Reading the Runes in Old English and Old Norse Poetry

Tom Birkett

ROUTLEDGE

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Reading the Runes in Old English and Old Norse Poetry is the first book-length study to compare responses to runic heritage in the literature of Anglo-Saxon England and medieval Iceland. The Anglo-Saxon runic script had already become the preserve of antiquarians at the time the majority of Old English poetry was written down, and the Icelanders recording the mythology associated with the script were at some remove from the centres of runic practice in medieval Scandinavia. Both literary cultures thus inherited knowledge of the runic system and the traditions associated with it, but viewed this literate past from the vantage point of a developed manuscript culture. There has, as yet, been no comprehensive study of poetic responses to this scriptural heritage, which include episodes in such canonical texts as *Beowulf*, the Old English riddles and the poems of the Poetic Edda. By analysing the inflection of the script through shared literary traditions, this study enhances our understanding of the burgeoning of literary self-awareness in early medieval vernacular poetry and the construction of cultural memory, and furthers our understanding of the relationship between Anglo-Saxon and Norse textual cultures. The introduction sets out in detail the rationale for examining runes in poetry as a literary motif and surveys the relevant critical debates. The body of the volume is comprised of five linked case studies of runes in poetry, viewing these representations through the paradigm of scriptural reconstruction and the validation of contemporary literary, historical and religious sensibilities.

Tom Birkett is a Lecturer in Old English at University College Cork, Ireland.

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Abbreviations

For the sigla used in citing individual runic inscriptions, see the bibliography.

ASE	*Anglo-Saxon England*
ASPR	Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records
BT	J. Bosworth and T.N. Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford, 1898) and T.N. Toller, *Supplement* (Oxford, 1921)
CSASE	Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England
CV	Richard Cleasby, Gudbrand Vigfusson and William R. Graigie, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1957)
EETS	Early English Text Society
JEGP	*Journal of English and Germanic Philology*
MSE	Phillip Pulsiano and Kirsten Wolf (eds.), *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia* (London, 1993)
N&Q	*Notes & Queries*
OE	Old English
OE Bede	Thomas Miller (ed.), *The Old English Version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (London, 1890)
ON	Old Norse
PLL	*Papers on Language and Literature*
RES	*Review of English Studies*
SBVS	*Saga Book of the Viking Society*
SN	*Studia Neophilologica*

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This book is dedicated to my ever-patient parents.

Introduction
Script and sensibility

Since the earliest days of antiquarian interest in the script, the study of runes has been dogged by misinformation and by emotive responses to a writing system popularly understood as esoteric and mystical. Although scholars such as Ole Worm and the Englishman George Hickes took the first steps in establishing runology as a discipline as far back as the seventeenth century, the early study of runes was far from an exact science, more often than not bound up with the idiosyncratic agendas of amateur enthusiasts. That the term 'runic' was regularly used to refer to Scandinavian languages and even 'northern' sensibilities, 'contrasting with the staid, formal and Classical "Roman"', is in many ways symptomatic of the misunderstandings that proliferated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries,[1] and it is perhaps no surprise that this ordinary script entered into the literary consciousness as an index of magic and barbarism. As late as the twentieth century we find sentiments such as that propounded in Alice Edwardes' poem 'Runes', in which the line 'startled Earth, awaking from her swoon' is rhymed with the dramatic declaration that 'Immortals! God alone may chant your Rune!'[2] In fact, this single couplet features a litany of misconceptions about the script: a conflation of letters with spoken chants; an association of runes with reading the future; a link with the divine. Earlier in this same poem we are led to understand that 'Burns in the rune our own fierce Parent Star', an association with racial identity that came to the fore in the *völkisch* movement of 1930s Germany, and which saw runes co-opted by the architects of the Third Reich. Thanks in part to Tolkien's more benign appropriation of the Anglo-Saxon *fuþorc* as the basis for the writing system of his race of dwarves, runes had become a staple of fantasy fiction by the latter half of the twentieth century. The script also found favour amongst New Age fortune tellers, and the fact that a publication such as *The Book of Runes: A Compass for Navigating in Turbulent Times* can boast of having sold over two million copies highlights the persistence of such misplaced ideas.[3] As the English runologist R.I. Page notes, such a pervasion of nonsense threatened to 'lead the study of runes into contempt amongst the thoughtful' and still casts a shadow over the discipline.[4]

Some of the associations that the writing system now holds in the popular imagination can be traced to 'such romantic ideas as can be attributed to old age and strangeness' as Bæksted points out.[5] Yet, if we want to understand the history of misplaced sensibilities regarding the script, we must go back past the early years of runology, and the over-zealous use of runes by poets in the modern era, to the literary accounts of the script that preceded and at times informed these later responses – particularly the poetry of the Anglo-Saxons and medieval Icelanders. Rather than reading this poetic material as a contemporary account of the realities of runic writing, this book understands the use and representation of runes in medieval poetry as the first layer in the complex reception history of the runic script, produced by a culture contemplating the runic tradition from the vantage point of a developed literary culture. Through critical reading of the runic tradition reflected and re-presented in this earliest literature, we can glimpse a culture interrogating the parameters of its literary traditions, negotiating a complex scriptural heritage and establishing a poetic image of the script that has influenced the discourse to the present day.

Reading the runes

In today's parlance, the phrase 'to read the runes' has become a staple journalistic jargon term, meaning to predict the future through scrutiny of the present, illustrating just how ingrained the notion of runic sortilege has become. However, the original writers of runes were far more concerned with *correct* reading and apprehension of the written message than with predicting the future, and variations on the call to *ráð rétt rúnar!* ('read the runes correctly!') appear frequently in runic inscriptions from medieval Scandinavia.[6] Indeed, the exhortation to *ráð rétt* seems to have become something of a stock phrase, common enough to be abbreviated as **ra(þ)rt** by one Ulfríkr, plying his trade in Rogaland (N 237), and for a rune writer in Hopperstad Church to sign off his inscription with a particularly curt **r= =r ra=r** (N 408).

Such a plea for correct interpretation is also echoed in the literature of medieval Iceland. In one oft-cited episode the poet-hero Egill rebukes a farmer's son for his poor command of the runic script, uttering a verse chastising incompetent rune carvers and pointing out the dangers of miswriting:

> Skalat maðr rúnar rísta,
> nema ráða vel kunni.
> Þat verðr mǫrgum manni,
> es of myrkvan staf villisk.[7]
>
> [A man should not cut runes unless he knows how to interpret them correctly; it happens to many a man that he goes astray with an obscure rune-stave.]

This half-strophe expresses in no uncertain terms the importance of reading runes correctly, and although the episode is somewhat fanciful (with the miswritten runes identified as the cause of illness) the sentiment expressed by Egill seems to be authentic, and is even paraphrased on a rune-stick from Trondheim (N A142).[8] The importance of not going 'astray' when reading runes is also expressed in the heroic and mythological poems of the Poetic Edda: the valkyrie Sigrdrífa refers to writing various categories of runes on amulets in unerring and unblemished form, and after a strange self-sacrifice carried out in order to gain knowledge of the runes in the poem *Hávamál*, Óðinn is said to enquire 'Veiztu hvé rísta skal? Veiztu hvé ráða skal?' ('Do you know how to carve? Do you know how to interpret?') (st. 144). The importance accorded to correct reading in the human world is reflected here in the concerns of the gods.

In Old English poetry we also find an implicit challenge to read the runes correctly through their use as clues in riddles, *Riddle 58*(56) even describing them as 'ryhte runstafas' ('true rune-staves') (l. 15), echoing the term *rúnar réttar* referred to in inscriptions from Scandinavia and suggesting a similar concern with correct practice. For Cynewulf certainly, the ability to solve the runic puzzle was a matter of considerable import, as it was bound up with the revelation of his didactic message. Indeed, whilst the type of reading called for by the rune carvers, stressed by Egill and demanded by Cynewulf, has its roots in correct apprehension of the runic characters and interpretation of the message, there is clearly another dimension to these pleas for correct reading in the poetry. Egill is referring to the effects of runes carved wrongly, which in this literary context are granted the power to heal or harm; *Hávamál* goes on to refer to sacrifice and to the carving of runes 'fyr þióða rǫk' ('before the origin of humankind') (st. 145); and Cynewulf demands that the reader not only expands the runic logographs, but also interprets their message in terms of personal salvation.

There is certainly more to reading the 'runic imagery', to borrow Seth Lerer's term,[9] in these literary contexts than avoiding mistakes in construing an inscription: in order to read them correctly it is necessary to interpret the literary and cultural value of the runes, appreciating the way they operate as meaningful signs (both graphical and literary) within the hermeneutical framework of poetic texts. This is a distinction between the sense of reading as a process of construing linguistic meaning from written signs (which must always be the primary focus of runology), and reading as a broader interpretative endeavour. If we fail to pay attention to the dynamics of the literary work when reading this runic imagery (or isolate the individual episode from the wider literary construction of the script), we are perhaps as culpable as runologists who offer an interpretation of an inscription without recourse to the material or archaeological context, and without reference to the wider corpus of inscriptions. Just as 'it is important for the philologically-minded runologist . . . to become at least acquainted with other aspects of the monument than just its linguistic ones',[10] so must the reading of runes in literary

contexts be premised on an understanding of the whole work in its manuscript context, as well as the wider tradition into which it falls.

This book sets out to read the runes in poetry on their own terms – as meaningful components of literary texts, rather than as a pale reflection of existential runic practice – and also to contextualise these poetic constructs by reference to the wider literary tradition. In doing so, it aims to shed new light on familiar poetic cruces, as well as to build up a picture of the role that runic inheritance played in the development of two dynamic literary cultures. Indeed, whilst comparisons between the literature of Anglo-Saxon England and medieval Scandinavia are often premised on vague analogues and a shared stock of Germanic tropes, the runic script represents a more tangible inheritance shared by both cultures. The differences between these literary cultures should not be understated, but with respect to runic heritage there are clear parallels. In Anglo-Saxon England – and particularly in Wessex where the vast majority of the surviving literature was produced – poets and scribes were looking back to a runic tradition that belonged to a past age, and that had been revived in the scriptorium for particular purposes and effects.[11] In medieval Iceland we find a situation in which poets are not so much temporally removed from runic practice, as geographically dislocated from a runic tradition that was flourishing elsewhere in the Norse world. For whatever reason, the epigraphical tradition that we find evidence of in Greenland, the Northern Isles and most conspicuously in Norway, does not seem to have been fully translated to the context of Iceland, at least before the thirteenth century,[12] and even then we seem to be dealing with 'a uniquely Icelandic development . . . that differs in important respects from neighbouring traditions'.[13] Although three centuries and a significant linguistic and cultural divide separate the two bodies of literature considered in this study, the position of the poets of Anglo-Saxon England and medieval Iceland with respect to runic heritage is thus broadly analogous. Both literary cultures inherited knowledge of the runic system and the conventions associated with it, but viewed this literate past obliquely, as custodians of received tradition. Comparing the role of runic imagery in mediating and mythologizing the contemporary culture of letters in the poetry of Anglo-Saxon England and medieval Iceland can thus help us to understand how these two cultures responded in different ways to a specific feature of a wider Germanic inheritance.

The runic legacy that is the subject of this book has been approached in the past from two main perspectives: that of the literary critic, more often than not interested in the role a particular runic strategy plays within a particular text, and that of the runologist typically concerned with the *runica manuscripta* tradition and the transmission of knowledge about the runic writing system. The study of runes in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts could not have advanced without the seminal work of René Derolez, who produced the first comprehensive study of Anglo-Saxon *runica manuscripta* and the dissemination of runic material in England and on the Continent. However,

Derolez was himself rather dismissive of the use of runes in literary contexts, and devotes only a single closing chapter to the unsystematic use of runes by Anglo-Saxon poets presumed to be drawing on the *fuþorcs* and runic alphabets that were his primary concern.[14] With respect to the Norse *runica manuscripta* tradition, there remains quite a bit of work to be done. Heizmann's foray into the earliest manuscript material has been supplemented by Bauer's survey of later manuscripts and detailed study of the Scandinavian rune poems,[15] both drawing on the initial collection of manuscript runes in Bæksted's corpus edition *Islands runeindskrifter*:[16] Derolez's planned study of the less uniform Norse material, reserved for a later occasion, did not materialise.[17]

Introductions to runology generally make reference to the *runica manuscripta* of England and Iceland, and occasionally include a discussion of the use and representation of runes in literature, although usually as an interesting side note to the practiced tradition.[18] It is also probably fair to describe the runes that appear in Old English and Old Norse poetic texts as 'marginal to general editorial interests'.[19] The standard Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records (ASPR) editions of Old English poetry provide only cursory (and sometimes erroneous) comments on the runic strategies on display, and even Anlezark's excellent recent edition of the Old English *Solomon and Saturn I*, whilst including a comprehensive study of sources and analogues for the poem, does not attempt to set the runic Pater Noster in the context of the wider runic tradition.[20] Dronke's edition of the Edda is as insightful with regards to the representation of runes as it is to most aspects of Norse culture, and represents a great improvement on the minimalist textual apparatus of Neckel,[21] but important poems such as *Sigrdrífumál* and *Guðrúnarkviða II* are missing from her three published volumes.[22] The student must turn to Evans for a close analysis of the *Rúnatal* section of *Hávamál*,[23] or to the excellent *Kommentar* of von See et al. for a comprehensive discussion of such slippery concepts as 'victory runes' and 'ale runes',[24] but even here there is not the scope to draw these isolated references together and make sense of them as a whole. In the early twentieth century, Dickins did attempt to gather certain Anglo-Saxon 'runic' texts together into a rather misleadingly titled anthology,[25] whilst A. Hacikyan made a start on a more reasoned survey of runes in poetry in a short article on the subject.[26] On the Norse side, we have several studies of runes in Icelandic literature from the turn of the twentieth century,[27] as well as a more recent survey of the material in Bæksted's *Målruner og Troldruner*. This work draws on evidence from both runic inscriptions and Old Norse literature with the aim of dispelling the notion that runes were regarded as magical symbols by the societies that used them. One legacy of Bæksted's study has been a more cautious use of the literary sources, many of which he reads as poetic distortions of practical procedures. However, he could also be accused of engaging in exactly the kind of approach that he vehemently criticised: namely straining the sources to fit a preconceived notion about

the role of the runic script. That said, the idea that accounts of the script in the Poetic Edda should be regarded as 'mythical reflections of practical conditions of life rather than suggestions of the magic properties of the runes' is salutary,[28] and in many ways this study supports Bæksted's contentions by understanding poetry as a response to the value of rather than the existential realities of runic writing.

Elliott's lively *Runes: An Introduction* combines serious runological scholarship with the kind of imaginative conjecture that Bæksted criticised, and some of his insights into the literary function of runes (as well as his speculations about the magico-ritual function of the script) were expanded upon in a series of articles relating to individual Old English texts.[29] Unlike Elliott, who used his literary training to inform his work as a runologist, I draw a clear distinction between the special context of literature and the practiced runic tradition. This is a distinction maintained by Seth Lerer in his insightful *Literacy and Power*, a study that sets runic literacy in the wider context of Anglo-Saxon learning and recognises the importance of the script in establishing a 'mythology of writing for a literate vernacular poetics'.[30] Lerer's approach, clearly influenced by post-structural criticism, is particularly significant in that it pays attention to the runic inheritance ignored in many studies of incipient literacy, and his chapters on the runic hilt in *Beowulf* and literacy and power in the OE *Daniel* will serve as vital points of reference throughout this book. However, in conflating runes with other imaginative images of script (such as illuminated letters) in an ambitious attempt to recreate the literate mentalities of an era, we lose sense slightly of what makes runic heritage distinctive in the Anglo-Saxon literary mindset, a question this book sets out to address.

Pending publication of Victoria Symons' eagerly anticipated monograph treating runes in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts,[31] Orton's *Writing in a Speaking World* is the latest study to draw on runic material (both epigraphical and manuscript) in order to understand the 'pragmatics of literacy' in Anglo-Saxon England.[32] In addition to addressing the evidence from the runic corpus and the 'staggered start' to the progress of literacy in England, he devotes attention to some of the most important Old English poetic contexts in which runes are used, including Cynewulf's signatures and the runic riddles of the Exeter Book. The notion that certain manuscript runes exhibit 'structural links with their original epigraphical function' is approached from a different angle in Chapter 3 of the current study,[33] but whereas Orton is interested in the marginal role of the script in the interface between epigraphical and manuscript literacy, I am concerned with the literary implications of this transfer of script between mediums, and the development of a consistent aesthetic of runic writing in the poetry. Studies by Bragg, Dewa, DiNapoli, Fell, Niles, Symons and Birkett take more targeted approaches to the use of runes in selected Old English poems,[34] whilst articles by Dillman, Macleod and Markey indicate a degree of continuing interest in literary references to runes in the Old Norse tradition.[35]

It is clear that in its focus on the runic script as a system of signs that carry both linguistic and cultural meaning this book is influenced by recent developments in the study and theorising of writing, and that it engages with the wider orality/literacy debate in medieval textual studies. To a certain extent this book's focus on a literary residue in medieval poetry presumed to be oral in origin serves to partially deconstruct the oft-perceived primacy of the oral-formulaic model of transmission: the use of runes in the Exeter Book riddles, for example, problematises Doane's characterisation of Old English poetry as 'never intended to feed into a lineage of writing' and 'extrinsic to its main existence in ongoing oral traditions',[36] whilst the internal references to runic writing in Eddic poetry put paid to the idea that these texts originate from a exclusively oral society. The mediation of oral poetry by Latin literacy and textual models has certainly been a fruitful area of enquiry, Pasternack and O'Brien O'Keeffe in particular bringing the concepts of 'inscribed texts' and 'visible song' to our attention,[37] and the subject has benefited from the widespread recognition that 'Latin texts and textuality supplied the models for most English texts', even those judged to be composed within the native oral tradition.[38] However, much less attention has been paid to the role of the runic script in the development of these hybrid modes of literacy, with the notable exception of the studies by Lerer and Orton mentioned previously. Although the runic script is alphabetic and functions in much the same way as the roman alphabet, the types of utterances, the conventions of rune carving and the material associations with runes were particular, and we are right to talk of runic literacy and runic textuality as distinct phenomena. Indeed, whilst earlier generations of runologists were keen to present the runic script as an exact equivalent to the roman alphabet, the distinctiveness of the runic medium and the particularities of runic literacy have themselves gained increasing attention in recent years.[39] Whether authentic or created in the literary imagination, the legacy that this alternative textual tradition had on Old English and Old Norse poetry incorporating or evoking the script should not be disregarded, and the productive meeting of these two textual cultures in the poetry informs every approach in the book.

The following study is broken down into five chapters, each of which represents a discrete but complementary reading of the runes in a selected group of poems. Chapter 1 focuses on the link between inscription and inheritance in Old English poetry, beginning with a discussion of the (limited) evidence for theoretical engagement with the origins of the runic script by Anglo-Saxon antiquarians. The Franks Casket provides a useful starting point for interrogating the syncretic narrative that developed in the process of integrating the runes with a Christian conception of scriptural heritage. Rather than representing an inert substitute for roman script, the runes are pointedly associated in the scheme of the Franks Casket with both Germanic and early Christian history, and with a particular prophetic register. A similar association between the script and Old Testament history seems

to inform the use of runic imagery in the OE *Daniel* and the representation of the runic sword hilt in *Beowulf*. In this latter case, the runes not only provide a warning to read their prophetic import correctly, but align the Germanic past with Old Testament history, and provide a test of the correct reading of scriptural history in the present. The runic reckoning in *Andreas* is based on a similar construction of the script as a prophetic Old Testament signifier that warns of the flood and indicates God's plan for the people. Taken together, these poetic representations of runic inscription suggest some effort by learned Anglo-Saxons to understand runic heritage within a paradigm for Christian salvation history.

Chapter 2 turns to address the co-option of runes as a book script within the context of the Exeter Book, an eclectic anthology of Old English poems that offers the opportunity to reconstruct the associations held by the script within a tenth-century community of scribes and readers. Runes are consistently used in the Exeter Book in the context of revelatory reading practices, an association with 'unlocking' that may be explained by reference to the venerable Bede's extraordinary story of Imma and his unlocking chains. I suggest that Bede's oblique reference to *alysendlic* ('unlocking') runes and the use of runes as solutions to many of the riddles in the collection represent two points on an intellectual continuum that associated the runic script with disclosure and revelation to the Christian initiate. The appeal of such a poetic association in the context of contemporary devotional reading practice is highlighted through an analysis of Cynewulf's runic 'signatures' as a form of invested disclosure.

Chapter 3 moves from a consideration of intellectual responses to runes in poetry to the aesthetic sensibilities that dictated their adoption in certain poetic contexts. The employment of the script for its unusual appearance suggests a truly antiquarian approach to runic heritage, but the alterity of this primarily epigraphical script also served as a productive means through which to draw attention to the written word as a material object. As well as serving to illustrate the hypostatised letters of the Pater Noster prayer, the use of runes in *Solomon and Saturn I* and an acute awareness of the ornamental qualities of the script may underlie the highly unusual portrayal of a 'palm-twigged' *Pater Noster* prayer. The rune poems of the Anglo-Saxon and Norwegian traditions are analysed with a similar focus on their expression of an ornamental textuality, highlighting the importance of shape and form to the guiding conceit of the poems, and even the unique layout of the OE *Rune Poem* on the page.

The historicity or otherwise of literary references to runic practice is a topic of some importance to literary critics, historians and runologists alike, and Chapter 4 directly addresses the issue of the historical concordance between traditional rune lore and epigraphical practice. Using a case study of the heroic poems of the Poetic Edda – concerned with legendary figures from the Migration Period, but surviving in a thirteenth-century Icelandic manuscript – the chapter compares references to runes in the poetry with

what is known of runic practice from an early period, looking in particular at the list of exotic rune types in *Sigrdrífumál*. I argue that the few overlaps between Eddic rune lore and the corpus of older *fuþark* inscriptions may arise from a blend of fossilised poetic association and sensitive literary reconstruction, whilst the more prosaic use of runes in *Atlamál in Groenlenzko* may represent the updating of runic heritage to reflect contemporary concerns.

Chapter 5, the final chapter of this study, addresses the mythological poems of the Eddic tradition and in doing so foregrounds the role of the runic script in the interrogation of literacy and written authority. Approaching Old Norse mythology with a view to the cultural work that it performs, this chapter situates the myths of the origin and transmission of runes represented in *Hávamál*, *Rígsþula* and *Sólarljóð* within a paradigm of contemporary engagement with the written word and its symbolic currency. The inclusion of runes in the mythological complex is testament to their important role in benchmarking social progress and engaging with the possibilities and apprehensions associated with an increasingly literate society. Whilst the mythological account of runic inception tells us little about the realities of runic practice, it undoubtedly casts light on the cultural importance of runes both in pre-Christian and post-conversion society, and their role in the development of literate sensibilities.

A note on conventions

Although drawing on epigraphical evidence, this study is not concerned primarily with the transcription and interpretation of inscriptions, and does not presume to inform this central business of runology. When making reference to runic inscriptions (and to runes in manuscripts) I follow the Swedish (Samnordisk runtextdatabas) standards: transliterations are thus given in **bold**, with a single hyphen, - , indicating an unreadable rune, an ellipsis, . . ., indicating a longer portion of missing text, round brackets ( ), for damaged runes which can still be read, and square brackets, [ ], for runes which cannot be read but can be conjectured from early readings. Following convention, the normalised text is written in *italics*, and an English translation is given in single quotation marks. The readings followed are for the most part that of the Samnordisk runtextdatabas, for inscriptions in the younger and medieval *fuþarks*,[40] and the database of the Kiel Rune Project (Runenprojekt Kiel)[41] for older *fuþark* inscriptions with reference made to the corpus editions of Krause and Jankuhn,[42] and Tineke Looijenga.[43] The various publications to which the runic sigla refer are listed in the bibliography. For inscriptions in the Anglo-Saxon *fuþorc*, Page's transcriptions in *An Introduction to English Runes* are supplemented by reports of individual finds. The ASPR editions and line numbers are used for Old English poetry and Ursula Dronke (ed.), *The Poetic Edda* for the Norse material, with Gustav Neckel (ed.), *Edda – Die Lieder des Codex Regius* used for

Sigrdrífumál and *Guðrúnarkviða I* and *II*, three Eddic poems not covered in Dronke's published volumes. When editions other than these are used they are referred to in the text, and all translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

Notes

1 R.I. Page, *An Introduction to English Runes*, 2nd edn (Woodbridge, 1999), p. 5.
2 Alice Edwardes, *Runes: And Other Poems* (London, 1925), p. 10.
3 Ralph Blum, *Book of Runes*, e-book edn (New York, 2012), Front Cover.
4 Page, *An Introduction*, p. xiii.
5 Anders Bæksted, *Målruner og Troldruner: Runemagiske Studier* (Copenhagen, 1952), p. 322.
6 Notable examples include DR 222, U 847, U 11, N 352 and N 575, this last inscription from Gol stave church simply reading **ra=þ rett ru(=n)a=r þesar** *Ráð rétt rúnar þessar.* 'Interpret these runes correctly!', and exhibiting distinctly 'meta-scriptural' characteristics, Terje Spurkland, *Norwegian Runes and Runic Inscriptions* (Woodbridge, 2005), p. 180.
7 Sigurður Nordal (ed.), *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar* (Reykavík, 1933), st. 48, p. 230.
8 James E. Knirk, 'Runes from Trondheim and a Stanza by Egill Skalla-Grímsson', in Heiko Uecker (ed.), *Studien zum Altgermanischen: Festschrift für Henrich Beck* (Berlin, 1994), pp. 411–20. Whilst recast as a positive statement, this late twelfth- or early thirteenth-century inscription bears a remarkable similarity to Egil's *lausavísa*, and Knirk argues it is 'most likely that the runic verse preserves an older half-stanza that was remoulded by tradition or by the author of *Egils saga*', p. 418.
9 Seth Lerer, *Literacy and Power in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Lincoln, NE, 1991), p. 16.
10 Judith Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age* (Woodbridge, 2001), p. 37.
11 Indeed, it is likely that there was no 'native' tradition in certain areas of England, including Wessex. See Page, *An Introduction*, pp. 16–37, p. 227, and the introductory discussion in Chapter 1 of this book.
12 See Michael Barnes, *Runes: A Handbook* (Woodbridge, 2012), p. 130.
13 Judith Jesch, *The Viking Diaspora* (Routledge, 2015), p. 173.
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1 The writing's on the wall

Inscription and inheritance in Old English poetry

There is little evidence from the corpus of Anglo-Saxon runic inscriptions to suggest that runes – the written characters known to the Germanic tribes who migrated to Britain from the Continent – were associated with pre-Christian religious practice in England,[1] and it is therefore hardly surprising that this alphabetic script was swiftly assimilated into the rich and capacious textual culture of the early Anglo-Saxon Church. The characters *þorn* and *wyn*(*n*) were co-opted from the *fuþorc* to serve as additional letters in the insular alphabet, and runes had a clear practical value as an alternative script particularly suited to epigraphy. The status that runes came to hold in Northumbria in particular is demonstrated by the use of the script on such significant monuments as the Ruthwell and Bewcastle crosses and St Cuthbert's Coffin, whilst recent finds such as the eighth-century page turner discovered in Baconsthorpe in Norfolk suggest that runes may have fulfilled a more important textual niche within the Anglo-Saxon Church than has previously been recognised.[2]

Whilst Anglo-Saxon ecclesiasts saw no contradiction in using runes alongside the roman alphabet – indeed, the runic tradition seems to have gained a new lease on life within religious communities in the seventh and eighth centuries – Lendinara reminds us that the script also came to 'represent an important feature of the Germanic inheritance in England' which lent runes a special place in Anglo-Saxon literary history.[3] Indeed, although the epigraphical tradition had all but died out in late Anglo-Saxon England, it is clear that the cultural memory of the script had not. Runes continued to be recorded in manuscripts and, at least in some quarters, to be closely associated with Anglo-Saxon heritage: as late as the eleventh century an innocuous reference to 'ure stafas' ('our letters') in a manuscript of the OE *Bede* seems to have inspired a scribe to pen a runic **abcd** directly beneath it.[4] If the *fuþorc* itself needed little adaptation to serve the needs of a newly Christian community,[5] the cultural narrative of the runic script must, like other features of a Germanic inheritance, have altered in the process of adoption by the Church. The origins of the *fuþorc* had to be understood within a Christian paradigm for history and salvation, and its relationship with the ascendant culture of Latin letters negotiated.

It is easy to forget that scripts represent cultural signifiers as well as practical technologies, and that Christianity developed its own mythology of writing, underpinned by the authority of the revealed word of God and the reliance on scripture to promulgate the faith. Indeed, early Christian theologians such as Isidore of Seville inculcated a narrative of scriptural development that fluently blended pseudo-scientific enquiry with religious superstition, his *Etymologiae* giving voice to a learned belief that all scripts ultimately derive from God's gift to Moses and the Israelites. Isidore, one of the most important scholars of the late Antique world, whose writings had already 'won a rapid and widespread popularity in Britain in the seventh century',[6] was concerned to define writing as a practical technology of literacy, stating that 'letters are tokens of things, the signs of words'.[7] Yet he also clearly fetishises this divine endowment, identifying mystical letters amongst the Greek alphabet including T as 'the figure of the cross of the Lord'.[8] What is more, whilst his account of scriptural development reiterates the orthodox notion that Latin and Greek were the direct descendants of the sacred script Hebrew (and that Chaldean and Syriac scripts were invented by Abraham), he also integrates extra-biblical narratives into this syncretic paradigm, including the notion that Latin was first brought to the Italians by the nymph Carmentis.[9] If the Augustinian take on universal history provided Anglo-Saxon ecclesiasts with a theological roadmap for the rehabilitation of the pagan past, it is Isidore's brief history of the genealogy of scripts that would have served as the authorised paradigm through which to understand the *particular* inheritance of the runic writing system.

The runic alphabet lay well outside Isidore's Mediterranean sphere of interest, and his *Etymologiae* leaves the question of runic origins open to interpretation. There is, however, some evidence that Anglo-Saxon ecclesiasts did attempt to situate runes within this Christian model of scriptural development, if not through design then perhaps through general ignorance of the writing systems to which Isidore refers. For example, certain manuscripts of an Anglo-Saxon provenance answer both the need for a separate Chaldaeo-Assyrian alphabet and the lack of a theory of runic origins in Isidore's scriptural history simply by labelling various runic alphabets as Chaldean or Assyrian, suggesting, perhaps, a conflation of traditions.[10] Of greater interest, however, is the short *De inventione litterarum* tract compiled in the first half of the ninth century, most probably in a German centre with strong Anglo-Saxon connections.[11] This tract draws on Isidore's *Etymologiae* in discussing the origins of the Hebrew, Greek and Latin alphabets, and usually includes a discussion of the runic script (as well as Aethicus Ister's invented alphabet) alongside these sacred writing systems. As Derolez points out in his comprehensive study of the *De inventione* tradition, it is in this particular context that 'runes are really integrated into the system of Mediaeval learning': one which understood the development of all writing systems in direct relation to universal history.[12] One important mid-ninth-century manuscript (St Gall, Stiftsbibliothek, MS 878) even contains what