**ep 80 rune**

[00:00:00] **New Track:** Welcome to the endless knot podcast where the more we know,

**Mark:** the more we want to find out

**New Track:** tracing serendipitous connections through our lives

**Mark:** and across disciplines.

**Aven:**

Hi, I'm Aven

**Mark:** And I'm Mark

**Aven:** and tonight we're going to be talking to you about runes after a fair amount of stuff we want to get through first because the very first thing we have to say is if you're listening to this, far in the future. That's an optimistic thought, Mark, isn't it? We are recording this right at the very end of March, 2020 the longest month I've ever lived through.

And, we're at home as many people are because of the coronavirus Covid-19 and so I just feel like we have to address that at the beginning of this.

But you know, one thing you can do when [00:01:00] you're, you know, locked up in your house is record a podcast.

So we're finally getting to it though, you might think we'd have all the time in the world to do that now.

But because both of us are teachers at a university, which went online, with less than 24 hours notice on March 12th, I believe the last few weeks have been pretty nonstop for us. We just sort of had to turn around and put all our classes suddenly remote. We had no warning. So anyway, that's fine. You know, we both are, at least accustomed to online things that helped, but it's been pretty busy and the kids have been home since two days after that for March break and then for the last two weeks and we now have bee told they'll be home for another month, which is totally to be expected. And frankly, I don't think they're going back this year. So that's also added to our life. So anyway, we're fine. We're good. We're healthy.

**Mark:** We have lots of things to make cocktails.

So

**Aven:** yeah, lots of things to make cocktails with. [00:02:00] A couple of our local businesses are doing deliveries and. A no touch pickups and things. So we've done that, but we've been pretty much staying at home. We've gone out only for groceries and booths for the last three. It's...three. It's almost three weeks now, eh?

well, this, this Wednesday will be three weeks from the day classes were canceled and I guess we went out sort of Thursday and Friday for various things, but that week

**Mark:** Time loses all meaning.

**Aven:** I know. It really feels like

**Mark:**  it's either been like a year since we, this all happened or, or like yesterday.

**Aven:** Yeah. So anyway, so we haven't had tons and tons of time.

We finally got a video out, which took us forever and ever to do, but finally got that out. Now we're doing the podcast. I would love to say that because of all this, we're going to be doing more podcast episodes more quickly. I don't think that's going to be true. This is the last week of term, but we have exams to get through, which are now take home exams and it's all very complicated, so it's going to be a little while before things slow down for us.

Yeah. And goodness knows what the [00:03:00] world will look like in a week or two weeks. Things are changing so quickly anyway. We really hope everybody out there is safe and well surviving, being locked down or having to work. If you do, doing whatever you do. If you're working the many jobs that are frontline in various different ways, thank you. If you're not, not working, I'm sorry. And if you're at home slowly losing your mind, I'm sorry about that too. I hope this can at least distract you for a bit, because we are not going to be talking about disease. I did briefly think about doing an episode on medieval disease or something, but we decided no, we're just going to go ahead with what we were planning to do, which is talk about runes and a video that we did on runes quite awhile ago.

So maybe this'll give you some distraction. So enough. I don't think there's anything else we have to say about that. Patreon, we have a couple of new Patreon supporters to thank Jordan Mackie and Cory from 12 tone. That's a YouTube channel that if you have not seen, you should check [00:04:00] out, it's music theory.

**Mark:** Thank you, both of you and yes, do, do check out 12 tone. It's one of my favorite channels

**Aven:** Related to that, however, is we are going to, as I said, this is the 31st of March, and we decided this afternoon we're going to pause our Patreon. I don't know exactly what it's called, the donations or whatever, like pause the charging for at least for April and maybe the next couple of months.

As I said, because we're teachers, our jobs haven't been affected and we're very lucky that way and while the money from the Patrion does definitely help us. With the costs that come from servers and services and various other things related to doing the videos and the podcasts. We are in a position to absorb that cost for a little while, and we just don't want to add to the cost of so many people who might not be able to right now, even a dollar or two or $5 a month, you know, that can matter if you suddenly don't have a job.

So [00:05:00] we're going to pause it. If you are a Patreon supporter and you still do have some financial stability, we'd love it if you took that couple of dollars and gave it to another creator maybe. There's a lot of creators who do depend on their Patreon money or other kinds of, you know, who do creation full time and for whom it's, it's really tough.

Or to, you know, give it to a charity or give money to somebody who can use it and don't, of course, if you don't want to, but you know, that's one of the things we thought people might be able to do and we'll give notice on the Patreon site before we turn it back on. So you will know you're going to be charged for the next month.

**Mark:** Our other big announcement is about the launch of an app and a group

**Aven:** community app and platform, I guess

**Mark:** called Lyceum. And what it is, is it's a platform all about educational podcasting. [00:06:00] And so there are a whole bunch of really fantastic educational podcasts on this new platform, including us. And it's really set up so that you know, people who are particularly interested in educational podcasts can find the stuff they want to find, find the creators they want to find, and interact with those podcasts. Just a nice little home for people who are, you know, really into that sort of thing.

**Aven:** And doing things like putting together collections of themed podcasts, podcasts, and different topics or on larger subjects are going to continue to do that. So this is a, a launch of a beta version of the app.

Like there's still going to be more development with it. But there's the sort of collections that's on the app itself. There's discussion forums for each show. They're definitely focused on sort of recommendations from creators for other creators. And [00:07:00] they are, you know, hand curating and checking out the shows that they are putting on the, the app.

So it's not just anyone who applies. I mean, they're also definitely not focused on, you know, only big shows. Yeah. Or we wouldn't be on there, but they're focused on shows that are good and thoughtful and yeah. And, and give the kind of educational experience that people are looking for. Yeah. So, yeah, so it's Lyceum. fm, that's L, Y, C E U M. dot. FM is the website right now, most of the functionality's only on the app. But you can learn about it on the website and I think they are planning to make it available on desktop.

**Mark:** Eventually. There's going to be a web app eventually,

**Aven:** but it's not there yet. But yeah, so if you go check us out there, we do have a discussion post posted. I mean, there's a lot of discussion yet it only launched a couple of days ago, but do feel free to talk to us there or just go and take a look at the various shows that are there.

If you are [00:08:00] yourself, a podcast creator. There's also on the website, there's information for applying to be on the app, and I would encourage it because one of the things that there is from the back end that's so good for us and that we really like, is that they're developing a community of creators. So there's a place for creators to talk and. You know, share ideas and problems and ask for advice and discuss the sorts of things that podcast creators care about than maybe nobody who's not a podcast creator cares about. And we have, you know, we have that community with videos with, WeCreateEDU and it's been so special and important to us and to be able to start developing that community with podcasters, it's really nice.

Yeah. So, so that's something, if you are a podcast creator that I would definitely recommend.

**Mark:** Absolutely. And, and by the way, we will try to post, you know, some sort of points of for discussion or questions on our forum there. So, head over there and, you know, join in the conversation.

**Aven:** So yeah. [00:09:00] So Lyceum check that out.

Alright, I think we're onto cocktail. Yes.

**Mark:** So since the topic today is, is runes, which you know are an important part of Germanic culture, and in particular the Northern Germanic, the Scandinavian cultures, we decided to look for. A cocktail that was somehow sort of Viking-y

**Aven:** well we looked for runes, but there was nothing.

So then we went with Vikings and we found a cocktail that is sort of Viking-y

**Mark:** Has Viking in the name

**Aven:** it does, but I think in the end it ended up being very appropriate because it's completely made up, it started with the name and worked backwards. Yeah. I mean, all cocktails are made up. I understand that, but, but this is one that has like no authenticity, no claim to it at all.

And as I think you'll discuss a little bit when you talk a bit, the runes and sort of Viking culture have kind of suffered from that. And [00:10:00] the use of runes in the modern world of people starting from that instead of back filling it with a story that isn't, has no authenticity

**Mark:** It became very, occulty in the 19th century with no direct connection to

actual historical practice.

**Aven:** Yeah. So I think there's a meta way in which this is good, so would you like to. Tell us the story of this, of this cocktail.

**Mark:** Well, for those of you old enough to remember, there was a television show called Cheers.

**Aven:** Mark said to me when he was talking about that , he was suggesting this cocktail. He said. Did you ever hear of a show called Cheers?

I nearly slapped him. I

**Mark:** She hardly watched television as a child. There's a lot of shows she doesn't know

**Aven:** who doesn't know Cheers?! Unless you are younger. But. I'm in my forties I know Cheers. Anyway, yes, yes. So the show. Cheers.

**Mark:** Well, so there was a joke on this show in which to get the bartender, Woody [00:11:00] has job back because they had another sort of very professional hot shot bartender. Yeah. And so to sink this other guy, they sort of formed this scheme in which they, everyone would like come in and ask for this made-up cocktail. And he wouldn't know how to make it, but Woody, he's in on it. So he would know, you know, he would pretend to know what this cocktail was. And that cocktail was called the Screaming Viking.

**Aven:** So of course in the, in this show, they don't explain what it is, but

the only thing they mentioned is. Cucumber, bruised cucumbers. Yeah.

But people have of course gone ahead and figured it out or figured it out. Made up a cocktail. Yes. So we went and found on Spruce Eats a cocktail recipe for it. So we are, we are drinking a screaming Viking.

**Mark:** Yes.

Now, part of the joke was they all then pretended to drink whatever crazy concoction that he made and they sort of. Did hate it. Yeah. And as soon as the guy walked out of the room, they all spit it out. So

**Aven:** it's not good. But we'll see how this [00:12:00] is. So cheers.

**Mark:** Well, it's not that bad.

**Aven:** I mean, I knew what went into it.

It couldn't be that bad.

so all it is, is it, vodka dry vermouth and lime juice. And garnished with a cucumber and a celery, cucumber spear and a celery stick. And ours have been sitting because we were prepping this for so long for quite awhile. So it actually tastes quite a lot of cu, cucumber.

**Mark:** And it has the, you get the, the nose of the cucumber.

**Aven:** It's very tart, no sweetness to it. But so yeah, so we're having the Screaming Viking, the Viking part of which has clearly no connection to anything actually Viking. But it still amused us and is perfectly tasty.

**Mark:** But it's a good joke on crazy cocktail names.

**Aven:** I suppose it's that

**Mark:** too. Cause you know, they do sometimes have

**Aven:** ridiculous

**Mark:** names, names like that.

So.

**Aven:** Alright, so what are we going to be talk, listening to, and then talking about Mark?

**Mark:** Well, this, so this was originally from [00:13:00] a video that we did, quite a while ago. And it was a collaboration with another, a YouTube channel called NativLang. For the record, this was just before NativLang went viral,

**Aven:** exploded with his hot Latin video.

**Mark:** Yeah.

**Aven:** I still love the fact that that's what took him viral,

never took me viral, but that's okay.

**Mark:** So, yeah, so we, we did this as a kind of two parter. In which, NativLang did a video. His video was entitled, Muslim Vikings and Magic Letters: the odd history of runes part one. And then my video was Guns, Thorns and Smartphones: the odd history of runes part two.

So basically, NativLang talks about kind of the origin of the runes or some, possix bly apocryphal story, but the origin of Rune

**Aven:** And cheese.

**Mark:** And cheese.

And, some general facts about the [00:14:00] runic alphabets. And then I talked about, the runes in as they're used in England, and then the later history of the runes after the middle ages and through all of that kind of occult stuff and whatnot.

**Aven:**  So what we'll do now is listen to the voiceover for that video and then come back and I think you have some more things you want to talk about after that, and we've got some discussion about early writing systems and the history of early writing,

**Mark:** and we'll also include in the show notes, a link to NativLang's videos so you can go into,

**Aven:** it's very fun.

You should definitely go see it.

 **Mark:** The runic system, that was used in Anglo-Saxon England and Scandinavia before the arrival of Christian missionaries, was rarely employed for writing extended texts, mainly just inscriptions and such like. Once the missionaries arrived, though, it didn’t take long for the new converts to come up with the idea of using the the Latin alphabet for writing down not just Latin but also their own language. Just one problem, or maybe a couple [00:15:00] actually — there were some sounds in the various Germanic languages that just didn’t exist in Latin, so there were no letters to use to write them down. For instance the /th/ sound—both the voiced -th- as in Modern English either and the voiceless -th- as in ether—didn’t exist in Latin, though a similar sound from ancient Greek was represented as <th> in Latin contexts. In early Old English manuscripts the sound was represented as the digraph, that’s two letters together making one sound, <th>, or simply as the letter <d>, but eventually a diacritic stroke was added to that letter <d> to differentiate it from a regular letter <d> to make a symbol we now refer to as eth. And a little later another solution to the missing sound also began to be used, one of those Old runic characters, the thorn, as it was called in Anglo-Saxon England, or thurs meaning “giant, ogre” in Old Norse. You see, though the runic writing system is an alphabet representing sounds not an ideographic system, the characters have meaningful names. These two characters, eth and the runic thorn, could be used for either the voiced -th- and voiceless -th-. Old Norse [00:16:00] manuscripts followed suit with first the thorn and a little later the eth, with the added twist that thorn came to be used only as the initial letter in words and eth in other positions in words, whereas in Old English the letters were used interchangeably.

Another runic character was pressed into service as well, the wynn meaning “joy” to represent the /w/ sound — in Latin the letter <u> was used for both the vowel /u/ sound and the consonant /w/ sound. Actually in the earlier Old English manuscripts the letter <u> was used for the /w/ sound, but eventually to avoid confusion between the vowel <u> and the consonant <u> the runic wynn was adopted. Of course to our modern eyes that runic wynn looks an awful lot like a letter <p>, so modern printed editions of Old English texts replace all the wynns with our modern w, a character that came about a little later by the joining up of two <v>s or two <u>s, the double-u. But if you’re reading actual manuscripts from the period, you have mind your P’s and… well… wynns.

Actually, we’re kind of prone to mixing up those runic characters [00:17:00] and roman letters. That’s kind of what happened with those “Ye Olde Shoppe” signs in fact. You see, the thorn hung around for a while after the Old English period, gradually becoming less and less common, and as it did so the form of the character became less and less distinct, with the ascender, that perpendicular line on the side, becoming shorter, so the thorn look more like the wynn, which by 14th century had disappeared, and like the <p> — confusing! And by the 15th century, it looked a lot like a letter <y>, so that when the printing press came along printers would often use the <y> in place of the thorn, though by that point the <th> digraph had mostly replaced it, with the thorn only being used in common words like the, often represented in text as <y> standing in for thorn with a superscript <e>. So what looks like <ye>, “ye”, was actually “the”, so it should really be pronounced “The Olde Shoppe”. But that’s not nearly so picturesque!

One last way that runes were worked into English, back in those Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, was as a type of secret key — a [00:18:00] few individual rune signs were dropped into the otherwise Latin script, which could be put together to spell out the answer to a riddle or the name of the author, as in this poem by Cynewulf.

It’s no coincidence that runes were used in this secretive way, since the word rune itself is not only Old English for ‘runic character’ but also meant “secret, mystery” and “council, consultation”. It comes via Proto-Germanic probably from an Indo-European root meaning “roar, murmur” which also gives us the words rumour, riot, and raucous. The word mostly faded from the language along with the runes themselves after the Anglo-Saxon period, only to be added back in later by scholars in the 17th century and later who were studying those old runes. But there is at least one hidden remnant of the word in the placename Runnymede. You see Runnymede in Surrey was where Anglo-Saxon kings held council meetings with their various nobles, ealdormen, thegns, and so forth — remember the council meaning of rune — the so-called witenagemot, literally meeting of the wise men, which [00:19:00] by the way inspired JK Rowling’s council of wizards the Wizengamot. So Runnymede literally means “rune island meadow”. And it’s therefore appropriate that in the year 1215 the feudal barons of England, who were, I suppose, raucous and ready to riot, buttonholed King John and forced him to accept the Magna Carta, which limited the powers of the tyrannical king. Not that he kept to his agreement, but rescinded it shortly afterwards. Nevertheless, Magna Carta marks an important milestone in constitutional history.

Getting back to runes themselves, for the most part their use faded with the middle ages, but they were later revived along with gothicism and the interest in the ancient Germanic past of the 18th and 19th century. This was a factor in the growing nationalism ofGerman Romanticism, which celebrated, and to some degree fabricated, a romanticized version of Germanic history, of which the runes were a part. Furthermore the runes fed into the esoteric and occultist fascination of figures such as Austrian mysticist Guido von List, who developed the Armanen runes, and inspired by them Karl Maria [00:20:00] Wiligut, who developed his own version of the runes in the 20th century. And that’s the next link in our chain. Because this was exactly the sort of thing that caught the interest of the Nazi occultists, particularly Heinrich Himmler who incorporated these runes into various Nazi insignia, most famously the insignia of the Schutzstaffel, the so-called SS. Another script-related thing the Nazis were into, at least at first, was the old Blackletter or Fraktur typeface, which had developed from the gothic manuscript hands of the later middle ages, and which by the 19th century had become particularly associated with Germanic culture and language. The Nazis eventually decided to dump the Fraktur typeface in favour of the Roman script, claiming mendaciously antisemitic reasons, but actually because it made practical sense to use the same typeface that the rest of the Latin-alphabet-using world used.

The Nazis weren’t the only ones to favour the Frakture typeface. Many writers in the 19th and early 20th century expressed a similar attachment to the script for German nationalist reasons, such as German type designer Rodolf Koch. In addition to [00:21:00] typefaces Koch was also interested in other graphic symbols, such as the old Germanic runes, and published a book on various old symbols, monograms, and runes called The Book of Signs. This book brought many of these old symbols and runes to popculture notice, including to the attention of rock band Led Zeppelin, who used a couple of symbols from the book on the album cover of their fourth album, which were meant to represent the band members. The one that drummer John Bonham selected was three circles, meant to symbolize two parents and a child. It also happens to be similar, though flipped upside down, to the company logo of the 400 year old German industrial Krupp family dynasty, known for steel works, and for, believe it or not, a German heavy metal band called Die Krupps who called themselves after this old German family name. The company logo is actually based on the seamless railway wheels the company manufactured, but lest you think this is all a bit of a tangential connection, the Krupp company ties into our story in another way. You see, the company manufactured weapons for WWII,for which they got into some trouble due to their forced labour practices, as well as for [00:22:00] WWI, during which they built the heavy gun called the Big Bertha, named after, if you’ll believe it, Krupp family member and heiress Bertha Krupp. Actually there’s a long history of giving guns women’s names, including it seems the very first gun, so to speak — at least that’s where the word gun comes from, a particular 14th century cannon at Windsor Castle called Domina Gunilde, or Lady Gunhilde. The name Gunhilde is an old Scandinavian name, the two parts Gunnr and Hildr both meaning “battle” and both names of Valkyries, the warrior goddesses who collect the souls of the slain warriors from the battlefield in Norse mythology. As the Oxford English Dictionary points out, there weren’t any notable women in England at that time by that name, so likely the use of the name for large munitions, before gunpowder and cannons they’d be ballistas or other large siege weapons, goes back to Scandinavian times. Such as when Gunhilde daughter of Harald Bluetooth was married to Pallig Tokesen ealdorman of Devonshire. She and her husband were apparently killed in the St Brice’s Day Massacre on November 13th, [00:23:00] 1002, when all the Danes in England were ordered killed by King Æthelred the Unready, in retaliation for which her brother Sweyn Forkbeard retook England, which Harald Bluetooth had held before Æthelred, bringing it back under Scandinavian control. And speaking of Harald Bluetooth, that’s where we get the term for the wireless short range communication technology that you probably have on your smartphone. You see Harald was also known for uniting the warring Danish tribes into a single unified kingdom—in fact, the Jellings runestone I’ve used as the background for this video was raised by Harald to commemorate his unification of Denmark and Norway—and on that basis Swedish telecommunications company Ericsson picked the name for a technology that was intended to unify the, at the time, disorganized communications protocols, uniting them into one standard. Oh, and the symbol for that unifying technology? — it’s based on the runic symbols for the initials of Harald Bluetooth.

Now that you’ve seen the later history of runes from the Viking sack of Seville to the mysteries of Elder and Younger Futhark! Click here to see that video—and check out his other videos on the history of writing systems while you’re there!

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 so, hopefully we'll try and post a few images of some of those runes in our show [00:24:00] notes. At least the ones we mentioned specifically and maybe one overall picture of the whole alphabet, just so you get a sense of what they look like. Because describing letter forms in a podcast works great.

**Aven:** It works better in the video where there's images.

**Mark:** so I want to talk a little bit more about the runes and their development. So the runes are an alphabetic writing system, right? Like the Latin alphabet that we use in English today.

it's known as the Futhark. Or Futhork; futhark in other Scandinavian places, futhork in England because of sound changes that happened.

**Aven:**  plus the English are weird,

**Mark:** well, because, because of sound changes that happened to that particular vowel,

**Aven:** I like my explanation better.

**Mark:** and the reason it's called the futhark or futhork is, from the first six characters written in order. So it's like A, B, C, D,. E, if you write them in order. It spells out, the first six characters spells out that word futhark.

And so that's what they were [00:25:00] called.

**Aven:** And it's not a word otherwise.

**Mark:** It's not a word otherwise. Yeah. So it's like saying the ABCs

**Aven:**  or the alphabet

**Mark:** or the alphabet. That too. Good point.

**Aven:** The alphabet named after alpha beta. Yup. first two letters of the Greek alphabet , sorry.

**Mark:** Yes. Which will come up in a later episode

**Aven:** later today.

**Mark:** Well, later today as well. Yes. Yeah.

so, the earliest runic inscriptions date from around 150 CE,

How much before that they existed is hard to say.

The earliest complete futhark, so like the whole

alphabet written out, is from the fourth century.

**Aven:** Okay. That's pretty early.

**Mark:** now there are several different versions of the futhark. It sort of changed over time. And I'm not going to necessarily mention all of them. I'm going to, I'm going to mention the, the main ones that were used in the early period. There are later sort of medieval runes. So after, after the year 1000,

so the [00:26:00] earliest futhark was the elder futhark that was used from around 150 or earlier, who knows, to around 800 CE.

**Aven:** And these names are later historical names, right? Yes. Elder is just meaning the older one. The old earlier one. Yeah.

**Mark:** Now that futhark consisted of 24 runes, which were often arranged in three groups of eight.

**Aven:** Okay.

**Mark:** And. From that developed the old English futhork, which was used from at least around 400 to 1100 CE. And those were used, as I say, specifically in England. So they represented some of the, sound changes that happened in England.

So, it's therefore an expanded set of 29 and later 33, runes, to account for those phonological changes that happened, including the development of diphthongs.

There's, there are a lot of diphthongs in old English compared to other Germanic languages at that time anyways. And so they needed characters for those.

[00:27:00] Another development from the elder futhark is the younger futhark. Big surprise

**Aven:** that was used. It's the great creativity and an amazing sense that, yeah, that's always impressive about scholars.

**Mark:** So that was used from around 800 to around 1100 CE, and it was first attested in Danish inscriptions. And so I guess spread from Denmark to other parts of the Scandinavian world. It is a reduced form of the elder futhark. It only has 16 runes, which is surprising. You'd think normally letters might be added,

**Aven:** but

**Mark:** no, this was specifically simplified, I think is the idea.

**Aven:** And so they're easier to learn to read, write?

**Mark:** Yeah, exactly. And so certain letters do double duty.

So it's a pared down writing system. Now the largest group of surviving runic inscriptions are in the younger futhark, which I suppose is not surprising. And specifically from the Viking age in Denmark and Sweden on rune stones, which is the thing you would expect to survive,

**Aven:** right.

**Mark:** There are [00:28:00] obviously other artifacts. That do have,

**Aven:** yeah, we'll get into that when you do, what's the earliest English words? Yeah,

**Mark:** so you know, this things like Combs, I think I mentioned one, in that video. and, you know, other sort of more perishable materials would be inscribed with runes, but, you know, they don't, they don't tend to survive as much.

So there were later runes, as I say, used in Scandinavian places through the later part of the middle ages, and even as late as around 1800,

**Aven:** like used for actual communication and record keeping?

**Mark:** Or for decorative purposes or for, for various other reasons. I don't know how much.

**Aven:** Well, that's what I wondered.

**Mark:** Yeah. There are runic manuscripts. I don't know if there's any that date that late, but there are runic manuscripts produced in later periods.

**Aven:** Ok, interesting.

**Mark:** So. Exactly where and when the runes were developed and from what earlier alphabet is a matter of much debate. There is so much written on this and most of it is written in [00:29:00] Danish,

**Aven:** so how's that a problem, Mark?

**Mark:** my, my comprehension of Danish is not great. I can, I can manage, modernize Icelandic if I need to.

Danish is harder.

**Aven:** Yeah. Fair enough.

**Mark:** but yeah, so. there are a number of competing kind of theories. Some of the older theories about the origins of runes is one, it came from the Latin alphabet, or two. It came from the Greek alphabet, by the Goths on the North coast of theBlack Sea, but with some Latin letters, there are obviously some letters that aren't Greek. So they must've come from Latin.

**Aven:** Okay.

**Mark:** or from Etruscan or other North Italian, alphabets.

**Aven:** Right. Okay.

**Mark:** And in fact, the symbol seemed to most closely resemble the North Italian alphabets, though there is no single alphabet that we have, that has all of the runic symbols in it. [00:30:00]

**Aven:** That's interesting.

**Mark:** So it may just be that it was, they didn't survive or, so we can't pin it down to a specific alphabet

**Aven:** and there's, there's so much interaction because like when you're talking about Germans, there are Germans. Broadly speaking, all along the sort of Northern parts where they could have interacted with any of these groups.

**Mark:** They were used in, in mercenary forces. And

**Aven:** so there's no particular, well, it was long before they were mercenaries. They were, they were fighting them and trading with them. So yeah, there's like so many points of possible contact. Yeah. You can't really pin it down. Makes sense.

**Mark:** But it's generally now accepted to be from an old Italic script. So I don't think anyone's championing the Greek or Etruscan hypothesis anymore.

But of course, even there, there is, you know, it's uncertain. Which particular variant

**Aven:** that narrows it down. It does not pin it down here.

**Mark:** So some possible sources include the, the Raetic?

**Aven:** These are just all, [00:31:00] everything you were going to name is almost certainly just going to be an early group that was then subsumed by the Romans.

**Mark:** Exactly. So they were in the North of Italy, that geographically, I suppose, makes sense.

the Venetic who are from the North East, that's where modern day Venice is. The Etruscans, who, who are in central Italy. So a little further down.

**Aven:** Yeah. Just North of Rome.

**Mark:** Yeah. Where modern day Tuscany is, or old Latin, which obviously is centered on Rome.

But of course, later on as Rome gained control of other parts of the peninsula, the alphabet went with them. So depending on when

**Aven:** exactly when this transition happens, yeah.

**Mark:** And there are various arguments in favor of each of these options. So you could say, Oh, well, this one has so many symbols that correspond, or, you know,

**Aven:** the shapes of these are more. Yeah.

**Mark:** So it's, everyone has their argument, it seems, and

**Aven:** you are in no position to judge.

**Mark:** I'm not an expert on this.

So, the process of [00:32:00] transmission is also greatly debated. The oldest inscriptions we have are in Denmark and Northern Germany, but that may not be where they were first used. Right. Those are just the earliest surviving ones.

**Aven:** Yes, of course.

**Mark:** So there's a West Germanic hypothesis, that suggested it happened in the area around the Elbe river , or there's a Gothic hypothesis that it was, in the East, and it happened along with the Eastern Germanic expansion.

so who knows. but. If it's early enough and it seems to be, I mean, in the, in the first and second century CE, the sort of common Germanic language had not yet branched off into its three major branches, East Germanic, West Germanic, and North Germanic.

**Aven:** Right.

**Mark:** Which is not to say that the languages they spoke was all uniform, but they were not so differentiated yet they were still all

**Aven:** so they may well have been mixing. Yeah.

**Mark:** Yeah. So it's even difficult to make that argument on phonological grounds, right, because they're phonologically [00:33:00] all kind of the same.

**Aven:** No easy way to distinguish them. Yeah.

**Mark:** what we can say, interestingly, I suppose, is we can look at the order of the runes in the Futhark. So at first glance, you might think, well, futhark, A, B, C, D, E, F, I mean

**Aven:** F, U. T. H.

**Mark:** A. R.

**Aven:** K.

**Mark:** It doesn't look related at all.

**Aven:** Yeah.

**Mark:** but actually there is evidence of the relationship between the order in the futhark and the alphabet.

So first of all, the F rune, that first rune, looks very similar to the A rune.

**Aven:** Okay. You're wearing a shirt with runes on it right now, so rather than call up the runes, show, just show me. All right. When you say look, similar to A what you mean by, Oh, the A rune. I was going to say, it does not look at all like A, yes.

Okay. Oh, the F rune. So yeah, the F rune is sort of is the angled, it's like the bar is on the F are angled upward, whereas the A rune the bars on the F are angled downward.

**Mark:** Exactly.

**Aven:** Okay.

**Mark:** Yeah. And [00:34:00] so what might've happened is they flipped positions,

**Aven:** so it might've started with an A,

**Mark:**  it started with an A, like the alphabet does

**Aven:** just not an A, that looks like an A,

**Mark:** well, if you consider,

**Aven:** you can make it

**Mark:** kind of end up looking like,

and if you look at early Italic alphabets, they don't look exactly like the

**Aven:** same with the early Greek ones.

**Mark:** Yeah. Anyways, so if you flip those two, then, futhark, gives you the order. A, U. T, H. F. R. K.

it still doesn't help, but we've got an a first now.

The B rune and the U rune may have also exchanged places, because this is a funnel logical thing. So the

**Aven:** The B rune looks like a B. Yes. And the U rune looks like an N with a slanty top. Yeah. Like a triangular N, but with us, like, yeah.

**Mark:** Now they don't look all that similar, but phonologically, what may have happened here is that, B was more like a wuh [00:35:00] sound. And so B, if you flip those two, because B is more of a buh it's made with the, the lips rounded. And so the two sounds are phonologically similar.

**Aven:** Okay.

**Mark:** they may have flipped places, in which case you get the B rune as second. So now we've got A and B.

**Aven:** Okay.

**Mark:** and it also puts the, the U after T.

**Aven:** right.

**Mark:** T U instead of STB.

**Aven:** I'm going to take a picture of this when we're done so I can post your shirt which you got in Iceland.

**Mark:** That's true. Yup.

**Aven:** So that's very exciting.

**Mark:** now as for the thorn. The third character in the futhark, well, that, phonetically, we can say is related to D and in fact, to D and

**Aven:** Yeah, that one I'll give you, you don't have to explain that. You can explain if you want, but it's, I can,

**Mark:** they're, both dental sounds , they are articulated in the same way. And indeed, you know, as I talked about in, in the video, D with a slash through, it made the th sound as well, so. So therefore, that thorn may have originally [00:36:00] represented a D. and so you get that in the, in the next position, which is where you would expect a D. And it

**Aven:**  it also doesn't look all that dissimilar to a D, right? Like a capital D. it's just that the, the side, the upper upright extends to either side beyond the,

**Mark:** you know, you can say it looks a bit like a Delta in particular, if you think about it that way.

though, I always thought that the thorn rune kind of looked like a thorn, right?

that may be a later rationalization. Who knows? The E rune, which confusingly

**Aven:** looks like an M. Exactly like an M

**Mark:** looks exactly like an M, is right next to the M rune, which looks like an M. w

**Aven:** yeah, a Nam that's wearing a bow tie. So the top where the where the, the my hand gestures aren't helping.

Where the, the angles, if you think about it, a capital M and how there's an, angle line. Imagine both of the angle lines going from the top all the way to the other uprights

**Mark:** and then keep going.

**Aven:** Keep going instead of just making a V in the [00:37:00] middle. So that's what I mean by the bow tie. You have two like triangles facing one another with the sides on the uprights, on the other sides,

**Mark:** so that E rune, may have been located elsewhere in the order.

**Aven:** And then there was

**Mark:** the two looks so similar, so we could then potentially reconstruct the position of the E near the beginning of the alphabet, where it ought to be.

then later on in, the futhark, we have the sequence P, Z S T.

**Aven:** yes. Right.

**Mark:** Now that sort of looks similar to the alphabetic order, right? Except for the one letter in there that sort of breaks the order.

so. That Zed looks at a place though, where did that Zed come from? There was another sound change that happened in early Germanic in which the Zed, became, the Zed sound, that is to say, became an R sound, which eventually led to there being two R's. So in later futharks, there are two characters that make the R sound though in transcription they [00:38:00] followed the usual practice of transcribing one of them as a capital R and the other one as a lowercase R just because, to represent the fact that they came from two different sources , they're originally two different sounds.

**Aven:** Okay.

**Mark:** so if you do that though, if that Zed turns to an R, then suddenly we have P R S

**Aven:** T. Okay, I feel like the amount of special pleading going on here, because each one of these is like a different mechanism, right? Yeah. That's the problem behind all of

**Mark:** this,

That is maybe the problem behind this,

**Aven:** but

**Mark:** any case, it gives us an order that looks a lot more like alphabetical order if we adjust all of those, we get a, B, D, E, F. And then that other R, and then the K / C, right, which is really, from a Kappa, I guess.

and then later on P R S T, U.

**Aven:** Right.

**Mark:** So, that's the argument,

**Aven:** but none of that helps you narrow down which Italic script it comes from, though, does it?.

**Mark:** It seems to be, similar to Western Greek and old Italic.

So that's, you know, pretty much all we can say for certain, and actually most of that was

[00:39:00] **Aven:** not certain in the slightest!

**Mark:** What I can say with somewhat more certainty, is the geographic spread of runic inscriptions. So the farthest North and the farthest West is the, I'll try and pronounce this cause it's a sort of Greenlandic word. Kingittorsuaq, Kingittorsuaq Runestone.

**Aven:** Okay. I'm going to guess that's in Greenland.

**Mark:** In Greenland, Yep. and by the way, before anyone writes in, no, the furthest West is not the Kensington rune stone.

**Aven:** Right. That's the one that like Minnesota or whatever,

**Mark:** it's not, it's not real. It's a hoax. Sorry.

**Aven:** Alright.

**Mark:** so yeah, so Greenland, the farthest, both the farthest North and the farthest West.

**Aven:**  Okay.

**Mark:** And that inscription says something along the lines of,

well I won't try reading it out in Norse cause I'll probably butcher it at this point.

I'm really out of practice.

but it says,Erlingur the son of Sigvaths and Baarne [00:40:00] Thor, Thordarsson , Thordars, Thordars son, and Enriði Ás son, washing day, which is my favorite Saturday. Saturday's my favorite day of the week in Norse, washing day before Rogation day, raised this mound and rode, and then you can't read the rest.

**Aven:** Rode. R. O. D. E.?

**Mark:**  R. O. D. E. okay. Yeah. When you're talking about with Scandinavian people, it could be the R O W E D yes. Right. All right. So it's a marker stone or a monument stone, and it's within the Christian period.

 Yes. Because they mentioned Rogation day. Yeah.

the farthest East is the Berezan rune stone, which was found on Berezan Island, which is on the Black Sea.

**Aven:** Okay.

**Mark:** And it says, Grani made this vault in memory of Karl, his partner. Grani is not like grandmother.

**Aven:** Yeah, I was totally thinking it was!

What an odd thing to write, not even [00:41:00] grandmother, but just Granny G R A N I yes,

so a vault like a tomb, basically, I guess.

**Mark:** Yeah. And just looking at it now, the, the word for partner is felaga which is fellow, literally fellow, right. The furthest South is the inscription on a marble lion from Athens.

**Aven:** Ah, yes.

**Mark:** The Piraeus Lion , which is now no longer in Athens. It's on display in Venice because of Romans, I guess.

**Aven:** Right? Well, at least it's Romans, not English.

I thought you were going to say the British museum, but yes,

**Mark:** No, it's in Venice. So this is presumably pilfered a long time ago.

And it says something along the lines of "they cut him down in the midst of his forces, but in the Harbor, the men cut runes by the sea in memory of Horsi, a good warrior." That's his name, Horsi, though it probably does mean horse. "The Swedes set this on the lion". So,we know it's Swedes who did it, I guess. "He went his way with good counsel. Gold he won in his [00:42:00] travels, the warrior cut names, hued them in an ornamental scroll, Æskell "or Áskell, Aeskell, depending on how you read it "and others." So this probably something that doesn't show," and Þorleifr had them well cut, they who lived in Roslagen." And then there are two bits that that aren't represented, but they seem to follow the formula of name, name, "name, name, son of name, name, cut these runes,

Úlfr and name name colored them in memory of Horsi. He won gold in his travels.

**Aven:** That's a long inscription. Yeah. Huh. To put on something that.

It wasn't purpose made for it that's long graffiti is really what I'm trying to say, especially given how much of it is just saying, I wrote this. Yes.

**Mark:** Well, that's what a lot, most of the runic inscriptions basically say that this is the best example of this. This is the next one. There's, there's also a runic inscription in Constantinople,

**Aven:** right, which is also fairly famous. Isn't this the one that. [00:43:00] Yes. NativLang talks about?

**Mark:**  Yeah. So it's in the Hagia Sophia or Hagia Sofia, depending on how you

pronounce it. There're in fact two inscriptions that have been found, and it's speculated there actually may be more that just haven't been discovered yet.

**Aven:** Okay.

**Mark:** But, they don't, they haven't fared as well, so they're not easily legible. One of them probably said, the only thing that can be read at this point, I think is four letters, FDA,N , but it probably said Halfdan, and the rest is not legible, but it's speculated to mean something like "Halfdan carved these runes." So literally they traveled all that way to Constantinople, went into a church and graffitied it with "Kilroy was here."

**Aven:** I think 'a church' is an understatement for Hagia Sofia

**Mark:** there is another one that is also pretty much illegible but may have said something like "Ari made" or "Ari made the runes", I mean, there's like one letter there that they can maybe read

[00:44:00] **Aven:** and then they've guessed the rest of it.

But mostly because that's clearly what everybody just went around doing, is writing. I was here. Exactly.

**Mark:** So, you know, apparently there's a lot of that going on in the Hagia Sofia.

and the, the other interesting thing about the geographical, spread of, of runic inscriptions is that though runes are mentioned frequently in the sagas, Iceland has the fewest inscriptions of all the Scandinavian countries

**Aven:** Even though hey talked about it all the time.

**Mark:** Yeah. So not that many in Iceland.

but. You know, kind of the interesting point to take away from that is that the mentions of the runes in Iceland are the ones that seem to describe mostly the magical use.

**Aven:** Right.

**Mark:** And so that brings me to my next topic, runes and magic. So the connection between the runes and magic is much debated,

**Aven:** another very securely discussed thing!

**Mark:** Runeology is all like crazy

**Aven:** made up stuff. It's what you're saying. Yeah. All made up, there is no truth.

**Mark:** It's this crazy, wild West of, [00:45:00] scholarly debate.

yeah. There was, there was, I think some famous quotes. That, you know, there are as many interpretations of a runic inscription as there are runoologists who looked

at it like, yeah.

yeah, that's really what it's like. And, you know, to be a runologist you have to either be, you know, really,

credulous. Or really skeptical

**Aven:** to be able to make an argument of any sort of

**Mark:** any sort. Yeah. You can just say it probably means nothing. Or you, you get two letters and somehow reproduce a long poem out of it. I dunno, but, the question is, are runes magical in and of themselves or are they just a script

**Aven:** way of writing a

spell

which

**Mark:** could be used.

For magical purposes. Right. We don't think of the Latin alphabet as magical, but it was used in, right. In

spells, except for when we have the abracadabra. But yes. Right. But that's not quite just the alphabet. It's still magical words. Yeah. [00:46:00]

And so it's really hard to judge, and it's also, just because it's, you know, maybe quite likely used for magic in one place, doesn't mean that it was used for that in another place. So you can't assume consistency over the entire Germanic regions.

**Aven:** Right.

**Mark:** one way of thinking of, I mean, you can look at the, the objects themselves and make judgments about what the object is, and is it likely to be something that was used for magical purpose?

You know, is it an amulet for protection, but how do you know,

**Aven:** or is

**Mark:** it just written on a comb that's not going to be magical, presumably,

there's also sort of arguments you can make by looking at the inscriptions themselves, what they're written on, how they might be used.

but the other way of thinking about this is, of course, the semantics of the word rune itself, which is what I talked about in that video.

so to just expand on that a little bit, the Gothic word 'runa' glosses Greek ' mysterion'. And occasionally 'boule', which means council . And they're commonly used, these, because our Gothic [00:47:00] stuff is all Christian. It's a biblical translation. So, they're used to refer to the divine mysteries.

**Aven:** Okay. So. Which means sort of hidden things of great knowledge. You know, that you have to have special knowledge to know, which would definitely parallel the idea of magic. But on the other hand, literacy is in itself a mystery. I mean, in none of these periods were people like massively literate at all levels, right. So writing is a mystery, and that doesn't have to make it magical. It just is, can be a good parallel. So

**Mark:** of course, the new Testament really has this, the, what is it, the famous quote?

**Aven:** there's a few famous quotes from the new Testament, so not really pinning it down.

**Mark:** Logos, one

**Aven:** word, in the beginning was the word, and the word was with God.

**Mark:** Yeah. So the word itself has a kind of, yeah, and that's true of all, the way that the religions of the book kind of function is that there is something sacred about words, words, right? Some words,

**Aven:** all words, something

**Mark:** Bibles in [00:48:00] themselves are sacred or Holy, they have this sort of power.

so I dunno, who knows? But that's one bit of evidence

**Aven:** that, okay. Okay.

**Mark:** There's also another word, a Gothic word, garuni, which is just 'runi' with, the 'ga' prefix or the 'ge' prefix that you find in all the Germanic languages , which means is used to mean consultation or counsel perhaps with the idea of secrecy.

**Aven:** Okay.

**Mark:** in old high German, you get the same two words, basically Runa and giruni, with similar meanings. In old Norse, the plural form runar is sometimes used to mean secret lore or mysteries. And there are related verb forms to it that mean whisper.

**Aven:** Okay.

**Mark:** old Irish has a cognate, and that's, this is the only seeming cognate for this

**Aven:** old Irish.

Now that's not Germanic

**Mark:** So this is the only seeming cognate outside of the Germanic languages. Right. Run. Which means secret.

there was also a Finnish word, runo, which is probably an early borrowing from Germanic, right.

**Aven:** Never look to Finnish [00:49:00] for roots.

**Mark:** And it means song. And perhaps originally incantation, so it goes from incantation to song.

**Aven:** I mean, that's, that is an absolutely standard indo-European; I know Finns aren't Indo European, but right. Song and spell are the same word in lots of languages.

**Mark:** So the sense, if looking at all this data, the sense shift may have kind of gone in this way from originally secret to secret meeting to whisper to secret formula to incantation to charm. And then by way of the tradition of Germanic lot casting, in which runes seem to have been used cryptic symbol and rune.

**Aven:** Okay.

**Mark:** So it originally just meant secret not referring to the writing specifically.

**Aven:** Right. And then that became used to refer to the writing because writing is secret. Right. Okay.

**Mark:** Now I say, I mentioned the, the Germanic lot casting that seems to have been used. And so again, this is one of these arguments [00:50:00] that's based on kind of.

slim evidence, but, or questionable evidence, anyways, but there is of course, an account of early Germanic peoples by the Roman author Tacitus. Of course, we don't have, since they were only writing inscriptions and not long texts,

**Aven:** yeah, we don't have, we don't

**Mark:** have a lot of textual evidence about Germanic people until much later, until after they were Christianized generally.

But we do have this account written by Tacitus. And he writes, in his Germania , which is his ethnographic work on the Germanic people. At one point he writes, " augury and divination by lot no people practice more diligently. The use of the lots is simple. A little bough is lopped off a fruit bearing tree and cut into small pieces. These are distinguished by certain marks". Nota is the word he uses, "and, thrown carelessly and at random, over a white garment. In public questions, [00:51:00] the priest of the particular state in private, the father of the family invokes the gods and with his eyes toward, towards heaven, takes up each piece three times and finds in them a meaning according to the mark previously impressed on them.

Now, we don't know that these are runes. We don't know that it's even writing. It could just be symbols

**Aven:** or it could be like slashes for numbers, right? I mean,

**Mark:** it could be anything, but some have argued that this is an account of the using of runes in the casting of lots in magical purpose and

**Aven:** but that still doesn't mean that runes are in the in and of themselves magical.

**Mark:** No, I suppose it doesn't

**Aven:** because I mean, if you put letters like tarot cards, have letters on them, but letters are still not magical. So yeah.

**Mark:** So of course, as I say, we don't know whether or not this means that runes were magical at all places. It was certainly the evidence of the Icelandic sagas suggests that at least there they thought of them in magical ways, but, so this leaves the [00:52:00] question were runes magical in England. And the evidence of magical runes in England is very slight.

Basically, there's two possible references,

and they're both about the same story, one taken from the other. So Bede tells the story of a young man named Imma who had been taken prisoner but could not be fettered because the fetters became miraculously loosened every time they, I think it was every time they celebrated the mass, they just popped off

**Aven:** because he was so Holy.

**Mark:** Yeah. But they, his, his captors, thought it might be magic and they asked him, " whether he knew the releasing rune and had about him, the staves written out. So in Latin, that would be, "quare ligari non posset an forte litteras solutoras , solutorias." the words in the old English translation of Bede, is, "alyssendlecan rune " so loosening rune, it seems to mean, though, there's some textual debate about this. There are [00:53:00] different readings and different manuscripts.

**Aven:** So

**Mark:** this is only in one manuscript, I think. And the other word stafas staves, literally, if he had them written, the staves written. So stave is, is used in, or staff is used in old English to mean letter.

Like you could refer to a Latin letter as much as anything else. Right? So it is definitely a word, you know, a word used to refer to individual letters. And then Aelfric later on refers to this passage from Bede, and he uses it in one of his homilies. And his version of the same story is that they ask him whether he "broke his bonds asunder by means of sorcery of rune staves", and the word there is literally runstafum. Right. rune staves.

**Aven:** Right.

**Mark:** So this sort of implies maybe something magical.

**Aven:** Yeah. Yeah. But again, it doesn't imply necessarily that the rules themselves are magical, but that's closer though. That seems more convincing to me.

That's it.

I mean, yeah, that's what you're basing your whole argument [00:54:00] there for England.

Right?

**Mark:** So who knows?

And since I'm talking about runes, I want to mention my favorite runic inscription, which is actually, the most numerous inscription.

**Aven:** I remember this one

**Mark:**  written in the elder futhark from the third to eighth centuries, and even occasionally in England, not as often, not nearly as often, but very common outside of England. It's the most common, as I say, of early runic charm words.

it's the word ALU, which on the face of it looks like the word ale.

**Aven:**  Right

**Mark:** Now, the origin and meaning of this, of course, is highly disputed.

Yet again.

It's generally taken as some kind of runic magic, but is it the word ale or is it some other meaning. It's really hard to say, cause usually why

**Aven:** bother? Just have that, like it's just that one word. Why would you, can you tell? But also why would you, if it does mean ale, why would you

**Mark:** write 'ale' on an amulet?

**Aven:** Yeah, yeah,

**Mark:** yeah. Who knows? So, it may be ale in the sense of an [00:55:00] intoxicating beverage, which sort of seems magical. The idea of intoxication.

though other meetings have been suggested, like it might mean amulet, and there's a word that's close enough to it that might be that or protect.

But again,

**Aven:** nobody knows.

**Mark:** Nobody knows. So it's been posited that it might come from a proposed Indo-European root, \*alu-, which might mean, or the, the sort of definition for this, according to Cal Watkins is, "in words related to sorcery, magic, possession and intoxication," or according to, Picorny, the Picorny dictionary, "bitter or beer." And so this bitter sense, might be related, therefore to alum in Latin alum, and therefore also aluminum.

**Aven:** Right. So

**Mark:** the bitterness might be the, the ultimate sense. Again, I don't know why that

**Aven:** be. Yeah. It makes sense. Medicinal things that are better off under this and all, but that doesn't make sense for [00:56:00] why you'd inscribe it places.

**Mark:** That might make sense for beer, I suppose. Anyways, the other interesting point of that though, is that, in Beowulf, there is a passage in which grief or terror is described with the word, ealuscerwen , which means "pouring out of ale", or at least, it seems to mean that literally, it's kind of hard to interpret, but, so it has some kind of force, right?

**Aven:** Right.

**Mark:**  Some sort of meaning

**Aven:** beyond that of metaphorical or emotional force. Yeah,

**Mark:** and of course, just because I like this etymology. The word bridal also comes from the word ale. There specifically its beer sense

**Aven:** B R I D A L to do with brides,

**Mark:** to do with brides. Like

**Aven:** not bridle as in a horse.

**Mark:** No, not bridle as in horse. It's literally from bride plus ale, and in old English it meant wedding feast. So ale in the sense of the feast. Now the etymology of bride, by the way, is uncertain. There is a Gothic cognate bruþs, which means daughter-in-law. But that actually [00:57:00] kind of makes sense because the newly married person, the newly married woman in any household is going to be the daughter-in-law, if you look at it from a certain perspective, right.

And so therefore, that bride part might be connected with the, we don't know where that, where that comes from, as I said, but it might be connected, through this logic to the Proto Indo European root \*bhreu- which means to boil, bubble, effervesce burn, with derivatives referring to cooking and brewing as it would be the daughter in law's job to do the cooking and brewing.

So it could mean beer, beer, therefore , right, bride and ale;bridal means beer, beer, beer ale. Anyways, I kind of like that.

**Aven:** Nice. Yeah.

**Mark:** Now I just have a couple of last little tiny things to mention, that aren't. Specifically, well, actually, just one last thing to mention, that isn't specifically runes, but it is another early Germanic writing system, and that's the Gothic alphabet. So I mentioned, the Gothic language and you know, we

**Aven:** had this, yeah, you

**Mark:** talked about a few words from [00:58:00] Gothic. And as I say, this was basically used by, probably invented by Bishop Wulfila who was, you know, a Bishop and missionary to convert the, the goths to Christianity. And so he used them in his biblical translations produced in the fourth century.

And it was believed that Wulfila consciously chose not to use the runic alphabet for translating the Bible into Gothic because of their association with pagan and, you know, magic things and so forth.

So the letters themselves, therefore, are mostly directly from the Greek alphabet. They're pretty recognizable, as kind of Greek, with a few extra letters to represent sounds that Greek didn't have, specifically, F and G, which were clearly taken from the Latin alphabet.

**Aven:** Right.

**Mark:** and there is possibly a runic character to represent, to distinguish between the consonant wa w sound and the vowel U, rather than using Ufor both, that may have [00:59:00] been based on a rune, but it's not clear. So that's speculation. It's not certain where it comes from, but that's one possibility.

So a small runic connection there, but it's just interesting that there was this whole writing system invented for a dramatic language

**Aven:** that consciously avoided rooms. Yeah.

All right, well that was a lot actually. You'd said you didn't have any much to talk about, but that was actually a lot, so I might kind of,

okay. I'm going to cut out some of what I was going to talk about. However, if you've made it this far into the podcast, dear wombat, our good friend Michael, just earlier today happened to tweet. " I wonder where the alphabet's order comes from, you know, is it just random or where does it come from?" And I don't want to go into too much detail detail about alphabets because we will get to that when we get to spelling. So we pointed him to our spelling video. And

**Mark:** that will become a podcast

**Aven:** that will become a podcast, but not yet. So I promised that we'd [01:00:00] talk a little bit about it on our podcast, and then I do have a couple of other little things I want to talk abo ut . Cause we talked about the futhark order, right?

And then all of that and how it's connected to the alphabet order. So very briefly, I want to talk a little bit about the Greek alphabet, right? the early Greek alphabet because it influenced the Latin, you know, when you talk about the Italic alphabet as opposed to the Greek. Yes. But of course, the Italic alphabet is derived from the Greek alphabet.

All of the alphabets in Europe are including the runic alphabet are derived eventually from the Greek alphabet. It didn't enough, so, so yeah, but it itself, of course, is derived from a Phoenician alphabet, which as you talked about in spelling, is itself derived from an Egyptian, not alphabet, but from Egyptian hieroglyphic writing.

**Mark:** Well, before that, there was another group of. Semitic people who weren't the Phoenicians, but it was a language fairly close to Phoenician,

**Aven:** right. So another Semitic people who took the hieroglyphs,

**Mark:** some of whom were in Egypt, who worked as miners apparently. And that's where we first see [01:01:00] it attested,

**Aven:** right. So if we're talking about where the order is, this is something we should look up for when we do talk about spelling is we should look more into the order because I don't think you went into why it is the order it is. And I'm not sure there is an answer to that, but. What is something that I will say is, so what happens is the Semitic alphabet draws on Egyptian hieroglyphs and basically does this thing of whatever the word the hieroglyph represents, it takes the first letter and makes that symbol now stand for just that letter, and that's how it becomes alphabetic,

 **Mark:** It was already being done that way in Egyptian to write out names specifically. Right,

**Aven:** right. And so that they sort of extend that practice to all writing. Then that by the time it gets to Phoenician and it all through the Semitic alphabets, they're not really alphabets.

They're abjads, they, they only have consonants. They don't write out the vowels because the rules of Semitic languages make vowels. I don't really know the details, but moderately [01:02:00] predictable. I think it's sort of the basic,

**Mark:** right? Yeah. Well, what happens is you change the vowels to change something grammatically about the word.

You'd still going to have the same root.

**Aven:** You'd still think you'd want to write that out? I still, I find it baffling, but I've never taken a Semitic language like, yes, and that's why we write down ed on the end of our verbs so that we can tell it's in the past tense. How do you read a sentence if you don't know what tense it is? Anyway.

Obviously I need to learn, you know, this is still how Arabic is written and, and Hebrew and stuff. So like, clearly people can make it work because they do know they use points and stuff, but you don't need to. Then for generations and millennia, they did it. Yeah. Anyway, the point being that Semitic didn't have signs for vowels. So when Greek, so just moving onto what I know a little more about, which is how the Greek alphabet moves.

 we don't know the details and there is this is disputed too. You know, how did it get from, it clearly got from Phoenicia to Greece. That's undisputed. But when, and how?

We [01:03:00] don't know.

**Mark:** We know the Phoenecians were seafaring

**Aven:** oh, there's no, it's not hard to understand. We know there's lots of contact, but like, exactly where, when in what particular, like why was it first taken over? What was the first purpose of it? Right.

our best guess right now seems to be some time in the eight hundreds BCE

**Mark:** okay.

**Aven:** Okay. And probably in like Cyprus or Crete or, in Asia minor just because of those big trading hubs. Right. But that's not because we know of it. I mean, people make different arguments, it makes logical sense. The Greeks themselves knew it was Phoenician. They reference it. So Herodotus, for instance, says that, he gives us the story of Cadmus and this comes elsewhere too.

I'll get back to that, but the term phoinikeia , which means Phoenician things is used for letters in early Greek writing, and in inscriptions and archaic Crete has an inscription that has poinikastas to [01:04:00] mean scribe and poinikazein to write. So to do Phoenician things means to write.

So, you know, they very clearly saw it as and knew it as Phoenician in their earliest incorporations of it into Greek. The big thing that, so to get back to the order of the alphabet thing here, the big thing is, as you know, I mean, this is, I'm not telling you anything you don't know.

but that the Greek language did want to represent vowels, and so they took, they repurposed a bunch of consonants they didn't have.

Yeah. Fortunately, Phoenician had more consonantal sounds,

**Mark:** you know, very similar consonants that were distinctions that Greek didn't make. So there was a whole bunch of different versions of the K sound,

**Aven:** for instance.

So they were able to use the, a number of signs that made sounds that weren't different from another sound, from a for Greek purposes. And so they use those and they just turn them into vowels. Often from the name again, from the first [01:05:00] letter, that had been, or first, you know, one of the sounds and then sometimes just some seemingly randomly, this is one of the questions is like, was there only one or were there many adoptions?

And it really seems to have been one, like one person or group did this and it spread. Because while there's a few variations in early alphabets in Greece, not very many. And in particular, the vowel, which vowels got adopted. Doesn't seem to have variations where you would expect, and that's because those are the ones whereas, there's a couple of consonants that sort of seem to switch around a little bit, like some, a psi and xi, I think sort of alternate in a couple of early scripts, but, but the vowels don't.

So that really does suggest that was one burrowing, because those are fairly, not completely arbitrary, but somewhat arbitrary so the order stuck to the Semitic order pretty much. What happens then is the Greek, some of the repurposed consonants though, get stuck on the end. so there, some of it's not arbitrary in the sense [01:06:00] that they put new invented letters onto the end. They didn't stick them in the middle of break up

**Mark:** the already existing

**Aven:** wall. So there was an order clearly why there was that order and why this, you know, so the earliest evidence we have for that order I think is Semitic. I'm pretty sure. So, you know, that's, that is still a question, but so there is some reasoning to the order at that stage. That's really all I wanted to say for, to try to answer Michael's question. I mean, that's not a full answer at all.

**Mark:** Yeah. I think we'd have to look to Egyptian

**Aven:** to really try to understand.

But I mean, because they didn't have an alphabet. I don't know that, like, was there an order to, you wouldn't have had an order to the hieroglyphs in the same way,

**Mark:** Well, you didn't use just any hieroglyph to do.

**Aven:** Yeah, I know.

**Mark:** But certain ones that were used, I don't know if they were ever written out as a set.

**Aven:** Oh, that's what I

**Mark:** certainly considered as a set.

**Aven:** Yeah. So maybe we'd have to look for that. So maybe we'll have, we'll look into that. So I mentioned Cadmus, and just to touch on that, there's this myth. so, you know, the Greeks were well aware there was a time before they had writing, and then the time after the [01:07:00] writing. So the myth is that Cadmus, who's the founder of Thebes, was an exile from Phoenicia. He's the brother of Europa, the girl who was abducted by Zeus in the shape of a bull and carried from Phoenicia to Europe, giving her name to Europe. And her brothers were sent out by their father to find her and told not to come back if they didn't. And they didn't because like Zeus, so Cadmus couldn't go back.

So he ends up going to the Oracle at Delphi and asking what to do. And they like go found a city where a heifer lies down to drink anyway. It doesn't matter. The point is he founds Thebes and, he is said to have been the inventor of the alphabet or to have brought the alphabet from Phoenicia. Now there's other versions of it where it's Prometheus,

Oh, because he's, he's the giver of the giver of technology. So there are other stories in which it's Prometheus, but that's just clearly, like he gives all of the important technologies, but the one that links it to Cadmus is it's not because Thebes was the early literate city. It's because he's [01:08:00] Phoenician and all the stories make them Phoenician. And so they just, because they know it comes from Phoenicia. So it must've been that.

So that's the alphabet in Greece.

The argument about why they started using it is interesting because like, why decide to start writing things down? Not everybody is in that time. And there are two competing arguments and there's good evidence on both sides, but I don't know that we'll ever know.

One argument is that it was specifically picked up in order to write Epic poetry.

**Mark:** Really?

**Aven:** Yeah. Remember writing was used for that, cuneiform more in the cultures that the Greeks knew and that they were definitely influenced by. So they were influenced bycSumerian and, and Mesopotamian cultures for their myths. We can tell that. So they would have had experience at some point of this idea of writing long Epic poems writing them down. No, I don't know that the Semitic language was being used for those purposes at the time, but knowing there was a way of writing that this, this was a way of recording [01:09:00] poetry, and then finding an alphabet that seemed better and way easier than cuneiform and more easily adapted to Greek, that, that might've been why, Hmm.

**Mark:** I would've thought it was like trade.

**Aven:** Well, so that's obviously the other argument is that it was first adopted for commercial purposes and the, you know, good evidence for that is that the people they were adopting it from are their trading partners. Yeah. And presumably they were using it for commercial purposes, the Phoenicians that is. The thing is that all of our early writing is not. Commercial, but of course, why would it survive?

**Mark:** Right? If it's like a list of the cargo on a ship, who would save that?

**Aven:** So that's the, so that's the argument that that's, you know, that's the counter argument is that, well, but why would that survive?

That's going to be written in perishable materials. What survives is stuff that's but what's survives?

**Mark:**  Why would you recopy it, right?

**Aven:**  Oh, no. But then none of this, none of the early stuff.

**Mark:** The copies of epic is not the original copies.

**Aven:** No, no, no, but none of them. None of what I'm talking about [01:10:00] is stuff that was recopied. We're talking about inscriptions.

What are the earliest inscriptions? Like? The earliest actual writing? So the extent writing we have from the eighth century and the seventh century is all popular, that is like not elite. It's sort of like, I mean. Probably to some extent, elite, but not just like, not Royal letters. Right. Not like, cause that's what, of course cuneiform is special because, its main medium with clay tablets, which then survive.

Yeah. So that's why we have so much of it. But, all of the extant writing is private and it's not commercial or administrative. We don't have administrative examples of inscriptions until into the sixth century, seventh century, none.And it's not monumental. The first known, one of the first, known inscriptions, one of the earliest, not the earliest, but one of the earliest inscriptions we have , and a lot of the ones that we have that are early are in hexameter.

So they're in verse. Even if they're not, they're not Epic. Like what we, we don't have inscriptions on stone of Epic or anything like that, but like, even if there are two line or four line [01:11:00] phones, they're in examiner, which is the meter of the early epics, of early poetry. So like we have poetic scraps, but we don't have any admin scraps.

these are arguments from slight evidence and there's lots of ways you can poke holes in them. But it's interesting. So one of the earliest inscriptions we have is actually on a cup, so scratched into and baked into a pottery cup. And there's a little bit of a problem with one rather important part of the first line, but I'm going to read the generally accepted restoration and we'll talk about what it is.

It's from the late eighth century, so you know, 780's or something like that. That's BCE. BCE. Yep. And it's from the Bay of Naples. So that's in Italy, right. So when we're talking about like that's how far far and fast the alphabet spread. Cause we're saying that it's the eighth century is when it's the first inscriptions we have.

The first evidence we have of it is in the mid eighth century and by the late eighth century it's in [01:12:00] Southern Italy, which is of course a very important Greek area.

**Mark:** That just makes me think, I don't think I was previously aware of how early yeah, there were Greek settlements in Italy.

**Aven:** Yeah. It's in the eighth century is a big period of colonization, eighth and seventh, but especially the eighth.

And so a lot of the Southern Italian cities were founded then, and even Marseille and, and Sicily, like Sicily was a huge Greek area from the eighth century onward. So yeah, it's, it's one thinks about those as. You know, Roman, but no, they're very big Greek areas. So the inscription reads, "I am the cup of Nestor, good for drinking. Whoever drinks from this cup, desire for beautifully crowned Aphrodite will seize him instantly."

**Mark:** So is this THE Nestor?

**Aven:**  Well, isn't that an interesting question? So it's in hexamaters, so it's in Epic meter, and Nestor, of course, is a famous name from the Iliad.

Hmm. and the problem is, one of the bits that's least [01:13:00] clear is the part where it says, I am there's few possible readings there. Now the I am is. Reasonably secure because there's a lot of items in the Greek world that have that, that speak like that, that say I am made by so-and-so.

I am

**Mark:** That's what runic inscription yeah, very often do.

Yeah.

**Aven:**  So it would be very common for it to say, I am the cup of Nestor, but does it mean it was made by Nestor, does it mean it's owned by Nestor. Is this just a guy named Nestor? But it seems so hard to be. Yeah, exactly. But it's sort of like, but this is like in hexameters, Lot's and lot's been written on this. I read one article that was interesting and I'll link in the show notes, that suggested that it has magical properties to it actually,

**Mark:** Well it seems to be an aphrodisiac, I guess

**Aven:** well, so this is it. So a lot of people have just said, all it's saying is if you drink wine from this cup, cause obviously that's what it's made for. you'll want sex. Yeah. Because wine is an intoxicant. It makes you want to have sex, right? This was actually arguing that it's a little more direct than that. It's saying this cup is magical specifically, and it was arguing from the [01:14:00] sort of syntax of, sort of conditional curses, which are quite standard.

If someone steals this, he will be struck blind. Right. Like that whoever steals this, he will be struck blind. Whoever,

disturbs this stone let him be cursed by... So, whoever drinks from this cup, he will be seized. Yeah. So that, so the argument was really from that, and it was also arguing quite rightly, that saying you're going to be seized by Aphrodite is not a promise.

It's a threat. The Greeks and the Romans thought of,

sort of lust as being kind of a, a madness, a pain, and a madness that would drive you out of your wits. So like we might think of it as like, ha ha, aphrodisiac, but it could also be taken as possibly as a joking curse, but still as sort of like a careful what you do with me.

I might drive you to lust

**Mark:** sort of like Paris and Helen in the Iliad.

**Aven:** Oh yeah. Well, think about love stories in Greek myth and find me one in which the [01:15:00] love does something good to the people in love and get back to me on that one. I mean,

**Mark:** Helen is always talking about how she despises, yeah. Aphrodite keeps making her

**Aven:** love of the kind that Aphrodite inspires as opposed to like marital love or family love. it's a destructive force. So anyway, I thought that was really interesting. So that's like one of our earliest inscriptions in the Greek alphabet is that cup.

So you can see why people have made the argument that it doesn't feel like they learned this special new skill so that they could like keep accounts. Right? But all of the caveats apply.

 Okay. A couple of things. Of course, the Alphabet's not the first way that Greek is recorde the first one we know is recording Greek is linear. B. So the earliest texts that we have recorded in the geographical area known as Greece are in a family of scripts in Crete. They've been labeled by Sir Arthur Evans, Cretan pictographic, Cretin, hieroglyphic, linear [01:16:00] A and linear B.

Now, the first three of those are undeciphered. And it's unclear what language they represent. They probably don't represent Greek because we don't think that the Minoans were a Greek people. Right. But we don't know. So those exist. But we do know linear B. So linear B

was undeciphered until the 20th century. But Michael Ventris, who was building on work by the classicist, Alice Cober, who never gets credit, so I'm just gonna make sure she does now, and using tablets that had been discovered by Sir Arthur Evans. And then also importantly, another cache that had been discovered by another archeologist, Carl Blegen and photographed. And he was working with the photographs by Alison Frantz. He, in 1952, Michael Ventris managed to decipher linear B for the first time, right. Using sort of code breaking techniques, but also building, as I said on Alice Cober had done the very important work of sort of suggesting this was syllabic, what parts that were syllabic and parts that are [01:17:00] alphabetic and like, it's mostly syllabic anyway, and she'd done work on, figuring out that there were inflections.

Right? And so once like that helped a lot. And then he built this sort of like table of inflections and figured stuff out and started to do it. And finally did manage to decipher it. And when he deciphered it, he proved that the language it represented was early Greek. Right. Which was a huge deal because nobody had thought that the Minoans were Greek.

We've gone on to feel like that they weren't, and this was Mycenaean influence on late Minoan culture, So we have linear B, and that is an a syllabic rather than alphabetic. It's, well, it's, it's sort of a bunch of things. It has numerals, it has hieroglyphic or pictographic elements. So like things that represent things, sort of simplified versions of cows and sheafs of wheat and stuff like that. And then it has the syllabic stuff,

**Mark:** and that's not unprecedented, you know, the Chinese script mixes.

**Aven:** Yeah, it [01:18:00] makes sense. Like some things are easily represented by pictographs. Why wouldn't you represent them by pictographs? Especially because, so in contrast to early Greek alphabet, linear B, what we have now, of course, what we have is stuff that was inscribed on clay that was, accidentally preserved when things burned down. So what we have is probably the stuff that was not meant to last. Right. But happened to last and the stuff that probably was meant to last, if it was written on things like papyrus doesn't survive.

So we don't know that linear B wasn't used for other purposes, but we don't have any inscriptions or monumental inscriptions like we do for cuneiform or for, you know, other things. All we have is the linear B tablets are all administrative. Okay, so it's inventories, it's lists of taxes, it's lists of expenditures by temples, it's all bureaucratic, which is why we have numbers and why we have lists, you know, these images. So like, yeah, if you're going to tally up a whole bunch of cows and jars of wine and all the rest of it, pictographs are perfectly good for [01:19:00] that. You don't need anything else for it. And then the words that are more complicated, they develop a syllabary for it. That was part of what made it hard to figure out what language it represented. And that's why like the pictographs and hieroglyphics, we don't know what language it represents, cause we don't have any sound. Right. So the syllabary was the important, well, figuring out that part of it was a syllabary was really important. And then being able to assign sounds to that and figure out how it worked was the key. Right. So anyway, but that writing system seems to have disappeared around 1100 BCE.

Or by certainly by the turn of the millennium, what's gone and when they started writing

**Mark:** again, now, that was the, that's the bronze age collapse?

**Aven:** Yeah. Yeah. So that was the Mycenaean peoples in Greece who are writing with that, and then yes, there's this somewhat mysterious catastrophic collapse of civilizations around the Mediterranean.

there's so much argument about that. I'm not going to start talking about that

**Mark:** Sea peoples! Sea peoples!

**Aven:** Well, but if it even happened anyway, [01:20:00] let's not get into that.

so that technology was lost and when they come back to it, a) they come from a totally different direction, they go with an alphabet from Phoenicia and b), potentially anyway, they use it for a completely different purpose. Right? So it's, its role in the civilization is not the same. Right. Too. So, that's the earliest scripts. And then the last thing I'll talk very briefly about, is our earliest evidence of writing, which obviously is in a written script, but Homer talks about or mentions writing.

And the thing about Homer is, while of course it comes down to us in a written form, it is now good accepted fact that the composition of the poem was preliterate right. And was so, it was being composed in a society that didn't generally have writing. So to some extent you wouldn't expect any mention of writing in it.

And we don't have mention of it really, in like the idea of writing down an epic or anything like that. There's no idea of literacy in that sense. So there's one passage that's does [01:21:00] have elements of writing, maybe. So it's, it's Iliad book six, and it's in the middle of a complicated thing where, Glaucus and Diomedes exchange`` armour it's an important scene. As part of this, they kind of exchange pedigrees and they end up finding out that they're guest friends by family connection. And that's why it's so they won't fight each other. So they exchange armor to mark that, in the background of it, Glaucus, the Trojan tells the story of his family and he tells the story of one of his ancestors who's Bellerophon. Bellerophon is famous elsewhere for having tamed Pegasus and fought the Chimera Chimaera. But the beginning of this has a story that is known as the Potiphar's wife motif after the similar story in the Bible, and I'll come back to that. Basically the King of the country has a young queen who falls in love with Bellerophon, he rejects her, she accuses him of rape. And so Proteus wants to get rid of Bellerophon, [01:22:00] but he's scared of him or doesn't want to do it himself. So he stopped short of putting Bellerophon to death. It was the thing he dared not do, but he packed him off to Lycia. So they're in a place In Greece is where they're starting up, but he passed them off to Lycia. So that's,

Asia minor, and that's important, with sinister credentials from himself. He gave him a folded tablet on which he had traced a number of devices with a deadly meaning and told him to hand this to his father in law, the Lycian King, and thus ensure his own death.

So Bellerophon goes, when he reaches there, he's welcomed as an honored guest. But on the 10th day, he examined him and asked to see his credentials, when he had deciphered the fatal message from his son in law, the King then tried to kill him by sending him off to kill a monster. Okay. The rest of it is not important. He survived, in case you're worried. So, what are those fatal signs, right? They don't have to be writing. They certainly don't have to be alphabetic writing, but a folded tablet. I mean, that is exactly how writing was done later. And the words that are used [01:23:00] are in the Greek there, semata lugra so 'semata' signs, and that's a word that is used later for writing. So it could be. So the passage has been this, I mean, from an article, "the passage has been explained away as a dim memory of Mycenaean script or a reference to some primitive system of signing tokens or pictograms. Yet recent finds from the near East convincingly suggest that the writing here is Oriental writing as are the motifs and geography of the story." And I think that's a really interesting point. So that motif, it's called the Potiphar's wife thing from the story of Joseph, where the same thing happens to Joseph when he's in Egypt.

Yep.

his supervisor's wife falls in love with them. Right. And it's exactly the same. That part of it's the same story. It turns up elsewhere, of course, but, , there's a Semitic connection to that story. And we know there's lots of Semitic connections, but specifically Semitic and he's sent to Lycia, which is in Asia minor. So in the Oriental in the terms of that article, it's an old term, [01:24:00] but in the near Eastern context. So the idea that that story would be in that context, in that geography, with that motif and include an understanding of writing that is a Semitic understanding of writing that comes from the Phoenician or, or some other, seems very probable.

I mean, you can't prove it, but it seems they've been borrowed from, so it could be that the whole story is borrowed and therefore the concept of writing in it that Homer doesn't know what the writing is, but has borrowed the story with this idea in it from this. And so just calls them, deadly signs because he might not have known what they are or that it's an understanding of Semitic writing that they don't, they still only use in these tiny little isolated ways that like a King might use to send a message to another King, but ordinary folk aren't using and so wouldn't know. So anyways, it's just an, it's the only mention of writing. If it is a mention of writing in Homer.

**Mark:** Can they. Cause I know to some degree you can date bits of Homer.

**Aven:** Don't even, don't [01:25:00] even! What are you some kind of analyst? Oh, I mean, I don't know. Short answer. And this article is trying to make some arguments about stuff and doesn't, doesn't appeal to an argument from dating the section. So I'm not gonna. I'm not going to say, I don't know, a question of Homeric composition and dates thereof.

Don't even want to talk about it, but you know, it is interesting because of course, Homer is being written down around the same time, like our dates for when is Homer written down are generally considered to be eighth century to sixth century. The alphabet comes in about the same time as some fairly reasonable dates for when Homer's first written down, I think these days people are leaning more towards a later date for writing down towards the seventh and sixth centuries. So the argument isn't maybe as strong, you know, the idea that we get the alphabet and we get Homer being written down pretty much at the same time was a big part of the argument for that being the reason.

Right.

I don't know that that's quite as accepted now, but I mean, when you talk about the date of [01:26:00] Homer, there's no such thing as accepted. So right. It's not wildly off. Let's put it that way.

**Mark:** It's interesting that you mentioned this. It suddenly made me think of Beowulf, which also doesn't have any mention of

**Aven:** writing of writing,

**Mark:** except when, so after Beowulf kills Grendel's mother, he uses this magic sword that he found there in her lair, underwater lair.

and the blade of the sword melts away with her blood.

**Aven:** Right.

**Mark:** But he's left with the sword hilt, which he brings back to the court of Hrothgar and it's not made clear exactly what it is, but there are some kind of markings on the sword hilt that tell a story that they're not able to really understand.

**Aven:** Huh. It's

**Mark:** not clear if these are

**Aven:** pictures, right? I mean, that doesn't have to be writing. Of course, writing,

**Mark:** it's very vague,

**Aven:** and if it is writing, they don't understand it. So

**Mark:** yeah.

**Aven:** So again, it might be some kind of vague understanding of writing. By a non literate person. Yeah.

**Mark:** Now of course, that depends [01:27:00] on the dating of

**Aven:** Beowulf and there's the whole question of like Virgilian influence on Beowulf and stuff, which would obviously suggest a literate, but, but again, Beowulf, the story is older than Beowulf the poem. Yeah. and with the poem is

**Mark:** there, who knows what, you can make it of that. But anyways, there is that, that nice parallel there. So.

**Aven:** okay. And then I have one last little tidbit to end with, which is just a fun little myth about writing, which is that there is a flower that has letters on it, in Greek myth. Well, fun. It's not a fun myth. There's death in it, they all have death in them.

There is a myth about a young boy, young Spartan Prince called Hyacinthus, who is beloved of Apollo and of the wind Zephyrus. So these two gods both love him because he's beautiful. And so Zephyrus is jealous because Apollo is winning. And so Apollo and Hyacinthus are playing a game one day. Maybe discus, maybe something else, some kind of throwing game and Zephyr uses a gust of his wind to blow [01:28:00] the disc off course and Hyacinth and kill him. Because of course, when you're jealous, you kill the person you love. Right? Because that's Greek myth.

**Mark:** Well, he couldn't kill the gods.

**Aven:** Well, indeed. So as Hyacinth lay, dying, Apollo was so sad that he caused a flower to grow out of his blood, and the flower is inscribed with the Greek words. Ai, Ai. Alas, alas, AI, AI. That's, of course the hyacinth flower. However, it's not the hyacinth flower that we think of, not the same species.

Probably the Larkspur or the Iris, and I will put a link to this story on Theoi.com and they have a picture of a Larkspur and they have it like written with the letters written beside it, the alpha and the iota to try to show you sort of how it works. I'm not certain about that, but anyway, but, but the interesting thing is there's another, there's another version of that story which says that that's not where that, so there seems to be a plant that they [01:29:00] definitely think has the letters AI on it.

Because it's either named after hyacinth, or it's another flower or the Larkspur flower that has the AI, because when Ajax, the Greek hero whose name in Greek is Aias, A I A S, when he killed himself, after being denied the armor of Achilles after the Trojan war, this big, long, complicated story. But he, he kills himself, that the flower sprang from his blood and it has his letters on it , AI just of his name. So, two different myths explaining these, this alpha iota. So clearly they definitely thought there was a flower that looked like an AI. I don't really see it in the Larkspur that that shows it, but whatever.

So, I just think it's interesting though, because you know, these are old myths then, but they can't be that old if they suggest there's alphabetic letters on the flowers.

**Mark:** Presumably so that that story about [01:30:00] Ajax. Would it have been in the Epic cycle

**Aven:** I mean, the story, the Ajax is in the Epic Cycle

**Mark:** Him wanting the, the armor and,

**Aven:** Oh yeah. That's all in. We know that it's from the Odyssey and, and it's, it's there early, but the detail that a flower sprang from his blood. No particular reason to think that that was in an early version. It's not in the Odyssey, for instance. Right. So who knows when that gets added. Right? And we only know it from Ovid. We only know it from Ovid. Right? So, like, it could be, God knows when it comes along. So anyway, and the same with the, the Hyacinth story is, all in late authors too, Ovid and Pausanius and Philostratus so, you know, could've come at any time, but, but it's still interesting to find a myth that actually has letters like that.

Right. And that is everything I have to say for the moment about early writing in Greece.

**Mark:** Well, I'll just add, since you mentioned myths about the creation of writing, there is a Norse myth about, about [01:31:00] Odin inventing

**Aven:** runes.

**Mark:** Runes. So it's mentioned briefly in, in several sources about him inventing runes. And there's one sort of long passage in the Hávamál, about Odin gaining the knowledge of runes by sacrificing himself to himself. Because of course, he's the God of death. So you, when you sacrifice someone, you sacrifice them to Odin. So he has to sacrifice himself to himself, by hanging himself from a mighty tree, which is probably Yggdrasil, and piercing himself with a fearsome spear, probably Gungnir his spear.

and you know, there's the description of the sort of pain and suffering of the, this process that he, so he, he wants wisdom and he does all these, he sacrifices an eye

**Aven:** yeah.

**Mark:** And so this is one of the things he does. And from this, he gets the knowledge of runes. And there, there may be even a reference to this same idea, even in old English, because there're too, I think two old English texts that talk about the invention of runes by Mercury, the [01:32:00] giant

**Aven:** who would of course be the analogue for Odin,

**Mark:** for Odin.

**Aven:** And then I mean that is I suppose, a piece of evidence or a suggestion that there might be magical elements to runes themselves, right? That he has to learn it in this really complicated and sort of magical way. And Odin is associated with magic in lots of ways.

**Mark:**  So, if you still want more about runes, there is actually a lot more to know, but I am probably not the one to tell you more. You should go to an expert, a runologist, and there is in fact a podcast just for that, right? It's called The Runecast.

**Aven:** Which is a good pun, right? Yeah. Cause casting the runes.

**Mark:** Yeah. I listen to it. It's, it's really interesting. It goes into lots of detail. So check that out

**Aven:** and we'll put a link to that. Of course. Right. Well, I hope that that has been a nice distraction from the world.

As I said, I, I'd love to say that we're going to be pumping these [01:33:00] out. But, we're not. I don't even know when this is going to come out. As I said, we're recording on the 31st though. It is now the first, cause we've gone over midnight by quite a long time.

so I have to now edit it and get it out. So I'm not quite sure how quickly that'll be. I'll try to do it quickly.

**Mark:** But you in the future know exactly when it is

**Aven:** Yes, yes you do.

So, we didn't really get a podcast out in March. This counts as our March one, but maybe we'll get another one out in April. You never know! So we'll see. Maybe we'll interview somebody else who's also isolated at home. closest to social interaction we're going to get, so we might as well do it.

Alright, be well everyone. Stay safe. We are thinking of everyone and please do come and visit us on Lyceum and chat if you're looking for something to do. We'd love to talk about this episode or any others.

**Mark:** Oh gosh, we have to think of a discussion topic .Quick!

**Aven:** Would you like to be hung from a tree to learn about runes?

No, let's not do that. All right. Thanks for listening.

[01:34:00] **Mark:** bye bye

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Thanks for listening.

**Mark:** Bye.