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The Journey Into Conlanging & The Way Back Home

by Carl Avlund

It happened sometime during the spring of 2001 that my parents decided to move to the countryside with me and my older sister. Our new home was in the municipality of Lejre where my mother was born and where my grandmother's side of the family is from.

The part of Lejre we lived in was called Kastholm. It was and still is a great area for children to grow up in. We were surrounded by fields and forests on all sides, cars were a rare sight, and there was far between us and our neighbors, the nearest two being 100 and 150 meters away. It all provided the perfect conditions for us children to grow and explore our surroundings without a care in the world for noise complaints and whatnot.

When I have to think of something Lejre is known for, I always say history. Growing up in Lejre, it's impossible not to be reminded of the past in your everyday life. Everywhere you go, a Stone Age burial mound or dolmen can be seen somewhere in the distance, and no matter where you are, there's always a megalithic tomb within biking distance. It's not just the prehistoric era either; the Viking Age was an incredibly important period in the history of Lejre as well, and it left us with many things that I grew up loving, such as their mythology, their ships, and, most importantly, their runes.

The thought of a rune stone alone was humbling to me: Many hundreds of years ago, someone had carved these mysterious-looking symbols into granite, the hardest rock of all, leaving the message to outlive the author, his children, their children, and ultimately me as well. Anyone who has sat down for anything over 10 minutes to study the runic alphabets know that there isn't anything

inherently “mysterious” about runes. But their mere presence intimidated me in the most delightful way possible, as did the way they seemed to refuse to tell their stories to those who hadn’t spent time and effort in order understand them. The word’s etymology, “secret,” was alive and well. As my love for runes grew, I expanded my field of interest to other ancient writing systems, and for each of them, my fascination remained the same: Each script was like a wall, or rather a gate that held the secrets of long gone people, frozen in time, revealing themselves to those who could understand it and inspiring awe and wonder in those who could not.

I started making up alphabets for myself to use. Most of them were ciphers of the Danish alphabet, of course, but I eventually ended up devising my own semi-phonetic alphabet for Danish as well as corresponding scripts. In designing a writing system, my goal remained the same: I wanted to emulate what the runes did to me. I wanted to create something implying importance and mystery. Each project, however, fell short. There was something missing. These fancy ways of writing Danish were void of real meaning. It was as if they had no purpose other than to merely exist, and that simply wasn’t good enough for me.

What happened next is still unclear to me. It could’ve been my exposure to the intricate systems of Japanese, which I had begun studying sometime in 2013. It might’ve been due to the discovery of many great online resources for linguistics, especially on YouTube. It could’ve easily been the still rising popularity of HBO’s show *Game of Thrones* and hearing about D. J. Peterson’s Dothraki language. It could’ve been a combination of all three factors and possibly more. Whatever it was, it led to the realization that was to be the missing piece and the key to understanding why I was left unsatisfied with my conscripts alone: They were without history and had no need to exist. I realized that what separated the real, ancient writing systems from my own scripts was the

presence of an underlying, complex language. And perhaps this was really what I had been looking for all along – an actual, real language with as much intricacy as any real one. This sent me on a long journey, one that I hope sees no end.

I kept experimenting and trying out new things. I've learned so much from the people of our community. I went into conlanging, ready to receive criticism with *kyshånd*, as we say here, and it has helped me improve greatly. It has even gotten me to a point where I feel comfortable giving advice to others standing in the same shoes as I did a few years ago. I've abandoned lots of projects over the past few years after having gotten into conlanging, and although I'm still trying to approach a state of completion with the few languages I still work on, I know that I'll likely never reach that point. I suppose it gives me something to keep working on if nothing else.

Every day, I take the same train home from Copenhagen after a long day at Gefion Gymnasium, where I study Latin and Ancient Greek. I enjoy it tremendously, spending my days translating to and from languages that once were spoken, not only by some of history's most prominent individuals, but by plebeians and commoners as well. After boarding the train, I always hurry to my preferred spot: The seat at the very back of the car where I can sit by myself, not having to worry about anyone looking over my shoulder. I sit there, looking out the window, and I sometimes wonder how I ended up where I am and how language became such an important part of my life and how I view myself. And then, somewhere between Roskilde and Lejre, my eye is caught by a burial mound in the distance, towering over the otherwise flat landscape.

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