

The Runestones

Three runestones are associated with Østerlars Church: one is placed just outside the church porch, one inside the porch itself and a third walled in over the inside of the north door of the church.

Bornholm's runestones

Forty runestones are known of on Bornholm, almost all of which are datable to the 11th and 12th centuries. Considering the size of the island, Bornholm has a greater concentration of runestones than anywhere else in Denmark. The interesting aspect of Bornholm's runestones is that the vast majority have a Christian feature, either in the form of a cross embellishing the stone or as Christian wording in the inscribed text. Bornholm's runestones were spread all over the island, but when churches were built, many were moved to – and frequently walled into – the churches, which is also the case here in Østerlars. We can only guess whether this was an attempt to carry on the stones' spiritual value in the churches.

Pouls Church in south-east Bornholm is decorated with a figure of the apostle Paul on the chancel arch keystone: "Paulus" is written in runes, as is the text in the open book in his hands. The baptismal font in Aa Church in central Bornholm is one of the most detailed in Scandinavia and also bears runes as an explanatory text for the frieze wreathing the font. The use of runes in early churches represents a merger of old and new times and forces.

Runes – the written language of Scandinavia

All runic inscriptions in Denmark can be searched for in the National Museum of Denmark's rune database. This includes both inscriptions carved into large stones, such as the ones here at the church, and those on combs, jewellery, weapons and other objects. Denmark's oldest runic inscription is the man's name "Harja" which was inscribed on a comb from around AD 150. The comb was found in a large find of offering weapons in Vimose on the island of Funen. Runes arose in the first century AD, the period we call the Early Roman Iron Age. Latin letters – which were familiar through trade with the Roman Empire – probably inspired the emergence of runes as a regional parallel. The runic alphabet of the Iron Age was made up of 24 symbols and is called "futhork" after the first letters in the runic alphabet. In the Viking Era, the alphabet was reduced to only 16 letters, and in the Middle Ages these letters were slightly changed and so-called pointed runes were added to bring the runic alphabet up to 22 letters.

A: The stone was first mentioned by Ole Worm in his work "Monumenta Danica" in 1643. Back then the stone stood in front of the church porch, as it does today. The inscription on the stone is dated to 1025–1075 and reads:

"Thykil/Thorkil erected stone after {bupu}, {pku} son ..."

The son's name is missing. The inscription has similarities with a runestone in Rø and another in Østermarie, which could mean that the same person inscribed all three.

B: The stone is a lintel over the north door of the church and was first discovered during the renovation of the church in 1955. The inscription is dated to 1075–1125, making it slightly younger than the church's other runestones. The inscription is partly hidden under the wall, but the legible section reads:

"[A]rnils and Ful[h]juge had this stone erected in honour of Thormar, their brother."

C: The stone was originally walled into the bell tower from where it was removed in 1921. It is now set up in the church porch. The inscription on the stone is dated to 1025–1075 and reads:

"Broder and Emund had this stone erected in honour of Sigmund, their father. May Christ help his soul – and Saint Michael and Saint Mary".

