Runic voices from Norwegian towns in the High Middle Ages

The Bryggen inscriptions and the rise of modern pragmatic literacy
Bryggen in Bergen anno 2012
Excavations at Bryggen after the fire in 1955

7 huge fires in the Middle Ages
1170/1171
1198
1248
1332
1393
1413
1476
What kind of inscriptions do we meet in Bergen?

- fuþark inscriptions (with or without a co-text)
- writing exercises
- cryptic (“encoded”) runes
- Latin texts written with runes
- name tags
- business letters and bills/invoices
- metrical texts, especially love poems
- obscenities
- pious prayers
- amulets and “magic formulas”
A selection of owner tags
What kind of runes did they use in the High Middle Ages?
B38 Fuþark from Bryggen
Dotted runes: graphemic differentiation

\[ l /i/ \Rightarrow \Phi /e/ \]

\[ \B /b/ \Rightarrow \B /p/ \]

\[ 1 /t/ \Rightarrow 1 /d/ \]

\[ \Gamma /k/ \Rightarrow \P /g/ \]
A. Vowels

A.1 The Viking Age futhark: vowel runes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>non-rounded</th>
<th>rounded</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>non-open</td>
<td>/ι/ + /ε/</td>
<td>/υ/ + /υ/, /ο/, /ω/, /φ/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>open nasal</td>
<td>/ø/</td>
<td>/α/ + /ε/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>open oral</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

↓ graphemic differentiation ↓

A.2 The Middle Age futhark: vowel runes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>front</th>
<th>back</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>non-rounded</td>
<td>rounded</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>close close</td>
<td>/ι/</td>
<td>/υ/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>close close-mid</td>
<td>/ε/</td>
<td>/ο/</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>open</td>
<td>/æ/</td>
<td>/α/</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
B. Consonants (plosives)

### B.1 The Viking Age futhark: consonant runes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>plosives</th>
<th>bilabial</th>
<th>dental/alveolar</th>
<th>velar</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bb</td>
<td></td>
<td>1t</td>
<td>k</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

↓ Graphemic differentiation ↓

### B.2 The Middle Age futhark: consonant runes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>plosives</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bp Bb</td>
<td></td>
<td>1t 1d</td>
<td>k g</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
How do cryptic runes work?

1 2 3 4 5 6

3 f u b o r k
2 h n i a s
1 t b m l y
Cryptic runes from Bryggen (e.g. B13)

3/6 3/2 3/3 3/6 2/3 3/1 2/3
k u b k i f i
Old Norse (standardised)

Guð gefi [oss byr ok gáfu Maríu].

English translation

“May God give [us fair wind and Maria’s gift/grace].”
Bergen as a commercial centre in the pre-hanseatic period: c. 1050-1300/1350

(after Herteig 1967:167)
A selection of name tags
Owner tag from Bryggen N673
Rune stick N648
Business letter N648 (after 1300): linguistic features

1. apocope: felag < ON félaga ‘business partner’ (dat.sg.) line A
   felag < ON félægi ‘id.’ (nom.sg.) line B
   cf. bondann ‘farmer-the’ (akk.sg. + def. article) line C

2. morphological simplification: postæin lang
   < ON porstein langan ‘Torstein the long’ (acc.) line D

3. assimilations: postæin < ON porstein (acc.) line D
   nokkos < ON nokkurs ‘noe’ (gen.sg.) line D
   senmer < send mér ‘send me’ (imperative) line D

4. vowel harmony: haugrími = Hafgrími (dat.) line A vs. mungatet
   (line B)

5. short forms and contractions: flaskap < ON félagsskap line A
Rune stick B448 / drawing

(after Knirk 1994:101)
Order of weapons B448 (c. 1200): linguistic features

1. vowel opening /e/ > /æ/
   - sændir < ON sendir ‘s/he sends’ (3. pres.) line A
   - ær < ON er ‘is’ line B
   - sændi < ON sendi ‘(l) send’ (1. pres.) line B
   - mæþ < ON með ‘with’ line B
   - æf < ON ef ‘if’ line D

2. no vowel reduction / no vowel harmony
   - sændir < ON sendir ‘s/he sends’ (3. pres.) line A
   - sændi < ON sendi ‘(l) send’ (1. pres.) line B
   - alnum < ON alnum/qlnum ‘ell/two feet’ (dat.pl.) line B

3. intervocalic h-loss (hiatus)
   - ioani < ON Jóhani (dat.) ‘Johan/John’
Metrical fragment B88 / drawing

(after Seim 2004:166)
Metrical fragment B88 (c. 1335): alliterative longline

 [...] 'ipir : inrirripiriy принятым : nrap

Old Norwegian

... síðir. Álinn var'k þar er almar / upplendingar bendu ...

"... Fostered I was where the hinterland people bent their bows ..."

Jf. Morkinskinna: Fódrar vass ek þars alma / upplendingar bendu

"Born I was where the hinterland people bent their bows."
Metrical fragment B88 (c. 1335): linguistic features

1. vowel reduction
   amær < ON almar ‘bows (cf. alma, acc.pl. of almr)
   uplindær < ON upplendingar ‘people from the hinterland’
   (nom.pl.)

bito < ON bendu ‘they bent’ (preterite)

2. dialectal loss of liquid /
   amær < ON almar pl. ‘elm-bows’
   cf. the first element in place names Ám- ~ Alm-
   (e.g. Ámdalir ~ Almdalir, DN)
   and modern place names such as Ám-li, Ám-dal, Om-dal
   (see Norsk stadnamnleksikon)
Rune stick B149

gya : sækir : atþu : gakhæim

ON tekst: Gyða segir at þú gakk heim!

‘Gyða says that you: go/come home!’