

Nordic Magic Healing

1:Healing galdr, healing runes

Yves Kodratoff

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*Nordic Magic Healing:
1:Healing galdr, healing runes*

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Nordic Magic Healing

Nordic Magic Healing is made of three books.

Book 1: *Healing galdr, healing runes*

Book 2: *Screaming, I gathered them*

Book 3: *Hand healing, Shiatsu and Seið: a spiritual journey*

These books illustrate my deep belief that healing must harmoniously merge rationalism and mysticism. Nordic Heathen magic and Shiatsu are very good examples of such a merger.

Our primitive being is hidden but ever present in our life, showing its demands in very strange and unexpected ways. We have to recognize and to heal the wounds that this primitive part of ourselves bears. That is what I call ‘healing magic’: it relies on deep superstitions and magical techniques.

These books share my experience in healing using galdr, runes, and shiatsu. They present a new healing technique that incorporates both the Japanese and Nordic approaches. Although they are far from each other physically, they are quite close in spirit.

Acknowledgments

Thanks and love to Lise Fontaine for her comments and questions which helped me so much in making this final version more precise than any original I have been writing.

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Chapter 1

RUNES AND HEALING

“And, all along their way - she taught him the runes, upon
her white hand.”

Danmarks Gamle Folkviser (in *Chants populaires
scandinaves*, p. 29)

Runes are magical tools, tools for all aspects of life.

They can be used, and were used, in many ways: for war, for love, for prosperity, and so on. In this book, we are going to explore the runes and the Galdr (song) associated with them. To begin this exploration, I will first give you a glimpse of how the runes were *actively* used in the past by using examples from an area that interests me very much - healing.

The following three rune poems show us the magical use of the runes to affect someone else's health.

Those who carve without knowledge
Should not write the runes
[for] Great misfortune will follow
When the secrets are misused
I have seen ten letters carved
On the whale bone

They brought on the pain
That tortured the leek's lime-tree. (saga1)¹

In this poem, “leek’s lime-tree” designates a ‘slender woman’: the leek brings in the idea of being slender and beautiful, and lime-tree is a classical image for a woman in Skaldic poetry. Thinking of the leek you buy at the marketplace, you might get a wrong feeling. This image obviously refers to the wild leek, a beautiful slender deep-green stem rising above the other herbs.

This poem is one of Egil Skallagrímsson’s, as told in the saga that describes his life. The runes that this poem refer to were carved into a whale bone in an attempt to seduce the young girl (the ‘slender woman’) who is spoken of in the poem, but instead they only served to make her ill. Besides the technical error of having chosen the wrong runes, this is an attempt at this kind of magic to force someone to act against their will. Whenever runes are carved for someone, this person must be made aware of what is being carved for them, they must agree with the carver, and they should participate in the creation of the poem that asks for their healing.

*Using the runes is more dangerous than you might believe.
Get deeply involved when you do, magic is not nice and
funny*

¹ Almost all the citations given here are my version of the ancient text I want to present of the reader. Most often, however, there is a classical English translation of the same ancient text. A reference such as (saga1) will be used in the bibliography, where I will give the pages of an English edition containing the translation of the same original ancient text. In general, this classical translation and mine differ. In particular, I noticed a tendency to translate ancient poetry in a pompous way that, in my opinion, kills their poetry. This is why, even when I provide a version with the same meaning as the classical translation, I tend to use simpler words.

The next poem, gives us the only example of how a healing should be done. This poem was found, written in runes, at Sigtuna on a copper plaque that dates from the end of the 11th century.

Demon of the fever of wounds,
Lord of the demons,
Now you must flee,
You have been discovered.
Three kinds of pain on you, wolf.
Three times the misery, wolf.
|||, the rune of Ice.
These ice runes will be your only joy, wolf.
Enjoy the seið well. (rune1)

This important poem will be discussed later in detail, with particular attention given to seið, a kind of shamanic journey practiced the by Norse magicians. Clearly, the only ill wished here is for the sickness.

Unfortunately, there are many examples of what not to do: using the runes for harming others. This book will not explain, and has no desire to explain, how to practice this kind of magic. Nevertheless, it would be dishonest to try to hide this kind of use, and its traces. Busla's curse, found in the *saga of Bosi and Herraud* (where it is called a 'prayer'), is a very striking example of a harmful use, although there is no evidence that these verses were carved in runes.

I wish you pain
in your breast,
that venomous vipers
gnaw your heart,
that your ears
are deafened forever,
and your eyes

become wall-eyed forever!
(edda1)

Runes: for divination or magic ?

Since many people use runes for divination, we shall now discuss their role in the ancient society.

First, the title of this book needs to be justified since the runes aren't commonly used for healing. Mystical books on runes have clearly shown that, today, their use is essentially for divination. This means that the runes are arranged in a specific system, and the seeker is asked to choose several of them. By interpreting the runes chosen, the rune reader helps people to better understand their difficulties, to better guide their life. Used this way, rune readings are similar to tea-leaf readings or tarot card readings. However, modern books on runes don't show how they can be used for healing.

The widely accepted belief in the divinatory abilities of the runes comes mostly from the widely cited Latin text written by Tacitus:

For omens and the casting of lots they have the highest regard. Their procedure in casting lots is always the same. They cut off a branch of a nut-bearing tree and slice it into strips; these they mark with different signs and throw them completely at random onto a white cloth. Then the priest of the state, if the consultation is a public one, or the father of the family if it is private, offers a prayer to the gods, and looking up at the sky picks up three strips, one at a time, and reads their meaning from the signs previously scored on them. If the lots forbid an enterprise, there is no deliberation that day on the matter in question; if they permit it, confirmation by the taking of auspices is required. (taci1)

From this text, we might be able to conclude that the Germanic people were adept at magic, but we can't say it shows us how the runes were used. A Roman such as Tacitus would interpret divination, as he knew it in the Greek/Latin culture. Therefore, we can't be certain that he understood exactly what was going on in the Germanic culture.

Tacitus also says that in case of success, a 'confirmation' was required. Why would this be needed if the runes already did a foretelling? Besides, a bit later Tacitus describes what he considers as the most important foretelling technique: the interpretation of the "neighs and snorts" of sacred white horses.

Another reason for the confusion about the use of the runes could be attributed to the Celtic Oghams. The druids were known to use all sorts of divinatory methods, from observing birds in flight to watching the convulsions of a victim stabbed in the back. In particular, the story of Etain, well known in Celtic mythology, attests to the use of the Oghams as a method of 'seeing'. In this case, the druid Dalan uses the Oghams to discover that Etain had been married to a God. The writings about the peithynen or "the Elucidator," also known as the Druids' wheel, describe a type of divination which used branches or staves that had poems (or maxims) carved on them in Oghams. Transferring an interpretation from the Oghams to the runes is certainly possible, but there is no historical justification for doing so.

One thing is consistent in the runic texts, they all show an **active** use of the runes. In other words, they are used to act on the future, or to wish for a change in the physical world. For instance, one of the few texts that alludes to the throwing of sacred branches is *Gautrek's saga*, and clearly the runes in this case aren't used to foresee the future, but to control it:

The King, Vikar ... came up against extraordinarily adverse winds and they stayed near small islands for a long time. They threw [some sort of]² ‘fate’ sticks in order to diminish the winds. The result was that Odin demanded that a man from the company be chosen by a draw and be hung as a sacrifice³. (saga2)

After these magical pieces of wood were thrown, the storm calmed itself and Odin demanded that of one of the passengers on the boat be sacrificed. The sacrifice took place several days later. This does not describe an example of divination, because clearly, the priest already knew what he wanted to achieve and without a doubt, simply waited to pay the due price, a sacrifice to the High One in this case. The runes of the Elder Futhark, like those of the Younger Futhark, serve as mediation between humans and Gods, a means of asking the Gods to grant a favor.

In *Gisli Sursson saga*, we find an example that looks casual enough, but it works in a similar way. The hero of the saga, Gisli, wants to meet up with his brother who refuses to open his door to him.

Gisli takes a stick, carves runes on it, and throws it inside. (His brother) sees it, catches it, looks at it, then he gets up, goes out, and welcomes Gisli ... (saga3)

This is not exactly what we would call miraculous, and certainly no great sacrifice was called for. But regardless of

² Texts in brackets and in italics are my comments.

³ The English translation found in Penguin’s *Seven Viking Romances* is much less precise than the present citation, taken from a German edition of Gautrek’s saga.

the price of this tiny miracle, it does show that the effect of the runes is not to foresee, but to obtain a result since, Gisli did try to speak to his brother first through the door but without any success.

We also find references to runes carved on a ‘pole of infamy’. These are also attempting to alter reality. An example of this comes to us through *Vatnsdoela saga*. The goal in this case is to curse those who break a solemn promise:

This one will be infamous to all and never find company with honest people. He will incur the wrath of the Gods and he will carry the name of Peace Violator! (saga4)

The following runic text comes from *Egil Skallagrimsson’s saga*:

I place here a pole of infamy against King Eric and Queen Gunnhild and I direct this curse to the guardian spirits of this country, so that each of them will be lost, unable to find their way until they have successfully driven King Eric and Queen Gunnhild out of this land. (saga5)

This demand is far more significant than the previous one, but similar in the sense that it relates to shaping the future, and not to predicting it.

In *Gretti’s saga* (*Grettis Saga Asmundarsonar*), there is a sorceress who wants to ruin Gretti. In order to do so, we are told that she took her knife and carved runes on a stump. She then reddened them with her blood and muttered a magical spell. Then she turned counter clockwise around the stump and recited powerful magical spells. Since this sorceress wanted then to make sure to be able to harm Gretti, before

she begins the final spell, she spies on him and listens to him speak so that she can discover his weak point. When she finally does carve the runes that will bring about Gretti's ruin, she has it all planned, and knows that she only needs to follow the proper steps to succeed.

Runes are also alluded to in other sagas. But in each case they either request that an event happen, or they assert and consecrate something (as for example in stating: "this ship is captained by X").

This active use of the runes is also found in relatively recent texts and customs, such as in *Danmarks Gamle Folkeviser* assembled by S. Grundtvig between 1853 and 1883. This collection of popular Danish poems contains 18 that mention runes. They show how to use them to calm floods, immobilize animals, seduce a partner, bring on deep sleep, ease birth, etc., but never once is there an allusion to a divinatory use of the runes. In the same way, Deichman in 1794 (cited by Léon Pineau, *Chants populaires scandinaves*, 1898, p. 144) explains two practices that were common in his time. The first, also described by Saxo Grammaticus some five centuries earlier, is that

it's a belief today, still common in the region of Himmelsbjaerg that, if the runes are engraved on a small piece of wood and if it is placed under the tongue of a corpse, the dead will talk.

The second is:

When Icelanders want to harm someone, they take a piece of wood, the length of two or three fingers. They engrave on it magical characters and they make their blood run upon them. After this, they go to the tomb of a corpse ... [*following*

this is a cursing ritual that I have no desire to repeat].

In any case, there is no allusion, not even a subtle one, to a divinatory use of the runes.

My purpose by this long argument is not to say that using the runes for divination is absurd, but to show that this is a more recent use that was certainly not practiced “since time immemorial” as many mystical books on runes state without batting an eye⁴.

Non-runic divinatory methods

There were obviously a large number of divinatory techniques in the Nordic society. It seems that the one used most often is called *seið*⁵, a kind of shamanic journey.

When knowledge of the future is what is desired, the magical means that was used was *seið* and not the runes. Many texts mention the work of a *völva* or a seeress who performs a *seið* to determine the future⁶.

⁴ There are so many things I would like to explain in this first chapter that it could easily become a book of its own. In order to avoid overloading it too much, I have added one appendix at the end of this chapter which is dedicated to a more thorough discussion of all the texts I have been able to gather which describe a use of runes that could have been interpreted as divinatory. (A great thank you to Marijane Osborn for sharing her notes with me on this subject!). In the end, as you will see, there are only two references describing an almost certain use of the runes for divination.

⁵ To be pronounced as ‘seithe’. It is also often written *seidh*, or *seidhr*. I noticed that most occurrences of this word in the meaning of ‘magical foreseeing’ are written *seið* in the Eddas and the sagas.

⁶ Different words were used to describe similar behaviors. The interested reader may refer to the Internet paper, *Spae-Craft, Seið, and Shamanism*, by Kveldulf Gundarsson, that makes sharp differences among all these practices.

For example, in *Vatnsdoela saga*, the hosts prepared a feast according to their ancient custom for conducting a seið. This was being done so that the people could know their destiny. A Lapp völvu was asked to attend the feast so that she could perform the seið. The Lapp, dressed in great gear, occupied the high-seat at the feast. People went forward to ask their future and ask questions about their destiny. For each of them, she prophesied their future.

A similar example of this use of the seið (and this is the only example I know of a seið conducted by a Scandinavian male) is found in *Gisli Sursson's saga*:

Thorgrim the Nose was paid to perform a seið that would locate a murderer, thus preventing him from getting away healthy and safe, even if others tried to help him. In return, Thorgrim was given an ox that was nine winters old. He began the seið, preparing for it as usual and building a scaffold. He completed the seið with all his spells and evil-doings, ... [*effectively locating the murderer.*] (saga6)

The word used for 'spells' in the original text is *ergi*. In Chapter 3, we shall discuss this concept at length, where we will show that it actually means 'impotence' or 'passive homosexuality'. This text is thus very despising towards the use of seið, but it does show that Thorgrim the Nose was able to use seið successfully to accomplish his task.

To complete this brief discussion of seið, I want to also consider the examples of seið, which attempt to modify the future, and we have many instances of those in the sagas. In particular, there are many examples where Lapp shamans have performed the seið as they were requested, correctly anticipating the future. We learn from the text that when they

have been asked to perform a seið in order to retrieve an object, but they failed. Despite their efforts, they were incapable of physically modifying reality.

The role of seið is twofold: to anticipate the future and, where possible, to modify the world of physical reality. The role of the runes, as the sagas and Eddic texts illustrate, is to affect physical reality, to consecrate a possession, or to claim some power, but never to foresee the future. More discussions and references on the use of seið are given in the excellent paper of H. R. Ellis Davidson, *Hostile Magic in the Icelandic Sagas*, published in *The Witch in History*, referred in the bibliography. See also the Appendix for more detail.

Healing and using runes to heal

The focus of this book is to study the runes as they relate to health and well-being. The runes were grouped into nine rune songs according to the *Lay of Sigrdrifa* (see later in this chapter), and of these nine songs, four are dedicated to health. The runes of Branches⁷, those of the physicians, are of primary importance here. Delivery runes are used to help in childbirth and they also relate directly to the medical area. Runes of Protection help in preventing sickness. The runes of Joy are also included with the healing runes because they are powerful in the prevention of sickness. The five remaining runes songs are : Victory, Undertow⁸, Magic⁹,

⁷ It is usually translated by ‘runes of Limbs’ but this keeps an ambiguity between the limb of a human and those of a tree. I chose to follow German translations that speak of limbs of trees without ambiguity, as ‘branches’ does.

⁸ Undertow runes are usually called Sea or Wave runes. I try to capture the threat they contain by calling them runes of the Undertow.

Speech, and Spirit. I deeply believe that each rune can be used to influence health (with the exception of Othala, and this will be explained later), complementing the rune typically assigned for this purpose. The end of this chapter will present a summary of the effect of each rune on health, and volume 2 of this book will be devoted to an in depth study of the twenty-four runes of the Elder Futhark, and their relation to health. It is interesting to note that no text describes this specific healing use of the runes. I have used the runic texts to find out the various meanings of each rune, and then from these meanings, I have associated a particular healing power to each of them.

What is striking about the ancient Northern European myths, (i.e. those referring to runes, such as the Icelandic and Irish sagas, Celtic and Germanic legends, the old-English poem *Beowulf*, etc.), is the extreme lack of details concerning health. And yet, healing must certainly have taken place. A rare example of a healing treatment is found in the Icelandic *saga of Glum the Murderer*. It tells the story of a woman whose close relative has just been killed.

She asks to see the corpse and they show it to her. She then takes her relative and lays him gently in a cart. And when she gets back home, she cleans and bandages his wounds.

She did all this so well that when she was done, he started to speak. (saga7)

This is an extraordinary miracle that well deserves to be told. However, when someone is simply hurt, the sagas often only explain what the end result of the injury was, and they do not discuss the care that has been provided. One of the few

⁹ The translators of the Edda call the runes of Magic the runes of beer, but the scientific runologist W. Krause insists that they are in fact runes of magic (“Zauberrunen”).

references that I could find to a doctor or healer of any kind is in the *saga of the Men of the Vapnford*.

Thorvard was a man who was thought of very highly in his community and he was considered to be the best physician in the district. One evening, a man broke his leg on the farm, and Thorvard was sent for. So, Thorvard came and bandaged the leg. The man then said to Thorvard, “My wounds are to the point where, thanks to your assistance, we can take care of it by ourselves, but I know that Thorkel is hurt, that he has nobody to care for him, and that he is weakening. I ask you to join him and to heal him.” Thorvard agreed to this and [*went to Thorkel’s place*]. He approached Thorkel and said, “I would like to see your wound, because I have heard that it goes badly.” Thorkel allowed him to see it and Thorvard spent seven nights with him, and the state of the patient improved each day. Thorvard went away, and for his care, Thorkel gave him a horse and a silver bracelet. (saga8)

This payment must have been extraordinary since the saga mentions it, but there are no details at all about how the wound was treated specifically.

Another medical treatment, though an unsuccessful one, is found in *Gretti’s saga*. When Gretti is wounded, and his wound obviously starts to gangrene, his brother Illugi treats him. The saga says simply:

Illugi watched him day and night, taking care of nothing else. (saga9)

The *saga of King Hrolf and his Champions* describes a similar type of recovery.

King Hrolf had received two wounds to his arms, and a major injury to his head which caused him to lose an eye.

These injuries weakened him for some time, but Queen Yrsa healed him. (saga10)

In the tale of *Egil and Asmund*, we are given some details about surgery. Egil lost a hand in a fight, and a friendly dwarf dressed the stump so well that “soon the pain was completely gone. In the morning the wound was healed”. The dwarf then made a sword with a hilt in the form of a socket and he fixed it on Egil’s arm. Later in the tale, Egil meets an old giantess who had kept the hand that was cut off, wrapped in “life-herbs.” She offers to help Egil: “If you’ll risk letting me reopen the wound; I’ll try to graft the hand on to the arm.” The tale goes on:

She took the socket off his arm and deadened the arm so that Egil didn’t feel any pain when she trimmed the stump. Then she put life-herbs on it, wrapped it in silk and held it firmly for the rest of the day. Egil could feel the life flow in. The old hag put him to bed and told him to stay there until his hand was healed. It was fully healed in three days, and now he found the hand no stiffer than it had been when the arm was still whole, though it appeared to have a red thread around it. (saga11)

This description can certainly be called a mere fantasy. Still, when taken all together, the details on the painkillers and the disinfectants (the ‘healing-herbs’), the bandage and quiet time necessary for recovery, look like the tip of an impressive iceberg of medical knowledge.

In *The History of Saint Olaf*, Snorri Sturluson describes a medical treatment as it was performed on a wounded man named Tormod. The healing fails, but it shows that some knowledge of surgery was common in the Nordic world.

Tormod then went away to a little room which he entered. Many were already there, sorely wounded men, and there was present a woman who bound up their wounds. A fire was burning on the floor and she warmed water wherewith to wash their wounds; Tormod sat down by the door. One came out and the other went in of those who were busying themselves with the wounded men. One of them turned to Tormod, looked at him and said: "Why art thou so pale? Art thou wounded and why dost thou not ask for a leech?" Then Tormod quoth a verse:

I have no fresh hue,
But the fair, slim woman
Herself hath a ruddy husband.
Few bother about my wounds.
Generous woman! The wound
In me was caused by
The deep track of Dag's spell
And the Danish weapons' smart.

[*Dag is the name of the warrior who wounded Tormod*]

Tormod then stood up and went to the fire where he stood for a while. The leech said to him: "Thou, man, go out and fetch me the wood which lies outside the door!" He went out, brought in an armful of wood and cast it down on the floor. The leech looked at his face and said: "Strangely pale is this man. Why art thou so?" Then quoth Tormod:

The noble woman wonders

That we are so wan.
Few grow fair of wounds;
I found them in the arrow-fall.
Through me the curved steel
Went mightily driven.
Keenly hath the perilous iron
Pierced near my heart, I think.

Then said the leech: "Let me see thy wounds and I will attend to them". He sat down and took off his clothes. When the leech saw his wounds, she looked carefully at the wound in his side; she noticed that therein stood a bit of iron but knew not for sure what path the iron had taken. In a stone kettle she had put leeks and other grass, and cooked them together; she gave it to the wounded men to eat and so tried to find out if they had deep wounds, for she could notice the smell of the leek coming out of a deep wound. She brought it to Tormod and bade him eat. He answered: "Take it away; I have not groats-sickness." She took a pair of tongs to draw out the iron, but it was fast and would not come out; it stood but a little way out for the wound was swollen. Then said Tormod: "Cut the flesh away down to the iron, so that thou canst get at it well with the tongs; then give them to me and let me wrench it." She did as he said. Then Tormod took the gold ring off his hand and gave it to the leech, bidding her do with it what she would, "a good possession it is," he said, "King Olaf gave me this ring this morning." Tormod afterwards took the tongs and wrenched the arrow out; there were barbs on it and on these lay the fibers of the heart, some red, some white. And when he saw it, he said: "Well hath the king fed us; fat am I still about the roots of the heart!" He then fell back and was dead. Here ends the tale of Tormod. (saga12)

In *Gesta Danorum*, Saxo Grammaticus also alludes to some kind of complex healing :

The farmer's son came then close to the patient's wounds, repaired the ripped parts of the stomach, put the innards back into the belly, and held them in place by knotted vines. (saxo1)

I think it safe to say that some people, at least, must have had medical knowledge, seemingly of a rudimentary kind, but we are never given any details about how healing actually takes place.

Christian texts often provide miraculous examples of healing, where the touch of a hand, or the blessing of a saint are enough to heal. For example, the venerable Bede¹⁰ goes into great detail on the miraculous properties of the blood of a saint, or the water that washed the bones of some other one. All his stories strongly evoke paganism, but he never goes into detail about how the saints performed their miracles. Nevertheless, this is no proof of a lack of medical knowledge, since according to Bede, John, the Bishop of York, obviously demonstrates this kind of knowledge. One day the Bishop of York arrives at a convent of nuns and he is told of a young nun who is very ill. After being informed that this nun had recently been bled in the arm, he asks the Abbess when the bleeding had been practiced. When he discovers that it took place on the fourth day of the moon, he growls roughly to Abbess Heriburg:

¹⁰ Bede, author of *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, completed his work at the end of his life in 731. Although this history is essentially aimed at the Christian crowd, the free style of the author produces in fact a very pleasant text to read, and of course, it is very instructive on the actual cultural context that Arthurian legends colorfully redesigned.