

Runes, alphabet and magic

Anja Normann

A lot has been written about runes, and one thing they all have in common is that no one really knows what they are, where they came from, and what you do with them; instead, everybody has their own theory, just as I do. There are, however, some historical facts, and some common points on the subject, so let us start by looking at those, and then go into their magical aspects.

THE ROOTS OF THE RUNES

The runes are an alphabet which probably derived from the alphabet used by the north Etruscans, who came from Tuscany, Umbria and Lazio in Italy, and whose alphabet was used up to about the C4th CE.

The runic alphabet as we know it today, was used in the Germanic and Scandinavian countries, and the first actual runic inscriptions have been dated to around 150 CE.

There are three different runic alphabets, and these could be seen as the three main groups. These are the 'Elder Futharc' runes, used in northern Europe before about 800 CE; the 'Anglo-Saxon' runes, used in Britain from about the C5-6th; and finally the 'Younger Futharc' runes, which were used in Scandinavia and Iceland between the C8-13th. There are also more local runes, such as ones used in the Älvdalen area of Sweden - which are still in use.

The word 'Futharc' comes from the names of the first six characters of the alphabet; *feh, ur, thurs, ass, reid and k(c)en*. The Elder Futhark had 24 characters, and the Younger Futhark only 16, but each character in that set was given several sounds, which made writing easier. The Anglo-Saxon runes, however, needed more signs for different sounds, so they added

more runes, resulting in a 33 character alphabet.

I would also like to mention the 'Uthark Runes,' a runic alphabet used in mostly Sweden. This has the same 24 characters as in the Elder Futharc, but here, instead of starting with 'feh,' it starts with 'ur' and has 'feh' at the end of the alphabet.

The progression of the runes is not linear, but circular - or spiralling - with no beginning and no end to their sequence - unlike our own alphabet, which starts with 'a' and ends with 'z'. But for us to be able to make sense of an alphabet we need a beginning to it - and an end, an 'a' and a 'z'.

The rune 'ur' means 'origin.' This rune is associated with Audhumbla, the nurturing, milk giving wild cow, which was the first being created in the Nordic creation myth.

The last characters, 'feh,' is associated with domesticated cattle, and it is logical to start with the wild, and finish with the domesticated. So starting with 'ur,' and ending with 'feh' has always seemed logical to me, and it also speaks to my heart.

But one of the beauties of the runes is that this type of understanding is personal, and so up to everyone who works with runes to find what speaks to them.

THE POWER OF THE RUNES

A lot of ancient runic inscriptions can be found carved on stones and monuments, erected to honour someone, or sometimes as magic formula. It is certain however, that the runes were also used as more than just a written alphabet.

There are descriptions of the use of runes in magical practices found in ancient accounts. For example, in the writings of Tacitus - a Roman senator and historian - we learn that the Germanic people used pieces of wood with signs on them, which they cast on the floor and interpreted before taking any big decision.

In the Viking sagas we also find examples of the runes being used for magical purposes. In the Icelandic poet Erik Skallagrimsson's Saga, written around 960 CE, it is told that a young man, who loved a beautiful girl, tried to use the runes to make her fall in love with him.

The girl became ill, and was near death, until Erik Skallagrimsson discovered the runes under her bed, whereupon, he erases the runic marks on them and wrote healing runes in their place, which made her regain her health.

This tale serves as a warning not to use the runes without having a good connection with them.

If we look at the Viking Eddas, we can find several clues as to the supposed magical origin of the runes. In the early medieval *Völuspá* manuscript - first written down in the C13th in the Codex Regius, we read:

Ash I know standing,
named Yggdrasil,
a lofty tree, laved
with limpid water:
thence comes dew
that in dales fell;
stands always over
the green Urd's well.

Thence comes maidens,
much knowing,
three, from the hall
under tree stands;
Urd hight the first,
the second Verdandi,
they ash-tablets graved,
Skuld hight the third;

They laws made,
they life selected;
all the children
they destiny say.

Völuspá: stanzas 18-20

Here - in the 'graved ash-tablets' - we come across the first sign of runes being used in the nordic text. The Norns - the three maidens in the poem - are the ones who know the past, the present and the future. The poem states that the ones who weave the destiny of men, carve on ash-tablets, the laws and the destiny.

And then we have Óðinn's initiation, found in *Hávamál*, another poem in the Codex Regius:

I know that I hung,
on a wind-rocked tree,
nine whole nights,
with a spear wounded,
and to Odin offered,
myself to myself;
on that tree,
of which no one knows
from what root it springs.

Bread no one gave me,
nor a horn of drink,
downward I peered,
to runes applied myself,
wailing learnt them,
then fell down thence.

Hávamál: stanzas 140-141

In that poem, we learn that Óðinn got his runes after a long and difficult initiation, and that he got them looking down.

Could it be that he was looking down into the Well of Urd, the deep well where the Norns take water, and from out of which grows Yggdrasil the cosmic tree? That is my theory, and every time I connect

with the runes, I see them coming up from out of that well, swirling and teaching me.

Stanza 141 of *Hávamál* uses the word 'wailing;' a sound, a cry. In the Swedish version of the poem the word is 'skrikande' [screaming], which is once again a sound. The runes themselves are also considered to have sounds, and the runes are meant to be sounded.

So, let's make a giant jump to the myth of creation - where at the beginning there was 'no earth and no sky,' there was just Ginnungagap, which means 'the big void,' but which can also mean 'the big mouth;' and mouths make sounds.

Could it be that at the beginning was sound? Many creation myths have the sound as there starting points - 'in the beginning was the word.' Could it be that the sound of the runes connects us to this original sound; that they make the Great Web, in which everything is connected within one vibration?

Below:
Runestone at
Växjö cathedral,
Sweden. It
translates as:
'*Tóki the Viking,
raised the stone
in memory of
Gunnarr, Grimr's
son. May God
help his soul!*'
C12th

Below Left:
Codex Runicus
manuscript
from Sweden or
Denmark which
contains a mix
of legal and
historical texts
C1300



Runes can change things, they can heal, and they can destroy. If you sing the 24 runes of the Elder Futhark over and over again, you may experience a profound trance state, and a connection to the Great Mystery, to the universe as a whole. It is said that if you do, it is possible to actually see, and interact with that Great Web which binds us all.

So, be careful, don't seek to interact, not unless you know what you are doing. Remember that young man in Erik Skallagrimsson's Saga, who almost killed his beloved because he didn't have enough knowledge.

In Óðinn's Runesong, found in Hávamál, is described all the work he did to understand and to be able to use the runes after his initiation, as well as what he - and therefore we - need to know before using the runes:

Then I began to bear fruit,
and to know many things,
to grow and well thrive:
word by word
I sought out words,
fact by fact
I sought out facts.

Runes thou wilt find,
and explained characters,
very large characters,
very potent characters,
which the great speaker depicted,
and the high powers formed,
and the powers' prince graved:

Hávamál: stanzas 143-144

Knowest thou how to grave them?
knowest thou how to expound them?
knowest thou how to depict them?
knowest thou how to prove them?
knowest thou how to pray?
knowest thou how to offer?
knowest thou how to send?
knowest thou how to consume?

Hávamál: stanzas 146

MY OWN RUNIC JOURNEY

So, let me tell you the tale of a little girl who fell and hurt her ankle. She was picked up by her great-grandmother, who put the little girl on her lap, and sang with a soft voice while stroking the little girl's hurt foot with gentle hands. The little girl stopped crying, and felt the warmth that spread through her ankle, and the pain disappeared.

The little girl was me and Selma was my great-grandmother, and the song she sang was one of healing runes.

That was my first contact with runes, the 24 sounds, the 24 characters, the 24 signs of the Universe, which allow us to connect with the Great Web.

Many books have been written on the runes, some are very good, and some are less so. But I didn't learn the runes from books,

Right:
Runestone
at Kullerstad,
Sweden. It
translates as:
'Hákon raised
this monuments
in memory of
Gunnarr, his son.
He died in the
West.' C11th

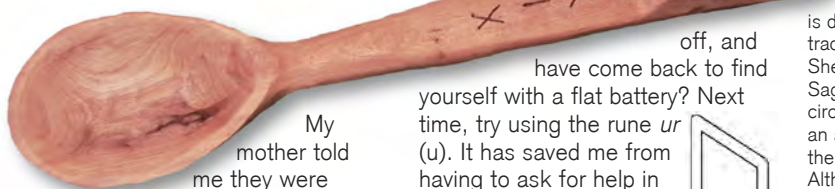


Far right:
Runestone at
Nöbbeleholm,
Sweden. It
translates as:
'Gunnkell placed
this stone in
memory of
Gunnarr, his
father, Hróði's
son. Helgi, his
brother, laid
him in a stone
coffin in Bath
in England.
C10-11th



instead I learned from family traditions, and from the runes themselves, by listening to them deeply over the years, listening to their own teachings.

A few years after my first meeting with the runes, I saw some strange signs on Selma's old wooden spoons, and I asked my mother about them.



My mother told me they were runes, and she told me the tale of the creation of our world, about the Ginnungagap - with Muspelheim, the world of fire, on one side, and the Nifelheim, world of ice, on the other side.

And my mother told me how, one day, sparks from the fires of Muspelheim crossed the big void and melted the ice at the source of Hvergelmir, one of the great rivers which feed the roots of the cosmic tree Yggdrasil. And my mother continued her story and told me how two beings emerged from the mist,



Audhumbla, the first cow, and Thurs the first giant. And so, in this way, I learned the names of the two first runes *ur* (u) and *thurs* (t).

Many years later, I was doing an *utesita* - a 'sitting out', which is a nordic version of a vision quest. That night the runes came to me - one by one - and they taught me, they connected with me, and invited me to go upon a long journey; one which I think will continue for the rest of my life.

Recently I was driving in the Pyrenees mountains in France, it was during a snowstorm and driving was hazardous. I began to lose control of my car and it began to slide towards the edge of the road, and a long fall down to the valley below.

As I slid, a rune immediately came in front of my inner eye; *eho* (y), the rune of the yew tree - a strong and resilient tree. If you look at it's shape, you will see it has a hook on both ends. With my mind, I 'threw' this rune on to all four wheels of my car,

which immediately gained a grip on the road once again; and then I made prayers of gratitude to my great-grandmother, my mother and the runes.

Have you ever forgotten to turn the lights of your car

off, and have come back to find yourself with a flat battery? Next time, try using the rune *ur* (u). It has saved me from having to ask for help in this exact situation. Just, in your mind's eye, picture it, superimposed upon the battery, and sing it too, make it's sound, send out the intention of getting the 'power of the origin' into your battery.



You won't be able to charge completely flat batteries using this rune of course, otherwise we would be able to reduced our electricity bills dramatically, but as a way to get help in an emergency situation it works just fine for me.

I don't only use runes with my car, I use them to help to get my fire started too, especially when it's difficult, or the wood is wet. I also use them to help my well flow, and never get dry, so I always have water.

When its cold outside, and I'm freezing, or when I'm too warm on a hot summer day I sing a rune. And of course, I use them in my healing work.

I used to work in a hospital and also gave home care to patients. Sometimes I had patients who had difficulties breathing because of the humidity and heat, and in those cases I put a rune connected with air - with my mind's eye - upon my hands, and then I could help them.

These are only a few examples of how we can use runes in our everyday life.

But before we use them, we need to get to know them. It is important that we connect with them and ask them to teach us. They are strong, powerful, and it's possible to make things worse instead of better if we don't know what you are doing.

Again, remember the young man in Erik Skallagrimsson's Saga, we do not want to burn down the

whole forest just to get our fire started.

Anja Normann has been on a shamanic path since she was six years old, but did not realise it at the time.

She has studied shamanism with Jonathan Horwitz, Annette Host, Mikkal Smith and Thierry Piras, and has also studied with traditional shamans in Mongolia and Tuva.

Her roots are Nordic, and her work is deeply connected to the Nordic traditions and her family traditions.

She is a member of the 'Cercle de Sagesse et Traditions Ancestrales' - the circle of wisdom and ancestral traditions, an association of shamans from all over the world.

Although Swedish, she currently lives in France, where she teaches and does healing work

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If you are looking for a book to guide you, I highly recommend 'Rune Magic and Shamanism - Original Nordic Knowledge from Mother Earth' by Jörgen I. Eriksson. Available at Amazon.

Below:
Runestone
in Gillberga,
Sweden.
It translates as:
'*Rauðr raised
this stone in
memory of Tóki,
his brother, a
very good
valiant man,
who was killed
in England*'
C10-11th

