



RUNES

The spectacular runes above were carved on a mountainside outside Eskilstuna nine hundred years ago. The text of these runes is not extraordinary. Like on most runestones, it simply says that Sigrid commissioned it for her husband Holgers. What, however, makes these runes something out of the ordinary is the 1.9 x 4.6 meter size.

Furthermore the common dragon motive has been extended into an illustration of one of the most popular sagas of the time, about Sigurd who slayed the dragon Favne - *Sigurd Favnes bane*.

At the bottom of the rune inscription you see Sigurd sticking the sword Regin has made through the body of the dragon. On the left you see the decapitated Regin in his blacksmith shop complete with tools of his trade. Sigurd broils the dragon's heart over the fire. When he checks to see if it is ready, he burns his thumb and sticks it into his mouth. When he tastes the blood of the dragon, according to the saga, he understands the songs of the birds in the tree, to which his horse Ragne is tied.

There are about 2 500 runestones in Sweden and a few hundred in Norway, Denmark and in Viking colonies such as the Faroe Islands, the Isle of Man and Russia. The earliest runestones have been found in Norway and Denmark and these date from around the year 400 A.D. Most are from the 11th century. With the advent of Christianity, the runestones gradually disappeared although there are some runestones that have crosses on them to show that the person honored with was a Christian.



Roadsign that often indicates runestones

Scholars are still not in agreement about the origins of the runes. A few of the rune letters like RNISTB are identical to latin letters and one theory is that the runes were originally the simpler form of letters used by the common Greeks and Romans in notes, letters and graffiti. The lettering was picked up by the Goths from roman legionaires around 700 A.D and then redesigned to fit the new medium: wood. That is why there are no round or vertical lines which were difficult to carve on the wood surface.

The first Germanic translation of the bible was written by Bishop Wulfial around 300 A.D. with runes adapted for writing on pergamon. The famous "silver bible" in Uppsala is a rune written copy of the translation dating back to 500 A.D.

The word *runa* meant "secret" and magic and varying degrees of power were given to the different letters. To this day the Sami people use a type of runes on their magic drums.

The runestones we visit today are hard to read if the runes have not been filled in with paint. Originally all runestones were painted in red, white and black and we know this from a few finds where runestones had



Parents teaching their children runes by Olaus Magnus 1555

Germanic runes on top. Below Danish and Swedish-Norwegian runes with 16 letters each.

ƒ	u	p	g	r	k	h	n	i	a	s	t	b	m	l	R
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16

ƒ	u	p	g	r	k	h	n	i	a	s	t	b	m	l	R
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16

become building material in the construction of early churches. There are also stones with texts like: "Asbjörn carved and Ulf painted".

The original "Germanic" rune alphabet had 24 letters. Around 700 A.D. these were reduced to 16. This number was sometimes not sufficient so the Danes introduced dots (that you can see on the Sigurd rune above) that extended the alphabet to 19 letters. At this time there were also a lot of rune dialects with their own version of runes. In *Hälsingland* the vertical lines were removed resulting in a "stenograph" type of alphabet that was much quicker to carve.

The inscriptions on the runestones are generally quite simple and strangely enough never involve any of the historically famous people of the time. It is the illustrations that accompany the texts that are the more spectacular. The illustrations teach us a lot about Viking life, dreams and aspirations. It is on the runestones that we see the first skier ever to be depicted. There are also a few beautiful stones filled with illustrations and without any text.

From ancient historians we know that the Vikings placed wooden signs with runes on top of their dead. They also used runes on wooden slabs for notes, and wooden sticks with runes for perpetual calendars. Very few rune inscriptions on wood have survived however, so this is why the runestones are such treasures.