

This attempts to provide a comprehensive survey of existing runic inscriptions, as they have been described in important but hard-to-find books (ones not so easy to understand either !) such as the ones written by Krause, Moltke, and Derolez. It gives the bulk of the runic inscriptions as they were seen in the 80's. In addition to providing translations of the runic inscriptions, W. Krause, E. H. Antonsen and E. A. Makaev wrote grammars for the older runic inscriptions and I will add the interpretation of the last two when it differs from Krause's.

I have not included the archeological runic finds of English origin because they have already been described in books, such as Page's, that are well-known and still easily available<sup>1</sup>. I did not include either the recent interpretation of the famous Pictish ogams, as given by R. Cox, that obviously are not runes, but that are read as Old Norse inscriptions by Cox.

(Note a recent edition : R. I. Page, *Runes and Runic Inscriptions*, Boydell & Brewer Ltd.)


On the contrary, I want instead to report the less well-known, and not so easy to access, runic finds as they are given by Krause, Antonsen and Makaev (i.e., mainly finds based on archeological material dated before the 10th century), by Moltke (i.e., mainly archeological finds found in Denmark, but with no time limits), and Derolez (i.e., manuscript finds).

### *Sources and approximations*

The inscriptions discussed by Krause and Moltke come mainly from archaeological finds such as stone monuments, bracteates and other archaeological discoveries, while those from Derolez are from manuscripts. Therefore there is a certain amount of overlap between Krause and Moltke, but almost none with Derolez. In this presentation, I have kept Krause's order (alphabetical by place name), and when the inscription has also been discussed by Moltke, Makaev or Antonsen, I provide their translation of the inscription as well. In this way, the various translations can be directly compared. Krause, Antonsen and Makaev are less known than Moltke, but I have to say that my preference is with them without hesitation because they included a grammar and an etymology of Primitive Old Norse (not a small undertaking to say the least), and this allows us to understand why they interpret the inscriptions as they do. All of them use the Nordic alphabet which contains several vowels which, for simplicity, I have reduced here to 'a' and 'o'. Therefore there will seem to be some incoherence in the alphabetical order I give.

Reporting all the runic scripts together (as I do here) without some approximation would be quite hard to do since there is such a wide variety, but if I didn't do so, this chapter would become loaded with digressions on the exact form of the runes. This is why I 'overlook' many facts in my presentation. I made three most notable simplifications.

First, I deliberately merge the large variety of forms and sounds that the letter 'a' has represented (going from 'a' to 'o' and including a nasal vowel like in French 'an'), which are usually marked by using different symbols, such as 'a', 'A', etc.

Second, (illustrating very well the kind of details I have suppressed for the sake of simplicity), I ignore the runic character  for the following reasons:



It does not exist in the early primitive Scandinavian Futhark, nor in the Germanic Futhark.

It appears in the 'late primitive Scandinavian Futhark' (at the end of the first period – see below of the three periods) which drops the runes Pertho, Ihwaz and Ingwaz. It is placed just after the rune Isaz, and represents an 'a' sound.

In the Anglo-Saxon Futhark it becomes the rune Iar or Ior. It is a new rune, which has no real equivalent in the Elder (or Germanic) Futhark;

In the Scandinavian (Danish and Swedish) Futhark of period 2 and 3, it becomes the rune Hagall (representing the 'h' sound), equivalent to the Elder Futhark's Hagla.

Third, I give the same representation ('R', see below) to the rune Algiz of the Older Futhark and to the rune Yr of the Younger Futhark because they are representing the same sound. Rune Algiz

has (most often, but not always!) the form :  while rune Yr has the form : .

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<sup>1</sup> Note his recent book : R. I. Page, *Runes and Runic Inscriptions*, Boydell & Brewer Ltd.

### *The three periods of Scandinavian runes*

Scandinavian runes can be conveniently clustered into three periods that, unfortunately, are unrelated to the life of the Anglo-Saxon Futhorc.

The first period goes from the origin of the runes (approximately dated to the beginning of our era) up to the 8th century.

(Note: Most runologists date the beginning of the runes to around the year 175 but there have been more recent finds that lower this limit down to something like year 50 (see the Meldorf fibula below, # 129). In passing, I should note that the same thing happened with the Anglo-Saxon Futhorc, where recently runes have been found dating from the 5<sup>th</sup> century instead of the 6<sup>th</sup>, as was previously thought.)

It is called the Primitive Norse period, and the language of the Nordic inscriptions is Primitive Old Norse, Gothic or other primitive Germanic languages in some other inscriptions found more southwards, and Anglo-Saxon in the British inscriptions. The runes are those of the Elder Futhark, and in Great Britain, it is the Anglo-Saxon Futhorc. All the Northern inscriptions are purely Heathen since christianity had not yet stricken that far North.

(Note: Due to a change in the sound value of the rune Ansuz of the Elder Germanic Futhark, (called 'Os' in the English one), and because Anglo-Saxon does not use the symbol 'k', it is usual to change the name Futhark to Futhorc when dealing with the English runic alphabet.)

The second, so-called Viking period starts from the 8<sup>th</sup> century (with an obvious transition, the 'late primitive period' that I will ignore for the sake of simplicity), and mostly Younger Futhark runes are found. The language is Old Norse, and the inscriptions show a mixture of Heathenism and christianity. This period ends in the eleventh century, around 1075. In the South, the situation is totally confused since many of the runic inscriptions of this period are due to British scholars who were traveling on the continent, bringing with them the Anglo-Saxon Futhark.

After this a third period starts, the Medieval period, that lasts until the middle of the fourteenth century when runic inscriptions disappear, certainly under pressure of the Church since many clerics were using runes in ways that morality, christian or not, reproves. In this last period, the magical use of the runes is at its maximum height, with a mixture of Pagan and christian magic, Latin charms written in runes, etc. We shall discuss a few beautiful charms from this period that still show a great deal of Heathenism, but we shall discard all inscriptions that call on Christ or his saints since runes were created within one particular religious context, and christianity has certainly proved since its incapacity to retain the magical aspects of life.

(Note: this argument would be rejected by most scholars who argue that the Æsir might not have been known so early. It is indeed absolutely impossible to date the beginnings of what we call today the Asatru religion and is still beautifully called by some, 'the old faith' or 'our way'. However, Tacitus clearly shows that a Germanic religion existed very early, which has obviously been evolving over time into Asatru. My argument applies perhaps more to this primitive religion than to the strict Asatru one. For instance, my own practice calls very much upon Nerthus and Njörd, the latter became a 'secondary' God in Asatru, and Nerthus disappeared to become perhaps both Freya and Frigg. However even modern Asatru is very tolerant in what would be called heresy in a christian context. I ask the reader to be tolerant as well with the definition of the exact religious context into which the runes were born, as long as a Germanic or Nordic heathenism is involved, even a Celtic one would be welcome although Ogam is better suited to a Celtic religion.)

Krause's inscriptions all belong to the first period, while Moltke reports mostly from the second and third period. As mentioned earlier, I will keep Krause's ordering of the inscriptions for the first period, and add, as a comment, Moltke's opinion when appropriate. Following this, I'll add the two instances that Moltke provides us with that are not found in Krause's work. They are indeed from the end of the first period but they were found after Krause's death. Many inscriptions are indecipherable at present, or they simply repeat ad nauseam 'NN made the runes'. I do not think it is necessary to be exhaustive here with these kinds of inscriptions. However, their sheer number is very interesting. One might ask if they were engraved simply as graffiti, or if they import some mystical content. Contrary to what modern runology tends to believe, I will maintain the position that they sanctify, or hallow, the object. The basis of my opinion is not at all mystical, it stems from the fact that many finds obviously have magical content. For instance, an inscription, now lost, on the Gummarp stone (# 32 below) said: 'Hadulv placed three staves **f f f**' where the rune Fehu is repeated three

times. Everyone agrees, including the most unimaginative rationalists, that this otherwise incomprehensible triple Fehu is of a magical nature. Since it shows just as much dryness as the other inscriptions, I do not see why the other inscriptions would not equally be of a magical nature especially since a large number of them do not even show the name of the rune-master, so the engraver cannot even be accused of wanting to spread his/her name all over the place, as the authors of graffiti are.

(Note: As a side remark, distinct from the argument held above, most runologists say that the inscription is a call to fertility. Since Fehu is the rune of wealth (attested by many objective traces), it seems much simpler to me to see it as a call to wealth, rather than a call to fertility. For once, they are showing an excess of imagination which contradicts existing knowledge about the runes. As far as I can imagine, this custom originates from late Icelandic texts describing their Futhark in three groups or *ætt*s, *Freys ætt*, *Hagals ætt*, *Tys ætt*. Since the last two names refer obviously to the first rune of the *ætt*, it *must* be the same with the first one, hence Frey (and/or Freyja) have been associated to rune Fehu.)

As a concluding remark, Krause, who died in 1966 just after finishing the book that I use here, does not report the more recent finds. Moltke also died in 1984 just after the publication of the English version of his book which makes his version quite up to date, but he was only exhaustive with the Danish inscriptions. So far, we have no available report of all the existing runic inscriptions in the world.

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