Rune-Net

The
Rune Primer

A Down-to-Earth Guide to the Runes

by

Sweyn Plowright

Organiser, Rune-Net

Second Edition

Rune-Net

Contents

Acknowledgements

New in this Edition

In the Resources section there are new translations of the Rune Poems, and discussion of some of the authors of esoteric runology. Also, a new chapter with discussion of the many popular myths about the runes.

1   Introduction

Rune-Net is an international online community of students of the Runes. We range in experience from over 25 years study to those who have only just discovered runes. I have taken on the task of writing a basic introduction to the Runes after many requests from new RN members for such a book.

The problem with the many New-Age rune manuals is a general lack of proper research. It does not take a great deal of research to write a reasonable introduction to the runes, yet most have chosen to write superficially about runes while padding out their books with large amounts of New Age, Wiccan, or Eastern esotericism. They cash in on the popularity of runes, with little regard to their proper cultural and religious context. Those of the modern Northern Traditions see this as not only poor research, but the greatest disrespect for an ancient cultural heritage.

On the other hand, the problem with the more reliable and academic works is that they are often rather dry and obscure for beginners. They tend to throw the beginner in at the deep end. In some ways the more academic popular writers require more caution in reading, as their own agendas and inventions are harder for the beginner to see.

One thing students asked for was a more concise and plain writing style. Most of the books they reviewed were found to be too padded out and wordy. They lacked focus and structure, and made it difficult for students to gain a clear basic picture.

The purpose of this book is to keep it brief and to the point, to stick to the known facts and established conventions, and to avoid unnecessary elaborations, while still including some useful extra information. It should therefore be a concise and handy primer on the runes, with respect for their cultural and

religious context. It is intended as a starting point. Not a complete volume of everything, but a basic foundation from which anyone can begin their studies from an informed perspective. With this grounding, the student should be able to read further, with the discretion to sort some of the wheat from the chaff.

## 2	Importance of Context

The Runes were used by the Germanic tribes from at least 1800 years ago until about 1000 years ago, when they were increasingly replaced by the Roman alphabet we use today. Their use survived in various forms in parts of Scandinavia until the 1700s. The Germanic tribes inhabited a large area of Northern Europe and were distinguished by their culture and language. The descendants of the Germanic tribes became the peoples of the countries whose native languages are Germanic. The main modern Germanic languages are English, German, Dutch, Danish, Swedish, Norwegian, and Icelandic.

The Runes were seen by the Germanic peoples as more than a system of writing. They were an integral part of their magical and religious culture. Although not much is actually known about their practices, enough examples have survived to give us an idea about the importance and respect the Runes held. We know that they were often used in magic, spells of protection, and for success in battle, as well as for healing.

The word "rune" can also mean a mystery or secret. Not only are there written characters we call runes, but spells and incantations could also be called runes. The Futhark runes were a special kind of mystery.

While studying rune manuals, we must be wary of those claiming to teach "traditional" runic practices, as we must ask about their sources. Many New Age manuals will invent or borrow ideas, and claim them to be ancient tradition, either without mentioning sources, or by a wild interpretation of an obscure part of an ancient source. Always check these sources and decide if they actually support the writer's assertions.

3.1 Elder Futhark

The Elder Futhark is usually presented in three groups of eight (Aetts = families).

First Aett

ᚠ	ᚢ	ᚦ	ᚨ	ᚱ	ᚲ	ᚷ	ᚹ
f	u	th	a	r	k	g	w

Second Aett

ᚺ	ᚾ	ᛁ	ᛃ	ᛇ	ᛈ	ᛉ	ᛊ
h	n	i	j	ei	p	z	s

Third Aett

ᛏ	ᛒ	ᛖ	ᛗ	ᛚ	ᛜ	ᛞ	ᛟ
t	b	e	m	l	ng	d	o
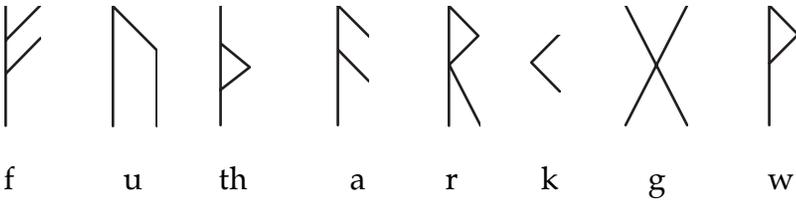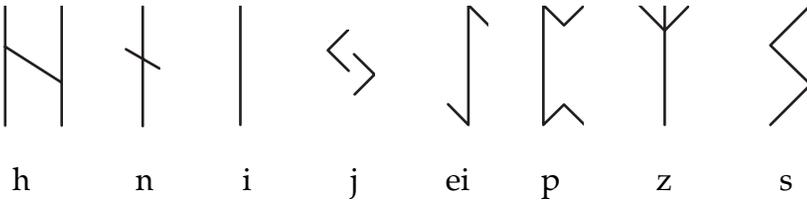
4 The Runic Revival

The modern runic traditions have various origins. Some of these origins are based on the interpretation of academic knowledge. Some are based on less reliable guesswork. In keeping with its purpose as a beginners guide, this chapter will take a brief look at the better known sources. Students should read further from the book list.

4.1 The Armanen

During the general occult revival of the early 1900s, Guido von List was inspired to publish his own vision of the Runes as part of a spiritual revitalisation of the German-speaking people.

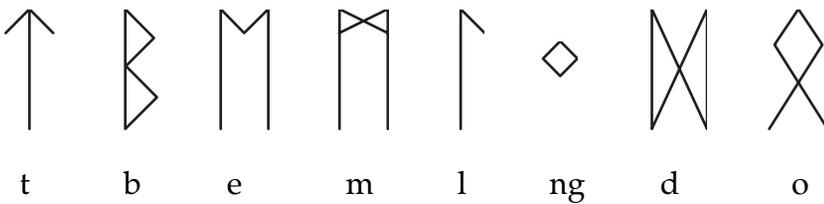Influenced by the works of Wagner and Nietsche, von List's system fitted in well with the pan-German nationalistic romanticism which was to evolve into Nazism by the 1930s. These runes became potent symbols of organisations within the Third Reich, and led to runes becoming a taboo subject for many years after the war.

List's system was based on the Younger Futhark, with some odd variant rune forms, and the addition of two runes to make 18.

His interpretations were largely based on the 18 riddles or spells mentioned in the Havamal. These are called "lays" (ljóð) in the original, and were unlikely to have referred to futhark runes. The word "rune" can also refer to a spell or mystery.

This method of interpretation, and the influence of Indian philosophy, popular in occult circles at the time, make the system now seem rather quaint and no more "authentic" than modern New Age fusions.

Like the Theosophists and other occult groups of the period, the Armanen system adapted techniques from Yoga, and incorporated them into their practices.

4.2   The Current Revival

The current runic revival really began with the explosion of interest in the 1970s in JRR Tolkien's novels. The growing New Age movement was ripe for powerful magical fantasy. Runes featured prominently in these books. This was not surprising; Tolkien was a professor of Nordic literature and drew heavily on Germanic mythological themes.

The popularisation of rune magic began in the early 1980s. There had been the occasional rune manual before that, but these had been largely focused on the Armanic system.

Around 1980, Michael Howard's early books were the first popular manuals to attempt to look at the Runes from their Germanic historical and mythological perspective. These early works look very rough to us now, with rather unusual shapes, inconsistent order, and not all of the runes discussed. But the 24 Elder runes and 3 Aetts are mentioned. His interpretations are of more interest, as they do seem to influence most of the later writers. His later work (1985) is much better.

In 1982, Ralph Blum produced a commercial hit with a slim book packaged with a bag of rune tiles. His book took the standard Elder Futhark , added a "blank rune" to represent wyrd or fate, and reorganised the row into a 5 by 5 grid. Although he mentions the futhark order and the 3 by 8

traditional arrangement in the introduction, he chooses to completely rearrange them for his system.

His interpretations are superficial, and seem to owe more to I Ching than to the Germanic system. This makes it an easy way for people to get started, and accounts for its huge success. However, to those interested in the revival of the Northern Traditions, he is seen as a cultural pirate, cashing in on our traditions at the expense of their integrity.

A turning point came in 1984 with the publication of Edred Thorsson's book on Rune Magic "Futhark". This was the first popular manual to include really accurate academic information on the Runes. Thorsson holds a PhD in Germanic studies, and his education shows.

His 1987 "Runelore" builds on the wealth of information. Although beginners have found these works somewhat dry, they are an essential part of modern esoteric runology.

Like other modern occult writers Thorsson is not without critics. His academic material is so good, and he writes with such authority, that it is easy to take the whole lot as "authentic". Reconstructionists point out that much of Thorsson's system is not based on elder sources, but like the New Age fusions, is a composite of various non-Germanic magical ideas with Jungian psychology and his own inventions.

The ideas of Thorsson most often criticised by Asatruar are; his Cabala-like tree with its connecting paths, his Armanen style rune yoga, and his insistence on tying the Runes to a modern Western Left Hand Path philosophy. Some see his Germanic psychology as a lot like Jung's model with Norse names slotted in.

Reconstructionists feel that Thorsson tends to start his books with excellent historical information, but then he goes on to present a system with little connection to the source tradition,

without clearly identifying his speculations, implying that they are somehow "authentic". Hard liners would argue that he has done much the same as the New Agers in inventing "tradition". The more moderate are grateful for the academic parts, and choose how much of the rest to use in their own practices.

Some of these problems have led to friction with many Asatru groups. Thorsson explains in Runelore that he originally intended to work organically within Asatru, but now finds that he and his followers must work as "outsiders" and carry on the "genuine" tradition alone. Many Asatruar see this as somewhat arrogant. However, "Futhark", and "Runelore" remain the best sources for detailed research once the speculative parts are identified.

Since the mid 1980s, there have been many New Age rune manuals. Although some have interesting insights, few are worth much comment. They have so far been characterised by a superficial approach, poor research, and a mix and match attitude that removes the Runes from their magico-religious culture. Often these writers will merely take the rune basics from another manual, and slot it into whatever system interests them; tarot, Wicca, shamanism, etc.

While nobody can claim to have a complete authentic runic system, we can at least become familiar with the old sources, and identify the new accretions in order to decide for ourselves which parts to adopt. In this way we can avoid falling into the trap of cultism, or the self-delusion of the fantasy traditions. If we want to defend our heritage from New Age piracy, we must be equally wary of our own urges to accept attractive inventions without question.

We need not reject the new out of hand, but neither should we count on a neat, complete system packaged for us. The way forward is to work within the Northern culture, and enable the re-emergence of a natural runic tradition from the foundation of the surviving lore.

The Anglo-Saxon Rune Poem
First 24 Runes

Old English:

ᚠ (**feoh**) byþ frofur fira gehpylcum;
sceal ðeah manna gehpylc miclun hyt dælan,
gif he pile for Drihtne domes hleotan.

Modernised script:

(**feoh**) byþ frófur fíra gehwylcum;
sceal ðéah manna gehwylc miclun hyt dælan,
gif hé wile for Drihtne dómes hléotan.

Modern English Translation:

Money[1] is a comfort to humans all;
but each one should deal it out abundantly,
if he wants before the Lord[2] to chance judgement.

---

[1] Wealth. From a word originally meaning cattle.
[2] Drihten. Lord. Usually a king or deity.

The Old Icelandic Rune Poem

ᚠ (**fé**) er frænda róg / ok flæðar viti / ok grafseiðs gata.

Money[9] is kinsmens' quarrel / and flood-tide's token[10] / and necromancy's[11] road.

      aurum[12]   fylkir[13]
       gold

ᚢ (**úr**) er skýja grátr / ok skára þverir / ok hirðis hatr.

drizzle is the clouds' tears / and the harvest's ruin / and the herder's hate.

      umbre   vísi
      shadow

---

[9] Money or cattle, indicators of of wealth.
[10] Kenning for booty. The flood (high) tide was best for raiding up rivers from the sea.
[11] Graf-seidh = "grave-magic".
[12] Latin word relating to each rune's meaning.
[13] Each verse includes a term for King or leader demonstrating the rune sound.

Authors

Here is a brief discussion of the better-known authors of books on esoteric runology.

Edred Thorsson

Probably the most controversial of the popular authors, Thorsson has published several extensive books on Runes in magic, divination, and religion. He has also published more scholarly works under his real name Stephen Flowers. His academic standard is high, and he does have a PhD in Germanic studies.

As one might expect from such an author, the books have plenty of accurate historical detail. The two best known are his first, "Futhark" 1984, and "Runelore" 1986, both still in popular use by New-Age and Reconstructionist rune users alike.

Thorsson calls his esoteric system "Odian", as opposed to "Odinist". While Odinists revere or worship Odin, Odians try to emulate Odin's discovery of the runes as written in the Havamal. To achieve this, he employs the idea of "internalising" the runes through rune yoga. These methods were developed by early 20th century German Armanic occultists Marby, Kummer, and Spiesberger, and have been adapted by Thorsson to fit the Elder Futhark.

To properly understand Thorsson's philosophical direction, we need to look at his long involvement with the Temple of Set, in which he holds one of their most senior ranks. Although he has made an effort in recent years to distance himself and his Odian efforts from ToS associations, and Odians can be quite defensive about being linked to satanism, the essence of Odianism can only really be understood in the context of its neo-satanic roots.

The Blank Rune

Perhaps the most hotly debated argument between rune users today. Traditionalists fume at the idea of adding a 25th non-rune. New-Agers like it. Where did it come from?

In 1982 Ralph Blum published his "Book of Runes". The book became a runaway success, partly due to the nifty set of ceramic divination tiles and pouch that came with it.

Blum claims that this blank rune idea came from a hand made rune set he bought in England the 1970s. He kept them unused for a few years, until one day he found them and started playing with them.

Blum decided to ignore the traditional Futhark order and three Aetts division (3 rows of 8 runes), and re-organised the 25 tiles into a random grid. Seeing no significance in the pattern, he decided to read them from right to left, and it happened that the blank tile was in the bottom left corner, thus last. It also happened that Mannaz was in the top right, thus first. These positions convinced him that there must be a deep significance to his new order. He then proceeded to use the I Ching (a Chinese method of divination) to assist him in interpreting each rune.

Traditionalists reading his account were horrified. Criticism was further fuelled by the fact that the book was such a commercial success. For most people who use runes for divination, this was their first, and often only, book on runes.

There are no references to a blank rune in any of the extensive literature on runes before Blum's book, so we can be quite certain that the idea dates to the mid 1970s at the earliest. There is certainly no evidence of a blank rune in the runic inscriptions, rune poems, or other Nordic literature dating from the time when runes were still in common use.

Search terms: blank rune, Ralph Blum, I Ching

Erilaz

Another of Krause's theories was that the word Erilaz, which appears in a small number of inscriptions, had a meaning of "Rune Magician". This was taken further by Thorsson, who postulated a cult or guild of rune magicians connected with a tribe called by the Romans "Heruli".

There are about a dozen early inscriptions of the form "I the Eril, wrote this" (-az being the masculine singular word ending). There is no indication in the inscriptions that gives a clue to the meaning of the word. However, there is fairly good linguistic evidence.

It is accepted by many scholars that there is a linguistic link between the name of the Germanic warriors listed by the Romans as "Heruli", the "Erilaz" from the runic inscriptions, and the Old Norse "Jarl", Old English "Eorl", and modern English "Earl". However, there is still much debate and disagreement among the experts, many do not accept that "Erilaz" from inscriptions has anything to do with the actual groups called "Heruli".

If we look at the linguistics, the only viable theory connects all of these words to warriors or armies. The reconstructed Germanic root is "***Har**jaz", = "army". The root word survives remarkably little changed in modern English as "to **harry**", a term still used in the military to describe repeated surprise attacks designed to wear the enemy down, or test their strength. It also survives in German as "**Heer**" = "Army". It is also the root word of the warriors of Valhalla, the "Ein**her**jar", and of names such as "**Here**ward" (army-protector).

The Heruli were "the army people", "those who harry", or "the marauders". "Ek Erilaz" almost certainly meant "I the warrior". The word obviously had a lot of prestige, and this is not surprising in a culture that valued warriorship so highly. The word gained further in prestige until it came to mean

"army leader" (Jarl/Earl). There is a clear linguistic theme in which the meaning of the root word remains consistent. It is highly unlikely that such a word would have diverted its meaning so radically that it ever suggested "rune magician" at any stage.

There is mention in the Rigsthula that a Jarl should be an educated person, who should know runes and also magic, among many other things. It can not be interpreted as saying that a Jarl was a rune magician, merely that an ideal Jarl should be broadly educated. Warriorship was still the Jarl's primary business. Virtually all other sources place Jarls squarely in their military and political occupations.

Nothing in the linguistic or historical evidence suggests "Erilaz" means "rune magician". In fact the bulk of evidence points against it. The most widely accepted meaning of "ek Erilaz" is "I the Earl", indicating a warrior of high standing or a commander who is stating his authority.

Search terms: ek erilaz, Wolfgang Krause, harjaz, harjan, harjilaz. See also Oxford Dictionary of Etymology for Erilaz as origin of Earl.

————

Further Linguistic Information

Proto Germanic reconstruction (dating before 100ce)

***Har**jaz = "Army" (cognate with German **Heer** = Army)

*-**il**- = "person belonging to" (cognate with English **–ling**) Example: Earth**ling**

***Harjil**az = "Army Person" = Warrior

Note 1: Cognate words = words directly related in form, meaning, & history.

Note 2: that **j** is pronounced as a **y** as in English "**y**es" (or the J in German "Ja") Eg. Har-yaz. Har-yil-az.

Historical Instances

Roman: **Herul**i, Greek **Erul**oi (dating from around 250ce onwards)

Runic: **Eril**az (dating from around 200ce – 400ce)

Further Evolution in written texts:

Old Saxon   – **Erl**   – Man, Warrior
Old English   – **Eorl** – Warrior Leader, Noble
Old Norse   – **Jarl** – Warrior Leader, Noble
Modern English – **Earl** – Noble Rank

All of these refer to warriors or military leadership.

Most Likely Evolution of the word:

*Harjil-... **Heril**-… **Eril**-... **Erl** ... **Eorl/Jarl** ... **Earl**

 Army Person - Warrior - Warrior Leader - Rank/Nobility

Erilaz/Herilaz, Heruli Phonology

When the Romans asked the raiders "what do you call yourselves?" they would have answered "the warriors", Heril**oz** (plural of Heril**az**). A common effect in the phonology of words with such endings is that the preceding vowel is conditioned by the vowel in the ending as it changes. This happens as the mouth unconsciously changes shape in anticipation of the next vowel. This would have caused lowering and rounding of the **i** as the ending changed from "**-az**" to "**-oz**" (singular to plural).

The conditioning of the unstressed **i** would have made it sound like a **u**, making Heriloz sound like Heruloz. Hence the Romanised "Heruli" rather than "Herili".

The initial **h** in *harjaz was never dropped (eg. Heer), most likely because there were other words that needed to be distinguished from it by the **h**. Dropping it would have caused it to sound like another existing word. However, with Herilaz, there were no competing words. In this situation an initial **h** often becomes optional.

Erilaz is often transcribed Erila**R**. The final **R** indicates a transitional period as the Germanic final **z** evolved into the Old Norse final **r**.