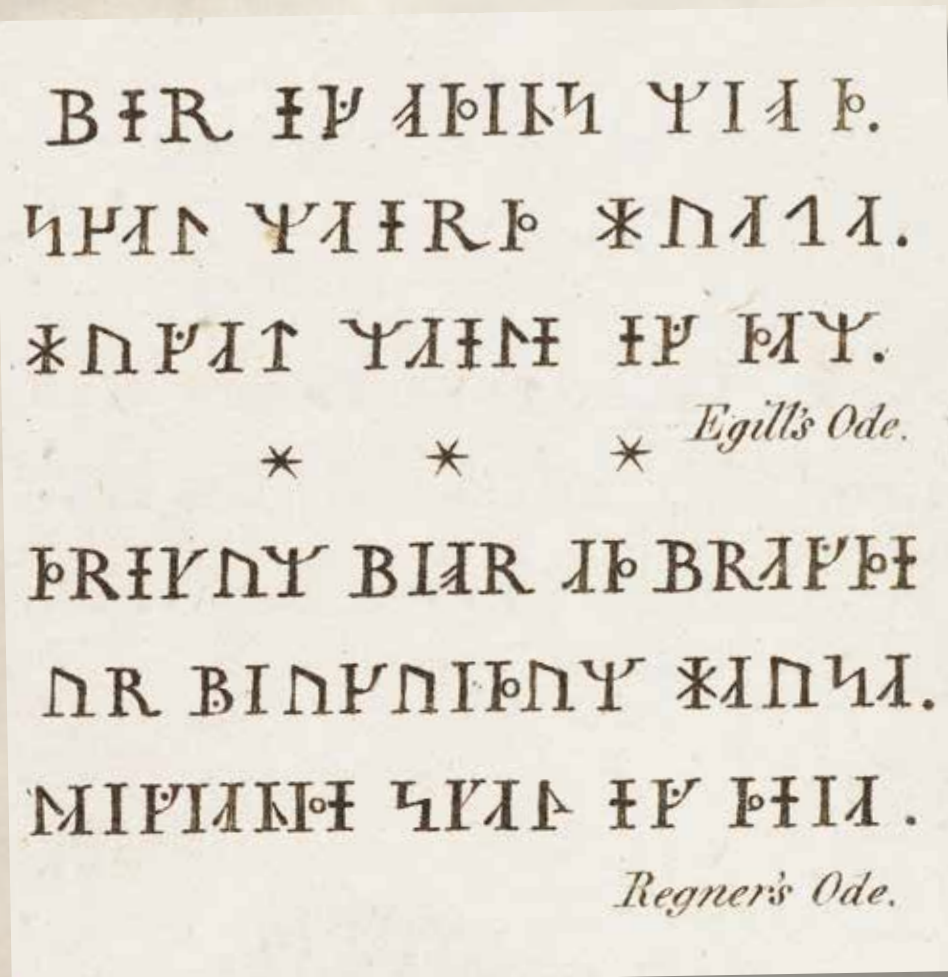


Language and Runes



Extracts of runic verse from *The Ransome of Egill the Scald* and *The Dying Ode of Regner Lodbrog* on the title page of their first English translation. Thomas Percy, *Five Pieces of Runic Poetry Translated from the Icelandic Language* (London 1763). Eirikur Benediktsson Icelandic Collection P17245.E5

These dialects were spoken across what are now Denmark, Norway, and Sweden, and were taken to Iceland when the Vikings settled there. Modern Icelandic is the closest surviving form of this medieval tongue; many Icelanders today can still easily enjoy the medieval Icelandic sagas of the 12th-14th centuries in their original written form.

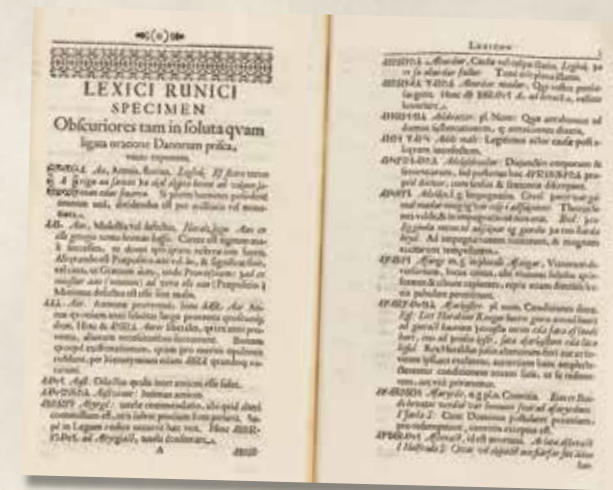
Anglo-Saxons spoke Old English, the ancestor to our modern language. Old English was another Germanic language, with close kinship to Old Norse, so it is plausible that Old English and Old Norse speakers could, to a certain extent, understand one another. Early medieval Scandinavians had a notable effect on the development of modern English: words such as *skirt*, *sky*, *window*, and *egg* are all derived from Old Norse. Loanwords such as these are evidence of the integration of Scandinavian culture into Anglo-Saxon England.

This integration is further displayed in English place-names in the Danelaw area, where there is a wealth of English-Norse hybrid names.

Swarkestone in Derbyshire combines the Old Norse personal name

Swerkir with the Old English element *-tūn* (meaning 'farm' or 'homestead'), suggesting perhaps that a Viking took over an Anglo-Saxon farm.

The Scandinavians also brought their system of writing with them: runes. The runic alphabet the Viking settlers employed is known as the Younger Futhark and consists of sixteen characters that represent the most common spoken sounds in Old Norse. The Scandinavian settlers commonly used runes to mark possessions, memorialise their dead on runestones, and celebrate their achievements.



Pp 1-2 from Magnús Ólafsson's Old Icelandic dictionary with runic headwords and Latin definitions. Magnús Ólafsson, *Specimen lexici runici, obscuriorum quarundam vocum, quae in praeis occurrunt historiis & poetis danicis* (Copenhagen 1650) Special Collection Oversize PD2093.W6

The Vikings not only brought their material culture with them to Anglo-Saxon England: they also brought their language. The first Scandinavian settlers spoke a language now called Old Norse, a Northern Germanic language with many local dialects.