

Runes

What are runes?

The Vikings used a runic alphabet to read and write. Each letter in the runic alphabet was called a rune.

Runic alphabet

The runic alphabet is often called 'Futhark', a word made from the first six runes. There are various versions of the runic alphabet. Some have 16 runes, while others have 24. A number of runes from the Danish, Norwegian and Anglo-Saxon runic alphabets look very different, while others are exactly the same.



How to read runes

Vikings often carved runes in straight, vertical lines. Usually, the reader would start at the bottom left corner of the text and read up. They sometimes used a dot or cross to separate sentences but didn't generally use punctuation or capital letters.

Recording runes

Rather than writing on paper, Vikings carved letters and words into materials including wood, stone, metal and bone. Each rune used straight lines instead of curves because straight lines were easier to carve.

Surviving runes

Many of today's surviving runes can be found in Scandinavian countries on rune stones. Today they are painted red to make it easier to see the carvings but it is believed they were originally brightly coloured. The Vikings carved the names of their dead onto these stones. The rune stones also often included the names of the deceased's family and the name of the person who engraved the stone.