



The Skeptics SA guide to Runes, Vikings and the New Age

Browse any New Age Bookshop and you'll find sets of the ancient Norse Runes whose magical essence gives them the power of telling the future and protecting from harm. Not many of us take this seriously, but we might accept that it is merely popularized version of the Norse religion. Closer study shows that the New Age version of the Runes give us much more reason to be skeptical. The Norsemen were a tough race living in a violent age. The term Viking only applies to the raiders who burned and pillaged their way around the European coasts in the 9th – 11th century, but they were just the most extreme exponents of their values. Their leaders were men like Eric Bloodaxe and Thorfinn Skullsplitter, and their elite were the berserkers who worked themselves into a psychotic fury before battle. The greatest honor was to die in battle, as dead warriors spent the afterlife feasting in Valhalla, and everybody else went to the gloomy abode of Hel. The gentler, less macho virtues were not highly rated.

The New Age wants to rehabilitate the Norsemen and show them as people of fairness honor and hospitality, since it is an article of their faith that any primitive people must be more spiritually advanced than we moderns. This sidesteps inconvenient features of their

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religion. Blood sacrifices were an important part of worship, as noted by an observer in a festival at Uppsala: 'Of every living thing that is male, they offer nine heads'. This includes dogs and horses, as well as seventy-two human captives. Prisoners of war who were not ransomed could be sacrificed to Odin or Thor; some were drowned, and really unlucky ones died in a gruesome ritual called 'blood eagle'.

The runes were considered magical and were used for divination as well as carving monuments. According to Norse mythology, the god Odin gave mankind the runes; historical research indicates that they were derived from the Etruscan alphabet. Many of them are recognized as direct copies of Latin letters: Is = I, Tyr = T, Beorc = B, Sigel = S, and so on. The runes are a recent alphabet, not appearing until the 3rd century BCE, and the power

ascribed to them is perhaps a reflection of a largely illiterate peoples' awe of the written word. The Norse practice of 'casting the runes' as a method of divination was recorded by Roman historians. The secret of interpreting the runes was known only to Runemasters who passed this knowledge on by word of mouth. The last of them died in the 17th century, taking the secrets with him.

The modern rune craze was started in 1982 by Ralph Blum's *The Book of Runes*, which had no connection with the Norse roots, but is derived from the Chinese I Ching and the author's imagination (or perhaps that should be 'mystical insight'). The lack of historical records on how the runes were interpreted has not hindered the flow of books on the subject. As Gunnora Hallakarva, a lecturer in Norse Paganism puts it: "New Age publishers do not generally require high standards of authority or authenticity in the manuscripts they publish".

The lack of any known guidelines for divination means that authors tend to make up their own. One says that it will only work if the runes are inscribed on the wood of a fruiting tree, another says that the surfaces onto which they are cast is of great importance, a third

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that true interpretation depends on an understanding of the bronze-age mother goddess religion. If any of them are right, then all the rest are wrong. Some books suggest adopting the Norse practice of wearing or carrying runes as protective talismans. This seems bizarre without the religious context: how much protection would a Hindu expect from a St Christopher medallion, or a Buddhist from Jewish phylacteries? Pick'n'mix is the New Age style.

In this psychic boot sale you can add bits from Taoism, Native American beliefs, crystal lore, Chinese acupuncture, reflexology, Arthurian myths, West African voodoo, and just about anything else. Of course you can only take the surface elements because otherwise you might find contradictions to spoil the patchwork of undemanding feelgood beliefs. This plundering of religions and cultures, a sort of trafficking in stolen gods, leaves the Christian King Arthur rubbing shoulders with the Saxon invaders and their pagan runes. He must be turning restlessly beneath the boutiques of Glastonbury. Regardless of the underlying theory, the important question is whether runic talismans work. They were tested in the field during the Second World War, when thousands of soldiers went into battle wearing the double 'Sigel' rune: symbol of 'good vanquishing evil, clear vision.' These were the soldiers of the SS, the Nazi elite. Himmler, the SS commander, resurrected the old mythology of Teutonic blood, with runes as a symbol of their supposed Viking forebears. After their defeat their beliefs were consigned to the dustbin of history.

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De Alphabeto Gothorum.

I do sympathize with some New Age attitudes. Respect for the environment should be encouraged, and the excesses of the consumer culture deserve criticism. But the bogus rune-lore does no credit to anyone. The ancient Norsemen, a fascinating if bloodthirsty people, are presented as a Walt-Disney parody of themselves. Their religion is trivialized, their whole pantheon of gods and related beliefs ignored. None of the sets of 'do it yourself' fortune-telling runes and books have any real connection with the ancient art of casting the runes. The only purpose served seems to be to sell something to people who already have a set of tarot cards, turning the runes into just another consumer product.

The New Age is closer to its parent culture than people realize.

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