Origin of the Runes

(1) Like wrestling, swimming and fighting, writing was considered a special skill among the Vikings. The alphabet they used was invented by their *ancient* Norse *ancestors* around 200 B.C. The letters or *runes* may have been based on the early Latin or Greek *alphabets* or on Neolithic (stone-age) characters carved in rocks throughout northern Europe. Whatever their origin, the runes were changed slightly by the Norse, probably because they had few things with which to write.

(2) The word *rune* means *mystery* or *whispered secret*. In Viking mythology, the runes were a gift from their all-powerful god *Odin*. In order to learn them and the magical powers they *possessed*, Odin hung upside down on the tree of knowledge for nine days. When he saw the runes, he used his sword to carve them into the tree. In return for gaining the *wisdom* and magic powers associated with the runes, Odin gave up his left eye. Because of this *sacrifice*, the Vikings considered the runes to be *sacred*.
The Viking Runic Alphabet

(3) The Viking alphabet is often called the futhark after the first six letters of the original alphabet of twenty-four letters. The alphabet was later reduced to sixteen runes. This made spelling difficult for rune carvers because all of the sounds in the Norse language could not be covered. It also made it difficult for translators who tried to understand their meaning.

(4) Viking runes weren't written with pen and ink on paper. Instead, runes were carved into stone, wood, clay and bone with a knife or chisel. To make carving into these surfaces easier, the runes were made using only straight lines. Words were formed by separating groups of runes with what we call a colon (:). In some cases, just a single period was used.

Uses of Runes

(5) Runes were used for many ordinary and extraordinary things. Ordinary Vikings used them to label household items and personal belongings like the fishing sinker pictured above. Viking merchants used runes to keep records of items bought and sold. Viking warriors decorated their swords with runes to identify the owners. Because the Vikings thought the runes were magical, the believed their weapons became stronger in battle. Warriors who knew how to read and write runes could blunt enemies' weapons, break chains, cure illnesses and guard against witches. The runes were also carved on amulets, pieces of jewelry worn by a deceased Vikings for protection in the next world.
Viking Rune (Memorial) Stones

(6) The Vikings used runes to inscribe memorial stones. Some of the inscriptions were tributes to fallen heros and loved ones. Other stones mocked a dishonest Viking who had betrayed family and friends. Nearly 3000 runestones have been discovered across Scandinavia. A much smaller number have been unearthed in other parts of Europe.

(7) The rocks used to make runestones were usually large boulders with at least one naturally flat surface. Before they became Christians, the stone contained only runes. After conversion, pictures were added. The images and inscriptions were often decorated with black, red, blue and white paint extracted from berries, garden plants and clay-like earth. The stones often depicted snakes, horses and ships.

Archaeological Importance of Viking Runes

(8) Wherever the Vikings went, they carved runes on rocks, buildings and statues. Some coins have been found that have Viking runes carved in their surfaces too. It’s lucky for us they were graffiti artists. Some of what we know about the Vikings has come from their graffiti. Runestones and the sagas recorded by skalds (Viking poets) have helped archaeologists reconstruct some of what we know about the Vikings. Some runestones are petroglyphs and their pictures give us a glimpse of what Viking life was like. What do you think the Thor’s hammer hanging from the top of this stone says about the deceased?
Other Viking Rune Stones

(9) Viking runes were also inscribed on thumb-sized stones. The stones were placed in bags and removed one by one by Viking fortunetellers and magicians. The stones were then used to predict the future, heal the sick, banish evil, or bless people, places, and things. The watermark (the lighter graphic in the background on this page) depicts a full collection of Viking rune stones. The rune in the lower left-hand corner is blank. This enabled a person to select his/her own rune, maybe a reminder that ultimately, we are in control of our own destiny.

The Viking Alphabet

(10) This is the 24 character old Viking runic alphabet. It is no coincidence that some of the runes resemble our own letters. Our alphabet was influenced by the Latin and Greek alphabets too!

(11) Viking runes were written and read from right to left- opposite to the way we write and pronounce our characters. When carved on a snake's body on a runestone, the runes were written and read beginning at the head and then following the body to the tail.

(12) Not all of the sounds in the English language are covered by the runes. The Vikings had no “qu”, “v” or “x” sounds and the “k” or “s” sound was used for our letter “c”.

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The End of the Use of Runes

(13) The use of runes was not limited to the Vikings. Many others societies in Europe used these characters. But, because the runes were associated with paganism, their use ended when the Europeans converted to Christianity. The Vikings were one of the last group of Europeans to make this conversion. Consequently, their use of runes lasted longer than any other European society.

More than Just Alphabetical Characters

(14) The individual characters in the Viking rune alphabet have several meanings. Objects in the Viking world -plants and animals for example- could be referred to by a single rune. The letter “f” - pronounced “fe”- meant cattle and was associated with wealth. Some characters represented the Viking gods. Pronounced “ride” the “R” rune meant wagon and was associated with travel, movement, progress and the wheels of time. It was also the sacred symbol for Thor, the oak tree and the eagle.

Feh
(fe)

Reid
(ride)
Viking Runes

Vocabulary  Match the following meanings with words contained in the passage paragraph in brackets. Use the context of the sentence to help you identify the correct word.

(1) Very old .................................. ______________________
(2) The all powerful Viking god ................... ______________________
(4) A tool used for carving .......................... ______________________
(4) A punctuation mark .............................. ______________________
(5) Dull, not sharp .................................. ______________________
(5) Add colours, ribbons etc ...................... ______________________
(5) Uncommon, out of the ordinary ............ ______________________
(7) Special words written on a card, letter or plaque . ______________________
(8) Unwanted letters and pictures ............... ______________________
(8) A very quick look ............................. ______________________
(8) Rocks containing pictures .................... ______________________
(9) Exile, remove, send away .................... ______________________
(11) Spoken ................................... ______________________

Mark and X on the word that doesn’t match the meaning of the word in bold print in each of the following.

a. reconstruct  rebuild  reconsider
b. praise  scolding  tribute
c. excavate  bury  unearth
d. mark  label  scribble
e. removed  added  extracted
f. mocked  humiliated  praised

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**True or False**

___ Viking alphabet letters are called runes.
___ Viking runes contain both straight and curved lines like our own.
___ There are no traces of Viking runes outside their Scandinavian homeland.
___ Viking who knew how to read and write runes were considered magical.
___ Runes were used to label pots, pans and clothing.
___ A merchant could keep track of people who owned him payments with runes.
___ Warriors didn’t like runes because they thought they were bad luck.
___ Runes were used to mark headstones.

**Comprehension Questions**

1. How does Viking mythology explain the origins of runes?

2. Why did the Vikings use only straight lines for the letters of their alphabet?

3. How did ordinary Vikings use runes?

4. How did Viking warriors use runes?

5. Why did the use of runes come to an end?

6. Why are the Viking runes of importance to archaeologists?

**Your Name**

Using the alphabet on the next page, write your own name in Viking Runes in the space below. The Viking read their runes from right to left.
Creating a Monogram Using Viking Runes

The Vikings carved the straight-lined letters of their alphabet in stone, wood, bone and metal. These lines were first constructed on a stave- a series of lines that served as a guide for rune writing. The graphic to the right is an example of what a stave looks like. It was made using straight sticks. You can trace any character of the Viking alphabet on this stave.

One fun activity you can do with Viking runes is to create a monogram. A monogram is really a pair of initials. Today, we write our initials by placing the letters one after the other and separating them with a period. Viking rune monograms are different. They are written with one letter placed on top of the other.

There are some rules for writing monograms. One is that monograms must looked balanced. That means that if all of the diagonal lines are to one side of the main vertical line, one of the runes can be reversed.

Your Turn

Create a monogram using your own initials. Be sure it is balanced. Compare yours to your classmate’s.

Use your rune monogram to identify objects that belong to you.

Using self-hardening clay or plasticine, create a pendant with your monogram. Using string and plastic/wooden beads and the pendant, make your own Viking rune necklace.
Make Your Own
Rune Stone

Below is the outline of a flat-faced stone very much like the ones the Vikings used to carve memorial stones and messages. Following the patterns you have seen in the pictures of real Viking rune stones, create a stone of your own. Add colour.
Anglo-Saxon runes

The Anglo-Saxons wrote using letters called 'runes'. They called their alphabet the 'futhork'. Can you work out why it was called this?

In the box below, write a secret message to a friend using 'runes'. Once you've finished your message, see if your friend can work out what you've written.

__________________________

__________________________

__________________________