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**Runes in Plain Sight**



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## **1. Introduction**

Runes have always captured the imagination of scholars and enthusiasts alike. This has most likely to do with the fact that Runes have been shrouded in mystery and their functions are regarded to range from communicative to aesthetical all the way up to the mystical, the magical and the majestic. The Runes' uses, symbolism, functions, origins, connotations, religious and significance have already been the subject of research, yet there are plenty niches left for further research to take place. The research that has already been performed focuses on more ancient times, but it is my intention to venture into a more contemporary field by filling the niche regarding the runes in more recent manifestations. This more recent frame of research stems from the many appearances of runes in contemporary literature, society, neo-religions and pop-culture that I have encountered. Hence, I wish to map and understand the reason why, and how, runes still carry on as socio-cultural and literary elements despite the fact that runes have long since been abandoned as a common practise, and the average person has little or just basic knowledge of them. I hope to clarify that runes are not only a field of research that concerns ancient times and archaeological sites, but also can be found, researched and applied to and within our high-tech society.

## **2. Method**

I will clarify this by first providing a historical framework, establishing a broad base in order to open the topic for any reader. Several of the questions I will raise peruse topics such as whether runes still command the same respect as they did centuries ago and whether they still empower the same functions, significance and religious denotations today as well as determine how the 'image' of runes has been created and shaped over time, and which connotations have been developed by contemporary society. Examples of contemporary adaptation and appropriation of

runes that I shall touch upon include modern Germanic/Celtic idolatry by pop-cultural scenes and relevant literary examples such as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* and David Farland's *Rune Lords*.

In order to be able to determine what role runes play in contemporary media like films, books and beliefs, it is important to establish a concept of the runes' history and origins first, by looking at more than the primary runic alphabet, *futhark*, alone. As a result, a clear picture of the multiple runic alphabets and their evolution should emerge. Once the history and diversity has been established it is necessary to examine the original function and significance runes held when they were still commonplace. Because the origins and functions are quite extensively theorised many theories still seem to clash in means of emphasis in the runes' role in society as well as its origins. After taking a closer look at the discussion surrounding these topics I will shift the perspective of the modern age, seeking correlations between runes in society then and now, as well as looking at how contemporary media, companies and literary genres borrow, adapt or overhaul runes completely.

## 2.1 Theoretical Framework

The historical context later provided is based upon years and years of research by some of the most renowned medievalists and runologists. Numerous important works form the basis for my research, but this does not even scratch the surface of all that has been researched in this field. Some of the important works concerning the many angles of research that merit acknowledgement include: *Runenkunde* (Düwel, 2001), *Runes around the North Sea and on the Continent AD 150-700* (Looijenga, 1997), *Orakel der runen : handboek voor gebruik en interpretatie van een oud orakel, de runen* (Blum, 1994), *Runsvenska namnstudier* (Salberger, 1976), *Raadsel der runen* (Boer-den-hoed, 1963), *Runeninschriften im älteren Futhark* (Krause, 1937) *Runes, an introduction*(Elliot, 1989). *An introduction to English Runes.*(Page,1999).

### 3. Historical Background

Runes are an ancient script, long shrouded in mystery and often misinterpreted. Even today scholars continue perform research on obscurities that are, as of yet, unsolved. Runes themselves are a unique script, used primarily as an alphabet that lends itself to inscription. The oldest runic script (second to eighth century), Elder Futhark, its name consisting of the first six runes in the classic sequence: *futhark*, consists of 24 characters (fig 1), each with a corresponding phonological element, much like our own roman alphabet. It consists of angular characters (as opposed to our cursive script), though many characters still bear similarities, even today. The reason for this is that runes were inscribed in various objects, be it wood, stone, or even metal. Runes can be used to form words and sentences in the same manner our roman script can. Elder Futhark (EF) was used from approximately the second century (earliest surviving EF inscriptions dated from this era) to the eighth century, and was used to write Proto-Norse (evolved from Proto-Germanic) which is part of Proto-Indo-European, the precursor to all Germanic languages (English, Frisian, Dutch, German, Danish, Norwegian etc) (Baker,3). EF consisted of 24 individual characters, each of which has its own 'name'. The names were reconstructed from the later alphabets (rune poems) and will be discussed in more detail later on. EF could be considered the 'original' runic script, and it is the progenitor to serveral later and minor runic alphabets which will be discussed in chapter 3.2.

| Rune | UCS | Transliteration | IPA         |   |   |          |         |
|------|-----|-----------------|-------------|---|---|----------|---------|
|      |     |                 |             |   | l | i        | /i(:)/  |
| ƿ    | ƿ   | f               | /f/         | ᚠ | ᚡ | j        | /j/     |
|      |     |                 |             | ᚢ | ᚣ | ī (or æ) | /æ:/(?) |
| u    | u   | u               | /u(:)/      | ᚤ | ᚥ | p        | /p/     |
| þ    | þ   | þ               | /θ/,<br>/ð/ | ᚦ | ᚧ | z        | /z/     |
| a    | a   | a               | /a(:)/      | ᚨ | ᚩ | s        | /s/     |
|      |     |                 |             | ᚫ | ᚬ | t        | /t/     |
| r    | r   | r               | /r/         | ᚭ | ᚮ | b        | /b/     |
|      |     |                 |             | ᚯ | ᚰ | e        | /e(:)/  |
|      |     |                 |             | ᚱ | ᚲ | m        | /m/     |
| w    | w   | w               | /w/         | ᚳ | ᚴ | l        | /l/     |
| h    | h   | h               | /h/         | ᚵ | ᚶ | ŋ        | /ŋ/     |
| n    | n   | n               | /n/         | ᚷ | ᚸ | o        | /o(:)/  |
|      |     |                 |             | ᚹ | ᚺ | d        | /d/     |

Fig 1. Elder Futhark (Image source: Wikipedia)

### 3.1 On-going Debate

The origins of the Germanic runic alphabet, *futhark*, are still among one of the greatest mysteries shrouding runes. The theories are quite far ranging, from “... the fantastic to the probable” (Elliot,<sup>3</sup>) and heavily influenced by myths, mystics and misinterpretation (and manipulation) by untrustworthy research such as performed by the German Third Reich, who sought to seize the runes as part of a ‘pure Aryian’ origin for “... not only the runes but all alphabetic scripts”(3). Leading the discussion on the actual beginnings of *futhark*, there are three leading theories which

argue that *futhark* has its roots in Latin, Greek and Northern Italic of which Elliot claims the latter of these is the most prevalent on grounds that it “offer the most striking parallels” in relation to other inscriptions found in the Alps. The Latin theory was pioneered by the runic scholar L. F. A. Wimmers in his 1874 treatise *Runenskriftens Oprindelse og Udvikling I Norden*(qtd. in Elliot, 3). In short, Wimmers concludes that the runes F, R, H, S(fig. 1) are parallel to the corresponding Latin capitals, and then continues to find similar parallels between all of the runes.

A similar theory has been put forward by S. Angrell (*Die Herkunft Der Runenschrift*, 1938), who also turns to the Latin script, only the cursive version which is based on Pompeian inscriptions(qtd. Elliot, 4). This theory, however, does not hold up very well because the runic script as “epigraphic,[...]little secular and utilitarian”(Elliot, 4) is not likely to have been derived from a cursive, practical script. The Scandinavian scholar O.V. Friesen, on the other hand, places the origin of *futhark* with the Goths, deriving the runes from Greek letters with some characters (the meaning of which could not be derived from Greek) with Latin origins(qtd. in Elliot 3-4). Friesen’s views have gained credence due to their inclusion in the 1929 *Encyclopedia Britannica*. (Elliot, 3-4). While each of these theories holds sway with many scholars, it seems unlikely that any of them is sufficiently accurate and this is why it is still a disputed matter. Despite the fact that each of the theories is inherently different they do allow us to draw some conclusions based on their study. Elliot does so quite eloquently: (the first regarding the Latin theory, and the latter to the elaboration of the North Italic theory by Marstrander and Hammarström(qtd. in Elliot, 4)).

There are two points which emerge with the preceding discussion: (1) The origin of Futhark must fit in with the dating of our earliest known runic inscriptions in Scandinavia; and (2) certain Latin-runic parallels are too striking to be ignored yet

the Latin alphabet must be ruled out if particularly strained derivations are to be avoided and if the variable direction of runic writing is to be satisfactorily explained.

[...] The general basis of the agreement [on North Italic origin] may be summed up like this:

(1) there is an unmistakable resemblance between many runes and letters found in the alpine inscriptions; this is probably not fortuitous.

(2) Some Germanic tribe must have been in touch with northern italic writing somewhere at some time.

(3) The creation of the *futhork* must have preceded the eventual extinction of North Italic scripts by the Latin alphabet.

(4) From the alps the knowledge of *futhork* must have been carried north to reach Scandinavia not later than the third century. (Elliot, 6-7)

In conclusion, in the years leading up to the third century runes must have spread to the Goths, the North Sea Germanic tribes and all the way up to Scandinavia. This short window into the on-going discussion on how *futhork* originated should provide a picture as to how researchers remain divided with no theory achieving dominance. Nevertheless, a rudimentary map of how *futhork* reached Scandinavia has been drawn. As mentioned earlier, EF was not the only runic script in use over the centuries, to illustrate how diverse the runic alphabets are the next section will discuss some of the younger runic alphabets that were used for centuries.

### 3.2 Other Runic Alphabets

Runes became more commonplace and widespread in use, and as a result of this they were adopted and adapted over many generations and many regions. Runes, like most aspects of language, were susceptible to change and this resulted in multiple branches of runic alphabets. The alterations made to the runes over time included stylistic changes as well as attempts to combine alphabets. Different cultures and communities created new runes (adapting or expanding existing runes, for example), by altering the rune names or rearranging them altogether. As cultures had sounds or sound changes unique to their dialect at the time (e.g. The Great Vowel Shift, fifteenth century) they would often also have runes that are specific to that area and timeframe (e.g. Anglo-Saxon Futhorc). EF has various daughter alphabets, and most noteworthy among them are Anglo-Saxon Futhorc, Younger Futhark, Medieval runes and the Marcomannic runes.

The first daughter alphabet is the Anglo-Saxon Futhorc, used from the fifth all the way up to the tenth century. The first notable change in the Anglo-Saxon runes is apparent in the change of the initial sequence (FUTHORC vs. FUTHARK), which is in accordance with the sound changes that took place in the language itself (Like the split of allophones like short and long /a/). Futhorc was expanded to accommodate such changes and thus consisted of 26, 28 and later even 33 characters. Futhorc was in use alongside Latin, by which it was eventually replaced (by the seventh century), but not before becoming closely linked to it. This association resulted in the fact that the *wynn* and *thorn* eventually became extensions of the Latin alphabet (Page, 188). It was used to write Old-English and occasionally Latin (where runes were used as the word they

represented, much like Kanji work today ( Chinese/Japanese character that symbolise a phrase or word, unlike spelling it out phonetically). For example: the rune *ehwaz*, meaning horse, could be used to replace said word. The Anglo-Saxon runes remained in use up to the eleventh century, but by this time it was very rare (Page, 189).

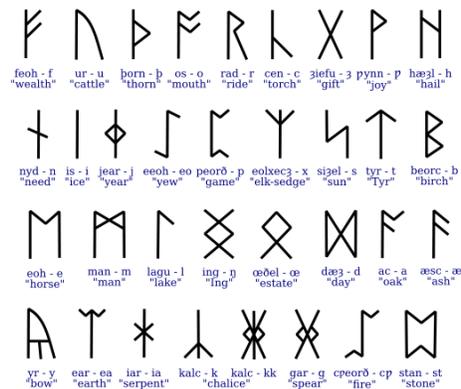


Fig 2. Anglo-Saxon Futhorc (Image source: Wikipedia)

Marcomannic runes are a lesser known runic alphabet which consists of an interesting amalgam of EF and Anglo-Saxon runes. The Marcomannic runes were supposedly an attempt to allocate all letters in the Latin alphabet a runic equivalent, as discussed by Wilhelm Grimm in his treatise *Ueber Deutsche Runen* (149-159).

The next, and one of the most important younger runic alphabets, is Younger Futhark(YF). YF was in use from the ninth up till the eleventh century. Younger futhark was divided in to Danish and Swedish-Norwegian variants, the first being the ‘short-twig’ runes and the latter the ‘long-branch’ runes. The difference between the Swedish-Norwegian version and the Danish runes remain controversial, but the difference is thought to be in their function (the long-branch were used for inscriptions in stone, and the short-branch for inscriptions in wood)(

Spurkland, 73-76). As is apparent in the image below, YF lost around a third of its runic inventory (16 characters, reduced from 24 in EF). Spurkland concludes with that the reason for this must have been “a matter of combined factors. These changes in the writing system must originate in an interplay of ... graphic simplification, changes in the sound system and changes of rune-names” (79-80).

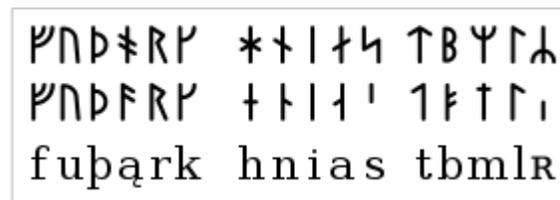


Fig 3. Younger Futhark Image source (Wikipedia)

The last of the runic alphabets presented here is what is known as the Medieval runic alphabet. It was in use from around the thirteenth to the seventeenth centuries and numbered 27 runes, evolved from YF. It was completed around the thirteenth century and included the introduction of the dotted runes from Viking Age (eighth to eleventh c.). The dots were a system to indicate whether a rune was voiced or unvoiced. Each rune corresponded with only a single phoneme whereas in YF each rune could correspond with multiple (Enoksen, 137). By now runes were still used for writing in the Old Norse language, but as runes coexisted with the Latin alphabet interaction was inevitable, they resulted in mutual influence such as the Latin borrowing of the thorn, and the Scandinavians starting to double spell runes like the Latin alphabet did (Enoksen, 140). It is also during this time, around the sixteenth century, that the first scholarly work began and thus the first runologists emerged. As noted by the famous botanist Linnaeus: medieval runes were still in common use even as late as 1734. He remarked upon this when he

visited the Swedish province of Dalarna during this period, which is known as “the last stronghold of the Germanic script”(Jansson, 174)

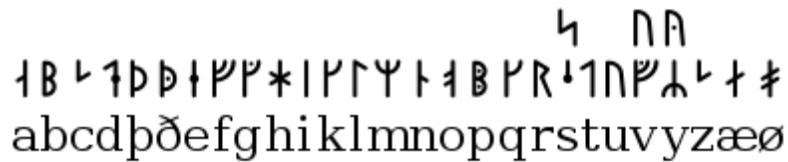


Fig 4. Medieval Runes (image source: Wikipedia)

#### 4. Functions

Archaeological and historical evidence suggests that runes were not practical as a particularly utilitarian script. Because of this it merits laying out what functions runes actually pertained and whether they were truly only significant as a mystical tool or whether runes were more practical than we are led to believe. The functional applications of runes seem quite wide spread, Some scholars (Elliot, Page) have argued runes to have served multiple purposes concerning communication, inscriptions, personal names as well as all sorts of religious and magical applications. The way runic inscriptions were employed were obviously quite limited in comparison to regular script(e.g Latin manuscripts etc.), as we see that almost every surviving runic inscription has been carved into wood, stone or objects. Of course, this does not lend itself very well to lengthy messages or texts. With this in mind it does require mentioning that some of the rune stones found were quite large, but still they are part of a society which had quite an extensive oral history, depending on bards (scops) to memorise and add to all the numerous sagas and poems they kept record of. Communication has been a secondary function throughout runic history and that it was more commonly used as “a way to invoke higher powers to influence the

lives and fortunes of men”(Elliot 2). So this allows for two branches divided into 1: the runes as a script; and 2: “[t]he runic lord of the old Germanic world”(Elliot, 2).

#### 4.1 Runes as a Script

Due to the fact that only so few runes have been found in manuscripts (most of them being carvings into wood, stone and metal as opposed to written manuscripts), along with the fact that runic script never truly developed into a cursive script ( and thus moving past the somewhat crude act of carving). Instead preservation by manuscripts, the oral tradition was what allowed law, legend and poetry to be carried on from generation to generation. Mention is made of some poetry inscriptions on wood, but so few of these have been confirmed that these are to be regarded as exceptions only(Elliot,62).An example of this is the Ruthwell cross, which contains fragments of one of the oldest Christian poems *Dream of the Rood* (Cross). Only few runic manuscripts survived, foremost among the short list the so-called Codex Runicus which contains a law text called ‘*skaanske lov*’. The most common applications for runic inscriptions in the utilitarian sense would include a number of applications such as short messages, inscriptions on tools and items, and inscriptions found in tombs and inscriptions to serve as ornamentation. As the runes had such powerful magical connotations it is very likely that the secular and the magical purpose of the inscription were often existing side by side. (Antonsen,37)

The true breakthrough came in 1955, when the ‘Bryggen’ inscriptions were discovered in Bergen, Norway (Bryggen was a fortress). The Bryggen inscriptions indicated that runes had a much bigger role in everyday life than was assumed. Though it was a local find, it indicated that runes might have had the same implications across Scandinavia. Among the finds are inscriptions of ownership, such as the skull of a walrus inscribed ‘Jóhan á’, meaning ‘Johan owns’. Further indications of daily applications are items inscribed with a name as well as ‘Warrior’ indicating

the owner's profession or reputation. More practical inscriptions were found to be business letters, orders as well as phrases (Christian) which might have been intended as wards or amulets. (National Library of Norway)

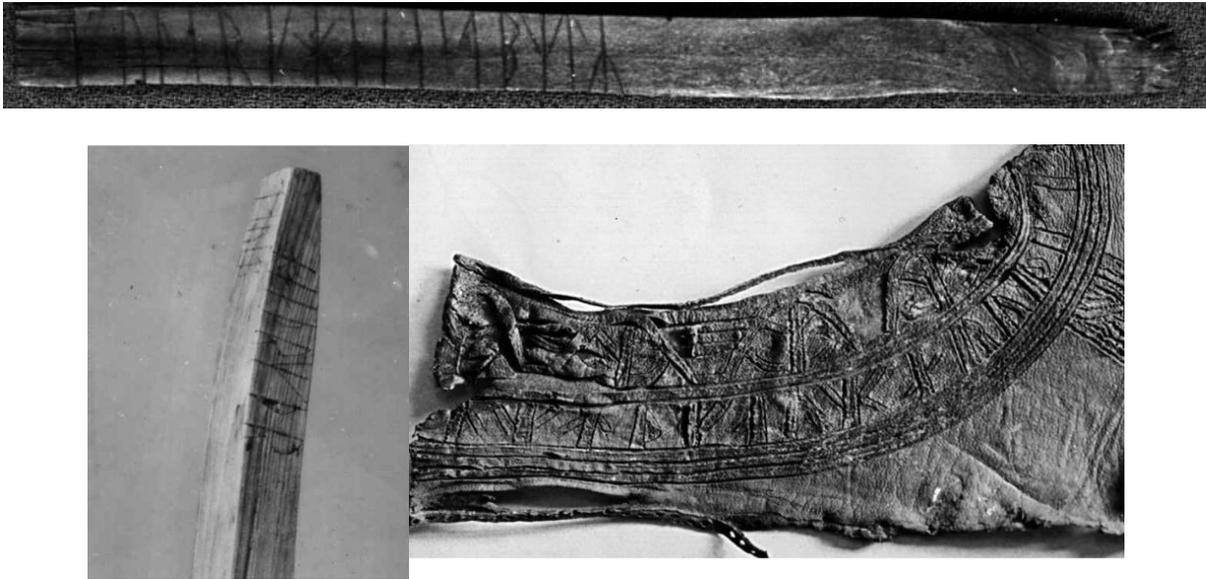


Fig 7-8-9. Exerpts from the Bryggen Inscriptions (Image Source: National Library of Norway)

## 4.2 Runic Lore

Runes are often entreated with magical properties, each rune signifying a word of power in itself (which will be discussed later on) granting the bearer or owner of the inscribed item the magic properties of the inscribed runes. Another well-known magical property of the runes is said to be that one can discern the will of the Wyrd (fate) through a process called rune-casting, which is effectively a form or fortune telling, similar to Tarot, using the names and connotations of the

runes to discern the future. This belief that runes themselves possess magical powers is supported by believers in magic referring to Old Norse literature which contained references to runic sorcery (Rune poems, discussed later on). However, these sources date from a period exceeding the period of the development of runic writing by at least a thousand years, along with the fact that Christianity had already been introduced at the time (Antonsen, 39). The mention of runes being of truly magical or religious origins is also contradicted by the fact that most of the earliest inscriptions (from the 1<sup>st</sup> up to the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD) have little or less to do with any deity or cult whatsoever and passages that have been interpreted as ward against evil or ghosts turned out to be a-religious or simply of a more mundane meaning (Baeksted, 1952). Further credence to the fact that magic attributes were not endowed until well past the introduction of Christianity is the fact that many inscriptions were found to be quite pious in accordance with Christianity. These findings include not only prayers for the souls of the deceased but also inscriptions in church doorways, church bells and even baptismal fonts (Antonsen, 39). The very fact that Christianity deemed runes suitable for Christian use discredits the fact that the runes themselves are distinctly heathen in origin.

However, leading experts (Page, Baeksted, Elliot) disagree on the notion that runes were associated with post-conversion (to Christianity) magic, the occult or paganism. As mentioned before, Elliot regards magic a primary function of the runes, with communication being only of secondary value, while R.I Page is on the fence, saying: "...while I think that Baeksted, in firmly rejecting magical values of runes, has sometimes to resort to special pleading ... 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" (Page, 13). Despite this on-going debate on this point, runic lore and magic remains relevant to this thesis as it is mystifying to see that these supposedly magical connotations still cling to the runes up till this day, and that these magical

element are exactly what keeps runes so fascinating to contemporary audiences today. It is because of these mysterious elements that contemporary media and fantasy fiction continue to incorporate runes into their work. As scholars argue about the runes' origins, Norse mythology offers another, more straightforward and religious explanation. The story is one of sacrifice for the greater good, suffering and martyrdom which can be found in many religions in at least some form or the other. The story is of how Odin, as told in this rendition by Dr.Hopfner, in his quest for knowledge, sought out the giant Mimir, the guardian of the spring of wisdom which nourish the world tree, Yggdrassil. Mimir would not allow Odin to drink from the spring of knowledge without tribute, so Odin sacrificed his left eye and Mimir thus taught him the mysteries of this world. Odin was unsatisfied with his knowledge, and on his way back to Valhalla he came across a barren tree. His cloak caught in the branches and even the mighty Allfather was unable to free himself. He hung there for nine days until:

His inner being gradually grew clearer and more luminous. Now he finally found the symbols of life's noblest values. He bent down deeply from the tree. Groaning with extreme exertion, he took up the signs and cut them into the trunk with his sword. Runes he called these sacred glyphs, because they whisper wisdom to the initiated (the word "rune" is related to the German "raunen"= to whisper). Now, Skyfather was possessed by the mighty ability to free himself from the tree. He fell down, jumped up, called his steed and rode back to Valhalla, the castle of the gods ... Now the signs became the sacred writing of the Germanic people, as announced by the Eddic Rune Poem. (qtd Rune-scripts).

This story is found in the Hávamál, part of the Elder Edda (poetic). In the text Odin also describes the magical traits the runes possess and gives a clearer picture of how he obtained his wisdom:

Wounded I hung on a wind-swept gallows

For nine long nights,

Pierced by a spear, pledged to Odin,

Offered, myself to myself

The wisest know not from whence spring

The roots of that ancient rood.

They gave me no bread,

They gave me no mead,

I looked down;

With a loud cry

I took up runes;

From that tree I fell.

...

Runes you will find, and readable staves,

Very strong staves,

Very stout staves,

Staves that Bolthor stained,

Made by mighty powers,

Graven by the prophetic God.

...

Know how to cut them,  
 know how to read them,  
 Know how to stain them,  
 know how to prove them,  
 Know how to evoke them,  
 know how to score them,  
 Know how to send them,  
 know how to send them.

...

The Wise One has spoken words in the hall,  
 Needful for men to know,  
 Unneedful for trolls to know:  
  
 Hail to the speaker,  
 Hail to the knower,  
 Joy to him who has understood,  
 Delight to those who have listened. (Hávamál, trans. Auden)

Apart from telling us how he obtained the knowledge of the runes and spread it among the gods and men, it also implies how runes have a more powerful purpose than mere writing characters. Odin refers to them combined into ‘charms’. He explains that they are to be inscribed into staves (“runes you will find, and readable staves”(Auden, 4) and it even contains a warning to those who seek too much knowledge and not to allow those unworthy to gain runic power.

“Better not to ask than to over-pledge / As a gift that demands a gift./ Better not to send / Than to slay too many” (Auden, 7). The descriptions of the rune charms Odin has obtained also hint at the use of magic: “Know how to evoke them/ ... / Know how to send them”. “I know a sixth / It will save me if a man/ Cut runes on a sapling’s roots / With intent to harm; it turns the spell; / The hater is harmed, not me” (Auden, 6, 13 ). With the functions of runes made clear, it is now time to look at some of the archaeological evidence found by means of two noteworthy artefacts.

### 4. 3 Archaeological evidence

Most of what we know about runes stems from archaeological evidence unearthed across the world. The findings come from a multitude of eras and locations, giving us a glimpse of what runic inscriptions actually looked like, as briefly touched up on earlier, concerning the Bryggen findings. One of the most famous findings is the Franks Casket, an Anglo-Saxon casket that is said to belong to a French church from which it was looted during the French revolution. It dates back to the eighth century and hails from Northumbria. After the looting it came into the possession of French family who used it as a sewing box. It eventually found its way to the British museum where it still resides today. As Webster explains in 'The iconographic programme of the Frank's Casket', The Franks casket displays a multitude of imagery from both Christian (Adoration of the Magi) and Germanic Legend (the legend of Sigurd) (qtd. Britishmuseum.org). As Page indicates: the writing across the casket is mostly in runes and Old-English, but also shifts into Roman, Latin scripts, and then back to runes while still writing in Latin (qtd. in British Museum). The main runic inscription on the front is a riddle in Old-English, by which the origin of the casket could be discerned. The riddle can be translated as: “The fish beat up the seas onto the mountainous cliff; the King of terror became sad when he swam onto

the shingle.” The answer provided is “Whale’s Bone”, leading to the conclusion that the casket was fabricated out of the bones of a beached whale (British museum.org).



Fig 5. The Franks Casket (Image source: Wikipedia)

Another interesting find is that of the Scramasax of Beagnoth. It is a ninth century Anglo-Saxon seax (knife), found in the river Thames. It is an important finding because, as Page and Wilson point out, it is the only inscription found using the full 28 character Anglo-Saxon alphabet (qtd. in Britishmuseum.org) On one side it has the name “Beagnoth” inscribed in runes. This is significant because the runic inscriptions on armour and weaponry often indicated either who created it or for whom it was made. The other unusual element on this artefact is that the inscription can be found on the blade itself, whereas most runic inscriptions were found on the hilt or scabbard. This, like the Franks Casket, can be viewed in the British Museum today (British Museum.org).



Fig. 6 The Seax of Beagnoth. (Image Source: Wikipedia)

Another Archaeological find of major significance was located in Bryggen, Norway. As described before, numerous inscribed artefacts were found and catalogued by the National Library of Norway.

Besides physical archaeological evidence, runes are also often described throughout well-known texts such as *Beowulf* (8<sup>th</sup> century) and *The Wanderer* (10<sup>th</sup> century), hinting to day-to-day application as well as magical function. An example from *Beowulf*, mentioning runes (while also showing how the thorn was still in use) can be found in line 1694:

/ Swa wæs on ðæm scenum sciran goldes /  
 / þurh runstafas rihte gemearcod, /  
 / geseted ond gesæd hwam þæt sweord geworht, /  
 / irena cyst, ærest wære, /  
 / wreopenhilt ond wrymfah.

Translating to: “ Also on the hilt-plates of glittering gold/was carefully characterized in runic letters/written and expressed for whom the good blade,/the spiral-hafted sword, the serpent patterned,/had first been made.” (trans. E.Morgan)

This reference to runic inscription indicates that runic inscriptions on weapons vary from

simple carvings, to the most elaborate patterns wreathed in gold. Also, note that here too the inscription is on the hilt of the sword, indicating that the inscription on the blade of the seax of Beagnoth is indeed unconventional. It is safe to say that a weapon such as described above would not be tailored towards combat, but served as lavish, perhaps royal, gifts. Inscription is only one of many functions runes have fulfilled, so in order to determine whether runes today still fulfil similar roles it is essential to look at them in more detail.

## **5. Runes in present day**

Over the ages the interest in runes started fading more and more into the background, but this does not mean that runes have disappeared completely. Despite this peripheral position in main stream media and the public eye, runes are, nowadays, hiding in plain sight. Even if there is no primary role for the runes themselves, they are still widely used, as for instance by mass media, companies, video games and within multiple pop-cultural and musical genres.

### **5.1 Hiding in plain sight**

An excellent example of this would be the Bluetooth protocol. Anyone with a relatively modern mobile phone, tablet or laptop has been in contact with or familiar with what Bluetooth is. Those mentioned above would thus also be able to identify the Bluetooth icon and the company's logo (below).



Fig 10. Bluetooth company logo (Image source: Bluetooth.com)

The interesting, yet not very well known, story behind Bluetooth and its logo is that Bluetooth in fact refers to Harald “Bluetooth” Gormsson (Old Norse: *Haraldr blátǫnn Gormsson*) who united the myriad Danish tribes, to become king of Denmark (c. 970). Like king Bluetooth, Bluetooth the protocol unites numerous devices under its protocol. The most relevant element here however, is the Bluetooth logo. The Bluetooth logo actually combines the H and B rune into a single bind-rune (Seigfried). This means that runes are presented to a very wide audience in many ways, without them actually being distinctly aware of it.

Another large community to whom runes are very much alive and who actively pursue Runology (if not involving some superstition) includes numerous pop-cultural groups. Excellent examples of these are both the ‘Viking Metal’ fan base as well as Live Action Role Play ‘LARP’ societies. The Viking metal fan base revolves around a collection of bands hailing from Scandinavian nations such as Sweden or Finland (Amon Amarth, Sweden; Finntroll, Finland). Their music is often based on folklore and mythology, which is also incorporated in their lyrics as well as their appearance, lifestyle and through their merchandise conveyed to their fans. Famous bands like the Viking metal band *Amon Amarth* exhume many traits from runic times into the entirety of the atmosphere surrounding the band. Their lyrics are based upon the sagas and stories from the Poetic Edda, telling of the exploits of Norse deities, Odin and Thor as the most noteworthy figures. This manifests itself in the use of runes and ancient heraldry (Thor’s hammer: Mjölner, Odin’s knot: Valknut) in the band’s merchandise and video clips, depicting the sagas and battles they incorporate in their lyrics.



Fig 11-12. Amon Amarth band logo depicting Mjölhnir and AA performing with runic stage props. (Image Source: Amon amarth)

The second community which employs runes on a regular basis is the Live Action Role Play (or ‘LARP’) community. This community consists of large groups of people who dedicate a lot of time (and money) to, in essence, live the way people did hundreds of years ago. Massive events are held where these people come together to spend their weekends, vacation and holidays with likeminded people seeking to experience these authentic lifestyles. These events include the re-enactments of famous battles, artisan workshops on ancient professions (from basket weaving and tailoring to blacksmithing, rune carving and ancient battle tactics). Many people involved in LARP, as opposed to many of the ‘weekend warriors’, take these events very seriously. Copious amounts of money are spent on living like people did centuries ago. This dedication is paramount to preserving knowledge of runes and other ancient heritage alive in other circles besides the scholarly world.



Fig 13-14. LARP activities.(Image source: 2004 Marietta Medieval Faire.)

With these communities having such intimate contact with the old Scandinavian culture, it is inevitable that runes also become a part of their lives. In submerging themselves in this ancient culture some would even go as far as to experiment with religion. Some have taken up worshipping ancient deities, which has led to numerous degrees of neo-pagan religions, including people who take up ancient magic practises such as rune-casting and other shamanistic practises. Naturally, this does not make everyone interested in runes or mythology a shaman. Interest varies from those trying to divine the future, casting magical spells, or merely wearing runic devices on their person as a charm (necklaces, bracelets, tattoos etc.). Despite runes having lost their actual value in everyday life, they are still an important source of inspiration to both traditional and new media.

## 5.2 Other Well-known Adaptations

Literature is the perfect medium to embody all the exciting knowledge, power and mystery runes represent. As many of the new media, like video games, continue to appropriate runes in their variety of universes, it can be said that runes are most likely to continue to exist, hidden in plain

sight and adapted into roles similar yet inaccurate. This does not have to lead to the conclusion that this is an undesirable development. The constant flow of creativity will serve to keep runes a viable cultural output as developers and artists will always look to the original for inspiration. Examples of runes adapted in recent games would be the rune system in the newly released *Diablo 3* (Blizzard entertainment), allowing players to alter and improve their characters' abilities based on the chosen rune. These runes look nothing like the Futhark we know, yet it does preserve characteristics attributed to runes such as angularity, carving and magical connotations. The prime literary example of runes undergoing a thorough redesign and adaptation is, of course, J.R.R. Tolkien's well-known *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy. Tolkien's linguistic prowess has been extensively researched and it is clear to anyone that he has successfully adapted runes, (Dwarven runes, as he uses them in his lore) eventually paving the way for an extensive evolution surmounting to the development of his own new script as well as a corresponding language: Elvish. Tolkien did not simply come up with an imaginary language; as a linguist he took pains to refine the language extensively, providing detailed notes on the intricacies of the language as well as providing far-reaching background information as well as a set of grammatical rules (which can be found in the appendices of the LOTR special edition).

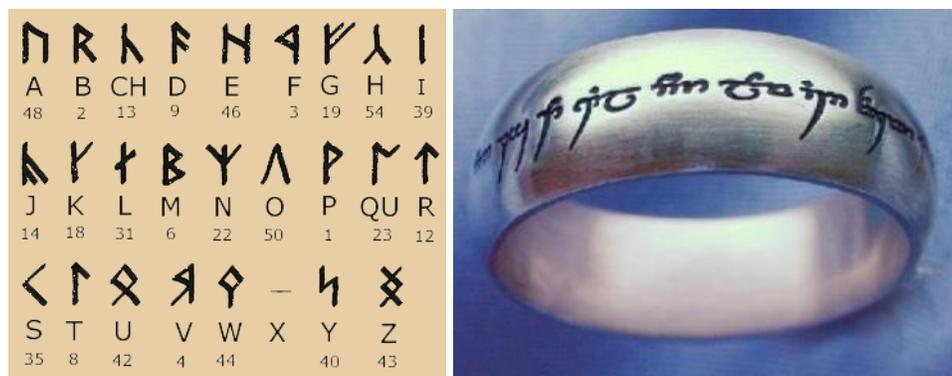


Fig. 15-16 Dwarven runes and an Elvish inscription(Image source: LOTR wiki )

For those who look for runes they are present throughout modern media, even if their role is secondary or peripheral. Fantasy literature is one of the most likely branches of fiction to focus on, or even incorporate runes. In order to see in what way this could be done it is imperative to take a closer look at one such series. Whereas LOTR is, as mentioned before, a perfect example, it has also already been extensively researched in the past (Chance 2001, Flieger 2004). In order to shed light on what function runes hold in more recent fantasy literature, it merits looking at a successful yet relatively unknown fantasy series which prominently features runes: David Farland's *The Runelords* (1999).

### **6. Runes in Fantasy Fiction: *The Rune Lords***

As the name suggests, runes are one of the main foci in *The Runelords* (RL). In short, the story is based on the fact that the kingdoms in its universe are ruled by powerful nobles, commonly referred to as Runelords. They are called so because every Runelord has been branded with numerous runes across their body, granting them increased potency in distinct bodily attributes upon which this magic system is based. These distinct bodily attributes include features like Brawn: increasing physical strength, Wit: increased mental capacity, Metabolism: enhanced reflexes and among the others are "Glamour", "Voice", "Stamina", "Sight", "Hearing", "Smell" and "Touch". Beyond this, the story is a 'save the world' archetype does not merit in-depth discussion here. The element that makes *Rune Lords* interesting to us is because it is a prime example of how the existing concept of runes can be adapted into entirely new, but related, magical lore systems.

## 6.1 Endowments

The process of obtaining such runic power is called 'endowment' and is done by taking these bodily aspects from a donor (called dedicates). In general, endowments must be given up willingly, out of service or for monetary compensation, but some Runelords force their subjects to surrender their endowments (threatening loved ones and other nasty business) collecting so many endowments that they become superhuman in nature. These bodily aspects are taken from the dedicate by the means of a small metal branding stave called 'forcibles'. Forcibles are made from a rare magical metal called 'blood metal' which is cast into a stave bearing the rune corresponding to the desired endowment, which then has a single-use ability to take an endowment and brand it onto a recipient. A dedicate granting an endowment to the forcible is temporarily wracked by agony, followed by the loss of the endowment taken, thus an individual granting an endowment of Stamina would become fragile and susceptible to disease, and will remain so until (1) the dedicate himself dies or (2) the Runelord bearing that dedicate's endowment perishes, upon which the dedicate regains their lost aspect (only one endowment can be given per individual). Upon receiving an endowment the Runelord briefly experiences extreme ecstasy, and from that day forward will have, in this example, enhanced stamina allowing him to survive devastating wounds in battle or to become nearly insusceptible to disease as well as becoming a lot more durable in general. Endowments can also be taken from, and given to (animal to animal), animals. In general, this is used to breed superior warhorses and war hounds. Humans can also take endowments from animals, but this is considered barbaric as the Runelord becomes more bestial the more animal endowments he receives. In essence, Farland has taken the practise of runic inscription, combined with the belief that this involves magical properties, and has devised a system that allows the same principle to be applied to the human

body.

## **6.2 Runic wards**

Apart from the relation to Endowments, runes also appear as separate magical authority in the RL novels. While endowments are all about the properties they bestow upon the receiver, it is also a form of magic that can be practised by anyone with enough knowledge of the proper rituals, chants and available forcibles. Runes appear separately as the magic practised by wizards. These wizards wield elemental magic, and the runes they draw are elemental in nature. These symbols all carry some semblance of magical power, but some are more intricate and thus more powerful. Whereas a rune drawn by a wizard could shield a city's walls for centuries, the same rune drawn by a commoner would make the walls of their home slightly more durable. This correlates to runes being used by the common man as well as a separate caste of rune carvers, to whom it would be a profession. Or today, by a regular person or those who consider themselves modern day (neo-pagan) shamans and actively apply runic divination and spell crafting today.

## **6.3 Names of the Runes**

An interesting question to be raised in order to shed light on the correlations between runic magic in RL and the magical connotations associated with runic lore is whether they actually share characteristics that might lead us to conclude that the RL runes are in fact based on EF and its history or that it is based on the simple concept of 'rune' as simple symbols carved into rocks. Because runes in RL are mostly the work of wielders of the elements it is quite shamanistic in nature. Runes in EF are all granted names as well as characteristics that are unique to that individual rune in both meaning as well as alleged magical properties: The /z/ rune for example is

named Algiz, which literally means protection, and is thus used as protection rune in runic magic and has divinatory meanings such as protection, assistance, defence, warning, support and mentor. Because of these properties it is also associated with the Norse deity Heimdall, guardian of the passage between the worlds (Tara Hill, 7). Another clear example would be the /h/ rune Hagalaz, meaning hail, which stands for sudden loss, destruction, disaster and drastic change in divinatory runic lore and is said to have magical applications such as removing unwanted influences and breaking destructive patterns. Because of these seemingly negative connotations, the rune is associated with deities like Loki (the Norse trickster god) and myths like Ragnarok (the end of days). (Tara Hill, 1) In RL a similar situation is presented.

One interesting difference must be kept in mind while considering this correlation: in RL no runes are accurately depicted. The only information provided is that a rune is being drawn, but no detailed information is provided as the character describing them is often unfamiliar with runes, resulting in the most basic of descriptions. Regardless of any visual confirmation of the runes in RL resembling those used in ages past it is clear that the concept, though made to fit, is quite similar. As we see with *futhark* runes, the runes in RL have functions ranging from simple charms for the common man, as well as serving as powerful magical wards or offensive spells. A notable shift is that where EF runes are also associated with Norse deities, like the /a/ rune Ansuz represents Odin's wisdom and leadership, both offensive and defensive, god of wisdom as well as warfare, the runes in RL instead associate the runes with the corresponding elements. Water runes represent healing and protection, whereas Fire runes are considered offensive and destructive, but are also associated with cleansing and rebirth. This universe Farland has created is obviously different from our own, yet even the 'possible' in his world has parallels with the 'impossible' in our world about which, as illustrated in chapter four, the experts still do not agree.

## 6.4 Contemplation

It is interesting to see how Farland has embedded runes into his story so convincingly while leaving the reader in the dark as to the actual visual representations of the runes which are so often encountered throughout the story. While some might consider this a gap in the lore surrounding the RL universe in comparison to the well laid out runic systems (magical or otherwise) in series like LOTR, it is in fact a powerful story element. In leaving the runes to the imagination of the reader, it inspires them to think and consider what runes are and what they mean to the reader. It allows readers to shape either their own concept of runes, or to trigger an interest into reading more about runes. It also indicates that contemporary fantasy fiction expects at least some preliminary knowledge of or preconceptions about runes and the history behind it.

## 7. Conclusion

This thesis has given an account of the use and functions of runes throughout history and sought to determine how widespread the use of runes in modern society and media is and to what extent the functions of runes have remained the same or have changed. The analysis of the involvement of runes in socio-cultural aspects of society yielded the following results: a large demographic of our modern society are still continually exposed to runes by means of, for example, Bluetooth protocol, and through popular literary icons like Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*. More specific demographics consciously immerse themselves in the history and lore surrounding runes, by re-enactment (LARP) or more typically through pop-cultural music genres, modern media like videogames, and more specific literary genres like fantasy fiction. The reason why this is still the case can be attributed to the on-going discussions and obscurity surrounding key aspects in runic research. In particular, the indecision regarding the origins of *futhork* and the strongly divided

opinions regarding the elements of truth in magical lore. These on-going debates result in a grey area between truth and speculation that leaves room, and serves as stimuli for creative possibilities. Looking at Farland's *Runelords* in this manner displays how runes serve as a medium of continual inspiration which can be adapted time after time to fit the desired pattern, i.e., a fictional realm with its own unique runic magic system, while still drawing underlying parallels with actual history. In short, it is the versatility, history and aura of mystery that fuels the constant reiteration of runes throughout society.

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