

Runes

(BCSFAzine #425, October 2008)

By Garth Spencer

A conversation at a BCSFA meeting about writing systems led to a breakdown of communication: I was maintaining that medieval runes not only served as a sort of alphabet, but the individual symbols could be used as ideographs on their own. The hostess brought me a volume to correct my impressions – which had nothing to do with the Norse runes I was talking about, but about Oriental symbols. I should have been more specific.

The short version of the story is that, even long after Europe was Christianized, some Northern Europeans used a sort of alphabet that was vaguely associated with paganism, with the Norse and Danes and Goths, and with folk magic. As symbols, alone or in combination, runes were used for calendars, for divination and in talismans.

That said, we can now go into details. Strictly speaking, an “alphabet” is not only a set of signs for the sounds that make up words; “alphabet” is specifically applied to the Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Arabic scripts, to the symbols used for Russian, or Coptic, or Armenian or Amharic – in fact, for a host of scripts descending from ancient Punic – all of which start with similar sequences. The Latin A, B, C, D, etc. are mirrored by the Greek Alpha, Beta, Gamma, the Hebrew Aleph, Beth, Gimel ... and so it goes. (Incidentally the Hebrew names for the letters are recognized as words for “ox”, “house”, and so on.)

Runes follow a different sequence, usually called a “futhark” ...

ƿ	Feoh	ᚠ	Perth
ᚢ	Ur	ᚡ	Eoh
ᚦ	Thorn	ᚢ	Elhaz
ᚱ	As	ᚦ	Sigel
ᚷ	Rad	ᚹ	Tyr

<	Ken	ᚷ	Beorc
χ	Gyfu	ᚠ	Ehwaz
ƿ	Wyn	ᚡ	Man
ᚱ	Hagal	ᚢ	Lagu
ᚦ	Nyd	ᚣ	Ing
l	Is	ᚤ	Odal
ᚥ	Jera	ᚥ	Dagaz

There have been different versions of Norse runes at different times and in different places, not only with variant forms but also with a different number of symbols, and with different names. The version shown above is the Elder Futhark, perhaps the earliest known form of the runes. The names of the runes – like the original names of letters in Hebrew – were taken from everyday objects or concepts, not all of them natural: “Feoh” was a word for cattle, “Urs” a word for the aurochs (now extinct), “Hagal” for hail. Also like the earliest alphabets, the runes are very angular, adapted to carving into wood or stone.

A longer futhark developed in Anglo-Saxon Britain; a shorter sequence, the “Younger Futhark”, developed in medieval Scandinavia. As late as the 17th century, runes were used for writing, for ciphers, for calendar reckoning and for folk magic. In the early 20th century yet another runic system was dreamed up by a German mystic, and co-opted by the German fascist movement in the 1930s.

Come to think of it, a lot of fringe culture from the 1930s was co-opted by the German fascist movement. Neo-fascism keeps popping up again in our generation. What I call “fringe culture”, including crop-circle theories and pyramid power and astrology and, well, rune lore keeps making a comeback, too. Without looking terribly hard I keep finding books on runes, on the same shelves where you find astrology guides and numerology texts, palmistry, witchcraft courses, and a thesis arguing that Atlantis was a Neanderthal stronghold.

(This is not to say that someone sporting runic tattoos or writing runic graffiti is likely to be a skinhead, anymore than a member of the Bush administration is likely to suffer from Alzheimer’s, just because they work in the same building as the late President Reagan.)

Runes, like Tarot cards, are prone to evoke a sense of cryptic, potent symbolism. (At least, crude geometric designs and symbols of basic, common experiences have that effect on me. Must be something in the limbic system.) I want to call this “iconic” even though it’s a misnomer.

The fact of life, however, is that *any* arbitrary set of symbols can develop “iconic” significance for people, in my sense; just give it enough time and

reinforcement. It has been traditional to claim that Tarot cards are some cosmic, timeless, Platonic powers *in themselves*, not just as symbols; the same thing has been claimed of runes, Hebrew letters, and Sanskrit writing, even of their very sounds. It may not matter.

The folk-magic aspect of runes combines the notion of runes as signs for Cosmic Values, and the notion that you can somehow divine character, foretell the future, or cast spells by rearranging the signs. From the days of Viking raids to the present, people have been casting runes for divination, writing runes in rings, and combining runes in talismans for health and good fortune.

The conclusion of this is obvious: we have here an Unregulated Industry, and it is past time to call for professional standards of runecraft, and government regulation. It only remains to consider whether this is a Federal or a Provincial jurisdiction.

We could also strike a Royal Commission to ask whether the archetypes of First Nations monumental art bear “iconic” significance. This calls for further study.