

Runic inscriptions in Britain

By Thomas Smith

Runes are a hot topic in New Age and Heathen spiritual circles, but what are they exactly? In this short article I hope to quickly introduce the reader to runes, before giving a few examples of how archaeological evidence can help us understand the spirituality behind these spiritual tools. Ultimately the aim of this article is to not just enlighten the reader on a basic level, but to show that we have the physical evidence to understand runes, and how the vast majority of publications on the topic vary so far from the true spirituality that the ancestors practiced.

To summarise the wealth of archaeological evidence on this topic, runes are an ancient magical alphabet that appears in the first century AD and is commonly used through until the late medieval period in Europe. The language is used in a variety of contexts, to describe a wide spectrum of topics, and can be found etched on a multitude of different artefacts and objects. Examples notably include practical purposes, such as calendars, cryptology, riddles, and poems, but also on oracle devices and as magical symbols. Tradesmen utilising the runic tradition sometime adopted runes as personal makers marks, much like in other cultures (Notably in pottery production and stonemason tradition, the Roman traditions being a good example of both), but runes could also be used as graffiti to convey simplistic messages. The most famous examples of graffiti come from the Hagia Sophia, in modern day Istanbul, Turkey. This was once the centre of Christendom, being the most important church in Byzantium, and yet Norse runic graffiti has been found inscribed within it. This just goes to show how far the knowledge of the runic alphabet stretched across Europe, even appearing in places that perhaps one would not expect.

The first runic alphabet was likely founded upon early Mediterranean examples, such as the North Italic, Etruscan, and Roman Latin. Evidence for this comes from pictographs and ideograms that depict the forms of runes before the creation of a full alphabet. Hence it is likely that certain runes had a history of meaning previous to being used alongside other runes. From the second century AD onwards we see the first working runic alphabet being used in Europe; the Elder Futhork (pronounced 'foothark'), so called after the first six characters of the alphabet. The Elder Futhork is made up of 24 unique runes, split into three 'Ættir', Old Icelandic for a family.

The use of runes didn't arrive in Britain until the post-Roman period in the fifth century AD. This was a time of great conflict and migration, where the Romano-British population of Britain struggled against peaceful settlers, invaders, and raiders from Europe. The Germanic peoples that arrived in Britain during this time formulated a new culture, which became known as Anglo-Saxon (The art form being known as Celtic – not to be mistaken for the indigenous Iron Age people of Britain). The Anglo-Saxon culture used an adapted version of the Elder Futhork runes, reaching 28 characters. This continued to develop as their culture continued to flourish, and with the Christianisation of the Anglo-Saxons came the recording of the Anglo-Saxon rune poem in Old English. This was written in Latin between the eight to tenth centuries, the original document being destroyed by fire in 1731. Each rune was translated along with its character, name, and verse to describe the meaning. The original poem was likely to be developed by someone who specialised in runes, with the translation being done by someone who was a member of the Church but sympathetic to Heathen beliefs, or a rune master who had converted to Christianity. However, with such long gaps in time between developments and translations, it is impossible for us to tell how close to the truth the Christian recording in Latin is to the original Heathen interpretation. Given that new runes were added, it is likely that interpretation was rather fluid over the centuries, adhering instead to overarching themes instead of precision meanings.

The closest modern comparison being that of the tarot, specifically Thoth style decks, whose meanings and definitions follow a similar pattern of interpretation to runes - being more about overarching themes in spirituality.

Caution must be taken by a modern reader when researching this poem, as most sources are 're-interpretations' of the original Christianised Latin interpretation. This means that someone has taken the Old English version, disagreed with it, and made it appear more 'Heathen' to their tastes. This should not be attempted, or published, simply because a modern practitioner should be humble enough when walking this path to accept the view point of the original practitioner of the time, and learn from their writings. It is wrong to try and impress a modern view point over an ancient one, and then publish it as a correction, as this will simply confuse future generations on the true meaning of the runes. As modern practitioners we cannot dictate if the original recorder of this history was Heathen, Christian, somewhere in-between, or had the worst or best interests at heart. The most we can do is accept that, without this person doing what they did, we would have nothing at all, and everything would be a mystery. Hence the greatest of respect is demanded, from one peer to another, and no re-interpretation of words is needed. This is how the ancestors practiced their spirituality, with an open mind, so why should this not be how we practice ours?

Many modern words are related to Old English, with the Black Country accent being the closest dialect to Old English that has survived the ravages of time. The Anglo-Saxon Futhorc was used up until the ninth century AD, by which time Viking settlers brought with them the Younger Futhorc runic alphabet, which was used up until the twelfth century. Some evidence suggests that the Viking and Anglo-Saxon runes were combined in some localities where both cultures met, for example, the Ruthwell Cross in Dumfries displays not only the longest passage of runic writing in Britain, but also expands the Elder Futhorc to 33 characters using Younger Futhorc influences. The passage is an example of the Northumbrian Old English poem, '*The Dream Of The Road*'.

The ironic thing about this example is that the runes are utilised to talk about the trials of Christ, but with Heathen overtones. Hence it is a mixing pot of three separate spiritual belief systems. Another example of this is the Bewcastle Cross, which depicts Christian iconography combined with runic scripture. Objects such as the Falstone Stone, found in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, show that there is even evidence for those with knowledge of the runic system were bi-lingual, and had experience of cultures further afield, with this example having Irish cultural influences. These examples show truly how versatile and accepting the ancestors were - something that all modern people on any spiritual path should seek to emulate, as most boast to be secular and yet just in their approach to copy the ancient paths.

The vast majority of New Age books on runes would have you believe that they are written like a typed letter, individual with no join between the two symbols. The truth is closer to that of modern hand writing, with runes being formed sometimes singular, and sometimes fluently joined. A brilliant example of this is the Alu Funerary Urns, from Spong Hill in Norfolk. This archaeological excavation unveiled around 1700 cremation urns, used for burials, and made in an Anglo-Saxon style. The urns are typically stamped with a runic maker's mark, the likes of which translates as '*magic beer*'. This runic inscription is formed with double runes, a more complicated form of rune shape formed through the joined symmetry of runes. The Thames Fitting, a silver gilt dragon dating to the ninth century and now in the British Museum, features similarly joined runes that flow from one to another, like joined handwriting. There are some modern day rune masters who follow the traditional pathways that teach this, but the vast majority who learn from books and not archaeological examples do not.

One may question why the runes are written in such an angular fashion, which persisted in the tradition throughout the centuries. The reason for this may rest in more spiritual elements of the tradition, where Woden takes nine twigs, and then splits the adder into nine parts. There are also nine Norse realms, and nine parts to the traditional '*nine herb Anglo-Saxon charm*'. Woden's nine twigs may have been etched with runes, and may have been able to form the fabled Web of the Wyrð, from which sacred geometry can be formed - the blueprint for all runes. Hence new runes can be created, so long as they fit within the web. This further expands the utilisation of double runes as having spiritual importance, with such heavy reference in Heathen mythology on the duality of ice and fire. Fusing these two polarities together creates something new in Heathen mythology, and is a core concept, so the presence of such types of runes on funerary urns is not a surprise; there is no greater duality than life and death, forming the afterlife.

In total there have been up to 39 individual runes identified through archaeological research, with only 36 having been attempted to be translated. For all their uses across the centuries, the very spiritual essence of the runes has matured into a much more mysterious beast, the likes of which has reached the point to which it can be claimed that certain aspects are unknown by any who now live. There are some who would say that despite this, they know the answers, through whatever means – but that is not possible, and simply beyond the point. The magic of the runes is still very much alive, but to utilise it to its full extent one must have the utmost commitment to study all of its mysteries, and to not take things for face value. Truly, proficiency with the runes can be achieved not through the study of New Age books that cover the topic in a single chapter, but by researching the objects manufactured by the ancestors, studying their accepting ideologies, and generally broadening one's mind to the life that was, as opposed to what is.