

History of the Germanic Script

Germanic tribes used three alphabets for their written records:

the Runic Alphabet

the Gothic Alphabet

the Latin Alphabet

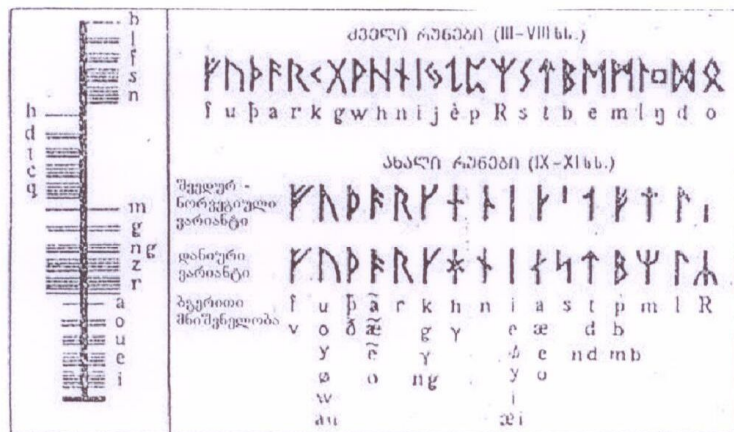
The Runic alphabet

The oldest of these alphabets (for the Germanic tribes) is the runic alphabet. It was created in the II - III centuries AD and was applied till the Late Middle Ages. The runic alphabet is a common Germanic script, it was used by all Germanic tribes, East Germanic, North Germanic, as well as West Germanic tribes. The runic alphabet is a specifically Germanic alphabet, not to be found in languages of other groups. Runic alphabet was used by various Germanic languages before the adoption of the Latin alphabet and for specialized purposes thereafter. It was generally replaced by the Latin alphabet as the cultures that had used runes underwent Christianization by around AD 700 in central Europe and by around AD 1100 in Northern Europe. However, the use of runes persisted for specialized purposes in Northern Europe. Until the early 20th century runes were used in rural Sweden for decoration purposes.

The three best-known runic alphabets are the Elder Runes (around 150 to 800 AD), also called Futhark; the Younger Runes (800–1100), which was further subdivided into Danish and Swedish-Norwegian; and the Anglo-Saxon Runes (400 to 1100 AD).

The name of the alphabet **futhark** or **fuþark** originated from the first six letters of the alphabet: **F, U, Þ, A, R, K**.

Runology is the study of the runic alphabets, runic inscriptions, runestones, and their history. Runology forms a specialized branch of Germanic linguistics.



The letters of the alphabet are of unusual form for those who are accustomed to European alphabets. The order of letters is also unusual from the point of view of European alphabets (*F, U, P, A, R, K etc*).

The word *rune* originally meant “secret”, “mystery” or “whisper”. The root *run-* can also be found in the Baltic languages meaning “speech”. In Lithuanian, *runoti* has two meanings: “to cut (with a knife)” or “to speak”. Hence “rune” came to denote inscriptions believed to be magic. Later the word “rune” was applied to the characters used in writing these inscriptions. The runes were used as letters, each symbol to indicate a separate sound. Besides, a rune could also represent a word beginning with that sound and was called by that word,

e.g. the rune **þ** denoting the sound [t] or [d] was called “thorn” and could stand for Old English *þorn* (New English *thorn*).

Main written records of this alphabet are inscriptions on hard material: stone, metal, wood, even rocks in Scandinavia. The technique of writing is carving, which explains angular shapes of the runes, shared with most contemporary alphabets of the period used for carving in wood or stone.

A peculiarity of the runic alphabet is the absence of horizontal strokes, although this characteristic is also shared by other alphabets, such as the early form of the Latin alphabet.

The earliest runic inscriptions found on artifacts give the name of either the craftsman or the owner, or, sometimes, remain a linguistic mystery. Due to this, it is possible to assume that the early runes were not so much used as a simple writing system, but rather as magical signs to be used for charms. The name *rune* itself, taken to mean “secret, something hidden”, seems to indicate that knowledge of the runes was originally considered esoteric, or restricted to an elite.

A recent study of runic magic suggests that runes were used to create magical objects such as amulets, but not in a way that would indicate that runic writing was any more inherently magical than were other writing systems such as Latin or Greek.

The number of runes varied in different Germanic languages. Elder Runes consisted of 24 characters, while Younger Runes, the Scandinavian version of the alphabet was reduced to 16 letters. As compared to continental, the number of runes in England was larger, new runes were added as new sounds appeared in

English. Originally Anglo-Saxon Futhork consisted of 28 letters, to be increased to 33. Neither on the mainland, nor in Britain were the runes used for everyday writing or for putting down poetry and prose works. Their main function was to make short inscriptions on objects, often to bestow on them some special power or magic. The two best known inscriptions in Britain are the earliest Old English written records. One of them is an inscription on a box called the "Franks Casket", the other is a short text on a stone cross near the village of Ruthwell, known as the "Ruthwell Cross". Both records are in the Northumbrian dialect of the Old English language.

The origin of the runes is a matter of conjecture. What is the origin of runes? Is it an original alphabet, invented by Germanic tribes, or is it based on some existing alphabets?

Professor Eric Moltke (1901 - 1984), a Danish Scholar gives a detailed comparative analysis of the futhork with the major variants of the Phoenician, Greek, Etruscan and Latin alphabets and arrives at the conclusion that the Latin alphabet was the basis for the runes. Ludvig Wimmer, another Danish scholar, also believed that the futhork was based on Latin letters.

The Greek and Etruscan alphabets have been taken seriously by scholars in the past as possible sources for the futhork. The latest 'Greek' theory was published in 1988. The debate on the development of the runic script concerns the question which of the Italic alphabets should be taken as their point of origin, and which, if any, signs should be considered original innovations added to the letters found in the Italic scripts. The historical context of the script's origin is the cultural contact between Germanic people, who often served as mercenaries in the Roman army, and the Italic peninsula during the Roman imperial period (1st c. BC to 5th c. AD).

Carl Marstrand (1883-1965), a Norwegian linguist put forward a theory, according to which the runic alphabet is based on the Subalpine Northern Etruscan Alphabet.

The Gothic alphabet

The Gothic alphabet was invented around the middle of the 4th century AD by Bishop Ulfilas (311-383 AD), the religious leader of the Visigoths, to provide his people with a written language and a means of reading his translation of the Bible. It is based on the Greek alphabet, with some extra letters from the Latin and Runic alphabets. The alphabet consisted of 27 letters.

The Gothic alphabet is preserved in a single written record of the Gothic language, known as **Codex Argenteus**. The **Codex Argenteus**, "Silver Codex", is a 6th century manuscript, originally containing bishop Ulfilas's 4th century translation of the Bible into the Gothic language. Of the original 336 folios, 188 have been preserved, containing the translation of the greater part of the four gospels. It is written on red parchment with silver and golden letters. The decoration is limited to a few large, framed initials and, at the bottom of each page, a silver arcade which encloses the monograms of the four evangelists.

In modern publications of the Gothic bible, mostly Latin transliteration is used.

ⱦ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ
ahsa	bairkan	giba	dags	aihvus	qairthra	iuja	hagl	thiuth	eis	kusma	lagus	manna	nauths
a	b	g	d	e	q	z	h	þ	i	k	l	m	n
[a/a:]	[b/v]	[g/ŋ/x]	[d/ð]	[e/e:]	[k ^w]	[z]	[h/x]	[θ]	[i/i:]	[k]	[l]	[m]	[n]
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	20	30	40	50
Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ	Ɱ
jer	urus	pairthra		raida	sauil	teiws	winja	faihu	iggws	hwair	othal		
j	u	p		r	s	t	w	f	x	h	o		
[j]	[u/u:]	[p]		[r]	[s]	[t]	[w/y]	[f]	[k ^h]	[w]	[o/o:]		
60	70	80	90	100	200	300	400	500	600	700	800	900	

Lord's prayer in the Gothic language

ATTA UNSAR þU IN HIMINAN WEIHNAI NAMO þEIN
QIMAI þIUDINASSUS þEINS WAIRþAI WILJA þEINS
SWE IN HIMINA JAH ANA AIRþAI
HLAIF UNSARANA þANA SINTEINAN GIF UNS HIMMA DAGA
JAH AFLET UNS þATEI SKULAN SIJAIMA
SWASWE WEIS AFLETAM þAIM SKULAM UNSARAIM
JAH NI BRIGGAI UNS IN FRAISTUBNJAI
AK LAUSAI UNS AF þAMMA UBILIN
UNTE þEINA IST þIUDANGARDI
JAH MAHTS JAH WULþUS IN AIWINS
AMEN

Latin transliteration

atta unsar þu in himinan weihnai namo þein
qimai þiudinassus þeins wairþai wilja þeins
swe in himina jah ana airþai
hlaif unsarana þana sinteinan gif uns himma daga
jah aflet uns þatei skulan sijaima
swaswe weis afletam þaim skulam unsaraim
jah ni briggais uns in fraistubnjai
ak lausai uns af þamma ubilin
unte þeina ist þiudangardi
jah mahts jah wulþus in aiwins
amen



The Latin Alphabet

The Latin alphabet spread among Germanic tribes alongside their conversion into Christianity. The Roman Catholic church banned religious services in vernaculars, therefore in countries, where Christianity penetrated directly from Rome, religious services were conducted in the Latin language. At churches and monasteries special schools were founded where the language of instruction was the Latin language. The very first Germanic words written in the Latin script were place names and proper names. Later appeared glosses in manuscripts and with the spread of Christianity the Latin alphabet came to be used for writing in Germanic languages. The first written records in the Latin script appear from VII – IX centuries in the West Germanic languages, while the North Germanic language start using Latin for their writings from XII – XIII centuries as a result of later Christianization of Scandinavian countries.

The Latin alphabet was created in the VIII – VII centuries BC on the basis of Western Greek and Etruscan alphabets.

The first written records of Germanic languages reveal that initially the Latin alphabet was used unaltered by Germanic tribes, later Latin alphabet was adjusted to the needs of sound systems of different Germanic languages and new letters appeared to render specifically Germanic sounds foreign for the Latin language. Some letters were introduced from the Runic script.

Depending on the size and shape of the letters modern philologists distinguish between several scripts which superseded one another throughout the development of the Latin alphabet. One of the ancient varieties of the alphabet is *scriptura capitalis* - capital letters. Some capital letters of the Latin alphabet developed from this variety. From *scriptura capitalis* in the III – IV centuries appeared the so-called *scriptura uncialis*, the origin of several small letters of the alphabet. The variety of the Latin alphabet, used by the Germanic tribes, was the variety of the Latin alphabet *scriptura minusculis* – the Minuscule script, from which originated

small letters of the Latin alphabet. The minuscule script is divided into two subtypes:

1. Insular Minuscule Script and
2. Continental Minuscule Script.

The main difference between these varieties is the graphic representation of four letters – f, g, r, s. The Continental minuscule was used by Germanic tribes who remained on the European continent. Insular script was used in England, this variety of the Latin alphabet was created in Ireland in the VI century.