Final Project

The Origins and History of Runic Alphabet

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The Runic alphabet, also called Germanic or Futhark, or simply runes, is one of the most fascinating writing systems of both the late ancient and Middle Age eras. Because of the unusual shape of the letters, the various tools and techniques of recording it, and the objects that letters were written on, such as the inscriptions on stones, are one part of its interesting origins. Second and equally important is how this writing system spread among multiple cultures and regions of Europe and when and why there was a need for its invention. The history and heritage of the Scandinavian countries where there is largest evidence of the use of runes, as well as other lands, such as Germany, Eastern Europe, and British Isles, confirm how certain cultures differentiate themselves by creating their own and original alphabets. The etymology of runes is a consecutive step after archeological and historical studies of the lands and nations that created them. Consequently, the history of books, and further the history of writing systems and of the objects they were written on, together with their preservation are all integral parts of researching the runic system.

I would like to present the areas of Europe where the vastest amounts of evidence and artifacts with runic inscriptions were discovered, since I believe it’s crucial to understanding the circumstances and needs of establishment of their writing system. The introduction to the alphabet would be the next step with description of its several versions. Moreover, I would like to briefly remark about the other side of runic system, which is its magical and occult meaning around the world.

The Runic alphabetical system was used among many nations mostly in Scandinavia, Germany, British Isles, the Netherlands, and a few Eastern and Central European countries. Because runologists agree that it originated in Germanic territories, it
The Origins and History of Runic Alphabet

It is common to call runes the Germanic writing system. However, “it is not clear when (exactly), where and for what reasons Germanic people developed their own writing system” (Looijenga, 2007, p.14). It is important to realize that when speaking about the runic writing system we do not have in mind one culture or one particular nation and territory; these are usually several major areas within the early centuries A.D. By a vast majority, it is a region in Sweden with approximately 5,000 runic inscriptions found, then Norway with a number of 1,000, Denmark territory with about 700, and Iceland with 60 runic inscriptions. This is why the runic alphabetical system is often called Scandinavian. Moreover, there are runic texts found in The Faroe Islands (a territory between Norway and Iceland) and Greenland. Additionally, there are texts and artifacts with runic inscriptions recorded from current Germany, England, and even Hungary, Poland, Romania, and France.

Common Runic Alphabet - Futhark
Runes were used for many centuries. According to the latest studies, they emerged in Denmark, in Scandinavia, in the 2nd century A.D. These were the earliest runic inscriptions found by archeologists, yet their proliferation declined in the 17th century A.D. when the Catholic medieval church banned their use with accusations of their occult and pagan purposes. In England and Germany, this popular writing system was superseded early on by Latin. It lasted until late 17th century only on Scandinavian territories and its colonies. “It is the early inscriptions that are of supreme importance to both linguists and social historian, for they record material for which there is otherwise little or no evidence” says R.I Page (1987) who was a professor of Anglo-Saxon at the University of Cambridge (p.13).

Even nowadays, scholars disagree about the prototype of runes as a writing system. Some of them concur that it must be the Etruscan alphabet, which was written and was spoken in present-day Italy. The Etruscan civilization was close to the Germanic tribes. There are evident similarities in both alphabets. Another widely postulated theory based on studies conducted from at least the 18th century A.D. by historians, archeologists, and linguists is that runes emerged from early Latin. The cultural exchange between the Germanic people and the Roman Empire during the first century A.D. was confirmed in the past. The latest hypothesis is closely associated to magical and religious usage of runes, as well similarities in orthography; therefore, “the connection between Celtic superstition, Celtic orthography and the well known dependence of the North on the Celtic transmission of technology in the last centuries B.C. all point to a Celtic transmission of the runes” (Mees, 1999, p.150). The Celtic or Keltic languages are part of the Indo-European language-family widely spread among the British Isles.
The most common thesis is that Futhark—the runic alphabet—derived from the North Italic languages in Romanized regions along the Rhine River in Europe in the 1st century A.D., which was an important frontier in the Roman Empire. Since we stated that runes derived most accurately from the North Italic alphabet, its precursor is Etruscan and consequently Greek letters.

Furthermore, certain origins remain unclear for scientists even now, but the etymology and well-established standard orthography of runes is greatly researched and proved in quite uniform forms of runic written scripts.

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*Ancient Latin alphabet; derived from the Etruscan; several letter added later on from the Greek alphabet.*

The traditional sequence of the common Germanic Futhark has 24 letters—runes.

“As with most early alphabetic scripts runic writing normally recognizes no division between words. Inscriptions… could be read from right to left, or from left to right… Sometimes an inscription of two or more lines is to be read from the bottom upwards” (Elliot, 1989, p. 21-22). It is common to divide the runic systems into three writing systems, which differ slightly since they originated in different periods.
Runic alphabet also known as Futhark.

The earliest version is called Elder Futhark (also called Older Futhrak), and it’s dated from the 2\textsuperscript{nd} to 8\textsuperscript{th} century A.D. The Old Futhark is called Anglo-Saxon Runes (in use since the 5\textsuperscript{th} to 8\textsuperscript{th} century A.D.), and latest one-the Younger Futhark - is called Scandinavian Runes. The use of the Younger Futhark corresponds to the Viking era in European history dating from the 8\textsuperscript{th} to the 13\textsuperscript{th} century A.D.

Nevertheless, the runes spread over many countries in Europe; Scandinavia remains its homeland from the beginning of their use to the latest found inscriptions. The objects discovered are various in shape, size, and purpose of use, and they are everyday objects, such as combs, wooden boxes, jewelry, etc. Ivory, metal or wood were the objects that the letters were carved on, but the most impressing of all are the monumental, although differing in shape, stones of Scandinavia with runes inscribed on them.
Moreover, because the everyday use objects were small, short messages were written on them. “Both objects and literate people could move and travel. Some clues may be found when answering: who were the rune-writers, and where did they come from. Tracing the provenance of the objects and the names with which the objects were inscribed will appear to be of crucial importance” (Looijenga, 1997, p.40). There is only a little known about the rune-masters, scribes who recorded messages or wrote sentences using letters.runes. There is no answer if they were trained scribes working among certain tribes. Inscriptions on fragile materials, such as bone, wood, and non-precious metal, are spread all over Scandinavia together with inscriptions on precious metal objects, such as gold and silver. They are readable but still give no answer if the scribe who scratched them was a professional or just a literate member among higher societies
of Germanic tribes. They were mostly illiterate people; therefore, we could suppose these who could carve in metal, wood, bone, etc. were soldiers, priests, or rune-masters trained among the elite groups. Moreover, there is a thesis, which most of the scholars try to abandon, that scribes were people trained to use runes as magical and religious texts, since we know the word “runes” means “mystery.” In that case, we would have to connect the use of rune writing with the occult-religious concept. In general, the most distinguished scholars-runologists state that scribes used runes for everyday purposes, mostly practical, sometimes to commemorate the dead member of the family, tribe, or village. Therefore, “the word ‘rune-master’ is frequently employed to designate someone responsible for scratching or carving runes. It is best regarded just that, namely a rune-literate person, without any occult connotations” (Elliot, 1989, p.20). The further indications that so-called priests were practicing and recording runes for strictly cultic reasons are lacking in evidence.

Runestones from Anundshog, Sweden (the 11th century A.D.)
This original alphabet mainly consisting of characters of straight lines was designed in this peculiar way to curve letters as effortlessly as possible on rocklike materials, for instance stone, metal, or bone. The Danish runologist Eric Moltke argued that through the centuries of using the runes, “many of the smiths who cut inscriptions in metal objects may have been semi-literate, with only partial understanding of their runes” (Page, 1987, p.25). Nevertheless, on all of the earliest scripts and inscriptions found, there are personal names engraved, and in time, runic sentences became very sophisticated in meaning.

These bronze and glass chambers protect two ancient runestones in Jelling, Denmark, from the elements.

The earliest well preserved specimens are from Thorsberg, Schleswig, in Denmark from about 200 A.D. In the next few centuries, runes were established in the
South of Europe, and scripts were found in Pietroassa in Romania, in Breza, former Yugoslavia and near Budapest, Hungary. Since runes were designed for Germanic groups, it appears that they were a much easier medium for interpretation of their Germanic vernacular than the Roman alphabet or later on Latin. Towards the end of this period of Older Futhark (the end of 7th century A.D.), the rune-stones with inscriptions became largely spread, most of them in Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. “The language shows the first changes from primitive Norse (language) towards Old Danish, and the runes indicate that the older futhark was becoming obsolete” (Page, 1987, p.30).
The Germanic invaders brought the use of runes into English and Frisian territories in the 5th century A.D. The Anglo-Saxon script added several new letters to the already known 24 characters; therefore, after about 900 A.D., it had 33 letters. These new letters better represented the sound of the Old English language. The shape of the letters slightly changed, but, “instead of adding letters to the futhark to represent the new sounds, the users of the Nordic script compounded the letter values, using the same letter to stand for more than one sound- e.g. one letter for k and g, one letter for a, ae, and o” (Encyclopedia Britannica).

This modified Futhrak (Anglo-Saxon) was used widely for centuries in the British Isles mostly in the Orkney Islands (Scotland) and in the Isle of Man (territories between Great Britain, Ireland and the British Isles). They often followed the Norse carving of stone-inscribed memorials. These inscriptions commemorated mother, father, daughter, son, or wife.

With the arrival of monks in Kent in the 6th century A.D., the conversion of heathen English begun. “One of the results of the conversion of England was the
The establishment of monastic scriptoria all over the country” (Elliot, 1989, p.56).

Nevertheless, monks were often fascinated by this cryptic alphabet, and because of the medieval scribes, the adoption of several runes is visible in manuscripts. They often adopted the runes into the regular minuscule script of Anglo-Saxon England. They were also used for ornamental purposes and illumination in medieval manuscripts throughout the Middle Ages. Furthermore, medieval codices were found on the subject of runes. Additionally, Anglo-Saxon poems were discovered, written in both Old English and in runes. The monastic expansion in the 10th century A.D. brought the end of the runic epigraphy on the Isles.

The Viking Age, dated from 700 A.D., began the Norse inscriptions in the Younger Futhark, and they are considered to be the most important among epigraphical inheritance of the Germanic people called the Vikings. These runic inscriptions on multiple artifacts and stones left incredibly rich history and knowledge of Vikings’ culture, beliefs, and migration from place to place. For centuries, the Norse people were considered as enemies, pirates, and killers. Even today, this is how they are often portrayed in contemporary literature, film, or games. Moreover, scholars for decades have tried to define Vikings as illiterate and barbarian tribes, plundering and colonizing new territories. However, the runes-stones, which are very characteristic to these tribes, tell us about their devotion and honor to the dead. These monuments traced often beautiful poems commemorating their loved ones. Their rune-stones are documents as important as archives are - they record births, circumstances of death, certain events, relationships, purchase or borders of property. “They relied on these symbols not only for writing but also to tell fortunes, cast spells, and provide protection” (Nova, 2000, p.1).
Recent scholars of the 20th century prefer to emphasize “their importance as merchants, colonists and explorers” (Page, 1987, p.47). The stones and other genealogical materials left by Vikings in runes were discovered in Scandinavia, England, and Greenland, and they are additionally of significant decorative value. From the 9th century A.D., the Vikings were very active in the Faroe Island, Russia, and even Istanbul in present-day Turkey. In England, for instance, runes were used together with English tongues. The bilingual community used both alphabets interchangeably for several centuries.

“Gradually, however, as the Viking world declined, the runic alphabet fell into disuse. Still, the writing persisted on great stones and on fine jewelry passed down through generations” (Olmert, 1992, p.28)

One of the biggest disputes among archeologists and historians for at least 200 years is the controversies over the presence of runes in North America. Americans with Scandinavian descendants or simply those curious and enthusiastic about the early history of the United States and Canada began to explore the topic intensely in the 19th and 20th century, claiming from time to time about their runic discoveries. I decided to take a close look at that particular topic of interest for so many, and I visited the Newberry Library. It is a world-renowned independent research library, concentrating on humanities and genealogy and is one of the most reputable not only in the Midwest but generally in the U.S. I decided to talk to the reference librarian who helps to conduct research for some of the genealogy enthusiasts. I spoke to her about this particular subject, namely individuals searching to discover the presence of runes in America. The librarian I spoke to definitely agreed that people are evidently even nowadays interested
in the subject, not necessary scholars anymore but regular patrons from different parts of the country.

I came across an immense amount of first editions of works on the subject, such as *Ancient Norse Messages on American Stones* by O.G. Landsverk (1969) or *Runic Rock Inscriptions along the American Atlantic Seaboard* by O. Strandwold published in 1939. These particular positions are dealing with dated runic carvings found in Greenland, and apparently in New England, Oklahoma, and Minnesota. The authors tried to solve the cryptograms that according to them were embedded in the inscriptions.

“Delving into Norse American Prehistoric Love” by studying photographs of ancient runic inscriptions left in America by the early Norsemen are, from left to right: Olaf E. Ray, Chicago etymologist; Olaf Strandwold, runologist; Earle Frederick- Norroenn Federation of America (picture from *Ancient Norse Messages on American Stones* by O.G. Landsverk, California, 1969)
Probably, the most legendary revelation is The Kensington Rune-Stone from Minnesota apparently found in the 19th century by a Swedish-American farmer. Its authenticity was rejected by most Scandinavian runologists and some of the American scholars. “Only the unimaginative runologist will fail to be impressed. But I have already declared myself an unimaginative runologist,” says professor R.I. Page (1987) from University of Cambridge (p. 61).

Afterwards, I found great scholarly and peer reviewed publications with definitive amounts of evidence of runes in Europe while speaking to the Newberry Library librarian. For instance, four original, immense volumes of The Old-Northern Runic Monuments of Scandinavia and England published in 1866-67 are not only valuable on the antiquarian market but rich in knowledge.

The German and Scandinavian languages, mythology, folklore, and history of writing bring another fascinating part of runes – its magical site and runic numerology. For centuries, people have been seeking the talismanic features connected to the Norse philosophy, rituals, fortune telling, etc. Unfortunately, this enigmatic alphabet was and still is interpreted and associated by different groups, such as in 1920s and 1930s with the Nazi beliefs and their unhealthy nationalism. New Age followers and other religious groups try to find in symbols and meanings of baffling history of runes answers to their own questions on life and the future.
I think this short introduction to the history of runes and its later development among several cultures and different territories dismisses many misconceptions about the runic alphabet and brings a fresh perspective on what we already accomplished in our knowledge about this unique writing system. It is of great importance to study and continue to research the existence and tradition of writing systems on all continents with a special impact on bygone languages or alphabets, such as runes. They are a crucial part of all mankind’s history, since everything that was recorded during the last two millennia we owe to multiple and complex writing systems.

The last decades of globalization on a smaller scale, such as unification and switching to one single alphabet, “corresponding to the already long-established computer keyboard” (Arutjunov, 2007, p.43) seem like a reality. That would mean that countries that use Semitic languages, such as Arabic, Hebrew, or Amharic or countries that use Cyrillic script would have to switch to a Latin alphabet. Scholars in different parts of the world postulate for such changes. Consequently, I must agree in the number
of benefits in these extreme but possible future transformations. However, it is unfortunate to lose ethnic and cultural heritage, which the writing system always was for numerous civilizations. That’s why preserving the knowledge and history about archaic alphabets, such as runes, is essential.
References


