

Viking Vocabulary

Gradually the Vikings who settled in England switched over to speaking Old English, but they brought some of their Old Norse words with them when they did. Many of these words are still part of English today, especially in Northern dialects. Here are some you might know:

they	< Old Norse <i>þeir</i> 'they'
egg	< Old Norse <i>egg</i> 'egg'
ill	< Old Norse <i>illr</i> 'evil, ill, bad'
lass	< Old Norse <i>*lask-</i> ?'unmarried'
gormless	< Old Norse <i>gaum-lauss</i> 'careless'

This piece of wood (about 10cm in length) from Bergen, Norway, carries a carved runic inscription.

The Language of the Vikings

Runestones

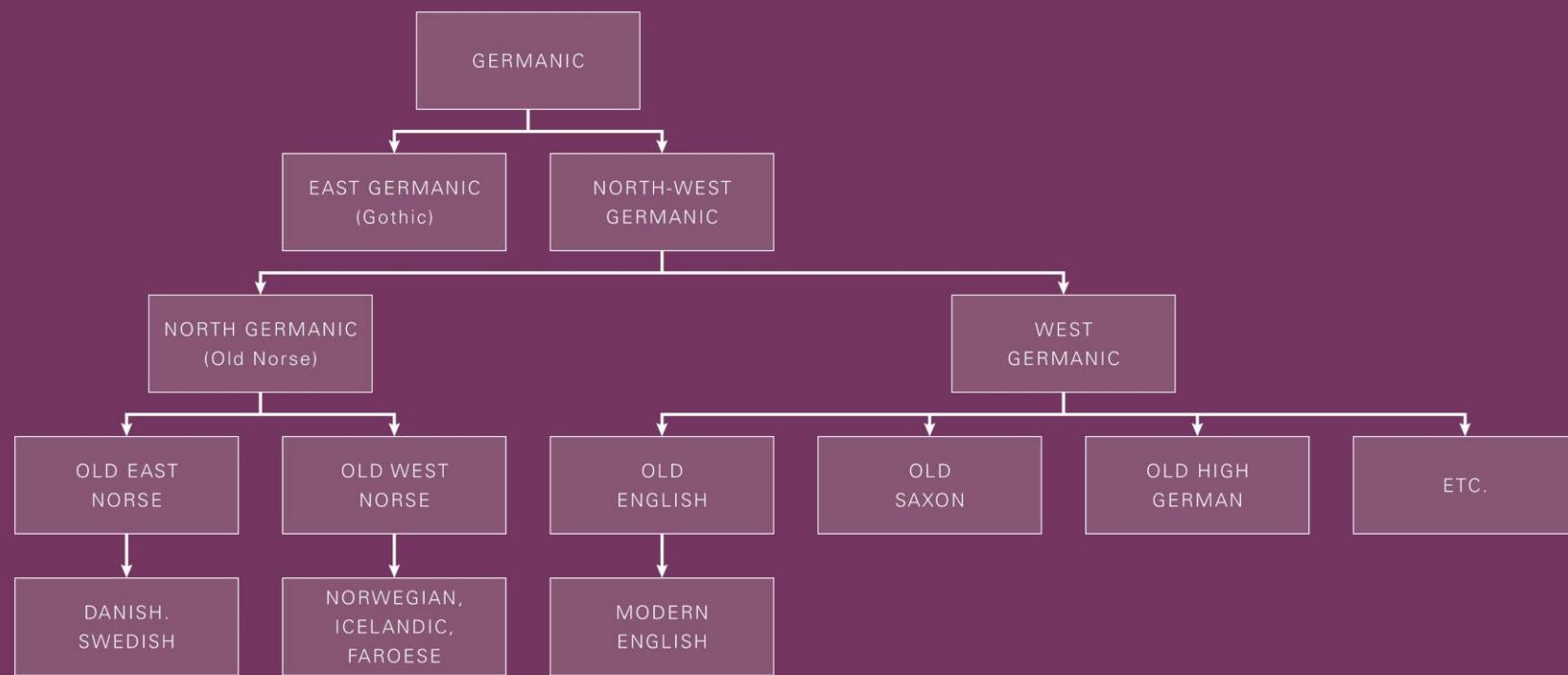
Before they started using Roman script, the Vikings used angular letters called **runes**, which were good for carving. Many of their stone monuments carrying these letters still survive today. Runes were also carved in wood.



This large runestone from Rök in Sweden carries a poem about legendary kings and heroes.

Patronymics

Vikings names usually identified each person with reference to their father (or sometimes mother). Thus Cnut, the famous Viking king of England (1016–35), was called Knútr Sveinsson after his father Sveinn. Some also had a nickname: Sveinn was called *tjúguskegg* 'forkbeard'. What would your Viking name be?



Old Norse

The language spoken by the Vikings (from about 700 to 1100) is called Old Norse. Old Norse belonged to the northern branch of the Germanic family of languages, and is the ancestor of modern Scandinavian languages like Icelandic and Swedish. It is closely related to other Germanic languages, such as English and German. In the medieval period, these languages would have been much more similar than they are today, so that when the Vikings arrived in England, they would have been able to understand the people they met there (with a bit of effort)!

Viking Letters

The Runic Alphabet

Also known in Scandinavia as the futhark, the Norse runic alphabet consisted of 24 or (later) 16 characters.

ψ	ᚾ	þ	*	ᚱ	ᚢ	*	*
f v w	u o	th	a	r	k c g q	h	n
ᛁ	ᛏ	ᚢ	ᛖ	ᛒ	ᛗ	ᛏ	ᛖ
i e j y	a	s x z	t d	b p	m	l	R

Writing Old Norse

Even when it is transcribed into Modern English, Old Norse (along with some modern Scandinavian languages) still uses some distinct letters:

Æ or æ: a letter combining a and e (usually pronounced like the vowel in Modern English 'cat')

Þ or þ: *thorn*, a soft version of th (as in Modern English 'thistle')

Ð or ð: *eth*, a voiced version of th (as in Modern English 'though')

There were also several accented forms of a and o.

This runic carving on a rock at Ramsund in Sweden skilfully weaves the inscription into images of the story of the legendary hero Sigurd.

