

Runic Divination

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*Thence come maidens who know much,
Three from that hall beneath the tree:
One was named Origin, the second Becoming.
These two fashioned the third, named Debt.
They established law,
They selected lives
For the children of ages,
And the fates of men.
- Völuspá*

Learning to Read

The first step in learning to read the runes must be to get to know the runes themselves. This doesn't necessarily mean memorizing interpretations out of a book, although the literal meanings of the rune names should be memorized as a starting point. Instead, take one rune each day, starting with fehu and ending with oþila, and meditate on it. There are several exercises you can do daily to aid in this: word association with the rune names, visualization, physical connection with the rune, etc.

Always keep a record of your rune readings in a journal. Although it's not quite as easy to draw a nine rune cast as it is to record a tarot spread, do try and make the effort. Record which runes landed face up and face down, what you think each one meant in the context of the reading, and what your general impressions were. Even if a reading makes no sense to you when you do it, its meaning might become clearer later on, and this will encourage you to pay closer attention to your instincts (even if you are sure you're wrong!).

Some Methods of Runic Divination

As there are no reliable historical descriptions of runic divination, virtually any method one chooses can be considered valid. However, certain characteristics of the runes make them better suited to some methods than others. For example, most runes are carved onto small bits of wood, clay or stone. These are better designed to be picked up and scattered, rather than being laid out in a specific pattern like the Tarot. This is verified by descriptions of runic divination in Norse literature, all of which refer to them being 'thrown', 'cast' or 'scattered'. Now, I used to recommend using Tarot-type patterns as a transitional method for those who are most comfortable with the Tarot, but I have come to the conclusion that it really isn't necessary. The best way to learn how to swim is to just jump right in!

Some books give upright and reversed meanings for the runes (like Tarot cards). This is obviously impractical if one is casting the runes, since many will land sideways or at odd angles. Also, one would think that if this had been the intention of the original creators of the futhork, they wouldn't have designed so many runes to look the same upright as inverted. In addition to these practical considerations, there is also the fact that the Norse don't appear to have seen their world in such black and white terms. Polarizing the meanings of the runes in this way, even if those opposites aren't phrased in terms of 'positive' and 'negative', tends to limit the range of possible interpretations and ignores the complex and subtle relationships between the different runes in a cast.

The important thing, however, is that you feel comfortable with the method you choose. If you feel the need for a more structured reading than a simple cast provides, devise a pattern for your casting cloth that has some meaning for you to give the reading a more tangible context. If you find nine or twelve runes to be a bit overwhelming, use three or four. If you want to just grab a handful and cast them, go right ahead. The runes themselves should tell you how they want to be read. Different sizes, shapes and materials lend themselves to different methods, and through meditation and experimentation you should be able to choose a technique that best suits both the runes' 'personality' and your own. Just make sure your method is consistent.

Most people eventually end up devising their own method of reading, but here are a few to get you started in the meantime:

1. The One-Rune Quicky.

As you might imagine, this method is designed to provide a quick, concise answer to a specific question. It can also be used daily as a subject for meditation, or as a general overview of the day before you go to bed. Think of a specific question.

Pull a rune out of the pouch and look at it. The answer may be an obvious yes or no, or the rune might provide a more conditional response. If the rune you picked seems to make no sense at all as a response to your question, ask another question or try again later.

2. The Norns (or, The Three-Rune Quicky).

This method is helpful in getting an overall fix on a given situation, and providing some idea about a future outcome. How much information you get out of it will depend on how much time you spend analyzing the reading and how well you understand the runes.

Pull one rune and lay it down face up. This rune represents the first Norn - those events in the past which affect the current situation. Pull another rune and lay it next to the first. This is the second Norn - the present situation, which frequently refers to a choice that needs to be made. Pull a third and lay it down. This is the third Norn, and the most difficult rune to interpret. In some cases it might represent the person's inevitable fate. In others, it might simply be the end result if the current situation remains unchanged, or even just one of several results. You must rely on your instincts to decide which is the case.

3. The Roman Method.

This is the method described by Tacitus in 'Germania'. The method itself is really another variation of the Three-Rune Quickie, with a few ritual details to lend it authenticity. If you really want to do it right, go out and find a fruit-bearing tree and use the wood to

carve your runes fresh each time.

Lay out a white cloth on the floor. Take all of the runes in your hands and scatter them. Invoking the aid of Odin, and without looking at the runes, pick three at random. You may look at them as a group, without considering them in any particular order, or you can pick them one at a time, using the 'Norns' method described above to interpret them.

4. The Nine-Rune Cast.

This method will give a detailed overview of a person's situation, providing insight into where they are in terms of their spiritual path, and clarifying the options and possible outcomes available to them. Nine is a somewhat arbitrary number - you may use any number that feels comfortable to you. I have chosen nine because a) three and its multiples were magically significant numbers to the Norse, and b) it is a large enough number to provide a detailed reading, but not so large that it over-complicates things. It is also easy for most people to hold nine runes in their hands.

Pick nine runes from the pouch. Hold them between your hands for a moment, and focus on your question (if you have one). Then scatter the runes on the table, floor, or cloth if you have one. Read the runes which land face up first. These will relate to the current situation and the circumstances which led to it. How the runes are read is largely subjective, but in general, runes lying in the centre are the most immediately relevant, while those lying around the edges are less important, or represent more general influences. Runes that are close together or even touching often compliment each other, or may even represent a single thing, while runes which fall on opposite sides of the pattern frequently represent opposing influences. Occasionally, a rune will land completely off the cloth or fall off the table. Some people consider such runes to be particularly significant, while others ignore them completely.

Once you have looked at the runes which landed face up (and remembered which ones they are), turn over the rest of the runes without moving them from their positions. These represent outside or future influences, and will point to possible outcomes. It is up to you to decide what the various positions and patterns in a reading mean, but once you have come up with a few general rules, try to stick with them. As I have said before, consistency is very important. However, rune readings by their nature are very fluid, subjective things. Try not to impose too much order on your readings by inventing set meanings for every triangle, square and tetrahedron. Runes are like people - you never know how they will get along together until you introduce them. Just look at the patterns and relationships that appear in each reading and see what interpretations make sense to you.

Once the reading is done, I usually like to pull one more rune out of the pouch. This helps to confirm (or sometimes dispute) the conclusions drawn from the reading, and may provide a focus or centre to an otherwise scattered and complicated cast.