

# Anglo-Saxon runes

**Anglo-Saxon runes** (Old English: *rūna*) are runes used by the early Anglo-Saxons as an alphabet in their writing system. The characters are known collectively as the **futhorc** (*fuporc*) (also spelled *futhark* or *futhork*),<sup>[1]</sup> from the Old English sound values of the first six runes. The futhorc was a development from the 24-character Elder Futhark. Since the futhorc runes are thought to have first been used in Frisia before the Anglo-Saxon settlement of Britain, they have also been called **Anglo-Frisian runes**.<sup>[2]</sup> They were likely used from the 5th century onward, recording Old English and Old Frisian.

They were gradually supplanted in Anglo-Saxon England by the Old English Latin alphabet introduced by Irish missionaries. Futhorc runes were no longer in common use by the eleventh century, but the Byrhtferth Manuscript (MS Oxford St John's College 17) indicates that fairly accurate understanding of them persisted into at least the twelfth century.

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## History

There are competing theories about the origins of the Anglo-Saxon futhorc. One theory proposes that it was developed in Frisia and from there later spread to Britain. Another holds that runes were first introduced to Britain from the mainland where they were then modified and exported to Frisia. Both theories have their inherent weaknesses, and a definitive answer may come from further archaeological evidence.

Futhorc	
<span></span> <div></div>	
Type	Alphabet
Languages	<span>Old English</span> and <span>Old Frisian</span>
Time period	5th through 11th centuries
Parent systems	<div>Phoenician alphabet<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><span>Greek alphabet</span> (Cumae variant)<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><span>Old Italic alphabet?</span><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li><span>Elder Futhark</span><ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Futhorc</li></ul></li></ul></li></ul></li></ul></div>
Sister systems	<span>Younger Futhark</span>

The early futhorc was nearly identical to the Elder Futhark, except for the split of *f* *a* into three variants *F* *āc*, *F* *æsc* and *F* *ōs*, resulting in 26 runes. This was done to account for the new phoneme produced by the *Ingvaemonic* split of allophones of long and short *a*. The earliest *F* *ōs* rune is found on the 5th-century *Undley bracteate*. *F* *āc* was introduced later, in the 6th century. The double-barred *ᚷ* *hægl* characteristic of continental inscriptions is first attested as late as 698, on *St Cuthbert's coffin*; before that, the single-barred variant was used.

In England, outside of the *Brittonic Westcountry* where evidence of *Latin*<sup>[3]</sup> and even *Ogham* continued for several centuries, usage of the futhorc expanded. Runic writing in England became closely associated with the Latin scriptoria from the time of Anglo-Saxon Christianization in the 7th century. The futhorc started to be replaced by the Latin alphabet from around the 7th century, but it was still sometimes used up until the 10th or 11th century. In some cases, texts would be written in the Latin alphabet, and *þorn* and *pynn* came to be used as extensions of the Latin alphabet. By the Norman Conquest of 1066, it was very rare and disappeared altogether shortly thereafter. From at least five centuries of use, fewer than 200 artefacts bearing futhorc inscriptions have survived.

Several famous English examples mix runes and Roman script, or *Old English* and Latin, on the same object, including the *Franks Casket* and *St Cuthbert's coffin*; in the latter, three of the names of the *Four Evangelists* are given in Latin written in runes, but "LUKAS" (Saint Luke) is in Roman script. The coffin is also an example of an object created at the heart of the Anglo-Saxon church that uses runes. A leading expert, *Raymond Ian Page*, rejects the assumption often made in non-scholarly literature that runes were especially associated in *post-conversion Anglo-Saxon England* with *Anglo-Saxon paganism* or magic.<sup>[4]</sup>

Letters

The letter sequence and letter inventory of futhorc, along with the actual sounds made by those letters could vary depending on location and time. That being so, an authentic and unified list of runes is not possible.

Rune inventory
























The left half of the front panel of the 7th century *Franks Casket*, depicting the Germanic legend of *Weyland Smith* and containing a riddle in Anglo-Saxon runes.

ƿ	ᚢ	ᚦ	ᚱ	ᚲ	ᚷ	ᚹ	ᚻ
feoh - f	ur - u	dom - þ	os - o	rad - r	cen - c	gifu - g	wyn - w
wealth	amuch	thorn	god?	riding	torch	gift	joy
is - i	gear - j	ceoh - t	poeth - p	ilx - x	sigel - s	ti/ti - t	berc - b
ice	harvest	yew tree	?	elk's?	sun	Tiw?	birch tree
lugu - l	ing - ŋ	dag - d	epel - æ	ac - a	æsc - æ	yr - y	ear - ea
lake	ling	day	estate	oak tree	ash tree	?	gravesoil?
							gar - g
							spear

A chart showing 30 Anglo-Saxon runes



A rune-row showing variant shapes.

Image	UCS	Name	Name meaning	Transliteration	IPA
	ƿ	<u>feoh</u>	wealth, cattle	f	/f/, [v] (word-medial allophone of /f/)
	ƿ	<u>ūr</u>	aurochs	u	/u(:)/
	þ	<u>þorn</u>	thorn	þ	/θ/, ð (word-medial allophone of /θ/)
	ƿ	<u>ōs</u>	god, or mouth (Latin) <sup>[5]</sup>	o	/o(:)/
	ƿ	<u>rād</u>	riding	r	/r/
	ƿ	<u>cēn</u>	torch	c	/k/, /ki/, /tʃ/
	ƿ	<u>gyfu</u>	gift	g	/g/, ɣ (word-medial allophone of /g/), /j/, /x/? , /gj/?
	ƿ	<u>pynn</u>	mirth	w	/w/
	ƿ	<u>hægl</u>	hail (as in "precipitation")	h	/h/, /x/, ç (allophone of /x/ before and after frontal vowels)
	ƿ	<u>nȳd</u>	need (as in "plight")	n	/n/
	ƿ	<u>īs</u>	ice	i	/i(:)/
	*/þ	<u>gēr</u>	year (as in "harvest time"?)	j	/j/
	ƿ	<u>ēoh</u>	yew-tree	ī, ȝ	/i(:)? /x/, ç (allophone of /x/ before and after frontal vowels)
	ƿ	<u>peorð</u>	(unknown)	p	/p/
	ƿ	<u>ilx</u>	elk's	x	/ks/
	ƿ/ƿ	<u>sigel</u>	sun (but rune poem implies "sail")	s	/s/, [z] (word-medial allophone of /s/)
	↑	<u>Tī, Tīr</u>	<u>Tiw?</u> <u>Mars?</u> <sup>[6]</sup>	t	/t/
	ƿ	<u>beorc</u>	birch-tree	b	/b/
	ƿ	<u>eh</u>	steed	e	/e(:)/
	ƿ	<u>mann</u>	man	m	/m/
	ƿ	<u>lagu</u>	lake (as in "body of water")	l	/l/
	ǣ	<u>Ing</u>	Ing (Ingui-Frea)?	ŋ	/ŋg/, /ŋ/
	ǣ	<u>ēðel</u>	ethel (homeland, estate)	œ	/ø(:)/
	ƿ	<u>dæg</u>	day	d	/d/
	ƿ	<u>āc</u>	oak-tree	a	/a(:)/
	ƿ	<u>æsc</u>	ash-tree	æ	/æ(:)/
	ƿ	<u>ȳr</u>	yewen bow?	y	/y(:)/
	*	<u>īor</u>	beaver? <sup>[7]</sup> eel?	N/A	/i(:)o/?
	ƿ	<u>ēar</u>	grave soil?	ea	/æ(:)a/

The sequence of the runes above comes from the surviving modern copy of the Anglo-Saxon rune poem which was based on the now-destroyed Cotton Otho B.x.165 manuscript. The first 24 of these runes directly continue the elder futhark letters, and do not deviate in sequence (though **𐌺** rather than **𐌾** is an attested sequence in both elder futhark and futhorc). The next 5 runes represent additional vowels (*a*, *æ*, *y*, *io*, *ea*), comparable to the five forfeda of the ogham alphabet.

While the rune poem and some manuscripts present **\*** as "ior", and **ᚦ** as "ger", epigraphically both are variants of ger. R. I. Page designated ior a pseudo-rune.<sup>[8]</sup>

Image	UCS	Name	Name meaning	Transliteration	IPA
𐌺	𐌺	calc	chalk? chalice? sandal?	k	/k/
𐌸	𐌸	(unknown)	(unknown)	ċ	/k/
𐌾	𐌾	gar	spear	g	/g/, [ɣ] (word-medial allophone of /g/)
𐌿	𐌿	cweorð	(unknown)	q	/k/? (for writing <u>Latin</u> ?)
𐌽	𐌽	stan	stone	N/A	/st/
𐌺	N/A	(unknown)	(unknown)	ę, E	/ə/?
ᚦ	N/A	(unknown)	(unknown)	i	/e(:)o/? /i(:)o/?

The runes above (in no particular order) were not included in the rune poem. Calc appears in manuscripts, and epigraphically on the Ruthwell Cross, the Bramham Moor Ring, the Kingmoor Ring, and elsewhere. Gar appears in manuscripts, and epigraphically on the Ruthwell Cross and probably on the Bewcastle Cross.<sup>[9]</sup> The unnamed **𐌸** rune only appears on the Ruthwell Cross, where it seems to take calc's place as /k/ where that consonant is followed by a secondary fronted vowel. Cweorð and stan only appear in manuscripts. The unnamed **ę** rune only appears on the Baconsthorpe Grip. The unnamed **i** rune only appears on the Sedgeford Handle.

There is little doubt that calc and gar are modified forms of cen and gyfu, and that they were invented to address the ambiguity which arose from /k/ and /g/ spawning palatalized offshoots.<sup>[10]</sup> R. I. Page designated cweorð and stan pseudo-runes, noting their apparent pointlessness, and speculating that cweorð was invented merely to give futhorc an equivalent to Q.<sup>[11]</sup> The **ę** rune is likely a local innovation, possibly representing an unstressed vowel, and may derive its shape from **ᚦ**.<sup>[12]</sup> The unnamed **i** rune is found in a personal name (birnferþ), where it stands for a vowel or diphthong. Anglo-Saxon expert Gaby Waxenberger speculates that **i** may not be a true rune, but rather a bindrune of **l** and **F**, or the result of a mistake.<sup>[13]</sup>

### Combinations and digraphs

Various runic combinations are found in the futhorc corpus. For example, the sequence **FF** appears on the Mortain Casket where **ᚦ** could theoretically have been used.

Combination	IPA	Word	Meaning	Found on
ƿl	/oi/ (?)	join[.]	(unknown)	Lindisfarne Stone II
xl	[gg] (?), [ddʒ] (?)	blagcmon	(personal name)	Maughold Stone I
xx	~[ddʒ]	eggbrect	(personal name)	(an armband from the <u>Galloway Hoard</u> )
ƿƿ	/w/	gehwelc	each	Honington Clip
ƿh	/ks/ (likely [xs])	wohs	to wax	Brandon Antler
tx	/ŋg/	hring	ring	Wheatley Hill Silver-Gilt Finger-Ring
ix	/ij/	modig	proud/bold/arrogant	<u>Ruthwell Cross</u>
ƿ* (?)	~/ij/ (?)	hæliġ (?)	holy (?)	<u>Gandersheim Casket</u>
ƿh	/ks/ (likely [xs])	BennaREis	king Benna	(a coin of <u>Beonna of East Anglia</u> )
hƿ	/sk/, /ʃ/	fisc	fish	<u>Franks Casket</u>
mf	/eo/, /e:ɔ/	eoh	(personal name)	Kirkheaton Stone
mx	/ej/	legdun	laid	Ruthwell Cross
mf	~/ej/, [ej] (?)	eateinne	(personal name)	Thornhill Stone II
mf	/æɑ/, /æ:ɑ/	eadbald	(personal name)	Santi Marcellino e Pietro al Laterano Graffiti
ƿn	~/au/	saule	soul	Thornhill Stone III
ƿl	/ai/ (?)	desaiona	(gibberish?)	(a gold shilling from <u>Suffolk</u> )
ƿ*	/ɑj/ (?), /ɑx/ (?)	fajhild? faghild?	(personal name)	Santi Marcellino e Pietro ad Duas Lauros Graffiti
ƿn	~/æu/	dæus	deus (Latin)	Whitby Comb
ƿƿ	/æɑ/, /æ:ɑ/	æadan	(personal name)	Mortain Casket

## Usage and culture

A rune in Old English could be called a *rūnstæf* (perhaps meaning something along the lines of "mystery letter" or "whisper letter"), or simply *rūn*.

Futhorc inscriptions hold diverse styles and contents. Ocher has been detected on at least one English runestone, implying its runes were once painted. Bind runes are not uncommon in futhorc (relative to its small corpus), and were seemingly used most often to ensure the runes would fit in a limited space.<sup>[14]</sup> Futhorc logography is attested to in a few manuscripts. This was done by having a rune stand for its name, or a similar sounding word. In the sole extant manuscript of the poem *Beowulf*, the ēðel rune was used as a logogram for the word ēðel (meaning "homeland", or "estate").<sup>[15]</sup> Both the Hackness Stone and Codex Vindobonensis 795 attest to futhorc Cipher runes.<sup>[16]</sup> In one manuscript (Corpus Christi College, MS 041) a writer seems to have used futhorc runes like Roman numerals, writing ʁll□ʁʁʁʁʁʁʁʁʁʁ, which likely means "12&30 more".<sup>[17]</sup>



The Anglo-Saxon futhorc (*abecedarium anguliscum*) as presented in Codex Sangallensis 878 (9th century).

## Inscription corpus

የቤርክስፕላንተት-ጊሃትቤም ጽድቅ ለሰባ ጥፋት

A long, curved dagger or spearhead, likely made of metal, with a decorative pattern of small circles along its length. The handle features a bird-like head design with a beak and eyes.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Saxon\\_runes](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Saxon_runes) 6/11

FRISIAN
* Ferwerd combcase, 6th century; <i>me uræ</i>
* Amay comb, c. 600; <i>eda</i>
* Oostyn comb, 8th century; <i>aib ka[m]bu / deda habuku</i> (with a triple-barred <i>h</i> )
* Toornwerd comb, 8th century; <i>kabu</i>
* Skanomody <i>solidus</i> , 575–610; <i>skanomodu</i>
* Harlingen <i>solidus</i> , 575–625, <i>hada</i> (two <i>ac</i> runes, double-barred <i>h</i> )
* Schweindorf <i>solidus</i> , 575–625, <i>wela[n]du</i> "Weyland" (or <i>peladu</i> ; running right to left)
* Folkestone <i>tremissis</i> , c. 650; <i>æniwulufu</i>
* Midlum <i>sceat</i> , c. 750; <i>æpa</i>
* Rasquert swordhandle (whalebone handle of a symbolic sword), late 8th century; <i>ek [u]mædit oka</i> , "I, Oka, not made mad" <sup>[20]</sup> (compare <i>ek unwodz</i> from the Danish corpus)
* Arum sword, a yew-wood miniature sword, late 8th century; <i>edæboda</i>
* Westeremden A, a yew weaving-slay; <i>adujislume[þ]jisuhidu</i>
* Westeremden B, a yew-stick, 8th century; <i>oph?nmuji?adaamlup / :wimœ?ahpu?? / iwio?u?du?ale</i>
* Britsum yew-stick; <i>þkniaberetdud / ]n:bsrsdnu</i> ; the <i>k</i> has Younger Futhark shape and probably represents a vowel.
* Hantum whalebone plate; <i>[.]aha:k[;]</i> ; the reverse side is inscribed with Roman <i>ABA</i> .
* Bernsterburen whalebone staff, c. 800; <i>tuda æwudu kius þu tuda</i>
* Hamwic horse knucklebone, dated to between 650 and 1025; <i>katæ</i> (categorised as Frisian on linguistic grounds, from <i>*kautōn</i> "knucklebone")
* Wijnaldum B gold pendant, c. 600; <i>hiwi</i>
* Kantens combcase, early 5th century; <i>li</i>
* Hoogebeintum comb, c. 700; <i>[...]nlu / ded</i>
* Wijnaldum A antler piece; <i>zwfuwizw[...]</i>

ENGLISH
* Ash Gilton (Kent) gilt silver sword pommel, 6th century; [...] <i>jemsigimer</i> [...] <sup>[21]</sup>
* Chessel Down I (Isle of Wight), 6th century; [...] <i>bwseeekkkaa</i>
* Chessel Down II (Isle of Wight) silver plate (attached to the scabbard mouthpiece of a ring-sword), early 6th century; <i>æko:ʔori</i>
* Boarley (Kent) copper disc-brooch, c. 600; <i>ærsil</i>
* Harford (Norfolk) brooch, c. 650; <i>luda:giboætæsigilæ</i> "Luda repaired the brooch"
* <u>West Heslerton</u> (North Yorkshire) copper cruciform brooch, early 6th century; <i>neim</i>
* Loveden Hill (Lincolnshire) urn; 5th to 6th century; reading uncertain, maybe <i>sipæbæd piuw hlaw</i> "the grave of Sipæbæd the maid"
* <u>Spong Hill</u> (Norfolk), three cremation urns, 5th century; decorated with identical runic stamps, reading <i>alu</i> (in <u>Spiegelrunen</u> ).
* Kent II coins (some 30 items), 7th century; reading <i>pada</i>
* Kent III, IV silver <i>sceattas</i> , c. 600; reading <i>æpa</i> and <i>epa</i>
* Suffolk gold shillings (three items), c. 660; stamped with <i>desaiona</i>
* <u>Caistor-by-Norwich astragalus</u> , 5th century; possibly a Scandinavian import, in Elder Futhark transliteration reading <i>raiĥan</i> "roe"
* Watchfield (Oxfordshire) copper fittings, 6th century; Elder Futhark reading <i>hariboki:wusa</i> (with <i>a</i> probably already fronted to <i>æ</i> )
* Wakerley (Northamptonshire) copper brooch, 6th century; <i>buhui</i>
* Dover (Kent) brooch, c. 600; <i>pd bli / bkk</i>
* Upper Thames Valley gold coins (four items), 620s; <i>benu:tigoii</i> ; <i>benu:+:tidi</i>
* <u>Willoughby-on-the-Wolds</u> (Nottinghamshire) copper bowl, c. 600; <i>a</i>
* Cleatham (South Humbershire) copper bowl, c. 600; [...] <i>Jedih</i>
* <u>Sandwich/Richborough</u> (Kent) stone, 650 or earlier; [...] <i>Jahabu</i> [...] <i>Ji</i> , perhaps <i>*ræhæbul</i> "stag"
* Whitby I (Yorkshire) jet spindle whorl; <i>ueu</i>
* Selsey (West Sussex) gold plates, 6th to 8th centuries; <i>brnrn / anmu</i>
* <u>St. Cuthbert's coffin</u> (Durham), dated to 698
* Whitby II (Yorkshire) bone comb, 7th century; [ <i>dæ</i> ] <i>us mæus godaluwalu dohelipæ cy</i> i.e. <i>deus meus, god aluwaldo, helpæ Cy</i> ... "my god, almighty god, help Cy..." ( <i>Cynewulf</i> or a similar personal name; compare also <u>names of God in Old English poetry</u> .)
* the <u>Franks casket</u> ; 7th century
* zoomorphic silver-gilt knife mount, discovered in the River Thames near Westminster Bridge (late 8th century) <sup>[22][23]</sup>
* the <u>Ruthwell Cross</u> ; 8th century, the inscription may be partly a modern reconstruction
* the Brandon antler piece, <i>wohs wildum deoræ an</i> "[this] grew on a wild animal"; 9th century. <sup>[24]</sup>
* <u>Kingmoor Ring</u>
* the <u>Seax of Beagnoth</u> ; 9th century (also known as the Thames scramasax); the only complete alphabet

## Related manuscript texts

- Codex Vindobonensis 795 — contains a description of Anglo-Saxon runes
- the Anglo-Saxon rune poem (Cotton Otho B.x.165)
- Cotton MS Domitian A IX



- The Byrhtferth's Manuscript MS 17 — contains a table of runic, cryptographic, and exotic alphabets (<http://digital.library.mcgill.ca/ms-17/folio.php?p=5v>)
- Codex Sangallensis 878 — contains a presentation of Anglo-Saxon runes
- Solomon and Saturn (Nowell Codex) — contains some runes that stand for the word that names them

## See also

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- Elder Futhark
- Ogham
- Old English Latin alphabet
- Runic alphabet
- Younger Futhark

## Notes

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## Further reading

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## External links

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- [Transliteration from Latin alphabet to Anglo-Saxon runes \(https://web.archive.org/web/20160223173646/http://the.rune.site/\)](https://web.archive.org/web/20160223173646/http://the.rune.site/)
  - [Anglo-Saxon Runic Texts at Georgetown Univ \(https://web.archive.org/web/19970614202945/http://www.georgetown.edu/labyrinth/library/oe/texts/runic-index.html\)](https://web.archive.org/web/19970614202945/http://www.georgetown.edu/labyrinth/library/oe/texts/runic-index.html)
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