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Reviews


Reviewed by Mindy MacLeod

A compact little book of only 100 or so pages, Martin Findell’s *Runes* provides a useful general introduction to the subject of runology. Published by the British Museum, the guide is understandably weighted to those inscriptions found in their collection and while the bulk of the book deals with Anglo-Saxon runic inscriptions, it nevertheless functions as an informative and up-to-date overview of the topic as a whole. For those with any knowledge of runes, the book covers familiar ground, bringing a smart and stylish coverage to a centuries-old subject of interest and fascination.

The best feature of the book, in fact, are the thirty-eight vivid illustrations which accompany the chapters. For too long, runologists have had to rely on line-drawings (or, even worse, no drawings at all), and the photographs provided here add enormously to the book’s impact, lifting the inscriptions out of the murky archives and storage areas of the museum to confront the reader with often blinding brilliance. The significance of this is hard to overstate. Even inscriptions routinely labelled “meaningless” or “unintelligible” are shown to be undeniably worthy of appraisal and admiration in their own right.

Findell’s introductory chapter, “What are runes?”, provides a lucid overview of runic history. It deals briefly and straightforwardly with enduringly controversial territory such as the origin and purpose of runic writing and the problems inherent in interpreting inscriptions, concentrating on what we do know rather than what we do not. The first chapter also rehashes much familiar territory, providing a fair and balanced account of the origin and early evidence of runic writing. Chapter two is by far the longest, concentrating on Anglo-Saxon runes as exemplified by many illustrated sample texts. The book is a popular work for a general readership, so it would be churlish to accuse it of shying away from difficult issues and in any case, such criticism is deflected with the caveat that “oversimplification” is required as “it would not be appropriate” to go into tech-
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The decline of runic writing in England itself in the late tenth or early eleventh century was countered by their renaissance in Scandinavian territories. The third chapter, on runes in the Viking period and later Middle Ages, could perhaps have provided more detail on the commemorative runic tradition outside of England, but nevertheless offers an interesting overview of the period. Chapter four discusses the rune-names as they are attested in manuscript sources and (briefly) epigraphically. This is a chapter where Findell could perhaps have found more to say, but presumably space was an issue. In the next chapter on the work of runologists, Findell emphasises the importance of not reading runic texts in isolation from the object and the archaeological context in which they were carved. The photographs provided throughout the edition highlight the importance of considering the material of the inscribed object and its decoration as well as the rune-carving technique alongside what the text actually says. The final chapter, on runes in the modern world, is an excellent summary of the twentieth and twenty-first century fascination with runes, in literary sources and popular consciousness and culture. A list of further reading contains a handy record of online resources in addition to the familiar print ones.

While the book is a welcome addition to the layperson’s runic library, there are some minor quibbles: on p. 22 Findell directs the reader to pp. 60–61 for a picture of a comb, although a comb-case rather than a comb is illustrated there. As regards technical details — the suprascript curves (usually termed “bows”, but here rather oddly called “breves”) over the bind-runes are unfortunately marked, usually covering only the second element of the bind (e.g. pp. 11, 28, 68). Sometimes the runes are not printed in bold face (e.g. k for k on p 59, r for r on p. 64, A for A on p. 78). More seriously, long-branch n, †, is mistakenly rendered as † a in the table on p. 58. In the table on p. 76, the reader is invited to compare the Old Norse rune-name h ʀ ’yew’ with Old English  borç ‘wealth’ rather than ʒ ẹoh ‘yew’.

Findell’s language is generally clear if sometimes a little clunky, and the ubiquitous ‘we’ quickly becomes more than a little irritating (when he writes on p. 11 that “the book will help us better understand the lives of people who inhabited Europe over a thousand years ago”, the use of the plural pronoun seems patronising: presumably it is the readers of the book rather than the writer who seek a better understanding of the people described). Granted, the book is aimed squarely at a non-specialist readership, but even so one may wonder whether quite so many explanations are required (must the reader really be reminded who Romulus and Remus are [p. 26], or that “epigraphically” means “in inscriptions”
and so on?). It can also be a little repetitious — we hear a few too many times that inscribed objects may be worn or corroded (pp. 9, 11, 82), or about Cynewulf’s runic signatures (pp. 39, 55). There are some infelicities of expression and some outright errors (e.g. Hickes’ suffers from a misplaced apostrophe on p. 74, there are two successive renderings of the word ‘and’ on p. 81, and ‘inform[a]tion’ and ‘signify[ie]s’ are misspelt on pp. 9 and 86 respectively), but these are hardly significant. Nor are the unwarranted spacings in the British Museum number for the Undley bracteate (p. 27) and after “runic” on p. 83.

Such trivialities hardly detract from the overall usefulness of the book, and its slight size does not diminish the worth of Findell’s contribution to the field. Although it adds nothing new, the work provides an accessible and reasonably wide-ranging treatment of the topic, and by taking a sensible approach and steering clear of sensationalist speculation, it delivers an enlightening introduction to the study of runes and their historical and cultural significance throughout the changing circumstances and settings of their use.