

Subject: **Ancient Scripts and Languages**

Article: **49**

The Viking Script

Vilhelm Ludwig Peter Thomsen (1842 – 1927) was a Danish linguist who initially began studying theology at the Danish University in 1859, but soon switched his focus to philology. In 1893 he became interested in some epigraphs brought from Siberia and the Orchun valley. Thomsen concentrated on the largest and lengthiest inscriptions in the hope of achieving a decipherment. He immediately saw that the letters on these inscriptions were very similar to the Scandinavian runes. Since he had already published in 1877 a treatise on the relations between ancient Russia and Scandinavia, he was hoping to prove that ancient Vikings went to Central Asia and inscribed their feat on stone stele (1).

Studying the layout and the position of whole passages, Thomsen was able to establish that these inscriptions should be read from right to left. The next step was the count of letters; and he soon found out that thirty-eight letters were involved. Since alphabets had rarely more than thirty signs, he reached the conclusion that this script was a syllabary. But since most syllabaries possessed no fewer than fifty signs, he guessed that certain signs should be read according to the signs which preceded or followed them. This kind of compact syllabary could only be related to a language which had a sound harmony or rather a very specific linguistic structure.

Thomsen published his decipherment in 1896 under the title *Inscriptions of Orchon Deciphered* (see Chapter 23-**The Orhun Valley Script**). The correct name of the valley in which these inscriptions were found is **Orchon** or **Orkhun** as Thomsen correctly identified. This is because **or** means "high" and **chun** or **khun** is **Khan** meaning "leader" in Turkish. This is because the sound "h", was pronounced as a guttural "kh" in ancient Asiatic Turkish. So, Orhun valley is the region in which "the high king" or "the universal leader" resides.

Scholars in general label the Orkhun script as the *Turkish runic script*, because of its similarity to the Scandinavian runes. But there is an important difference between a syllabary and a runic script. The runes are accepted to contain spiritual mysteries and that they represent certain life energies, while the letters or signs in a syllabary have no such mysterious spiritual meanings; they represent the locally spoken language.

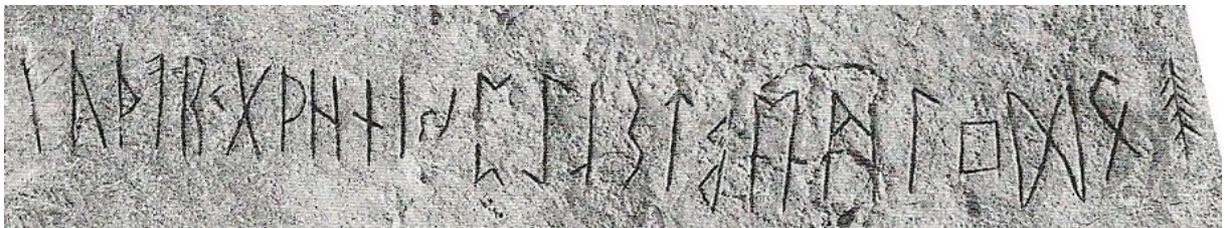
Here exists two different Viking alphabets; the older alphabet which was used until AD 800 contains twenty-four characters, while the later version contains only sixteen characters. The total number of inscriptions written in the archaic runic series is over 200, of which 50 are found in Sweden. The remaining ones are located in Denmark, Finland and Norway. Most of them have not been definitively interpreted. This is most probably because the early inscriptions were written in a language which does not belong to the Indo-

European group of languages. Finnish as well as Estonian are languages belonging to the Ural-Altaic group of languages and are quite different in their grammatical structure when compared to the other Scandinavian languages.

The twenty-four so called "Futhark" alphabet and the interpretation of each letter is seen below.

ƿ	ᚋ	ᚏ	ᚠ	ᚱ	ᚨ	ᚷ	ᚹ
F	U	TH	A	R	K	G	W
ᚕ	ᚗ	ᚖ	ᚲ	ᚴ	ᚢ	ᚦ	ᚸ
H	N	I	J	E	P	Z	S
ᚢ	ᚫ	ᚓ	ᚦ	ᚦ	ᚩ	ᚱ	ᚩ
T	B	E	M	L	Ng	D	O

The whole alphabet was found on the side-slab of a sarcophagus from Kylver, Gotland in Sweden. The letters of this alphabet have been read from left to right and this is why the alphabet has been named "futhark". But almost all ancient inscriptions written with this alphabet were written from right to left. So, the name **futhark** is a serious mistake made by early scholars. The original inscription is seen below (2).



The  sign seen on the very right, does not belong to this alphabet, because it is the twenty-fifth sign when we count the letters of this inscription. It most probably means "start reading from here", as one can tell from its shape. Thus the letters should be read from right to left and the alphabet should be called the "**Odinglim**" instead of the "Futhark".

Odinglim can clearly be interpreted in Turkish as meaning "**Belonging to my Odin**", where the suffix **-lim** or **-im** means "my". For example, **ben** means "me" and **benim** means "mine". This name given to an alphabet is quite meaningful, because runes were believed to be invented by the god Odin and "rune" meant "secret" or "mystery" in proto-Germanic. Since we have very little knowledge about the early Germanic languages, there shall be as many interpretations as there are scholars working on the early runic inscriptions. My interpretation is quite logical since Odin was the god who invented the runes (3).

Odin's spear was called **Gungnir** and it always found its mark; in addition, it had the property that any oath sworn upon it could never be broken. His steed **Slepnir** had eight

legs and could travel at colossal speed all over the nine worlds. Information from these nine worlds was brought to him by his two ravens, **Hugin** and **Munin**, who fled each morning from **Asgård**, the home of the gods, and returned each evening. Odin was also the master of two wolves, **Freki** and **Geri**, which he personally fed with gobbets of raw meat (4).



Above we see two drawings of Odin.

According to the Nordic Mythology the runes were invented by Odin. One can see that the letters of the Viking alphabet are very similar to the Turkic letters discovered in the Orchun valley. Although the sounds assigned to the Viking letters do not correspond to the sounds of the Orchun syllabary, there is a striking similarity between the shapes of many signs. Below we see that out of 24 Scandinavian runes 19 are similar to the letters of the Orchun syllabary. This similarity cannot be coincidental since the ratio is 79 %; a percentage not to be underestimated.

ƿ _r	ᚠ _{k2}	ᚢ _u	ᚦ _{th}	ᚨ _m	ᚫ _a	ᚭ _{g2}	ᚱ _r	ᚷ _k	ᚸ _{ik}	ᚹ _g	ᚻ _{d2}	ᚾ _w	ᚿ _{y1}	
ᚰ _h	ᚲ _ü	ᚴ _n	ᚶ _{ng}	ᚸ _i	ᚺ _{s2}	ᚼ _j	ᚾ _{ae}	ᚿ _{ae}	ᚰ _p	ᚳ _{ök}	ᚴ _z	ᚶ _{iç}	ᚸ _s	ᚺ _{nç}
ᚰ _t	ᚲ _{ok}	ᚴ _b	ᚶ _{d1}	ᚸ _e	ᚺ _{it}	ᚼ _m	ᚾ _i	ᚿ _i	ᚰ _{ng}	ᚳ _{nt}	ᚴ _d	ᚶ _o	ᚸ _{b2}	

Viking letters are on the left and Turkish Orchun letters are on the right of each box.

The main reason behind the difficulty of interpreting the 24 letter so called primitive Viking script may be because the sounds corresponding to the letters have not been

correctly identified. Would it be possible to interpret correctly the Nordic scriptures if the sounds of the Orhun letters were given to the primitive runic letters?

The inscription on the Klyver stone has been interpreted by some Turkish scholars as representing a meaningful message written in ancient Turkish. I am not of the same opinion. This is because there are no two signs that are repeated on this inscription. It is quite improbable to write a sentence where no letter is found even twice. Moreover, there are no dots or any other sign separating the words. All signs are equally distanced from each other and one can define words according to a personal choice. This leads, naturally, to many different interpretations, making it very difficult to decide which one is correct and which one is wrong. Therefore, I will not try to make a transcription of this inscription and will accept it as being the full alphabet used before the 8th century AD. The Klyver inscription was dated on archeological grounds to the fifth century, most probably to its first half (Ref. 2, page 12).

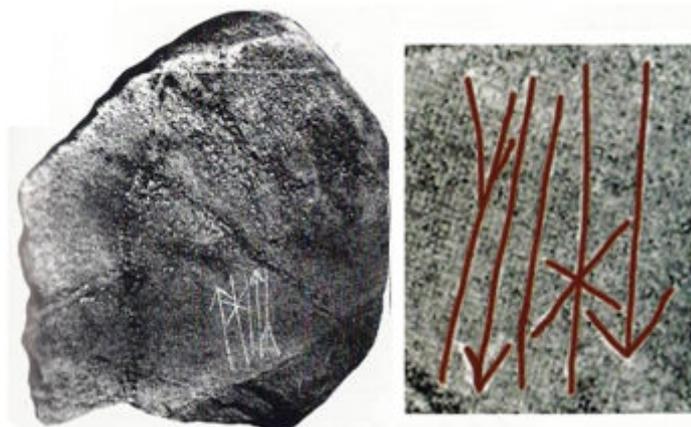
After the 8th century AD, a new and simplified alphabet containing 16 letters has been in use. S. B. Jansson says the following (Ref. 2, page 26):

The Viking Age script is greatly simplified: from a linguistic point of view it is decidedly inferior to the 24-rune series, which in its time corresponded considerably better with phonetic realities.

This simplification of the alphabet may be because the language in use after the 8th century AD changed from a Ural-Altai dialect to a Scandinavian Indo-European language.

The stone seen below was found in Norway. Its exact date is not known, but it was most possibly inscribed before the 8th century AD. When the stone is rotated 180 degrees we get the picture on the right. From the Orhun syllabary we get the following letters: Ç – OKH – S2 – ING-D2 – OKH. Concatenating these letters we get: **ÇOKH ISINGDIOKH** or in modern Turkish "**Çok Isındık**", which means "We were very warm". Norway being a cold country, most probably, they lit a fire and one of them carved these runes on a piece of stone; in order to commemorate this event.

ORHUN SYLLABARY					
	↵	A – E		⋈	1 & 2 Ç
	⋈	I – I		⋈	1 & 2 M
	⋈	O – U		1	1 & 2 P
	⋈	O – U		⋈	1 & 2 Ş
B1	⋈	⋈	B2	⋈	1 & 2 Z
D1	⋈	X	D2	⋈	iç, ci Ç
G1	⋈	ε	G2	⋈	IKH, KHI Q
Q	⋈	⋈	K	⋈	LT, LD
L1	⋈	⋈	L2	⋈	NÇ
N1	⋈	⋈	N2	⋈	NT, ND
R1	⋈	⋈	R2	⋈	ING
S1	⋈	⋈	S2	⋈	NYI
T1	⋈	⋈	T2	⋈	OK, UK
Y1	⋈	⋈	Y2	⋈	OKH, UKH

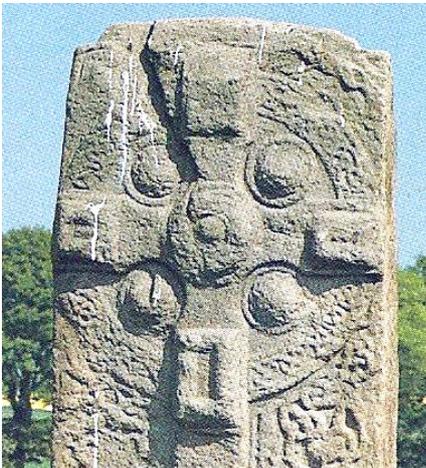


In Chapter 6 – **Universal Symbols** we saw the ONKH symbol. This symbol is known as the "**Odin Cross**". Below we see the Odin Cross and a Viking amulet depicting the

“**hammer of Thor**”. These symbols belong to the Viking mythology and were in use before the 8th century AD.



Thor was the god of Thunder and was responsible for the weather and crops. His invincible hammer was **Miölnir** and he used it to kill anyone foolish enough to be nearby. No one knows what Miölnir means in Swedish or Norwegian, but it becomes meaningful when the name is split into its morphemes as: **Mi-Ölnir**. **Mi** is clearly “me” and is still being used as “men” in some Turkish dialects. **Ölnir** is most probably the ancient form of **öldir**, or **öldür** which means “kill” in Turkish. Thus, the meaning of **Miölnir** becomes “I kill” or “the one that kills”, in perfect accordance with the use that Thor made of his hammer. We also find the suffix **-nir** in the name of Odin’s steed Slepnir. The word **slep** in Swedish, which is written as **släpp** means “let go” or “get loose”. Thus the meaning of Släpnir becomes “the one that gets loose”.



On the amulet shown above we find the OK symbol as mentioned before. The same symbolism is found on the Celtic tombstones from northern Scotland (5). On the left we see a tombstone belonging to the Picts or to the Celts. The name Pict was given by the Romans because these people who were fighting them used to paint their faces before going to war. This habit of painting the face existed among the American Indians and had to do with the belief that the paint will protect them spiritually from any harm that the enemy may inflict.

- (1) **Voices In Stone**, Ernst Doblhofer, page 285, Paladin Books, 1979, UK.
- (2) **Runes In Sweden**, Sven B. Jansson, page 13, Falthe Publishing, 1987, Sweden.
- (3) **The Story of Writing**, Andrew Robinson, page 178, Thames & Hudson, 1995.
- (4) **An Introduction to Viking Mythology**, John Grant, page 74, Grange Books, 1990, London, UK.
- (5) <http://www.halukberkmen.net/pdf/17.pdf>