

What is The Troth?

The Troth is a religious organization, dedicated to exploring, practicing and promoting the pre-Christian religion of the Germanic peoples, who include the English, Norse, Icelanders, Swedes and Germans, among others. Our religion today is known by various names, including Ásatrú, Heathenry, the Elder Troth, Theodism, and others. Although there are many variations in beliefs and practices within this faith, we all share a defining personal loyalty to, or "Troth" with, the gods and goddesses of the Northlands, such as Odin, Thor, Frigga, and many others; a deep respect for our Germanic religious, cultural and historical heritage; and a strong determination to practice the moral principles followed by our noble predecessors.

The Troth publishes a quarterly magazine, *Idunna*, along with other writings on heathen belief and practice. We serve as a networking organization for individuals and kindreds, and we try to assist our members to form local groups to practice our religion and make it more widely available. Once a year, the Troth sponsors a major gathering, Trothmoot, at which members and interested folks conduct workshops and ceremonies, and discuss and demonstrate their many skills and practices. The Troth also operates a clergy training program, incorporating both academic study of lore and theology and training in ceremonial practice, group organization, and counseling. We are incorporated as a non-profit religious corporation in the state of Texas, and are recognized by the U.S. Internal Revenue Service as a tax-exempt religious organization.

The Troth believes that the Gods call whom they will—regardless of race, ethnic origin, gender, or sexual orientation. To hear their call is a joy, an honor, and also a duty. If you hear that call, and if you are willing to live by our values and honor our Gods, then we invite you to take your place among friends and kin, and bring new honor and strength to our ancient Heathen faith.

How can I find out more about The Troth?

- Visit the main website of The Troth at <http://www.thetroth.org/>
- The Troth has a network of local coordinators, or "Stewards", who are happy to answer questions and provide contacts. To find your nearest Steward, go to <http://www.thetroth.org/memsvc/stewards/>
- E-mail the Troth at troth-contact@thetroth.org
- Write to the Troth at the address on the front of this pamphlet.

What are those emblems on the cover?

The cover shows a runestone from Tullstorp in southern Sweden, made around the year 1000. The inscription, in the Younger Futhark, reads: + *klibiR* + *auk* + *ása* + + *risthu* + *kuml* + *thusi* + *uftiR* + *ulf* +, "Kleppir and Ása raised this memorial in memory of Ulf." The Thor's Hammer in a wreath is the emblem of the Troth.

DOCTOR BEOWULF'S HANDY GUIDE TO THE RUNES



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PO Box 472
Berkeley, CA 94701

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What are runes?

The word *rune* originally meant “secret” or “mystery” in the Germanic languages; it is also related to words for “counsel”. A rune is a mystery of the cosmos, which manifests itself in all dimensions. A rune is also the sign and the sounds which represent the mystery, through which the mystery can be understood and worked with. In particular, the word *rune* refers to the letters used to write various Germanic languages, such as Common Germanic, Gothic, Old Norse and Old English, between about 250 BC and 1200 AD.

Why do rune letters have such angular shapes?

The angular appearance of the rune letters stems from the fact that they were originally designed to be carved on wood. Curved lines are difficult to carve, and horizontal cuts are likely to blend into the grain (and possibly split the wood), and so the rune letters are usually made up of vertical and diagonal strokes. Some wooden objects with engraved runes have survived, but most rune inscriptions that have come down to us were carved or cast on more durable materials, such as stone, pottery, or metal. Carved runes were often colored or stained with blood or paint. Medieval paper and parchment manuscripts, written in part or completely in runes, have also come down to us.

For what purposes were runes used?

Rune letters were and are used in the same ways as any writing system. Messages of all kinds, from business letters and Christian poetry to love charms and obscene graffiti, have been found written in runes on medieval artifacts. Runes were widely used in Scandinavia and Britain for memorial inscriptions, even well after the introduction of the Latin alphabet.

However, perhaps the most famous historical use of runes was in magical practices. Artifacts and literary references show that runes were carved on amulets (*taufur*) and weapons for protection, healing, blessing or cursing. There is indirect evidence for the use of rune sounds in chant-magic (*galdor*). Runes were also used in divination: a 9th-century German bishop wrote, “Those whom we call heathens use these letters to record their poems, magical songs and predictions.” Heathens today still use runes for all of these purposes.

Are runes different from other ancient alphabets and divination systems?

Yes, very much so. Runes are sometimes confused with *ogham*, an alphabet used by the Irish and other Celtic peoples (also called the Beth-Luis-Nin alphabet, after the names of the first three letters). However, the shapes and meanings of the ogham letters are quite different from those of the runes. Some recent writers have tried to link runes with the Kabbalistic Tree of Sephiroth, or the Tarot, or the Hebrew alphabet, or the I Ching. Most runemasters today would argue that there’s no real need to do this: we have enough knowledge about how the runes were used in ancient times to recreate a free-standing system of knowledge. Other modern writers have developed systems of correspondences between runes and gemstones, herbs, or constellations. These should be evaluated on their own merits, through experience.

⚡ **othala** (inheritance)—long *o*

In contrast to *fehu*, which represents “liquid assets” such as money, *othala* is an old term for ancestral land. Odal-land was land that had stayed in a family for many generations. We now see *othala* as a symbol for everything that a person inherits from his or her family. These may include inborn talents, genetic traits, and customs and attitudes learned in the family, as well as physical property. *Othala* is also a rune of the family itself, of ancestors and kinfolk, whether by blood or by adoption. It symbolizes boundaries and stability.

How can I find out more about the runes?

There are many books on the runes. Some are well-researched and of high quality. Others contain flawed information—be careful! Look for books that contain documented references to ancient texts, artifacts, and other sources. Some of the original texts with the best information on how runes were used in ancient times include:

Hollander, Lee M. (translator). *The Poetic Edda*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962.

Tacitus. H. B. Mattingly (translator). *The Agricola and the Germania*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1970.

Palsson, Hermann and Paul Edwards (translators). *Egil’s Saga*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976.

For historical overviews of the runes, the following books are excellent:

Elliot, R.W.V. *Runes: An Introduction*. 2nd ed. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987.

Page, R. I. *Reading the Past: Runes*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.

To learn more about the magical and religious meanings of the runes, look for these books:

Aswynn, Freya. *Northern Mysteries and Magick*. St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn, 2002.

Gundarsson, KveldulfR H. *Teutonic Magic*. St. Paul, MN: Llewellyn, 1990. Out of print, but now available on the WWW at <http://www.aswynn.co.uk/>

Paxson, Diana. *Taking Up The Runes*. York Beach, ME: Weiser, 2005. [Not yet printed, but it’ll be worth the wait.]

Thorsson, Edred. *Futhark: A Handbook of Rune Magic*. York Beach, ME: Weiser, 1984.

Thorsson, Edred. *Runelore: A Handbook of Esoteric Runology*. York Beach, ME: Weiser, 1987.

On the WWW, check out these sites:

The Angelseaxisce Ealdriht: <http://www.ealdriht.org/>

The Rune-Gild: <http://www.runegild.org/>

Jordsvin’s Rune Pages: <http://home.earthlink.net/~jordsvin/Runes/Index.htm>

Our Troth: <http://www.thetroth.org/ourtroth/>

between the Gods and the earth, partaking in the nature of both. *Mannaz* is the rune of the “human condition”, of intellect and the rational mind. It stands for the perfect balance of reason and intuition, of mind, soul and spirit. Like *othala*, it also symbolizes inheritance; *mannaz* represents wisdom gained from your ancestors.

┌ **laguz** (lake) or **laukaz** (leek)—*l*

The Vikings and their kin depended on water voyages for their survival and prosperity, but they knew the dangers well. The Old English Rune Poem associates this rune with a stormy sea voyage: “the sea waves strongly terrify, and the sea-steed [ship] obeys not its bridle.” *Laguz* thus has two sides; it can bring benefits or dangers. It may be referred to in the “*Sigrdrifumál*” as one of the “sea-runes” which should be carved on a ship to protect it at sea. In a more psychological sense, *laguz* represents the “deep waters” of the unconscious mind, which can be a source of life-giving insight, but which may also storm and rage, or stagnate and become toxic if not allowed to flow. *Laguz* is also the water within the Well of Wyrð itself, which conceals both great power and potential dangers. This rune’s alternative name, *laukaz*, means “leek” or “garlic”. Leeks were used in Norse magic to defend against poison.

◇ **ingunaz** or **ingwaz** (the god Ing)—the **ng** sound, as in **finger** and **ring**

Ing, or Yngvi as he was called in Sweden, is more commonly known by his title Frey or Freyr (in Norse) or Frea (in Old English). Both titles mean “the lord,” and in some ways Frey is like the “Lord” of Wiccan tradition. The Norse history *Heimskringla* tells that Freyr was invoked for “peace and good seasons” and called “the god of the world” or “the god of man’s life.” Yngvi-Freyr bestows riches, fertility, and other bounty for humans to enjoy. The *ingunaz* rune is also connected with male sexuality and fertility; it is the male counterpart to *berkano*. Yet Freyr can be a warrior as well, and he is an ancestor of the old royal families of England and Scandinavia.

✕ **dagaz** (day)—**d**, sometimes **dh** or voiced **th**

In the heroic poems of the Volsung cycle, the heroine Brynhild speaks a prayer to the Day after Sigurd has awakened her from a magical sleep: “Hail, ye Day! Hail, ye Day’s sons! Hail Night and daughter of Night!” *Dagaz* is the rune of awakening, of enlightenment—of things that “finally dawn on you.” *Dagaz* can stand for the resolution of paradoxes, and for full awareness of one’s surroundings. It is a rune of revelation, unlike *perthro*, which is a rune of concealment and mystery. It can mean a new beginning on a higher level, or new insight and wisdom. Finally, in folklore, daylight causes trolls and other night creatures to turn to stone; this rune can be used to protect against literal or figurative “creatures of the night.”

How did the runes originate?

In the mundane sense, the rune letters were probably derived from a north Italic alphabet. Other theories suggest derivations from a version of the Greek alphabet, the Etruscan alphabet, or the Latin alphabet (which themselves were derived from the Greek alphabet). This explains why many rune letters look like angular versions of our own. Some rune letters were added or modified to express sounds not used in Latin or North Italic tongues. The oldest true rune inscription dates from about the year 50, but runes may have been in use for a century or more before that date. Before the invention of the runes, the Germanic peoples carved various holy symbols in stone for religious or magical purposes, some of which are very much like rune letters. These signs are commonly called *Hällristningar* today. The shapes and meanings of these signs are thought to have influenced the final form and meaning of the runes.

What is a futhark?

A futhark is a rune alphabet. Just as the word “alphabet” comes from the names of the first two Greek letters, *alpha* and *beta*, the word “futhark” comes from the first six rune letters, F, U, Th, A, R and K. Different futharks were used at different times and places.

This flyer focuses on the oldest rune alphabet, the Elder Futhark of twenty-four letters. This futhark was used in Germany and Scandinavia until about 600 AD. Later futharks added, changed or deleted various letters, reflecting changes in the languages spoken by the carvers. Changes in the sounds of certain letters explain why the Anglo-Saxon or Anglo-Frisian Futhark is technically a *futhorc*. The Anglo-Saxon Futhorc has twenty-nine letters (later expanded to thirty-three in northern England), some of which represented sounds that were unique to the Old English language. The various Scandinavian or Younger Futharks, used by the Vikings among others, contain only sixteen rune letters, many of which have simplified or otherwise modified shapes. The Anglo-Saxon Futhorc (top) and the Danish version of the Younger Futhark (bottom) are shown below:

ƿ ƒ ƥ ʀ ʁ ʀ ʁ ʀ ʁ ʀ ʁ ʀ ʁ ʀ ʁ ʀ ʁ ʀ ʁ ʀ ʁ ʀ ʁ ʀ ʁ ʀ ʁ ʀ ʁ
f u t h o r c g w h n i j e i p x s t b e m l n g d o e a a e y i o e a q k s t g

ƿ ƒ ƥ ʀ ʁ ʀ ʁ ʀ ʁ ʀ ʁ ʀ ʁ ʀ ʁ ʀ ʁ ʀ ʁ ʀ ʁ ʀ ʁ ʀ ʁ ʀ ʁ ʀ ʁ
f u t h a r k h n i a s t b m l r

Incidentally, J.R.R. Tolkien—a professor of Old English who knew the runes well—used English runes in *The Hobbit*, and developed his own runic alphabet in *The Lord of the Rings*. His rune alphabet is quite different from the ones that were used historically.

How are runes used in divination?

The Roman author Tacitus described ancient German divination. The querent cut slips of wood from a fruit-bearing tree, marked them with distinguishing signs, and tossed the slips onto a white cloth. Then he would take up three of the slips and interpret their meaning. Tacitus didn't describe the "signs", but many scholars think that they were runes or rune-like symbols. Similar divinations seem to have been carried out in Anglo-Saxon England, and the Rune Poems are thought to contain clues to the meanings of the runes in divination.

Today, rune-lots (rune letters used for divination) may be drawn on cards or carved into pieces of wood, stone, glass or metal. Sets of runes can be purchased, but most experienced runecasters feel that the best set of rune-lots is the one that a caster makes himself. The simplest way of divination is to meditate on a question and then draw three runes at random. The first rune that is drawn represents actions or factors in the past that are actively contributing to the situation at hand. The second rune represents the current "state of affairs." The third rune represents what would be expected to result, growing out of the present situation and its past influences. However, the third rune does not represent unalterable fate.

More complicated divination spreads are used by some runeworkers, some of which have been inspired by Tarot card spreads. Some runecasters read runes using the principle of inversion: a rune that appears upside-down in a divinatory spread represents an inversion or blockage of what it would mean appearing right side up. Others don't believe that inversion is important—nine of the runes look the same whether inverted or not, anyway. Some runecasters use the position of the runes with respect to each other to distinguish between positive and negative aspects. If you study rune divination further, you should keep records and find out what gives you the best results.

How are runes used in talismanic magic?

Any rune or combination of runes may be engraved on an object that the runemaster carries or gives to someone else. The power of the rune is "loaded" into the object by the act of carving, by the runecarver's songs or spells (*galdor*), and usually by inlaying color into the rune as well. Traditionally, runes are colored red, whether with blood or with other natural red pigments such as ochre.

One of the most powerful kinds of magic in Viking times was the *nidhstong*, the "pole of insult"—a pole topped with a horse's head, set up facing the victim's home, with a curse carved on it in runes. There are several references to runes carved on tree roots in order to curse someone. But runes could also be used for healing and protection; the Icelandic *Egil's Saga* tells how runes carved on a drinking horn caused the horn to burst after it was filled with poisoned ale, saving the would-be drinker from death. Healing talismans have to be used carefully: *Egil's Saga* also tells how a girl became sick when a whale bone with poorly carved runes was placed in her bed. The runemaster Egil Skallagrimsson carved new runes and made the girl well. As Egil said, "None should write runes who can't read what he carves; a mystery mistaken can bring men to misery."

wise and brave. His rune is a rune of victory; the Norse poem "Sigdrifumál" recommends that a warrior who wants victory should carve runes on his sword and call on Tyr. This rune is also linked with the Old English word *tir*, meaning "glory." But Tyr is also the god who sacrificed his hand, so that the wolf Fenrir—the embodiment of the forces of chaos and destruction—could be bound before he could destroy the cosmos. *Tiwaz* can thus mean a sacrifice to gain a greater good: "victory doesn't come for free." The Old English Rune Poem calls this rune a star that "keeps faith well with nobles; over the mists of night it never fails." Thus *tiwaz* is also a rune of high ideals, faithfulness, loyalty, guidance, and trust in one's self.

berkano (birch tree)—*b*

This is a rune associated with the goddesses of the Norse tradition, especially Frigga and Freya. *Berkano* can represent the Earth, who receives the seed in her womb until it is time for it to grow again; thus it can mean concealment, the slow growth of potential until it is time to come forth. On another level, it is a rune of female fertility and women's mysteries. It can symbolize rebirth; the greening of birch trees is a sign of spring. Along with *perthro*, it is one of the "birth-runes" that aid in pregnancy and childbirth; the poem "Sigdrifumál" tells us that certain runes were drawn on the palms of midwives to help them help women in delivery.

ehwaz (horse)—*e*

Think of the close bond between an experienced rider and his or her horse; the two communicate almost telepathically. This rune is a rune of trust and of close emotional and spiritual bonds. The Old English Rune Poem states that *ehwaz* "for the restless is ever a help." Like *raidho*, *ehwaz* can indicate a journey, whether outward or inward; it can also symbolize the integration of the various parts of the psyche into a harmonious whole. Heathens consider the horse to be sacred to the gods Odin and Freyr. Some Germanic tribes observed the actions of sacred horses to divine the will of the Gods; thus this rune, along with *elhaz*, can be a rune of receiving divine wisdom.

mannaz (man)—*m*

Mannaz is linked with the god Heimdall in the Norse myths. Heimdall is the watchful guardian of the gods' home Asgardh. As the poem "Rígsthula" tells, he is father to the different classes of humans, and he taught runes to his children. The Norwegian and Icelandic rune poems tell us that "Man is the increase of dust", and the Old English poem also reminds us that our "frail flesh" must return to the soil. Man is mortal, destined to die and return to the Earth that bore him. But nonetheless, we still carry in ourselves Heimdall's gift, the spark of divine heritage. We are able to claim this heritage as our own if we prove ourselves worthy and willing. The "Abecedarium Nordmannicum" calls this rune "man in the middle"—standing

and death and rebirth, and of the synthesis between opposing forces. Finally, yew was the favored wood for making bows, and is associated with Ullr, the god of hunting and archery who protects fighters. This rune can be a protective symbol—"a piece of war-gear", as the "Old English Rune Poem" says.

↳ **perthro** (gaming piece or dice-cup)—*p*

The meaning of the word *perthro* isn't clear, but the likeliest idea is that it means a board-game piece, or possibly a dice-cup. The Old English Rune Poem calls it "play and laughter amongst bold men, where warriors sit in the beer hall, happy together." Yet *perthro* isn't purely a rune of amusement; board games are linked in the heathen lore with *wyrd*, a concept something like "fate" but less rigid. Many runecasters today see *perthro* as the "Mother-Rune," the rune of *wyrd* itself. It is the Mystery from which all the runes spring, and symbolizes the Well of *Wyrd*. *Perthro* is also connected with birth. Several modern rune experts have found that *perthro* in a divination means that an outcome is still "up in the air", not yet fixed.

Y **elhaz** (elk)—originally *z*; in Norse a sound between *zh* and *r*; *x* in Old English

Elhaz means "elk", but is also linked to the old Germanic word *algiz*, meaning "protection" or "sanctuary." The old custom of putting elk horns on the roofs of houses shows the link between these meanings: this is a rune of cleansing, protection and defense. It also is a rune of hallowing sacred space, and of connection with higher powers: *elhaz* shows the posture that a worshipper stands in when calling upon the Gods, proudly standing straight up (not kneeling or bowing!) with arms up and outstretched. In personal development, this rune can be used to rid oneself of guilt and self-condemnation. One of the most powerful protective bindrunes, the *aegishjalmr* or "Helm of Awe", consists of eight *elhaz*-runes radiating from a common point.

< **sowilo** (sun)—*s*

Like its neighboring rune *tiwaz*, *sowilo* is a rune of victory. In northern Europe, the sun rises late and sets early all through the winter; in the far north it may not rise at all. The return of the sun's warmth and light is a victory of light over darkness, and a cause for celebration. *Sowilo* is also linked with healing and with restoring life energy, and with personal power and the will to act. In magic it can be used to aid a good cause to triumph (although it the cause isn't really good, the magic may easily backfire). Finally, it is a rune of honor; a verse in the "Havamál" compares the light of the sun with a life lived without disgrace.

↑ **tiwaz** (the god Tyr)—*t*

The god Tyr or Tiw is the god of rightness and cosmic order; the Norse knew him to be both

How do we know what the runes mean?

Several poems have survived from England and Scandinavia that list each rune and give clues to its meaning in a stanza. These include the "Old Norwegian Rune Rhyme", the "Old Icelandic Rune Poem", the "Abecedarium Nordmannicum", and the "Old English Rune Poem." Most of the books listed at the end of this pamphlet contain translations of the rune poems.

Many clues to the runes' uses and meanings can also be found in the *Poetic Edda*, a collection of Old Norse mythological and heroic poems. Other clues are scattered through the sagas, the prose tales of Iceland that preserve much Heathen lore. Carvings, memorial stones, and other artifacts often yield further clues to how the runes should be used. Finally, the intuition and inspiration of knowledgeable runemasters, guided by the surviving ancient lore, has enabled us to construct our modern understanding of the runes.

What is a bindrune?

A bindrune is a symbol made of two or more runes that share strokes. Some bindrunes were used simply to save space, rather like we would use abbreviations in modern English. In other cases, bindrunes were (and are) used magically, to combine the influences of two or more runes. For example, a talisman to gain wealth might include the *fehu* rune on it—but money becomes a source of strife if it's hoarded; it has to circulate freely. Thus if you wanted to attract money but avoid greed and stinginess, you might combine *fehu* with *gebo*. Several amulets have been found that combine *gebo* and *ansuz* in a bindrune. This is an abbreviation for *gibu auja* ("I give good luck"). It also can be read as "give wisdom" or "give inspiration".

To give another historical example: around the year 1300, a group of Norwegian explorers left a runestone at Kinggitorssuaq, Greenland; the stone was rediscovered in the 1800s. The inscription includes three bindrunes that combine *sowilo* (sun) with the protective rune *elhaz*, meaning something like "may we be protected by the warmth and light of the Sun." It also includes three bindrunes that combine *elhaz* with two *thurisaz* runes; *thurisaz* is a rune of defense and attack, and is associated with Thor, the god who battles the frost-giants. The overall meaning of these is "may we be defended on all sides by Thor's power." Since the explorers were well above the Arctic Circle, these bindrunes make perfect sense!



Bindrunes must be made with care. A bindrune that combines poorly matched or conflicting runes is likely to have unexpected effects; it may backfire completely.

What is *wyrd*?

Wyrd is a very simple concept that is oddly difficult to translate, but it has to be understood in order to use the runes correctly. Heroic poems such as *Beowulf* often include statements to the effect that “no man may escape his *wyrd*.” The word often is translated as “fate” or “destiny”. However, “fate” often implies that something in the future is fixed and can’t be altered. *Wyrd* is a much more dynamic concept than that.

The word “*wyrd*” was originally a verb tense, meaning “it has become”. The word is also related to words meaning “to turn.” So *wyrd* means “what has happened”, “the way things have turned out.” The same word in Norse, *urdh*, is the name of one of the Norns, three powerful goddesses who shape time. The other two Norns are Verdhandi, literally “what is now becoming”, and Skuld, “what should become.” *Urdh*, Verdhandi and Skuld are not exactly “Past, Present and Future”; Skuld does not represent a fixed future. Instead, Skuld is “what ought to happen”, “what would be expected to happen”—but always subject to change. Heathens saw the past—“what has become”—as constantly guiding and directing the present and the future, but not determining them completely. *Wyrd* is the force by which the past shapes the future—something like *karma*, but without the moralistic overtones that the concept of *karma* sometimes takes on.

One of the most powerful images in Norse mythology is of the Well of *Wyrd*; a great, turbulent, seething spring. The Norns sit at the Well, at the foot of the World Tree, which holds all the universes of men, gods and other beings. Past actions drop into the Well of *Wyrd*, forming layers of *orlog* (“primal law”). These actions eventually come back into the present, as the Norns take water from the Well to nourish the growth of the Tree.

Another metaphor for *wyrd* is the weaving of a great tapestry. Countless threads have already gone into the weaving, which have set the pattern of the tapestry. However, a weaver can constantly change the growing pattern as she goes along, depending on her will, her skill, and on what material she has to work with.

It’s a little misleading to think of the runes as a tool for “fortune-telling” or “knowing the future”—by definition, you can’t know the future, because the future is always in flux. What you can do with runes is investigate past cause and effect. Knowing and meditating on the runes can show you the *wyrd* that has already been laid down, the threads that have already been woven into the pattern of your life. The runes can help you see how that pattern is affecting your present situation. They can also give you an idea of what is likely to happen if the pattern continues—what the “path of least resistance” is. Experienced runemasters can understand this pattern a little better than most people, and can sometimes use their knowledge to consciously redirect and shape the pattern that *wyrd* is making. But in the end, you are responsible for setting your own *wyrd*. You can strive to shape your *wyrd* for better or worse—but in the end, whatever it brings, you must meet with courage and dignity. Even our Gods are subject to *wyrd*.

is associated with hardship, poverty, isolation, and stress. However, the Old English Rune Poem tells us that *naudhiz* can be “helpful to the sons of men if heeded in time.” *Naudhiz* is connected with “need-fire”, fire made by rubbing sticks together. It’s very difficult to make a fire that way, but it may be necessary to keep from freezing to death—and need-fire was considered holy by the heathen Germans. *Naudhiz* represents a struggle or difficulty that nonetheless may leave a person stronger and better for having undergone it. The saying “That which does not kill me makes me stronger” applies to this rune!

isa (ice)—*i or ee*

The Norse myths tell how the universe came into being from fire and ice—or, as physicists might call them now, energy and matter. *Isa* represents stability, permanence, and peace; it’s the exact opposite of the fiery rune *fehu*. On the other hand, it can also represent stagnation and constraint. In human affairs, it can mean calmness, patience, concentration, the ego (“I”), and the numbing of pain. More negatively, it can stand for inertia and sloth. Ice can be beautiful—the Old English Poem states that “a floor wrought of frost is a fair sight.” Yet ice can’t be trusted; other rune poems call *isa* “exceedingly slippery,” and the “Havamál” warns against trusting thin ice. We still refer to a perilous situation as “skating on thin ice.” Thus *isa* can indicate hidden dangers or warn of a false sense of security.

jera (year, harvest)—consonantal *y*

Jera stands for the cycle of the seasons and the agricultural year; the Icelandic Rune Poem calls it “a good summer and a ripened field.” It resolves the opposed forces of fire and ice so that they complement each other for the benefit of everyone. *Jera* is a rune of slow, steady, natural growth, of patience, long-term planning, and awareness of the changing seasons. Heathens often associate it, as well as *ingunaz*, with the god Freyr, whom the Norse prayed to for “peace and good seasons.” In divination, *jera* can mean that the results of past actions are being “harvested”—hopefully for the better, but as the Icelandic *Njál’s Saga* warns us, “When ill seed has been sown, so an ill crop will spring from it.” The more modern saying “What comes around, goes around” is also appropriate to this rune.

eiwaz (yew tree)—a high front vowel often transliterated *ei* or *y*

Heathens see the universe as being supported by a great tree called Yggdrasill, the center and axis of all that is. This rune is a symbol of that tree, which is sometimes identified as a yew. *Eiwaz*, at the center of the futhark, is the stable point around which the cycles of the world revolve (*jera*). Yew wood was considered especially powerful in magic, and was often used for rune amulets. Yews are evergreen, alive when all other trees have died, but yews are also highly poisonous. They were traditionally planted in graveyards, even well after the Christianization of northern Europe. Thus this rune, rarely used in writing, is the rune of life

✘ **gebo** (gift)—hard *g*

Generosity was one of the highest virtues in ancient Germanic societies. Gifts exchanged between friends bound the friendship more closely, as long as the gifting was equal—the Norse poem “Havamál” says that “a gift always looks for gain.” Gifts from a ruler to his people kept them loyal and faithful; in Old English poetry, “ring-giver” and “gold-friend” were some of the highest compliments that could be paid to a ruler, but a stingy ruler was despised. *Gebo* is a rune of equal exchange, alliances, friendship and hospitality, but it also means obligation. It keeps the power of *fehu* from stagnating and becoming destructive. It may also be used in love magic to bring about a stable and fulfilling partnership.

▷ **wunjo** (joy)—*w*

Wunjo is exactly what it says: this is the rune of joy and cheerfulness. This is not simply an outward show of happiness; *wunjo* is an inner resource that can carry the one who has it through difficult times. As the hero Sigurd says, “To be glad is better than of gloomy mood, whether all fall fair or foul.” *Wunjo* means perseverance and strength of will, and the willingness to meet challenges cheerfully rather than giving in to despair. It can be used to ward off depression and bring emotional and physical healing. It is also a rune of friendship and kinfolk—“man is cheered by man,” as the “Havamál” says. In the same poem, Odin tells of a rune spell that he knows: “when hatred runs high, heroes among, their strife I can settle full soon.” This shows the power of *wunjo* for good.

∩ **hagalaz** (hail)—*h*

Anyone who has been through a major hailstorm knows that hail is a destructive and damaging force. Yet this rune isn’t wholly negative. The Rune Poems all describe *hagalaz* as “white grain”—and by definition, grain is a seed. The Old English poem tells how hail eventually melts and turns to water, which nourishes new growth, while the Norse poems call it “the sickness of snakes”—something that does harm to dangerous reptiles. Thus *hagalaz* can mean the destruction of old patterns, but it ultimately can clear the way for the creation of something new and better. Despite its association with calamity, several modern runemasters see *hagalaz* as representing the “seed crystal” from which the entire universe came into existence. It might not be inappropriate to call this the “Big Bang” rune.

† **naudhiz** (need)—*n*

The rune poems call *naudhiz* “troublesome work” and “a difficult situation,” and the Norwegian Rune Poem give “the naked freeze in the frost” as a meaning for this rune. *Naudhiz*

What are the aetts?

Aett means “clan” or “tribe” in Old Norse. Traditionally the futhark is divided into three aetts or aettir. In the Elder Futhark, each aett consists of eight runes. Some Heathens call the first eight runes Frey’s Aett, the second eight Hagal’s Aett, and the last eight Tyr’s Aett. Some rune-workers feel that runes in the same aett are linked in meaning. Others disagree—this is an area in which you should work to develop your own understanding.

What is the religious significance of the runes?

In Scandinavian myth, the runes were first grasped by the god Odin, the god of wisdom, death, battle, poetry, and fury (among other things). The myth tells how Odin underwent an ordeal in which he hung from the World Tree for nine nights, pierced by a spear, until he grasped the runes. Odin later gave knowledge of the runes to all beings. The story is told in the Old Norse poem “Havamál”, one of many poems in a collection called the *Poetic Edda*. Another poem in the *Poetic Edda*, “Rígsthula,” tells how rune knowledge was specifically taught to humans by the god Heimdall. These myths refer not to the origin of the rune letters, but to the grasping of the secret meanings behind them. Runes can be thought of as reflecting parts of the human mind, and also as dynamic forces and patterns of manifestation working throughout all the worlds of the cosmos.

In the “Havamál”, Odin asks us:

Do you know how to carve? Do you know how to read?

Do you know how to color? Do you know how to understand?

This verse refers both to the making of rune inscriptions, by carving them and by coloring or staining the carvings, and to knowing and interpreting their meanings, both as letters of the alphabet and as symbols of patterns of energy manifestation in all the worlds.

Today, a growing number of people are seriously returning to the ancient myths and practices, reviving the religion of the ancient Germanic peoples. This revived religion is variously known as Ásatrú, Heathenry, the Elder Troth, the Old Way, Theodism, and other names. Not all followers of this religion (usually known as Heathens, Ásatrúar, or Theodsmen) practice divination or other forms of magic with the runes, and not all persons interested in the runes identify with this path. Nonetheless, almost all Heathens know something about runes, and honor them as meaningful and sacred symbols. Anyone who wants to understand the runes, whatever his or her spiritual path, needs to learn, understand, and respect the mythology behind them, at the very least. Serious students of the runes should not only memorize the names and sounds of the runes, but should learn to meditate on each rune in order to absorb its meaning into themselves. Runes are not just cool-looking symbols or “secret letters”. They are holy, and they should be treated as such.

A GUIDE TO THE RUNES OF THE ELDER FUTHARK

ƒ **fehu** (cattle)—*f*

The word *fehu* originally meant “cattle”, but it later came to mean “money” or “movable wealth”—a holdover from the days when a man’s wealth was measured by how many cows he had! *Fehu* can also represent vital energy, or talents and skills (which themselves are a kind of “money in the bank”). The rune poems warn, however, that wealth breeds greed and misery unless it is allowed to circulate. As the Icelandic Rune Poem says, “Wealth causes strife among kinsmen.” (Anyone who has ever had to deal with a contested will or a messy divorce will understand this aspect of *fehu* immediately!) The Old English Rune Poem tells us that “every man should deal it our freely”: *fehu* causes problems if it stagnates. Finally, *fehu* is associated with fire, a source of warmth, but also a source of destruction if not carefully used.

u **uruz** (wild ox)—long *u* or *oo*

The aurochs, or European wild ox, was a ferocious, untamable animal. Unfortunately, the European ox is extinct today, but Julius Caesar, in *The Gallic Wars*, described them thus: “Great is their strength and great is their speed, and they spare neither man nor beast once sighted.” He also mentioned that young men were tested by hunting aurochs—a test that not all of them survived. The Old English Rune Poem calls *uruz* “savage and greatly horned, a very fierce beast, it fights with its horns, a well known walker of the moors.” *Uruz* thus stands for untamed energy, wild and independent. In human affairs it can stand for masculine strength, virility, and courage. It can be used to strengthen the will and personality, and to smash down obstacles; it can also be a powerful healing rune. But more negatively, it can manifest in aggression, violence, and arrogance. Use this rune carefully!

th **thurisaz** (giant), or **thorn** (thorn)—*th*

In heathen mythology, the race of beings called the Giants, Etins, Thurses or Jotnar often represent the “blind” forces of nature. This rune stands both for the giants and for the god Thor, the storm-god and lightning-wielder, himself the son of a giantess. Thor constantly battles against the giants—not to wipe them all out, but to maintain the natural balance so that humans can live in the universe. In the Old English futhark, this rune was renamed *thorn*: “very sharp for everyone who grabs it.” *Thurisaz* can be a powerful rune of defense, but like any weapon, it must be used with caution, or else it can cause chaos and destruction. The Norwegian and Icelandic rune poems call this rune “the sickness of women,” and the poem “Skirnismál” in the *Poetic Edda* depicts a man carving this rune to curse a woman.

o **ansuz** (god, especially Odin)—*a*; in later futharks it represents a short *o*

The word *ansuz* in Proto-Germanic became *Aesir* in Old Norse. The Aesir are a tribe of gods; their leader is the god Odin (Wotan in German, Woden in Old English). Odin is the winner of all the runes, but he is especially associated with this rune. Among other things, Odin is the giver of inspiration, poetry, and wisdom, which he bestows on those whom he favors—his very name means “the inspired one”. For this reason, this rune is associated with inspiration, insight, and higher states of consciousness. In the Old English Rune Poem, this rune’s name became *óss*, “mouth”, but it retained its link with Odin’s wisdom by being described as “the primal source of all speech, wisdom's support and wiseman's help”. A bone amulet dating to 750 AD found in Lindholm, Sweden, has this rune carved eight times in a row, evidently calling on Odin’s wisdom.

r **raidho** (riding)—*r*

The rune poems call *raidho* “the toil of the horse.” *Raidho* means journeying and travel, both in space and in time. It can be used to protect travelers. Many modern runecasters see it as a metaphor for the “journey of life,” and as the rune of communication. The ancient Scandinavians saw the Sun and Moon as being drawn across the sky in horse-drawn chariots. In ancient Germanic rituals described by the Roman author Tacitus, a statue of the earth goddess Nerthus was drawn in a chariot around the land; a truce was always declared during the time of her procession. Thus *raidho* symbolizes the cyclical rhythms of the natural world and the rituals and days of the human calendar. In this respect *raidho* is similar to *jera*. Finally, like *tivaz*, *raidho* is connected with right action, right behavior, law, and integration of individuals into communities—the results of living in harmony with natural laws and cycles. Modern Heathens often associate it with the god of justice and judgment, Forseti.

k **kenaz** (torch) or **kaunaz** (sore)—*k*; in Old English it came to represent a *ch* sound

A burning torch is a way of harnessing and controlling fire for human good. *Kenaz* is associated with creativity, exploration, guidance, art and craftsmanship; it takes the fire of *fehu* and applies it for a purpose. At best, this is a constructive act. At worst, the alternative name *kaunaz* (sore) for this rune, found in some of the poems, reminds us that creative energy can be misapplied, and that gaining knowledge is not always comfortable. The Norse poem “Havamál” describes a good and wise conversation as being like a flame being passed from one torch to another, until all are ablaze and the room is filled with light. Thus *kenaz* is a rune of higher mental activity. Some also see it connected with death, initiation and rebirth—the purifying flames of the forge that strengthen our minds and wills, or the flames of the funeral pyre that free the soul.