

RUNIC MYSTICISM AND THE NAMES IN BEOWULF

David L. Deratzian

Temple University
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

When we set out to consider how names are used in literature, one technique that can be applied is to break the name down into components, and analyze the meanings that the components have in other languages, thereby producing a sort of composite of the character to whom the name is assigned. However, there is a deeper structure available to the onomastic analyst than the morpheme. Here, I will suggest that in the cases of certain alphabetic systems, those sufficiently old to have not yet lost their attached mnemonic devices, such as Babylonian, certain Semitic languages, and Runic, words and names can be analyzed through these mnemonic devices. It is the latter system, Runic, that will now be explored.

Analysis of names through letter values is hardly a new idea. Those interested in the occult or mystical studies are familiar with at least two such methods: acrophonology and numerology. In the latter case, letters are replaced with numbers, and through a series of calculations, a composite number is found that is said to define the person's character type. The former practice, acrophonology, replaces letters with zodiacal signs, and through

traditional astrological interpretation, the name is analyzed. The method that I am suggesting is to replace letters with their original equivalents, and then to analyze the name using the mystical meanings assigned to them by the original users of the alphabet. In this case, for purpose of illustration, the names in Beowulf will be transliterated into Runic glyphs, and then to complete the task, the mystical reading of the names will be given, applying the individual runes to the character's nature.

Runes were the alphabetic system used by the people of medieval Scandinavia. Norse mythology tells us that the Runes were discovered by the god Odin as he hung from the Yggdrasil, the tree that supports the earth.¹ According to the Poetic Edda, once Odin had found the Runes, he was released from bondage, and in the words of the Poetic Edda:

Well being I won
 And wisdom too.
 I grew and took joy in my growth:
 From a word to a word
 I was led to a word.²

So the Runic glyphs not only originated at the base of the earth, but also were viewed as the route to freedom and wisdom.

In terms of historical origin, the runes were probably the work of one person attempting to devise a form of written language for his people, much as the Bishop Wulfila would do with Gothic in the Fourth century.³ But runes are probably older than Gothic, since runes were actually used as part of the basis of Gothic, and incorporated into it.⁴ The Goths had runes long before Wulfila, and since Beowulf is the work at hand, it is not inappropriate to mention that the people whom we know as the Goths, and those whom we know as the Geats, were probably the same people; the name change possibly the result of a rune whose phonemic value changed from /i/ in Old English, to /au/ in Middle and Modern English.⁵

The term "runes" comes from the Low German raunen which means "to cut."⁶ The word later went into Gothic as runa meaning "mystery." But one thing that we can be almost certain of is that the runes were not at all mysterious to the people who inhabited Scandinavia and the British Isles. Runes was an alphabetic system of the people, not just of the learned scribes and holy men; a divining tool usable by all.⁷ This is where the mystery comes in, for Runes were not designed for primarily literary purposes. Tacitus tells us, in his Germania, of their common use and familiarity, reporting that rune cuttings (from hewn tree limbs) were often impromptu, done by anyone who required them. He also

tells us that most males eventually learned to divine using runes, for it became their duty as head of a household.⁸ Runes came to serve the same function that the Tarot did in Southern and Eastern Europe, and that the I Ching did in the Orient. Runes also provided a means for making charms for the users, in the forms of inscriptions on seals, cups, weapons, and other common articles.

The word "runes" also has another meaning, the name given to council meetings and secret gatherings. The Wanderer attests to this use of the term in Old English:

Swa cwaerð snotter onmode, gesaet un
sunder aet rune,

and it will be remembered that in Beowulf, Aeschere was Hrothgar's "runvita."⁹

It is probable that the alphabetic use of runes was known to Old English scribes, since the runes  and  became part of the early English alphabet.¹⁰ It is equally probable that the mystical use was also well known. After the Anglo-Saxon occupation of Britain, it is assumed that the Druids adapted the Runes to their own purposes. When Britain was later Christianized by St. Columba, the Druids were driven into seclusion on the islands of Iona and Anglessey. Later, these same islands would also be Christianized,¹¹ and the Druids, the only aboriginal occupants, would become

the scribes.

Of course, the Old Religion must not have just died away, for even today we see remnants in such activities as may-poles, and also, no new religion has ever completely wiped out all traces and aspects of an existing one. Part of that which survived was something that had already been partially adopted into English culture, through its script: the Runes. So, what we had were Christian scribes (former Druids), one of whom might have composed (set to writing) Beowulf in the midlands of England, which coincidentally lie very close to the island of Anglessey. ¹²

There are twenty-eight Anglo-Saxon runes that were in use in the ninth century, when Beowulf was probably composed. The runes comprise the futhorc, the name given to the system and derived from the names of the first six runes: feoh, ur, thorn, os, rad, and cin. In addition to the phonemic values, there was also a mnemonic value given to each; a word or concept that the rune represented. It is likely, however, that these values were something more than merely mnemonic, for each was given a name that embodied some ideal of the Anglo-Saxon mythos. ¹³

The rune poem is the body of mnemonic definitions, and the source from which I have drawn the mystical meaning of each rune. Here is the Anglo-Saxon rune poem:

- ƿ feoh Wealth is a comfort to all men.
 Yet everyone must give it away freely
 If he wants to gain glory
 In the Lord's sight.
- ᚢ ur The aurochs, a very savage beast,
 Is fierce and has huge horns.
 A great roamer of the moorlands
 It fights with its horns.
 It is a courageous brute.
- ᚦ thorn A thorn is extremely sharp.
 Grabbing hold of it is painful to any warrior,
 Uncommonly severe to anyone
 Who lies among them.
- ᚷ os The origin of all speech,
 The prop of wisdom and the comfort of the wise,
 And a joy and consolation to every man.
- ᚱ rad In the hall rad is pleasant for every warrior,
 And energetic for the man
 Who sits on the back of a powerful horse
 Covering the mile-long roads.
- ᚷ cen Cen is known to all living beings by its flame
 Pale and bright.
 Most often it burns
 Where princes are staying.
- ᚷ gyfu Men's generosity is a grace and an honor,
 A support and a glory,
 And a help and sustenance
 To any outcast who is deprived of them.

- ƿ wynn Joyful is the man who knowa no miseries,
Affliction or sorrow,
And who has prosperity and happiness,
And the wealth of great towns.
- ⚡ haegl Hail is the whitest of grains.
It swirls from the heights of heaven,
And gusts of wind toss it about.
Then it turns to water.
- ✕ nyd Affliction constricts the heart,
But it often serves as a help
And salvation to the sons of men,
If they attend to it in time.
- l is Ice is very cold, extremely slippery.
A floor fair to the sight,
Made by the frost,
Glitters like jewels, clear as glass.
- * ger A year of good harvest is a joy to men.
When God, holy king of heaven,
makes the earth give forth
Bright fruits for rich and poor.
- ⚡ eoh A tree with rough bark,
Hardy and firm in the earth,
Supported by its roots, the guardian of flame,
And a pleasure upon an estate.
- ✕ peorð Peorth is a continual source of amusement
And laughter for the great
Where warricrs sit together in the beer hall.]
- Y eolhx Sedge grass which usually lives in a fen,
Growing in the water.
It wounds severely, staining with blood
Any man who makes a grab of it.
- ⚡ sigel The sun is a continual joy to seamen,
When they take the sea-steed
Over the fish's bath
Until it brings them to land.

- ↑ tir Tir is one of the guiding marks.
It keeps its faith well with princes.
Above night's clouds it is always on its path
And never fails.
- ⚡ beorc Beorc has no fruit, yet without seeds
It produces shoots. It is glorious
In its branches, tall in its crown, fairly adorned,
Heavy with leaves, reaching to the sky.
- Ⓜ eh The horse, the charger proud on its hoofs,
Is the prince's delight in the presence of warriors,
When rich men on horseback discuss its points.
For the restless it is always a source of re-
laxation.
- Ⓜ man In his mirth man is dear to his kinsman.
Yet each is bound to fail his fellow
Because the Lord, by his decree,
Wishes to commit the wretched body to the earth.
- ∧ lagu Water seems interminable to men
If they have to venture on the rolling ship,
And the sea-waves scare them out of their wits,
And the surf-horse does not respond to its bridle.
- ⓧ ing Ing was the first seen by men among the East-
Danes,
Until he travelled east^o across the wave.
His chariot followed on.
His is what the Heardins called the hero.
- ⓧ daeg The day, dear to men, is the Lord's gift,
The Creator's glorious light.
It is a joy and solace to rich and poor,
And useful to everyone.
- ⓧ eðel The ancestral home is dear to every man,
If in his house there he can enjoy
What is right and decent
In continual prosperity.

^o Also "back." The word est can be read as either east (est), or back (eft). Scholars differ on this point.

honor to the killer. Wergild has the roots "man" (wer) and "money" (gild). The seven runes that spell the word are: \mathfrak{W} (wynn), the rune of joy; \mathfrak{E} (eðel), the rune of ancestry; \mathfrak{R} (rad), the rune of journey; \mathfrak{X} (gyfu), the rune of giving; \mathfrak{I} (is), the rune of standstill or ice; \mathfrak{L} (lagu), the rune of water; and \mathfrak{D} (daig), the rune of day.¹⁶ Reading from right to left, we see the events that made up a wergild.

First, the rune of day had the connotation of a gift from god; another day of life, and therefore, life. Following is the rune of water, which the rune poem defines as a sort of transition, in this case from life. Following this is standstill, ice, the period wherein the offender is dissociated from his people, for fear that his sins will be visited upon them. The rune of ice represents the powerlessness that precedes rebirth, in this case granted in the second half of the word.

Gyfu, the rune of giving, which the rune poem refers to as a "help and sustenance to an outcast," tells us what must be done in order to remedy the situation, and the rune of riding that follows tells us of what must have been a difficult journey to complete, the delivery of the wergild. The last two runes, "eðel" and "wynn," the ancestral home and joy, tell of the

decency that is restored to the home and to the family of the offender by the wergild. It will be remembered that it was in this way that Beowulf's father was restored to an honorable position. As can be seen, then, the runic transliteration approach to understanding does not fall very far short of accurate definition, if not a more thorough explication. Now, on to the names.

For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen five names from Beowulf: two pairs that are compared in the poem, and Grendel. The name 'Beowulf' is composed of the runes beorc (B), the rune of the birch tree, a symbol of fertility; eh (M), the horse, associated with the course of the sun; os (P), the rivermouth, a source of divine utterance; wynn (D), the rune of joy; ur (U) rune of manly strength; lagu (L), rune of fertility and transition; and feoh (F), rune of possessions and wealth.

Reading from right to left, we find Beowulf's life painted. We know that he was, during his early life, a lazy and worthless young man. Through his first act of bravery, the contest with Breca, Beowulf sacrificed his earthly possessions as the rune poem dictates (F) and undergoes a test of water, thus being cleansed and reborn (U). His later trials also involve water, first in crossing to challenge Grendel, and later actually in water to slay Grendel's dam. The rune of strength, representing the aurochs, a beast with huge horns, describes

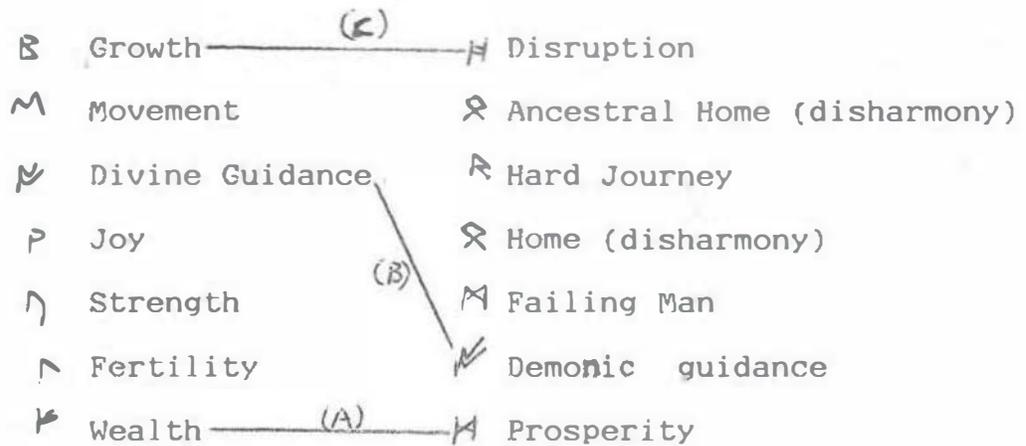
Beowulf's fighting technique, for, like the aurochs, Beowulf prefers to fight with only his natural resources, as he did with the sea beasts and Grendel.

After his return to Geatland and Hygelac's defeat, the rune of joy governs Beowulf's life, allowing him to boast at the last that during his reign he had warred on no man. The rune of the rivermouth now provides, as the rune poem states, comfort to all. It also allies Beowulf with Odin, through the Norwegian reading of os as ass, which was the rune of Odin. This is of course consistent with the Old English rune poem's reading of os, since the rivermouth there is given as the source of divine utterance, and Odin is thought to have been the greatest of all gods.¹⁷ The rune of the horse, bringer of the day, emphasizes the pleasure of his reign, analogized with the joy experienced at each new daybreak. His last trial is by fire, an element for which he has no rune, but his final rune of the birch provides that Beowulf will have a successor, even though he has no known descendants. Wiglaf follows Beowulf, arising even as the fruit of the birch tree, without the seed of the parent tree.

In the poem, Hygelac counsels Beowulf not to become

like Heremod, and so offers a contrast to Beowulf's character. 'Here-mod' means 'battle-heart,' as compared with 'Beo-wulf,' meaning 'bee-wolf' (or like a wolf) or 'bear.' The seven runes in 'Heremod' show a man of prosperity and fruitfulness (daig, \mathfrak{H}), but who was corrupted, as Loki (using the heathen rendering of os, \mathfrak{N} as the god Loki, or Satan, in Christian mythology) toward man (man, \mathfrak{M}), as the rune poem says is inevitable, since one man will always fail another. His ancestral home rune (eðel, \mathfrak{R}) has the opposite meaning of Beowulf's, for what is decent and right is not enjoyed in his home, as the rune poem defines \mathfrak{R} . We will later see again that runes are not predestinations, but rather two-edged swords that can turn on those who possess them. Heremod's journey rune (rad, \mathfrak{R}) is a difficult one, one spent on the road, for he became the most hated of men, and his second rune of ancestral home emphasizes the disharmony present in his life. His final rune of hail (haig, \mathfrak{H}) points up his destructive nature, and also that like hail, Heremod's reign was short, and melted away leaving little trace (as history is rendered by the scop in line 1751).¹⁸

Heremod is Beowulf's perfect anti-type as can be seen in a side-by-side comparison of the transliterations:



Note that both begin with runes of prosperity (A) and contain runes of godly influence (B), but each comes to a different end (C). Note also that the guidance comes from different sources.

Grendel presents a somewhat troublesome name to analyze. The seven runes are those of water \mathcal{N} , ancestral home \mathcal{X} , day \mathcal{M} , constraint \mathcal{F} , ancestral home \mathcal{X} , journey \mathcal{R} , and giving \mathcal{X} . What we find is fertility, something dear when right and decent, a gift of the Lord to be useful to all, a salvation if attended to, something difficult on the road but pleasant on the hearth, and sustenance to an outcast. Most of these sound positive, but as suggested above, runes cut with both edges, presenting conditions that must be fulfilled in order to realize the positive.

The water is probably the mere, that which spawned Grendel, and his home cannot be enjoyed, for what is

within is neither right nor decent. Grendel cannot be a salvation for he is an outcast and therefore not properly attended to. Once attended by Beowulf, however, men are saved.

As for the journey rune (R), it cannot be said that Grendel's journey is an easy one, but here the poet might have been flexing a witticism akin to when he named Gren-del as "hall-guard."¹⁹ The pun could be on the "easy at home" notion of the rune poem, for Grendel also makes the home hearth a less pleasant place, as reflected in the previous rune of ancestral home.

The second ✎ refers then not to Grendel's abode, but to Heorot.

To continue the examples of the use of the transliteration approach, we find that Hygde, Hygelac's queen, has a name that, in addition to its literal meaning of "thought,"²⁰ comes to mean a place which is dear because it is right and decent (S), grace, honor and sustenance (Y); a gift from god and a solace (H); and an adornment of princes (H), but a decidedly destructive one, one that would not allow Hygelac and Heardred to go off on an unwise campaign that would end their lives (H).

Hygde is contrasted by the poet with another queen

whose name was Modthrytho, which has the element of Loki (L), giants and demons (F), an adornment of princes (H), a hard journey (R), demons reiterated (D), joy and solace (S, which we are told she falsely provided), Loki reiterated (L), and man (M), again with the tendency to fail others. Note again that common runes are present: adornment of princes, and of the day; joy and solace. Both Modthrytho and Hygde have these elements which one might assume made them good queens and consorts, but Modthrytho chose to use hers to gain control to attain her goals.

Although I have limited this consideration to five names, suffice it to say that this system provides similar results when applied to the other names in the poem. This analysis by phoneme seems also, and I take this on faith from those who have studied more intensively, to work with other alphabetic systems, employing their underlying mysticism. There might be those who would criticize this method as too unscientific a method of literary or philological analysis, but it does tend to shed a new light on old names, perhaps the very light that the writers of old wanted to reveal, and the same light seen by their readers, and heard by the listeners of the bards. It tends to contribute to how we understand the literature of the practitioners of the old ways.

David L. Deratzian
Temple University
Philadelphia, PA

NOTES

- 1 Hilda Radzin, "Names in the Mythological Lay Völupsá," Literary Onomastic Studies, XI:93-97, 1984.
- 2 Ralph Blum, The Book of Runes (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1932), p. 11.
- 3 Ibid., p.12.
- 4 Ralph W.V. Elliot, Runes: An Introduction (Manchester, Eng.: Manchester University Press, 1959), p. 45.
- 5 R.I. Page, An Introduction to English Runes (London: Methuen, 1973), p. 85.
- 6 Lewis Spence, An Encyclopedic of Occultism (New York: University Books, Inc., 1960), s.v. "Teutons."
- 7 Blum, p. 24.
- 8 Blum, p. 27 (discussing Tacitus, Germania X).
- 9 Beowulf, l. 1325.
- 10 Elliot, p.45.
- 11 Bulfinch's Mythology (New York: Avenel Books, 1979), p. 362.

- 12 Norton Anthology of English Literature, M.H. Abrams, ed.
(New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1979), v. 1: 25.
- 13 Page, p. 75.
- 14 Ibid., pp. 73-85.
- 15 Blum, p. 31.
- 16 The transliteration method employed here was set
out by Bruce Dickens in "A System of Transliteration
for Old English Runic Inscriptions," Leeds Studies in
English, v. 1, 1932.
- 17 Radzin, p. 95.
- 18 The text of the poem is a compilation from the
Nowell Codex (Copenhagen, Baltimore and London: Rosenkilde
and Bagger, 1963), The Thorkelin Transcripts (Rosenkilde
and Bagger, 1951); and Julius Zupitza, Beowulf (London:
Oxford University Press, 1959), printed in Howell D.
Chickering, Jr., Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition
(New York: Anchor Press, Doubleday, 1977).
- 19 Chickering, pp. 6-7.
- 20 Ibid.