

## REVIEWS

***Runes: A Handbook.*** By Michael P. Barnes. Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2012. Pp. 256. Hardback. \$90.

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This work provides an introduction and overview to the many facets of runes and runology. In conception, the book is aimed toward both “layman and the undergraduate student” (p. xii) and more than adequately delivers what one would expect. Corresponding to this goal, the book consists of 18 chapters of varying lengths, which one can easily read and digest without being overly taxed. Despite the book’s approachability, however, there is no loss in rigor or scholarly insight. Some 40 plates, 31 figures, and three maps support the written material and provide visual appeal to the book. Subsequent to each chapter is a short list of bibliographic materials, the majority of which are written in English, for further readings on the chapter’s topic.

Chapters 1 through 4 provide an introduction to the basics of runes and the older futhark. In keeping with the book’s aims, no previous knowledge of runes, languages, or linguistics is assumed. Nonetheless, complex notions such as phonemes, graphemes, and minimal pairs are presented to the reader without intimidation. Additional topics within these chapters are the theories of the origins of the runes (pp. 9–15), the composition of a runic letter as staves and branches (pp. 17–20), and the sequencing and names of the runic letters (pp. 21–25). Particularly refreshing in a book of this scope are the attention and critical eye the author devotes to the complex argument that the shape of runic letters suggests the use of wood as a writing surface. The manner in which Barnes presents information, with carefully thought out explanations and an emphasis on empirical evidence, is just as helpful as the information presented. Similarly, in chapter 4 Barnes examines several inscriptions, including the Reistad stone, the Kjøløvik stone, and the Weimar 3 buckle inscription in particular, by presenting the multiplicity of possible interpretations (pp. 27–34).

Chapters 5 and 6 are given over to the English and Frisian epigraphic traditions, though naturally English inscriptions comprise the bulk of the discussion. Innovations within the Anglo-Saxon futhorc are the main subject of chapter 5. The focus splits roughly evenly between the additions to the futhorc in **os**, **ac**, **yr**, and **ear** (pp. 37–39) on the one hand, and later innovations such as in the runes **calc**, **gar**, and minor variant shapes of other runes (pp. 39–41) on the other. Here, unfortunately, I think that Barnes misses some important theories about the development of runes in the Anglo-Saxon futhorc. It is worth mentioning that the linguistic developments of the diphthong *ai* seen in the rune **ac**, ᚾ (from earlier <sup>+</sup>*aik-*), supports viewing the innovation as a bindrune of ᚠ and ᚠ, and that one can similarly view **os** (from earlier <sup>+</sup>*ans-*) as a combination of ᚠ and ᚠ (Page 1999:43–44). Similarly, explanations for the development of ᚦ have looked toward a roman-script model of *ea* as the source of first ᚠᚠ, which then lost the first ascender of ᚠ and the lower twig of ᚠ to produce ᚦ (Antonsen 2002:340).

Barnes also approaches the development of Anglo-Saxon \* as the sign for /j/, suggesting that it is an amalgam of X and ᚠ used by speakers whose pronunciation of [gi] had shifted to [ji]. I think Barnes is correct here, though he dismisses his own suggestion, stating that, “this assumes a good deal of sophistication on the part of the inventor” (p. 41). I would point out the similarity in the use of \* in the text of the *Wessobrunner Prayer* (in MS Munich Staatsbibliothek Clm 22053) to represent [ga]. The continental usage of \* to represent [ga] (first as the Old High German prefix *ga-* but later extended elsewhere) could have been learned from Anglo-Saxon monks who used it for the Old English prefix *gi-*.

Chapter 6 turns from the developments in runes found in the preceding chapter to their occurrence in inscriptions. Important inscriptions presented for discussion are the Harford Farm brooch, the Lovedon Hill and Spong Hill urns, numismatic runes, St. Cuthbert’s coffin, and monumental crosses from the Maughold 1 slab, Thornhill 2, and the Bewcastle cross, amongst other, smaller pieces. Mentioned in passing are the Franks Casket and the Ruthwell cross. Barnes’ focus in their presentation is the interplay between roman and runic scripts, and the questions that arise regarding their coexistence and mutual influence (p. 50). The final two pages of the chapter contain the book’s coverage of Frisian runic inscriptions, mostly discussing the problematic nature of the Frisian corpus and examining the Oostum comb inscription (pp. 52–53).

In chapters 7 through 11, the book turns its attention to the Scandinavian runic tradition. Just as chapter 5 discussed developments from the older futhark to the Anglo-Saxon runes, so too does chapter 7 deal with changes internal to Scandinavian runes. Barnes begins by discussing the competing theories for explaining the reduction of the number of runes from 24 to 16, along with the strengths and weaknesses of each theory (pp. 54–59). He concludes the overview of the varying hypotheses as follows:

[t]hose (and there are many) who have viewed the reduction of the *futhark* as an incomprehensible impoverishment of the writing system have considered the development very much from the point of view of the reader, not least the modern reader. For those who wrote runes, however, the new system must have been quicker to learn, and have offered economy of carving effort. (p. 59)

I would say, in support of Barnes here, that the same culture that produced the complexities of skaldic verse might not have valued perspicacity and ease of interpretation as we do in our culture. In addition to the generalities of the younger futhark, Barnes also presents the major variants, such as the “long-branch,” “short-twig,” “mixed,” and “staveless” forms (pp. 61–64).

After the introduction to the peculiarities of Scandinavian runes, Barnes provides a chapter on each of the major eras of runic inscriptions for the region: the Viking Age, the Middle Ages, and the post-Reformation era. Chapter 8, on the Viking-age rune-stones, begins with issues related to dating and typology of the stones, with an eye toward warning the reader about the difficulties therein. One typology presents itself in the differences between Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish stones, each nation standing as a convenient shorthand for the arrangement of the writing upon the stone (pp. 66–69). Section 8.3 then turns to the content of inscriptions’ messages. Barnes brings to life the interesting social and cultural aspects which the stones evidence. Notable inscriptions are the Jelling 2, the Glavendrup, the Gripsholm, the Hillersjö stones, and, of course, the Rök stone (pp. 71–85). Toward the end of the chapter there is a short discussion of the appearance of memorial rune-stones in the post-Viking period as a possible fashion, which mimicked earlier practices. A final note is given to epigraphy on materials other than stone. Inscriptions examined in passing here are the Ribe cranium,

objects from the Oseberg ship, and the Senja neck-ring, among others (pp. 88–90).

Chapters 8 and 10 are bridged by the short chapter 9 addressing the formal changes, which runic writing underwent between the late Viking Age and the later Middle Ages. Prominent in the discussion are the rise of dotted runes and whether they arose out of imitation of English traditions (pp. 92–94). In closing, chapter 9 observes the influences the roman script and Latin had on runic writing, such as the rearrangement of the runic sequence of **ml** to **lm**, and the runic spellings that informed the contemporary pronunciation of Latin (pp. 96–97).

Like chapter 8, chapter 10, which addresses inscriptions of the Middle Ages, is extensive. For the purposes of the book, this period is restricted to approximately 1050–1450 C.E. Barnes divides the chapter into sections on formal inscriptions (larger-scale, less-mobile inscriptions generally for public consumption; pp. 100–106), informal inscriptions on loose objects (pp. 106–116), graffiti (pp. 116–120), antiquarian-type texts (pp. 120–121), and Latin inscriptions in runes (pp. 122–126). Barnes elucidates the cultural and sociological background of all the inscriptions with vivacity, out of which the treatment of Bergen inscriptions is the most interesting.

Following chronologically, chapter 11 treats runic writing of the post-Reformation era, spanning roughly from 1500 to present. Barnes begins this chapter with Gotlandic developments, a handful of Icelandic inscriptions, and the runes Dalarna, Sweden (pp. 129–133). As befits a running interest of this book, Barnes raises questions regarding the societal functionality of the runic script vis-à-vis roman script (pp. 132–133). After a quick note on early publications of runes by antiquarians (Johannes and Olaus Magnus, Ole Worm, Arild Huitfeld, and Johannes Bureus; pp. 133–135), the remainder of the chapter concerns runes created out of antiquarian interest, for encryption, forgery, or what Barnes terms “promotion of a superstition” (p. 135). Some noted writings examined here are a stone erected in 1887 on the Isle of Skye for Queen Victoria’s Gold Jubilee (p. 137), the Danish court official Bent Bille, who encoded parts of his log books in runes (pp. 137–138), and, naturally, the Kensington stone (pp. 139–142). The chapter concludes with a sample of book titles from the 1980s and 1990s, which purport to use runes for esoteric purposes (pp. 142–143).

Cryptic runes and inscriptions, touched upon briefly in the preceding chapter, is the subject of chapter 12. Various types of runic encryption are present. There are the “same-stave” runes (exemplified by the Sønder Kirkeby stone), abbreviated runes (most extremely shown in the Golstave-church, which lists numbers 1 through 20 with their first letters only), and transposition of letters (from parts of the Rök stone), which demonstrate one class of cryptic or pseudo-cryptic runes (pp. 144–148). Perhaps more interesting are the truly encoded runes. Although Barnes is careful to point out a caveat about difficulties in detecting an encryption (versus a simply unintelligible inscription), he begins with the interesting set of runic ciphers based on numeric position within a given *ætt*. These ciphers are demonstrated with samples from the Rök stone, rune-sticks from Bergen, and twig-runes from Maeshowe, among others (pp. 148–152).

Barnes departs from the epigraphic evidence and turns our attention to *runica manuscripta* and related topics in chapter 13. Most of the discussion on *runica manuscripta* focuses on English and Continental manuscripts, ideographic runes, and runic influences in the *Third Grammatical Treatise* from Iceland. Specific manuscripts discussed are MS Munich Clm. 6250, MS St. John’s College, Oxford 17, MS CCCC 422, and the *Exeter Book*, as well as *Bósa saga* (pp. 153–157). The second half of the chapter discusses the issue of names of individual runic letters. Information on Anglo-Saxon rune names is taken from the previously mentioned MS St. John’s College, Oxford 17, and three 9th-century manuscripts (which are left unspecified), along with Hickes’ copy of the *Rune Poem* in his *Thesaurus* (pp. 157–159). The Anglo-Saxon data are set against the rune names from the Norwegian and Icelandic *Rune Poems* (pp. 159–161). Brief mention is made of Gothic letter names. Barnes settles on a set of eight relatively certain correspondences: Old English *feoh*, *rad*, *hægl*, *nyd*, *is*, *ger*, *mann*, and *lagu* with Old Norse *fé*, *reið*, *hagall*, *naudr*, *íss*, *ár*, *maðr*, and *lǫgr* (p. 161). Four are compared but are less certain: Old English *ur*, *os*, *tir*, and *beorc* alongside Old Norse *úr*, *óss*, *Týr*, and *bjarkan*. The names for the runes **s**, **R/z**, **þ**, **k**, and others are considered too problematic and do not provide sufficient clues to their original names, if there were any (pp. 162–163).

In comparison to the traditional handbooks, chapter 14 is a welcome addition, in that it discusses the means by which inscription-bearing objects were carved. Inscriptions in stone are dealt with first (pp. 165–

170), in wood and bone next (pp. 171–172), then in metal (pp. 172–173), and then finally other materials (such as wax, plaster, and brick; p. 173). The social dimension of the stone inscriptions is emphasized, namely, that raising a rune stone was a collective endeavor that required patronage, workshops, and workers. Working from the social to the individual, questions about the possible orientation of inscribed object and tool are discussed in relation to carvings in wood and bone. The conclusion to the chapter addresses a common question, namely whether the carver of the runes was also the composer of the runes, and who a rune carver might have been within the society. Barnes notes the breadth of social groups who seem to have been literate in runes (pp. 174–175).

Barnes is conscientious throughout the book to make it accessible. Some of the fine details of interpretation are not brought up. This is not to say that the author is not careful, quite the contrary. Moreover, to give the reader an understanding of what interpretation entails, chapter 15 presents three case studies. The inscriptions chosen for presentation are the Kjølevik stone (pp. 180–183), the St. Albans 2 bone inscription (pp. 183–186), and Birsay 1 from the Orkneys (pp. 186–189). In each case Barnes presents a transliteration and the manifold ways one might parse, interpret, and/or translate all the problematic sections.

Whereas chapter 15 deals with very crucial, narrow-scope decisions of extant inscriptions, chapter 16 follows with a discussion of how runes present themselves as imaginary constructs in literary culture and through politically motivated usage. Into this first category fall instances such as J. R. R. Tolkien's adoption of runes and rune-like characters in *The Hobbit* as well as the role played by runes in *Egils saga Skallagrímssonar* and the *Poetic Edda*. Barnes offers a sober reminder that the powers of runes exemplified in literary works need not correspond to beliefs held by those who actually carved runes (pp. 190–194). A summarizing question posed by Barnes is "Above all, what general conclusions, if any, can be drawn from sources of widely varying date, type and trustworthiness?" (p. 194). In relation to politics, Barnes presents some of the historical uses of runes by the NSDAP in Germany and fallacious origins attributed by the NSDAP to the runes (pp. 194–196).

Close to the end, chapter 17 presents an overview of the history of runology. The opening portion of this chapter can be split into three major eras each marked by a representative number of runologists,

namely, the antiquarian runologists (such as Ole Worm, Johannes Bureus, Olaus Verelius, and George Hickes; pp. 197–198), the 19th-century philologists (beginning with Johan Liljegren, Richard Dybeck, P. G. Thorsen, George Stephens, Ludvig Wimmer, Sophus Bugge, among other; pp. 198–200), and runologists of a more modern period (Lis Jacobsen, Erik Moltke, Wolfgang Krause, Herbert Jahnkuhn, Helmut Arntz, and, of course, R. I. Page, among others; pp. 200–202). Each overview summarizes the main achievements of the periods as well as the runologists’ shortcomings and particular scholarly tendencies. After this overview, the chapter turns to issues of a broader scope, such as historical trends and intents of some runologists to pursue nationalistic ends. The runologists of note here are Ole Worm, George Hickes, Wilhelm Grimm, and Jakob Bredsdorff. Some of the topics addressed are the relative dating of runes (younger versus older *fubark*; pp. 205–206), the origin and age of the runes (pp. 206–207), the use and purpose of runes (pp. 207–208), and improvements of dating (pp. 208–210).

The title of chapter 18, “Where to find runic inscriptions”, is perhaps a little misleading. The chapter is not so much a guide to where runic inscriptions can be found archaeologically, but rather to where, within most national collections, runic inscriptions are currently housed. Moreover, there are recommendations on where to research collections and which catalogs to consult. Further addenda after this chapter are a relatively terse glossary of only twenty terms, and a guide to phonetic transcription and the articulation of speech sounds. Naturally, there is also an index to the main inscriptions and their reference works, both of which are a little more extensive than the conclusion to each chapter and include non-Anglophone works.

Some of the shortcomings of the book are not to be laid at the author’s feet. In the preface it is noted that the book was “originally conceived as a joint venture, to be written by Ray Page” and Barnes, but that Page’s health prevented it (p. xii). It is clear that Barnes’ forte lies in the Scandinavian runic traditions. As regards the Anglo-Saxon runic tradition and continental *runica manuscripta*, there are certain identifiable gaps, which likely would have been more deeply discussed by Page. It seems to be a shortfall of the book that more attention was not paid to the Franks Casket. Many of the topics running through the work, such as the relation of runic to roman script (see, for example, Klein 2009) and encrypted runes, would have paralleled well Barnes’ treatment of the



Scandinavian examples. Similarly, in dealing with *runica manuscripta*, some desiderata are to be noted. One might hope to see a more thorough discussion of items such as MS Codex Vindobonensis 795, which is the oldest manuscript containing Anglo-Saxon runic names (ca. 798 C.E., as dated, for example, in Unterkirchner 1969:10, 19) and which has the Anglo-Saxon runes on the reverse side of the *gotica* mentioned by Barnes (p. 21).

An additional item which would befit the discussion of both the rune names and the beginnings of runology is the *Abecedarium Nordmannicum* of MS Codex Sangallensis 878, partly because of the notable mixture of Old Norse, Old English, Old Saxon, and Old High German forms, but also on account of Wilhelm Grimm's fortunate preservation of the piece in his *Ueber deutsche Runen*, prior to the manuscript page's being damaged to near illegibility in the *Abecedarium* text. Finally, the discussion of cryptic runes in chapter 12 would have been more thorough had the author mentioned the *Isruna*-tractate on page 52 of MS Codex Sangallensis 270, which, dating to the second half of the 9th century, is roughly contemporaneous to the epigraphic material discussed by Barnes on the topic.

These omissions, however, do not detract from a book whose goal is to present a wide-ranging topic to the layperson or undergraduate student. In conjunction with R. I. Page's *An Introduction to English Runes*, all bases would conceivably be well covered. As stated initially, this collection of several relatively short chapters befits a range of readerships, even as a sort of runological florilegium for the novice. Each chapter's summation with a short list of suggested further readings is well thought out, and Barnes commendably walks the line between a thorough and honest presentation of the material on the one hand, and accessibility and intelligibility to the layperson on the other.

#### REFERENCES

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