

Runic writing in Old Norse societies utilized an alphabet known as the *futhark*, which by the eighth century had been simplified from the 24-character pre-Viking Age “older futhark” into the 16-character “younger futhark” (Williams, 281; Barnes, 274). Because these 16 characters were insufficient to represent all spoken sounds, the script was relatively ambiguous, and often lacked word spacing as well (Williams, 281-282). The script appeared in three variants: long-branch runes, short-twig runes, and staveless runes (Williams, 281-282).

The vast majority of surviving runic texts are memorial runestones (or earth-fixed slabs) that follow a common formula recording who commissioned the monument, in whose memory it was raised, and the relationship between them (Williams, 283). However, runes were also used to record skaldic poetry, mark property, and carve magical inscriptions on small metal plates used as amulets, as well as on wood, birch bark, and copper sheet (Williams, 284-285; Pereswetoff-Morath, 176, 321-322; Androschuk, 18, 225, 520).

In terms of design, early runestones featured simple, linear text, such as on Rökstenen, but during the eleventh century, the layout evolved into highly complex visual artistic expressions (Andrén, 12). Runic texts were frequently carved directly into the bodies of intertwined snakes or beasts, with carvers utilizing physical word-crossings and animal images to create visual associations that expand the meaning of the written text (Andrén, 12-18).

The Sö 111 granite runestone, dated to about 1010–1050, at Stenkista churchyard has been moved at least twice, likely more, and used as building material for the old church, which was later replaced (Gräslund and Lager, 634; Källström, 178).

It illustrates several phenomena in Viking society. The inscription “Helgi and Freygeirr and Þorgautr raised the rune-decorated landmarks in memory of Þjóðmundr, their father” is typical of this period, when land-owning families raised carved stones as social monuments to commemorate dead relatives, display status and influence others, and to make public claims about land property, kinship inheritance, and public memory. This stone suggests that runic literacy could be used to make formal social and legal claims in eleventh-century society (Williams, 284-285).

The beast-head or serpent-band style Fp, with the fusion of text and a designed image, is also typical of the period. The monument was readable to the literate, but could also be recognized and interpreted by non-literate viewers through its shape, symbolism, placement, and scale. In Viking society, visual and textual communication were used together (Källström, 176; Andrén, 9–12, 26–27).

Not typical of the period 1010–1050 is a depiction of Thor’s hammer in place of a cross. The Christian cross had become common on rune monuments from 1000 onward (Williams, 284). If the dating is correct, Sö 111 demonstrates that old religious symbols remained publicly meaningful in eleventh-century Södermanland; it indicates syncretism, with pagan and Christian elements combined (Gräslund and Lager, 636; Andrén, 21). This may also suggest a relatively late Christianization of Svealand.

However, it is interesting that on close inspection of Sö 111, you see that the last part of the inscription “*faður sinn*” is placed so that it, together with the upside-down hammer, forms a cross! Another piece of evidence of syncretism and transition.