

The Rune oracle and Anglo-Saxon magic¹

A plea for Wyrð as a guideline for thorough divination

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*When living your life like an arrow in flight
you must always accept that the end is in sight,
be grateful at least for the fact that you knew
you came to death - he did not come for you.
You are like targets who sit and await -
patiently suffer the arrows of fate,
saying 'I am but mortal and destined to die -
I can change nothing so why should I try?'*

**Martin Walkyier, Dreamweaver: Reflections of our Yesterdays,
1989, The best of Enemies (Wulf's tale)**

Abstract

Amidst the many exotic mantic techniques, that are fashionable today, like the tarot, I Ching, and astrology, the runic oracle is, as part of our European cultural heritage, very popular. As with many others, if not all techniques of divination, C.G. Jung's principle of synchronicity is being called upon as a justification for the use of the runic oracle. However, authentic considerations about coincidences that explain and validate the mantic potential of an oracle, are almost systematically passed over. In this article I will try to show that thorough knowledge of the assumed nature of existence of coincidences in general and their models of explanation in particular are indispensable for a good comprehension of the runic tradition. For that purpose I turn to the traditional Anglo-Saxon culture, that sketches a very fascinating, thought provoking *Weltanschauung*. In order to be able to offer the runes a more appropriate and more justified place among other methods of divination, it is also important to scrutinize their nature and history.

Origin and history of the runes²

According to myth the runes came to this world because Odin, hanging on the world tree 'Yggdrasil' as a self-sacrifice, fathomed their mysteries. Later he also gave an eye to obtain deeper knowledge. Besides being the chief god of the Viking pantheon, Odin was the god of magic and prophecy and still is being associated with runic divination.

The truth behind the coming into being of the runes is shrouded in mystery, although there are two assumptions about their origin. One generally held idea is that they are Germanic, possibly with some Roman influence. This assumption is based on historic writings including that of Caesar and Tacitus.

Another thought points the similarities between runes and the writings of the Greeks and Phoenicians, or even the cuneiform script; assumptions that seem to give

¹ This essay is a translation by the author, and was originally published in 1998 in the Dutch Journal *Prana* (issue 108), a Dutch, two-monthly periodical concerned with spirituality and the periphery of science.

² See e.g. Davidson (1994).

rise to the idea that the runes are of non-Germanic origin, but are a corruption of these scripts. The Scottish mythologist and mystic Lewis Spence is dedicated to this view, and adds that the Germanic³ culture was in a state of relative barbarity when the runes first appeared. His idea must however be doubted, when his motivation is unveiled: his *Encyclopaedia of the Occult*⁴ goes to show that he has a plain aversion to the original Germanic culture. Apparently his opinion laid the foundations of his divergent view. Besides this it is fact that contact with other cultures is essential for copying the script of that culture, and it is just this that would be very unlikely, taken the barbaric state of the Germanic culture into account. Besides this, the similarity between the different scripts can be explained because they all have in common that they have to be carved in hard material. Angular characters are best suitable for that purpose and it are these characteristics that cause the similarities. However it would be too rash to discard the possibility of a non-Germanic origin altogether.

The period of the migration of the Germanic peoples (roughly third to sixth century AD) caused diverse geographical separations between the different Germanic tribes and from that time forward distinct varieties of the runic script would evolve. The Angles and Saxons settled in the Southeast of England in the fifth century AD, taking with them their runic tradition.

Scrutinising the runes

Just like our set of letters is called an alphabet, after the Greek equivalents of the modern letters 'a' and 'b', ('alpha' and 'beta' respectively), the set of runes is called a *futhark*, because the first runes have the sounds f, ú, th, ó, r, and c. A rune letter is originally called a *runastafr*. Each *runastafr* represents an aspect from reality so the *futhark* is a symbolic and systematic *Weltanschauung* and the *runastafr* an ideogram. It must however be noted, that none of the traditional meanings of the rune letters has survived the ravages of time. In our present day there seems to be a consensus about what meaning to attach to the runes. The meaning is derived from the name of each individual rune, and from there the ideogram is extended to a symbol that covers all associations that the name of a rune may have (possibly derivable from the traditional symbolism of such a name, or else from other methods of divination).

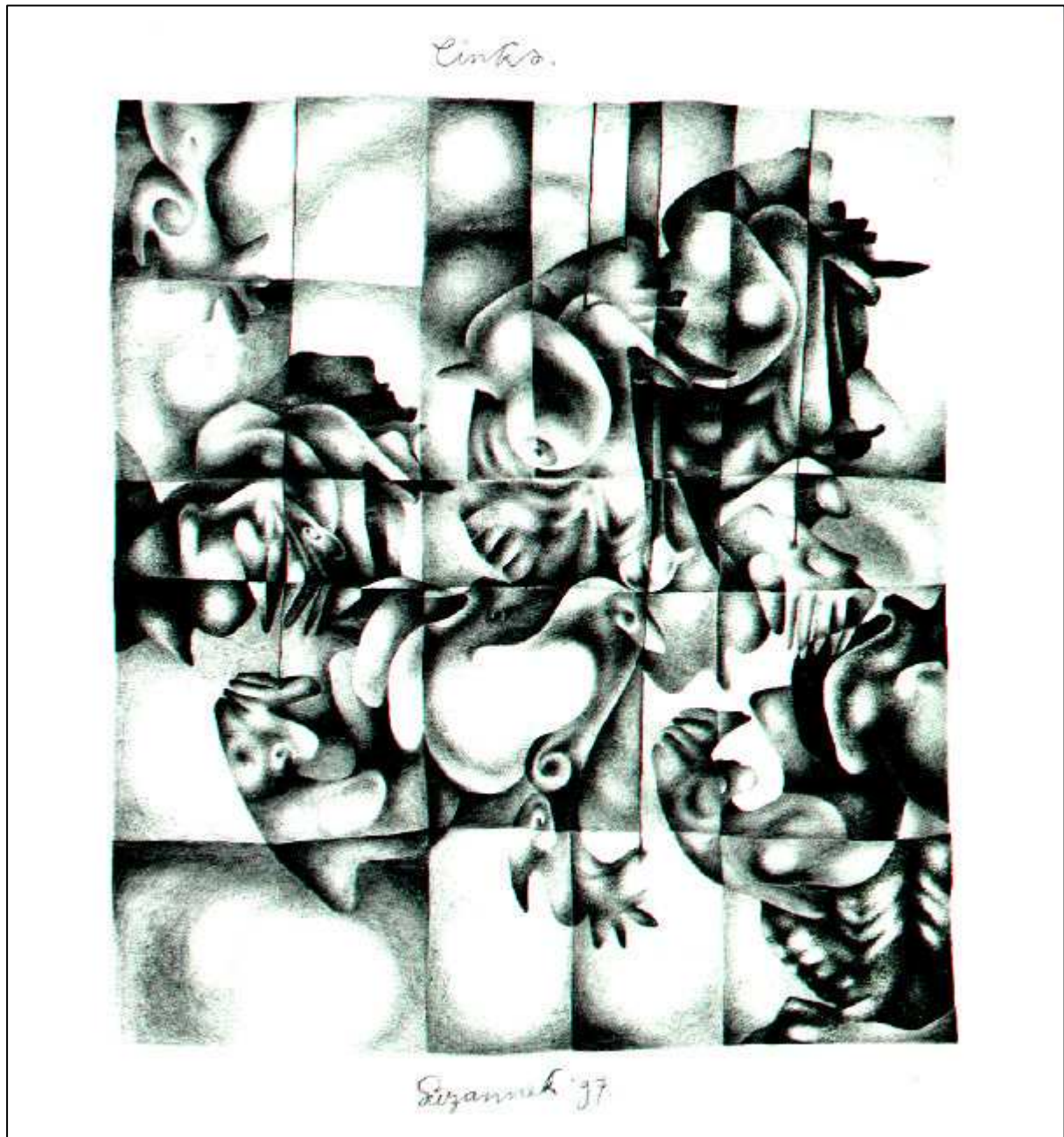
The separation of the Germanic peoples discussed above caused that different *futharks* emerged, all with different numbers of runes. An early *futhark* of the Vikings consisted of twenty-four runes, while a more recent which was based on the early one, only contained sixteen characters. Some old English inscriptions were written with no less than thirty-one or even thirty-three runes. The twenty-four-character *futhark* is the one that is most often used for means of divination. Sometimes a twenty-fifth rune, the so-called empty rune, is added.

Runes are used in numerous ways for divination nowadays. The renowned Francis X. King describes a method of casting runes in a down-to-earth book on do-it-yourself divination.⁵ The procedure involves a casting cloth with four segments

³ In English the term *Teutons* is often used as a generic term for the Germanic tribes. Probably to avoid confusion between *Germanic peoples* and the modern *Germans*. Strictly speaking, however, the term *Teutons* refers only to the West-Germanic tribe of that name.

⁴ See Spence, 1994, pp. 409-410.

⁵ King, 1988.



with the four traditional elements (earth, water, fire and air). The runes are given a certain meaning that depends on which of the segments they are eventually cast.

Other methods of casting runes are a bit more basic and only imply drawing runes from a pouch, which afterwards can be interpreted with the aid of a spread that was chosen beforehand. All in all this method closely resembles the procedure that is followed with the tarot.

None of the modern methods is authentic, so states King also, and he discards the allegations of modern mystics that they employ traditional methods allegedly known only to them by hereditary esotericism. He does stress that the modern methods, however not authentic, do work fine and implies that breeding a mystical aura around the implementation of runes is as bombastic as unnecessary.

The Way of Wyrð

There is a very fascinating study of Anglo-Saxon shamanism, of which the results, published as a narrative, offer a univocal and complete picture of the use of runes in ritual magic and depict wonderfully how they are imbedded in the daily life of a traditional Anglo-Saxon sorcerer. The book, titled *The way of Wyrð*⁶, written by Brian Bates, also offers, integrated in the story, some very eloquent descriptions of the captivating world view of the Anglo-Saxons. Because their way of thinking is of the essence to fully grasp the use of runes in their culture, it is necessary to acquaint oneself to the most important features of this Anglo-Saxon world view. Not only to obtain a correct image of the runic tradition in England before the Anglo-Saxons were christened (the story is set in the end of the seventh century), but rather because the Anglo-Saxon range of ideas are enriching even in this day and age (maybe even more so in this day and age). Besides this the Anglo-Saxon approach opens new dimensions to the fertile oracle tradition of the runes. Principles like synchronicity and Oriental mysticism that explain oracles, have rather interesting similarities to the Anglo-Saxon cosmology, but the latter does stand on its own and offers us new insights.

The way of Wyrð tells us about a Christian scribe, named Wat Brand, who travels to the south of England. He embarks on his journey to study Pagan customs and their tradition of mysticism, as a beginning of what would eventually become a slow process of conversion. More or less under false pretences a guide is arranged (by his monastery), who is not only supposed to lead him through the unknown lands, but also to help him gain knowledge about Pagan spirituality. Wulf, Wat Brands guide, turns out to be a sorcerer in the Anglo-Saxon tradition and Brand's journey does not go as planned. Not only is Brand unwillingly becoming heavily involved in the ritual magic that Wulf practises, Brand himself is subjected to it, when spirits steal his soul. It is this sweeping experience that knocks over his already waning Christian faith and changes it to Anglo-Saxon Paganism, a process sustained by Wulf who remains his helper through thick and thin.

Some very striking Anglo-Saxon concepts are discussed throughout the book. They are all integrated in the story, but are also explained in Bates' preface. The idea of *life-force* is one of the concepts that he discusses. It is an Anglo-Saxon concept of energy, that holds a strong resemblance to that of *chi* and *prana*. Also the *spirit world* is of significance. The spirits are the manifestations of all forces that are part of the one binding principle, the Anglo-Saxon cosmology in a nutshell: *Wyrð*. It is this concept that deserves special attention with an eye to the runes.

Wyrð is the most important idea of the Anglo-Saxon world. Sometimes it is inaccurately seen as synonymous to 'fate' or 'destiny', but its significance stretches far beyond those words. *Wyrð* exceeds our notions of free will and determinism.⁷ The principle suggests an endless interrelatedness between all aspects from the cosmos, including all living things, but also mechanical forces. All these things are situated individually in a spectrum between the poles Fire and Frost. That is why *Wyrð* is often depicted as a web, the threads of which represent the myriad links between all aspects of the cosmos.

⁶ Bates, 1996.

⁷ Ibid., p. 11.

Besides this, the sketched image seems to imply causality to some extent: if one fibre vibrates, so to all the others. Nevertheless, this view does also justify an argument that suggests the opposite. After all, *Wyrd* is omnipresent and thus has nothing to do with time. This thought is nicely worked out in a passage in which Wulf predicts a warrior's death by observing the flight of two ravens.⁸ Brand interprets that Wulf assumes that the ravens are the cause of the impending death, and discards this idea altogether. Wulf, in his turn, reveals the real nature of *Wyrd*. He states that it is incorrect to assume that two events, occurring at different moments in time, are thereby separate. He does avoid the trap of determinism and causality, though, when some time later he continues that an omen, like the pattern of a bird's flight, is not the same as an indicator of fate, but just one of *Wyrd*. Wulf 'reads' the vibrating fibres and can deduce earthly events from that. Later he adds that the flight of birds is no less (or no more) a cause of the warrior's death than is the other way around. The fact in itself, that he goes to great lengths to state the apparent obvious, gives rise to the thought that there is more to it. Once again it is causality that implies chronology, which would justify possible criticism. It must be taken into account, however, that time does not exist in *Wyrd* and thus chronology and anti-chronology are one and the same. Maybe now the time has come to take *Wyrd* to the world the runic oracle and discuss some restrictions and possible pitfalls that come with any oracle.

Oracles, their potentials and restrictions

Jung's principle of synchronicity⁹ is called upon whenever an oracle needs to be justified. This is often done very unarticulated, because one tends to pass over the fact that oracles often speak to us only after we draw more than one card, stone, etc. Each drawing, according to the rules of the spread, must be interpreted within the framework of all drawings within that spread. This causes that separate drawings of one spread could be more divided in time or situation than two drawings of two different spreads. The explanation that no moment occurs twice is often given for justifying methods of divination that involve more drawings, but it is exactly this explanation that undermines the oracle's credibility.

Besides this, some oracles, especially those that involve more drawings for a spread, are exposed to a chance that synchronicity will not occur. After all, research of acausal connections¹⁰, conducted by the parapsychologist Rhine, found that only a few people had more hits than could be expected from the laws of probability. In plain language this means that the power to use oracle as a means of divination is not assessable to all, and those who are gifted in divination will nearly always produce a number of random drawings. The fragile balance of a complex spread, say five stones or cards, would collapse even if one element is chosen without synchronicity.

Only two possible assumptions, subtle in their differences, stand proudly amidst this critique and support the thought that oracles can be valuable. The first assumption is built on the thought that if an oracle is founded on a thorough and

⁸ Ibid., pp. 72-76.

⁹ Jung, 1952.

¹⁰ Rhine, 1948.

complete cosmology, every spread, received by an open-minded person, could offer some advice. The questioner would pick precisely those aspects of a corresponding meaning from the oracle, because the rudiments of the solution to his query within him wake from their slumber as soon as he sees their nature mirrored in the powerful symbolism of the oracle.

The second assumption is that of the potentials rituals posses. Not the difference between each moment and the thesis that every moment is unique, but rather the thought that by ritualising the essence of a moment can be preserved, open gates to a different and more thoughtful use of oracles. Just like Wulf follows the protocol and regains the essence of a moment, an oracle user may try to do so by using his own rites. The subtle change of consciousness may well aid in letting the mind flow more freely, so that it can be called upon more adequately to let the oracle speak more purely.

Finally, whatever critique there is, my experience has taught me that oracles do work most of the time, even if I take the self caused distortion of the advise into account. So I would like to plead for a critical self-analysis and self-knowledge to a certain extend, before seeking an oracle's counsel: the advise an oracle offers needs a corresponding rudiment in our mind. The laws of logic work always at any time. Everywhere the path of least resistance is followed – *Omne agens propter finem*. If we cannot, even with the aid of logic as an instrument, explain even knowing about the critique, why oracles work, we have to admit that there are still things beyond our grasp. We have to appreciate the result of each spread and cast aside all forced justifications and explanations; it is the result that counts.

In the *Way of Wyrð* it almost seems that Wulf directly addresses us, when he says to Brand that man spins a web of words – a word-hoard – and with those words we try to fathom reality. *Wyrð* is only knowable by he who experiences and does not try to capture that experience or the world in words. All in all it vaguely resembles the mystical adagio that one should not mistake the finger that points to the moon for the moon itself. The 'meeting' with an oracle is a unique, personal event for anyone. One that is upright, daring to ask questions and believes in one's potentials as a ground for insights, shall not see one's trust in oracles deceived, for one then trusts oneself.

Epilogue

The initial encounter with an oracle shall remain treasured memory for adepts. The often anecdotal approach that most descriptions of oracles have in common and the discussing of individual cases bear witness to that. Probably it is just romantic banter, but maybe that the road, which leads to an encounter with an oracle, carries in itself some divinatory worth. At least it is fact that the encounter with an oracle holds some convictions that speeded back through time. Subliminal, before retrospection, though with retroaction, an oracle should be able to lighten the teleological nature of such an individual path – even when taken into account the mentioned restrictions.

On a grey Saturday in the spring of the year 1991, a musical masterpiece, named *Dreamweaver* from the English band Sabbat, crossed my path.¹¹ Appealed by the spherical cover with red composition, autumnal frame and striking tableau, I decided to listen to find out whether if the externals mirrored the internals. Soon I found myself in a musical landscape sketched by firm strokes, in which most of all the lyrics, almost prosaic, bore witness of an enormous rich insight and a highly refined flair for language. Some years later I could lay my hands on the source of inspiration of this musical piece: *The Way of Wyrð*. A comparison with the interpretation of the book in the musical piece shows that Martin Walkyier – the lyricist – in spite of following the original plot very carefully, does introduce some different nuances. He sharpens the chasm between Christianity and the Pagan Anglo-Saxon mysticism and enlarges the initial animosity between the two ideologies. Finally, Walkyier hints at the Anglo-Saxon *Weltanschauung* in his lyrics, because he uses its implications several times when he describes some situations without narration in his lyrics. Even before Brand becomes aware of this world view.

Later even I found a set of runes. With the acquired knowledge of the way of Wyrð and the additions of *Dreamweaver*, the time for me has come to reap the seeds these works saw. Wisdom for me is the correct use of knowledge, and it is the process of transformation in which I see myself at this moment. I have already asked the questions and valued them at their worth, but maybe they still burn on the lips of those that not yet have recognised Wyrð.

Does Wyrð speak to us through the runes? Is the runic oracle a ritualised omen producer? I do believe that the cosmology of the runes is a fairly complete one. But only if we come to really know the culture in which the runic tradition is embedded, will we be able to appreciate the runes the way they deserve. I hope that Wyrð enriches our views on coincidences and therefore I'd like to ask everyone who's willing to go deeply into this matter, to try to find Bates' book *The way of Wyrð*. Just like the book, my article meant to be a plea for valuing and appreciating our European cultural heritage and I hope that I have made clear that the runic oracle, each oracle for that matter, inspires us to play a more active role in life. It teaches us to be prepared to anticipate to the constant stream of situations we come across. Even if any individual life is intertwined in Wyrð, we have to broaden our views to heed the solutions to our problems and counsel that we all have within ourselves – by letting the runes be the voice of those inner feelings. We must not be the targets who sit and await, patiently suffering the arrows of fate, but we must be like the arrow in flight, heeding the inescapable, yet actively and daringly choosing our course and proudly bearing the burden our chosen course through life forces us to bear.

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¹¹ Sabbat, 1989. The lead singer of this band, Martin Walkyier, formed folk metal band Skyclad in 1991, whom he left in 2001. Both bands are known for their excellent Pagan lyrics, though their music is not for the faint-hearted.

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