wood-inscriptions, but some have been preserved in the Danish peat-moors and the Frisian *terpen*, that is, artificial mounds for dwellings, and there are references to such inscriptions on older Germanic literature. Apart from wood, metal and stone were the other chief materials for runic writing. Metal was used especially in connection with weapons, ornaments, tools and coins. Many such finds are extant and there are again references in the older literature. In the Old English poem *Beowulf* the description of the sword captured by Beowulf and presented to Horthgar contains the lines (1694ff):

Swa wæs on ðæm scennum sciran goldes  
þurh runstafas rihte gemearcod,  
geseted ond gesæd, hwam þæt sweord geworht,  
wreoþehilt ond wrymfah.  
(Also on the hilt-plates of glittering gold

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Was carefully characterized in runic letters,  
Written and expressed for whom the good blade,  
The spiral-hafted sword, the serpent-patterned  
Had first been made.)

Rock-inscriptions are relatively few, but runes were frequently inscribed on stones, whether tombstones or memorial stones or more artistically shaped stone monuments like the Ruthwell Cross in Dumfriesshire (*cf.* Table IV & V). The method of inscribing varied with the material. The frequent use of the verb O.E. *wrītan*, O.N. *rita*, O.H.G. *rīzzan* suggests that originally runes were ‘carved’ or ‘scratched’ into wood, metal, or stone; but more elaborate means of ‘writing’ followed, such as carving into wood, chiselling into stone, or stamping in the case of coins and bracteates. There is pattern-welding on some early runic spearheads: here the cuts are inlaid with thin metal wire, sometimes coloured red. Colouring may also have been used on wood or stone.

If we take into consideration all of the evidence available to us, including the shapes and sound-values of the runes themselves, the rune names, inverse spellings, the known historical development of the Germanic languages, and the peripheral features that runic writing shared only with the Mediterranean writing practices of the Archaic period, then the conclusion is inescapable that runic writing must have arisen during the Proto-Germanic period, at a time when the standardisations characteristic of the classical periods of Greek and Latin had not yet been fully carried out. We most certainly have not yet discovered the earliest runic text ever executed, but new discoveries continue to be made, such as the spectacular finds from Meldorf in Holstein, Germany, and in the Illerup River Valley of Jutland, Denmark.

The Germanic *futhorc* underwent profound changes in the transitional period. In England, it developed into an alphabet with 28, and sometimes even 31 (and more) runes. The increase in the number of symbols can be accounted for to a large extent by the phonological changes that Old English underwent in its development from the other stages of Germanic. Similarly, in Scandinavia significant changes occurred in the language, but instead of increasing the number of runes, the Scandinavians reduced the 24-letter *futhorc* to several variant alphabets of 16 runes each. Here, too, the changes in the *futhorc* can be traced largely to phonological developments, but it should be noted that in Scandinavia, as in England, phonological changes in the names of the runes played a significant role in the changes.

The Old English *fuþorc* was well suited to represent the phonological system of that language. Nevertheless, in the long run, it could not compete with the Latin alphabet, and the runic tradition did not survive the Norman conquest, except as an object of antiquarian interest. In Scandinavia, where the new *fuparks* represented several different sounds by the same rune, and the runes themselves had taken on simplified shapes, the system was a boon to the carver, but the bane of the reader.

It was nevertheless manageable enough to remain in us for approximately 400 years (until ca. 1050) when it was replaced by the medieval system of dotted runes, which more adequately represented the sounds of the language. After approximately 1400, even this improved system yielded completely to the Latin alphabet, and runic writing no longer represented a living tradition, although in certain quarters, knowledge of the runes persisted into early modern times.

### III. Runic writing in England

The runes employed by the Anglo-Saxon settlers of Britain show certain modifications in form and sound conditioned by linguistic changes. Unlike the Scandinavian treatment of the common Germanic *fupark*, however, with its reduction to sixteen runes, the Anglo-Saxon runic alphabets show an increase in the number of runes, reaching in ninth-century Northumbria a maximum of thirty-three runes. In the first stage of this development four new symbols were added, while the phonetic value of certain inherited runes changed. It is generally, and I think rightly, assumed that this process began on the Continent prior to the Anglo-Saxon settlement of Britain.

It was probably on Frisian soil that the twenty-eight-letter alphabet evolved, for Old Frisian shared certain linguistic changes with Old English, and some of the new runes actually occur in Frisian inscriptions of the fifth to seventh century. In the second phase of Anglo-Saxon runic development a further five runes were added bringing the *fuþorc* to a final total of thirty-three runes. There is good reason for believing that this later development was confined to Northumbria and that it was not completed until the beginning of the ninth century; the Vienna manuscript, for example, which probably goes back to an eighth century prototype, knows only the twenty-eight runes of the earlier English *fuþorc*. The Anglo-Saxon *Runic Poem* of the eighth or early ninth century adds to the twenty-eight-letter *fuþorc* the rune \**īo*. The splendid stone cross of Ruthwell (Dumfriesshire), which bears in runes some portion of the Old English poem *The Dream of the Rood* and which may be

assigned to the first half of the eighth century, uses thirty-one runes.<sup>1</sup>

St Augustine and his monks arrived in Kent in A.D. 597 to begin the task of converting the heathen English. Superficially, their success seemed quick and assured, but beneath the converted surface there probably lurked for a long time a much larger residue of paganism than Bede's account or those of later historians would have us believe. In the middle of the eighth century (A.D. 747) the Council of Clofeshoh found it necessary to condemn those who practised heathen rites of divination, incantations, and the like; and eighth-century poems, like the 'elegiac' *Wanderer* or *Seafarer* pay as yet only lip-service to Christianity; The full assurance, the firm faith of genuine conversion are not yet theirs. Together with other relics of the pagan past, runes survive well into Christian England, just as they did in Scandinavia.

One of the results of the conversion of England was the establishment of monastic scriptoria all over the country. It is here that runes became a bookish pursuit, first merely an orthographic convenience in the writing of the vernacular, but later an antiquarian pastime for its own sake; alphabet lore and cryptic writing had, it seems, a particular fascination for medieval minds; as late as the second half of the fourteenth century weird alphabets based on the fuþorc appears in *Sir John Mandeville's Travels*, with quite clearly a long monkish tradition behind them. To the scribal knowledge of runes we owe the adoption of the runes Þ *th* and ƿ *w* into the regular minuscule script of Anglo-Saxon England. The former, 'thorn' rune, persisted throughout the Middle Ages approaching increasingly the shape of our letter *y* and becoming finally identified with it in forms like 'y<sup>e</sup>' for 'the' and 'y<sup>t</sup>' for 'that', still visible today all over the country on signs of the 'Ye Olde Tea Shoppe' type. The 'thorn' rune still forms part of modern Icelandic writing today.

#### IV. A Case of Runic Inscriptions: the Ruthwell Cross

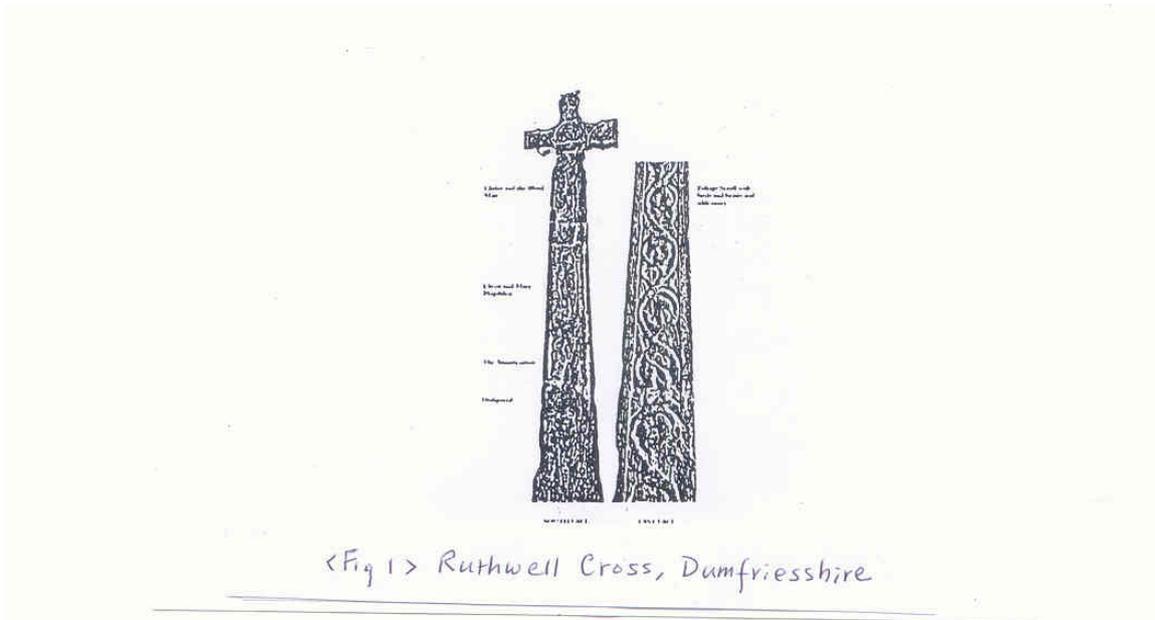
This 18 ft. tall stone cross, a splendid specimen of early eighth-century Northumbrian art, is undoubtedly the best known and most imposing of all the remaining English runic stone monuments; its closest parallel is the artistically similar and probably contemporary shaft of the runic cross at Bewcastle.

The Ruthwell Cross(*cf.* Fig 1) was removed from its place in the parish church

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<sup>1</sup> The final thirty-three-letter fuþorc was printed in 1705 by G. Hickes in his *Linguarum Veterum Septentrionalium Thesaurus*, vol. 1, p. 135, from the Cotton MS. Otho B x, which perished in the fire of 1731 when so many early English treasures were destroyed.

and broken into several pieces as a result of an Act of Assembly of the Scottish Church in 1642 directed against 'idoltrous monuments'. In 1802 the remains were gathered and the cross set up in the grounds of the manse with an additional transom, the original transom having been lost. In 1887, to avoid further damage from the weather, the cross was returned into the church where it now stands.



In addition to lavish sculpture ornamentation, the cross bears inscriptions in Roman and runic characters. On the north side: (1) John the Baptist bearing the Agnus Dei; (2) Christ standing on two animals; (3) the saints Paulus and Antonius breaking a loaf of bread; (4) the flight into Egypt; (5) Indistinct remains of a figure subject, possibly the Nativity. On the south side: (1) the Visitation; (2) Christ and Mary Magdalene; (3) Christ healing the blind man; (4) the Annunciation; (5) the Crucifixion.

The main runic inscription is carved on the two narrower sides of the cross, east and west, above and along the side margins of the long panels containing foliage and animal sculpture. The principal inscription is devoted entirely to certain passages, in the Northumbrian dialect of the early eighth century, of the beautiful Old English poem *The Dream of the Rood* in which the Cross itself speaks of the agony and glory of the Crucifixion.

For convenience the runes are here given in separate words and in lines 44, 45, and 48 on the south-east side of the Ruthwell Cross.(*cf.* Fig 2). No marks of



word *almeʒttig*, 'almighty' (line 39, N.E. face), where it clearly stands for the spirant [ç], pronounced with the following dental as in German *nicht*.

The date of Ruthwell Cross has been considerably debated on artistic, linguistic, and runological grounds. In the case of Bewcastle the likeliest view still is that the cross was erected in memory of Alcfrith, the son of Oswiu, king of Northumbria, both whose names are mentioned in the main runic panel, and that it records also the name of Alcfrith's wife Cyniburug, daughter of King Penda of the Mercians. The art and epigraphy of both monuments are very similar and are assigned by most recent authorities to the period 670-750. On linguistic and runological grounds the first half of the eighth century is the more acceptable; before this time the additional rune ✘ was probably not yet in use, while at a later date one should have expected at least the *ŝt*-rune to occur which by the end of the eighth century had found its way to Friesland to figure three times in the yew wand of Westerem-dem.

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Appendix

[Table 1] Runes and North Italic letters

Etruscan	North Italic	Runes	Pre-Runic Symbols	Latin
𐌆 v	F	𐌆 f		F
YV	Λ Λ V U	𐌆 u	Δ	V
	β	𐌆 p		D d
A	Ɔ ʌ Ɔ ʌ A	Ɔ a		A
𐌆	𐌆 𐌆 𐌆	𐌆 r		R
>c ʌk	< C K k	< k		< c
		X g	X	X x
	𐌆 𐌆 Ɔ ʌ	𐌆 w		
𐌆	𐌆 𐌆 𐌆	𐌆 h		H
𐌆	𐌆 𐌆 𐌆 𐌆	𐌆 n	+	N
l	l	l i	l	l
		𐌆 j	𐌆	G g
		𐌆 e	𐌆	
𐌆	𐌆 𐌆 𐌆 𐌆 𐌆	𐌆 p		P
I †	𐌆 𐌆 𐌆 𐌆 𐌆	𐌆 z	𐌆	Z
3 2	𐌆 𐌆 2 3	𐌆 s		S
T †	𐌆 𐌆 T † l X	𐌆 t	𐌆	T
	B	𐌆 b		B
𐌆	𐌆 𐌆 𐌆 𐌆	𐌆 c		E
𐌆 𐌆	𐌆 𐌆 𐌆 𐌆	𐌆 m		M
𐌆	𐌆 𐌆 𐌆 𐌆	𐌆 l		L
𐌆 𐌆		𐌆 𐌆	𐌆 𐌆	
	𐌆 𐌆	𐌆 d	𐌆	
	𐌆 𐌆 𐌆 𐌆	𐌆 o	𐌆	O

[Table 2] The *futhorc*, or Germanic runic alphabet

ƿ	ᚋ	ᚑ	ᚖ	ᚗ	᚛	ᚨ	ᚦ
f	u	p	a	r	k	g	w
ᚥ	ᚢ	ᚣ	ᚷ	ᚫ	ᚥ	ᚷ	ᚱ
h	n	i	j	æ	p	z	s
ᚠ	ᚪ	ᚱ	ᚷ	ᚦ	ᚩ	ᚨ	ᚱ
t	b	e	m	l	ng	d	o

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[Table 3] The Northern *fubarks*

Common Germanic	Danish	Swedish-Norwegian	Mixed	Hälsinge	Dotted Runes	Orkney
F f	ƒ	ƒ	ƒ	ᚠ	ƒ	ƒ
U u	U	U	U	U	U	U
P p	þ	þ	þ	ᚢ	þ	þ
A a	ǣ	ǣ	ǣ	ǣ		ǣ
R r	R	R	R	R	R	R
K k	ƿ	ƿ	ƿ	ᚦ	ƿ <sub>k,q</sub>	ƿ
X g					ƿ	
P w						
H h	*	†	*	ᚨ	*	*
T n	†	†	†	ᚢ	†	†
I i	l	l	l	l	l	l
G j	† a	† a	† a	† a	† a	† a
J é						
K p					B	
Y z	† R	† R	† R	† R		† R
S s	~	†	†	†	†	†
T t	†	†	†	†	†	†
B b	B	ƒ	B	ᚢ	B	B
M e					†	
M m	φ	†	Y	†	Y	Y
L l	†	†	†	†	†	†
o ŋ						
o o					†	
d d					†	
					† ᚠ ᚢ ᚦ	
					† y	
					† ū	
					† æ	
					† o	

[Table 4] Old English futhorcs and the Ruthwell runes

	Common Germanic	Thames	Vienna	Cod. Otho B X (10th century)	Ruthwell
1	F f	F	F	F	F
2	U u	U	U	U	U
3	P p	P	P	P	P
4	A a	A o	A o	A o	A o
5	R r	R	R	R	R
6	C c	H c	H c	H c	H c
7	G g	X	X	X	X
8	W w	P	P	P	P
9	H h	H	H	H + H	H
10	N n	+	+	+ +	+
11	I i	I	I	I	I
12	J j	+	φ	φ	
13	E e	L e	L 'ih'	S Z 'eo'	L [ʃ]
14	P p	L	L	H	
15	Z z	Y x	Y x	Y x	
16	S s	r	H	L	L
17	T t	↑	↑	↑	↑
18	B b	B b	B b	B b	B b
19	C c	M	M	M	M
20	M m	X ŋ	M m	M m	X m
21	L l	H d	L l	L l	L l
22	ŋ ŋ	L l	X ŋ	X X ŋ	X ŋ
23	O o	M m	X d	X æ	X æ
24	D d	φ æ	φ æ	X d	X d
25		A a	A a	A a	A a
26		F æ	F æ	F æ	F æ
27		D y	Y êa	F y	D y
28		Y êa	D y	* io	Y êa
29				Y êa	Y k <sup>I</sup>
30				Y q	X k <sup>II</sup>
31				Y k	X g <sup>II</sup>
32				X st	
33				X g <sup>II</sup>	