LINGUISTICS

# Putting the Elder Futhark Into a Young Spiritualism: A Semantic Analysis of an Odinist Divination Guidebook

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The Nordic people embodied the Elder Futhark runes—the oldest-known form of the Germanic writing system—with esotericism (knowledge available only to a small group of people), seeing them as a direct line of communication to divinity. This mystical significance has been reintroduced to neopagan groups through guidebooks on runecasting, a divinatory practice in which the runes are interpreted negatively or positively depending on how they land. This analysis checks the interpretations of a popular Odinist writer against secular scholarship, evaluating for both semantic authenticity in the Germanic tradition and runic symbolism within Odinism—a modern religious sect based on pre-Christian roots in Northern Europe. All 24 runes are separated into three groups of eight depending on their relationship to the Old English and Old Norwegian rune poems, both of which are involved in the reconstruction of runic etymology. The findings indicate a range of ideological terminologies that either stem from intellectual obscurity or are anachronistic when compared to Germanic traditions. This illustrates a spiritual appropriation of the runic symbols rather than a return to pre-Christian concepts, thus disqualifying the text as a source of scholarship. Furthermore, the findings also define guidebooks as works of speculative literature—specifically, a revitalization of Gothic themes—within groups who have no sacred text. Further research should examine how other Odinist publications and practices create semantic derivations for religious purposes.

## Introduction

For the Nordic people, the Elder Futhark runes had already held religious significance. In a tale like the Greek Prometheus, the chief god Odin had suffered for several nights to learn the esoteric properties of these inscriptions. As Sanderson (2000) writes, Odin then passed the knowledge on to His people who, according to modern scholars, did not use the runes for magic until much later. Following the first century C.E., they had existed originally for everyday communication and to denote inheritance. Those who came to practice divination, however, revered the runes with utmost seriousness.

One type of divination included runecasting, a method of interpretation based on the individual meaning of these runes rather than their phonetic components. The runemasters would first carve the runes into bark, pebbles, bones or like materials. Upon the client's request, the practitioner would toss the runes on the ground. Runes that landed upright would then answer the client's question as per the Master's interpretation (Sanderson, 2000). Rune casting, therefore, was an intimate experience for Germanic people in the same way as modern prayer and meditation: through the ritual, the inquirer seeks specified knowledge, advice and assurance from a perceived authority.

Today, practitioners of Germanic neopaganism, such as Odinism, adopt their own modern methods of rune casting. The following analysis cross-examines a popular Odinist guidebook to runic divination with secular scholarship. Its initial purpose is to compare modern rune-casting interpretations to traditional Germanic meaning. Further research will also consider how Odinism reinvents traditional symbolism for use in contemporary spiritualism. These findings conclude that the text misappropriates rather than reincarnates the possible meanings behind these symbols. However, this appropriation becomes its own form of literature in the wake of modern religious reformation.

## Method

### Primary Text

*The Big Book of Runes and Rune Magic: How to Interpret Runes, Rune Lore, and the Art of Runecasting* is a guidebook written by Edred Thorsson, a pen name of American runologist and occultist Stephen Flowers. Thorsson (2019) had already made a career of writing similar guidebooks, mentioning his previous publications from the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the preface, he promises that this most recent work will be a true spiritual successor to the others. Further, he advertises his work as appropriate for those whose "interests … run the gamut from historical information to the actual practical application of runic knowledge in working the magic of these symbols," a magic that he later calls "comprehensive" and "culturally authentic" (p. vii). Thus, Thorsson credits himself in dual capacities as a popular researcher and a practitioner of magic. Because of his self-promoted accuracy and long-standing connection to Odinism, this text will be useful in understanding the neopagan adoption of the runes.

### Source for cross-analysis

Michael P. Barnes's *Runes: A Handbook* contrasts Thorsson's work as a source of secular scholarship. Based on undergraduate courses given through the University College London Department of Scandinavian Studies, Barnes's (2012) book aims to introduce knowledge of the runes to those unfamiliar with the subject. Additionally, Barnes takes a hardline stance against incorporating mysticism into runic scholarship. He divides scholars into those who are more imaginative and others who are more skeptical, writing, "Whatever the starting-point, we should examine the evidence carefully and dispassionately, ever striving for precision and clarity. … The silent transformation of supposition into fact does little to advance understanding" (p. 194). This non-speculative approach continues throughout Barnes's work, therefore making it a source worthy for cross-analysis.

### Categorization of Runes

The way this analysis categorizes the runes depends solely on how runologists reconstruct meaning with surviving knowledge. Barnes (2012) writes that because the knowledge of the original rune meanings are lost to modern scholars, they must reconfigure these meanings by using manuscripts

Table 1: Relation of Elder Futhark runes to the Old English and Old Norwegian rune poems

| Concordant (OE/ON) | Discordant (OE/ON) | Absent (OE only) |
| --- | --- | --- |
| (1) *fehu* | (2) *uruz* | (7) *gebo* |
| (5) *raidho* | (3) *thurisaz* | (8) *wunjo* |
| (9) *hagalaz* | (4) *ansuz* | (14) *perthro* |
| (10) *nauthiz* | (6) *kenaz* | (15) *elhaz* |
| (11) *isa* | (13) *eihwaz* | (19) *ehwaz* |
| (12) *jera* | (16) *sowilo* | (22) *ingwaz* |
| (20) *mannaz* | (17) *tiwaz* | (23) *dagaz* |
| (21) *laguz* | (18) *berkano* | (24) *othala* |

written in languages descended from the Germanic tradition (see Appendix A for a full list of the reconstructed names and translations). Such manuscripts include the Old English (OE), Old Norwegian (ON) and Old Icelandic (OI) rune poems, all three of which begin with the name of the rune followed by the rune's meaning. Runologists have since compiled the meanings from all three of these poems to better discern the original meanings of the Elder Futhark—the version which, incidentally, belongs in the Odinist's prelapsarian worldview as unaffected by Christianity's later perversions (Thorsson, 2019).

Unfortunately, understanding the original rune meanings is not without difficulty. The time between when these poems first appeared—OE in the ninth century and ON in the 17th century—accounts largely for the extent of linguistic separation. For instance, while some of the OE and ON runes have more apparent etymological and semantic similarities (e.g. *rad* in OE and *reid* in ON both mean "riding" or "ride), other comparisons are less clear (e.g. *tir* in OE means "guiding star," but *Tyr* in ON refers to "the god Tyr"). Additionally, the OE poem retains all 24 of the runes while the ON only has 16, having effectively lost eight of the runes over time (Barnes, 2012). This knowledge is significant when analyzing the primary text due to Thorsson's active speculation on each rune's meaning despite the varied degrees of scientific backing.

Borrowing from Barnes's classification, this analysis categorizes all 24 Elder Futhark runes evenly into three groups of eight. Table 1 lists the names of the runes and their numbered order in Elder Futhark sequence under three categories: concordant, in which the semantic meanings in the OE and the ON poems agree; discordant, in which the semantic meanings vary; and absent, in which the runes only appear in the OE poem. The next section will examine how Thorsson discerns meaning from each of the runes depending on their group. For this purpose, the examination will focus primarily on the information included in Thorsson's 16th chapter "Runic Symbolism and Divinatory Tables" in which he offers both interpretive lore and negative or positive readings depending on the runecast.

# Findings

## Concordant Runes

As likely anticipated, the similar semantic meanings in OE and ON are also present in Thorsson's readings: The first rune *fehu*, meaning "wealth," can be interpreted positively as generosity or negatively as greed or poverty; the fifth rune *raidho*, meaning "ride," can signify either a rewarding or turbulent journey ahead; the ninth rune *hagalaz* can be a damaging force in its current form as a "hailstone" or a rejuvenating one when it melts into water; and the 12th rune *jera*, meaning a "good year" or harvest, may result in a reward or failure (Thorsson, 2019). The interpretations from these semantics progress seamlessly but only to a point. Take, for instance, the rune *fehu*. Thorsson (2019) describes the rune with strong Promethean overtones as a "mobile power... that flows outward like fire from its course and must be circulated in order to be beneficial" (p. 172). This language, as well as Thorsson's (2019) later reference to "the 'inner wealth' of knowledge" (p.172), directly compares the myth of Odin to that of the Greek character in which both beings brought wisdom to humanity. It is likely that this figurative and non-material idea of wealth, although picturesque in a spiritual mindset, far transcends what the Germanic people had understood literally as how much livestock one person had owned (see Barnes, 2012). Additionally, Thorsson (2019) seems to take the Promethean metaphor of fire much too far, writing that a negative reading indicates a "'burn[ing] out' of your creative energies" (p. 172). Already, the guidebook's language indicates an overlap with other belief systems rather than a "culturally authentic" (Thorsson, 2019, p. vii) reincarnation of Germanic traditions. Although it may be possible that historical interaction with the Greek peoples contributed to this mythological theme, such evidence goes beyond the scope of this analysis.

Contemporary influences also appear in the runic lore that Thorsson suggests. The 20th rune *mannaz*, meaning "man" or "human," is perhaps the most glaring example. A positive reading of this rune indicates that "individuation of the self is needed. There is happiness in inner and social life, born of a realization of the truths of human existence" (Thorsson, 2019, p. 194). Self-actualization in the form of "individuation" points directly to Jungian psychology. Influences from Carl Jung and his contemporary Sigmund Freud appear later in the other runes: According to Thorsson (2019), the 10th *nauthiz*, meaning "need" or "affliction," advises that "stress is turned to strength through consciousness" (p. 182); the 11th rune *isa*, meaning "ice," promises an "enhancement of self-consciousness and of ego awareness" (p. 184); and the 21st rune *laguz*, meaning "water" or "liquid," represents a "vast sea ... of which humankind is usually unconscious" (p. 195). The differentiation between consciousness and unconsciousness, as well as the concept of the ego, are all terms that seem inappropriate when applied to a culture that had existed several centuries prior. This language is likely to appear within new age esotericism anyway, but its use is anachronistic in a text that promises historical accuracy.

## Discordant Runes

Thorsson also attempts to reconcile the semantic differences between OE and ON into one cohesive interpretation. Three of these runes follow a straightforward metaphorical structure despite gaps in each reconstruction. The 16th rune *sowilo* is understood to mean "sun" in OE and ON, yet Barnes (2012) writes that both languages disagree on its form (*sigel* in OE, *sol* in ON), making it difficult to clearly trace an etymology. Thorsson (2019) represents this rune positively as guidance or hope and negatively as a lack of direction, thus retaining some of the significance in each poem. The second rune *uruz* likely transformed drastically due to the extinction of the "auroch" and the need for a later semantic replacement, becoming "drizzle" in OI and "slag" in ON (Barnes, 2012). Thorsson (2019) clings to the idea of strength both in animalistic and metalworking terms, again showing some semblance of a core principle. Finally, Barnes (2012) writes that the 18th rune *berkano* likely relates to a birch tree even though a line in the OE rune poem – "without seeds it produces shoots" (p.162) – does not apply. Despite this, Thorsson (2019) applies this rune to the "principle ... of self-contained and continuous propagation or growth" (p. 192), relying on the natural element of each poem. The interpretation of these three runes are perhaps the easiest to follow in this section.

Other runes require outside knowledge. An interpretation of the fourth rune *ansuz* ("god"), the 13th rune *eihwaz* ("yew") and the 17th rune *tiwaz* ("the god Tyr") all require some grasp of Norse mythology, as Thorsson (2019) references the "divine conscious power as embodied in the god Odin" (p.176), the "World-Tree Yggdrasill" (p.186) and "the world column (Irminsul)" (p. 191) to all three, respectively. Of course, a dedicated practitioner of Odinism would likely understand these terms, and an initiate would have read the other sections of Thorsson's book for better understanding. Additionally, Barnes (2012) notes that the meanings behind *ansuz* and *tiwaz* are mostly sound in their reconstructions except that the latter rune had meant "guiding star" in OE. However, the meaning of *eihwaz* as "yew" is unclear, as Scandinavian inscriptions reveal a possible derivation of from the term *algiz* meaning "elk." Although the rune poems Thorsson uses do not indicate a clear connection to these mythologies, the inclusion of pagan elements creates an authentic appearance.

The same cannot be said for the remaining two runes, both of which differ widely in their semantics. For instance, the third rune *thurisaz* changes from "thorn" in OE to "giant" in ON. According to Barnes (2012), some scholars believe that "thorn" was meant to replace the pagan association of "giant;" regardless, the vague description in OE could still apply to a giant depending on the translation. Thorsson (2019) battles with both meanings. He does write about the "brute nature" of both elements, but he devolves again into Jungian and Freudian concepts, mentioning such terms as "unconscious forces," "the psychosexual symbolic response," "erotic expression" and "reactive compulsion ... in relations with the opposite sex" (pp. 174-175). Here, he

could be representing the "thorn" as a phallic symbol, but that again would be relying on psychoanalytic concepts. The sixth rune *kenaz* displays a similar discrepancy, having meant "torch" in OE and "boil" or "sore" in ON. Scholars are still unsure which one is the original meaning (Barnes, 2012). However, Thorsson attempts to incorporate both into his readings, albeit separately. A positive interpretation represents a "creative fire" meant for "a person in the arts or crafts," yet a negative one becomes "dissolution … in the form of physical disease or the breakup of a relationship" and "problems with children" (p.176). This section conflates the creative power of art with that of reproduction, the former being separate from physical illness and the latter again relying on psychoanalysis.

### Absent Runes

Thorsson describes some of the runes present only in OE in a straightforward manner like the concordant category. However, this likely stems from the lack of disagreement with – or, rather, the linguistic inability of this version to disagree with – the other rune poems. In the seventh rune *gebo*, meaning "gift," Thorsson (2019) advises the runecaster to "provide for hospitality and generosity with guests" without "giv[ing] all you have" (p. 179); the eighth rune *wunjo*, meaning "joy," indicates "social and domestic harmony" in the positive and "strife and alienation" in the negative (p. 182); the 19th rune *ehwaz*, meaning "horse," harkens to the relationship of trust between the beast and its rider, two "harmoniously working entities" (p. 193); and the 23rd rune *dagaz*, meaning "day," signals enlightenment or "a great awakening" (p. 198). Whether metaphorical or literal, these runic readings are easy to trace. Barnes (2012) would object to Thorsson's method, though. "Given the extent of the disagreement between the Old English and Norse sources," he writes, "the reconstruction from English evidence alone … is a hazardous undertaking" (p.163). Because Thorsson is forced to borrow only from the OE tradition, the interpretations here are dubious. Therefore, the runes in this section may not mean what Thorsson alleges them to mean – even if he indicates the contrary.

More peculiar is Thorsson's interpretation of the remaining runes, particularly that of the 14th rune *perthro*. The original meaning of this rune is largely unknown due to the vague description in the OE poem (Barnes, 2012), which indicates an object of merriment. The guidebook is not transparent about this ambiguity. Instead, Thorsson (2019) simply calls the rune a "device for casting lots" (p. 187), likening the practice of runecasting to gambling. In this sense, the mystery of the rune's meaning becomes its own interpretation. Additionally, Thorsson invents the object mentioned in the rune poem out of this obscurity without indicating that there is any. This creative leap perfectly illustrates a desire for definite semantics in the runic lore, one that the practitioner can point to for an unambiguous understanding. While Thorsson's interpretation of this rune is especially dubious, it reflects a need to find substance in something unsubstantiated.

Thorsson (2019) also introduces modern political ideology into the 24th rune *othala*, meaning "inherited possession." (Note that the order of *othala* and *dagaz* are transposed in Thorsson and Barnes's lists.) He writes that the lore behind the rune indicates a psychological as well as a social aspect, both "the self in all its complexity" and "the group ... distinguished from those outside that group" (p. 198). The latter one is peculiar as it seems to promote some form of tribalism. Thorsson (2019) seems to confirm this association up to a point, advising that "attention must always be paid to customs and order within the group and to the vigilant defense of the group" (p. 199). Although he later speaks to the benefit of "productive interaction with 'outsiders'" (p. 199), these lines speak to social conservatism and insularity. He is quick to draw a line, though, claiming that "a misunderstanding of 'odal' can lead to a totalitarianism that runs counter to the interests of the whole" (p. 199). The use of "totalitarianism" speaks to a condemnation of fascist ideology which, incidentally, has historically used the symbol of *othala* "to signify Aryan and Germanic heritage, power and life" (Barnes, 2012, p. 195). With this phrasing, Thorsson outwardly distances himself and his beliefs from white supremacy while at the same time injecting his own ideologies into the runic interpretations.

## Discussion

This analysis cross-examined a runic divination guidebook with secular scholarship to better understand how Germanic meaning is reincarnated in an Odinist context. The findings illustrate that Thorsson's interpretations of the runes are not as homogenous as he claims. Rather, they appropriate runic symbolism to spread new age concepts within extended metaphor, Norse and Greek mythologies, Freudian psychoanalysis, Jungian psychology and modern political theory. On a prescriptive level, the primary text therefore does not serve as an accurate representation of traditional Germanic practice of runecasting. On a descriptive one, however, the analysis illustrates the Odinist worldview as a rebirth of pagan ideologies.

Thorsson's interpretation of *perthro* perfectly embodies this endeavor. With little evidence to reconstruct the Elder Futhark's original meanings, scholars are forced to either claim ignorance or speculate. The latter option appeals most to Odinists whose religiosity lies squarely in these elusive semantic components. Any chaos in this worldview likely causes discomfort among practitioners, especially in a rune like *perthro*, which leaves virtually no indication of the object it once stood for. The best way to deal with chaos, then, is to order it. Naturally, the mystery of the runes becomes the inherent meaning. *Perthro* becomes the embodiment of this mystery, represented as a device in a game of chance, a gamble with unknown outcomes. No one will likely know the original meanings of the Elder Futhark, so practitioners must chance inaccuracy to achieve clairvoyance, even if that means borrowing from other schools of thought.

In effect, the Odinist readings of the Futhark becomes its own literature. Mountfort (2015) describes runic guidebooks as a kind of Gothic revivalism. According to him, these guidebooks carry the darker themes that define Gothic literature, namely supernatural fascinations, omens, curses, occult knowledge and destiny. These themes appear frequently in the primary text. Thorsson (2019) puts the discordant runes *ansuz*, *eihwaz* and *tiwaz* in the context of Norse mythology, relying on the supernatural significance of proper nouns. Depending on how they land, each rune can also indicate either a warning or a celebration. The runes *fehu* and *perthro* embody either the known or the unknown. Finally, runes such as *mannaz*, *nauthiz*, *isa* and *laguz* promote self-awareness and personal growth. One of the few differences between Gothic literature and neopaganism is how either group represents these elements, with the former being more sensational and the latter as a guide to monitoring external forces (Mountfort, 2015). These thematic components – whether incidental or intended – makes for an interesting context in which academics could view Odinist publications and practices.

Of course, Thorsson's work is not the lone representation of the Odinist worldview. As Blain & Wallis (2004) write, neopagans do not have what would be considered a sacred text compared to major religions, such as the Muslim *Koran* or the Jewish *Torah*. In fact, considering any text sacred would create a fundamentalist organization that these groups are explicitly trying to avoid. The closest ideal of a printed text would be the rune poems – which, according to the authors, puts the magician in direct communication with divinity or otherworldly entities. Thorsson's work, then, is not as much a scripture as it is a contribution to the conversation within Odinist circles. His interpretations provide some method of interpreting runes, but they are not the standard for religious practices. As such, further research should examine other forms of meaning in neopagan circles, especially guidebooks by other authors or other runic magic.

## Conclusion

This study both critiqued the authenticity of Thorsson's runic lore and extrapolated common themes among the interpretations. Despite the varied degree of surety in the semantic meanings, the guidebook introduces concepts that would otherwise be unfamiliar to the Germanic people who existed millennia prior. Therefore, Thorsson's active speculations do not advance the study of the Elder Futhark runes, and thus his work should not be considered a scholarly source. However, the runes function as a literary form in their modern iterations as mystic symbols. Therefore, the themes in Thorsson's work present an opportunity to examine semantic debates within neopagan circles, particularly in Odinism.

## Author Biography

Ashton Corsetti is a senior at Dixie State University majoring in Professional and Technical Writing and minoring in Psychology. In Fall 2018, he received his Associates of Science in Communications from Weber State University

Appendix A

| Number | Rune | Name | Translation |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | ᚠ | *fehu* | cattle, wealth |
| 2 | ᚢ | *uruz* | ? wild ox |
| 3 | ᚦ | *? þurisaz* | giant, monster |
| 4 | ᚨ | *ansuz* | god |
| 5 | ᚱ | *raiðo* | riding, ride |
| 6 | ᚲ | *? kauna* | boil |
| 7 | ᚷ | *gebo* | gift |
| 8 | ᚹ | *wunjo* | joy |
| 9 | ᚺ | *haჳalaz* | hail |
| 10 | ᚾ | *nauðiz* | need, affliction |
| 11 | ᛁ | *isaz* | ice |
| 12 | ᛃ | *jara* | (good) year |
| 13 | ᛇ | *? i(h)waz* | yew |
| 14 | ᛈ | *? perþo* | ? |
| 15 | ᛉ | *? alჳiz* | ? elk |
| 16 | ᛊ | *sowilo* | sun |
| 17 | ᛏ | *tiwaz* | the god Tyr |
| 18 | ᛒ | *berkana* | birchwood |
| 19 | ᛖ | *ehwaz* | horse |
| 20 | ᛗ | *mannaz* | man, human |
| 21 | ᛚ | *laჳuz* | water, liquid |
| 22 | ᛜ | *ingwaz* | Ing [a proper name] |
| 23 | ᛟ | *oþala/oþila* | inherited possession |
| 24 | ᛞ | *daჳaz* | day |

Source: Barnes, 2012, p. 22. Note: Question marks indicate ambiguity about the name or translation. All the names above are reconstructed forms and are thus likely to be incorrect according to historical relevance.

where he also completed two levels of certification from the College Reading and Learning Association International Tutor Training Program. Before then, Ashton was selected to participate in the National Italian-American Foundation 2018 Ambassador Peter F. Secchia Voyage of Discovery Program. He currently tutors at the DSU Writing Center and is considering linguistics as part of his graduate studies. He can be reached at ashton.corsetti@dmail.dixie.edu.

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