

***Runes: A Handbook.* By Michael P. Barnes.** Boydell. 2012. xvi + 240pp. £45.

In runology there is little – from interpretations of individual inscriptions to larger questions such as the ultimate origin of the script – which does not generate a certain amount of controversy. In this new introduction to the subject, Barnes provides concise, clear and even-handed explanations of issues which preoccupy specialists, explaining sometimes highly technical debates without losing the reader in arcane details.

Like most textbooks on runes, this one begins by outlining what runic writing is and discussing the various theories about its origin as an adaptation of roman, greek or etruscan/“north italic” alphabets (a connection with roman script is currently favoured, although the matter is by no means closed). A part of any such introduction is an etymology of the word *rune* (Old English *rūn*, Old Norse *rún*, Gothic *rūna*). Some introductory accounts do little more than repeat the traditional claim that the “original” meaning of the word was something like “mystery, secret” (on the grounds that Gothic *rūna* glosses Greek *mysterion* in Ulfila’s Bible translations), a view which has been used to advance various speculative notions about the inherently cryptic and magical nature of runes. It is gratifying to see that Barnes – alone among the introductions known to this reviewer – also cites the less glamorous etymology proposed in 1985 by Richard Morris, who argued that *rune* and its cognates may be connected with verbs meaning “dig”, and that like words for writing in many languages, the word “rune” refers to the act of carving or scratching.

The core of the book is an account of the four major types of rune-row: the Older *futhorc* of 24 characters; the expanded versions used in England and Frisia, chiefly the standardised Anglo-Saxon *futhorc* of 28 or more letters; the reduced 16-letter *futhorks* of the Viking Age; and the modified and expanded versions of the latter used in medieval Scandinavia. In each case, Barnes devotes one chapter to the developments in the writing system (emphasising the extent of variation in the forms and functions of individual runes), and another to inscriptions using that form of runic writing. Later chapters cover post-Reformation developments (where an ongoing tradition of runic writing in a few areas coincided with a revived scholarly interest in the script), cryptic runes and manuscript runes. Chapters 14 and 15 deal with two topics which have been gaining attention in recent years: the techniques used to create inscriptions; and the development of methodologies for runology. In chapter 17, Barnes also provides a brief but informative history of runology, from medieval antiquarianism to present-day scholarship.

Chapter 16, “Runes and the imagination: literature and politics”, is likely to be of significant interest to the general reader, who may be more familiar with the portrayal of runes as magic symbols in fantasy literature and New Age books on divination than with the historical uses of runic writing. Like most runologists, Barnes has little time for the popular idea that runes have inherent magic powers, and his discussion of neo-pagan “rune-lore” is understandably rather cursory; one can easily sense the author’s impatience with such ill-informed nonsense as Ralph Blum’s *The Book of Runes* (1982) and other works which treat runes exclusively as magical symbols, disregarding their function as a writing system. As remote as these modern practices may be from the historically attested uses of runic script (including its uses in charms, spells and prayers, which are discussed in chapter 17 and elsewhere), they have some historical interest in themselves. This phenomenon perhaps merits a longer discussion, not least because of its relationship with the use of runes in National Socialist iconography. Barnes briefly mentions the Nazis’ appropriation of runes as Aryan/German symbols (with which some serious scholars co-operated); but he does not set it against the background of German and Austrian *völkisch* occultism in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century. This is rather a shame, as the historical connections between *völkisch* runemagicians, Nazi ideologues and modern advocates of runic divination are complex and

interesting in themselves, if admittedly peripheral to Barnes's main topic – the “genuine” historical uses of runes as writing.

Barnes is certainly not inattentive to popular interest in runes in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. The chapter on runic writing in the post-Reformation period (chapter 11) deals with a range of modern uses of runes in (for example) the tourist industry and artwork; and it includes an admirably dispassionate treatment of the notorious Kensington runestone.

The book includes helpful apparatus for the non-specialist: a glossary, guides to transliteration and phonetic notation, and a short description of articulatory phonetics. At the end of every chapter is a reading list which includes both introductory and more specialised works. Barnes also directs the reader to some of the excellent online resources available, such as the *Samnordisk runtextdatabas* (<<http://www.nordiska.uu.se/forsk/samnord.htm>>) and the database of Older *fupark* inscriptions hosted at Kiel (<<http://www.runenprojekt.uni-kiel.de>>).

A new general introduction to runology in English is long overdue (German speakers have Düwel's *Runenkunde*, now in its 4<sup>th</sup> edition, 2008). Most of the existing textbooks, such as Page's *Introduction to English Runes* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1999) or Spurkland's *Norwegian Runes and Runic Inscriptions* (2005), explicitly focus on inscriptions in, or from, individual countries. The only general work in English is Elliott's rather outdated *Runes: an Introduction* (2<sup>nd</sup> edition 1989). Barnes's contribution provides students with an introduction to the topic which is both accessible and erudite. It brings the reader up to date on current issues in the discipline and demonstrates the concern with methodological rigour for which its author is well known.

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