

# The reception of myths concerning literacy and poetry

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This paper will draw together some of my own work and that of others on the history of the study of runes. I will concentrate on scholarly works from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries which discuss Old Norse-Icelandic runology and/or myth. I wish to place these works within the context of some broad intellectual movements of the period, particularly those which affected theories of language, writing and literature; as such, I will be restricting this survey largely to published material, but I will make some reference to unpublished works and correspondence.

The main Old Norse (-Icelandic) texts dealing with runology or the uses of runes and known in the seventeenth century were:

1. *The Third Grammatical Treatise* (3GT) by Óláfr Þórðarson hvítaskáld. This work is found in four medieval manuscripts, three of which contain versions of *Snorra Edda*. Two chapters of the first section contain detailed information on runes: their names, phonetic values and so on.

2. The Old Icelandic and Old Norwegian *Rune Poems*. These poems contain a short verse for each of the runes in the *fubark*.
3. The Eddic poem *Sigrdrífumál* (as the Codex Regius version is known) or *Brynhildarljóða* (as the version in *Völsunga saga* is known). This contains a number of verses which refer to magical uses of runes, that is, spells for which runes can be employed.
4. The Eddic poem *Hávamál*. The section which deals with runes was treated as a separate work in the period which I am discussing today; There is a decorated capital in the Codex Regius which separates that section, which was known as *Runa Capitule* or the runic chapter(s). This contains an account of Óðinn's ordeal, in which he hangs on a tree for nine nights in order to gain knowledge of runes. Óðinn then enumerates a number of purposes for which runic spells can be employed.

The information on runes found in these works falls into two main categories. Firstly, material which consists of largely technical discussions of the nature and origin of runes or material which can provide such information — I will be referring to such material as runological. This includes 3GT and the *Rune Poem*. Secondly, material which refers to the magical uses of runes, primarily the Eddic poems. There is another category, the mythology and mythological genesis of runes or runic knowledge, which is seen in the first section of the 'Runic Chapter', that is, *Hávamál*, but as we will see, this last category of information on runes did not generate nearly as much interest as the others.

The early seventeenth century saw a rapid increase in interest in runes and consequently, in almost any texts that could shed some light on their uses.

Arngrímur Jónsson seems to have been the originator of modern runology, if largely indirectly. In his 1609 work *Crymogæa* (ed. Jakob Benediktsson 1951) he included a chapter on the language of the Icelanders. This discussed, along with language, runes. Much of his material is taken from the grammatical treatises in the Codex Wormianus, a manuscript which had been in his family for some time. The material on runes is largely based on the rune chapters of 3GT and the *Rune Poem*.

Arngrímur's chapter seems to have generated Ole Worm's interest in runes, and Worm and Arngrímur eventually entered into a long-lasting and enthusiastic correspondence. The Codex Wormianus was probably in Copenhagen in 1626 (Faulkes, 72), on loan to Þorlákur Skulason. Eventually Arngrímur sent Worm the manuscript. Worm used the runological material in 3GT as the basis for a great many of the chapters in his 1636 work, *Literatura Runica*. There are strong indications that 3GT influenced Worm's theories on runes.

The only other medieval text which Worm quotes at length in the body of

*Literatura Runica* is the Old Norwegian *Rune Poem*. In other words, the medieval sources of Worm's runological material were limited to works dealing specifically with runes themselves — works which were themselves runological. Other material, which dealt with the uses of runes was not used so much by Worm.

The reasons for this were at least in part that Worm's contacts in Iceland do not seem to have sent him material. Nevertheless, they knew of his interests. Such material would not have supported his theory that runes were the original way of recording all early Scandinavian literature. It is possible that the Icelanders thought that the material would not have been of interest to Worm, who had already formed his theories about the uses of runes.

The interest in runes led Ole Worm and many following him to some unusual conclusions. Those of most significance to us centre on two basic theories (which we now know to be more or less false). These theories involved an extreme exaggeration of (a) the age of runes and their origins; and (b) the extent of the use of runes. More specifically, scholars, mostly following Worm, believed runes to be extremely old and many thought that they derived from Hebrew; likewise, it was believed that they were used to record all Old Norse-Icelandic literature, and that it was the primary, indeed the only script used to record Old Norse literature in manuscripts. The latter theory in particular continued to be widely held throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The second half of the seventeenth century saw the discovery and publication of the Old Icelandic mythological poems. For example, Björn Jónsson á Skarðsá in his unpublished work 'Noekut Litit Samtak vm Runer' (1642) cites *Sigrdrífumál* and *Hávamál* (Faulkes 75), largely for their information on runes.

In 1651, Worm published the second edition of *Literatura Runica*, and in it were quotations from *Völuspá* and *Hávamál* (Faulkes 85). The material from *Hávamál* is not from 'Rune Capitule', except for one verse which is quoted twice. This does not contain much in the way of mythological material:

Rúnar munt þú finna  
ok ráðna stafi,  
mjök stóra stafi,  
mjök stinna stafi,  
er fáði fimbulþulr  
ok gørðu ginnregin  
ok reist Hroptr ragna,

The runes you must find  
and the meaningful letter,  
a very great letter,  
a very powerful letter,  
which the might sage stained  
and the powerful gods made  
and the Hroptr of the gods [Óðinn] carved out.

(Evans 69, trans. Larrington 34 (modified))

Worm's interest in *Hávamál*, therefore, was not closely tied to the mythological material on runes.

Perhaps the most significant of the seventeenth-century texts to the present

study is Resén's 1665 editions of *Snorra Edda*, *Hávamál* and *Völuspá*. In his introduction to the edition of *Snorra Edda* he cites Arngrímur and Worm, including the latter's quotation of the Valdemar rune-phrase in 3GT (a short sentence containing all the runes, designed to demonstrate their phonetic values). Resén's edition of *Hávamál* includes Guðmundur Andrésón's notes to the runic section. It is quite apparent that this section caused great difficulty in interpretation, in particular, the two lines 'nýsta ek niðr / nam ek upp rúnar' (I looked down / I took up the runes). Nevertheless, Guðmundur makes basic sense of what is going on in the passage (page c 3r), that Óðinn's ordeal results in his acquisition of the knowledge of runes.

The first four stanzas of the 'Runa Capitule' are not quoted in any edition for over a century after Resén's edition (see Clunies Ross 1998, 254–255) — it is only the references to magic which are quoted; the myth of Óðinn's acquisition of runes is thus not dealt with for some time.

Faulkes states that the interest in *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* was largely because of their material on runes (Faulkes, 76). However, the material on runes, particularly in *Hávamál*, covers both mythology and magic. Most seventeenth- and eighteenth-century scholars were fairly selective when it came to this material.

The interest in *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál* seems to have centred on the examples of runic spells or references to such instances of magic. The use of runes for magic was one of the things that generated a lot of interest in this period and later, despite the anti-Christian resonances of such practices. The actual myth of Óðinn's acquisition of runes is not something that seems to have been of as much interest as the references to the magical uses of runes. There may be some practical reasons for this: the passage of *Hávamál* in which it occurs is obscure and difficult, particularly so for early scholars without much access to material which could aid them in understanding and interpreting the passage.

The reason why the mythological runic section in *Hávamál* was not reproduced and discussed more was not just because it was difficult. After all, when faced with other difficult material, for example, in *Völuspá*, many scholars applied themselves to trying to understand the material. It seems rather that scholars were not particularly interested in Old Icelandic myths about runes, even though they were interested in almost anything to do with their uses. Hence the sections on the magical uses of runes were of interest to them.

I think the reasons for this have to do with the reasons why people were interested in runes in the first place. The study of runes coincided with a much broader cultural movement in which non-Latin scripts became the focus of a great deal of scholarly attention. An enormous number of works were published in the seventeenth century which looked at a range of issues to do with writing and language. These works dealt with writing systems such as Chinese and Hieroglyphics; with magic languages, such as the secret language of the

Rosicrucians; and they presented a range of theories about the concept of a perfect language and the origins of language: usually that they all derived from an original language, that which Adam spoke, which was Hebrew (cf. Eco 1995, chapters 5, 6 and 8).

This tendency can be seen in the seventeenth-century works on runes and other texts which mention them. Worm's *Literatura Runica* is very much part of this scholarly tradition. Worm discusses at length the possible origins of Runes in Hebrew letters; Resén, in his introduction to *Snorra Edda*, discusses the various writing systems of Greek, Hebrew, Latin, hieroglyphics, and so on (pp. d 1v–3v). Runes were seen as an example of another non-Latin script, which scholars were keen to link closely with the original and perfect language, usually thought to be Hebrew.

The uses of runes for magical purposes, as presented in *Hávamál* and *Sigrdrífumál*, also had some relevance to these currents in European thought: the material in those works fitted in well with the interest in magic languages that was prevalent in the seventeenth century (cf. Eco, 178–83).

This general scholarly framework goes some way to explaining why the mythological material in *Hávamál* was not particularly interesting for seventeenth-century scholars. The myth of the origin of runes would have seemed a bit strange in the context of these ideas about language. It involves Óðinn going through a ritual of endurance and self-injury to gain knowledge of runes. Not only was this a fairly barbaric account, but it placed the origin of runes in a framework very much alien to the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century views of the genesis of writing systems.

The eighteenth century saw a gradual shift in the philosophy of language and writing. This involved moving away from the emphasis on writing systems and more towards literatures. Consequently, runology gradually dwindled (a notable exception being Jón Ólafsson frá Grunnavík's 'Runologia') and attention to Old Norse-Icelandic literature as a subject of interest increased.

This general movement involved a decreased interest in runes for their own sake. Nevertheless, Worm's theories remained popular, largely because they addressed an ongoing issue. While runes as a writing system were not so interesting, the theory that everything was written in them meant that the Old Icelandic literary material could be separated from the Latin tradition, and thus be seen as more original. As Romanticism emerged, originality became a highly important characteristic for those wanting to promote certain literature or literatures.

The material published in the seventeenth century continued to be of interest to scholars in the eighteenth century, including *Hávamál*. Perhaps the most important of the eighteenth-century publications containing the poem was Paul-Henri Mallet's *Monumens de la mythologie et de la poésie des Celtes* (1756; 2nd ed. 1763), and its English translation, Thomas Percy's *Northern*

*Antiquities* (1770). It was also translated into German. Mallet and Percy quote the so-called Runic Chapter, along with selections from *Hávamál*. The Runic Chapter, which is given the alternative title, ‘The Magic of Odin’, in *Northern Antiquities*, starts with the seventh verse in the Codex Regius and then goes through to the end, skipping an occasional verse along the way. The quotations are thus restricted to stanzas referring to magical uses of runes, and the mythological material is left out.

*Northern Antiquities* does not reveal a good impression of the mythological aspect, either:

I have before observed, that the Conqueror, who usurped this name, attributed to himself the invention of Letters; of which, they had not probably any idea in Scandinavia before his time. But although this noble art is sufficiently wonderful in itself, to attract the veneration of an ignorant people towards the teacher of it: yet Odin caused it to be regarded as the Art of Magic by way of excellence, the art of working all sorts of miracles: whether it was that this new piece of fallacy was subservient to his ambition, or whether he himself was barbarous enough to think there was something supernatural in writing. He speaks, at least in the following Poem, like a man who would make it so believed. (Percy, 216)

The problem seems to be that the ‘Runic Chapter’ of *Hávamál* portrays runes as being principally for performing magic; the myth of Óðinn’s acquisition of runes would have only accentuated this, had it been included. Mallet and Percy, like most scholars in the eighteenth century, wanted to see runes as having a primarily literary function, that is, having the function of recording and preserving the literature of the Scandinavians. Once again, the myth conflicted with the broader intellectual context, and it is probably at least in part for this reason that the mythological material is suppressed.

The reception of the myth of the mead of poetry in many ways is very similar to the reception of the myth of the acquisition of runes. Despite great interest in both the poetry and the mythology of medieval Iceland, there was comparatively little interest in the mythology of poetry, in particular, the account of the mythological genesis of poetry in *Snorra Edda*.

*Northern Antiquities*, again, is a good example of this lack of interest. After including almost all of *Gylfaginning*, it includes selections from *Skáldskaparmál*, and among these is the myth of the mead of poetry. It is introduced as ‘an allegory not altogether void of invention’ (Percy, 185) and is included in an abridged form. Unlike the other selections, there is no commentary on the myth. Few other scholars saw much interest in it, either, in spite of its classical resonances — that is, as a divine drink which inspired poetry.

Once again, I think the lack of interest stems largely from the conflict between the ideas of the genesis of poetry in the myth and those of late eighteenth-century scholars. The mead of poetry as poetic inspiration is the

product of saliva, murder and fermentation, and its acquisition by Óðinn the result of trickery, seduction and cunning. This, in many ways, is not a representation of poetry that pre-Romantic scholars would have wanted to promote.

Thus we can see that although the writing system and poetry of the medieval Icelanders was of great interest to early scholars, and in addition, the mythology and mythological works of medieval Icelanders were also of interest, it did not necessarily follow that the myths concerning runes and poetry were also of interest. These in many ways conflicted with the dominant intellectual movements of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, which, at the same time, also generated much of the interest in other Old Norse-Icelandic material.

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