

The Runic Journey

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1. What Are Runes?

Runes are an alphabetic script used by the peoples of Northern Europe from the first century c.e. until well into the Middle Ages.

In addition to their use as a written alphabet, the runes also served as a system of symbols used for magic and divination. Runes into disuse as the Roman alphabets became the preferred script of most of Europe, but their forms and meanings were preserved in inscriptions and manuscripts.

The primary characteristic that distinguishes a runic alphabet from other alphabets is that each letter, or rune, has a meaning. For example, whereas "ay", "bee", and "cee" are meaningless sounds denoting the first three letters in our alphabet, the names the first three runes, "fehu", "uruz", and "purisaz" are actual words in the Germanic language, meaning "cattle", "aurochs", and "giant", respectively. Runes also have magical and religious significance as well, thus transforming the simple process of writing into a magical act. They are also used for divinatory readings and to create magical spells.

Today, runes have been rediscovered as a symbolic system and have gained immense popularity as a means of divination. However, much more than a curious alternative to Tarot cards for telling fortunes. They provide a key to understanding the lives beliefs of the ancient people who created them, and have much to teach us about a way of life that was perhaps more intimately connected to the natural world, and to the realm of spirit, than our own.

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2. History and Origin of the Runes

What we now know as the runic alphabet seems to have developed from two distinct sources - one magical, one literate. Pre-runic are symbols, or hällristningar, have been found in various Bronze Age rock carvings, primarily in Sweden. Some of these symbols are readily identifiable in the later alphabets, while others represent ideas and concepts that were incorporated into the names of runes (sun, horse, etc.). The exact meanings of these sigils are now lost to us, as is their original purpose, but they are believed have been used for divination or lot casting, and it is fairly certain that they contributed to the magical function of the later runic alphabets.



There is some debate over the origin of the "alphabet" aspect of the runes. Cases have been made for both Latin and Greek derivation, but historical and archaeological evidence strongly indicates a Northern Italic origin. The parallels between the two alphabets are too close to be ignored, particularly in the forms of the letters, as well as in the variable direction of the writing. This would also explain why so many of the runes resemble Roman letters, since both Italic and Latin scripts are derived from the Etruscan alphabet (itself a branch of the Western Greek family of alphabets). This theory would place the original creation of the futhark sometime before the 1st. century c.e., when the Italic scripts were absorbed and replaced by the

Latin alphabet. Linguistic and phoenetic analysis points to an even earlier inception date, perhaps as far back as 200 b.c.e.

When the northern tribes began integrating the Italic alphabet into their own symbolic system, they gave the letters names relating to all aspects of their secular and religious lives, thus transforming their simple pictographs into a magical alphabet that could be used for talismans, magical inscriptions and divination.

The name "futhark", like the word "alphabet", is derived from the first few letters in the runic sequence, which differs considerably of the Latin alphabet and is unique amongst alphabetic scripts. The futhark originally consisted of 24 letters, beginning with F and ending with O, and was used by the northern Germanic tribes of Sweden, Norway, Denmark, and Northern Germany. This form of the runes is known as the Elder, or Germanic Futhark.



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Sometime around the fifth century AD, changes occurred in the runes in Frisia (the area around the northern Netherlands and north-western Germany). This period coincided with the Anglo-Saxon invasions from this area and the appearance of similar runes in the British Isles. The forms of several of the runes changed, notably the runes for A/O, C/K, H, J, S, and Ng. Also, changes in the language led to between five and nine runes being added to the alphabet to compensate for the extra sounds, and several runes were given different corresponding letters. This alphabet has become known as the Anglo-Saxon Futhorc.



In Scandinavia, the Elder Futhark remained in use until some time around the eighth century (the time of the Eddas), when changes the Old Norse language occurred, and corresponding changes in the runic alphabet were made to

accommodate the new sounds. However, unlike the Anglo-Saxon Futhorc, the Younger Futhark (as it is now called) reduced the number of from 24 to 16, and several runes came to represent multiple sounds. The forms of the runes were also changed and simplified. There are several variations of this futhark - Danish, long branch, Norwegian, dotted, etc. form of the runic alphabet spread from Denmark north into Sweden and Norway, and was carried into Iceland and Greenland by the Vikings. It is possible that they were also brought to North America with the Vinland expeditions, but so far no authenticated inscriptions have been found.

2.1 The Runic Revival

The runes, primarily in their Younger form, remained in common use until well into the 17th. century. Up until this time, they were everything from coins to coffins, and in some places their use was actually sanctioned by the Church. Even the common knew simple runic spells, and the runes were frequently consulted on matters of both public and private interest. Unfortunately, with the magical arts, they were officially banned in 1639 as part of the Church's efforts to "drive the devil out of with Europe". The rune masters were either executed or went underground, and the knowledge of the runes may well have died with them. Some that the knowledge was passed on in secret, but it is almost impossible to separate ancient traditions from more modern esoteric philosophies in such cases.

Perhaps the darkest period in the history of runic studies was their revival by German scholars connected with the Nazi movement in the 20's and 30's. What began as a legitimate folkloric resurgence unfortunately became so tainted by Nazi ideology and racism that the research from this period was rendered all but useless to any serious student of runic lore.

After the Second World War, the runes fell into disfavour as a result of their association with Naziism, and very little was written about them until the fifties and sixties. It was not until the mid-eighties, with the widespread appeal of the "New Age" movement and revival of Pagan religions (especially the Asatru movement) that the runes regained their popularity as both a divinatory system and a tool for self-awareness.

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3. The Meanings of the Runes

3.1 Sources

There are several historical runic inscriptions, found on everything from swords to stones to bronze pendants, which list the entire runic alphabet in order. One of the oldest and most complete of these is the Kylver stone, found in Gotland, Sweden and dating from the fifth century c.e. Others are less complete, but show a remarkable continuity in the order in which the runes until are listed. The only surviving written accounts of the actual names and meanings of the runes, however, were not recorded until the advent of the Christian era. Some of these manuscripts, which date from the 9th century until well into 12th, are known as rune poems. These poems have a verse for each rune, each of which begins with the rune itself and its name. Some of these poems are more Pagan than others, particularly those from Iceland, where Christianity was not yet as widespread as it was in the Anglo-Saxon regions.

The rune names themselves appear to have been passed down relatively intact, and although no manuscript exists listing the names of the older, Germanic runes, the Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian rune poems agree to such an extent that their common origin can be deduced. These names are probably our best clue as to what the individual runes actually meant to the people that used them.

3.2 Interpretation

The unique order of the futhork and its traditional division into three 'aetts' (a word meaning 'families' or 'groups') may be of significance in decyphering the complex interrelationships between the runes. Several authors have noted certain pairings and groupings within the order (cattle / aurochs, hagalah / nauthiz / isa, etc.), but so far the meaning of the overall pattern has remained a mystery. Recently, a few authors (notably myself and Freya Aswynn) have independantly-developed systems of interpreting the futhork as a whole, using Norse mythology and literature as a guide, and division into aetts as the underlying structure. Although these efforts are mostly speculative, they do provide some insight into how the Norse might have used the runes as a symbolic key to their understanding of the physical and spiritual world.

I tend to approach the futhork as a journey - a spiritual odyssey in which the traveller encounters obstacles, receives gifts, and learns vital lessons that will aid in their development as a human being. This process is at once personal and mythic, following cycles and patterns that reflect the Norse world-view. This world-view was fundamentally different from that of the average 20th century Westerner, so a thorough understanding of the myths, culture and lifestyle of the ancient peoples of northern Europe is a complete understanding of the runes. Please see the online resourses on these subjects, as well as my recommended reading list for more information.

It should be noted that the following interpretations of the meanings of the runes, while firmly founded in historical evidence and understanding of the Norse culture, are at least partially speculative and should not be taken as the "True and Original Meanings of the Runes". Given that so little is actually known about the runes, it is to be expected that even the most cynical scholar writing about them will inevitably bring their own theories and biases to their subject. I am no exception. To make things a little clearer, I have tried to distinguish hard fact from my own speculation wherever possible.

3.2.1 The First Aett



fehu: cattle

Phonetic equivalent: f



fehu.wav

DIVINATORY MEANINGS: prosperity, money, wealth, concern with physical and financial needs, goals, promotion, self-esteem, centredness, karma

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MAGICAL USES: for money, business, promotion, finding a job, achieving a goal, starting new enterprises

ASSOCIATED MYTHS & DEITIES: Freyr, Brisingamen, Gullveig, Dwarfs, Sigurd & the Otter's Gold

ANALYSIS: Fehu is both the day-to-day reality of our lives and the catalyst that awakens us to what lies beyond. It is whatever we think we are which frequently bears no resemblance to what we will eventually find. It is also our home, for after all our wanderings we will need to attend to our physical needs and ground ourselves in the simple pleasures of home, family, and good work. Oz might be a fun place to visit, but after a while all you really want to do is go back to Kansas.

Fehu reminds us that we must be secure in our physical situation before embarking upon any spiritual journey. We all must begin with the mundane reality of our lives, although many people never get beyond this. In many ways, we have become as domesticated as the cattle, living our day-to-day existence without wanting or even being aware of anything more being possible. The first step in breaking away from this situation is to catch a glimpse of what is possible, without dwelling on what security we may lose to attain it.



uruz : aurochs

Phonetic equivalent: u



uruz.wav

DIVINATORY MEANINGS: passion, vitality, instinct, wildness, sexuality, fertility, the unconscious, primitive mind, irrationality, shamanic experience, rite of passage

MAGICAL USES: to strengthen the will, increase sexual potency and energy; for hunting

ASSOCIATED MYTHS & DEITIES: Ullr, Loki, Odin (as shaman)

ANALYSIS: The aurochs was a species of wild ox, similar to a bison, that was once found all over Europe, but which became extinct sometime in the 17th century. They were said to be slightly smaller than elephants, and had horns as long as six feet, which were highly prized by the Germanii as drinking horns. Paintings of aurochs have been found in Neolithic caves, and it is believed that the aurochs hunt had some significance as a rite of passage for a boy entering manhood. The aurochs is the epitome of the wild animal, as opposed to the domesticated cattle represented by fehu.

Uruz is the rune of the God of the sacred hunt and his shaman/priest. Following the kind of mundane, day-to-day survival represented by fehu, it is the first recognition by mankind of the divine in nature, and his first attempt to control it through the use of sympathetic magic. It also represents an awareness of death and our own mortality, which may well be the only thing that truly distinguishes us from other animals. The energy of this rune is raw, powerful, and distinctly masculine, in the sense that it is first pure, elemental fire. The boy who has killed the aurochs has just entered manhood, and has therefore been initiated into the first level of the mysteries - the awareness that the source of life is death.



purisaz : giant

Phonetic equivalent: th (as in 'thing')



thurisaz.wav

DIVINATORY MEANINGS: hardship, painful event, discipline, knowledge, introspection, focus

MAGICAL USES: aid in study and meditation, self-discipline, clearing out a bad situation

ASSOCIATED MYTHS & DEITIES: the Frost Giants, Loki

ANALYSIS: purisaz is the first of the 'obstacle' runes. These obstacles are not necessarily destructive things, but are placed in our path to strengthen and teach us. After all, you can't have a mythic hero without dragons to slay or giants to fight!

The lesson of this rune is 'to learn you must suffer', meaning not only literal suffering, but also in the biblical sense of 'allowing' - allowing one's destiny to unfold as it should, and allowing one's self to

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experience all that life offers us. What may at first appear to be a negative, destructive event may well turn out to contain an important lesson. The Giants may seem to be evil and destructive to the Aesir, but they bring about change, and eventually clear the way for a new age.



ansuz : Odin

Phonetic equivalent: a (as in 'fall')

DIVINATORY MEANINGS: authority figure, leader, mind & body balance, justice, shaman, clairvoyant



ansuz.wav

MAGICAL USES: for wise decisions, success, leadership; to help in divination and magic

ASSOCIATED MYTHS & DEITIES: Odin

ANALYSIS: This rune represents the instinctive, primal energy of uruz tempered with the discipline and experience of þurisaz. These elements are combined in the personage of Odin, who exhibits the characteristics of both chieftain and shaman - a god of wisdom as well as war. Odin is also a shaman, travelling between the worlds on his eight-legged horse, Sleipnir.

Ansuz is a balanced rune. As with fehu, many people choose to remain at this point in their journey. It represents power, both secular and magical, and this power can be quite seductive. Odin has learned the lessons of the first three runes, thus gaining the wisdom to rule wisely, but this is really only another beginning. He has only gained temporal power, and has only a few of the tools he will need to perfect himself spiritually. There is a certain lack of compassion and perspective in this rune. Odin sits high above his world, looking down and making decisions, but he doesn't yet have the capacity to really care about or understand his people or himself. He still needs that emotional connection to become a truly great leader.



raido : journey

Phonetic equivalent: r

DIVINATORY MEANINGS: journey, pilgrimage, change, destiny, quest, progress, life lessons



raido.wav

MAGICAL USES: protection for travellers, to ease or bring about change, to reconnect

ASSOCIATED MYTHS & DEITIES: the Norns, Sigurd's journey

ANALYSIS: Raido represents the path of a person's life and how it intersects and interacts with other paths. In Norse mythology, these paths are seen as threads of fate, and are regulated by the Norns. The Norns are three sisters who live near the first root of Yggdrasil, which they tend with the water from the well of Wyrd. They also spin the fates of Gods and men, which is important when understanding the mechanism of runic divination and magic.

The complex network of relationships formed by these threads of fate can be thought of as a web. Every chance encounter forms another connection in the web, and by tugging on one thread you affect everything else in the system. Most people do this completely unconsciously, but by becoming aware of the pattern of the threads surrounding you, it becomes possible to recognize and follow up on the kind of catalytic events that seemed to happen to us randomly back at fehu. In this way, we can find our way more easily along the path of our own journey, thus deriving the greatest benefit from its lessons. Otherwise we tend to get distracted and end up on detours and dead ends.

Raido reminds us that, although it may seem that we have accomplished our goals at ansuz, life and change continue and we must always go on. We will eventually end up where we began, but on a higher level and with a better perspective. The journey never really ends.



kenaz : torch

Phonetic equivalent: c (as in 'candle')



kenaz.wav

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DIVINATORY MEANINGS: wisdom, insight, solution to a problem, creativity, inspiration, enlightenment

MAGICAL USES: for creative inspiration, aid in study, fertility, dispelling anxiety and fear

ASSOCIATED MYTHS & DEITIES: Mimir, the Dwarfs, Muspellheim

ANALYSIS: In modern usage, the Scottish 'ken' means to know or understand, and this is the sense in which the rune should be interpreted. Today, light, inspiration and knowledge are often associated, as in 'gaining enlightenment' and 'shedding light on the problem', even in the image of a lightbulb going on over someone's head when they get an idea. To bring light is to make the invisible visible.

Unlike the wisdom gained at þurisaz, kenaz only allows us to take bits and pieces of this knowledge away with us as we need it, usually at the discretion of the Gods. This knowledge will generally come in the form of a sudden inspiration, and we are able to see clearly the answer that was once hidden from us. This form of wisdom is more closely associated with the right half of the brain than the left, since it does not come through conscious effort but rather through passively opening one's self to it. Thus, a more feminine element is added to our journeyer's experience.

The act of bringing light into the darkness is also a creative one. Again consider the image of the person carrying a torch, representing the masculine elements of fire and air, entering the cave and penetrating the feminine realm of earth and water. This joining of masculine and feminine elements results in the creation of new ideas. In physical terms, this can be correlated to the application of fire to mold and shape matter - the art of the smith.



gebo : gift

Phonetic equivalent: g (as in 'girl')

DIVINATORY MEANINGS: gift, offering, relationship, love, marriage, partnership, generosity, unexpected good fortune



gebo.wav

MAGICAL USES: to find or strengthen a relationship, for fertility, to mark a gift or offering, to bring luck

ASSOCIATED MYTHS & DEITIES: Sigurd & Brunhild; Aesir & Vanir treaty

ANALYSIS: Gebo is a rune of connection, particularly the connections between people. Up until now, our journey has been a solitary one. This rune represents those places where our path intersects with others, and allows us to begin to form conscious relationships. Such relationships are strengthened and sanctified by the exchange of gifts.

The use of the gift as a symbol of an oath or a bond is an ancient one. When a lord wanted to ensure the loyalty of one of his subjects, he would give that person a gift. The gift would create a debt on the part of the person receiving it, and this debt would ensure his readiness to serve his lord. Similarly, a gift given between lovers, especially that of the ring symbolizes the bond between them. Originally, only the man gave the ring in a marriage for much the same reason as the lord giving gifts to his vassals, but today the arrangement is usually more equitable. Gifts or offerings given to the Gods often carry the same meaning, representing the giver's love for or loyalty to their Gods. The giving of a gift implies the acceptance of a debt with the understanding that the debt will not be repaid. It is this imbalance that forms the bond.



wunjo : glory

Phonetic equivalent: w

DIVINATORY MEANINGS: success, recognition of achievements, reward, joy, bliss, achievement of goals, contentment



wunjo.wav

MAGICAL USES: for success in any endeavor, to motivate, to complete a task.

ASSOCIATED MYTHS & DEITIES: Baldr, Asgard

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ANALYSIS: Wunjo is the last rune of the first aett, and thus represents both the end of one cycle and preparation for the next. It is a very positive, stable rune, and is another place where people tend to get stalled along their journey. Christian poets related it to heaven, but in fact it more closely resembles the Pagan Valhalla, since this particular paradise is not a permanent one.

Like the wealth of fehu, the glory of wunjo is only an illusion. We have achieved success on one level only, and there are many more lessons to be learned. It is, however, a welcome respite that allows us to rest, re-charge our batteries and prepare ourselves for the rest of the journey. It also gives us some perspective, allowing us to look back and reflect on the road thus far. Wunjo gives us a glimpse of what is possible, but if we try too soon to reach out and grab it, like the Grail it will disappear between our fingers.

3.2.2 The Second Aett



hagalaz : hail

Phonetic equivalent: h

DIVINATORY MEANINGS: sudden loss, ordeal, destruction, disaster, clearance, testing, karmic lesson, drastic change.

MAGICAL USES: removing unwanted influences, breaking destructive patterns

ASSOCIATED MYTHS & DEITIES: Ragnarok, Loki, Frost Giants

ANALYSIS: The idea of the destruction of the old being necessary to the growth of the new, as contained in the Norse myth of Ragnarok, is essential to our understanding of this rune. Interestingly enough, haglaz lies between sowulo (fire) and isa (ice), reminding us of the Norse creation myth and the creative potential that lies between these two opposites, even though their meeting may seem first to be destructive. Like the Tower in the Tarot, haglaz is only a negative rune if we choose to view it in that way, and refuse to learn its lessons. Appearing as it does at the beginning of the second aett, it marks both a beginning and an end, and knocks us out of the safety and complacency of wunjo. It represents what a friend of mine used to refer to as the 'flying ladle Fates, syndrome' - that whenever things appear to be going too well, you can expect a good, healthy whack in the head from the Fates, just to make sure you're paying attention.

These sorts of 'wake-up calls' from the Gods will happen frequently throughout a person's life, but are often misinterpreted as divine punishment for some imagined wrong when in fact they are merely a way of drawing your attention to a recurrent pattern in your life. Unfortunately, these types of events have a tendency to repeat themselves with greater and greater severity until the lesson is learned and the pattern is broken. For example, someone who needs to break their dependency on a certain type of person will find themselves in relationships with such people over and over again with more and more disastrous results until they recognize the pattern as emanating from themselves and break it willingly.



naupiz : need, necessity

Phonetic equivalent: n

DIVINATORY MEANINGS: poverty, hardship, responsibility, discontent, obstacle, frustration

MAGICAL USES: to represent a need to be filled

ASSOCIATED MYTHS & DEITIES: Freyr & Gurd, the Otter's Gold

ANALYSIS: If haglaz is a flying ladle, then naupiz is the empty pot. It is a gentle, nudging reminder that all is not as it should be. Life appears to be out of synch, and nothing seems to be going right. No matter how much you have, it is never enough, and there is an ever-present desire for something more, something better. On the positive side, this dissatisfaction with the status quo can serve to draw one away from the relative safety of wunjo and motivate towards change.



hagalaz.wav



nauthiz.wav

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Naupiz represents an imbalance between one's desires and one's assets. How you resolve this situation will influence the rest of the journey, but the awareness of the imbalance itself can also be illuminating. It causes you to closely examine and perhaps reassess your values and priorities, and forces you back onto the path of your own happiness. Perhaps mythologist Joseph Campbell said it best when he enjoined us to 'follow our bliss'; in other words, that we will know that we are on the right track spiritually when we are doing those things which make us the most happy and fulfilled. Naupiz helps us to take the first step on that path by letting us know when we have strayed from it.



isa : ice

Phonetic equivalent: i (as in 'inch')

DIVINATORY MEANINGS: inactivity, blockage, stagnation, potential, patience, reflection, withdrawal, rest

MAGICAL USES: to stop a process; to represent primal form

ASSOCIATED MYTHS & DEITIES: Auðumla, Nifelheim

ANALYSIS: In modern symbology, fire is generally masculine and ice (or earth) is feminine, but it is unknown whether the Norse shared this association. Certainly, ice was a constant factor in their day to day lives. It threatened their crops and their ships almost throughout the year, but it also served as a symbol of creation, from which all life will eventually spring. It says something about the Norse mind that they could recognize the need to have such a seemingly destructive joining of elements in order to create maintain life. Fire may be warm and pleasant, but it must be balanced by the freezing of winter just as birth must be balanced by death. Even the little death of sleep has been proven to be vital for our mental and physical well being.

Isa encompasses all of these ideas, but primarily represents a period of rest before activity, and itself forms the material from which life can be created. It is matter, inert by itself, but transformed into the stuff of stars when wedded with energy. It is the immovable form acted upon the irresistible force. In many ways, the Norse predicted Einstein with their version of the creation of the universe, recognizing that everything in their world contained both fire and ice (energy and matter), and that the relationship between the two defined the processes of life itself.



jera : year, harvest

Phonetic equivalent: y (but may be used in place of 'j')

DIVINATORY MEANINGS: change, cycle turning, reward, motion, productivity, inevitable development

MAGICAL USES: to bring change; for fertility and growth

ASSOCIATED MYTHS & DEITIES: Sif, Thor, Freyr, Granni

ANALYSIS: In this modern age of central heating and oranges in February, it is difficult to imagine the close ties that people once had with the cycles of the year, particularly in the more Northern climes. The changing seasons affected not only the weather, but also the to day activities and even the diets of ancient peoples. Constant change was the norm, and the object was to become attuned those changes, not to fight against them. An ancient farmer (or even some modern ones) wouldn't need to look at a calendar to tell him when to plant, or read a weather forecast to know when the snows were coming. The changing seasons were a part of his blood and bones, and his very existence depended on adapting to change.

Jera follows isa just as spring follows winter. The turning of the wheel breaks the frozen stangancy of ice, and things are once again moving along, as they should. In fact, we have now broken out of the entire set 'negative' runes with which we began this aett. This has been accomplished not by fighting to escape the ice or railing against the unfairness of fate, but by learning from those experiences and simply waiting for the inevitable thaw. Jera is the communion wine - the product of the joining of opposites bringing life. Storms may come and go, but the sun is always there and life is generally pretty good. Enjoy it while you can.



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eihwaz : yew

Phonetic equivalent: ei

DIVINATORY MEANINGS: change, initiation, confrontation of fears, turning point, death, transformation

MAGICAL USES: to bring about profound change, to ease a life transition

ASSOCIATED MYTHS & DEITIES: Hel, Yggdrasil

ANALYSIS: The yew tree has been associated with runes, magic and death in northern and western Europe since time immemorial. The reasons for this ancient association are numerous, but seem to principally derive from the fact that yews are evergreens which retain their greenery even through the death of winter, and because their red berries are symbolic of the blood of life. The yew is extremely long-lived, thus effectively 'immortal'. Reverence for the yew dates back to before the times of the Celts, and continues today in Christian tradition.

Eihwaz is the thirteenth rune in the fupark, and marks the middle of the alphabet. (It is interesting to note that the Death card in the Tarot is also the thirteenth card.) This rune is the turning point in the runic journey, and represents the transformation the initiatory process. All rites of passage, particularly those marking the transition into adulthood, contain the symbolism of death, the idea being that one's former 'self' has died and given birth to a new persona.

Eihwaz is the passage through which we must enter the realm of Hel in order to gain the knowledge and acceptance of our mortality, as well as those mysteries that can only be learned from the dark Lady of the dead. The process is a truly frightening one, but it is something we all must go through if we are to confront our deepest fears and emerge with the kind of wisdom that be taught but must be experienced. Eihwaz is the gateway to this wisdom, and lies between life (jera) and rebirth (perþ).



perþ : dice-cup? vulva?

Phonetic equivalent: p

DIVINATORY MEANINGS: rebirth, mystery, magic, divination, fertility, sexuality, new beginning, prophecy

MAGICAL USES: fertility, easing childbirth, to aid in divination and magic, enhancing psychic abilities

ASSOCIATED MYTHS & DEITIES: Freya, Angrbode

ANALYSIS: The actual interpretation of perþ has been the subject of much controversy among runic scholars. The problem lies in the fact that the initial P sound doesn't occur anywhere else in the old Germanic language, leading to the belief that the word was imported from another language. The Old English rune poem seems to indicate that it had to do with some sort of game, leading many to interpret it as 'chess pawn' or 'dice-cup'. The dice-cup meaning is particularly interesting as it not only fits the shape of rune, but also hints at such an object's original use as a container for the runes themselves. An alternate interpretation of perþ is derived from the Slavic 'pizda', meaning 'vulva'. This meaning (although obscure and somewhat unlikely) fits quite into the progression of runes up until this point, symbolizing the rebirth that follows death. Viewing it as a symbol of the womb of the Goddess, it represents the same element of the mysterious and hidden as 'dice-cup', but taken literally as 'vulva', it adds a powerful, feminine, sexual counterpart to uruz that would otherwise be missing from the fupark.

However you choose to interpret the literal meaning of perþ (and again, nobody really knows what that is), the basic symbolism is that of a vessel, nurturing and giving 'birth', keeping hidden and secret all those mysteries, which can be uncovered only after the initiation of death. The rune is closely tied in with the idea of fate, that the road we travel, regardless of what we choose to do along the way, is pre determined from the moment of our birth. The very act of being born sets us along a course of cause and effect, action and reaction that we may choose to follow blindly, or try to divine through the runes or other means order that we may better understand the lessons we will learn. Perþ is the beginning of this process, as well as the tool for accomplishing it.

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algiz : protection

Phonetic equivalent: x, z

DIVINATORY MEANINGS: protection, assistance, defence, warning, support, a mentor, an ethical dilemma

MAGICAL USES: for protection, hunting

ASSOCIATED MYTHS & DEITIES: Heimdall, Gjallerhorn

ANALYSIS: Heimdall is an interesting and mysterious figure in Norse mythology, and I associate him with the rune algiz because of his role as protector and guardian. He is the watcher at the gate who guards the boundaries between the worlds and who charges all entering and leaving with caution. He is best known for his famous horn, but his sword is also important in the consideration of rune. Snorri mentions that the poetic name for a sword is 'Heimdall's head', and the poetic name for a head is 'Heimdall's sword'. This is particularly significant if we consider that one form of his name was 'Heimdali', meaning 'ram'. Through the image of the ram, Heimdall's sword and his horn can be seen as two different sides of the same image. Both the sword and the horns (or the elk's antlers) are symbols of power that may be used for either offence or defence, depending on the situation.

In terms of the journey, we have passed through death and rebirth, and must now face the Guardian before returning to our world. It is he who charges us to use our new-found power wisely. The person can no longer be simply concerned with their own personal development, but must now consider the effect that their actions may have on others. This is a crucial turning point, and the person will either choose to adopt a system of ethics or ignore the effect on others and only work to serve their own ends. Again, the sword is in their hands, but they must decide whether to use it for defence or offence.



sowulo : sun

Phonetic equivalent: s

DIVINATORY MEANINGS: success, positive energy, increase, power, activity, fertility, health

MAGICAL USES: energy, strength, success, healing, fertility

ASSOCIATED MYTHS & DEITIES: Sunna

ANALYSIS: The sun is held sacred by almost every religion in the world. Its light and warmth symbolize life and growth and all that is good. Norse cosmology describes the sun being driven around the heavens in a chariot and chased by a great wolf, which will devour at Ragnarok. Throughout Indo-European Paganism, the sun has frequently been associated with the horse, often described as being carted around the sky by a horse. Both are symbolic of life and fertility, and are usually considered 'masculine' in polarity, although in Norse myth the chariot is driven by a girl. The swastika or sun wheel is a constant motif in rock carvings dating Neolithic times, and occurs throughout Europe and Asia. The sun rune itself is a variation on this symbol, and represents motion and energy.

Sowulo marks the end of the second aett, and like wunjo represents success and glory. However, unlike the rest and relaxation of Valhalla, the sun is very much an active symbol. We have reached the end of the aett successfully, and the conclusion is a positive one, but in this case we are fully aware of the changing and transient nature of the universe. We can see the wolf at heels, and we know that we must move on. Here, though, the journeyer may pause briefly in the warmth and light of the sun, absorbing and applying its energy to the work ahead. This time we won't need to be blasted out of our safe position, but will rather choose to leave it in order to continue on the journey.

3.2.3 The Third Aett



teiwaz : Tyr

Phonetic equivalent: t



algiz.wav



sowulo.wav



teiwaz.wav

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DIVINATORY MEANINGS: duty, discipline, responsibility, self-sacrifice, conflict, strength, a wound, physicality, the warrior path

MAGICAL USES: protection, victory, strength, strengthening the will, healing a wound

ASSOCIATED MYTHS & DEITIES: Tyr and the Fenris Wolf, Odin's ordeals

ANALYSIS: Just as the second aett began with the cleansing destruction of hagalah, so too does the third aett begin with a loss. However, hail is imposed by the Gods to force the sacrifice of those things that aren't really vital to our development. Teiwaz, on the other hand, represents a voluntary sacrifice, made by someone who understands exactly what he or she is giving up and why.

Tyr's sacrifice of his hand to allow the binding of the Fenris Wolf was a noble one, and notable in a pantheon of deities not known for their sense of duty and ethical responsibility. He is believed to be one of the oldest of the Norse Gods - a Bronze-age rock carving was found in Scandinavia depicting a one-handed warrior - and his position may well have originally superseded Odin. Tyr's rune is also one of the oldest in the futhork, having survived virtually unchanged from the earliest Bronze-age carvings. It represents all those qualities associated with the God: strength, heroism, duty and responsibility. But it also represents a deeper mystery - that of the wounded God. Like þurisaz, the pain of teiwaz focuses the attention and forces discipline. However, in this case the effect is more conscious and the wound carries a greater significance. Uruz has been confronted and bound, and the lessons of teiwaz and hagalah have been learned. This is the path of the warrior.



berkana : birch

Phonetic equivalent: b

DIVINATORY MEANINGS: fertility, health, new beginnings, growth, conception, plenty, clearance



berkana.wav

MAGICAL USES: healing (especially infections), achieving conception, making a fresh start

ASSOCIATED MYTHS & DEITIES: Frigg, Idunna

ANALYSIS: The birch is fundamentally a symbol of fertility. There are numerous instances in European folk tradition where birch twigs are to bring prosperity and encourage conception. They were fixed above a sweetheart's door on May Day in Cheshire, England, and were placed in stables and houses to promote fertility. On the continent, young men, women and cattle were struck with birch twigs for this same purpose, and young boys would be sent out to "beat the bounds of the parish" with branches of birch to prosperity in the coming year. Witches were said to ride broomsticks made from birch, an image which probably originated with fertility rituals where dancers would 'ride' brooms through the fields, the height of their jumping indicating how high the grain should grow.

If teiwaz is the fundamental male mystery, then berkana certainly belongs to the women, for it represents the path of the mother, the healer and the midwife, bringing new life after death just as the birch puts out the first leaves after winter. While Tyr's wound is acquired through his encounter with death, berkana's wound is that of menstruation, and her ordeal is that of childbirth. The birch is abundant and all providing, and heals through nourishment, cleansing and empathy.



ehwaz : horse

Phonetic equivalent: e (as in 'egg')

DIVINATORY MEANINGS: transportation, motion, assistance, energy, power, communication, will, recklessness



ehwaz.wav

MAGICAL USES: power, aiding in communication, transportation; to 'send' a spell

ASSOCIATED MYTHS & DEITIES: Sleipnir, Freya's feathered cloak

ANALYSIS: The horse has been a powerful symbol in nearly every culture and every age. They were often believed to draw the sun about heavens. Strong, swift and loyal, their relationship with humankind is unique. They allow us to perform tasks that would normally be beyond our strength, and to

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travel distances that would normally be beyond our reach. The mare symbolizes fertility fecundity, and the stallion is the epitome of virility and raw energy. It is an animal that never lost its power by being domesticated.

Like the sun that is its counterpart, ehwaz represents energy and motion. In this case, however, there is also respect for the source of the power to be considered. This is not merely an impersonal energy source - it is a living, breathing thing whose needs and desires must be taken into consideration, rather than be simply used as a slave. This is the power that was given by the God at algiz, and this rune reminds us of our oath to only use it to help, never to harm. Like the two-edged sword, the horse powerful tool, but must be carefully controlled to avoid harming yourself or other. It is tempting to just go barrelling along recklessly, but to do so is to risk loosing that power forever. This is the balance that must be achieved on the path of pure magic.



mannaz : man, humankind

Phonetic equivalent: m

DIVINATORY MEANINGS: significator, self, family, community, relationships, social concerns



mannaz.wav

MAGICAL USES: to represent a specific person or group of people; to establish social relationships

ASSOCIATED MYTHS & DEITIES: Ask and Embla, Midgard

ANALYSIS: In its broadest sense, mannaz represents all of humanity, and therefore the entire realm of Midgard. In more practical terms, it is those with whom we have personal connections, from our immediate circle of family and friends to the wider community around us, reminding us of our nature as social animals. It also represents our connection with the Gods (Ymir), and with nature (the two trees). It takes the raw energy of ehwaz and controls it through our social conscience, reminding us of those we affect with our deeds both magical and mundane.

The rune itself resembles gyfu with its joining of masculine and feminine elements, but is much more complete. It is the entire web of human relationships, with the self at the centre, which mirrors the web of fate explored through raiðo. But while that web joined was more or less fixed, this one is mutable and alive. Past and present, male and female, self and other - all opposites are joined here and made whole. Mannaz is our home, and speaks for all those whose lives we touch when we use the gifts we have been given through the runes.



laguz : water

Phonetic equivalent: l

DIVINATORY MEANINGS: emotions, fears, unconscious mind, things hidden, revelation, intuition, counselling



laguz.wav

MAGICAL USES: enhancing psychic abilities, confronting fears, stabilizing mental or emotional disorders, uncovering hidden things

ASSOCIATED MYTHS & DEITIES: Njord, Midgard Serpent

ANALYSIS: When most people think of water, they generally think of its more pleasant associations - peacefulness, love, compassion, intuition, and the emotions in general. However, we must remember that, to the Norse, water most often meant the sea, and the sea was a terrifying, unpredictable place, home of the Midgard serpent and the grave of many sailors. Laguz, then, should be thought of in terms of the lighter and the darker sides of the element of water. It speaks to our primal fears of the dark, the cold, and all those terrifying things hidden deep within our subconscious minds.

Like eihwaz, which forced the journeyer to confront his or her mortality, laguz makes us examine the underlying roots of our and behavior, and allows us to modify those aspects which are hindering our spiritual development. The understanding and wisdom gained through eihwaz and the runes that followed have prepared the journeyer to face this darker side (represented by laguz) and accept it as an

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integral part of their selves. Laguz also prepares the person to take on the task of helping others through this self-examination process, allowing them to empathize more strongly and share their own experiences, making it (among other things) the rune of the spiritual counsellor.



inguz : Ing

Phonetic equivalent: ng

DIVINATORY MEANINGS: work, productivity, bounty, groundedness, balance, connection with the land

MAGICAL USES: fertility, farming, growth, general health, balance

ASSOCIATED MYTHS & DEITIES: Freyr / Ing, Nerthus, Thor, the Vanir

ANALYSIS: Ing is a Danish / Anglo-Saxon name for Freyr, the God of agriculture and fertility. Agriculture represents one of the first attempts by mankind to control the environment, and the fertility of crops, animals and people has always been the primary concern and religious focus of most Pagan agrarian societies. From the earliest Sumerian accounts to modern-day British folk custom, people throughout history have sought to ensure the success of their crops.

The vast majority of people in Western society have lost all contact and connection with the land and the process of growing things. The spiritual consequences of this segregation from the earth have been disastrous, since most people find it difficult to relate to deity in a purely man-made environment. The shape of this rune can be likened to that of a field, but its real significance may lie in its balance, representing the harmonious relationship between ourselves and the four elements / four directions. Inguz reminds us of that ancient connection between the Gods and the land, and re-links (the real meaning of the 'religion') us with our spiritual natures through the realm of the physical. It is quite literally a grounding rune, and by reintroducing us to the earth, it reconnects our bodies, our minds and our spirits.



inguz.wav



dagaz : day

Phonetic equivalent: d (pronounced as 'th', as in 'this')

DIVINATORY MEANINGS: happiness, success, activity, a fulfilling lifestyle, satisfaction

MAGICAL USES: to bring a positive outcome

ASSOCIATED MYTHS & DEITIES: Sunna, Baldr, Nerthus, Yggdrasil

ANALYSIS: This rune effectively marks the end of the third aett, leaving only opila to complete the cycle. As in the previous two aetts, dagaz concludes the third with light and hope. However, while wunjo represented earthly glories and the sun, heavenly the day brings these two realms together, bringing the more abstract light and power of sowulo 'down to earth' and applying it to our everyday lives.

The shape of the rune itself denotes this kind of interconnection. It is reminiscent of gebo, with its balance of masculine, feminine and the four elements, but dagaz makes further connections to the celestial and the realm of nature. Like inguz, it symbolizes harmony with one's environment. but again takes it a step further, implying a harmonious relationship with the spiritual environment as well. It is a bringing together of all six cardinal points - the four compass directions, the celestial realm above us where the Gods are thought to dwell; and that which is below - all the spirits of the earth and of nature. All of these things are balanced and integrated through dagaz and brought into our daily lives.



dagaz.wav



OpILA : property

Phonetic equivalent: o

DIVINATORY MEANINGS: property, land, inheritance, home, permanence, legacy, synthesis, sense of belonging

MAGICAL USES: for acquiring land or property, to complete a project, to strengthen family ties



othila.wav

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ASSOCIATED MYTHS & DEITIES: the nine worlds of Yggdrasil

ANALYSIS: In opila, we find ourselves back in the seemingly mundane realm of wealth and property, just like the first rune, fehu. However, while cattle represented a more movable, transitory form of wealth, the land (as Mr. O'Hara said) is the only thing that lasts. It can be passed on as a legacy, but more importantly, it defines who we are by defining where we are. It is, ultimately, our home.

This rune brings us to the seventh cardinal point, which is the centre. It is the meeting place between Midgard and Asgard; between our Gods and us. It is the axis around which our lives revolve. The idea of land or property is only a symbol - we must all find our own "centre" (or, as Joseph Campbell termed it, our "bliss") to give our lives meaning, and this is really the ultimate goal of the runic journey. Like Dorothy in the Wizard of Oz, we discover that after all our travels and adventures, we all eventually end up going home. But this doesn't mean that the travels and adventures are pointless. On the contrary, it is only through those explorations that our 'home' or spiritual centre can have any real meaning for us. "There's no place like home" of will have no power to send us there unless we come to truly understand what and where our home is to us. Conversely, none of lessons learned along the way can be of any real use to us unless we actively integrate them into our 'mundane' lives and find that centre point to anchor them to. Opila not only completes the smaller cycle of the third aett, but also brings us back to the beginning of the fupark itself, only on a higher level. We may now begin the grand cycle of the runic journey again.

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4. Runic Divination

*Thence come maidens who know much,
Three from that hall beneath the tree:
One was named Origin, the second Becoming.
These two fashioned the third, named Debt.
They established law,
They selected lives
For the children of ages,
And the fates of men.*
- *Völuspá*
-

4.1 Learning to Read

The first step in learning to read the runes must be to get to know the runes themselves. This doesn't necessarily mean memorizing interpretations out of a book, although the literal meanings of the rune names should be memorized as a starting point. Instead, take one rune each day, starting with fehu and ending with oþila, and meditate on it. There are several exercises you can do daily to aid in this: word association with the rune names, visualization, physical connection with the rune, etc.

Always keep a record of your rune readings in a journal. Although it's not quite as easy to draw a nine rune cast as it is to record a tarot spread, do try and make the effort. Record which runes landed face up and face down, what you think each one meant in the context of the reading, and what your general impressions were. Even if a reading makes no sense to you when you do it, its meaning might become clearer later on, and this will encourage you to pay closer attention to your instincts (even if you are sure you're wrong!).

4.2 Some Methods of Runic Divination

Since there are no reliable historical descriptions of runic divination, virtually any method one chooses can be considered valid. However, certain characteristics of the runes make them better suited to some methods than others. For example, most runes are carved onto small bits of wood, clay or stone. Runes are to be picked up and scattered as opposed to being laid out in a specific pattern like the Tarot. This is verified by descriptions of runic divination in Norse literature, all of which refer them being 'thrown', 'cast' or 'scattered'. Now, I used to recommend using Tarot-type patterns as a transitional method for those who are most comfortable with the Tarot, but I have come to the conclusion that it really isn't necessary. The best way to learn how to swim is to just jump right in!

Some books give upright and reversed meanings for the runes (like Tarot cards). This is obviously impractical if one is casting the runes, since many will land sideways or at odd angles. Also, one would think that if this had been the intention of the original creators of the fuþark, they wouldn't have designed so many runes to look the same upright as inverted. In addition to these practical considerations, there is also the fact that the Norse don't appear to have seen their world in such black and white. Polarizing the meanings of the runes in this way, even if those opposites aren't phrased in terms of 'positive' and 'negative', tends to limit the range of possible interpretations and ignores the complex and subtle relationships between the different runes in a cast.

The most important thing, however, is that you feel comfortable with the method you choose. If you feel the need for a more structured reading than a simple cast provides, devise a pattern for your casting cloth that has some meaning for you to give the reading a more tangible context. If you find nine or twelve runes to be a bit overwhelming, use three or four. If you want to just grab a handful and cast them, go right ahead. The runes themselves should tell you how they want to be read. Different sizes, shapes and materials lend themselves to different methods, and through meditation and experimentation you should be able to choose a technique that best suits both the runes' 'personality' and your own. Just make sure your method is consistent.

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Most people eventually end up devising their own method of reading, but here are a few to get you started in the meantime:

1. The One-Rune Quicky.

As you might imagine, this method is designed to provide a quick, concise answer to a specific question. It can also be used daily as a subject for meditation, or as a general overview of the day before you go to bed. Think of a specific question. Pull a rune the pouch and look at it. The answer may be an obvious yes or no, or the rune might provide a more conditional response. If the rune you picked seems to make no sense at all as a response to your question, ask another question or try again later.

2. The Norns (or, The Three-Rune Quicky).

This method is helpful in getting an overall fix on a given situation, and providing some idea about a future outcome. How much information you get out of it will depend on how much time you spend analyzing the reading and how well you understand the runes. Pull one rune and lay it down face up. This rune represents the first Norn - those events in the past which affect the current situation. Pull another rune and lay it next to the first. This is the second Norn - the present situation, which frequently to a choice that needs to be made. Pull a third and lay it down. This is the third Norn, and the most difficult rune to interpret. In some cases it might represent the person's inevitable fate. In others, it might simply be the end result if the current situation remains unchanged, or even just one of several results. You must rely on your instincts to decide which is the case.

3. The Roman Method.

This is the method described by Tacitus in 'Germania'. The method itself is really another variation of the Three-Rune Quickie, with a few ritual details to lend it authenticity. If you really want to do it right, go out and find a fruit-bearing tree and use the wood to carve your runes fresh each time. Lay out a white cloth on the floor. Take all of the runes in your hands and scatter them. Invoking the aid of Odin, and without looking at the runes, pick three at random. You may look at them as a group, without considering them in any particular order, or you can pick them one at a time, using the 'Norns' method described above to interpret them.

4. The Nine-Rune Cast.

This method will give a detailed overview of a person's situation, providing insight into where they are in terms of their spiritual path. It can also clarify the options and possible outcomes available to them. Nine is a somewhat arbitrary number - you may use any number that feels comfortable to you. I have chosen nine because a) three and its multiples were magically significant numbers to the also Norse, and b) it is a large enough number to provide a detailed reading, but not so large that it over-complicates things. It is also easy for most people to hold nine runes in their hands.

Pick nine runes from the pouch. Hold them between your hands for a moment, and focus on your question (if you have one). Then scatter the runes on the table, floor, or cloth if you have one. Read the runes that land face up first. These will relate to the current situation and the circumstances that led to it. How the runes are read is largely subjective, but in general, runes lying in the centre are the most immediately relevant, while those lying around the edges are less important, or represent more general influences. Runes that are close together or even touching often compliment each other, or may even represent a single thing, while runes which fall on opposite sides of the pattern frequently represent opposing influences. Occasionally, a rune will land completely off the cloth or fall off the table. Some people consider such runes to be particularly significant, while others ignore them completely.

Once you have looked at the runes which landed face up (and remembered which ones they are), turn over the rest of the without moving them from their positions. These represent outside or future influences, and will point to possible outcomes. It is up to you to decide what the various positions and patterns in a reading mean, but once you have come up with a few general rules, try to stick with them. As I have said before, consistency is very important. However, rune readings by their nature are fluid, subjective things. Try not to impose too much order on your readings by inventing set meanings for every triangle, square and tetrahedron. Runes are like people - you never know how they will get along

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together until you introduce them. Just look at the patterns and relationships that appear in each reading and see what interpretations make sense to you.

Once the reading is done, I usually like to pull one more rune out of the pouch. This helps to confirm (or sometimes dispute) the conclusions drawn from the reading, and may provide a focus or centre to an otherwise scattered and complicated cast.

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5. Runes And Magic

5.1 Types of Rune Spells:

5.1.1 Inscriptions

Today, many people take written language for granted and use runes as an alphabet without really understanding the magical importance of doing so. When you write a word in runes, it empowers that word. The Norse would often finish inscriptions with the statement, "So-and-so wrote this", or "So-and-so made me". This was a way of magically connecting the writer or carver of the runes with what they had just written. For example, there was a bone plate found in Derbyshire which bears an inscription that reads, "God will preserve the honour of Hadda because he wrote this". Thus, the very act of writing something in runes is a spell in itself, bringing the statement into concrete reality.

5.1.2 Rune Scripts

Another way of using the runes for magic is to write out rune rows, or rune scripts. These are type of shorthand spell, made up a sequence of two or more runes. For example, if you wanted to create a rune row to help enhance your psychic abilities, you incorporate laguz/water (relating to the subconscious and mysteries), perth/dice-cup (for divination and magic), ansuz/Odin (the God of the runes), and kenaz/torch (for inspiration).

5.1.3 Bindrunes

A bindrune consists of two or more runes that have been superimposed or joined together in some way. Occasionally, runes like fehu, raidho or wunjo would be joined at the base of their "stems", forming a wheel. Other times, runes would be joined side-by-side, or combined into a single rune. This latter method is the most popular today. Historically, bindrunes were as "contractions" in an inscription, either to save space or to reduce the number of runes in the inscription to a more magically auspicious total. Today they are commonly used in rune magic by themselves to create a magical sigel that will encompass several runes at once. For example, if we were to transform the above runescript for psychic ability into a bindrune, we would end up with something like this:

Additional runes will often appear when creating a bindrune, and these can contribute to or detract from the purpose. However, rune is only truly present if you consciously include it by tracing its shape. If you can avoid including a conflicting rune by changing the configuration, then by all means do so. However, you shouldn't worry about it too much.

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6. Materials and Methods

Runic inscriptions, rune scripts and bindrunes can be used in many ways. They can be inscribed on a talisman - a permanent, physical manifestation of the magic of the runes that a person would wear or carry around with them. They may also be used for more immediate purposes, by carving them into a piece of wood and then burning it, by scratching them into a candle and lighting it, or in any number of other ways. Making runes for magical use is a little bit different from making a set for divination, but the process of marking, colouring and naming them is essentially the same.

The choice of materials when making a talisman or spell is important, since this will be the medium that 'carries' your message and add it's own peculiar energies to the process. A permanent talisman or inscription can be carved on anything you like, although natural materials are best. Specific rune spells are traditionally sent by burning them, so your medium must be flammable. Paper or parchment is handy and will do in a pinch, but keep in mind that your average Norseman wouldn't have had access to such finery. Paper is also magically quite neutral, and while it won't detract from what you are trying to accomplish, it certainly won't add anything.

Rune spells and talismans were traditionally cut or scratched into wood. Of the few wooden runic artifacts recovered from that many were made from yew, which has a long history of association with the runes and magic. There are many other woods that have their own magical associations.

The process of creating a rune spell is a ritual in itself. The technique traditionally involved the following steps:

- , " Carving or cutting the runes into the wood, bone or stone
- , " Colouring ('reddening') the runes with either red ochre paint or the magician's own blood (this would connect the spell magically to the person doing it)
- , " Speaking or singing the names of the runes to empower them
- , " Sending the rune spell to its destination (if it is not a permanent talisman), often by burning
- , " Making an offering (a 'blot') of thanks to the Gods, usually of mead or ale
- , " You can elaborate on this simple ritual as much as you like.