

Runes

a window on the past.



1. What is a rune?

Runes are often approached as relics — an archaic alphabet carved into stone, associated with a distant and partially understood past. They are treated either as historical curiosities or, at the other extreme, as objects of symbolic or mystical speculation. Both approaches miss something essential.

Runes are a writing system, but they are not only that. Each rune carries a sound, a name, and a meaning. Unlike most modern alphabets, where letters function as abstract phonetic units, the runes remain tied to concepts drawn from lived experience: wealth, journey, need, ice, sun. This raises a deeper question. What kind of world produces a writing system like this?

The runes emerged in northern Europe during a period when much of the continent was being reshaped by Roman influence. Yet the regions in which they developed were not fully absorbed into that world. As a result, the runic system took form within cultures that retained strong oral traditions and local symbolic frameworks.

If this is the case, then the runes may preserve more than language. They may offer insight into how these cultures structured meaning itself — how they understood the relationship between sound, symbol, and reality.

This work explores that possibility. Not as a claim of direct survival from deep prehistory, but as an investigation into continuity: the extent to which the runic system reflects patterns of thought that developed outside the dominant literary traditions of the classical world.

To study runes, then, is not only to read inscriptions. It is to approach the edge of a worldview — one that is only partially visible, but not entirely lost.

Across the hills of southern Britain, there is a figure cut into the chalk: a long, stylised horse, formed by trenches dug into the earth and kept clear of grass through repeated human effort. It has been maintained for thousands of years.

There is no clear practical function for this figure. It does not enclose land, mark a boundary, or provide shelter. Its form is only fully visible from a distance. Whatever its original purpose, it was not utilitarian in any ordinary sense.

And yet it was made, and remade, across generations.

This suggests a different kind of importance. Not function, but meaning. Not immediate use, but cultural significance — something understood well enough to justify sustained effort, even as its full context may have shifted or been lost over time.

The runes may be approached in a similar way.

They are often treated as letters, or as symbols with fixed meanings. But like the figure on the hillside, they may represent something more fundamental: an attempt to fix aspects of experience, relationship, and understanding into forms that can be carried across time.

If so, then what survives is not the original intention in full, but the structure that held it — a pattern of meaning that remains visible, even when its complete context does not.




Before the runes can be understood as a system of meaning, it is necessary to establish what they are — and what they are not.

2. What runes are (and what they are not)

Runes are not a language. They are a writing system: a set of symbols used to represent the sounds of spoken languages such as Proto-Norse, Old Norse, and Old English. In this respect, they function in a broadly similar way to other alphabets.

However, this similarity can be misleading.

In most modern writing systems, letters are abstract. They represent sounds, but carry no inherent meaning beyond their phonetic role. The letter itself does not refer to an object, a condition, or an experience. There is nothing within the form of a letter that connects it to the world it is used to describe.

Runes differ in this regard. Each rune has a name, and that name corresponds to a concept drawn from lived experience. The rune  (Fehu) refers to cattle — a primary measure of wealth in early northern European societies. The rune  (Gebo) signifies a gift, not merely as an object exchanged, but as part of a social relationship structured by obligation and reciprocity. The rune  (Nauthiz) represents need or constraint, a condition that shapes action rather than a thing that can be possessed.

These names are not decorative additions. They form part of how the system is remembered and transmitted. In a largely oral culture, such associations provide anchors for memory, linking sound to meaning through familiar elements of daily life.

The pattern that emerges from these names is not random. They cluster around domains that would have been central to survival and social organisation: material resources, environmental conditions, and human relationships. Wealth is not abstract capital, but livestock.

Exchange is not transactional, but relational. Hardship is not theoretical, but immediate and unavoidable.

At the same time, it is important to avoid a different kind of misunderstanding. Runes are not, in their historical use, a system of encoded mystical meanings or hidden messages. Archaeological evidence shows that they were used in practical contexts: inscriptions marking ownership, memorial stones, personal names, and short dedications. A runic inscription might simply state that a stone was raised in memory of a relative, or that an object belonged to a particular individual.

This apparent simplicity does not contradict the conceptual nature of the rune names. Rather, it reflects the dual role of the system. Runes function as tools for writing, but they are constructed from elements that carry meaning beyond their phonetic value.

This dual structure becomes clearer when compared to later alphabetic systems shaped by Latin literacy. In those systems, letters are increasingly detached from meaning, becoming purely functional components of written language. The relationship between sound and concept is carried entirely by words, not by the letters themselves.

Runes occupy a different position. They sit at the intersection of sound, meaning, and memory, shaped by the needs of cultures in which oral tradition remained dominant. The rune names act as points of

connection between spoken language and the material and social world in which that language is used.

To understand the runes, then, is not to choose between “alphabet” and “symbol,” but to recognise that they operate as both. They are a writing system built from meaningful elements, reflecting a way of structuring experience in which sound, concept, and reality are more closely aligned than in later, more abstract forms of writing.

3 the Roman contrast

To understand why the runic system developed in the form it did, it is necessary to consider the wider cultural environment of early Europe, and in particular the influence of the Roman Empire.

At its height, the Roman world was characterised by administrative scale, urbanisation, and the need for standardisation across vast territories. Writing, within this context, served clear and practical functions: law, governance, trade, and record-keeping. The Latin alphabet, as it developed within this system, became increasingly abstract and efficient, its letters functioning purely as phonetic units within a structured and widely shared framework.

This abstraction was not accidental. It reflects the needs of a society in which writing had to operate consistently across regions, languages, and contexts. Meaning was carried by words and sentences, while the letters themselves became interchangeable components — reliable, repeatable, and detached from specific lived associations.

In contrast, the regions in which runes developed lay largely outside direct Roman control. While there was contact through trade, migration, and cultural exchange, these northern societies did not undergo the same processes of administrative integration or urban standardisation. Their social structures remained more localised, and their systems of knowledge transmission remained predominantly oral.

This difference in context has significant implications for how writing systems function.

In an environment shaped by administration and scale, abstraction is an advantage. In an environment shaped by memory and locality, association is more valuable. A system that links sound to familiar concepts — cattle, gift, need, ice — provides anchors for recall, allowing knowledge to be retained and transmitted without reliance on extensive written records.

Archaeological evidence reflects this divergence. In the Roman world, inscriptions are often formal and standardised: legal texts, dedications, official markers, and public records. In the runic world, inscriptions tend to be shorter, more situational, and more closely tied to individuals and immediate contexts. Objects bearing runes may record ownership, commemorate the dead, or mark the presence of a name in a specific place.

This is not a difference in sophistication, but in function.

The Latin alphabet developed within a system that prioritised uniformity and expansion. The runic system developed within cultures that prioritised continuity of memory and meaning within smaller, interconnected communities.

It is also important to recognise that these worlds were not entirely separate. Contact between Roman and northern European societies influenced the development of runic writing itself, and the forms of the earliest runes show clear adaptation from Mediterranean alphabets. The distinction, therefore, is not one of isolation, but of divergence: a shared origin shaped by different cultural pressures.

Over time, the expansion of Christianity and the spread of Latin literacy would extend the Roman model further into northern Europe. As written culture became more formalised, the use of runes diminished in many contexts, replaced by the Latin alphabet and the systems of thought it carried.

What remains, however, is evidence of an alternative trajectory. The runic system preserves a mode of writing in which sound, meaning, and lived experience are more closely connected — not because it is more “primitive,” but because it developed under different conditions, with different priorities.

To place runes within this broader context is not to oppose them to the Roman world, but to understand them as part of a wider landscape of human adaptation: different solutions to the same fundamental problem of how to record, transmit, and structure meaning across time.

4: Rune Names as a Map of Reality

If the runes are more than a system of phonetic symbols, then their names provide the most direct evidence of how they function beyond sound. Taken together, these names form a set of concepts drawn from the world of those who used them.

When examined as a group, they do not appear random. Instead, they cluster around recurring domains of experience: material resources, environmental conditions, and social relationships. These domains reflect not abstract categories, but the practical and lived concerns of early northern European societies.

One of the most immediate of these domains is that of material wealth and subsistence. The rune \mathfrak{F} (Fehu), meaning cattle, does not represent wealth in an abstract or numerical sense. It reflects a form of value that is mobile, vulnerable, and directly tied to survival. Wealth, in this context, is something that must be tended, protected, and managed within the rhythms of the natural world.

Environmental conditions form another consistent group. Runes such as I (Isa), meaning ice, and I_1 (Sowilo), meaning sun, point to forces that shape daily life in immediate and often uncompromising ways. Ice is not merely a seasonal occurrence, but a constraint on movement and activity. The sun is not simply a celestial object, but a source of life, warmth, and cyclical order. These are not symbolic in the abstract sense; they are realities that define the limits within which life is lived.

A third domain emerges in the realm of social structure and obligation. The rune \times (Gebo), meaning gift, reflects a system of exchange that is not purely transactional. A gift establishes a relationship, creating bonds of reciprocity and expectation. Similarly, other runes associated with inheritance, partnership, or lineage point to a world in which identity is shaped through connection rather than isolation.

Alongside these, there are runes that express conditions or constraints rather than objects or relationships. The rune N (Nauthiz), meaning need, represents a state of necessity or pressure that compels action. It is not a thing that can be possessed or exchanged, but a condition that must be endured or resolved. In this way, the system includes not only elements of the world, but the forces that act upon human experience within it.

What becomes visible through this grouping is not a catalogue of meanings, but a pattern of attention. The runes encode what is necessary to recognise, remember, and respond to: resources, forces, relationships, and constraints. They do not prioritise abstraction, but immediacy — the aspects of life that demand awareness and action.

This pattern aligns closely with what is known of the broader cultural context. In societies where survival depended on the management of resources, the navigation of environmental extremes, and the maintenance of social bonds, these domains would naturally form the core of shared understanding.

The rune names, then, can be read not as isolated definitions, but as components of a system that reflects how the world was organised and understood. They do not describe everything, but they highlight what mattered most.

This does not mean that the runes provide a complete or unfiltered picture of that worldview. What survives is partial, shaped by time and loss. Yet even in fragmentary form, the structure remains visible. The runes offer a compressed map of reality — one that reveals not only how things were named, but how they were prioritised within the experience of those who used them.

Alongside the material, environmental, and relational domains, there are elements within the runic system that point toward more abstract forms of social regulation. While less immediately tangible than cattle or ice, these concepts are no less central to the functioning of a community.

In societies without extensive written contracts or formal legal institutions, stability depends on shared expectations of behaviour. Trust is not enforced through documentation, but through reputation, obligation, and the maintenance of one's word. Within this context, the importance of oath, honour, and integrity becomes structural rather than incidental.

Although the rune names themselves do not always map directly onto these abstract terms in a simple or uniform way, the broader pattern of meanings — particularly those relating to exchange, lineage, and consequence — suggests a system in which actions are embedded within networks of expectation. A gift creates obligation. A promise binds future behaviour. A failure to uphold either carries consequences that extend beyond the individual.

Reputation, in such a system, is not a matter of personal identity alone, but a form of social currency. It determines the reliability of exchange, the strength of alliances, and the stability of relationships over time. In the absence of external enforcement, it functions as a mechanism through which order is maintained.

Seen in this light, the runic system does not merely reflect the physical and social environment, but the underlying principles that allow that environment to remain coherent. It encodes not only what exists, but how individuals are expected to act within it.

This introduces a further dimension to the runes as a structure of meaning. They do not only map the world as it is encountered, but also imply the conditions under which it can be navigated successfully. The presence of these more abstract elements suggests a worldview in which survival depends as much on the maintenance of trust and obligation as on the management of material resources.

A further feature of the runic system reinforces the extent to which its meanings are grounded in direct experience: the specificity of many of its referents.

Certain runes are associated not simply with general categories, but with particular elements of the natural world, including identifiable tree species. In the Anglo-Saxon tradition, for example, the rune \mathfrak{Aesc} (Æsc) refers explicitly to the ash tree, while others such as birch and yew appear in related traditions. This level of specificity suggests a mode of attention that is closely tied to the material environment.

Such distinctions are not arbitrary. Different tree species possess distinct properties and uses, and would have been recognised as such within daily life. To name a tree is therefore not only to identify a living thing, but to invoke a set of practical associations: strength, flexibility, durability, or other characteristics relevant to survival and craft.

At the same time, these elements provide stable points of reference within an oral culture. A tree is visible, enduring, and shared within a landscape. As such, it offers a reliable anchor for memory, allowing concepts to be linked to features of the world that persist across generations.

This combination of practical familiarity and symbolic stability makes such referents particularly effective as components of a system of meaning. They do not require abstraction in order to be understood, yet they are capable of supporting layered associations.

In this way, the runic system reflects a form of thinking that is closely embedded in the environment. Its meanings are not detached from the world, but drawn from it, using specific and recognisable elements as the basis for more complex patterns of understanding.

To follow these associations is to move not toward greater abstraction, but toward increasing concreteness. The further one traces the system, the more it resolves into a world defined by direct interaction with landscape, material, and lived experience.

5: Oral Culture and Memory

To understand how a system such as the runes could carry layered meaning, it is necessary to consider the cultural environment in which they developed. In societies where writing was limited in scope and use, the primary medium for preserving and transmitting knowledge was not text, but memory.

Oral cultures are not simply “pre-literate” in the sense of lacking writing. They are structured differently. Information is stored, organised, and transmitted through patterns that support recall: rhythm, repetition, narrative, and association. Knowledge is not externalised in documents, but embedded within shared practices and performances.

Within such a system, compression becomes essential. Complex ideas must be reduced to forms that can be remembered and reliably reproduced. This does not mean simplification, but structuring. A story, a name, or a symbolic association can carry far more meaning than its surface form suggests, provided it is situated within a shared framework of understanding.

The runic system can be seen as operating within this context. Each rune combines a sound with a name, and that name connects to a familiar concept. This creates a layered structure: a single symbol can function phonetically, while also invoking a wider set of associations. In an oral environment, such layering is not incidental — it is a practical advantage.

This pattern is also visible in the surviving mythological material of the region. Texts such as the Poetic Edda preserve narratives that were shaped by oral transmission long before they were written down. These narratives rely on repeated motifs, symbolic figures, and structured relationships between elements. They are not random collections of stories, but organised systems for carrying meaning across time.

The connection between these narratives and the runic system is not one of direct explanation, but of shared method. Both operate through association, compression, and the linking of elements into patterns that can be remembered and reinterpreted. A concept is not defined once and fixed; it is reinforced through repeated encounters in different forms.

In this context, the dual nature of the runes becomes more intelligible. Their conceptual names are not an unusual feature added to a writing system, but part of a broader strategy for maintaining coherence in a world where knowledge must be actively remembered rather than passively stored.

This also explains why such a system can persist even as parts of its original context are lost. The structure remains, because it is embedded in forms that are stable under repetition. The precise meanings may shift,

and interpretations may change, but the relationships between elements continue to provide a framework for understanding.

The runes, then, do not stand apart from the oral culture in which they developed. They are an extension of it: a point at which sound, symbol, and memory converge. They allow certain elements of that culture to be fixed in material form, while still retaining the flexibility and depth that oral transmission makes possible.

To approach the runes in isolation is therefore to miss a crucial part of their function. They are not simply marks on objects, but components of a wider system in which meaning is carried through repetition, association, and shared understanding. It is within this system that their full significance becomes visible.

Within an oral culture, spoken words are inherently transient. They exist in the moment of their utterance and persist only through memory, repetition, and social reinforcement. Meaning is maintained collectively, and its stability depends on continued transmission.

The act of writing introduces a different dynamic.

When words are fixed into material form — carved into wood, bone, or stone — they acquire a form of persistence that speech alone cannot provide. An inscription remains in place, visible and repeatable, independent of the speaker. It does not rely on memory in the same way, and it cannot be altered without effort.

This shift has significant implications for how words are understood.

A name carved into an object or monument does more than record identity. It establishes presence. A memorial inscription does not merely describe the dead; it maintains their place within the social and cultural landscape. Ownership marks do not simply indicate possession; they assert it in a durable and publicly visible way.

In this context, writing can be understood as a form of stabilised speech. It does not create reality in a literal sense, but it fixes certain elements of it, making them resistant to change and loss. What is written becomes harder to deny, easier to recall, and more widely shared.

This may help to explain why inscriptions can carry a weight that exceeds their apparent simplicity. A short phrase or a single name, once carved, participates in a different mode of existence than spoken language. It persists across time, maintaining meaning even as the surrounding context shifts.

The runic system operates within this transition between speech and inscription. Its symbols are rooted in the associative structures of an oral culture, yet they are capable of fixing those associations into material form. In doing so, they bridge two modes of understanding: the fluid, relational world of spoken meaning, and the more stable, enduring world of written expression.

To those using the system, this may not have been experienced as a purely technical shift. The act of carving words into the world — of giving

them form and persistence — carries an inherent sense of consequence. Not because it invokes external forces, but because it changes the conditions under which meaning exists.

In this sense, writing does not merely record what is already present. It alters how that presence is maintained.

6: Mythology and the Structure of Meaning

The runic system does not exist in isolation. The same cultural environment that produced it also gave rise to a body of mythological material, preserved in later sources such as the Poetic Edda. While these texts were recorded after the earliest period of runic use, they retain structures and patterns that reflect earlier modes of thought.

The relationship between runes and mythology is not one of direct explanation. The myths do not function as instructional accounts of the runic system, nor do the runes encode specific narratives. Instead, both can be understood as expressions of a shared framework — different forms through which similar patterns of meaning are organised and transmitted.

This becomes visible in the recurrence of certain themes.

Conditions such as need, constraint, and inevitability appear frequently in mythological narratives, shaping the actions of both gods and humans. These themes align with runic concepts such as necessity and limitation, suggesting a worldview in which external pressures are recognised as fundamental aspects of existence rather than exceptional circumstances.

Exchange and reciprocity form another consistent pattern. Acts of giving, receiving, and obligation are central to many narratives, reflecting systems of relationship that extend beyond individual transactions. This mirrors the conceptual structure associated with runes such as that

representing gift, in which exchange establishes and maintains social bonds.

Cycles and transformation also play a significant role. Natural and cosmic processes are often represented as ongoing and interdependent, rather than fixed or linear. This corresponds to a system of meaning in which elements are understood in relation to one another, rather than as isolated units.

A well-known example of this pattern can be seen in the account of Odin and the acquisition of the runes. In this narrative, knowledge is not granted freely, but gained through endurance, sacrifice, and transformation. While this account should not be treated as a literal origin of the runic system, it reflects an underlying principle: that meaning and understanding are not separate from experience, but arise through it.

Taken together, these parallels suggest that both the runic system and the mythological material operate within the same conceptual landscape. One expresses this through compressed symbols and names; the other through extended narrative. Both rely on association, repetition, and the linking of elements into patterns that can be recognised and retained.

This does not provide a direct key for interpreting the runes through mythology, nor does it reduce myth to a coded form of the runic system. Rather, it indicates that both emerge from a shared mode of organising experience — one in which meaning is structured through relationships, conditions, and recurring patterns rather than abstract definition.

To consider these two forms together is therefore not to merge them, but to observe their alignment. In doing so, the runes can be understood not only as elements of a writing system, but as part of a broader cultural

process through which the world was interpreted, remembered, and communicated.

7: Continuity, Evidence, and Projection

The idea that the runic system reflects a continuity of worldview raises an immediate question: how much of this can be supported, and how much is interpretation?

The evidence for runes themselves is clear. Archaeological finds across northern Europe provide inscriptions on stone, metal, wood, and bone, dating from the early centuries of the Common Era onward. These inscriptions demonstrate the use of a consistent set of symbols, associated with known linguistic contexts such as Proto-Norse and its later developments.

The names of the runes are also preserved, though not always in their earliest forms. Sources such as later rune poems provide structured lists in which each rune is associated with a word or concept. These sources, however, were recorded after the period in which the runic system first developed, and reflect traditions that had already undergone change.

This introduces an important limitation. The meanings we assign to the runes are not recovered directly from their point of origin, but through layers of transmission. What survives is not a complete system, but a

reconstruction assembled from inscriptions, later texts, and comparative analysis.

Within this framework, certain conclusions can be made with reasonable confidence. The runes functioned as a writing system. They were used in practical contexts. Their names correspond to recognisable elements of the world, and these names were part of how the system was understood and remembered.

Beyond this, interpretation becomes necessary.

To observe that rune names cluster around material, environmental, and social domains is a matter of pattern recognition. To suggest that this reflects a broader structure of worldview is a further step. It is a plausible one, supported by the coherence of the pattern and its alignment with what is known of the societies in which the runes were used, but it is not directly demonstrable in the way that an inscription can be read.

A further distinction must be made between historical interpretation and modern projection. Contemporary interest in runes often brings with it additional layers of meaning, drawn from later traditions, reconstructed belief systems, or individual interpretation. While these may be meaningful in their own context, they do not necessarily reflect the original conditions under which the runes developed.

This does not invalidate interpretation, but it requires discipline. The aim is not to strip the runes of meaning, but to remain aware of the boundary between what can be supported and what is inferred.

In this sense, the study of runes occupies a space between evidence and reconstruction. It is not a matter of recovering a complete and fixed system, but of identifying patterns that remain visible within the surviving material.

Continuity, in this context, does not mean unbroken preservation. It refers instead to the persistence of certain structures — patterns of association, ways of organising experience — that can be traced across time, even as their specific expressions change.

The runic system, as it survives, offers access to these structures in partial form. It does not provide direct answers, but it allows for informed questions. It does not reveal a complete worldview, but it outlines its framework.

To work within these limits is not a weakness, but a condition of the material itself. The past does not present itself in full. It must be approached through what remains, with attention both to what can be known and to what cannot.

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8: What Was Lost

If the runic system offers a partial view into the structure of a past worldview, it is equally important to recognise the extent of what it does not preserve.

The surviving runic material is fragmentary. Inscriptions are often brief, context-specific, and unevenly distributed across time and geography. Many were carved into materials that do not endure, such as wood, and have been lost entirely. What remains represents only a fraction of what once existed, shaped as much by survival as by original use.

This limitation extends beyond the physical record. The runes preserve elements of language and naming, but they do not retain the full structure of the cultures in which they were embedded. They do not provide complete accounts of belief, practice, or social organisation. The broader systems of meaning within which they operated must be inferred from other sources, themselves incomplete.

Even where supporting material exists, it is often separated from the original context of the runes. Texts such as the Poetic Edda were recorded centuries after the earliest runic inscriptions, and reflect traditions that had already evolved under changing conditions, including the influence of Christianity and literacy. They preserve valuable patterns, but not an unaltered record.

As a result, the connections that can be drawn between runes, mythological material, and cultural practice are necessarily indirect. They rely on comparison, reconstruction, and the identification of recurring structures rather than explicit explanation.

There are also entire dimensions of experience that the runes do not capture. They do not preserve tone, performance, or the full richness of oral expression. They do not record the nuances of speech, gesture, or shared understanding that would have accompanied their use. Much of what gave meaning to the symbols would have existed outside the inscription itself, in contexts that are no longer accessible.

This absence is not simply a gap in information, but a defining condition of the material. The runes do not offer a complete system waiting to be recovered. They provide fragments that must be approached with caution, recognising both what they reveal and what they cannot.

At the same time, it is precisely this partial survival that makes the runes significant. What remains has endured because it was fixed into material form, and because it continued to be recognised and, in some cases, maintained across generations. The structure that can still be observed is not complete, but it is not arbitrary.

To work with the runes, then, is to operate within these limits. It is to accept that reconstruction will always be incomplete, and that interpretation must remain provisional. The aim is not to fill the gaps with certainty, but to understand the shape of what is missing.

In this way, absence becomes part of the evidence. What is not preserved defines the boundaries of what can be known, and gives weight to what remains within those boundaries. The runes do not provide a full account of the past, but they mark its contours, allowing certain features to be seen in outline even where the detail has been lost.

9: Conclusion

Across the hills of southern Britain, the figure of a horse remains cut into the chalk, maintained across generations whose understanding of its original purpose may not have been identical to that of its makers. The effort required to preserve it has persisted, even as the full context of its creation has receded.

What remains is not a complete explanation, but a structure.

The runic system can be approached in a similar way. It does not survive as a fully intact expression of the world that produced it. Much has been lost: the full range of its use, the nuances of its interpretation, and the complete cultural framework in which it was embedded. Yet what persists is not random. The structure of the system — its combination of sound, name, and concept — continues to reflect patterns that can be recognised and examined.

To read the runes, then, is not simply to translate symbols into sounds or meanings. It is to engage with a framework that connects language to lived experience: to resources, to environment, to relationships, and to the conditions that shape human action. It is to encounter a mode of thought in which these elements are not separated into abstract categories, but understood as parts of an interconnected whole.

This does not provide direct access to the past. The worldview that gave rise to the runes cannot be fully recovered, and any attempt to do so must remain aware of its own limits. Interpretation is shaped by the present as much as by the material that survives.

Yet this limitation does not render the effort meaningless. The persistence of the runic system, like the continued presence of the figure on the hillside, indicates that certain structures endure even when their original context is no longer fully accessible. These structures can still be approached, not as complete systems to be restored, but as patterns to be recognised.

In this sense, the runes do not offer answers so much as orientation. They suggest ways in which experience may have been organised, and highlight what may have been considered essential within that organisation. They provide a means of approaching the past that is grounded not in reconstruction alone, but in attention to what has been preserved.

To engage with the runes is therefore to accept a particular kind of knowledge: one that is partial, structured, and contingent. It does not claim certainty, but it allows for understanding. It does not recover a lost world in full, but it brings its outline into view.

What remains is not everything. But it is not nothing.