

Runes, Magic, and Divination

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It was in about 1985 or so that I came across runes for the first time. I was nine or so, and a friend of my mother had some old books in the trunk of her car, one of which was *The Hobbit* by J.R.R. Tolkien¹. I had heard of it somewhere, probably from the 1977 animated film², and when she saw my interest she told me to keep it, since she was getting rid of them anyway.

Of course, most of my readers will be familiar with the book: In the hardcover editions (I lost no time acquiring one!) there is a form of Anglo-Saxon runes modified for the use of modern English by Tolkien³, and from this initial interest I soon found a list of the original Anglo-Saxon “Futhark” in, of all places, a dictionary. I used these for some time in my private diary, without ever seeing more than an interesting and ancient alphabet connected with the ancestor of my own familiar tongue.

Tolkien’s initial inspiration turned into a love of language in itself, as a form of spoken music. The written expression was even more beautiful, as I came to love the very sight of any written tongue whether my own or especially one I could not recognize: It was a challenge to be overcome, a new wine to taste. This inspired me to learn more about that first taste which J.R.R.T. had given to me posthumously.

It wasn’t long before I obtained *Sweet’s Anglo-Saxon Primer*⁴, and followed this with *An Introduction to Old Norse*⁵. It was in the latter, in a special section, that I found once again my old friend the Runes, but for the first time I became aware of the great variety in which they occurred. There was no “standard” list, nor even a consistency in the letters themselves from region to region. The “Hälsinge Runes” bear little or no resemblance to runes as they are generally understood. This greatly intrigued me, providing me with even more incentive to learn about the alphabet(s) that I so loved. At the time the Northern legends were my first love: *Beowulf* had come to my attention in the translation of Constance B. Hieatt⁶ and later the original in *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition*⁷, and I had fallen in love with all things Nordic⁸. Gordon introduced me to *Grettis saga*, which proved to be an earlier and analogous tale to that told in *Beowulf*, and further demonstrated to me the close association between the two cultures.

For those unfamiliar with the writing-system(s) collectively called “runes” they are alphabetical, but composed almost entirely of straight lines for ease of carving into stone, wood, and the like. Their origin lies with the Goths on the north coast of the Black Sea,

¹ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1974. I still have the original volume.

² *The Hobbit*, DVD, Rankin-Bass Productions, U.S.A., 1977.

³ J.R.R. Tolkien, *The Hobbit*, Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, 1966, pp. 9-10.

⁴ Norman Davis (ed.), *Sweet’s Anglo-Saxon Primer, Ninth Edition*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1953.

⁵ E.V. Gordon, *An Introduction to Old Norse*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1990.

⁶ Constance B. Hieatt (trans.), *Beowulf and Other Old English Poems*, Bantam Books, New York, 1988.

⁷ Howell D. Chickering, Jr. (trans. and commentator), *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition*, Anchor Books, Garden City, NY, 1977.

⁸ It was an odd coincidence that almost all of my sources: Davis, Gordon, and Hieatt had all been friends, students, and/or colleagues of J.R.R.T.!

being derived from the Greek, Latin, and possibly Etruscan systems of writing. The earliest Norse inscriptions date from the third century and the oldest complete “Futhark” (so called because the usual order begins with “f-u-þ-a-r-k”⁹ and so on) from fourth century Gotland.¹⁰ Their association with magic probably began from the very common fact that in ancient, mostly illiterate, societies (such as Egypt) writing came to have a sinister or even holy reputation among the illiterate majority, so that, like blacksmiths, those who knew the art came to be perceived as having special powers.

I was not surprised at all to find that Runes were commonly used by those in the Neo-pagan community. It made sense within the context of Wicca, especially. What baffled me the most, however, was that I saw that they were being used as a form of divination. I had never come across such a usage in the literature. Runes were considered somewhat sacred: The ordeal that the Norse God Óðinn underwent to obtain the runes is described in lines 139 and 140 of the *Hávamál*, a section of the Old Norse Elder or Poetic Edda:¹¹

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|--|---|
| <p>139. Veitk at hekk vindga meiþi ā nætr allar niu, geiri undaþr ok gefinn Óþni, sjalfr sjölfum mēr, [ā þeim meiþi, es manngi veit, hvers hann af rötum rinnr.]</p> | <p>I ween that I hung on the windy tree, Hung there for nights full nine; With the spear I was wounded, and offered I was To Othinn, myself to myself, On the tree that none may ever know What root beneath it runs.</p> |
| <p>140. Viþ hleifi mik sældu nē viþ hornigi; nýstak niþr þaþan: namk upp rúnar, øþandi namk; fell ek aþtr ofan.</p> | <p>None made me happy with loaf or horn, And there below I looked; I took up the runes, shrieking I took them, And forthwith back I fell.</p> |

Obviously runes in general were highly revered by the Germanic peoples of Northern Europe, but is there any evidence for their use in divination prior to the 20th century?

A common practice seems to have been to carve the runes into wood or stone and to then inlay the runes with blood, probably of some sacrificial animal, although in *Egil's saga* Egil cut runes into a drinking-horn, reddened them with his *own* blood while reciting a verse, and thereby detected poison. The general belief seems to have been that an event

⁹ The letter “þ” sounds like “th” in English “think”; correspondingly “ð” sounds like “th” in the word “that”.

¹⁰ E.V. Gordon, op. cit., p.181.

¹¹ Karl Hildebrand, Hugo Gering, and Henry A. Bellows, *Poetic Edda: Old Norse-English Diglot*, ebook, Melbourne, Australia, typeset by Bogdan Opanchuk. Valuable as it gives both the Old Norse line-by-line with the English.

would come to pass if it were cut in runes which were subsequently inlaid with blood while pertinent charms were recited.¹² An interesting example is also given in a runic inscription on a stone at Eggjum, Norway, dated to around the ninth century, C.E.: “This stone has been inlaid with the sea of the body (blood),¹³[...]Let no man make this stone naked, nor let bold or senseless men throw it down.”¹⁴

It has been noted¹⁵ that runes tend to be categorized into 24 letters in three series of eight. No one seems to know why but there is evidence that there is some numerological reason for this consistency. At one point in England they were used for the very non-magical (in the traditional sense) use as a basis for a form of cryptography!¹⁶ An interesting point in this numerological use is that if one begins with f=1, u=2, etc...o=24 we thus have a rune-based system of gematria¹⁷, which, to my knowledge, is not used in any widespread form at the current time.

Runes as magical tools are one thing. The runic alphabet as a divinatory oracle does not necessarily follow from this, and it is this assumption among the modern Neo-pagans and other occultists that I wish to contest.

Many cite the Roman historian Tacitus who, in his work *Germania*¹⁸ (written c.98 C.E.) wrote regarding the ancient Germanic tribes: “To omens and the drawing of lots they pay the very greatest attention. Their method of divining by the lot is simple. They lop a branch from a fruit tree and cut off the twigs: they mark these differently in order to distinguish them apart, and they then cast them loosely, at haphazard, on a white robe. Then the priest of the community, if it is going to be a public divination, or if a private one, the head of the household, offers a prayer to the gods, and turning up his eyes to heaven he draws three twigs, one at a time, and he interprets those which he has drawn according to the marks previously set upon them.”¹⁹ While this may seem to be a good argument for the case that the early Germans used runes as a divinatory tool, the case could be just as forcibly argued for any other system, including one not in the historical record. The fact

¹² E.V. Gordon, op. cit., p.183.

¹³ E.V. Gordon, op. cit., p.184. Here we have a beautiful use of a “kenning”, which is a poetic metaphor often used in both Old Norse and Anglo-Saxon poetry (see P.J.T. Glendening, *Teach Yourself Icelandic*, NTC Publishing Group, Chicago, IL, 1993, pp.91-92).

¹⁴ E.V. Gordon, op. cit., pp.184-185.

¹⁵ R. Derolez, ‘Runes and Magic’, *American Notes and Queries*, vol. XXIV, Numbers 7 & 8, March-April 1986, pp. 96-102.

¹⁶ R. Derolez, op. cit., p. 98.

¹⁷ “...explaining a word or group of words according to the numerical value of the letters, or of substituting other letters of the alphabet for them in accordance with a set system.”—Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*, Meridian, New York, 1978, p. 337.

¹⁸ Publius Cornelius Tacitus, *The Agricola and the Germania*, trans. R.B. Townshend, Aberdeen University Press, London, 1894.

¹⁹ “*Auspicia sortesque, ut qui maxime, observant. Sortium consuetudo simplex. Virgem frugiferae arbori decisam in surculos amputant, eosque notis quibusdam discretos super candidam vestem temere ac fortuito spargunt. Mox, si publice consulatur, sacerdos civitatis, sin privatim, ipse pater familiae precatus deos coelumque suspiciens ter singulos tollit, sublato secundum impressam ante notam interpretatur.*”: Tacitus, *The Germania of Tacitus*, Macmillan and Co., London and Cambridge, 1869. Due to my own problems, and the variety of translations of this passage, I have concluded that Tacitus is a difficult Latin writer to translate! Therefore I include the original text for comparison.

that Tacitus' work predates the earliest known runic inscriptions by roughly two centuries makes it even more doubtful that runes were used in the oracle he described.

The 20th-century revival of runes seems to stem from the occult circles of Germany active prior to and during the era of the Third Reich, from people such as Guido von List. This seems to have been seen as a return to the ancient roots of the Germanic people and of course was used to further German nationalism and pride (even the Nazi *Schutzstaffel*, or S.S., insignia is formed from two "S"-runes). It seems that the most significant contribution to the current conception of runes as a divinatory oracle stem from the efforts of Ralph Blum in his book *The Book of Runes*²⁰, who to his credit has never expressed the opinion that his explanation of the divinatory nature of runes has any historical basis. For some reason, however, those who followed him *did*, and now we are stuck with an entire generation of individuals who accept the antiquity of this system without question. It seems that many within the Neo-pagan community turn a blind eye to any form of scholarship regarding the "traditions" they hold so dear, either from outright intellectual laziness or an unwillingness to face the fact that what they have been taught as being of ancient origin may in fact be no older than their parents or even themselves.

One glaring piece of evidence for the modern origin of the rune-oracle is the blank rune, which could not for obvious reasons have ever been in any ancient list. It is a modern construction, admitted as much by Blum²¹, intended to fill a purpose in the system as an oracle and with no other functional use; it also throws out the aforementioned tendency to have 24 grouped in three batches of eight by introducing a new "25th rune", which to my mind is the final nail in the coffin to any "traditionalist". Along with this idiosyncrasy is the fact that, due to variations in the various runic alphabets used, some were kept while others discarded. This begs the question: If the runic alphabet is a genuine oracle then why throw out certain letters while keeping others? Did Blum and others throw the proverbial baby out with the bath water?

It is not my assertion here to say that runes cannot be used as a valid oracle: One can take any system and turn it into a functional method of divination if one so chooses. There are various reasons for this, and a close scrutiny of Jung's conception of synchronicity²² might show why this can be. It *is* my assertion, however, that those who think they are utilizing a method in any way similar to the ancient Germanic peoples are simply wrong. Since runes are both in origin and in essence first and foremost an alphabet there is no reason to "skry" or otherwise treat them in any way different than one would the Latin/English, Greek, or other alphabets. Of course, one has the argument the Hebrew alphabet is so treated by Qabalists, and in this case one would be correct, but I do not feel that any rational person would think that there is any inherent property in the letters themselves; rather, we assign certain values and then derive meaning therefrom. The vast majority of humanity assign values to the world around them. Those more awakened absorb and are receptive to the meaning of experience as it is.

I hope that this short discussion has been somewhat helpful in placing the modern use and fascination with runes in relation to the actual historical use of ancient times.

²⁰ Ralph Blum, *The Book of Runes*, Oracle Books, New York, 1987.

²¹ Ralph Blum, *op. cit.*, p.25.

²² C.G. Jung, *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, trans. R.F.C. Hull, Routledge, London, 1991, pp.417-531.

While I personally know many people who utilize the runes with great success in various ways, I simply want it to be known that there is simply no support in the extant remains, either wood, stone, or literary, to imply that the modern usage is in any way “ancient”. It is highly popular among modern occultists to claim an ancient origin for a modern practice. One must assume that this is to lend more credence to the method in question,²³ although some feel that there is a gap in understanding between scholars and non-scholar, practicing pagans.²⁴ To my mind it is either wishful thinking or outright dishonesty. Regardless of the reasons, runes seem to be here to stay.

²³ One very famous example of this is Moses de Leon, whose widow claimed that he wrote *The Zohar* himself, crediting authorship to Shim'on ben Yohai because “If I told them...that I am writing from my own mind, they would pay no attention to my words, and they would pay nothing for them.”—Daniel Chanan Matt, *Zohar: The Book of Enlightenment*, Paulist Press, Ramsey, New Jersey, 1983, p. 4.

²⁴ Caroline Jane Tully, ‘Researching the Past is a Foreign Country: Cognitive Dissonance as a Response by Practitioner Pagans to Academic Research on the History of Pagan Religions’. *The Pomegranate*, vol. 13, No. 1, 2011, pp. 98-105.

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