

# Runes in Old English literature

---

Writing is an infectious invention. It seems to have been invented independently in three or four locations (Sumerian, Chinese, Maya, and possibly Egyptian), to be then popularized by cultural diffusion as part of the material culture carried by peoples, reaching the final number of several dozens, if not a hundred, of distinct writing systems (Trigger 2004: 61-68).

## *Runes*

The runic alphabet is one of the writing systems invented and used in Europe before the Latin alphabet became dominant. The extant runic inscriptions date to the 2nd century AD, so the alphabet must have been developed before that time (1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD) and in some regions continued to be used in the Middle Ages and into early modern times. It was used by Germanic tribes, such as Goths, Vandals, Lombards, Franks, Frisians, Teutons, Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Scandinavians, the oldest archeological finds being from Eastern and Central Europe, so this region may have been the place where the invention originates from. By 500 AD it spread to Scandinavia and England, recording a number of Germanic languages (Page 1987: 6, 9-10).

The runic alphabet is called the *futhark* for the first six letters (see Figure 1). It was written left to right or right to left, and sometimes even with alternate lines in opposite directions (*boustrophedon*). Some runes are possibly related to (r, i, b) or adapted from (f, u = inverted v) the Roman alphabet (being part of the culture dominant in Europe at that time), with a possibility of a Greek influence (b – beta, s – sigma) or a North Italic influence, but some runes reflect specifically Germanic sounds (th, ð, ŋ) which did not exist in the Roman alphabet (Page 1987: 9-10, Williams 2004: 265-6). There was no distinction between capital and lower-case letters and often no division into individual words. The English rune-masters finally expanded the alphabet to 31 runes to reflect changes in pronunciation, the innovated English version now being called *futhorc* (Page 1987: 20).

fehu wealth	úr aurochs	þurisaz giant	ansuz god	raipō riding	kaunaz ulcer	gebō gift	wunjō joy
hagalaz hail	naubiz need/hardship	isa ice	jera year/harvest	eihwaz yew tree	perþ luck	algiz sedge (?)	sōwulō sun
teiwaz the god Tyr	berkana birch twig	ehwaz horse	mannaz man	laguz water	inguz the god Ing	dagaz day	ōþila inherited land

Figure 1: The Elder Futhark  
(<http://www.omniglot.com/writing/runic.htm>)

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

Figure 2: Anglo-Saxon Futhorc  
(<http://www.omniglot.com/writing/runic.htm>)

### *What they were used for*

The primary medium for writing was wood incised with a knife or other sharp object, which is reflected in the shape of runes: they employ vertical or slanting strokes but not horizontal ones which would mingle with the grain. They could also be cut, stamped, inlaid or impressed on metal, bone and stone (Page 1987: 6-7, 10).

Inscriptions are found on a number of various objects:

- Personal objects such as jewellery or weapons (name tags, names of owners),
- Wooden objects: boxes, merchants' labels stuck into goods bought, personal messages on pieces of wood,
- Bone objects, e.g. combs,
- Clay objects: pottery, cremation urns,
- Stones: grave-slabs, architecture,
- Coins,
- Wall graffiti.

Any other perishable materials might have been used but they simply have not survived. As a Belgian runologist Rene Derolez argues, "if there were only ten runologists working at any one time in the whole of the Germanic world, and if each cut only ten inscriptions in any one year, there would have been made, between 100 and 500 AD, some 40,000 inscriptions. We know about eighty of them" (Page 1987: 12). Thus, we can only guess what was lost and we do not even know how representative our runic corpus of around 5,000 surviving inscriptions is.

### *Anglo-Saxon runes*

The Germanic tribes settled down in England in the fifth century AD and "it is sensible to think they brought runes with them" (Page 1987: 32). There are also some Norse runes brought to England by

Vikings, though their number is not high (Page 1987: 53). For several centuries runes were used in England alongside the Latin alphabet, basically disappearing after the Norman conquest.

### *The Ruthwell Cross*

The first longer runic text that we are aware of is the eighth-century cross in the church at Ruthwell. It is a 5.5 stone monument depicting scenes from the life and death of Jesus Christ with a runic inscription featuring an early version of the *Dream of the Rood* (Page 1987: 39). It reads:

"supplemented by a few bits of material from other sources" (Page 1987: 39)	poem reconstruction paralleled with Vercelli <i>Dream of the Rood</i> (Ball 1991: 113)
<p>Almighty God stripped himself as her prepared to climb the gallows, valiant in men's sight... I raised up a great king, lord of heaven. I dared not bow down. Men reviled us both together. I was drenched with blood... Christ was on the cross. Yet to him in his solitude came noble men, eager, from afar. I beheld it all. I was bitterly troubled with griefs. I bowed ... wounded with arrows. Down they laid that limb-weary one. They stood at the corpse's head. There they beheld...</p>	<p>+ He stripped himself, Almighty God, when he wished to ascend the scaffold, courageous before all men. (But I dared not) bow down (to the ground.)</p> <p>+ I bore a mighty King, the Lord of heaven; I dared not bend. Men mocked us both together. I was drenched with blood, soaked, (from the Man's side, after his spirit departed.) + Christ was on the Cross. Yet, hastening thither from afar, there came together Noble men: I saw it all. I was grievously afflicted with sorrows; I bowed (towards the hands of the men.) Wounded with arrows they laid him down weary of limb; they stood at the head of his body; they beheld there heaven's (Lord at rest.)</p>

Figure 3: Two reconstructions of the runic verse on the Ruthwell Cross in modern translation

The poem (as it has been reconstructed by Ball) seems to be metrically unique with stanzaic layout and a "mixture of half-lines, normal verses and hypermetric verses" (Ball 1991: 113), which makes it stand out in the corpus of Old English texts. Although the main inscription is runic and in Old English, it also contains Latin description of the imagery in Roman letters (Page 1987: 42), which may be part of the original design or the result of failed reconstruction in later centuries (Ball 1991: 108). Based on detailed linguistic analysis, Ball also argues that the runic text might be a transliteration of a Latin text, which may also be true of the Franks Casket (1991: 121).

### *The Franks Casket*

Another interesting runic object is a whalebone box called Franks Casket, which depicts several scenes with inscriptions carved partly in runes, partly in Roman letters. The top of the box features an archer with his name inscribed, 'ægili', the front – the Adoration of Christ with the title 'mægi',

'Magi', the left side depicts Romulus and Remus with runic text reading: 'Romulus and Remus, two brothers, a she-wolf nourished them in Rome, far from their native land', the right side is damaged and very enigmatic, and the front explains the origin of the box. The main difficulty provides the back of the casket, which shows Emperor Titus's capture of Jerusalem and the accompanying text is a mixture of Old English and Latin: 'Here fight Titus and the Jews. Here the inhabitants flee from Jerusalem. Doom. Hostage', but surprisingly the Latin text is "neither perfect nor classical" (Page 1987: 40-41), which may suggest limited literacy of the carver or designer of the object. On the other hand, it also confirms that both writing systems were in use at the same time and that most likely the scribes were (more or less) competent in both.

### *Runes in Latin texts*

There is one Old English poet whom we know by name because he actually signed his poems, and what is more, he did it in runes. Little is known of Cynewulf's life: he may have lived between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries in Mercia or Northumbria, what we are certain of is that the following works contain his runic signature: *Christ II (or The Ascension)*, *Elene*, *The Fates of the Apostles*, *Juliana*. The four poems attributed to Cynewulf are composed in Old English but written down with Latin letters and deal with early Christian topics (Treharne 2010: 101). The use of a signature may, on one hand, signal a shift from literary anonymity to authorship, on the other hand, the use of another alphabet may be seen as a device to differentiate between the piece of work and the author's name, which was a novelty and required a certain consideration. Alternatively, it might also have been a way of expressing one's identity, distancing oneself from the acquired Latin literacy and identifying with the native Anglo-Saxon tradition.

There are also a number of works which are primarily non-runic but contain some runes, and these include:

- *Beowulf*
- *The Husband's Message*
- *Riddle 19*
- *Riddle 24*
- *Riddle 64*
- *Riddle 75*
- *Riddle 91*
- *The Rune Poem*
- *Solomon and Saturn*
- *Waldere A*

*The Husband's Message* and *Riddles* use runes in the Latin text as a literary device which encodes some additional meaning by means of a rebus, which probably was easy to understand for a literate Old English user, but now is difficult to decipher. In the former, runes represent a message sent by a husband to his wife and possibly carved in runes on a piece of wood (Treharne 2010: 90), which was a practical and convenient way of communicating for Germanic people (Page 1987: 8). In fact, it can be claimed that "the poem is actually spoken by an animated piece of carved wood" (Treharne 2010: 90), which could potentially link the poem to *Riddle 60*, preceding it in the *Exeter Book*; the riddle is rather enigmatic and difficult to interpret, but one reasonably plausible answer is "a piece of wood with runes".

Even if not directly used as a means of communication, runes are often mentioned as part of the glorious past and heroic present, e.g. in *Beowulf* lines 43-47 describe a powerful sword inscribed with runes. They must have been taught quite commonly as there exist three *Rune Poems: Anglo-Saxon, Norwegian and Islandic* which were a teaching tool and helped to memorize and understand the letters of the alphabet. Although finally replaced by the Latin alphabet, runes seem to have been an significant part of Germanic and Anglo-Saxon identity, cultivated for almost a thousand years. The limited scope of inscriptions can be treated in two ways. Either we assume that the corpus is more or less representative and simply runes had limited use in the society, or we assume that writing has certain standard functions in societies, and in case of runes, simply material evidence has not been preserved.

### References:

- Ball, Sir Christopher. 1991. *Inconsistencies in the Main Runic Inscriptions on the Ruthwell Cross*. In: Bammesberger, Alfred (ed.). *Old English Runes and their Continental Background*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag (107-123).
- Derolez, R. 1991. *Runica Manuscripta Revisited*. In: Bammesberger, Alfred (ed.). *Old English Runes and their Continental Background*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag (85-106).
- Elliott, R.W.V. 1991. *Coming back to Cynewulf*. In: Bammesberger, Alfred (ed.). *Old English Runes and their Continental Background*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag (231-247).
- Hines, John. 1991. *Some Observations on the Runic Inscriptions of Early Anglo-Saxon England*. In: Bammesberger, Alfred (ed.). *Old English Runes and their Continental Background*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag (62-83).
- Osborn, Marijane. 1991. *The Lid as Conclusion of the Syncretic Theme of the Franks Casket*. In: Bammesberger, Alfred (ed.). *Old English Runes and their Continental Background*. Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag (249-268).
- Page, R. I. 1987. *An Introduction to English Runes*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press.
- Treharne, Elaine (ed.). 2010. *Old and Middle English Literature c. 890-c.1450. An Anthology*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Trigger, Bruce G. 2004. *Writing systems: a case study in cultural evolution*. In: Stephen Houston (ed). *The First Writings. Script Invention as History and Process*. New York: Cambridge University Press (39-68).
- Williams, Henrik. 2004. *Reasons for runes*. In: Stephen Houston (ed). *The First Writings. Script Invention as History and Process*. New York: Cambridge University Press (262-273).

### Internet sources:

- Anglo-Saxon Age*. <http://ansax.com/futhorc-anglo-saxon-runes/>. (19 Dec 2011).
- Project Gutenberg. *Beowulf*. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/16328/16328-h/16328-h.htm> (5 Jan 2012).
- Jebson Tony. *Anglo-Saxon Runic Texts*. <http://www8.georgetown.edu/departments/medieval/labyrinth/library/oe/texts/runic-index.html>. (19 Dec 2011).
- Omniglot – the online encyclopaedia of writing systems and languages*. <http://www.omniglot.com/writing/runic.htm>. (19 Dec 2011).