

Considering the ancient runes, why and how

1 Corinthians 9:20-22: And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some.

While the issue of “being under the law” is a theological one, it is also a cultural one, hence the common mis-citing of this text as “Paul was a Jew to the Jews, a Greek to the Greeks.” Culture must be considered in both understanding the Gospel and in communicating the Gospel. To “gain” those of different cultures requires understanding their culture sufficiently to communicate the Gospel, not only to “explain” the Gospel, but to present the Gospel in such a way that they are “won.” This requires the use of aspects of the culture of those we intend to win for Christ. Cultural aspects which must be considered include language, art, history, pre-existing religious and philosophical views, social and economic structures, as well as many more.

When Christian missionaries came from the Mediterranean world to the north and west of Europe with their Hebrew based religion, Greek based philosophical approaches and Latin language, they had to address a wide range of cultural issues. The runes were part of that culture and the Christians use and adaptation runes engaged the culture in the cultural areas of language, art, and history.

In today’s First Half, we will discuss the evidence we have regarding runes, the history of the Christian interaction with runes, including linguistic and artistic expression, how the uses of runes provide us with evidence of Christian impacts to European culture and how the history of the use of runes has itself impacted the interaction of Christianity with later cultural developments in Europe and North America.

This will necessarily require some discussions of the way runes are described and studied (which are themselves cultural artifacts). Hopefully this is at least a bit engaging. We will discuss the range of purposes for which runes were used over the previous 2000 years. We will look at a variety of artifacts which represent the Christian uses of runes, including examples such as:

The Franks Casket, which includes text in both runes and Roman letters with imagery from Jewish history, the visitation of the Magi and Northern European folklore,

The Ruthwell Cross, with text from the “Dream of the Rood” in runes,

The Jelling Stone with its announcement that King Harald “Made the Danes Christian,” and

The writings of J.R.R. Tolkien, which helped secular people believe in the transcendent.

We will also consider the historic uses of runes for purely secular purposes, and, sadly, for superstitious, nationalistic, and racist purposes.

