

Reading Comprehension

The Viking Alphabet

All over the world, ancient peoples who established a high level of civilization also developed their own writing systems. The Egyptians had hieroglyphics, the Greeks had the Greek alphabet, and the Romans used the Roman alphabet. What about the Vikings? Could these seafarers and mysterious warriors read and write? Well, the answer is yes. They developed an alphabet known as the Futhark.

The Futhark was an alphabet—one may say a character or pictograph—that was comprised of 16 letters, or characters. The Futhark alphabet is called this because of the first six sounds in the alphabet: f, u, th, a, r, and k. This is easy to imagine, even the word “alphabet” comes from the first two letters of the Greek alphabet: alpha and beta. The letters, or symbols, of the Futhark are made up of phonetic sounds and they are also closely related to Norse mythology.

These letters were imprinted onto stone, or sometimes wood, metal, and even bone. After the Futhark was carved into these materials, they were known as runes. A rune is simply the message that the Vikings wrote, but a rune seems to have been more than a simple message. Some archaeologists believe that they were closely related to fortune-telling or magical ceremonies.

Historian Jeff Sypeck says some Vikings believed that runes were magical and that engraving them on a sword would make it stronger. Warriors also used runes for more mundane purposes, such as carving their names onto their swords to make sure nobody stole them. Craftsmen used runes to proclaim their skill. An inscription on a gold horn made by a Viking in Germany around 400 A.D. reads, “I, Hlegest of Holt, made this horn.”

All over the British Isles, and of course throughout Scandinavia, archaeologists are continuing to dig up runes of all shapes and sizes. Many of the writings on the runes are carved to honor a man’s dead family member or fellow Viking fighter. One of the most famous runes is a gigantic stone discovered in Denmark. This is where King Harald Bluetooth created a rune stone (around 950 A.D.) that was made to honor the death of his parents. This rune stone was over 2.5 meters high.

Examples like this Bluetooth rune stone and other runes leave modern-day archaeologists with lots of information about where and when the Vikings visited. Through the messages left on these stones, archaeologists know of Vikings who visited parts of the Middle East, Africa, and even the New World that later became known as the Americas, and this was way before the time of Christopher Columbus.

Choose the best answer by blackening the circle.

1. The main idea of the passage is
 A. the origin of the word “futhark”.
 B. how the vikings used the written language.
 C. the magical powers of the rune stone.
 D. different ancient writing systems.
2. Which of the following can be inferred from paragraphs 1 and 2 in the passage?
 A. The Vikings used hieroglyphics similar to the Egyptians.
 B. The Vikings had the most advanced writing system of the ancient peoples.
 C. The author believes that the Vikings had a high level of civilization.
 D. The author thinks the Romans developed the best writing system.
3. The word inscription in paragraph 4 means a kind of
 A. writing. B. book.
 C. riddle. D. alphabet.
4. Which of the following can be inferred from the passage?
 A. Rune stones are like storybooks.
 B. Scientists have deciphered the runes.
 C. The meaning of the runes is unknown.
 D. Only a few runes have survived.
5. What can we infer about Jeff Sypeck who is mentioned in paragraph 4?
 A. He found the first runes.
 B. He can speak the Viking language.
 C. He is an expert on runes.
 D. He is a descendant of the Vikings.
6. Which of the following could be predicted from paragraph 5?
 A. Archaeologists will learn more about Vikings from newly discovered runes.
 B. Archaeologists will soon be able to confirm that the Vikings visited Australia.
 C. Archaeologists will learn more about the Vikings from newly discovered hieroglyphics.
 D. Archaeologists will discover new Viking settlements in the Middle East.

Answer the questions in complete sentences.

7. Why does the author mention the Greek alphabet in paragraph 2?

8. Why do some archaeologists think a rune is more than a simple message?

9. What does the Bluetooth rune stone commemorate?

