

Ray Page

A kindly aunt has just sent you a letter asking what you want for Christmas, so you are in a hurry to write back. You get a piece of paper from the drawer, pick up your ballpoint pen (or, if you are old-fashioned, you use a pen and ink), and write your reply, put it in an envelope and send it off. But how would you have managed a thousand years ago, when there was no paper in England, no ballpoints, no ready-made pens and ink?

Well, if you have been taught in a monastic school you might know something about writing, and about the materials you need for it. Instead of paper, you would know about parchment, and you might even be able to make it, by taking animal skins, those of sheep and calves for instance, treating them to give a smooth surface, and cutting them into convenient size sheets. For a pen you could take a goose's feather and cut it into shape so as to form a 'quill pen' (the word 'pen' originally meant 'feather'; if you know French you will know that they call a pen 'plume', which also means 'feather'). This isn't as easy as it sounds. For ink you would have to make your own, and there are several ways of doing it. A common one was to pick galls from some tree such as an oak (what we call 'oak-apples'), and pound them in a basin until you had got all the juice out of them. Then you added acid and out of this came a dark black dye which could be used for ink. By the time you had got all this ready, Christmas would be long past and you would have missed your present!

However, for a long time the Vikings were not Christians, and were therefore not taught in monastic schools. But they still wanted to send messages, and they came up with a much more convenient way of doing it. Most Vikings would carry a knife at their belt. There was plenty of wood about — you could always pick up a stick from the firewood basket. You squared this

stick up so that it had three or four flat sides. Then, starting at the end of one side, you began to cut your message with the point of the knife. When you came to the end of that side, you turned the next side uppermost and began again, until you had either finished your message or filled the whole stick. If you made a mistake you would only need to shave off the surface a bit at that point and recut your word. You wouldn't need an envelope: you would get someone to take the stick to whoever you were writing to. How much easier and quicker than all that parchment business!

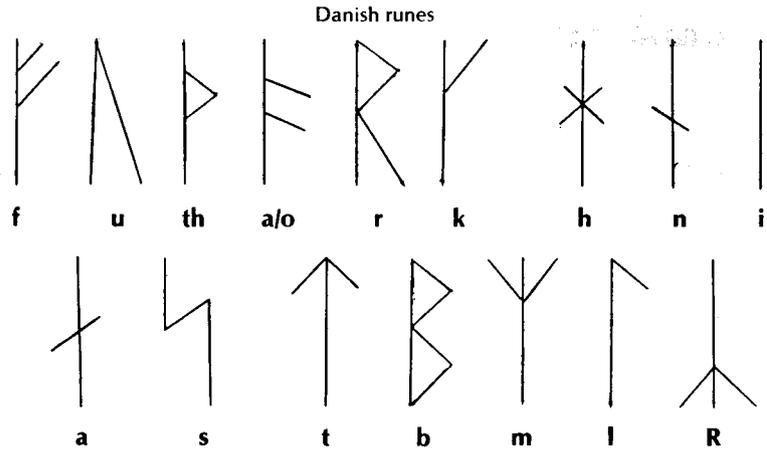
But of course you would need a special alphabet for this sort of writing. Ours — the Roman one — has all sorts of curved letters like O, G, C, and curves are hard to cut on a wood surface because of its grain. The Vikings made up a special alphabet with letters that had only straight lines and which were on the whole simpler than the Roman ones. This alphabet was called 'runic', and each letter was a 'rune'. They didn't use our ABC order; the first letters of their alphabet had the values f u th a r k, so it was called a **futhark**. Of course, though it was invented for writing on wood, it wasn't used only on wood. If they wanted to scratch the owner's name on a metal brooch or a ring, or on a bone comb, they would use runes just the same. In fact it is usually on metal or bone or stone that runic writing survives today, because wood tends to rot away in England. But in some other places — in Dublin, Ireland, and in Bergen, Norway — runes on wood have been found; and they are often mentioned in Viking stories. So it is likely that the Vikings in England cut runes on wood too.

In fact it is a bit too simple to say that the Vikings had a runic alphabet, a **futhark**. Different Vikings had slightly different **futharks**. If you were a Norwegian Viking, you might use this **futhark**:

Norwegian runes



If you were Danish, it might be a bit more complicated:



In either case you wouldn't bother about capital and small letters. Nor did the Vikings bother much about punctuation (though they might use dots or small crosses to divide up sentences), and they didn't always bother even to divide a message up into its separate words.

Some of you may think that, though the Vikings had a good idea in making an alphabet for cutting on wood, they didn't manage it very well. And you'd be right. You will notice that the **futhark** has only sixteen letters instead of our twenty-six. What's more, some of the letters seem to be wasted. There are two letters for **r** (which we distinguish by writing **r** and **R**), and there are two letters for different sorts of **a** (though one of these can also be used for **o**). On the other hand, there are some letters that are missed out altogether. If you were called Ulfr or Ása, you could manage your name without difficulty. But what if you were called Gamall or Haraldr? There are no letters for **g** and **d**, so you would have to use **k** and **t** instead.

Gammall would be spelled **kamal** (you wouldn't bother putting in both **l**'s at the end) and Haraldr would be **haraltr**. And what about Eric Bloodaxe (who in Norse would be called Eiríkr)? There's no letter **e**, so you might use **i** or **ai** instead, and some might spell it **irikr** and some **airikr**. Obviously this could lead to confusion.

At last even the Northmen realized that this was unnecessarily difficult, and they started adding new letters to their **futhark** to make it more complete. Eventually they managed an almost complete alphabet, rearranged in ABC order, though that was not until quite late in the Middle Ages. It is not easy to find examples of this because by this time runes were being replaced by the Roman alphabet even in Scandinavia, and anyway, many of these letters were not commonly needed to represent Scandinavian sounds. here is one possible suggestion for the later runic alphabet, though note it still does not distinguish between **i** and **j** or between **u**, **v** and **w**.

