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Runes

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There is still considerable uncertainty about the origin of the runic writing system, but it was almost certainly developed by a Germanic community in contact with the Roman Empire in the first or second centuries CE, and was inspired by one of the Mediterranean alphabets (see Moltke 1985; Barnes 2012). The script is angular in nature and was probably intended for engraving into wood, and it is unusual for a derivative writing system in having a nonalphabetic arrangement, the first letters in the sequence of the oldest alphabet giving us the name *futhorc*. The script was originally used for only very limited purposes, often inscriptions of ownership on portable objects, but these laconic inscriptions nevertheless provide important information about early Germanic languages and culture. Older *futhorc* inscriptions have been found as far apart as central Norway and Ukraine, though the earliest examples cluster around southern Scandinavia.

The runic script was first brought to the British Isles by Germanic peoples migrating from Continental Europe, and early inscriptions from Anglo-Saxon England have a particular affinity with the small corpus of Frisian runic inscriptions. The runic system originally followed a phonemic principle, but due to linguistic changes this one-to-one correspondence between letter and sound was eventually lost. It was perhaps in response to these linguistic shifts that the runic system

underwent several changes, being reduced from 24 to 16 characters in the Scandinavian younger *futhorc* (before being expanded in the later medieval period), and modified with the addition of several new characters in Anglo-Saxon England, a reform perhaps undertaken by seventh-century ecclesiasts (Parsons 1999).

The script was used in a variety of ways in early Anglo-Saxon England, from informal scribbles to runic coin legends. Despite a number of popular books stating the contrary, there is very little evidence for pagan ritual associated with Anglo-Saxon runes: the *alu* stamp on the Spong Hill cremation urns is one of only a few inscriptions credibly linked to pre-Christian religious practice (Page 1999). Perhaps the best evidence that runes were treated as little more than an alternative writing system is the fact that they occur on such overtly Christian monuments as the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Crosses, with objects such as the Franks Casket representing an ambitious synthesis of Christian and Germanic traditions. However, runic inscriptions could also be informal and personal – a prayer, partly in Latin, is found inscribed on a seventh-century bone comb from Whitby, whilst the inscription on the reverse of the Harford Farm Brooch simply reads “Luda repaired the brooch.”

Inscriptions in the Anglo-Saxon *futhorc* are found predominantly in the north and east of England, though new finds continue to refine our understanding of runic activity in the British Isles. The question of how long the runic script continued in use in Anglo-Saxon England is a more difficult one,

not least because informal inscriptions – or what Parsons refers to as “ephemeral literacy” (1994) – may be unlikely to survive in the archaeological record. There are few monumental inscriptions produced after the ninth century, and the latest Anglo-Saxon runic coins also date from this period. However, several critics have cautioned against demarcating a clear cut-off point for the tradition in England or a fundamental division between the epigraphical tradition and runes recorded in the scriptorium (see Derolez 1983; Parsons 1994). Indeed, runes continued to be copied in manuscripts up to the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, and whilst these often have a distinctly antiquarian character, the ingenious use of runes in the Exeter Book riddles suggests that the reader was expected to be able to understand the script. The so-called *runica manuscripta* include the Anglo-Saxon *Rune Poem*, which gives us an insight into the common names given to individual runes, a feature of the script also exploited by Cynewulf in his runic colophons. A further way in which the script survived in Anglo-Saxon England is through the incorporation of the runes named *wynn* and *þorn* into the Insular script system (as *ƿ* and *þ*) – characters that continued in use well into the post-Conquest period.

The runic tradition in Scandinavia endured for much longer – into the early modern period in some parts of Sweden. During the Viking Age, Scandinavian settlers brought knowledge of the younger *futhorc* with them to the British Isles, and there is a growing corpus of Scandinavian inscriptions from Britain (see Barnes and Page 2006). Particularly impressive is the runic graffiti from Maeshowe in Orkney. These inscriptions include boasts of runic dexterity and sexual conquest, as well as references to “Jerusalem farers” breaking into the Neolithic tomb (Barnes 2012). Scandinavian runes are found

scattered sporadically throughout areas of Viking settlement in Britain and Ireland, and often attest to cultural integration, as well as connections with the wider Viking world.

Runes have a long postmedieval history of appropriation for a variety of purposes, including in the iconography of Nazi Germany and in the fantasy writing of Tolkien and his many imitators: an area of reception that is gaining increasing scholarly attention. Neopagan appropriations of the runic script mostly ignore the fact that the runes were first and foremost written letters, and take much inspiration from the mythological poems of the *Poetic Edda*, including the account of Odin’s self-sacrifice to gain knowledge of runes. However, the evidence of the inscriptions suggests that such associations had little impact on the everyday use of the script.

SEE ALSO: Franks Casket; *Rune Poem*; Ruthwell Cross

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