

ABSTRACT

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This thesis seeks to illustrate that runes were considered magical even if also utilized as an alphabetic script. This argument will be achieved by first looking at scholarly arguments concerning the characters' origins. However, though runes may be compared to other scripts, there existed a belief among the Old Norse people that the runes contained more and that even their true origins could be found in the divine. These divine connections are not without problems as they seem to fall into two categories involving male and female divinities. In addition, it will be shown that the practice of runic magic can be separated into three major categories: curse, cure/protection, and prophecy. More mundane, but equally important subjects such as memorials and inheritance will also be explored. Finally, lingering traces of runes continuing until today will be viewed to gauge lasting effects of the runes even after their primary time period.

RUNIC MAGIC

by

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Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to my parents, who have continually supported my scholastic endeavors and to my adviser, Rose-Marie Oster, who showed me that the study of Vikings and their mythology was possible. You have my heartfelt gratitude.

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Introduction

The question of the origins of runes and their uses has engaged many scholars spanning multiple centuries up to modern times with runologists on both sides of the Atlantic and beyond. To illustrate the long history of runic research, one need only look at some of the major names in the study of runology such as Johannes Bureus (1568-1652), Johan Ihre (1707-1780), Otto von Friesen (1870-1942) and Sven B.F. Jansson (1906-1987). The definition of the word “rune” and its origins in The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language already hints at the scholarly debate that has swirled around the topic of runes.

1a. Any of the characters in several alphabets used by ancient Germanic peoples from the 3rd to the 13th century. **b.** A similar character in another alphabet, sometimes believed to have magic powers. **2.** A poem or incantation of mysterious significance, especially a magic charm.

The progression of the word’s meaning in the English language is treated in the “word history” section of the dictionary, which gives the reader a sense of mystery surrounding the term.

The direct descendants of Old English *rūn* are the archaic verb *round*, “whisper, talk in secret,” and the obsolete noun *roun*, “whispering, secret talk.”

It is interesting to note that the German cognate *raunen* continues to carry the meaning “to whisper.” These different definitions of “rune” have contributed to the divergent opinions among scholars as to interpretation of particular runic texts whether they are inscriptions on jewelry, weaponry, wooden items or stone monuments for the dead.

Theories Concerning the Origin of the Runes

What are the true origins of the runic characters? This very question holds the key to explaining many facets of runology – magic especially. As with any scholarly pursuit there exist multiple schools of thought within which exist many varied approaches. R.I. Page, a British scholar, has encountered some antagonism pointed to the lack of unity among scholars.

A witty, not to say mischievous, Viking archaeologist has defined the first law of runic studies as ‘for every inscription there shall be as many interpretations as there are runologists studying it.’ (Page 10)

A quick search for interpretations on any major rune stone will quickly support this claim. Despite the seeming chaos of the field there appears to be two major camps, to which the majority of scholars belong. Page describes these two groups by means of their philosophy and preferred approach:

It follows that the runologist needs two contrasting qualities, imagination and scepticism. The first gives him insight into the possible meanings a letter group may express: the second restrains his fancy and holds his erudition in the bonds of common sense. In practice, of course, runologists tend to lean to one side or the other, to be primarily imaginative or primarily sceptical. (Page 12)

Although Page clearly prefers what he labels the skeptical side of runology, imagination is still given great emphasis in his works. The division of runologists into these two camps is not the dominant factor of their research, but can be noted in the attention they give to certain details. The names associated with each rune are one such detail that has been given variable treatment by runologists.

The names of the runes as evidence of magical associations can be found in Ralph Elliott’s work, Runes. Elliott notices the similarities of rune names between the languages of Old English, Old Norwegian, Old Icelandic and Gothic (64). However,

even slight differences are cause for consideration. He specifically looks at the þ-rune for clues of religious significance.

A substitution prompted perhaps by Christian motives took place in the case of *th*, Gc. **þurisaz*, ‘giant, demon’, retained in the Scandinavian poems, but replaced by the more innocuous *þorn*, ‘thorn’, in Old English. (Elliott 64)

Not only are the names meaningful, but Elliott considers the runes’ names to be a mirror of the Germanic world and divides the names into three categories or “worlds”: Gods and Giants, Nature, Man. The most fantastic realm, Gods and Giants, contains four runes, which bear names associated with the divine: þurisaz (giant), ansuz (god), teiwaz (the god Tyr) and inguz (the god Ing) (Elliott 71-2). However, not all scholars consider the names of runes important.

Henrik Williams, a Swedish scholar, believes that the association of runes with magic is nonsense. For example, he points to a 1991 work by Christine Fell, which sought to demonstrate that the word “rune” did not carry a pagan meaning for Anglo-Saxon Christians. Fell stated that magical connections were instead imported with Scandinavian invasions in the ninth century onwards. Thus to Williams the runes are nothing more than a means of writing (Williams 270). William’s form of skepticism seeks to discredit magical associations, but his logic seems askew. He allows magical associations to come from Scandinavia, yet his focus is the Christianized Anglo-Saxons, a group whose religion forbade belief in magic and sought to suppress older pagan beliefs. Although the approaches of Williams and Elliott, who can be labeled as “skeptical” and “imaginative,” are in direct opposition, they do share a small portion of common ground.

Despite differences in philosophy, runologists tend to agree that the runic characters were strongly influenced by another script. However, the most plausible source of influence is fiercely debated. Though Greek was once considered to be a possible source, in the most recent arguments scholars prefer to choose either the Latin script or a mixture of the Etruscan and North Italic alphabets as the major influence for runes as a written script.

In his book on runes, Ralph Elliott takes a local approach to the development and employment of the runic script. He believes the runes are a mixture of North Italic influence and native symbols already in existence among the Germanic people. From the perspectives of magical usage and early writing, Elliott refers to the early pictorial carvings, which can be found throughout the Germanic regions. He refers specifically to David Diringer's idea of embryo-writing to explain the native element in the creation of the runes.

All we can say with some assurance is that runic writing, when it came and wherever it came from, reached a people already familiar with pictorial 'embryo-writing' which enhanced the use of runes for inscriptions of ritualistic or magic import, quite apart from any profane employment for messages or indications of ownership. (Elliott 2)

To give an idea of the large scope of native carvings, over 2000 Bronze Age rock carving sites can be found in the Swedish province of Uppland alone (Coles 47). However, in relation to the individual characters' usage as letters instead of magical symbols, Elliott finds that the majority of similarities are to the Etruscan or North Italic scripts. A table is provided in his book to show aesthetic similarities and it also contains some of the more obvious Latin letters as well. Elliott finds few phonetic issues with the Italic scripts.

Reference to Table I will show that for three-quarters of the twenty-four common Germanic runes perfectly good parallels exist among the alpine alphabets. In the case of voiced stops *b, d, g*, for which the Etruscan and alpine alphabets used the corresponding voiceless sounds, other sources had to be found, as in the case of the more specifically Germanic sounds, *j, e, ŋ*, and *þ*. (Elliott 7)

There are, however, holes in Elliott's Italic theory as the above passage shows, but the concept of embryo-writing quickly fills these with existing forms found in older, native inscriptions. Elliott chooses (gebō), (eihwaz), (inguz) and (ḍagaz) as derived from native characters, but allows F and B to remain as Latin influence. Although he mentions the Latin G as a possible theory for (jēra-), Elliott believes this character is also adopted from pre-runic characters (Elliott 7-8).

Elliott also employs an archeological artifact to support his North Italic claim. Though no longer considered a "missing link" proving the relationship between the runic and North Italic scripts, a bronze helmet found at Negau bears a North Italic inscription, which appears to contain the name and unit of a Germanic soldier in Roman service (Elliott 9). Elliott notes how the inscribed characters closely resemble runic inscriptions and thus believes this artifact can be used to demonstrate a possible link between the two scripts in the first half century AD. However, Elliott's theories rely on nebulous support and thus other schools of thought are also able to put forward their own ideas with a high level of confidence.

One proponent of the Latin derivation of runic characters is Henrik Williams. Williams believes the runes were almost wholly taken from the Latin alphabet as the Germanic people were not capable of a feat such as writing or other cultural acts of greatness. He states

... runic inscriptions are not associated with a group of people otherwise renowned for cultural achievements... at least not if we demand impressive buildings, extensive written texts, and a central organized society as evidence of a culture with claims to be great.” (Williams 262)

Williams provides the reader with a character by character comparison demonstrating how every rune has a Roman origin, save one. Not making the claim that every single character was plagiarized from the empire to the south, Williams does allow for one “innovation.” Having accounted for all twenty-three of the Latin letters he was left with one problem. For this Williams allows some independent creation at the hands of the otherwise “stupid barbarians.” “Since the inventor of the runes felt the need for 24 graphemes, one had to be made up: (ḍagaz) (Williams 267).” This point is reconciled as the phonetic value is one different from the “necessary” sounds in Latin. While the idea of divine runes is touched upon as a possible Scandinavian import, the general idea of early runes having magical applications is dismissed. This total disregard is explained by Williams in the following argument: the secret nature of the runes does not appear to be secret enough.

That runic inscriptions were not intentionally hidden is also borne out by comparing the spearheads with inscribed shafts of various kinds, chapes, shieldbosses, buckles, and other details of equipment... This lack of seemingly secretive purposes accords well with the absence of any evidently occult inscriptions in the earliest material. (Williams 268)

Williams thus argues that if one cannot find magical applications in archeology they do not exist. However, if one finds such possibilities, they lack the needed secrecy in order to be truly magical. What then could Williams say about the earliest runes? Given that the origins of the Latin script are also nebulous, he turns to Rex Wallace’s explanation that writing was a symbol of prestige for early Romans. “A ‘symbol of prestige’ is a

good enough reason for runes, also (Williams 275).” Fortunately, his brand of skepticism can be measured by a more moderate theorist.

R. I. Page maintains the stance that so little is known to a great extent about runes that one who studies them must be cautious as to what can truly be said with any certainty. Therefore, his brand of skepticism allows for multiple uses of the runic script without favoring too heavily any particular application.

I am prepared to accept that runes were sometimes used to enhance magical activities, and even to suspect that they may sometimes have been a magical script, or at least an esoteric one that could be used in magical practices, without wanting to think them essentially magical during the Anglo-Saxon era, or to interpret all difficult or obscure texts in magical terms. (Page 13-4)

Page decides to gather as much material information as possible, though specifically in Anglo-Saxon Britain, to bear out any claim that might be staked. For the question of Roman vs. Runic, he turns to coins and their legends. Though the Romans had ruled portions of the British Isles for centuries before their empire’s collapse around 410, there appears to have been great competition in the script used for coinage following their withdrawal. Specifically, Page considers two coins, which read (or are considered to read) *desaiona* and *ltoedh*. The *desaiona* coin is “based upon an Imperial Roman model, but with the runes replacing the original reverse legend.” The “ltoedh” coin on the other hand is only partially runic and the runic section itself is problematic with the use of ‘oe’ in the sequence (Page 214). To give one possible answer to this mystery, Page turns to D. M. Metcalf, who views the coinage issue with loose statistical terms. Metcalf believes that although there were only very few “moneyers” who employed runic characters, the usage can be interpreted most likely as a result of personal choice rather than authoritative decree (Page 215). Again the concept of literacy is taken into account.

What purpose would scripts on coins serve to a mostly illiterate populace? For Page this signifies a 'literacy event' in which an effort is made to give record or possibly a public sign to give consumer confidence (216). However, when fully confronting the Runic vs. Roman question Page is unable, or at the very least unwilling, to make a firm stand due to the sheer limitations of material.

Traditionally, 'literacy' has meant 'book literacy'. If we are to review the question, we must put more stress on other forms of literacy. But we then face the problem of inadequacy of material, of the statistical poverty of our samples. To go further than I have done here requires a book rather than a chapter. Like Ibsen I have contented myself with asking questions leaving others to find answers. (Page 225)

Though Page makes many interesting points with his skeptical approach to the scant evidence, one is left almost in the same position as one started. This continued confusion in the search for answers can be found in the most recent publications on the topic of runology.

There exists a myriad of other explanations concerning the runes' origins and uses if one reaches for clues across many other cultures and aspects. One only need turn to a recently published collection of papers found in Runes and their Secrets, published in 2006. Such titles as "Standardised futharks: A useful tool or delusion?" stress the multiple versions of the runic script, which connotes many possible relationships instead of fixed developments. The possibility of other cultures than those traditionally assumed to be a basis of influence can be seen in another title, "Rune names: the Irish connexion." Even the assertion that illiteracy reigned is challenged in "South Germanic runic inscriptions as testimonies of early literacy (Stocklund 5)." Katrin Lüthi asserts that the claim concerning runes as primarily for writing is itself advocating the beginning of a culture of literacy (170). However, though archeology and linguistic study cannot truly

discern a true beginning of the runes, such a question was likely far from the minds of the people who used the script. It is therefore important to look at the cultural products of people closer to the culture of the runes in order to catch a glimpse of what they themselves considered their script to be.

Divine Origins of Writing

The early advent of writing in cultures around the globe is cause enough for the origins to be shrouded in mystery and the power that literacy provides to give it mystical associations. The Gospel of John begins by describing the origin of existence in the framework of a single word.

IN THE BEGINNING was the Word;
the Word was in God's presence,
and the Word was God. (John 1:1)

Reading further reveals that the Word is Jesus. It is therefore not surprising that mythologies across the world contain great stories about how writing and the wisdom connected to it came into being. The runic script, though young in comparison to other major scripts, is no exception.

The *Havamal*, a treasure trove of Old Norse wisdom contained in the Poetic Edda, details the account of when Odin, one of the chief gods of Germanic mythology, first attains runic wisdom. Though the true origins are limited to two stanzas, multiple meaningful elements are borne out.

I know that I hung on a windy tree
nine long nights,
wounded with a spear, dedicated to Odin,
myself to myself,
on that tree of which no man knows
from where its roots run.

No bread did they give me nor a drink from a horn,
downwards I peered;
I took up the runes, screaming I took them,
then I fell back from there. (Larrington 34)

It is important to note three major elements within this short selection: the important deity involved, the sacrifice required, and the paramount location. The simplest element is, of course, the involvement of a deity.

The concept of a major deity in connection with a script is hardly limited to the culture of the Old Norse people; striking similarities to other cultural groups may be noted. In the case of the Germanic mythology, Odin is ranked amongst the chief gods and has played significant roles in other demanding creation tasks. For example, he takes part in the slaying of Ymir and the creation of the world using the parts. A strong Egyptian parallel to this can be seen in Thoth.

Thoth was the personification of law and order, being the god who worked out the creation as decreed by the god Ra. He knew all of the words of power and the secrets of all hearts, and may be regarded as the chief recording angel; he was also the inventor of all arts and sciences. (Brown 247)

Another important item in Thoth's possession, at least initially, is the Book of Thoth, which contains all the magical secrets in written format. Shifting one's focus to Mayan mythology will also reveal a creator-wisdom god in the guise of Itzam Na.

Itzam Na ... was the most important of Maya deities, to whom, at least in the eyes of the hierarchy, mankind owed its creation, preservation, and not a few of the blessings of this life. (Thompson 205)

These blessing include "writing, curing and divination" and although he falls from a dominant position by the time of the Popol Vuh, he was earlier also known as Hunab Ku or "Only Spirit" (Littleton 517). Though extremely prominent gods are incorporated into the creation of such a powerful element of being, it still remains a challenge for them to acquire such knowledge.

The pursuit of knowledge often comes with a heavy price. For Odin, this entails hanging for nine days and being pierced with a spear. Interestingly enough, he is dedicated to himself and ritually killed. However, as a god this is not an end, but merely an obstacle. Returning to Egyptian mythology, there exists also a major sacrifice in the pursuit of the mystical knowledge in the Book of Thoth. Nefer-ka-ptah is described as the son of a king and enjoys nothing else in the world save reading ancient texts. This brings him to a temple in which a priest tells him of the Book of Thoth.

Then Nefer-ka-ptah was eager in his questions, and the priest replied, "Thoth wrote the Book with his own hand, and in it is all the magic in the world. If thou readest the first page, thou wilt enchant the sky, the earth, the abyss, the mountains, and the sea; thou wilt understand the language of the birds of the air, and thou wilt know what the creeping things of the earth are saying, and thou wilt see the fishes from the darkest depths of the sea. And if thou readest the other page, even though thou wert dead and in the world of the ghosts, thou couldest come back to earth in the form thou once hadest. And besides this, thou wilt see the sun shining in the sky with the full moon and the stars, and thou wilt behold the great shapes of the gods."

Then said Nefer-ka-ptah, "By the life of the Pharaoh, that Book shall be mine. Tell me whatsoever it is that thou desirest, and I will do it for thee." (Brown 280)

The priest wishes to have one hundred pounds of silver to provide for his elaborate burial, which is provided. The book is said to be inside six boxes of varying precious materials and guarded by many scorpions and an immortal snake at the bottom of a river. Thus Nefer-ka-ptah is forced to undergo a many day task to retrieve the book through labor and cunning. However, he pays ultimately in the death of his son, wife and his own life before he can even return to his home. Though killed far upriver, Nefer-ka-ptah's power is not diminished and his body is found for a proper burial in Memphis.

When they came to the haven, they saw the body of Nefer-ka-ptah floating in the water beside the barge, close to the great steering-oars. And this marvel came to pass because of the magical powers of Nefer-ka-ptah; even in death he was a great magician by reason of the spells he had washed off the papyrus and drunk in the beer. (Brown 290)

Thus two extreme versions of sacrifice are easily noticed: a quest and death. There exists yet one more major aspect to the attainment of runic knowledge in the form of location.

The extreme importance of writing can be seen through its central position in mythological contexts. In the case of Eddic tradition, Odin hangs on a very special tree within Norse cosmology: Yggdrasill. As others have done, Larrington points out in her explanatory notes how Yggdrasill must be the tree on which Odin hung, but a deeper look into the Poetic Edda provides concrete evidence (268). Though divine beings are known to cross cosmic boundaries, it is stressed that the origin of the tree's roots is unknown to mankind. This is touched upon in *Grimnismal*.

Three roots there grow in three directions
under the ash of Yggdrasill;
Hel lives under one, under the second, the frost-giants,
the third, humankind. (Larrington 56)

Clearly mankind cannot know the origin of Yggdrasill's roots as they spread across the very existence of the entirety of being. Thus the runes stem from the world axis.

However, this central focus can also be noticed in Chinese tradition and one of their emperors of ancient legend, Huang Di. Also believed to have a role in bringing about a writing system with the help of his attendants, Huang Di is considered to have become the center of Chinese mythology.

He achieved immortality and, riding on a dragon, rose to heaven where he became one of the five mythological emperors who rule over the cardinal points. Huang Di himself rules over the fifth cardinal point, the centre. ("Huang Di" 446)

Huang Di's historian was Cang Jie and traces of this legend can be seen today in the Cangjie method, which is the method for entering Chinese characters into a computer. In every aspect, the origins of writing are given the highest respect.

There exists also an interesting side note in the acquisition of writing and wisdom in connection to sacred beverages. Returning once again to the story of Nefer-ka-ptah and the Book of Thoth, one finds that he not only read the two pages, but also internalized them.

Nefer-ka-ptah now called for a piece of new papyrus and for a cup of beer; and on the papyrus he wrote all the spells that were in the Book of Thoth. Then he took the cup of beer and washed the papyrus in the beer, so that all the ink was washed off and the papyrus became as though it had never been written on. And Nefer-ka-ptah drank the beer, and at once he knew all the spells that had been written on the papyrus, for this is the method of the great magicians. (Brown 286)

As was mentioned earlier, Nefer-ka-ptah must pay dearly for this acquisition of knowledge. There exist two similar stories concerning Odin and his quest for wisdom though neither explicitly states a connection to runes. The parallels are nonetheless striking. Snorri Sturluson's Edda gives a detailed account about the well of Mimir and draws from the *Voluspa*.

But under the root that reaches towards the frost-giants, there is where Mimir's well is, which has wisdom and intelligence contained in it, and the master of the well is called Mimir. He is full of learning because he drinks of the well from the horn Giallarhorn. All-father went there and asked for a single drink from the well, but he did not get one until he placed his eye as a pledge. Thus it says in the *Voluspa*:

I know it all, Odin, where you deposited your eye, in that renowned well of Mimir. Mimir drinks mead every morning from Val-father's pledge. Know you yet, or what?
(Sturluson 17)

The three major elements once again show themselves. However, the sacrifice demanded of Odin in this instance is the loss of one eye, which plays a major role in descriptions of

this god in literature and art. Also, he is once again at Yggdrasill though at the very base of one root. There exists, however, one nagging problem when using the Eddas of the post-Viking thirteenth century: do we have any earlier hints of divinely attributed origins?

Although the Eddas describe a time before the thirteenth century, they are nevertheless filtered through the biases of their composers and influences accrued over the years. However, older sources exist, runic stones, which date to the early Viking Age and contain verses that closely parallel those found in the Poetic Edda. Sven B.F. Jansson gives two such ninth century stones attention in his work, The Runes of Sweden.

The Sparlösa stone dates from about the same time as the Rök stone. In the inscription – still only understood in part – the reader is invited to interpret *runaR þaR ræginkundu*, “the runes derived from the divine powers”. The same lofty adjective to describe runes is found on the Noleby stone in Västergötland (seventh century), whose original site seems to have been inside a grave: “Runes, derived from the gods, I cut...” This word, *ræginkunnr* in Old Icelandic, has otherwise only been found once, in the *Hávamál*, and there too it is used of runes:

*Þat er þá reynt
er þú at rúnum spyrr
inum reginkunnum
þeim er gørðu ginnregin
ok fáði fimbulþulr...*

“Then it is proved, when you ask about the runes derived from the gods, those which the mighty powers made and the great word-master [= Odin] painted...” (Jansson 15-17)

It seems clear with the repetition of the verse and the location of one verse within a grave that they were indeed considered to have come from the gods and therefore had inherent power. This power is, as with any form of power, not without danger. The Eddic poem *Havamal* continues and finishes the verse with a warning for any would be rune master to be truly careful.

Þat er þá reynt, er þú at rúnom spyrr,
inom reginkunnum,
þeim er gorðo ginregin
oc fáði fibulþulr,
þá hefir hann bazt, ef hann þegir. (Kuhn 29)

That is now proved, what you asked of the runes,
of the potent famous ones
which the great gods made
and the mighty sage stained,
then it is best for him if he stays silent. (Larrington 25)

To gain a fuller understanding of the runes' origins and use, however, one must consider the intended practitioners of runic knowledge – at least from what can now be deduced from surviving evidence.

Runes as both Male and Female Power

Although Odin's sacrifice is the best example of how the runes came into existence through divine intervention, there exists a far more puzzling group of divine entities who also have the ability to use the runes. Did the runes belong primarily to the realm of man or woman? Is Odin the only rune practitioner amongst the major gods? Since the masculine, specifically kingly, connections are given more prominence in literature they can serve as the point of departure.

The importance of literacy over the ages and continuing into today has always marked a key point in a person's ability to succeed. The aristocracy of the Middle Ages constantly worried about the serfs learning to read and being able to organize successfully against them. In more modern times, American slave owners also worried about their African slaves gaining the same knowledge and the threat it entailed, and so forbade them being taught. This line of thinking can also be traced in the literature of the Vikings. Though the divine origins of writing are attributed to Odin, the chief god, there exists a much more explicit bond between the gods and the upper class of the Old Norse people.

The transmission of writing to humanity is contained within the last section of *Rigsthula* in the Poetic Edda. In this poem, the origins of the Norse class system are laid out by and attributed to divine intervention. The deity at work in this case, however, is the god Heimdall in the guise of Rig. Rig visits each of the classes, from lowest to highest, and bestows runic knowledge upon the upper class son, Lord.

Kom þar ór runni Rígr gangandi,
Rígr gagandi, rúnar kendi ;
sitt gaf heiti, son kvez eiga ;
þann það hann eignaz óðalvǫllo,
óðalvǫllo, aldnar bygðir. (Kuhn 285)

Then came Rig walking,
walking out of the thicket, taught him runes;
gave him a name, said he was his son;
then he told him to get ancestral property,
to get ancestral property, a long-established settlement. (Larrington 251)

The runes serve to amplify the noble class' position in society as they are a gift from the gods. Not only does Lord get the script, but he is also given a name and becomes the son of a god. Additionally, there is significance in the name of the noble. Though translated by Larrington as "Lord," the original Old Norse name of "Iarl" closely parallels the modern English title "Earl." This archetypal noble goes on to have many children, one of whom, in turn, enhances the power of the runes and the status of his class.

Hann við Ríg iarl rúnar deildi,
brögðom beitti oc betr kunni ;
þá ǫðlaðiz oc þá eiga gat
Rígr at heita, rúnar kunna. (Kuhn 286)

He contended in rune-wisdom with Lord Rig,
he knew more tricks, he knew more;
then he gained and got the right
to be called Rig and to know the runes. (Larrington 252)

This next generation noble has surpassed his father in the two vital areas. Not only has his runic power become stronger, but his connection to the divine has become much closer as is shown in his right to be called Rig. The nobleman's name is once again significant and also displays his higher standing. Called "Konr ungr," close parallels can be seen in modern Swedish as "konung" and modern English as "king." The continuation and enhancement of Lord's role in his son thus outlines a royal lineage with

runic knowledge as a key segment. A Roman account by Tacitus seems to correlate with this idea.

Though it is not certain whether Tacitus truly visited or was stationed close to the Germanic region, his Germania of the year 98 contains many descriptions of the area and has served as a reference for that time period for many scholars. However, for the purposes of this thesis, the most important selection lies within the beginning of the tenth chapter.

Auspicia sortesque ut qui maxime observant. sortium consuetudo simplex. virgam frugiferae arbori decisam in surculos amputant eosque notis quibusdam discretos super candidam vestem temere ac fortuito spargunt. mox, si publice consultetur, sacerdos civitatis, sin privatim, ipse pater familiae, precatus deos caelumque suspiciens ter singulos tollit, sublato secundum impressam ante notam interpretatur. si prohibuerunt, nulla de eadem re in eundem diem consultatio; sin permissum, auspicioꝝ adhuc fides exigitur.

They have as much regard as anyone for auspices and the taking of lots. Their method of casting lots is unvaried. They slice a branch cut from a fruit tree into slips and throw these, distinguished by certain marks, completely at random onto a white cloth. Then the priest of the state, if it is a public consultation, or the head of the family, if it is private, first having prayed to the gods and gazing up at the sky, picks up three, one at a time, and interprets them in accordance with the mark that had been inscribed before. If the lots have forbidden anything, there is no consultation about the same subject on the same day; but if permission has been won, the support of the auspices is still required. (Tacitus 22-23)

Here one can see that the emphasis of the description is underscored by the statement that the ritual never changes. The use of wooden slips, which have marks upon them, may certainly be considered runic. Tacitus' word selection is paramount for this argument. Tacitus' use of the word "notis" rather than "litterarum notis" suggests the marks are not Latin, but of foreign usage.¹ It is also important to note the tree from which these slips

¹ Benario compares a selection of Cicero's De Divinatione with Tacitus' Germania. He specifically looks at the passage *sortes erupisse in robore insculptas priscaꝝ litterarum notis*. Benario comments that

are taken. Though literally a “fruit-bearing tree,” it must certainly denote a “nut tree.”² Although some scholars suggest the tree could be oak, it is also plausible it was beech. The current German term for “letters” is “Buchstaben” and Swedish uses “bokstäver.” Both literally mean “beech staves.” The use of staves or slips will play a prominent role in later sections about magic. In any case, the ones engaged with the casting of lots are described as men. This is easily seen in “sacerdos civitatis” and “pater familiae,” both of which are declined as masculine. The mention of private rituals under the power of a family’s head also hints at a relatively widespread form of literacy, even if only for magical purposes. Returning to later literature, the kingly aspect is more highly stressed.

Evidence of runes as necessary kingly knowledge can also be found in The Saga of the Volsungs.

Regin, the son of Hreidmar, was Sigurd’s foster father. He taught Sigurd sports, chess, and runes. Among many other things, he also taught Sigurd to speak in several tongues, as was the custom for a king’s son.
(Volsungs 56)

Sigurd, the great hero of The Saga of the Volsungs, is shown in this scene with his foster father. In his notes to this edition Byock points out the practice of fostering was customary for nobles in order to extend political alliances and strengthen family bonds (Volsungs 116). Though this specific example does not show an immediate divine connection, the runes are listed as a vital skill for a future king. However, a possible link might be found in the Sparlösa stone.

Sven B.F. Jansson noted that some of the oldest rune stones in Sweden refer to the runic script itself. Specifically, he cites a portion of the Sparlösa stone: “*runaR þaR*”

Cicero’s use of the word *litterarum* must indicate Roman letters. The absence of which in Germania therefore implies foreign characters. (pg. 75)

² Benario refers back to chapter 5.1 where Tacitus stated there were no fruit trees in Germany. He therefore believes the trees must be nut bearing and suggests the oak. (pg. 75)

ræginkundu, ‘the runes derived from the divine powers’ (15)”. This may be a kenning, which refers to the story of Sigurd and his own teacher or perhaps the story drew from this expression (“Regin’s knowledge” or “reigning knowledge”). As was shown in the previous section, the Sparlösa stone’s inscription closely imitates a portion of the *Havamal*. This shows once more the close relationship between the king and the divine. Thus the male dominance of the runes as legitimization of the ruling class seems fairly solid in its origins. However, what can be said of the female sphere of influence concerning the runes?

The female connections to the runes and their magic are less explicit and even interwoven with their kingly counterparts, but they are no less important. Spanning the realms of the divine and the mortal, multiple links to female deities can be found. These links reach to the centrality of being in the form of three feminine entities at the base of Yggdrasill: the norns.

The norns are lesser deities, who determine the fates of every creature whether mortal or divine. The many forms of norns as well as their duties and lineage are narrated in Snorri Sturluson’s Edda.

There stands there one beautiful hall under the ash by the well, and out of this hall come three maidens whose names are Weird, Verdandi, Skuld. These maidens shape men’s lives. We call them norns. There are also other norns who visit everyone when they are born to shape their lives, and these are of divine origin, though others are of the race of elves, and a third group are of the race of dwarfs... (Sturluson 18)

However, to notice the connection of the norns to the runes one must look instead in the Poetic Edda, which gives the norns a much shorter treatment.

Þaðan koma meylar, margs vitandi,
þriár, ór þeim sæ, er und þolli stendr ;
Urð héto eina, aðra Verðandi
-- scáro á scíði --, Sculd ina þriðio ;
þær lög lögðo, þær líf kuro
alda bornom, ørlög seggia. (Kuhn 5)

From there come three girls, knowing a great deal,
from the lake which stands under the tree;
Fated one is called, Becoming another—
they carved on wooden slips—Must-be the third;
they set down laws, they chose lives,
for the sons of men the fates of men. (Larrington 6)

Here one can see that the three major norns carve on wooden slips. This closely parallels the lot casting ritual mentioned by Tacitus, and the norns' function as entities who determine the fates of men does not deviate from this association. The location of the norns under Yggdrasill also correlates with Odin's sacrifice for the attainment of the runes. The norns' sacred lake could also be seen as a possible parallel to Mimir's well. Unlike the weak connection between Odin and Heimdall, however, there exists a strong relationship between the norns and the valkyries, who also serve as transmitters of runic knowledge to humanity.

These are called valkyries. Odin sends them to every battle. They allot death to men and govern victory. Gunn and Rota and the youngest norn, called Skuld, always ride to choose who shall be slain and to govern the killings. (Sturluson 31)

Though a close bond exists between the norns and the valkyries, it will be the interaction between a very specific valkyrie, Sigrdrifa, and the great hero Sigurd that illustrates the female transmission of runic knowledge to mankind.

Sigrdrifa's teaching of Sigurd is contained within two Eddic poems: *Gripisspa* and *Sigrdrifumal*. The first poem functions as a summary of the Sigurd legend and therefore gives a very short description of the knowledge to be learned.

‘Hon mun ríkiom þér rúnar kenna,
allar, þær er aldir eignaz vildo,
oc á mannz tungo mæla hveria,
lif með læcning; lifðu heill, konungr!’ (Kuhn 166)

‘She will teach you powerful runes,
all those which men wish to know,
and how to speak every single human tongue,
medicine with healing knowledge; may you lived blessed, king!’
(Larrington 145)

The knowledge Sigurd is to receive closely parallels that which he learns from Regin in The Saga of the Volsungs and the idea of kingly knowledge is expressed in the way he is addressed: king. However, he learns not from a foster father, but from a valkyrie. This is treated in greater detail in *Sigrdrifumal*.

Sigrdrífa feldi Hiálm-Gunnar í orrostonni. Enn Óðinn stacc hana svefnþorni í hefnd þess oc qvað hana aldri scyldo síðan sigr vega í orrosto oc qvað hana giptaz scyldo. ‘Enn ec sagðac hánom, at ec strengðac heit þar í mót at giptaz ǫngom þeim manni, er hræðaz kynni.’ Hann segir oc biðr hana kenna sér speki, ef hon vissi tíðindi ór ǫllom heimom.

Sigrdrífa qvað:
‘Biór færi ec þér, brynþings apaldr,
magni blandinn oc megintíri ;
fullr er hann líóða oc lícnstafa,
góðra galdra ocgamanrúna. (Kuhn 190)

Sigrdrifa brought down Helmet-Gunnar in battle. And Odin pricked her with a sleep-thorn in revenge for this and said that she would never again fight victoriously in battle and said that she should be married. ‘And I said to him that I had sworn a great oath in this matter, never to marry a man who was acquainted with fear.’ He [Sigurd] asked her to teach him wisdom, if she had information about all the worlds. Sigrdrifa said:

‘Beer I give you, apple-tree of battle,
mixed with magical power and mighty glory;
it is full of spells and favourable letters,
good charms and joyful runes. (Larrington 167)

This selected text is filled with examples of feminine power. First and foremost is Sigrdrifa’s role as teacher. Sigurd is taught powerful spells, part of which appears in Old

Norse as “lícnstafa.” Once more a form of the word “stave” appears and makes clear the use of runes on wood. However, not only does Sigurd learn the runes from this valkyrie, but he is given the knowledge mixed with beer. The brewing of beer during the Viking Age was, of course, one of the roles of women. It was also a role of valkyries to serve alcoholic beverages in Valhalla, but in this case Sigrdrifa openly defies Odin as is seen through her punishment in the form of a sleep thorn. Though castigated, she demonstrates runic power that is more suited to women’s needs in her long list of runic magic.

Biagrúnar scaltu kunna, ef þú biarga vilt
 oc leysa kind frá konom ;
 á loaf þær scal rísta oc of liðo spenna
 oc biðia þá dísir duga. (Kuhn 191)

Helping-runes you must know if you want to assist
 and release children from women;
 they shall be cut on the palms and clasped on the joints,
 and then the *dísir* asked for help. (Larrington 168)

Sigurd is taught the proper method for assisting in childbirth. While a great king would certainly need to continue his lineage in the form of a son, he is as bound to the nature of childbirth, requiring a woman, as is any man. The feminine nature of childbirth is without question, and a third divine group appears in connection with the helping runes for this purpose: the *dísir*. Not much is known about these entities, but they also appear in the Poetic Edda in *Grimnismal*.

Eggmóðan val nú mun Yggr hafa,
 Þitt veit ec líf um liðit ;
 úfar ro dísir – nú knáttu Óðinn síá,
 nálgaztu mic, ef þú megir! (Kuhn 68)

Slaughter that wearies sword-edges the Terrible One now wants to have;
I know your life is over;
the *disir* are against you, now you may see Odin,
draw near to me if you can! (Larrington 59)

Here the *disir* are closely tied to Odin and the king's death, which shortly follows in this poem. The close connections of the *disir* to both birth and death show parallels to the *norns* and *valkyries*, which some scholars have speculated may be the same although in older or younger names. Returning briefly to the question of childbirth runes, a similar stanza can be found describing Konr ungr's rune prowess in *Rigsthula*.

Enn Konr ungr kunni rúnar,
ævinrúnar oc aldrúnar ;
meirr kunni hann mǫnnom biarga,
eggjar deyfa, ægi lægia. (Kuhn 286)

But young Kin knew runes,
life-runes and fate-runes;
and he knew how to help in childbirth,
deaden sword-blades, quiet the ocean. (Larrington 252)

Though not taught by a valkyrie, the importance of childbirth runes is stressed in detailing of the runes, which Konr ungr enhanced. Thus it appears there is a strong female element belonging to the runes. However, just as lesser female deities share in the runic knowledge, there exist clues that point to one of the major goddesses.

Although never mentioned explicitly in connection with runes, it appears Freyia may be the unnamed goddess of their feminine applications. The first of many clues is the association of the *Vanir* with runic magic. This is found hidden among the multiple names given in *Alvissmal*.

Viðr heitir með mǫnnom, enn vallar fax með goðom,
 kalla hlíðþang halir,
eldi iqtar, álfar fagrlima,
 kalla vǫnd vanir. (Kuhn 128)

Wood it's called by men, and mane of the valleys by the gods,
slope-seaweed by humankind,
fuel by the giants, lovely boughs by the elves,
wand the Vanir call it. (Larrington 113)

As has been shown many times already in this thesis, the relationship between runes and wands or wooden slips is very close. However, here it is now shown that the Vanir view wood itself with a magical perspective. In addition to their name for “wood,” the Vanir are also associated closely with magic as can be seen in the figure of Gullveig in *Voluspá*.

Heiði hana héto, hvars til húsa kom,
vǫlo velspá, vitti hon ganda ;
seið hon, hvars hon kunni, seið hon hug leikinn,
æ var hon angan illrar brúðar. (Kuhn 5-6)

Bright One they called her, wherever she came to houses,
the seer with pleasing prophecies, she charmed them with spells;
she made magic wherever she could, with magic she played with minds,
she was always the favourite of wicked women. (Larrington 7)

In this stanza one sees a mysterious member of the Vanir before the first war of the world. Gullveig comes to the Aesir and brings magic, here called seið, which is perceived as a great threat. For this the Aesir unsuccessfully attempt to destroy Gullveig and spark a war with the Vanir. It is believed by some scholars that Gullveig and Freyia are the same goddess due to their connection with gold and magic. However, in addition to this questionable link there exist much stronger associations with the valkyries and disir.

And Freyia is the most glorious of the Asyniur. She has a dwelling
heaven called Folkvangr, and wherever she rides to battle she gets half the
slain, and the other half Odin... (Sturluson 24)

Freyia's status as a goddess of battle is clear and given great prominence as she receives an equal share of the dead compared with Odin. By riding into battle she must certainly have some connection with the valkyries and one of her names also suggests a close tie to

the disir. Among many others, Freyia is named “Lady of the Vanir” by Snorri, which in Old Norse is read as “Vanadis” (Sturluson 30). Although sparse and far between, these passages all seem to indicate that there may have been a cult involving runes and runic transmission dedicated to Freyia, which was not given full treatment by Snorri or was lost as many sources have been over the ages.

Runic Curses

Whether mastery of the runes and magic belongs in the realm of Odin or Freyia can certainly be debated. However, we know that runic magic as portrayed in Norse literature touches on many areas and is as diverse as its practitioners. Among the gods and heroes, men and women, young and old, there is a plethora of individuals with runic knowledge. The three major categories into which runic magic can be divided are the following: curses, cures and prophecy. As many of the cures and protections are aimed to nullify the curses, it would be best to first see some examples of what is to be feared.

Runic curses had the power to harm mind, body and soul. No person or divine being was immune to their devastation and the threat of their use alone could be used to persuade. This can be seen in *Skirnismál* when Freyr's servant, Skirnir, resorts to his best threat against the beautiful giantess, Gerd.

Tamsvendi ec þic drep, enn ec þic temia mun,
 mær, at mínom munom ;
þar scaltu ganga, er þic gumna synir
 síðan æva sé.

...

Til holtz ec gecc oc til hrás viðar,
 gambantein at geta,
 gambantein ec gat.

...

Þurs rist ec þér oc þriá stafí,
ergi oc æði oc óþola ;
svá ec þat af rist, sem ec þat á reist,
 ef goraz þarfar þess. (Kuhn 74-76)

I strike you with a taming wand, and I will tame you,
girl, to my desires;
there you shall go where the sons of men
shall never see you again.

...

I went to the forest, to the living wood,
to get a potent branch;
a potent branch I got.

...
“Giant” I carve on you and three runes:
lewdness and frenzy
and unbearable desire;
thus I can rub that off, as I carved that on,
if there is need of this. (Larrington 65-67)

Having failed with bribery and even the threat of murder, Skirnir proves the awesome power of runic magic as his final and most fearsome tactic. Gerd relents immediately thereafter and Skirnir is able to report success to his lord, Freyr. Familiar elements are again to be noted in Old Norse. As is fitting for a servant of one of the Vanir, Skirnir threatens first to use a “tamsvendi” or “taming wand.” He even describes that he went into the living woods to find a “gambantein,” which translates as “magical branch.” To complete the idea of a carved curse in relation to staves, Skirnir describes the runes as “stafi” rather than “rúnar.” What is more is that he will carve three “stafi,” each of which represent another curse. However, such love curses are not limited to mythology and can also be found in archeology.

Runic curses dealing with issues of love and magical runes have been found in locations throughout Central Europe. A silver brooch dated to the sixth century and found in Switzerland bears one such curse written in runes.

Frifridil duft mik.
L(auk) l(auk)

Dear beloved desire me! Leek, leek. (MacLeod 42)

Though short, the request is absolutely clear. However, it is the presence of two individual runes at the bottom of the inscription that draw more attention to the magical usage of the runes. MacLeod and Mees suggest the reversed l-runes represent leeks,

which were associated with the phallus and lust in the Germanic tradition (43). A far more malicious runic inscription is found on a bone weaving tablet from Sweden.

SigvaraR Ingimārr hafa [m]un minn grāt; aallatti.

Sigvor's Ingimar shall have my weeping, aallatti. (MacLeod 61)

In this case, a very ordinary and very feminine object is used for the inscription.

However, this woman does not seek to draw her lover, but punish her rival. The final runes trailing the legible text give the sense of an anguished cry, but perhaps their combination contains something far more sinister. Unfortunately, the details are likely lost to time. However, there still exists examples of magical ceremony in Old Norse literature.

Earthly women were no less capable of utilizing the sinister side of the runes in the sagas. Grettir, the eponymous hero of his own saga, falls victim to an old woman's act of revenge. In this episode of the saga, great detail is given concerning the ritual combined with the runes.

It was done as she asked, and when she got to the shore, she limped along by the water as if she was being guided. There lay before her a log of wood with its root as big as one could carry on one's shoulder. She looked at the log and told them to turn it over for her. It looked as though it had been scorched and rubbed on one side. She had a little flat bit carved where it had been rubbed. Then she took her knife and cut runes on the root and reddened them with her blood and recited spells over them. She walked backwards widdershins round the log and spoke over it many powerful formulas. After that she had the log pushed into the sea and made this pronouncement that it was to drift out to Drangey and be a source of every evil to Grettir. (Grettir 242)

This passage illustrates the complicated nature of runic magic. While the runes themselves are carved into this cursed log, other forms of enchantment in the form of spoken spells and acted out rituals accompany them. As was mentioned earlier in this

thesis, the old woman colors the runes with her blood, staining them as Odin had done. While Grettir was wary of the nefarious log on multiple counts in the story, his suspicions proved to be futile, ultimately resulting in great harm in the form of a serious, slipped axe wound and later a dire infection. This direct attack on Grettir provides for a more bodily curse. Whether vague as the log's inscription was or more specific, archeology has found inscriptions, which correlate to this attack on one's person.

Aggressive attack curses, much like the love curses discussed above, are also to be found across Central Europe. A wooden beater from Bergen, Norway illustrates a broader stylized runic inscription curse.

Illa hefir sá maðr er hefir slíka konu...

Evil take the man who has such a woman... (MacLeod 62)

Although MacLeod and Mees consider this to be a curse of spite, it follows the form of the old woman, who cursed Grettir. Not specifying any form of suffering or a transfer of emotion, the carver instead wishes that the source of evil take its toll on carver's unnamed foe. A far more direct attempt at harm can be found on another Bergen find, this time a rune stick.

Sezt niðr ok ráð rúnar;
rís úpp ok fíis við!

Sit down and interpret the runes;
rise up and fart! (MacLeod 34)

This direct attack on a body is nowhere near as dire as the wish for every evil to come to its recipient, but it does show a humorous and very mundane curse. Obviously the runic magic could go beyond the bounds of extremes. These "fart runes" are not without mythological precedent as can be seen in *Locasenna*.

Þegi þú, Freyia! þú ert fordæða
oc meini blandin mið,
síztic at bræðr þínom stóðo blíð regin,
oc mundir þú þá, Freyia, frata. (Kuhn 103)

Be silent, Freyia, you're a witch
and much imbued with malice,
you were astride your brother, all the laughing gods surprised you,
and then, Freyia, you farted. (Larrington 90)

Even the foremost amongst the gods are not safe from such jokes made at their expense.

However, far more practical runes for the infliction of bodily harm were practiced for the art of war. Victory runes can be observed in *Sigrdrifumal*.

Sigrúnar þú scalt kunna, ef þú vilt sigr hafa,
oc rísta á hialti hiðs,
sumar á véttrimom, sumar á valþøstom,
oc nefna tysvar Tý. (Kuhn 191)

Victory-runes you must cut if you want to have victory,
and cut them on your sword-hilt;
some on the blade-guards, some on the plates,
and invoke Tyr twice. (Larrington 167)

The runes are to be cut in many specific areas over one's sword and a very specific rune is to be used: Tyr. This t-rune is named for and invokes the god, Tyr, who represents courage from his involvement with the Fenris wolf. Many archeological weapon finds are inscribed with confusing runes, which can be interpreted as magical. However, some are far less confusing and utilize both alphabetic and magical uses. A spear shaft from a Danish bog bears one such inscription.

Ek Erilaz Ansgīsala Mūha haite.
Gagaga gīnu gahellija,
hagala wīju bi g[aize].

I am called Earl Muha, Ansgisal's (son).
I cry a roar resoundingly,
I invoke hail in the spear. (MacLeod 78)

Here a Danish noble calls for the power of hail to enter his spear and augment its destructive force. Additionally, it can be noticed that his cry, “gagaga,” is a form of onomatopoeia. One can almost hear his cry even now. A further mixture of magical elements is to be found in a curse pertaining to the mind.

Returning to the Poetic Edda, a curse upon the mind can be observed. In *The Second Lay of Gudrun*, Gudrun tells King Theodrek of her suffering, which includes how a concoction of many aspects of magic robbed her of her memories.

Færði mér Grímildr full at drecca,
svalt oc sárlicr, né ec sacar munðac ;
þat var um aukit urðar magni,
svalköldom sæ oc sonardreyra.

Vóro í horni hvera kyns stafir
ristnir oc roðnir -- ráða ec né máttac --,
lyngfiscr langr, lanz Haddingia
ax óscorit, innleið dýra.

Vóro þeim bióri bql mǫrg saman,
urt allz viðar oc acarn brunninn,
umdogg arins, iðrar blótnar,
svíns lifr soðin, þvíat hon sacar deyfði. (Kuhn 227-8)

‘Grimhild brought me a cup to drink from,
cool and bitter, I could not remember the past;
that drink was augmented with fateful power,
with the cool sea, with sacrificial blood.

‘On the drinking-horn were all kinds of runes,
cut and red-coloured—I could not interpret them—
a heather-fish, an uncut corn-ear
of the land of the Haddings, the entrails of beasts.

‘Many evil things were mixed into that drink,
the herbs of all the woodland, and burnt acorns,
the dew of the hearth, the innards from sacrifice,
boiled pig’s liver, since it blunted the past. (Larrington 199)

Again, the curse undertaken utilized various forms of Norse magic, but the runes once more play a pivotal role. It is interesting to note that two similar portions of magical items are shared within this curse. Sacrificial blood appears once again, though not explicitly stating it is the blood of the magic weaver, as does a burnt wooden item, in this case acorns. It appears the nut bearing tree is not limited to divination. While the boiled pig's liver, a possible hint of Vanir magic, is singled out as an ingredient to blunt the past, it is safe to say that the 'red-coloured' runes also played their part in the magical process. The mention of a "heather-fish," which is a kenning for "snake" also hints to female divinities. It is as if two magical traditions are being combined. Realizing now what damage the runes can cause and the widespread group able to tap their power, it only makes sense that forms of protection would be necessary. For although the curses may linger on as the best stories in our modern minds, cures would have proven far more valuable knowledge to those fearing the possibility of aggressive magic.

Runic Cures/Protection

Whereas runes could be used to cause great harm, they were also used to protect against such evils and also to cure fantastic elements. Portions of the Poetic Edda serve as a runic guide for anyone who knows where to look. Returning to the *Havamal*, one can see some of Odin's runic exploits within his greater magical knowledge.

þvíat iqrð tecr við qlðri, enn eldr við sóttom,
eic við abbindi, ax við fiqlkyngi,
hqlll við hýrógi -- heiptom scal mána qveðia --,
beiti við bitsóttom, enn við bqlvi rúnar ;
fold scal við flóði taca. (Kuhn 39-40)

For earth is good against drunkenness, and fire against sickness,
oak against constipation, an ear of corn against witchcraft,
the hall against household strife, for hatred the moon should be invoked—
earthworms for a bite or sting, and runes against evil;
soil you should use against flood. (Larrington 34)

Numerous articles of magic are listed for both practical and magical protection. One can see the use of what resources were available to deal with the problems encountered. It is easy to note how important the runes are regarded against the worst cosmic power: evil itself. It would therefore make sense that some form of runic object would be crafted to protect the owner. One such pendant was found on the Danish island of Zealand.

Hariuha haitika, Farawisa. Gibu auja.

Hariuha I am called, Danger-wise. I give good luck. (MacLeod 94)

Continuing upon this extreme protection is another of Odin's runic claims: the power to revive the dead.

Þat kann ec iþ tólpta, ef ec sé á tré uppi
váfa virgilná:
svá ec ríst oc í rúnom fác,
at sá gengr gumi
oc mælir við mic. (Kuhn 43)

I know a twelfth one if I see, up in a tree,
a dangling corpse in a noose:
I can so carve and colour the runes
that the man walks
and talks with me. (Larrington 37)

This spell, unlike any of the others listed, is the only to directly mention runes. Such a spell truly befits Odin, who sacrificed himself like a hanged man for runic knowledge.

Although not calling upon Odin to revive a dead man, there exists a runic skull fragment from Ribe, which beseeches the god for protection.

UlfR auk Oðinn
auk HōtýR
hialp Buri es
viðr þæima: værki auk dværgynni.
Bur.

Ulf and Odin
and High-Tyr
is help for Bur
against these: pain and dwarf-stroke.
Bur (carved). (MacLeod 25)

The charm's inscription is problematic, but it possible that either a trinity of gods are called upon or merely three forms of Odin. Dwarf-stroke is also an unknown affliction, but one feared enough to require a protective charm calling upon the highest god.

Though truly drastic and fantastic in their application, these forms of spells are not unheard of in other mythological traditions. Returning to Nefer-ka-ptah, one can see the use of gleaning knowledge from the dead even if not reviving them altogether.

Then Nefer-ka-ptah read another spell, and so great was its power that the dead child spoke and told Nefer-ka-ptah all that had happened among the gods, that Thoth was seeking vengeance, and that Ra had granted him his desire upon the stealer of his Book. (Brown 288)

However, such knowledge comes with an inherent danger. A warning is aptly given among Odin's counsel in *Havamal*.

Veiztu, hvé rísta scal, veiztu, hvé ráða scal?
veiztu, hvé fá scal, veiztu, hvé freista scal?
veiztu, hvé biðia scal, veiztu, hvé blóta scal?
veiztu, hvé senda scal, veiztu, hvé sóa scal?

Betra er óbeðit, enn sé ofblótið,
ey sér til gildis giðf ;
betra er ósent, enn sé ofsóit. (Kuhn 41)

Do you know how to carve, do you know how to interpret,
do you know how to stain, do you know how to test out,
do you know how to ask, do you know how to sacrifice,
do you know how to dispatch, do you know how to slaughter?

Better not to pray, than to sacrifice too much,
one gift always calls for another;
better not dispatched than to slaughter too much. (Larrington 35)

The warning is poetic, but the message is clear: you had better know what you are doing.

Such a lesson is played out in Egil's Saga when the crafty Egil comes to the farm of Thorfinn. He is told that the daughter of the household has fallen ill and that runes had been carved by a local boy. Egil goes to her bed and gets to work.

Egil searched the bed where she had been lying and found a whale-bone there with runes carved on it. After he had read them, he scraped them off and burnt them in the fire. He burnt the whole bone and had the bedclothes she had been using thrown to the winds. Then he made this verse:

*None should write runes
Who can't read what he carves:
A mystery mistaken
Can bring men to misery.
I saw cut on the curved bone
Ten secret characters,
These gave the young girl
Her grinding pain. (Egil 191)*

This passage illustrates many vital points that seem to consistently reemerge. First, one must have the proper knowledge if he is to go about practicing runic magic. Second, burning appears to play an important role just as blood sometimes does. As burning was

seen earlier in the old woman's cursed log, here fire is used to undo what was done and then to initiate the cure as Egil then proceeds to carve the correct runes to cure the girl's illness.

Egil's runic prowess is not confined to this one act. He saves himself from certain death while in the presence of Bard and his queen, both of whom aim to kill Egil with poison.

Egil drew out his knife and stabbed the palm of his hand, then took the horn, carved runes on it and rubbed it with blood. After that he made this verse:

*Carve runes on the horn,
Rub them with red blood,
With these words I bewitch
The horn of the wild ox;
Let's swallow and sup
This slave-girl's brew,
With the blessing of Bard
This beer should do much for us.*

Then the horn split apart and the drink poured out onto the straw.
(Egil 101)

With his spell, Egil is spared and after a brief fight, he manages to escape completely from the grasp of his current enemies.

Where and how Egil gained his knowledge is itself a mystery, but it is possible that lists existed such as in the *Lay of Sigrdrifa*. The lay is itself a rune master's handbook as the following selection will show.

Biagrúnar scaltu kunna, ef þú biarga vilt
oc leysa kind frá konom ;
á lófa þær scal rísta oc of liðo spenna
oc biðia þá dísir duga.

Brimrúnar scaltu gera, ef þú vilt borgit hafa
 á sundi seglmörum ;
á stafni skal rísta oc á stíórnar blaði
 oc leggja eld í ár ;
era svá brattr breki né svá blár unnir,
 þó kómztu heill af hafi. (Kuhn 191)

Helping-runes you must know if you want to assist
and release children from women;
they shall be cut on the palms and clasped on the joints,
and then the *disir* asked for help.

Sea-runes you must cut if you want to have guaranteed
the sail-horses on the sea;
on the prow they must be cut and on the rudder,
and burnt into the oar with fire;
however steep the breakers or dark the waves,
yet you'll come safe from the sea. (Larrington 168)

This is merely a small portion of the list of runes to aid those who would know them. In addition are listed runes for healing, speaking, the mind, or victory. What is spectacular about this lay is that not only the results of the runes are given, but also instructions as to how to use them. It is therefore within the realm of possibility that our hero, Egil, may have learned his spells from such a story or one very similar. However, why cure what ails you if you can prevent it altogether?

Runic Prophecy

The final major category of runic magic deals with the art of prophecy. One must not look far from the Poetic Edda, to find more on this aspect. A very straightforward example can be found in the *Greenlandic Poem of Atli*.

Kend var Kostbera, kunningi hon scil rúna,
inti orðstafi at eldi liósom ;
gæta varð hon tungo í góma báða:
váro svá viltar, at var vant at ráða.

...
Eitt ec mest undromc -- mácað ec enn hyggia --,
hvat þá varð vitri, er scyldi vilt rísta ;
þvíat svá var ávisat, sem undir væri
bani yccarr beggia, ef iþ brálla qvæmið ;
vant er stafs vífi, eða valda aðrir. (Kuhn 249)

Kostbera had been taught, she knew how to interpret runes,
spelled out the letters in the light of the fire;
she held her tongue, bit back her words,
the runes were so confused they could scarcely be made out.

...
'I'm greatly surprised by one thing—I still can't make it out—
why the clever woman should carve so awry;
for they seemed to indicate an underlying meaning:
it would be the death of both of you if you hastened there now;
the lady's missed out a letter or else others have caused this.'
(Larrington 219)

Hogni's wife is incredibly disturbed by what she had seen with Kostbera's runic prophecy. The close relationship of the runes with staves is easily noticed in this passage as "rúna" and "orðstafi" occur together. The prophecy is elaborated upon further with dreams, also an integral aspect of prophecy throughout Norse literature, which Hogni at first seems to ignore. In the realm of the gods, runic prophecies were also used. It is of no surprise that we return to Odin.

Ár valtívar veiðar námo,
oc sumblsamir, áðr saðir yrði ;
hristo teina oc á hlaut sá,
fundo þeir at Ægis ørkost hvera. (Kuhn 88)

Once, the victory gods ate their catch from hunting,
they were keen to drink before they got enough;
they shook the twigs and looked at the augury,
they found at Ægir's was an ample choice of cauldrons. (Larrington 78)

Here the very thirsty gods use wands much as Skirnir had, which Larrington interprets as runic staves, to find a source of cauldron to brew more beer. Larrington explains in her Explanatory Notes that these twigs are similar to another form of prophecy mentioned in the *Seeress's Prophecy* (273). This usage of twigs leads to another godly prophecy, which occurs at the reformation of the world after Ragnarok.

Þá kná Hænir hlautvið kíosa,
oc byrir byggia bræð tveggia
vindheim víðan -- vitoð ér enn, eða hvat? (Kuhn 14)

Then Hænir will choose wooden slips for prophecy,
and the sons of two brothers will inhabit, widely,
the windy world—do you understand yet, or what more? (Larrington 12)

Here we see that despite the ultimate destruction of Ragnarok, the old custom of prophecy by use of staves (hlautvið - fate wood) will be continued. Though the gods and the world tree will be ravaged, it was possibly a bit of comfort to see a few familiar ways survive.

It is also interesting to note that runes were cast between the realms of the mortals and the divine in the *Second Poem of Helgi Hundingsbani*.

Ær ertu, systir, oc ervita,
er þú bræðr þínom biðr forscapa ;
einn veldr Óðinn qllo bqlvi,
þvíat með sifiungom sacrúnar bar. (Kuhn 157-8)

‘Sister, you are mad, you are out of your wits,
that you should wish this evil on your brother;
Odin alone caused all the misfortune,
for he cast hostile runes between the kinsmen. (Larrington 138)

While we do not see the act of casting runes for prophecy, there is allusion that Odin had a hand in this family’s fortunes. As Dag mentions in the passage above, only Odin could be responsible for such a thing as traitorous as turning kinsmen against one another.

While all of this magic may be an interesting read, did it have any lasting effect on daily life?

Runes in Connection with “Ordinary” Life

Although it is difficult to gauge exactly how great an effect runic magic played upon the actual lives of the Vikings, there is ample evidence to show that the runes were used and used often. Their use as an alphabet allowed many things to be written, including memorials. Particularly abundant are the rune stones found throughout Scandinavia, especially in central Sweden. The general message of rune stones runs along the lines of “(Name) raised this stone in memory of (Name) their (relationship).” While this may not appear very fascinating in its own right, this very form of stone is mentioned in the *Havamal* as a good family duty.

Sonr er betri, þótt sé síð of alinn
eptir genginn guma ;
sialdan bautarsteinar standa brauto nær,
nema reisi niðr at nið. (Kuhn 28)

A son is best, even if he is born late,
when the father is dead;
seldom do memorial stones stand by the wayside,
unless one kinsman raises them for another. (Larrington 24)

This passage specifically praises the birth of a son and the raising of a stone in memory of a fallen father, but stones have been found, which commemorate mothers and wives. One good example is the Fläckebo stone, which praises Odindisa: “There will not come to Hassmyra a better mistress, who looks after the farm. Balle the Red cut these runes. To Sigmund was Odindisa a good sister (Jansson 115).” In addition, many stones go to greater lengths to tell how one died or more about relationships, though the vast majority are simple in design. One does, however, rarely come across a runic stone, which incorporates magic into its text. One particularly involved inscription is the Glavendrup stone, which can be found in Denmark and dates to the ninth century.

Ragnhildr satti stēn þænsi æft Alla Solva-goða vēa-liðs heð-værðan þægn.
Alla syniR gærðu kumbl þøsi æft faður sīn, ok hans kona æft vēr sīn. Æn
Sōti rēst rūnar þæssi æft drōttin sin. Þōrr vīgi þæssi rūnar.
At rætta sā vērði áes stēn þænsi ælti æða æft annan dragi.

Ragnhild placed this stone in memory of Alli, the priest of the Salver,
honour-worthy thane of the holy-troop (?).
Alli's sons made this monument in memory of their father, and his wife in
memory of her husband. And Soti carved these runes in memory of his
lord. May Thor bless these runes. May whosoever damages this stone or
drags it to stand in memory of another become a warlock. (MacLeod 224)

Here we have an entirely new god being invoked to bless the runes, Thor. However, not only does this stone beseech the gods to hallow the runes, but a curse is also incorporated to keep any prospective rune stone thieves at bay. Not only might they anger Thor, but they could be turned into “rætta,” which MacLeod and Mees translate into “warlock.” This translation is difficult to trace, but perhaps “rætta” is associated with “ræðr,” which the Isländisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch defines as “männliches schwein.” This German insult translates as “manly swine,” but has far stronger connotations. Certainly no rune fearing man would risk this. Also, as said in *Havamal* this rune stands as a family's memorial and each member of the family as well as a vassal takes part. In addition to commemorating the dead, runes also served to assist the survivors.

Runic inscriptions were also used to deal with the ever tricky problem of inheritance. To take inheritance to an epic scale, one need only look to The Saga of King Hrolf Kraki in which claiming one's treasure was a quest in and of itself.

... bring them here to the cave. You will find here a chest with three bottoms. Runes are carved on it, and they will tell what each of the boys should receive as his inheritance. (Kraki 38)

The complexity of inheritance does not confine itself to the realms of the sagas. Equally intertwined issues can be seen on rune stones. An incredibly detailed inscription belongs to the Hillersjö stone.

Read! Germund got Gerlög, a maiden, as wife. Then they had a son before he (Germund) was drowned and then the son died. Thereafter she got Gudrik as her husband. He... this... [damaged part]. Then they had children but only one girl survived, her name was Inga. Ragnfast of Snottsta got her as wife. Thereafter he died and then the son. And the mother (Inga) inherited from her son. Then she had Erik as her husband. Then she died. Then Gerlög inherited from Inga, her daughter. Thorbjörn the skald carved the runes. (Sawyer 49-50)

Needless to say, this is quite a tangled affair of who inherits from whom. The entire inheritance must have been worth a great deal as much trouble was taken to carve the entire history of the legal precedent to stone. Thus the extent of runes for purposes both magical and mundane in daily life is apparent.

Runic Echoes Lingering After the Viking Age

While the runic script was to be superseded by the Latin alphabet, traces of the script and its ties with magic would be found throughout the remainder of history in various forms, such as in literature or continued magical practices. Many of the sticks mentioned in this thesis date back to the fourteenth century and come from a significant find at Bergen. This chapter will indicate the presence of runes in the minds of the Germanic people long after their fully understood purposes had vanished.

As can be expected with major cultural changes, runes, like the pagan faith of Scandinavia and the Sámi, came to be viewed as threatening or evil by the state, but lingered among the most common people. A Norwegian trial in 1627 details a Sámi practitioner of magic to conjure wind for sailing vessels.

Furthermore the bailiff asked whether he knew how to do sorcery. He answered that he had never taken anything for his runic spells. The bailiff asked him what the rune spells were.

“When one wants to cast rune spells, one takes a rune drum; it is made of pine root and covered with ox skin or buckskin. Then one uses a piece of wood as a handle under the drum, and hooves from every kind of animal in this country are hung around the drum...” (Kvideland 192)

Though the description provided by Quive Baardsen is labeled runic, it is most definitely a form of shamanism from the Saami people. The importance of the drum, also called a troll drum in certain cases, shows a further divide between the state and the subject it attempts to understand, here shamanistic magic. In this case it is seen closely akin to runic magic. Despite the absence of runic characters, there is mention of Odin as a drum-beating shaman in *Locasenna*.

Enn þic síða kóðo Sámsayo í,
oc draptu á vétt sem volor ;
vitca líki fórtu verþióð yfir,
oc hugða ec þat args aðal. (Kuhn 101)

But you once practiced *seid* on Samsey,
and you beat on the drum as witches do,
in the likeness of a wizard you journeyed among mankind,
and that I thought the hallmark of a pervert. (Larrington 89)

This form of spell casting is connected to Odin, though not as honored as his attainment of the runes themselves. Though strongly fought by the state, there would be great academic interest expressed within a century.

Johan Ihre, a mid-eighteenth century student at Uppsala University, attempted to wrestle with the very idea of what the ancient script in his country could be. In the span of three dissertations, he attempts to analyze their antiquity, origins and decline. It is perhaps most telling to read a selection of the introduction to his first dissertation.

(2) Indeed it calls for amazement that these lettered stones, which were raised for the sake of saving the memory of others from oblivion, have themselves been so totally neglected that almost everything concerning their role in the history of learning escapes our knowledge. Thus, we do not know when they first began to be raised or how long they were in use; nor is it clear whether the runes are indigenous or were brought here from somewhere else and, if so, what their place of origin was. (Östlund 85)

It may seem either fitting or eerie that nearly two and a half centuries later scholars are still arguing similar questions and many of the answers themselves often only seem readily apparent to the scholar arguing them. Though the very people responsible for the usage of runes in an earlier time no longer understand the script's mysteries, the runes were taken up once more by literary authors to be put to use for their own purposes.

German writers of the nineteenth century were often fascinated with the Middle Ages and often drew upon them to shape their themes. The ever-elusive runes proved perfect material to evoke mystery and magic. One example of such a German author is Ludwig Tieck, who particularly played with the idea of runes in his work, Der

Runenberg. In addition to the title, Tieck plays with the naming of a mandrake root in his story.

Er sprang auf und wollte entfliehen, denn er hatte wohl ehemals von der seltsamen Alrunenwurzel gehört, die beim Ausreißen so herzdurchschneidende Klagetöne von sich gebe, dass der Mensch von ihrem Gewinsel wahnsinnig werden müsse. (Tieck 29)

He sprang up and wanted to escape for he had earlier heard of the strange *Alrunenwurzel*, which upon plucking gives forth such gut wrenching screams of pain that one must go insane from the whining.

The proper German word for mandrake is “Alraunwurzel,” but Tieck prefers instead to call it an “Alrunenwurzel.” Though the mandrake has magical connotations without word play, Tieck decides to deepen the sense of mystery and magic by inserting the idea of runes into it. “Raunen” and “Runen” or “whispers” and “runes” are, of course, incredibly similar in their own right. A slightly less obvious, but equally striking example can be drawn from von Droste-Hülshoff’s Die Judenbuche. This murder mystery contains a mysterious beech tree, which figures prominently whenever a death occurs. The tree itself is noteworthy, but the damning evidence appears when Hebraic characters are carved into the tree with a curse.

Am nächsten Morgen stand an der Buche mit dem Beil eingehauen:
אם תעפוד כמקום הנה יפנע כך כאשד אתה עשית לי (von Droste-Hülshoff 46)

The next morning there stood on the beech carved with an axe:
אם תעפוד כמקום הנה יפנע כך כאשד אתה עשית לי

The curse itself, though not revealed until the final sentence, is given an extra sense of mystery as these exotic characters are presented in a fashion that is somewhat native, mimicking runic inscriptions, and somehow extremely exotic, in the use of Hebraic characters. Though the reader is unaware of what has truly been inscribed, they are likely aware that it must be powerful in the old tradition of runic usage. The twentieth century

would go beyond authors' literary themes and instead see the runes used in religious revivals.

Fascination with the runes as part of an early Germanic and pre-Christian spirituality led to various expressions during the twentieth century. In the first half of the century many German nationalists sought to rekindle interest in a glorious ethnic past. One such man was Rudolf Gorsleben.

Gorsleben sought to reconstruct this spiritual science of the runes and their magical uses. In the first place he regarded the runes as conductors of a subtle energy that animated the entire universe, and therefore as devices which could be used to influence the material world and the course of events. The runes were a link between the macrocosm and the microcosm of Aryan man, a representation of God in the world. 'The runes had arisen from the original relationship between the human racial spirit of the gods and the world-spirit, and they could lead the true seeker back to his cosmic homeland and offer a mystical union with God.'
(Goodrick-Clarke 157-8)

Not only did Gorsleben view the runes as the center of the universe, but he also sought to show that Germanic religion was also a direct influence for the Christian religion. He compared the chi-rho symbol with a variant of the hagall rune (Goodrick-Clarke 158). Unfortunately for the study of runology, Gorsleben and his colleagues were adherents to Nazi ideology and this perspective has stained the field. However, in the second half of the century, runes would once again find themselves in use for religious revival. It is not surprising that a revival of the Norse pagan religion is to be found in Iceland. The *Ásatrúarmenn* were founded on May 16, 1973 by Sveinbjörn Beinteinsson, but are perhaps more widely known as simply *Ásatrú* (Thorsson 17-8). Although there is no central authority for members of the *Ásatrú* faith, they do share a respect for the runes as magical objects. Far more books on the subject of runic magic can be found pertaining to the *Ásatrú* faith than scholarly debate and one of Thorsson's many books, *A Handbook of*

Rune Magic, has a list of the magical applications for each character including not only carving directions, but also singing and body positions. According to Thorsson at the time of the book's publication in 1984, there exist three major Ásatrú groups: the Ásatrúarmenn in Iceland, the Ásatrú Free Assembly in California and the Odinic Rite in England (18). Thus it is seen that the runes have stood the test of time in various forms among different people and it seems likely they will continue to manifest themselves in other new ways in the coming years.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it has been shown that the runes were considered magical even if also utilized as an alphabetic script. Their magical associations were drawn from divine associations with the major god, Odin, and possibly also Freyia. The use of runes for magic was primarily linked with the carving of the runic characters on wood for the purposes of curses, cures/protection and prophecy, but also were utilized in more mundane forms such as monuments for the dead. These magical associations were of such strength that despite new religions and societal structures they have lingered in the minds of the Germanic peoples until the present in various forms and will likely continue to morph as time progresses.

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