



## LESSON PLAN: RUNES AND WRITING SYSTEMS

**Level:** Stage 4 NSW curriculum

**Length:** 2 x 50 minutes

**Learning Intention:** Students will use learn about the meaning and symbolism of Viking runes and what purpose they were used for.

**Success Criteria:** By the end of this lesson sequence, students will be able to recognize the shape and meaning of Viking runes, and appreciate the cultural achievement of written language systems. Students will be able to explain how runes help us understand Viking life.

**Stage 4 History Syllabus content:** Depth Study Topic 4a: The Vikings (c. AD 790 – c. 1066)

- The way of life in Viking society (social, cultural, economic and political features) and the roles and relationships of different groups in society (ACDSEH007)
- Significant developments and/or cultural achievements that led to Viking expansion, including weapons and shipbuilding, and the extent of their trade (ACDSEH047)

**Stage 4 History Syllabus outcomes:**

- HT4-1 describes the nature of history and archaeology and explains their contribution to an understanding of the past
- HT4-3 describes and assesses the motives and actions of past individuals and groups in the context of past societies
- HT4-6 uses evidence from sources to support historical narratives and explanations

**Previous Knowledge:**

- Viking lore and mythology
- Viking everyday life

**Historical Concepts and Skills:**

Perspectives, empathetic understanding, comprehension, analysis and use of sources

**Learning across the curriculum:**

Critical and creative thinking, intercultural understanding, literacy

## Vocabulary:

- Rune: a letter of an ancient alphabet used by people of Northern Europe between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, typically cut into stone or wood.
- Talisman: an object believed to bring good luck, have magical powers, or to keep its owner safe from harm.
- Heirloom: a valuable object that has belonged to a family for several generations.
- Auroch: an extinct wild ox found in Europe that is the ancestor of domestic cattle.
- Yew: a coniferous tree linked with folklore and superstition due to its highly poisonous berries. Its wood was also used to make longbows.
- Birch: a slender tree with a thin peeling bark, typically found in Northern temperate regions.
- Commission: to put in a request or order to produce an item.
- Reverence: a deep respect for someone or something.

## Activity 1: Artefact inquiry (5 min)



Using your purse of runes, go around the class and ask each student to pick one out of the bag. As they pick their rune, students should consider what letter it might represent. Does the shape look familiar? What do they think its symbolic meaning is?

Show this icon to students. Does this icon look familiar? Does anyone know what it is?



This is the Bluetooth logo, which is made up of a runic H and B; the initials of a Viking king! Harald Bluetooth was the king of a significant Viking stronghold in Denmark and helped unify Denmark. The name was chosen due to Swedish telecommunication company Ericsson's Viking heritage. The founders felt that Harald Bluetooth's ability to unite people in peaceful negotiations would be appropriate for a telecommunications technology.

























$$H \left( \text{ᚺ} \right) + B \left( \text{ᚱ} \right) = \text{Bluetooth logo}$$

# VIKINGS

## Activity 2: Teacher exposition and student exploration (10 min)

These Viking runes are in a runic language called elder Futhark. They are named after the first six letters of the runic alphabet, just like our alphabet is named after the first two letters in Greek (alpha, beta), and a QWERTY keyboard is named after the first six letters.

Share the Futhark alphabet below with students. Ask them to find the rune they picked. What letter does their rune represent? What does it symbolise?

							
fehu (wealth, cattle)	uruz (aurochs, strength of will)	þurisaz (giant, danger, suffering)	ansuz (god, prosperity)	raidō (ride, journey, movement)	kaunan (mortality, pain)	gebō (gift, generosity)	wunjō (joy)
<b>F</b>	<b>U</b>	<b>TH</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>K</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>W</b>
							
hagalaz (hailstones, destruction, chaos)	naudiz (need, desire)	ĩsaz (ice)	jēra (year, reward, harvest)	ĩ(h)waz (yew tree, strength, stability)	perþ (meaning unknown)	algiz (elk, protection, defence)	sōwilō (sun, success)
<b>H</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>J/Y</b>	<b>I ("eye")</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>Z</b>	<b>S</b>
							
berkanan (birch, fertility, growth)	tīwaz (the god Tyr, victory, honour)	ehwaz (horse, trust, faith, companionship)	mannaz (man, support)	laguz (water, lake, the unknown)	ingwaz (the god Freyr, beginning)	ōþala- (heritage, inheritance, tradition)	dagaz (day, hope, happiness)
<b>B</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>L</b>	<b>NG</b>	<b>O</b>	<b>D</b>

## Activity 3: Class discussion (5 min)

- What items do you think the Vikings carved runes on?
- Why do you think they carved runes?

# VIKINGS

## Activity 4: Teacher exposition (15 min)

The Vikings used runes in many different ways. Each rune has not only a sound, but also a meaning or symbol, so they can be interpreted in different ways by historians. Runic inscriptions can be both poetic ("Listen, ring-bearers, while I speak/Of the glories in war of Harald, most wealthy") and mundane or obvious ("Rannvieg owns this box").

In 2018, archaeologists discovered a Viking comb at a site in Denmark. It was inscribed with the word "comb", perhaps as a way of teaching children to read and write. Vikings also used runes to display ownership and often carved their names on different items. They also used them for magical and mystical applications, such as healing powers. Viking warriors often carved runes on their weapons, entreating the Nordic gods to protect them in battle or to help them destroy their enemy. Warriors often carved the symbol for Tyr, the god of war, onto their shields.

Vikings also carved runestones, which are large stone slabs that have been raised upright and inscribed with a message. They were typically used to commemorate people or deeds but were never placed at graves like what we know of typical tombstones. Runestones followed a strict formula: the name of the person who commissioned the runestone, the name of the deceased, what this person achieved in life, a prayer, and the name of the rune carver. This stone in Sweden was commissioned by a farmer named Holmgot for his wife Odendisa, saying that there was no better woman to run a farm than she. ([Image](#))



Vikings even used runes for graffiti! In the Orkney islands of Scotland there is a site called Maeshowe, an ancient chambered cairn – essentially four stone walls and a domed ceiling covered over in earth. It is a Neolithic structure built about 5,000 years ago. But the fascinating aspect to this is what we find inside. According to the Orkneyinga saga, during a terrible winter, a band of Viking raiders was caught out by a blizzard. They broke into the cairn through the ceiling and spent four days huddled in there. While they were doing that, they carved their graffiti on the walls. Reading some of these inscriptions, you'll see that really, despite 1,000 years of difference, Vikings are a lot like us. None of this is any different to the graffiti you find anywhere in the modern day.

- "Haermund Hardaxe carved these runes"
- "These runes were carved by the man most skilled in runes in the western ocean"
- "Ingigerth is the most beautiful of all women"
- "Tholfir Kolbeinsson carved these runes the highest up"



## Activity 5: Worksheet (15 min)

Complete the Viking runes worksheet (attached). This worksheet can be completed for homework if it is not finished in class.

**Activity 5 would be the end of the first 50-minute classroom session. The second classroom session would begin with Activity 6.**

### **Activity 6: Recap and Short answer questions (10 min)**

- Review the answers on the Viking runes worksheet.
- Compare the Futhark runes with the English alphabet. What letters or sounds are missing? What additional letters do they have?  
*C, J, Q, V, X. Runes also include letters for Th and Ng sounds.*
- Consider the shape of the runes. There are no curved letters like we have in English. Why do you think this is?  
*Students should consider the writing materials and technologies available to Vikings for carving and include this in their response.*

### **Activity 7: Teacher exposition and link to syllabus content (15 min)**

Runes were considered a gift from the king of the Norse gods, Odin. Scandinavian mythology tells the legend of Odin, chief of the Norse gods, who hung himself from the Yggdrasil tree in order to learn the runes. As he hung suspended for nine windy nights, he learned the mysteries of the runes, which he then passed on to his people. Since then, the Vikings believed runes to be a gift from Odin, they treated them with great reverence and took the magical powers of runes very seriously. Norse poetry emphasises the dangers of misinterpreting runes, and one poet states "Let no man carve runes to cast a spell, save first he learns to read them well."

Students choose one question to answer.

- How are runes connected to belief systems and how did this affect their use?
- What are the social and cultural advantages of a written language system?

### **Activity 8: Extended writing task (20 min)**

Students answer the following question: What can runes tell us about Vikings and Viking life? Students should consider that runes provide direct insight into the people, practices, and beliefs of the Viking people throughout history. They allow historians to trace the migrations and trade routes used by Vikings based on where runic inscriptions have been found. They provide insight into the beliefs and actions of both kings and ordinary people. Runic inscriptions tell us the names of people who made and owned various objects, about their lives, and even provide glimpses of their individual personalities and feelings.

### **Activity 9: Creative task (10 min)**

Imagine you a Viking runemaster commissioned to make a runestone. What would you write on it to commemorate a person or event?

### **Extension activities (15 + min)**

- Create a runic find-a-word or crossword puzzle. The clues should be in English while the letters in the puzzle should be runic letters.

# VIKINGS

- Runes were often used to send short messages between people, similar to the way we send text messages today. Write a runic conversation between two people. What kinds of abbreviations could you use to get your message across faster?
- Students can make their own runestones using clay. They can write their name, a word that inspires them, or a secret Viking riddle!
- Play a game of Scrabble or Bananagrams with Viking runes in small groups.

## Additional Resources:

- TED-Ed: The secret messages of Viking runestones  
<https://ed.ted.com/lessons/spells-threats-and-dragons-the-secret-messages-of-viking-runestones-jesse-byock>
- BBC Reel: The ancient Viking runestone revealing a modern fear  
<https://www.bbc.com/reel/video/p08676tt/the-ancient-viking-runestone-revealing-a-modern-fear>
- Vikingskibs Museet: Runes  
<https://www.vikingskibsmuseet.dk/en/professions/education/viking-knowledge/viking-age-people/runes>
- National Museum of Denmark: Runestones  
<https://en.natmus.dk/historical-knowledge/denmark/prehistoric-period-until-1050-ad/the-viking-age/power-and-aristocracy/rune-stones/>
- Vikings in the East Midlands  
<https://emidsvikings.ac.uk/resources/runes-and-runic-inscriptions/>
- Viking runestone facts  
<https://www.mentalfloss.com/article/601594/viking-runestone-facts>
- National Geographic: Why archaeologists are excited about a Viking comb  
<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2018/01/viking-age-ribe-comb-runes-alphabet-spd/>

## VIKING RUNES WORKSHEET



fehu (wealth, cattle)	uruz (aurochs, strength of will)	þurisaz (giant, danger, suffering)	ansuz (god, prosperity)	raidō (ride, journey, movement)	kaunan (mortality, pain)	gebō (gift, generosity)	wunjō (joy)
<b>F</b>	<b>U</b>	<b>TH</b>	<b>A</b>	<b>R</b>	<b>K</b>	<b>G</b>	<b>W</b>



hagalaz (hailstones, destruction, chaos)	naudiz (need, desire)	īsaz (ice)	jēra (year, reward, harvest)	ī(h)waz (yew tree, strength, stability)	perþ (meaning unknown)	algiz (elk, protection, defence)	sōwilō (sun, success)
<b>H</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>I</b>	<b>J/Y</b>	<b>I ("eye")</b>	<b>P</b>	<b>Z</b>	<b>S</b>



berkanan (birch, fertility, growth)	tīwaz (the god Tyr, victory, honour)	ehwaz (horse, trust, faith, companionship)	mannaz (man, support)	laguz (water, lake, the unknown)	ingwaz (the god Freyr, beginning)	ōpala- (heritage, inheritance, tradition)	dagaz (day, hope, happiness)
<b>B</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>E</b>	<b>M</b>	<b>L</b>	<b>NG</b>	<b>O</b>	<b>D</b>

Use your Viking Runes worksheet to answer the following questions.

1. Spell your name in runes (or as close as you can get without certain sounds!)
  
2. Write out the names of Thor, Odin and Loki using the runes.

## VIKINGS

3. Now consider the meaning of each rune. Write down which runes you might carve on an object in the following situations:
  - a. A gift for a newborn baby
  - b. A sword for an upcoming battle
  - c. A talisman for a sick person
  - d. An heirloom passed down in a family
  - e. A shield to be buried with a great king
  - f. A gift for a newly married couple
  
4. Translate the following sentence:

Þ | < | ◊ | S . F R M . F P M S ◊ P A