

# 16.02.47, Findell, Runes

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Findell, Martin. *Runes. Ancient Scripts*. Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2014. pp. 112. ISBN: 978-1-60606-448-1 (paperback).

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The Ancient Scripts series, published in partnership with the British Museum by Getty in the US (and by the British Museum Press in the UK), had two 2015 publications: one on the oldest writing, *Cuneiform*, written by I. Finkel and J. Taylor, and this book on runic inscription by Martin Findell. Runes, an ancient set of related alphabets in use in northwestern Europe from late antiquity through to the early medieval period, were carved on stone monuments, whalebone caskets, weaponry, and gold ornaments. They were also written down in manuscripts. Findell's introduction to this script seeks to tell the story of runic writing from its origins to its function in the modern world. This is achieved in an informative and concise way through the use of rich, high quality images of some of the British Museum's most wondrous objects on which these curious and knowledge-resistant signs are inscribed. This is a highly visual book, then, and one that does not assume prior knowledge of the subject. Furthermore, although it is designed to engage and interest the reader, Findell's contribution to the Ancient Scripts series remains conservative: it does not sensationalize or purvey popular modern fantasies that have appropriated or even re-envisioned runes as magical symbols that have iconic or apotropaic qualities.

Any new introduction to runic script has certain responsibilities. As runes have some common associations with modern fantasy writing and modern "pagan" magic--both of these often present runes as a set of magical, iconic symbols rather than as a form of writing with its origins early Germanic Europ--the writer would often be right to assume that the new, interested reader has come in search of information either precisely because of these associations, or because of an interest in related areas taught in higher education (e.g. Anglo-Saxon, Norse myth, Viking culture). So, an introduction to this topic has its work cut out in the sense that, ideally, it should inform about the origin, history and past usage of runes, while also being sensitive to a reader's possible interest in the attractive mystery and esotericism of runic glyphs.

Writing an introduction to runes today is daunting in other ways, too. The work of the esteemed R. I. Page brought scholars and students of runology to a much deeper understanding of this old script, and any new writer seeking to introduce this topic could be forgiven for wondering just what can be said that was not covered in Page's own *An Introduction to English Runes* (1991). But Findell's book is well placed, and, as its written content aims for brevity and direction, it orientates the student towards Page's work (it might be said to serve as a gateway to Page's scholarship and this is certainly needed for those without prior knowledge of runic writing). Yet, Findell also offers something more: thirty-eight varied and high resolution color images of objects marked with runic inscriptions. These are not isolated to the British Isles or to the Anglo-Saxon period and are of a much higher quality than those provided by other introductions to this topic. In addition, Findell's book also comes at a very affordable price.

Underlying the Introduction of this book, "What are runes?" (6-14), as well as the six short chapters that follow, is the aim to invoke contemplation of the material cultures of the past. Chapter 1 offers an overview of the origin of runic writing; two focuses on Anglo-Saxon runes (the "futhorc"); chapter 3 examines what are perhaps less difficult to interpret, Viking runes;

and chapter 4 outlines simply and clearly the "rune-names"--that is, what names have been given to each individual rune. Chapters 5 and 6, on "The Work of Runologists" and "Runes in the Modern World" respectively, are perhaps the book's strongest, although that could be a result of Findell's choice to place them at the end of his own exercise in runology which here leads the reader steadily, clearly and concisely through the history of runes.

While this is a slim volume, and one that eschews a line of critical argument in favor of outlining features and providing accepted details about rune-inscribed objects, it is still an ambitious book. In the Introduction, Findell observes that runes were predominantly used for carving and thus the book will focus 'on examples of inscribed objects to illustrate the use of runic script' (10). With that acknowledged, he writes that by "analysing the texts found on these objects we will trace the origins of runic script, its development over the centuries during which it was used and how it has been interpreted and used in more recent times" (10-11). A bold statement of intent, perhaps, but it is one that is seen through with a solid and plain style. Short subsections within chapters mean that the reader is not overwhelmed. The stage for this is set in the introduction itself, where a short sequence of sections about the conventions of transliteration and phonetic transcription and another on the etymology of the word 'rune' are arranged unobtrusively.

The impressive high-resolution images that accompany Findell's journey through runic history are always in context, and he is conscious that these treasures require no over-embellishment. Following an overview of the shady origins of runic writing in chapter 1, in which the reader begins to understand the difficulty inherent in garnering the circumstances or purposes of runic writings that have survived (which include those on the wondrous golden drinking horns found at Gallehus in Jutland, Denmark, in 1974, dated to the fifth century--their British Museum copies are presented here across a two-page spread, 20-21), in chapter 2 Findell turns his attention to seventh-century Britain, where the "futhork" (the name given to the runic alphabet based on its first six letters) of the previous centuries, surviving on objects that have been found in Scandinavia as well as southern Germany from the period c. 300-c. 800, gains some additional letterforms and alterations, becoming the 'futhorc': the runic alphabet used by the Anglo-Saxons.

The changes to the runic alphabet that occurred during the seventh and eighth centuries, which included the creation of two new runes to represent speech more effectively (displayed by Findell on 25-26), produced an expanded runic alphabet which is outlined in one of several of the book's helpful tables (these show the rune and transliteration alongside Findell's comments on sound-value) (35). This chapter on Anglo-Saxon runes is, like the others, full of beautiful visuals, and the marvelous objects on which inscriptions from the 'futhorc' are found are lavishly reproduced. The Undley bracteate, one of the earliest rune-inscribed objects found in the British Isles (arriving, Findell notes, in one of his rare speculations, with a settler from Germany) and dated to the fifth century, becomes a focal point at the beginning of the chapter. This is an object on which can be seen the beginnings of the change to the runic alphabet that is becomes fully established by the seventh. But this pendant is significant for other reasons. Findell points out that the image of Romulus and Remus (the mythical founders of Rome, suckled in their infancy by a she-wolf), imprinted on the bracteate, is representative of a tale that had "enduring appeal in Anglo-Saxon England" (26-27). The surrounding runic inscription on the same object suggests an early form of *maga med* ("kinsmen's reward"). Guided by Findell through the features of this object, the reader is led to understand that the object shows something of the appeal of origin myths for the Anglo-Saxons, but also that reward and recognition for service to a lord played an important role in the societies of this place and time. Findell is reserved when it comes to ascribing to any one critical view, as his writing thuds with "commonly believed to represent" and "may have been used" and "other interpretations have been proposed," which are representative of the book's desire to have the reader decide for themselves and pursue further study (there are suggestions at the end of the short discussion of the Undley ornament (29), for instance, of what scholarship might assist the student on such a path).

The Franks Casket is at the core of this chapter and, arguably, at the center of the book as a whole. This early eighth-century artifact, carved from whalebone, is reproduced and discussed across ten pages (45-55). Findell takes care when outlining the complex visual and verbal riddles found on this object. Thus, the reader is shown how events from Germanic legend, such as Weland's act of fashioning wings for himself from dead birds and his crafting of drinking vessels from skulls (events that the craftsman of the casket may have thought particularly relevant, given that he manufactured his artifact from the bone of an immense sea creature), are found alongside others from biblical history (including the Adoration of the Magi). But Findell does not fill his pages with speculations about what these juxtapositions might mean. Instead, in simple yet acerbic terms, he details what the panels of the Franks Casket are commonly thought to represent, and translates the runic inscriptions that run back and forth around its borders according to the most widely accepted consensus. This compliments the stunning visual presentation of the casket and the image of each panel is given at least a page. The usefulness of this form of presentation cannot be underestimated for those beginning to learn about the Franks Casket or about Anglo-Saxon runes more broadly: this is a difficult and intellectually complex artifact to approach critically--it asks to be interacted with, experienced and deciphered. Findell presents the casket through quality visuals that allow it to be seen as well as it can be on the page, and there is no overt or singular critical argument at large here that would distort that rewarding first encounter.

While the Franks Casket dominates this chapter, other, lesser-known objects are included here as well. Findell is able to move between different aspects of early medieval material culture, drawing comparisons when relevant. Preceding the Franks Casket section, for example, Findell briefly addresses the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Northumbria in the seventh and eighth centuries (41). The importance of this kingdom in the spread of literacy is acknowledged, and, usefully here, Findell points out that "far from being associated with pagan magic, as is sometimes claimed, the high point of runic literacy in England was in Northumbria's religious communities" (41). This short section on Northumbria prepares the way for the extended case study of

the Franks Casket's (the whalebone artifact is thought to have been crafted in Northumbria), but also offers insights into another kind of material on which runes are found from this period: stone.

The Ruthwell and Bewcastle monuments, sometimes referred to as 'crosses', are majestic survivals from the Northumbrian "golden age." Etched around the panels of the Ruthwell monument is part of a poem about the Crucifixion told in the first person (so that the stone "cross" speaks), a longer version of which is found in the Vercelli Book manuscript. While the Ruthwell monument is well known among early medievalists because of its connection with the Vercelli Book, other stone crosses receive less attention in the field. Findell is keen to account for some of these, which is a fine touch in an introductory book, and provides stunning images of fragments of two crosses with surviving runic inscriptions. One of these is from Monkwearmouth, Tyne and Wear, dated to the tenth century (inscribed with runes of a person's name, *tidfirþ*) and the other from Lancaster, dated to the late ninth century, includes the name *cupbere* in runes--a possible form of Cuthbert, a person who may have commissioned the monument.

While space and the nature of this book demand that Findell does not speculate about the implications of such names, or the variety of possible meanings swarming around certain other runic inscriptions, at times the reader will desire more insight. Overall, though, that works positively, because, in tandem with Findell's occasional pointers to further reading, it incites further curiosity.

In chapter 3, "Runes and the Vikings" (56-72), the focus moves from early medieval England and Frisia to Scandinavia. A common theme of the book up to this point is the difficult nature of deciphering runes--many Older Futhark and Anglo-Saxon inscriptions survive in a damaged or obscure state--and, as the focus moves to Viking culture, Findell is keen to point out that the runes carved on surviving artifacts from medieval Scandinavia are often more intelligible because they were used to write longer texts. This chapter shows how the runic writing system was reorganized once again in Scandinavia, as the forms of runic characters were simplified, and the number of runes were reduced from twenty-four to sixteen (another possible reason for Viking runes being more intelligible). This "Younger Futhark" is described clearly and graphically by Findell in this chapter and it is accompanied by some fine examples of runestones (including the large, imposing hulk of rock that is the magnificent Jelling runestone from Jutland, Denmark, 63). The concluding section covers Scandinavian runes in the later Middle Ages and beyond (66-71) and is structured around the many *runakelfi* (wooden sticks carved with runic messages) from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries that were excavated from the Bryggen district of Bergen following a fire there in 1955.

Following a short section on "The Rune-Names: (72-79), in which Findell offers some extremely useful tables that explain the names of each rune in Old English and Old Norse, the final two chapters move to the work on and of runes in the modern world. Runology, as the book has already established by this point, has a long history, and it is difficult, frustrating, illuminating and fascinating work. The final chapters reiterate those points, but they also do more work to account for and explain the eclectic and multidisciplinary nature of the field. Findell notes that the uncertainty surrounding runic inscriptions from the earlier periods "is the nature of the evidence" (80-81) before offering some insights into the common methods and aims of the contemporary runologist. The choice to include this section was a smart move because it allows the reader new to the topic to see how working with and interpreting runes can be done. Two case studies, with accompanying images, are used to expand these methodologies, and show them in process: the Loveden Hill Urn (recovered from a cemetery in Lincolnshire, d. sixth century) and the Chessell Down pail (found on the Isle of Wight, d. sixth century). The presentation of these objects risks confusing the reader at first--in contrast to the presentation of material elsewhere in the book, these visuals are found at some remove from the minute text that details what the objects are--but remain useful in the context.

The concluding chapter, "Runes in the Modern World" (92-100), is a fine postscript that offers a depiction of the use of runes in Nationalist agendas and unravels the modern associations between runes and magic, debunking such a connection by simple reference back to the runic inscriptions that have been detailed earlier in the book (the "real" runes, as oppose to the symbolic runes found in fantasy or modern pagan lore). As Findell writes, "runes have entered popular culture and popular consciousness largely due to their supposed magical properties" (92). The book has often been at pains to play down these kinds of associative connections. In keeping with that, Findell ends on a slightly mournful note and writes that it is hard "not to regret the extent to which the modern reinvention of runes as magic symbols has obscured their far more interesting and complex history as written ones"(98). This final sentence stands alongside a map from J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, with its text written in Anglo-Saxon runes (with some forms slightly adapted). A more positive point might have been made in conclusion about the ways in which working with runes and understanding their 'complex history' can stir the creative imagination, for that was the case with Tolkien, and it might also be so for the student gazing at the artifacts in this book.

Still, *Runes* will be very useful for anyone seeking an informative and concise introduction to runes and runic objects. While Findell's guide stands as a gateway to the work of R. I. Page, its delicious images of ancient objects, along with its helpful letter tables and insights into practice, make it a book more than worth its affordable price and one with which the student of Old English literature or Anglo-Saxon archaeology should be encouraged to begin their journey into the world of runes.

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