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CHAPTER 4, THE MEANINGS OF THE RUNES

The Elements of Runes by Bernard King.

As with all scripts, the runes grew and evolved with use, taking on different meanings in different areas. The Norwegian, Icelandic and Anglo-Saxon runic poems all provide variants which, for the beginner, serve to confuse the issue rather than clarifying it. Because of this I have consistently used the (reconstructed) Common Germanic names throughout this book.

While the role played by the runic poems must, because of their comparatively late dates, be suspect when attempting to consider the earliest assigned meanings of the rune-names, they served a useful mnemonic role at the time of their composition. In all probability there was a poem which gave the names of the Common Germanic Futhark, but it would have been too early, or too secret in later times, to have been recorded.

Interpretations Of The Runes

As we have seen, each rune possesses at least one meaning linking it to an idea or object. With many of the runes there are at least two or three possible meanings.

FEHU

The meaning of this rune is 'cattle', a vital aspect of the life of any agricultural community and an important factor in the economy of a group of peoples initially unacquainted with the use of money. The rune represents possessions won or earned and thus also material gain.

The Anglo-Saxon runic poem describes wealth as a comfort to all men, then goes on to add that they must bestow it freely if they wish to gain favour in the sight of the Lord. This is not the Christian interpolation that it at first appears, as the bestowing of rewards and generosity is an important feature of much of the extant saga literature. As we shall see later there is even a 'gift' rune.

The Norwegian and Icelandic rune poems take a more cynical view and regard wealth as a cause of discord among kinsmen. The Norwegian poem (NRP) compares this to the wolf living in the forest, whilst the 'fire of the sea and path of the grave-fish' of the Icelandic text (IRP) is a clear allusion to its inspiration of Viking practices.

The rune may be linked to Frey or Freya. Oxen were sacrificed to Frey, as detailed in Gisli's Saga and Viga-Glum's Saga. IRP glosses 'gold' for this rune and both gold and amber, which was mentioned by Tacitus as one of the trade commodities of the Aestii which fetched a good price from the Romans, are referred to in Norse myth as the 'tears of Freya'. Significantly the Aestii were said to have worshipped the mother of the gods and worn her emblem, the wild boar. This will later be found linked to Frey, Freya's brother, and while in later myth Freya tends to be the whore of the gods rather than their mother she has also been identified with Frigg.

The necklace Brisingamen, obtained by Freya at the price of sleeping with the four dwarf craftsmen who created it, is the symbol of Freya's wealth. The rich God Njord, her father, has been implied here, but his place comes more properly when we examine Laguz.

Runes, as both letters and mnemonic symbols, undoubtedly had correspondences attached to them. Continuing the association of Fehu with Freya, the following correspondences should be mentioned. Freya found her missing husband, Od, beneath a myrtle tree. Myrtle wreaths are said to have been worn by northern brides, possibly as a symbol of the defloration of the first night.

The butterfly was called Freya's hen. Cats were sacred to Freya and drew her chariot. The cat isn't a particularly old domestic animal in Scandinavia, and a suggestion has been made that the creatures which pulled the chariot may have been ermine. These could also have provided the white

catskin gloves for the völva in Eirik the Red's Saga. The main qualification for an animal being designated kött, a cat, was the ability shared by both cats and ermine to catch mice.

With the advent of Christianity all the Norse gods were demoted to the status of common demons and Freya became the patroness of the witches. Her sacred animal, the cat, became the archetypal witch's familiar, or animal go-between serving both the Christian devil and herself. Two of her sacred birds, the swallow and the cuckoo, also fell from grace.

An identification of Norse paganism with later witchcraft isn't as fanciful as might at first appear. Several authors have already made the identification, and witch persecutions were chiefly a Northern European phenomenon.

When speaking of Nerthus, who might be identified as a mother of the gods, Tacitus mentions that her carriage was drawn by kine. Two of Freya's titles are hörn and syr, the former meaning liquid manure and the latter meaning sow. Both have, albeit differing, fertility connections, and sow would be an appropriate attribute in opposition to Frey's boar.

Fehu is pronounced as F in modern English.

URUZ

This represents the aurochs, the great wild and untameable cattle of northern Europe which are now extinct. Julius Caesar described them in *De Bello Gallico* as slightly less than the elephant in size and of the colour and shape of a bull. They had extraordinary strength and speed and were exceptionally ferocious. By far the best way of capturing an aurochs was with a pit trap, and the proof of the adventure was the display of the dead beast's horns. These were of massive size and were bound at the tips with silver for use as festive cups.

Thus the aurochs came to be a symbol of great strength and speed, and in being such a challenge to the hunter, also a symbol of man's prowess. There was also a parallel to be implied in its defence against the hunter, which compared to man defending his home against the invader. The Anglo-Saxon rune poem (ASRP) describes the beast in terms similar to those employed by Caesar, as both proud and 'having great horns; it is a very savage beast and fights with its horns; a great ranger of the moors, it is a creature of mettle'. NRP took a new meaning of dross, or slag, while perplexingly offering the line that the 'reindeer often races over the frozen snow'. This echoes the speed of the aurochs and shows an awareness, albeit a reduced one, of the earlier meaning. IRP offered a meaning of shower, making the strength of the noble beast into the force of rain beating down upon crops and livestock.

The bull was believed to have been dedicated to Thor, and certainly the strength of the one reinforces a possible correspondence with the other. 'Achievement' may also have been a meaning of this rune, with the hunting of the aurochs providing an ultimate test of strength and initiative.

Uruz is pronounced as the double O sound in the modern English word 'book'.

ThURISAZ

This is of disputed meaning, but is generally regarded as unpleasant in nature. Giant, troll and demon have all been given as possible interpretations, and the 'thorn' of ASRP cannot be ignored either.

This is the troll-rune as used in the Norse poem *For Scirnis or Skirnir's Ride*. It has the power when employed in a sequence of three to alter the meanings of succeeding runes. Its use was said to evoke demons from the underworld, and it was also known as 'Hrungnir's heart', after the legend recorded by Snorri Sturluson of the killing of the giant Hrungnir by Thor. The giant's heart was said to be like the runic character, sharp-edged and three-cornered, and on the Skane bracteate 1 Thurisaz is written !\ which is perfectly in accord with this description. !/

ASRP reads 'thorn' for the meaning of this rune. This description of a sharp and evil thing to touch, uncommonly severe to those who sit amongst them, applies as well to the enemies of the Æsir as to thorns. NRP and IRP retain 'giant' as the meaning, and ascribe to these creatures a penchant for torturing women. This could well be a sexual allusion, as the ideas of the thorn and the penis are not unrelated, as the archaic but still current slang term 'prick', meaning the male member, ably demonstrates.

The shape-shifting power of this rune is that ascribed to trolls or ogres. That it is hardly favourable is supported by the NRP gloss that 'misfortune makes few men cheerful'.

Thurisaz is pronounced th as in 'thin'.

ANSUZ

This rune has the meaning of a god or deity, specifically one of the Æsir, and as such it is usually ascribed to Odin as their leader. In later times Odin was also regarded as a wind God and the leader of the Wild Hunt of disembodied and damned souls, leading them through the air on the storm clouds. The hanged were sacred to him because of his hanging upon Yggdrasil to win the runes, and sacrifice to Odin by hanging was occasionally practised.

ASRP terms this rune Os, praising it as the source of all language, a blessing and joy and a comfort to the wise. NRP reads Oss, meaning an estuary and further describing it as the beginning of most (Viking) voyages. A further cryptic gloss is that a 'scabbard is of swords'. IRP reads Oss as god, specifically making the God Odin by adding 'Prince of Asgard and Lord of Valhalla'. In case this were insufficient to render the meaning clear, the Latin gloss in IRP is 'Jupiter, Father of the Gods', which Odin indubitably was - physically in most cases.

ASRP also provides a verse for Aesc, the 'ae' rune of the Anglo-Saxon Futhork, which would have taken the place of Ansuz had not Oss been ascribed. The meaning equated here is the ash tree, said to be exceedingly high and precious to men, whose sturdy trunk offers a stubborn resistance though attacked by many. The ash is worldly counterpart of the world-tree Yggdrasil, and this meaning reinforces the connection of the A-rune with Odin/God. Indeed, Yggdrasil means 'Ygg's horse' as 'Ygg's gallows', and it was here that Odin hung while discovering the runes, making ash one of the sacred trees of both runecraft and Northern myth. According to one authority venomous animals wouldn't shelter beneath its branches. A carriage with axles of ash went faster and tools with ash handles performed better for the craftsman. Witches rode upon ash branches and ash is the ideal handle for a besom. Those who ate the red buds of the tree upon St John's Eve would be invulnerable to bewitchment.

Yggdrasil is rendered as Ygg's, or Odin's, horse or gallows. As the discoverer of the runes, Odin was also the sorcerer of the gods, and his magic is invariably more powerful than anyone else's. Among his most famous worshippers was the runemaster Egil Skallagrimsson.

The spear was pre-eminently Odin's weapon and ash was the wood most favoured for spear-shafts. The casket in which Idun kept the apples which prevented the gods from ageing was made of ash-wood.

Ansuz is pronounced as in the modern English word 'stack'.

RAIDO

A variety of meanings have been ascribed to this rune. They include journey, cartwheel, ride, long journey on horseback and cart or chariot. The rune could have served as a journey charm to protect both the living and the dead, and there is also some reason for ascribing it to the God Thor. The Old Norse word reid could mean either a wheeled vehicle or thunder. Thunder was caused by Thor's wheeled chariot drawn by two he-goats, rattling across the sky.

ASRP offers Rad as the name for the Rune, but in doing so fails to provide a clear meaning. The gloss, that Rad seems 'easy to a warrior indoors and very courageous to one abroad on horseback', fits well with the meanings of either thunder or riding. Both NRP and IRP take riding as the meaning, IRP in its Latin gloss adding iter, or journey. NRP is again somewhat cryptic in its remark that Regin, the master-smith who was foster-father of Sigurd and brother of the dragon Fafnir, forged the finest sword.

Thor is closely associated with the oak, and it is widely recognized that the god of the oak, the tree more frequently struck by lightning than any other, is also the god of thunder. ASRP provides a verse for Ac, the 'ai' rune, describing how acorns fatten swine for man's table, as well as the wood being used for building ships. Oak was also the wood of the Yule log, and it would have been very appropriate for the wood burned upon Thor's principal festival to come from his sacred tree. Oak pillars are associated with Thor in Iceland, as in Eyrbyggja Saga, where Thorolf Mostur-Beard throws his high seat pillars, made of oak, overboard to establish where he should settle, the decision being taken for him by the place at which they drift to land. Here, as in other places, the additional matter which can be derived from the extra verses provided by ASRP invariably seems to show that, in order to find material with which to gloss the extra letters, an earlier, now lost, source was dissected.

This rune is pronounced exactly as in modern English.

KAUNAZ

As with Raido, no immediate and clear interpretation emerges for this rune. Meanings which have been given include torch, light, boil, abscess and ulcer.

ASRP reads 'torch', known to all living by its pale, bright flame, and adding that it always burns where princes sit within. This could read just as easily if the meaning were fever, and the less equivocal renderings of IRP and NRP agree that the rune's most likely interpretation is an association with some form of discomfort or disease. Both these texts take ulcer as the most probable meaning, and IRP's 'disease fatal to children, and painful spot, and abode of mortification' can leave us in little doubt, as does its Latin gloss of flagella. NRP provides a direct parallel with ASRP by stating that this rune 'makes a man pale'.

Other possible interpretations include an association with cremation, as well as a correspondence with kano, skiff, the sacred vehicle of the cult of Nerthus. Some form of burning pain or fever, however, still seems the most likely interpretation.

The rune is pronounced exactly as in modern English.

GEBO

This rune has the meaning of a gift, but the nature of the gift remains ambiguous. It could be the sacrifice of man giving to the gods, or the bounty of the gods giving to man. Man giving to the gods would imply a religious act, and religion could be regarded as the gift of the gods to man.

This rune was said to protect against the poisoned cup, and as such may have formed a part of the sequence scored by Egil Skallagrimsson at Bard's feast, when Gunnhild passed a poisoned cup to him. When we examine the numerology of runecraft later we shall see that three is an important number, and beer-barrels marked with three Xs, or gebo-runes, are almost a cliché.

This was one of the runes which was dropped from the later Scandinavian Futhork, and only ASRP holds a comment upon it. The name as given here is Gyfu, and it translates to mean generosity. Thus it is said to bring credit and honour to the support of one's dignity, and in the sense of charity it furnishes help and subsistence to those in need. Again this represents situations applicably to man to man, man to god or god to man.

The pronunciation of this rune is rather difficult. It is only rarely used as a hard sound, as in 'girl', and never as a J equivalent. Mostly it was a soft sound with the tongue further back on the palate than for the hard sound, producing a longer, more rolling 'gh'.

WUNJO

The meaning of this rune was bliss, comfort and even glory. It might be taken to mean the support of concrete possessions, but it primarily represented an absence of suffering. Linguistically it compares favourably with the Germanic wulthuz, glory and winjo, pasture, both of which support its meaning. Wulthuz may also support an association with the Norse God Ull.

ASRP has Wenne, bliss, enjoyed by the prosperous and contented ones who don't know suffering, sorrow or anxiety. One opinion has it that this rune induces intoxication, linking it to Gothic woths, furious or raging, and the frenzy rune which was employed by Skirnir. Woths may in turn descend from the Germanic wod-z, which has the same meaning and is one of the most probable derivations of Odin. In the Anglo-Saxon 'Nine Herbs Charm' Odin performs magic with 'glory wands', leading us around in almost a complete circle, with the truth lying somewhere therein. After all, there is no reason why the 'glory wands' should not be 'glory staves', which in turn would relate to the 'glory runes' of Wunjo. The nine twigs bore the runic initials of the nine plants they represented, which in turn were related to the powers inherent in the plants.

This rune is pronounced as in modern English.

HAGALAZ

This rune means 'hail', both as an aspect of the weather and in the sense of a hail of missiles in battle. In both senses it has the implication of a destructive and order-threatening force.

ASRP ascribes hail as the 'whitest of grain, whirled from the vault of the heavens and tossed about by wind before turning finally to water'. NRP agrees with this, whilst irrelevantly adding that Christ created the world of old. IRP refers specifically to hail as an aspect of the weather, with its 'cold grain and shower of sleet and sickness of serpents'. 'Sickness of serpents' is a kenning, or poetic simile, for Winter.

Both as a weather weapon and as phenomenon of battle, hail represents a force not completely within an individual's control.

The flaming wheels, which were later representations of symbols from the hällristningar, traditionally rolled by the Germanic peoples upon St John's Eve, were called 'hail-wheels'. Their purpose, in that uncertain climate, was to protect the ripening crops from the ravages of hail. This opens the speculation that the power of this rune could be magically counteracted by the use of the sun-wheel. Another measure against hail is remarkable because it was employed by a Christian bishop yet obviously referred back to paganism in its usage. The dignitary concerned took a piece of wax from the grave of a saint and cut pagan signs, which were most likely runes, upon it. This piece of wax was then fastened to a tall tree to ward off the hailstorms which had previously damaged the bishop's crops.

This rune is pronounced as in modern English.

NAUTHIZ

This rune has the meanings of need, constraint and even, in extremis, misery. Some authorities read this as a fate-rune and equate it with the Nornir, or Fates, or Norse myth. It had the power of providing help when scratched upon a fingernail, and its meaning thus vacillates between assistance and the need to survive.

While Nauthiz might provide assistance, NRP glibly states that constraint gives scant choice, and

that a naked man will be chilled by the frost. IRP also offers constraint, but equates the rune with the need for work, thereby offering a solution to its attendant difficulties. It glosses the rune with the Latin *opera*, or work, confirming this. ASRP alone offers a degree of hope, despite rendering the rune-name as *Nyd*, which translates as trouble.

The rune is pronounced as in modern English.

ISA

This means ice, which like hail, is an essentially damaging natural force. ASRP regards ice as very cold and slippery, like a floor which has been made from glass but which is nevertheless fair to look at. NRP calls it the broad bridge and adds that the blind man must be led. This could be taken as a cryptic warning or as a straightforward piece of practical advice.

IRP glosses this rune with the Latin *glacies*, or ice, and provides kennings with the phrases 'bark of riveers', 'destruction of the doomed' and 'roof of wave', despite the fact that salt water freezes with less ease than fresh.

In some interpretations of the story of Odin's wooing of Rind, ice is regarded as the power he used to bind his enchanted bride-to-be. If this is the case, then one virtue of this rune might be to reinforce the strength of a rune-spell.

The rune is pronounced as in modern English.

JERA

Interpretations which have been offered for this rune include year, spear, harvest, year of plenty and year of good harvest. Both NRP and IRP prefer to render the meaning as 'plenty', IRP adding a good summer and thriving crops for good measure. NRP, cryptic as ever, adds that the peace-loving Danish king Frothi was generous, adding to the overall impression of prosperity associated with this rune. IRP offers the Latin gloss *annus*, year, and ASRP reads 'summer' while giving the name of the rune as *Ger*. This derives from *gear*, a word originally referring to the warm part of the year.

The concepts of a season of fertility and a good harvest were vital, in the true meaning of 'vital', to agricultural communities in the uncertain northlands.

The rune is pronounced as in the modern English word 'yes'.

EIHWAZ

This rune means 'yew', a wood both sacred to runecraft and used for the making of bows. The hunting God Ull built his hall in Ydalir, Yewdale, and the bow was regarded as his sacred weapon.

ASRP and NRP eulogize the qualities of the tree, which has rough bark, stands hard and fast in the earth, is a guardian of flame, a joy upon an estate, the greenest of trees in winter and, lastly, apt to crackle when it burns. Only IRP reads 'bow', describing it as an implement of battle and speeder of the arrow, and using *arcus*, bow, for the Latin gloss. In Christian times Ull's place was taken by St Hubert, the hunter, patron of the first month of the year. Ull was regarded as a winter God and the first month began, appropriately, on 22nd November, when the sun passed into the sign of Sagittarius, the archer.

In Christian myth, the yew was both a help and a hindrance to witches. According to some, it was of assistance because it was planted near to churches, thus offering some sacrilegious but unspecified benefit. According to others it protected churchyards from the demonic arts of these vile creatures. Certainly it was of use to the third with in Macbeth, who employed among other charm ingredients 'slips of yew, sliver'd in the moon's eclipse.' In German folklore, yew ground to powder and baked was a sovereign remedy against the bite of a mad dog.

The rune is pronounced as in modern English 'yet'.

PERTHO

Perhaps the greatest mystery in the futhark is the meaning of this rune. Attempts to interpret its meaning range from dance, through fruit tree, to hearth.

ASRP offers 'chessman' as a meaning, describing it as a source of recreation and amusement to the great gathered together in the banqueting hall. Yet in citing this, Dickins notes a comparison of the rune-name with the Slavonic word pizda, or vulva. This would make the rune sacred to Frigg as the mother figure of the gods and provide direct parallel with the essentially male fertility implicit in the later rune Inguz. Pertho has also been thought to be symbolic of the magical powers of the earth, through a supposed derivation from the Latin petra, rock.

A brief examination of some of the other meanings may serve to clear things up somewhat. Dance was one of the earliest symbolic acts of worship, possibly because of the erotic excitation it was capable of producing. Certainly in some of its motions it could provide parallels with movements used in sexual activity. Its suppression by Christianity, probably during the council held under Boniface in 742, and the identification in Anglo-Saxon of the word lac with both religious ceremony and dance, combine unerringly when we realize that lac forms the second syllable of the Anglo-Saxon for wedlock, and is still identifiable in the word we use today.

A possible candidate for the fruit tree might well be the elder. 'Devil's wood' is a folk-name still extant for elder in our own time, because of its difficult properties when burning. Elder is wood associated with witchcraft and its name is said to be derived from the Slavonic hohl, hollow, itself a synonym for the female genitalia. The use of both elder flowers and berries for wine, Odin's intoxicating staple drink, is well-known. The church's regard for witchcraft as an essentially female phenomenon, coupled with 'devil's wood', and the derivation of its name from a synonym for the female sexual organs, begins to reinforce the interpretation of vulva for this rune. Elder is regularly used in charms to relieve pain, and the therapeutic value of sexual intercourse is too widely known to require more comment.

The rune is pronounced as in modern English.

ALGIZ

This rune implies defence and protection, possibly even in the form of an amulet or temple sanctuary, and related words are the Gothic alhs, temple and the Old English ealgian, to protect. There may also be a relationship here with the mysterious runeword alu. The meaning has also been equated with the elk, mentioned by Caesar as sleeping upright leaning against a tree to elude the hunter more easily, and thus in some measure a symbol of preservation in the face of adversity.

ASRP confusingly takes the meaning as some kind of sedgegrass found in marshes, and inflicting terrible wounds on anyone incautious enough to brush against it. This would be an admirable protection against being uprooted or eaten.

The rune's resemblance to the outstretched hand, palm outwards or upwards, has also been pointed out by some writers, again implying a protective power which can avert or banish evil. This is a tempting reinforcement of the rune's meaning, but it has the disadvantage of leading into the highly speculative area of attributing pictographic meanings to the runes. This has led many would-be interpreters into gross errors, yet its resemblance to the branch configurations of ash, walnut or linden trees, at which witches were wont to assemble at the full moon in Slavonian gypsy lore, might be noted in passing.

The rune is pronounced somewhere between z and r.

SOWULO

This rune represents the sun, the heavenly body upon which all life depends and one of the principal objects of any ancient worship. Caesar observed that the Germani worshipped both the sun and the moon, and both of these luminaries would have played an important part in daily life, regulating as they do between them both the seasons and the tides.

ASRP describes this rune as the hope of seafarers, NRP has it as the light of the world, and IRP poetically calls it shield of the clouds, shining ray and either destroyer of ice or circling wheel. The Latin gloss is *rota*, wheel. As shining is the most frequently applied adjective to the sun we may trace a correspondence with the Shining God of Norse myth - Baldur, patron of innocence and light. Camomile was called 'Baldur's brow' because the flower was so immaculately pure it resembled the god's forehead. Baldur is also closely associated with the mistletoe, a shaft of which was set into blind Hodur's hand by Loki to kill Baldur.

The rune is pronounced as in modern English 'sea'.

TEIWAZ

This is the rune of Tyr, God of war, giver of victory and protector from harm. Amuletic use of this rune was widespread, even in the earlier centuries of runecraft.

ASRP stands alone in not ascribing the rune to the God of war. Yet although it prefers to make Tyr a star, possibly a circumpolar constellation, the descriptive gloss goes well enough with the war God: 'well does it keep faith with princes; it is ever on its course over the mists of night and never fails.' Thus it confirms the sense of optimism integral to this rune.

NRP and IRP, which glosses Tyr as Mars, both refer to Tyr as the one-handed God. When the Fenris Wolf was being bound with fetter from which it could not escape, Tyr placed his hand in the creature's mouth as a false pledge. It discovered it was trapped and bit Tyr's right hand off. Despite the falsity of the pledge, this story is used to illustrate Tyr's nobility of spirit. Frey gave his sword for love of Gerd; Odin gave his eye for personal love of wisdom; but Tyr gave his hand for love of his fellows. (For this reason the wrist is referred to as the 'wolf-joint'.)

Aconite was known in the north as 'Tyr's helm', an interesting fact in view of its folk name of wolfsbane. Wolfsbane was also known as *Sagittarius* because of its poison was used on arrow-heads. It was also a principal ingredient of the witches' flying ointments. In view of the rune being a perfect representation of an arrow, this association is both remarkable and apposite.

This rune has also been identified as the geir's-odd or spear-rune. This was the sign supposed to be cut by an ageing warrior in his own flesh so that he might enter Valhalla, instead of dying a 'straw-death' in bed of old age.

Teiwaz is the commonest of the runic symbols found upon English cremation urns. On the one from Sawston in Yorkshire, it appears in connection with that other archetypal Germanic symbol the swastika.

The rune is pronounced as in modern English.

BERKANA

The birch tree was regarded as sacred and associated with spring fertility rites. Idun was believed to be the Goddess of spring, and her youth, vigour and beauty were symbolic of the vegetative resurrection which the season brought. She was also the keeper of the apples that gave perpetual and spring-like youth to the gods.

ASRP confuses the issue by describing a tree which is more likely to be a poplar than a birch. NRP and IRP agree that birch has the greenest leaves of any shrub, and NRP comments cryptically that Loki was fortunate in his deceit, which would appear more perfectly applicable to the mistletoe.

This rune is rarely pronounced as a stop, as in 'bird'. Elliott compares the sound to that made when blowing out a candle without rounding the lips.

EHWAZ

This is the horse rune. Horses have been regarded as sacred since the earliest times, and Tacitus describes pure white horses, kept at public expense and not used for any kind of work, yoked to a chariot and used to confirm divinations by their snorts and neighs, which were interpreted either by the king or by a state priest. He added that the horses were believed to be privy to the counsels of the gods. Odin's own eight-legged mount, Sleipnir, was believed to have been either pure white or dappled grey.

ASRP confirms the rune-meaning of horse, describing it as a joy to princes in the presence of warriors, a steed in the pride of its hoofs when rich men bandy words about it, and ever a source to comfort to the restless. The horse was frequently regarded as sacred to Frey, and the animal's dedication to that deity is a central theme of Hrafnkel's Saga.

The heathen Swedes were called 'horse-eaters' by their converted compatriots, an appellation which continued to be used throughout the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Such a diet, albeit ceremonial, was also the reputed provender of giants and witches and was associated with the worship of Odin. The witches, the equivalent of the old pagan völvass or sybils, suitably denigrated for the purposes of the Christian hierarchy, were well-suited to keep company with the giants, who were themselves a distorted memory of the old pagan heroes. The horse was the favoured animal of that folkloric archetype the solar hero, and thus to the virtue of this rune may be added that certainty which accompanied the exploits of the invulnerable hero carried along by the sacred solar horse.

The rune is pronounced as in modern English 'end'.

MANNAZ

This rune stands for man, either the individual or the race, and it was thought to possess powers for defence and protection.

ASRP comments with true pessimism that every man is doomed to fail his fellows, since the Lord by his decree will commit the vile carrion to the earth. NRP adds, cryptically as ever, that great is the claw of the hawk. IRP maintains a steady optimism by describing man as the augmentation of the earth and the adornment of ships, and glosses the Latin homo, man. Some authorities note mention in Tacitus of an earth-bound God called Tuisto, who had a son called Mannus, thus establishing a speculative link between the deity and this rune.

The rune is pronounced as in modern English.

LAGUZ

This rune represents water, perhaps as a source of fertility. One authority regards the name as a late replacement and prefers to read an earlier sense of leek, or herb, pointing to an association of the shape of the leek with pagan phallic practices. Whilst this coincides with the fertility aspect of the rune, the water interpretation is very well established, and the rune is associated with the Vanir God Njord. The marine sponge was known as 'Njord's glove', and he was regarded as a wealthy deity associated with the sea. Gulls and seals were sacred to him.

ASRP reads 'ocean' for the meaning and glosses this with a note on the terrors of the deep. NRP reads waterfall, but glosses Njord's richness with the line that 'ornaments are of gold'. IRP glosses the Latin lacus, lake, and confirms water as the eddying stream and the land of the fish and the broad geyser.

The rune is pronounced as in modern English.

INGUZ

This rune is associated with the deity Frey, also known as the hero Ing. It denotes fertility, as as Frey has been represented ithyphallically, it may well stand for the male generative organ and be a direct equivalent to the female Pertho.

ASRP refers to Ing as a departed hero of the Danes. Fertility flourishes best in peacetime and Frey's cult as a god of peace and prosperity descends from that of the earlier Goddess Nerthus. The jul, or Yule, feast was dedicated to Frey, and the head of his sacred animal, the boar, was served crowned with laurel and rosemary.

The rune is pronounced as in the modern English word singer.

OTHILA

This rune means inheritance, in the wide sense of anything of value which can be passed down or handed over, including knowledge. It can also refer to the ancestral home and, by extension, the native land.

This is one of the runes not included in IRP and NRP, and so we only have the words of ASRP to work with for amplification. ASRP glosses the meaning with 'estate', which is very dear to every man if he is able to enjoy, in his own home, whatever is right and proper in constant prosperity. Unfortunately here we have the materialistic tendencies of medieval Christianity creeping in to modify the wider meaning.

The rune is pronounced as in modern English.

DAGAZ

This stands for day, the security of daylight as opposed to the inconvenience, if not actual terror, of night. Day is the time of being able to see and thus counteract one's foes, the time when work may go ahead well.

Again, we only have the glosses from ASRP to help augment the interpretation here. Yet the poem is optimistic, for once, if Christian, in saying that the glorious light of the Creator, send by the Lord, is beloved of men, serviceable to all, and a source of hope and happiness to both rich and poor alike.

Despite representing the letter D this rune is usually pronounced 'th' as in modern English 'then'.