

Magic and the Runes: A Skeptical View by Dan Campbell

Most of us Heathens who study the runes believe that they were used magically during the period of the Elder Futhork. In particular, some of us believe the runes were originally developed in Germanic culture primarily for magical and sacral use rather than for utilitarian usage, like other alphabets. Our beliefs are supported by virtually all of the books on runes that we regard as reliable; for instance, those by Thorsson, Gundarsson, and Aswynn – particularly those by Thorsson, whose academic credentials are well-known in the Heathen community. But how well are our beliefs supported by the surviving evidence of how our ancestors used the runes? Are we reading too much into the evidence, out of a desire to find authentic roots that support our contemporary magical runic practices?

Reading academic runological literature provides some interesting perspectives on these questions. I do not say “answers”, because the questions on whether, and how, the runes were used magically provoke a wide range of opinions among academics. R.I. Page described the spectrum as being between “imaginative” runologists who are more willing to accept, or look for, magical interpretations of inscriptions; and “skeptical” runologists who favor limited interpretations of the evidence and only resort to magical interpretations where the evidence is unambiguous.

The work of Thorsson and those who followed him is founded on the work of the imaginative runologists. Magical interpretations of Elder Futhork inscriptions – and the belief that the runes, as an alphabet, were devised primarily for magical or sacred use – were favored early in the study of runes, from the 19th century up through the mid-20th century. The first introductory text on Runes in English, R.W.V. Elliot’s *Runes: An Introduction* (1959) dates to this time and is an epitome of the “imaginative” perspective. More skeptical approaches began in the mid-20th century and continue to be prevalent. In particular, linguistics was used to interpret inscriptions that previously could not be interpreted or were regarded (incorrectly) as magical. The shift in perspectives, though not wholesale, nonetheless led Elliot to revise some of his opinions towards a more skeptical viewpoint when preparing the 2nd edition of *Runes: An Introduction* (1989).

Despite this development in the academic study of runes, the authors we most often read tend to disregard the skeptical runologists' perspectives. As a result, we as Heathen readers tend not to be aware of the ambiguous evidence for use of the Elder Futhork runes or of the varied interpretations that are possible. In the interests of raising such awareness, I would like to present a skeptical runological perspective on magical inscriptions and magical use of the runes in the pre-Christian period. In the process, I hope this presentation will lead others to seek answers in their rune studies from all quarters, whether esoteric or academic, skeptical or imaginative.

...on that tree of which no one knows
from what root it runs.

- Hávamál strophe 138

A Comment on the Nature of the Evidence

When considering the earliest period of runic use, it is worth bearing in mind the following about the evidence with which we have to work. Runes were devised for carving in wood, as can be seen from the uncommonness of rounded shapes and the usual lack of horizontal lines (the latter of which would be hard to distinguish from the grain of the wood if one were carving a runic message along the length of a flattened stick). The vast majority of surviving inscriptions, however, is *not* in wood, but is in stone or metal. Of these, the former are predominantly memorial stones, while the latter are prone to errors and badly copied runes. In particular, inscriptions from bracteates that seem magical or else difficult to interpret are usually better “explained as the attempt of an illiterate diecutter to copy an incomprehensible Vorlage” for the purposes of using the runes on the bracteates as a selling point (Antonsen, 2002, pg. 178). The corpus of surviving inscriptions has been estimated by R. Derolez to “represent no more than one percent of all inscriptions carved, and hence may very well not be representative or typical of the total

output” (Derolez R. “The runic system and its cultural context”, Michigan Germanic Studies, 1981; 7: 19-20 - as quoted in Page, 1991, pgs. 16-17). This point is underscored by the archaeological discovery at Bergen of hundreds of runic inscriptions in the Younger Fupark – all on wood and many of a most mundane character – which increased the catalogue of Norwegian inscriptions in the Younger period from ~600 to over 1000 (Antonsen, 2002, pgs. 320-321; see also the Runes in Bergen website: <http://www.nb.no/baser/runer/ribwww/english/runeindex.html>)

“Magical” Inscriptions: A Representative Example

One of the prime examples of Elder Fupark magical inscriptions that Thorsson gives in Runelore (1987) is the Järsberg stone, of which he writes:

Any nonmagical interpretation of the many runemaster formulas seems absurd. ... Runemaster formulas represent documents of transformative magical acts in which the rune magician assumed his divine aspect for the performance of some working. It is quite possible that with runemaster inscriptions we are dealing with the remains of but one fraction of a more elaborate ritual process. A runemaster formula could give force to a rite working together with the formula, or it could be the whole of an operant working in itself. In the latter case one will usually find that the runemaster designates himself with various magical names (which are often very similar to some of the holy names of Ódhinn). One of the most famous examples of this is provided by the Järsberg stone in central Sweden. ... This stone, not attached to any grave and probably originally part of a ritual stone arrangement, is then charged by the force of the runemaster in this threatening aspect of “the malicious one” and “the raven”. Through the linkage of these foreboding aspects with the site, he is able both to fill it with magical force and protect it from desecrators. (Thorsson, 1987, pg. 76)

The “runemaster formulas” Thorsson refers to are those inscriptions which feature “ek erilaz”, most often translated as “I, the runemaster” by imaginative runologists. I will come back to the matter of “erilaz” shortly, but first let us have a look at the inscription.

It is visually challenging at first, as may be seen by the following illustration, which is a close (though regularized) facsimile of the inscription:



Where *** appears in the illustration, the stone is broken off on that end of the inscription. Thus, the first word of the second line is incomplete. For a picture of the stone, see Arild Hauge’s Swedish Runic Inscriptions website: <http://www.arild-hauge.com/sweden.htm>

Usual interpretation of this inscription among runologists is that the first 4 runes **tiah** on the start of the first line should be read as **hait...**, from right-to-left. Then the inscription is read from the fifth rune, left-to-right, **ek erilaz**. Different scholars then debate whether to continue with the smaller **ru...** sequence that seems to be on the same level as the first line or to jump down to the second line’s **ub...** Within the second line, nonetheless, the fragment **...ubaz** is the next word, followed by **hite**, and then **harabanaz**. Some scholars have trouble interpreting the rest of the inscription, but the smaller **ru...** sequence on the right most likely wraps around, boustrophedon fashion, as these words: **runoz waritu**.

Thorsson (seemingly ignoring the break in the stone) transliterates the inscription as (1987, pg. 76):

ek erilaz rünōz wrītu. Ūbaz haite, Hrabanaz haite.

And translates it:

“I the Erulian carve the runes. I am called the Malicious-one (= *Ūbaz*), I am called the Raven.”

In contrast, E.H.Antonsen, who takes a linguistic-based approach to runic inscriptions, transliterates the inscription (2002, pgs. 120-124):

ek erilaz | ...ūbaz hite : H^arab^anaz | hait... | runoz waritu

And translates it:

“I, (the) erilaz | ...ubaz am called : H^arab^anaz (raven) | (is/am) called... | runes (I) write”

Antonsen highlights that Erik Moltke “points out...that when the smaller runes are removed, the right line is centered over the left one”. In other words, if the initial right-to-left **hait...** on the top line and the boustrophedon sequence **runoz waritu** are removed, then the inscription would have appeared as:

*** MYMRIN Fk
*** NBFNITM:FRFBFk

Antonsen later (page 148) suggests that the smaller runes (plus **hait...** on line 1) were added to a prior inscription and that “it is utterly futile to attempt to integrate them into a single original text”. If treated as two separate texts, then we would have:

‘original’ **ek erilaz ...ūbaz hite : H^arab^anaz**

“I, (the) erilaz | ...ubaz am called : H^arab^anaz (raven)”

‘later’ **hait... | runoz waritu**

“(is/am) called... | runes (I) write”

It is difficult to say whether the proposed ‘later’ inscription should be read as trying to incorporate the proposed ‘original’ or not. On its own, it certainly seems incomplete; and it is doubtful there was sufficient room to the left of **hait...** for a name, which would make more sense of the ‘later’ inscription by itself.

But the ‘original’ inscription alone is complete enough to read, with the fragment “...ubaz” most likely another proper name like H^arab^anaz. In this form it also is a very typical inscription, in which the following formula is used: “I, (the) [office or social position], am called [proper name].” This formula is a variation on the usual formulae for memorial stones, in which the carver or stone-raiser names himself, names the person being memorialized, and ends with a statement such as “wrought (this)” or “carved (these) runes” – which brings us back to the matter of “erilaz”.

Thorsson, as quoted earlier, asserts that formulae using “erilaz” are clear evidence for magical workings involving the runes, where the inscription is all that remains of the magical activity. But on what basis does he translate “erilaz” as “Erulian” and treat “Erulian” as equivalent to “rune magician”? I am not sure of the origin of Thorsson’s “Erulian”, but I suspect it is related to an interpretation that connects “erilaz” to a purported tribal name “Heruli”. The tribe presumably gained a reputation for runic mastery, thus conferring this connotation on their name, which went on to become a byword for “rune magician” (Elliot, 1959, pg. 13). The theory has not proved convincing among runologists, however. On the matter of “erilaz”, Antonsen states:

Inscriptions that contain the word **erilaz** are supposedly particularly powerful in regard to magic. We have 10 such, of which 2 occur on bracteates that were pressed with the same stamp, therefore 9 different inscriptions in all. ... All of these stone inscriptions are, however, variants of very common dedicatory formulas without special magical content. The meaning of **erilaz** has not yet been firmly established, but it is important to note that it can be replaced in otherwise identical formulae by words like **pewaz** ‘servant’ on Valsfjord...and **gudija** ‘priest’ on Nordhuglo... It seems certain that **erilaz** designates a particular office in the society of the time. (Antonsen, 2002, pgs. 185-186).

The most likely social role designated by “erilaz” seems to have been military in nature. The name “Heruli”, whether a tribal designation or not, refers to warbands (both large and small). And a study of later Germanic languages suggests “erilaz” is related to words meaning “warrior, noble” – eg. Old Saxon “erl”, Old English “eorl”, Old Norse “jarl” (Plowright, 2006, pgs. 144-148). If “warrior, noble” has a connotation with the runes, it would seem to be one less mystical and magical than that conveyed by translating “erilaz” as “rune magician”. At most, it suggests a figure like the later Egil Skallagrimson, equally quick with sword, poetry, and runes alike – certainly someone skilled in magic, but not the kind of occult specialist conjured by Thorsson’s interpretation of the Järsberg stone.

Given that “erilaz” is not specifically a magical designation, does the Järsberg stone inscription offer any other evidence of “a more elaborate ritual process” as Thorsson claims? I am inclined to think not. Interpretation of the inscription is problematic, as shown by Moltke’s suggestion that the stone holds not one, but two inscriptions. Yet Thorsson’s transliteration of the stone ignores these problems, including the broken end of the stone, which undermines his translation of the name fragment ...**ūbaz** as “the Malicious One”. The other name, **Hrabanaz**, may seem to have associations with Odin, by way of Hugin and Munin, but in essence it is a name drawn from the animal kingdom (much like the later Old Norse Úlfr or Björn). Ultimately, if we take a skeptical approach to the Järsberg stone inscription, it most resembles inscriptions on memorial stones, where (1) the emphasis was on the social position of the carver and the person being commemorated and where (2) the inscription served to preserve the memory of both in the local community (along with the prestige of the carver and/or commissioner of the stone).

Magical Use of the Runes as Depicted in the Literature

Among the sources cited for evidence of magical use of the runes, primary importance is often given to episodes in the *Poetic Edda* and the Icelandic Sagas. These instances either describe runes in terms that emphasize their inherent magical power or show them being used in magical spells and acts. But not every occurrence of ‘rune’ or ‘runes’ in the literature is magical. In some cases, the same word **rūnar** – given magical connotations elsewhere – is used to denote secret, private or intimate conversations. On other occasions, the word seems only to refer to runes as letters with neither magical nor mundane connotations.

Thus, in searching for evidence for magical use of runes from the Old Norse literature, it seems best to look at all instances of ‘rune’ or ‘runes’ in the texts. Finding all instances of the use of runes depicted in the *Poetic Edda* and the Sagas is, however, not as simple as looking up ‘rune’ in the Index of one of these books. The published editions of the *Edda* and the Sagas usually have, at most, an index of Names. Thus, to identify excerpts from the literature where runes are mentioned, I have relied on a selection of secondary works plus the *Glossary to the Poetic Edda* (which effectively serves as an index of the *Edda*).

Certain excerpts from the literature are repeatedly mentioned in secondary sources as examples of magical use of runes. These were the secondary works that I used to find the most commonly cited excerpts:

Davidson, H.R.E. *Myths and Symbols in Pagan Europe: Early Scandinavian and Celtic Religions*. Syracuse University Press, Syracuse. 1988.

Davidson, H.E. *The Lost Beliefs of Northern Europe*. Barnes & Noble Press, New York. 1999.

Simpson, J. *Everyday Life in the Viking Age*. Dorset Press, New York. 1967.

Thorsson, E. *Runelore*. Weiser Books, Boston. 1987.

The excerpts cited by these secondary sources are the following:

Voluspá, strophe 20
Hávamál, strophes 138-163
Skírnismál, strophe 36
Sigdrífumál, strophes 5-19
Egil’s Saga, chapter 44, 57, & 72
Grettir’s Saga, chapter 79

Vatnsdæla Saga, chapter. 34

La Farge's and Tucker's *Glossary to the Poetic Edda* (Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, Heidelberg, 1992) cites the following poems from the *Poetic Edda* as containing the word **rúnar**, with one of three meanings:

1. *secrets* (Voluspá, strophe 60; Vafprúðnismál, str. 42-43; perhaps also Hávamál, str. 111)
2. *secret or confidential conversation* (Sigurðarkviða in skamma, str. 14 & 44; Guðrúnarkviða in þriðia, str. 4; Guðrúnarhvot, str. 12)
3. *runes* (as magic symbols and letters: Hávamál, str. 80, etc.; Grípisspá, str. 17; Dráp Niflunga; Atlamál, str. 4, etc.; Rígsþula, str. 36, etc.; Fiolsvinnsímál, str. 26 conjectural)

The third entry also cites these compound words, elsewhere defined (and with examples) in the *Glossary* as follows:

aldr-rúnar - *life-runes* (Rígsþula, str. 43)

biarg-rúnar - *'birth-runes', runes for aiding women in childbirth* (Sigrdrífumál, str. 9 and 19); c.f. **biarga** *to save, protect, rescue; salvage* (used of ships); esp. *to bring corpses to safety (through burial); to save children from the perils of birth*

bók-rúnar - *book-runes*, probably an error for **bót-rúnar** *healing runes* (Sigrdrífumál, str. 19)

brim-rúnar - *'surf-runes', runes which calm the sea or runes which protect a ship endangered by waves* (Sigrdrífumál, str. 10)

gaman-rúnar - 1. *pleasure-bringing runes* (Sigrdrífumál, str. 5); 2. *pleasurable intimacy, closeness* (Hávamál, str. 120 & 130)

hug-rúnar - *'mind-runes', magical runes which bestow wisdom* (Sigrdrífumál, str. 13)

lim-rúnar - *limb-runes* (Sigrdrífumál, str. 11)

mál-rúnar - *speech- or negotiation-runes* (Sigrdrífumál, str. 12); **gefa...mál-rúnar** *to cause someone to talk* (Guðrúnarkviða in fyrsta, str. 23)

megin-rúnar - *mighty or powerful runes* (Sigrdrífumál, str. 6)

sak-rúnar - *strife-runes, runes which cause strife* (Helgakviða Hundingsbana onnur, str. 34)

sig-rúnar - *battle-runes* (Sigrdrífumál, str. 6)

val-rúnar - *'battle-runes', riddling or obscure expression for killing* (Helgakviða Hundingsbana onnur, str. 12)

ævin-rúnar - *life-runes or eternal runes* (Rígsþula, str. 43)

öl-rúnar - *ale runes* (Sigrdrífumál, str. 7 & 19)

Combining the excerpts cited by the secondary sources with those cited in the *Glossary* produces the following list (ignoring the conjectural citation of Fiolsvinnsímál, str. 26, as an example of runes as magic symbols and letters):

Atlamál, str. 4, etc.
Dráp Niflunga
Grípisspá, str. 17
Guðrúnarhvot, str. 12
Guðrúnarkviða in þriðia, str. 4
Hávamál, str. 80, 111 & 138-163
Helgakviða Hundingsbana onnur, str. 12 & 34
Rígsþula, str. 36, etc. & 43
Sigrdrífumál, str. 5-19
Sigurðarkviða in skamma, str. 14 & 44

Skírnismál, str. 36
Vafþrúðnismál, str. 42-43
Voluspá, str. 20 & 60
Egil's Saga, ch. 44, 57, & 72
Grettir's Saga, ch. 79
Vatnsdæla Saga, ch. 34

All told, there are:

- 2 instances of runes used for **Communication** (Atlamál + Dráp Niflunga referring to Atlamál, and Helgakviða Hundingsbana onnur 12)
- 4 instances of **rúnum** meaning '**Counsel**' (Guðrúnarhvot, Guðrúnarkviða in þriðja, and twice in Sigurðarkviða in skamma)
- 1 instance of runes referred to in the sense of **Communication** and/or **Counsel** (Hávamál 111)
- 1 instance of **rúnum** meaning '**Secrets**' (Vafþrúðnismál)
- 9 instances where **Knowing** the runes is mentioned, 8 of which have magical connotations (Grípisspá, Hávamál 80, 139, 142, 144-145, Rígsþula 36, 43, 45, and Sigdrífumál 14 – of which, only Rígsþula 36 lacks a clear magical connotation)
- 20 instances (at least) of **Magical** use of the runes, where:
 - 16 involve the runes as the primary, active component of the magic performed (Egil's Saga ch. 44, ch. 72, Hávamál 157, Helgakviða Hundingsbana onnur 34, Sigdrífumál 6, 7-8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 19, Skírnismál 36)
 - 4 involve the runes as a secondary or supporting component (Egil's Saga ch. 58, Grettir's Saga ch. 79, Sigdrífumál 5, Vatnsdæla Saga ch. 34)

Many of the above examples do indicate magical use of the runes. Most of those present the cutting of runes as the active component of the magical act. And unlike the interpretation of sparse inscriptions, this evidence from the literature seems unequivocal. Not only are runes magical, but some passages describe specifically how the runes were used magically.

But can we take the literature at face value? R.I. Page addresses this problem in his *An Introduction to English Runes* (1999, pgs. 108-110), in which he points out: "Medieval Scandinavia supplies a mass of information on rune magic, but the difficulty is in sifting it, in deciding how much is genuine, how much literary convention."

The *Poetic Edda* was recorded in the 13th century A.D. *Egil's Saga* and *Grettir's Saga* were recorded in the 13th and 14th centuries, respectively (Sturluson, S. *Edda*. Faulkes, A. transl. Everyman, London. 1996. pg. ix). Yet, the sagas (as a whole) depict events from the 9th-12th centuries, and their original oral tradition is presumed to begin in the first centuries of the Icelandic settlement (10th-11th c.). Similarly, the *Poetic Edda* is thought to originate in oral tradition from the Viking Age, if not before. We might reasonably say that these recorded tales of rune magic are a fair representation of how runes were actually used during the pagan Viking period, if we allow for literary conventions (eg. Rígsþula 43 seems modeled on Sigdrífumál). The magical practices in the Eddas and Sagas, after all, are depicted *not* as they were practiced in the Viking Age (9th – 12th centuries A.D.), but as they *were understood to have been practiced* in the Viking Age, from the later perspective of early Medieval Iceland when the literature was recorded.

We must recognize that comparing these literary descriptions of rune magic with potentially magical runic inscriptions of the Elder Futhark (pre-500 A.D.) is tenuous. Germanic society underwent tremendous change and upheaval during the 3rd – 6th centuries A.D. (the Migration Age). Among other events:

- Entire peoples were on the move, such as the Goths and the Vandals.
- Warlords (who maintained their position through conflict and the redistribution of spoils) increasingly seem to have become the social as well as military leaders of the time.

- The earliest language changes that later lead to the differentiation of Old Norse and Old English – and correspondingly, the changes in the Elder Futhark that lead to the development of the Younger Futhark and Anglo-Saxon Futhorc – occurred during this time.

Given this disruption in the cultural continuity from the period of the Elder Futhark into the Viking Age and the lack of corroborating evidence for magical use of runes in the Elder period, it is highly unlikely that the Eddas and Sagas could be used, with any certainty, as a guide to the magical uses of runes prior to the Viking Age. The only conclusion supported by the evidence *as we have it* is that, as Page points out, “[n]o doubt some medieval Norsemen believed that cutting runes gave a man access to supernatural powers. But this does not prove that runic magic existed in Germanic times” (Page, 1999, page 110).

Before leaving the literature and drawing this article to a close, I would like to give strophes 146-163 of the Hávamál special attention, still from a skeptical viewpoint. Multiple writers have assumed that this section of the Hávamál refers to rune magic, with each of the eighteen spells described being either individual runes or specific combinations of runes. This doesn't seem correct, however, as strophe 146 begins with “I know those spells...” and then the other stanzas' counting (eg. “I know a third...”) refers back to ‘spells’. The ON word for ‘spell’ here is ‘lióð’: ‘song, magic spell, incantation’. Runes, in contrast, are always referred to as either ‘rúnar’ or ‘stafr’ (eg. Hávamál 142, where ‘letters’ is ‘stafr’).

All of the eighteen spells in strophes 146-163 (with one exception) thus seem more accurately understood as sung incantations. This interpretation is echoed by the following passages (where quotes are taken from Larrington's translation of *The Poetic Edda* and inserted word definitions are taken from *Glossary to the Poetic Edda*):

- Hávamál 140: “Nine mighty spells {=**Fimbulliód**: powerful incantation or spell} I learnt...”
- Hávamál 152: “I know the spells {=**galdr**: magic spell, charm} to chant.”
- Hávamál 156: “...under the shields I chant {=**gel**: as in ‘gella’: ‘to yell, roar, bellow’}...”
- Hávamál 160: “...the dwarf Thiodrerir / chanted {=**gól**: as in ‘gella’: ‘to yell, roar, bellow’} before Delling’s doors: powerfully he sang {=**gól**: as in ‘gella’}...”
- Hávamál 162: “Of these spells...”; and Hávamál 163: “...at the end of the spells...”; {in which ‘spells’ =**lióða**: songs, magic spells, incantations}
- Sigrdrífumál 5: “...it is full of spells {=**lióða**: songs, magic spells, incantations} and favourable letters {=**líkn-stafa**: healing or beneficial runes}, / good charms {=**góðra galdra**: good magic spell, good charm} and joyful runes {=**gaman-rúna**: pleasure-bringing runes}.”

Further, Hávamál 157 has the only spell which specifically involves the use of runes:

I know a twelfth one if I see, up in a tree,
a dangling corpse in a noose:
I can so carve and colour the runes
that the man walks
and talks with me.
(Larrington, 1996, pg. 37)

In fact, this strophe along with Sigrdrífumál 5-19, Skírnismál 36, and the examples from the Sagas emphasize the distinction between the magic of sung spells (‘lióð’, ‘galdr’, etc.) and the magic of runes (‘rúnar’, ‘stafr’). The latter are always described in terms of being cut, sometimes also colored, with the magical action deriving from the cutting of the runes. Where runes and incantations are used together (c.f., Egil’s Saga, Grettir’s Saga, Vatnsdæla Saga), one of the two always seems to support the other, but there is no description of runes being chanted. It leaves one with the impression that, to the Norse, the idea of ‘chanting runes’ would have been as bizarre as ‘cutting songs’.

As further support for this point, strophes 142-145 of the Hávamál – which are often cited as critical for anyone wishing to understand how to use runes magically – all emphasize (1) the runes as letters {=**stafr**},

(2) the cutting or carving of runes, and (3) the staining of runes, without any reference to singing or chanting as being part of the magical process.

In Summary

Given the minimal evidence for magical use of the runes during the Elder Futhark period, and the difficulties inherent in its interpretation, it seems to me that caution is warranted when drawing conclusions about magical use of the runes in pre-Christian times. Our beliefs about our ancestors' runic use thus seem more informed by our own magical practices than by what we know, with reasonable certainty, about our ancestors' usage. Even where magical usage seems clearly indicated – such as during the Viking Age – a careful reading of the evidence sometimes, as in Hávamál 146-163, shows that the desire to find magical runes lies more in the eyes of the beholder than in what is beheld.

Taking a skeptical viewpoint on the runes need not undermine our own use of runes in magical or sacral practice, however. I use the runes for divination, for instance, and find Tacitus' description of divination among the Germans (using signs cut in wooden slips) very interesting and highly suggestive of the use of runes for divination or casting lots. But I do not consider Tacitus' passage as evidence for runic divination or as support for the "validity" of how I divine with runes: it may be that signs other than runes were used. If that is true – and so far we do not really know, either way – it would mean that contemporary runic divination is based on a modern misinterpretation of Tacitus' passage. In the end, though, using runes cut in wood for divination works just fine, regardless of where we got the idea for doing so.

But when it comes to understanding what our pre-Christian ancestors did (and why), careful treatment of the evidence is critical. As Antonsen demonstrates repeatedly in his book *Runes and Germanic Linguistics*, failure to understand the evidence in context, using all the scientific and scholarly tools available to us, results in conclusions that say more about the interpreters, and their beliefs, than they do about the peoples who left the evidence. As we work to revive our ancestors' religious and magical practices, we may find that a skeptical viewpoint is more of a help than a hindrance in understanding those we wish to emulate.

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