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When we set out to consider how names are used
in literature, one technique that can be applied is
to break the name down into components, and analyze
the meanings that the components have in other languages,
thereby producing a sort of composite of the character
to whom the name is assigned. However, there is a deeper
structure available to the onomastic analyst than the
morpheme. Here, I will suggest that in the cases of
certain alphabetic systems, those sufficiently old to
have not yet lost their attached mnemonic devices, such
as Babylonian, certain Semitic languages, and Runic,
words and names can be analyzed through these mnemonic
devices. It is the latter system, Runic, that will
now be explored.

Analysis of names through letter values is hardly
a new idea. Those interested in the occult or mystical
studies are familiar with at least two such methods:
acrophonology and numerology. In the latter case, letters
are replaced with numbers, and through a series of calculations,
a composite number is found that is said to define the
person's character type. The former practice, acrophon-
ology, replaces letters with zodiacal signs, and through

traditional astrological interpretation, the name is analyzed. The method that I am suggesting is to replace letters with their original equivalents, and then to analyze the name using the mystical meanings assigned to them by the original users of the alphabet. In this case, for purpose of illustration, the names in Beowulf will be transliterated into Runic glyphs, and then to complete the task, the mystical reading of the names will be given, applying the individual runes to the character's nature.

Runes were the alphabetic system used by the people of medieval Scandinavia. Norse mythology tells us that the Runes were discovered by the god Odin as he hung from the Yggdrasil, the tree that supports the earth.[1] According to the Poetic Edda, once Odin had found the Runes, he was released from bondage, and in the words of the Poetic Edda:

> Well being I won
>
> And wisdom too.
>
> I grew and took joy in my growth:
>
> From a word to a word
>
> I was led to a word.[2]

So the Runic glyphs not only originated at the base of the earth, but also were viewed as the route to freedom and wisdom.

In terms of historical origin, the runes were pro-
bably the work of one person attempting to devise a
form of written language for his people, much as the
Bishop Wulfila would do with Gothic in the Fourth
century.[3] But runes are probably older than Gothic,
since runes were actually used as part of the basis
of Gothic, and incorporated into it.[4] The Goths had
runes long before Wulfila, and since Beowulf is the
work at hand, it is not inappropriate to mention that
the people whom we know as the Goths, and those whom
we know as the Geats, were probably the same people;
the name change possibly the result of a rune whose
phonemic value changed from /i/ in Old English, to
/au/ in Middle and Modern English.[5]

The term "runes" comes from the Low German raunen
which means "to cut."[6] The word later went into Gothic
as runa meaning "mystery." But one thing that we can
be almost certain of is that the runes were not at all
mysterious to the people who inhabited Scandinavia and
the British Isles. Runes was an alphabetic system of
the people, not just of the learned scribes and holy
men; a divining tool usable by all.[7] This is where the
mystery comes in. for Runes were not designed for pri-
marily literary purposes. Tacitus tells us. in his
Germania, of their common use and familiarity, reporting
that rune cuttings (from hewn tree limbs) were often
impromptu, done by anyone who required them. He also

tells us that most males eventually learned to divine
using runes, for it became their duty as head of a house-
hold.[8] Runes came to serve the same function that
the Tarot did in Southern and Eastern Europe, and that
the I Ching did in the Orient. Runes also provided
a means for making charms for the users, in the forms
of inscriptions on seals, cups, weapons, and other com-
mon articles.

The word "runes" also has another meaning, the
name given to council meetings and secret gatherings.
The Wanderer attests to this use of the term in Old
English:

> Swa cwaerd snotter onmode, gesaet un
> sunder aet rune,

and it will be remembered that in Beowulf, Aeschere
was Hrothgar's "runvita." [9]

It is probable that the alphabetic use of runes was
known to Old English scribes, since the runes $\mathcal{E}$ and P
became part of the early English alphabet.[10] It is
equally probable that the mystical use was also well
known. After the Anglo-Saxon occupation of Britain,
it is assumed that the Druids adapted the Runes to their
own purposes. When Britain was later Christianized
by St. Columba, the Druids were driven into seclusion
on the islands of Iona and Anglessey. Later, these
same islands would also be Christianized.[11] and the
Druids, the only aboriginal occupants, would become

the scribes.

Of course, the Old Religion must not have just died away, for even today we see remnants in such activities as may-poles, and also, no new religion has ever completely wiped out all traces and aspects of an existing one. Part of that which survived was something that had already been partially adopted into English culture, through its script: the Runes. So, what we had were Christian scribes (former Druids), one of whom might have composed (set to writing) Beowulf in the midlands of England, which coincidentally lie very close to the island of Anglessey. [12]

There are twenty-eight Anglo-Saxon runes that were in use in the ninth century, when Beowulf was probably composed. The runes comprise the futhorc, the name given to the system and derived from the names of the first six runes: feoh, ur, thorn, os, rad, and cin. In addition to the phonemic values, there was also a mnemonic value given to each; a word or concept that the rune represented. It is likely, however, that these values were something more than merely mnemonic, for each was given a name that embodied some ideal of the [13] Anglo-Saxon mythos.

The rune poem is the body of mnemonic definitions,
and the source from which I have drawn the mystical
meaning of each rune. Here is the Anglo-Saxon rune
poem:

   ᚠ feoh Wealth is a comfort to all men.
              Yet everyone must give it away freely
              If he wants to gain glory
              In the Lord's sight.

   ᚢ ur   The aurochs, a very savage beast,
              Is fierce and has huge horns.
              A great roamer of the moorlands
              It fights with its horns.
              It is a courageous brute.

  ᚦ ðorn A thorn is extremely sharp.
              Grabbing hold of it is painful to any warrior,
              Uncommonly severe to anyone
              Who lies among them.

   ᚩ os   The origin of all speech,
              The prop of wisdom and the comfort of the wise,
              And a joy and consolation to every man.

   ᚱ rad   In the hall rad is pleasant for every warrior,
              And energetic for the man
              Who sits on the back of a powerful horse
              Covering the mile-long roads.

   ᚳ cen   Cen is known to all living beings by its flame
              Pale and bright.
              Most often it burns
              Where princes are staying.

  ᚷ gyfu Men's generosity is a grace and an honor,
              A support and a glory,
              And a help and sustenance
              To any outcast who is deprived of them.

ᚹ   wynn   Joyful is the man who knows no miseries,
                  Affliction or sorrow,
                  And who has prosperity and happiness,
                  And the wealth of great towns.

ᚻ   haegl   Hail is the whitest of grains.
                  It swirls from the heights of heaven,
                  And gusts of wind toss it about.
                  Then it turns to water.

ᚾ   nyd   Affliction constricts the heart,
                  But it often serves as a help
                  And salvation to the sons of men,
                  If they attend to it in time.

ᛁ   is   Ice is very cold, extremely slippery.
                  A floor fair to the sight,
                  Made by the frost,
                  Glitters like jewels, clear as glass.

ᛃ   ger   A year of good harvest is a joy to men.
                  When God, holy king of heaven,
                  makes the earth give forth
                  Bright fruits for rich and poor.

ᛇ   eoh   A tree with rough bark,
                  Hardy and firm in the earth,
                  Supported by its roots, the guardian of flame,
                  And a pleasure upon an estate.

ᛈ   peorð |Peorth is a continual source of amusement
                  And laughter for the great
                  . . .
                  Where warriors sit together in the beer hall.]

ᛉ   eolhx   Sedge grass which usually lives in a fen,
                  Growing in the water.
                  It wounds severely, staining with blood
                  Any man who makes a grab of it.

ᛋ   sigel   The sun is a continual joy to seamen,
                  When they take the sea=steed
                  Over the fish's bath
                  Until it brings them to land.

↑ tir Tir is one of the guiding marks.
It keeps its faith well with princes.
Above night's clouds it is always on its path
And never fails.

ᛒ beorc Beorc has no fruit, yet without seeds
It produces shoots. It is glorious
In its branches, tall in its crown, fairly adorned,
Heavy with leaves, reaching to the sky.

ᛖ eh The horse, the charger proud on its hoofs,
Is the prince's delight in the presence of warriors,
When rich men on horseback discuss its points.
For the restless it is always a source of re-
                                        laxation.

ᛗ man In his mirth man is dear to his kinsman.
Yet each is bound to fail his fellow
Because the Lord, by his decree,
Wishes to commit the wretched body to the earth.

ᛚ lagu Water seems interminable to men
If they have to venture on the rolling ship,
And the sea-waves scare them out of their wits,
And the surf-horse does not respond to its bridle.

ᛝ Ing Ing was the first seen by men among the East-
                                        Danes,
Until he travelled east° across the wave.
His chariot followed on.
His is what the Heardins called the hero.

ᛞ daeg The day, dear to men, is the Lord's gift,
The Creator's glorious light.
It is a joy and solace to rich and poor,
And useful to everyone.

ᛟ eðel The ancestral home is dear to every man,
If in his house there he can enjoy
What is right and decent
In continual prosperity.

° Also "back." The word <u>est</u> can be read as either
east (<u>est</u>), or back (<u>eft</u>). Scholars differ on this point.

ᛢ ac The oak feeds the pig for meat for the sons
                                                of men.
          It often journeys over gannet's bath.
          The ocean tests whether
          The oak keeps honorable faith.

ᚠ aesc The ash, precious to men,
          Is very tall.
          Firm on its base, it keeps its place securely
          Though many men attack it.

ᚾ yr Yr is a piece of war gear,
          It is a pleasure and adornment to
          All princes and warriors, fine on a horse
          And firm on a journey.

ᛦ ear Ear is hateful to everyman, when the flesh,
          The pallid body, begins inexorably to grow cold,
          To choose the earth as its consort.
          Prosperity fades, joys pass away, covenants
                                                lapse.[14]

Using the mystical values, we may now pass to a

consideration of the names. According to students of

runology, such inquiries into the fates of men, or inter-

pretation for metaphysical understanding, is done by

reading the runes from right to left.[15] This is probably

to separate the use of runes for ritual purposes from

their use as an alphabetic system. Hence, the name

"Beowulf," for interpretive purposes, would be read

from 'f' to 'B.'

To begin this study, let us consider a word from

Old English for which the meaning is known: wergild,

the payment exacted by a bereaved person from the offender,

both to satisfy the family of the dead man, and to restore

honor to the killer. Wergild has the roots "man" (wer) and "money" (gild). The seven runes that spell the word are: P (wynn), the rune of joy; $\times$ (eþel), the rune of ancestry; R (rad), the rune of journey; $\times$ (gyfu), the rune of giving; $|$ (is), the rune of stand-still or ice; $\wedge$ (lagu), the rune of water; and H (daig), the rune of day.[16] Reading from right to left, we see the events that made up a wergild.

First, the rune of day had the connotation of a gift from god; another day of life, and therefore, life. Following is the rune of water, which the rune poem defines as a sort of transition, in this case from life. Following this is standstill, ice, the period wherein the offender is dissociated from his people, for fear that his sins will be visited upon them. The rune of ice represents the powerlessness that precedes rebirth, in this case granted in the second half of the word.

Gyfu, the rune of giving, which the rune poem refers to as a "help and sustenance to an outcast," tells us what must be done in order to remedy the situation, and the rune of riding that follows tells us of what must have been a difficult journey to complete, the delivery of the wergild. The last two runes, "eþel" and "wynn," the ancestral home and joy, tell of the

decency that is restored to the home and to the family
of the offender by the <u>wergild</u>. It will be remembered
that it was in this way that Beowulf's father was restored
to an honorable position. As can be seen, then, the
runic transliteration approach to understanding does
not fall very far short of accurate definition, if not
a more thorough explication. Now, on to the names.

For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen five
names from <u>Beowulf</u>: two pairs that are compared in the
poem, and Grendel. The name 'Beowulf' is composed of
the runes beorc (ᛒ), the rune of the birch tree, a symbol
of fertility; eh (ᛗ), the horse, associated with the
course of the sun; os (ᚩ). the rivermouth, a source
of divine utterance; wynn (ᚹ), the rune of joy; ur (ᚢ)
rune of manly strength; lagu (ᛚ), rune of fertility
and transition; and feoh (ᚠ), rune of possessions and
wealth.

Reading from right to left, we find Beowulf's life
painted. We know that he was, during his early life,
a lazy and worthless young man. Through his first act
of bravery, the contest with Breca, Beowulf sacrificed
his earthly possessions as the rune poem dictates (ᚠ)
and undergoes a test of water, thus being cleansed
and reborn (ᛚ). His later trials also involve water,
first in crossing to challenge Grendel, and later actually
in water to slay Grendel's dam. The rune of strength,
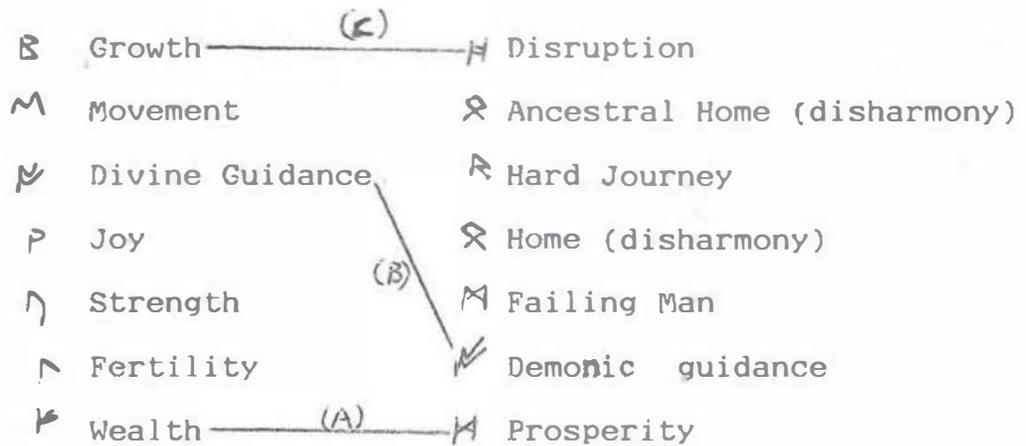representing the aurochs, a beast with huge horns, describes

Beowulf's fighting technique, for, like the aurochs,
Beowulf prefers to fight with only his natural resources,
as he did with the sea beasts and Grendel.

After his return to Geatland and Hygelac's defeat,
the rune of joy governs Beowulf's life, allowing him
to boast at the last that during his reign he had warred
on no man. The rune of the rivermouth now provides,
as the rune poem states, comfort to all. It also allies
Beowulf with Odin, through the Norwegian reading of
os as ass, which was the rune of Odin. This is of course
consistent with the Old English rune poem 's reading
of os, since the rivermouth there is given as the source
of divine utterance. and Odin is thought to have been
the greatest of all gods.[17] The rune of the horse, bringer
of the day, emphasizes the pleasure of his reign, analo-
 gized with the joy experienced at each new daybreak..
His last trial is by fire, an element for which he has
no rune, but his final rune of the birch provides that
Beowulf will have a successor, even though he has no
known descendants. Wiglaf follows Beowulf, arising
even as the fruit of the birch tree, without the seed
of the parent tree.

In the poem, Hygelac counsels Beowulf not to become

like Heremod, and so offers a contrast to Beowulf's

character. 'Here-mod' means 'battle-heart,' as compared

with 'Beo-wulf,' meaning 'bee-wolf' (or like a wolf)

or 'bear.' The seven runes in 'Heremod' show a man

of prosperity and fruitfulness (daig, ᚻ), but who was

corrupted, as Loki (using the heathen rendering of os, ᚩ

as the god Loki, or Satan, in Christian mythology) toward

man (man, ᛗ), as the rune poem says is inevitable, since

one man will always fail another. His ancestral home

rune (eᴓel, ᛉ) has the opposite meaning of Beowulf's,

for what is decent and right is not enjoyed in his home,

as the rune poem defines ᛉ, We will later see again

that runes are not predestinations, but rather two-edged

swords that can turn on those who possess them. Heremod's

journey rune (rad, ᚱ) is a difficult one, one spent on

the road, for he became the most hated of men, and his

second rune of ancestral home emphasizes the disharmony

present in his life. His final rune of hail (haig, ᚺ)

points up his destructive nature, and also that like

hail, Heremod's reign was short, and melted away leaving

little trace (as history is rendered by the scop in

line 1751).[18]

Heremod is Beowulf's perfect anti-type as can be

seen in a side-by-side comparison of the transliterations:

ᛒ Growth ————————(C)————————ᚺ Disruption

ᛗ Movement   ᛉ Ancestral Home (disharmony)

ᚼ Divine Guidance   ᚱ Hard Journey

ᛈ Joy   ᛉ Home (disharmony)

(B)

ᚾ Strength   ᛗ Failing Man

ᚦ Fertility   ᚥ Demonic guidance

ᚠ Wealth ————(A)————ᚺ Prosperity

Note that both begin with runes of prosperity (A) and
contain runes of godly influence (B), but each comes
to a different end (C). Note also that the guidance
comes from different sources.

Grendel presents a somewhat troublesome name to
analyze. The seven runes are those of water ᚠ, ancestral
home ᛉ, day ᚻ, constraint ᛏ, ancestral home ᚱ, journey ᚱ,
and giving ᚷ. What we find is fertility, something
dear when right and decent, a gift of the Lord to be
useful to all, a salvation if attended to, something
difficult on the road but pleasant on the hearth, and
sustenance to an outcast. Most of these sound positive,
but as suggested above, runes cut with both edges, present-
ing conditions that must be fulfilled in order to realize
the positive.

The water is probably the mere, that which spawned
Grendel, and his home cannot be enjoyed, for what is

within is neither right nor decent.   Grendel cannot
be a salvation for he is an outcast and therefore not
properly attended to.   Once attended by Beowulf, however,
men are saved.

As for the journey rune (ᚱ), it cannot be said
that Grendel's journey is an easy one, but here the
poet might have been flexing a witticism akin to when
he named Gren-del as "hall-guard."[19] The pun could
be on the "easy at home" notion of the rune poem, for
Grendel also makes the home hearth a less pleasant place,
as reflected in the previous rune of ancestral home.
The second ᛇ refers then not to Grendel's abode,
but to Heorot.

To continue the examples of the use of the trans-
literation approach, we find that Hygde, Hygelac's
queen, has a name that, in addition to its literal
meaning of "thought,"[20] comes to mean a place which
is dear because it is right and decent (ᛇ), grace,
honor and sustenance (�); a gift from god and a solace
(ᚺ); and an adornment of princes (ᚼ), but a decidedly
destructive one, one that would not allow Hygelac and
Heardred to go off on an unwise campaign that would
end their lives (ᚻ).

Hygde is contrasted by the poet with another queen

whose name was Modthrytho, which has the element of
Loki (ᚾ), giants and demons (ᚦ), an adornment of
princes (ᛝ), a hard journey (ᚱ), demons reiterated
(ᚦ), joy and solace (ᚹ, which we are told she falsely
provided), Loki reiterated (ᚾ), and man (ᛗ), again
with the tendency to fail others. Note again that
common runes are present: adornment of princes, and
of the day; joy and solace. Both Modthrytho and Hygde
have these elements which one might assume made them
good queens and consorts, but Modthrytho chose to use
hers to gain control to attain her goals.

Although I have limited this consideration to
five names, suffice it to say that this system provides
similar results when applied to the other names in
the poem. This analysis by phoneme seems also, and
I take this on faith from those who have studied more
intensively, to work with other alphabetic systems,
employing their underlying mysticism. There might
be those who would criticize this method as too unscien-
tific a method of literary or philological analysis,
but it does tend to shed a new light on old names,
perhaps the very light that the writers of old wanted
to reveal, and the same light seen by their readers,
and heard by the listeners of the bards. It tends
to contribute to how we understand the literature of
the practitioners of the old ways.

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NOTES

[1] Hilda Radzin,"Names in the Mythological Lay Volupsá," Literary Onomastic Studies, XI:93-97, 1984.

[2] Ralph Blum, The Book of Runes (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1932), p. 11.

[3] Ibid., p.12.

[4] Ralph W.V. Elliot, Runes: An Introduction (Manchester, Eng.: Manchester University Press, 1959), p. 45.

[5] R.I. Page, An Introduction to English Runes (London: Methuen, 1973), p. 85.

[6] Lewis Spence, An Encylcopedia of Occultism (New York: University Books, Inc., 1960), s.v. "Teutons."

[7] Blum, p. 24.

[8] Blum, p. 27(discussing Tacitus, Germania X).

[9] Beowulf, 1. 1325.

[10] Elliot, p.45.

[11] Bulfinch's Mythology (New York:Avenel Books, 1979), p. 362.

[12] *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, M.H. Abrams, ed. (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1979), v. 1: 25.

[13] Page, p. 75.

[14] *Ibid.*, pp. 73-85.

[15] Blum, p. 31.

[16] The transliteration method employed here was set out by Bruce Dickens in "A System of Transliteration for Old English Runic Inscriptions," *Leeds Studies in English*, v. 1, 1932.

[17] Radzin, p. 95.

[18] The text of the poem is a compilation from the *Nowell Codex* (Copenhagen, Baltimore and London: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1963), *The Thorkelin Transcripts* (Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1951); and Julius Zupitza, *Beowulf* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959), printed in Howell D. Chickering, Jr., *Beowulf: A Dual-Language Edition* (New York: Anchor Press, Doubleday, 1977).

[19] Chickering, pp. 6-7.

[20] *Ibid.*