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THE HOUSE MARKS IN NORWAY

- English Summary of [BUMERKER I NORGE](#) -
By Hans Cappelen, Oslo 2005

Our thousands and thousands of house marks represent a rich cultural treasure. Many house marks look like the runes (our eldest script) others are international and wide spread symbols like the pentagram and the Venus sign. The house marks were used in connection with farming and hunting, craft and trade, religion and magic. Some are very simple and others are elaborate and complicated.

I shall here give a brief survey. My main sources are four Norwegian books: (1) Norwegian medieval seals (NS), (2) house marks from the district Sunnmoere (Strømme), (3) house marks from the district Voss (Kindem) and (4) merchants' marks of Bergen (Koren Wiberg). A literature list is printed in [BUMERKER I NORGE](#).

What are house marks?

We can start with a short and functional definition:

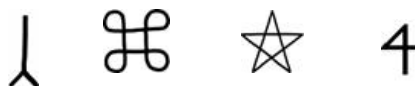
House marks are distinguishing signs consisting of simple lines without colours.

This definition includes even modern signs and marks - as the *logos* - when they are looking and used like the old marks.

Some famous basic forms and popular names:



The hourglass, the slut, the counter hook and the Virgin



The grouse foot, the knot, the witch lock and the staff of Mercury

Peasants and farmers used house marks. Also merchants, craftsmen, workers in mines, priests and civil servants used them. We have some from the nobility but rather few from medieval kings and emperors (e.g. Charlemagne). Some cities had house marks and there were churches and hospitals using them.

Today we find most of the old house marks in seals on documents, but we also have old house marks scratched on building bricks, sculptured on tombstones, carved on pieces of furniture etc. House marks have been used even in the 20th Century on some Norwegian farms; especially on cattle and timber.



Some Norwegian seals with house marks

Some writers on house marks have separated the personal marks on movables (German: *Hausmarke*) from the property marks on real estate (German: *Hofmarke*). I see little reason for that, because both categories are distinguishing signs for persons and the marks look exactly the same.

In English there is the more comprehensive concept of *hallmark* including both house marks and other marks for the production and sale of goods. The *brand* is an even more comprehensive concept. In some Asian languages we have the word *tamgas* for house marks and similar signs.

The coats of arms are quite different from house marks. The arms consist of coloured fields, partitions and charges, not of simple lines without fixed colours. But there are combinations of arms and house marks. The lines in a house mark can be made broad and have colours, or the lines can be transformed in other ways to heraldic charges.



Some old and new arms with house marks transformed into heraldic charges. First: A 17th Century Swiss window and a seal from an 18th Century Norwegian farmer. From our time: the Norwegian municipality Røros and Mr. Knud Prange, Denmark.

Regular house marks are very often placed inside a shield but this is not making them heraldic coats of arms. The shield is for decoration or to show that the house mark is a distinguishing sign with some functions similar to a coat of arms.

The use as distinguishing signs

House marks are for distinguishing and symbolizing persons - physical or legal persons as authorities, corporations and other institutions. The use of a house mark tells us that a certain person has been here; signing a document or as the owner of goods, weapons, tools, trees, timber, houses, cattle etc. From all over the world we know that *animals and birds* have been stamped with owners' marks and those marks can be house marks made by simple lines.

The house mark might be a sign for the *producer*, as the marks from craftsmen, goldsmiths and stonemasons. Other house marks are merchants' *trademarks* or quality *control signs*. There are some stonemasons' marks even from the time before Christ.

We have rules for the use of owner's marks in European laws as far back as 4-500 A.D. The statute laws from later times order shield makers, goldsmiths and other craftsmen to stamp their products with *producer's marks, marks of origin*, control signs or other marks.

Variants and owners

When we look at groups of house marks, we will see that there are some *basic forms* and that they have developed into lots of *variants*. By methods as adding or omitting small lines, people could vary the marks. Other methods are reversing or changing the mark to a vertical, horizontal or inclined position. The different methods can also be combined.

When house marks from different persons are identical or look alike, that might be due to mere coincidence or lack of fantasy. On the other hand, a similarity between marks might be due to reason: the owner has wanted the mark to look like another mark. We can see that certain house marks are used by a family for some time or by different owners of a certain farm. It can be the same mark but mostly the marks' lines are somewhat varying through the generations.

A problem for us today is that we have fathers and sons, brothers and succeeding owners of farms using completely different house marks. This means that owners of similar house marks can be related or they can have no connection at all.

We have to conclude that we cannot establish any general or firm principles for the transition of house marks in Norway.



A basic form with five variants from farmers in the western part of Norway in the 18th Century (Kindem)

Basic forms with variants

How shall we classify the house marks into basic forms and variants? There are different methods. One method is to make many groups and subgroups based on the design of the lines and starting with a single vertical line. I shall use a less advanced method with a few groups only - based on both origin and design. I must admit, however, that some house marks can fit in more than one of the following groups:

1. Runes
2. Letters and numerals
3. Geometrical shapes
4. Physical things
5. International signs

Runes

A great number of house marks is based on the *runes* of the *futhark* alphabet. The mark can be one rune for the first letter of the owner's first name. It can be two combined runes; the other rune standing for the second letter in the first name or for the initial of the father's first name. Such marks are initials and monograms. Other house marks look like runes but today we can't find any traceable connection between the runes and the owner. We should also remember that the runes vary and have been developed through the centuries. There are many other forms than the most known runes from the Middle Ages.

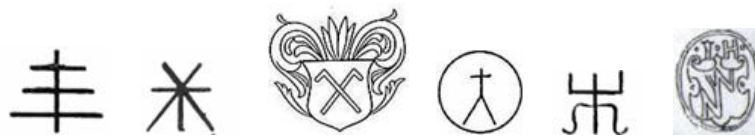


We start with the single, vertical line as a motif for runes and house marks, being called the *staff*. But staffs are as usual only one of several elements in a house mark. The staff can be repeated several times, it can point in all possible directions and there can be horizontal lines placed on a staff.

The two crossed staffs, the **X**-form, some times mean the rune for our letter G. In heraldry this figure is named *the cross of St. Andrew*. There are many variants of this form and it may have one or more lines added to the basic X. The three staffs combined, look like the rune for H, and they may even be a combination of the Greek letters **I X** to symbolize Jesus Christ. With three or more lines the mark can look like a star, especially when it is a small, additional figure to other figures. The three or more lines crossed, have been called a *double cross*.

The hook is a staff with a little sloping line to one side. When the little line is from the top and pointing downwards to the right, it has the same form as the rune for L. Two such small lines make the hook as the rune for A, and when the two lines point upwards the hook is the rune for F.

Staffs with one little, sloping line has been called a *half hook* by authors using "hook" as the name of a staff with one sloping line downwards from the top and another little line at the bottom on the other side and pointing upwards. Other authors use the name *counter hook*. Staffs looking like the **Z** are called a *kettle hook* (for hanging kettles over the fire).



House marks with variants of runic letters from farmers in the western and eastern parts of Norway between the 16th and 18th Centuries (i. a. Kindem).

There are many names and forms for the **Y**-like figure. In heraldry it is called the *shake fork*. Turned upside down it looks like an old fashioned fork with two dents only, and in Norway it has been called a *grouse's foot*. When a little line is added between the two sloping lines, it may look like a fishing spear or the *trident* in the hands of Neptune (Greek: Poseidon) on ancient pictures. Pointing upwards it is the rune for M, and pointing downwards the rune for Y. The trident downwards is in Norway also called *a crow's foot* or *a witch's foot*.

We may use the names *banner* and *pennant* on a staff with a little square or triangle to the side of the top. They look like variants of runes and they might also be classified as variants of the numeral 4 or of a stylised axe. The banner or pendant can point to the right or the left, there can be a banner or pendant to each side (*double banner/pendant*), they can be at the middle point or at the bottom instead of the top etc.

Today we all know the *arrows* used on traffic signs. The simple drawing of an arrow, like the three conjoined lines, has been a popular motif for thousands of years. The basic arrow form is like the rune for the letter **T** and it was also used as a symbol for the Norse god Tor. The *arrowhead* can be a variant and we can see arrows with one arrowhead on top and one arrowhead upside down at the bottom of the staff. An arrow in a house mark can

point in any direction. Some authors (Koren Wiberg) use the name *spear*, especially if the straight middle line is quite long.

Letters and numerals

House marks can consist of all kinds of *letters* as well as *Roman* or *Arabic numerals*. Not all letters are initials or monograms that we can identify. Then it might well be that they have no particular meaning, because house marks are distinguishing signs and not a script. Marks may have started as monograms and later have been inherited and/or developed into variants. We know similar cases with coats of arms being created for one person and used by the descendants.

In some house marks we can see the traditional Greek monograms of Christ: the combination of **I X** or the *Chi ro monogram* consisting of **X P**. For Virgin Mary we have the *Ave Maria monogram* with a combination of **A M**, also named the *Tau alfa monogram* when it looks more like a combined **T** and **A**.

A figure like a **V** turned upside down is called a *chevron* in heraldry and it is also used in house marks. The *angle* can be a **V** or an **L**. There are house marks having several chevrons or angles forming **M**, **W** or lines of zigzag.



House marks based on letters and the staff of Mercury from farmers in the western and eastern parts of Norway between the 17th and 18th Centuries (i. a. Kindem).

We see the numeral **4** in a multitude of house marks from all over Northern Europe. It is often called the *staff of Mercury* and this name was introduced about 1870 by the German writer C. G. Homeyer. He claimed that the sign was common among merchants who have Mercury (Greek: Hermes) as their symbol. The 4-like sign should mean the same as the symbolic staff of Mercury with two serpents around a winged staff (the *caduceus*). Homeyer's theory is not right – at least not in Norway, because lots of peasants have the 4-sign as a basic form in their house marks. The 4-form is almost the astrological sign for Jupiter.

Geometrical shapes

In house marks we find many geometrical shapes with or without additional lines, especially the circle, the triangle and the square.

There are lots of *circles* in house marks and their variants may have one or more lines crossing the circle. When there is a cross inside the circle, this sign has been called by the names *wheel cross*, *sun cross* or *consecration cross*.

A semi-circular line can have the names *bow*, *curve* or *crescent*. It can have a dot near the middle point and there are house marks with two bows and two dots in various positions. The combined bow and dot may look like the old international crescent and star symbol.



House marks based on geometrical forms from farmers in the western and eastern parts of Norway between the 16th and 18th Centuries (i. a. Kindem).

Triangles have been popular for thousands of years, as the Greek letter *delta* and in modern traffic signs. The basic triangle only is not common in house marks, but we can see a lot of triangles combined with additional lines. A triangle with a little cross on top has been called the *Virgin* (“Jomfrua”), looking like female genitals and a religious cross.

Two triangles with points touching each other are called the *hour glass*. The form looks like a stylised hourglass and we know it today from computer graphics. In old house marks it might for some persons have symbolized time or death, since it was a common symbol in the churches. Mostly it had no other meaning than being nice to look at and easy to carve. The hourglass is also the form of a rune used for the letter **D**. A variation is with one horizontal line omitted and is then called the *half hourglass*. When the half hourglass has a hook on each of the open lines, it has been called the *slut* (“frkja”), as it might look like female genitals and two bent legs.

Physical things

Several house marks have lines looking like *stylised things* from the real world, as the silhouette lines of an axe, a bow, a sword, an anchor, a horseshoe, a branch or a tree. Because house marks consist of simple lines, the similarity with physical things might be merely coincidental and not made with purpose.

Some times *an axe* might represent the name Olaf because a battleaxe is the martyr symbol of the national Norwegian Saint, King Olaf. But I have not found other examples of saints' symbols for personal names, like keys for Peter, sword for Paul or anchor for Clemens.

International signs

The *cross* as a basic form is very popular in house marks and in all variations of this sign. Many house marks have an element of the cross when they have a small horizontal line crossing a vertical line.

A fascinating and almost mystical sign is *the knot*. It consists of three or four loops made by curves, triangles or squares. The knot of squares is sometimes called the *cross of St John* or *St Hans' cross*. We can see the knot on textiles buried with a Norwegian Viking ship from the 9th Century. A knot of three loops is called *triquetra*.



House marks based on international signs from farmers in the western part of Norway between the 17th and 18th Centuries (Kindem).

We have other old, international symbols in house marks: the *swastika* and the star like figures as the *pentagram* and the *hexagram*. They are well known in house marks from Norwegian peasants and merchants since the Middle Ages. We can also see them as decorations on textiles, wood and metal. Both the pentagram and the hexagram have been considered magical and used on objects or buildings for protection against evil. The pentagram has been called the *witch lock*, *seal of Salomon*, *sign of Pythagoras*, and by several other names.

We even find *astronomical*, *astrological* and *alchemists' signs* in house marks; especially signs for Mars (iron) and Venus (copper) were popular motifs. Mars is a circle with an arrowhead on top and Venus is a circle with a cross at the bottom point.

More research

Much research remains to be done with the house marks. Examples might be social and geographical trends in the use of house marks, the development in time and space of basic forms and variants, possible designs invented by engravers and other craftsmen, the varying purposes, use and functions, house marks in law and literature, pre historic pictures with possible house marks etc