

How to Do Things with Runes: A Semiotic Approach to Operative Communication

In Memoriam Edgar Polomé

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Introduction

The label “magic” is of dubious value. As a category of thought used as an aid in unraveling the mysteries surrounding the runes, the term “magic” has sometimes proved counterproductive. Whether we refer to earlier supporters of the idea of rune-magic, such as Magnus Olsen or Wolfgang Krause,¹ or to critics of the idea, such as Anders Bæksted (1952) or Elmer Antonsen (1980), the true nature of the subjective behavior and beliefs reflected by many runic inscriptions has too often gone unrecognized and unappreciated. Even earlier academic enthusiasts for rune-magic hardly took into account any contemporary scholarly – anthropological or ethnological – theories concerning what has been commonly called “magic”. This was the gap I attempted to fill with my 1986 book, *Runes and Magic*. Additionally, over the last fifteen years theories concerning what we may heuristically call “magic” continued to mature toward a semiotic approach to *performative or operative acts*.² In those same years a number of significant advances in the study of runes and magic were offered, most notably

- 1 Olsen’s 1916 essay “Om Trolldrner” presented an influential argument for the idea of rune-magic, while the works of Wolfgang Krause also regularly presented arguments for rune-magical interpretations. Krause’s 1966 edition of the older runic inscriptions conveniently summarizes these arguments.
- 2 The concept of performative speech acts was persuasively articulated by J.L. Austin (1962), the use of the term “operative” is derived from John Skorupski’s 1976 work *Symbol and Theory*.

by Klaus Düwel, Karl Martin Nielsen and Günter Müller.³ Here I will present some of the newer solutions to the problem of runes and their relationship to “magic”, as well as ask some questions which still elude any solution. One thing that has become abundantly clear is that the problem of runes and magic must be redefined in terms of *operative communication* or *practical theology*;⁴ and placed in the more general context of religious or spiritual ideas of the world in which the inscriptions were executed.

Runic Hermeneutics

Many of the problems connected with our topic are hermeneutic in character. It has been said that not a single older runic inscription can definitely be called “magical”. This opinion is usually offered by those who perhaps see themselves as “skeptical runologists”.⁵ Of course, this statement could just as easily be reversed to indicate that no one can definitively prove that all of them are not “magical”, i.e. concrete representations of performative speech acts the intent of which was to effect inter-reality communication or discourse. In this type of communication symbolic acts are often responded to in phenomenological ways. One of the most vivid representations of this process in Old Norse literature is found in *Egils Saga* (ch. 44), where Egill performs a complex, yet compact, symbolic act of carving and coloring runes on a drinking horn (a symbolic concretized speech act) to which the phenomenological world responds by bursting

3 Klaus Düwel (1988, 1992, 1997a, 1997b) has, along with Günter Müller (1988), made significant advances in understanding the runic tradition in the context of a semiotic theory of communication and in the larger cultural context of magical traditions within societies adjacent to the Germanic peoples contemporaneous with the older runic inscriptions. Karl Martin Nielsen (1985) made an exemplary survey of the whole topic of runes and magic just prior to the publication of my book *Runes and Magic* (1986).

4 The concept of practical theology as a more accurate definition of what has traditionally been called “magic” is discussed by Te Velde (1969–70).

5 See R.I. Page’s (1999: 12–14) now famous discussion of the idea of imaginative and skeptical runologists.

the horn apart revealing the information that poison had been placed in the drink.⁶

In order to understand how our ancestors thought of the runes, and did things with them, we must develop some sense of their traditional worldview – and indeed have a good deal of empathy with it. This empathy with, or insight into, the individual or culture which created a communicative act in order for the reader or receiver to be able to understand the communication is a long-standing and fundamental principle of hermeneutics – or the art of interpretation.⁷ If modern men and women reject as “illogical” or “fantastic” elements of traditional cultures past or present which they do not find to their tastes, it is unlikely they will be able to interpret or understand those elements with any accuracy. To a certain extent what is called for is a spiritual or cultural version of what is being carried out elsewhere in the field of experimental archeology. Such an approach necessitates neither skepticism, which tends to deny our ability to know anything really worth knowing, nor imagination, which connotes the tendency to see things that are not there at all. What seems to be called for is a radical runology – a synthesis of approaches drawn from a spectrum of disciplines all within the context of a semiotic model of communication.

In this context a variety of questions arise. Among these are: Were the runes a feature of the religious culture of the Germanic peoples from the time of their origin, or were these associations grafted in only later, and if so when and how? Who were the main (original and subsequent) bearers of the runic tradition? When discussing the topic of runes and “magic” what should our definition or theory of “magic” be? Which of the runic inscriptions can be characterized as being “magical” or “religious” (i.e. operative)? How are such inscriptions to be interpreted in accordance with the general definition of operative speech acts? Finally, and most importantly, what did the creators of these inscriptions believe

6 Literary evidence from medieval Iceland should only be used with caution and with further corroborating evidence when trying to understand the practices of several centuries earlier. However, Egill’s ritual techniques seem to be backed up by evidence internal to the runic inscriptions and by comparison with other consistent presentations in literature, see Flowers (1986: 144ff.).

7 For a review of this basic idea in hermeneutics and its subsequent development, see Connolly & Keutner (1988).

about who they themselves were, and how did they conceive of the world around them – cosmologically, theologically and culturally. I myself am somewhat skeptical about being able to answer all of these questions definitively. However, by broadening our view and taking into account the theories of our colleagues in ethnology, or anthropology, and by judiciously applying comparative evidence, some previously closed doors might be opened.

Tentative answers can be offered on many of these questions, while others can be answered more conclusively. Later literary evidence, as well as etymology, tends to support the idea that the runes were a feature developed and maintained by an inter-tribal network relatively more concerned with matters of what might be called myth and religion, rather than commerce and law, for example. The rune-names, attested from the 9th to 15th centuries may be counted here.⁸ Moreover, Eddic references to runes almost exclusively place a halo of mystery around them. This feature appears to be confirmed by earlier inscriptions, e.g. the explicit reference to a rune being **raginaku(n)do**: ‘derived from the gods’ (Noleby, KJ 67). Other convincing evidence that the PGmc. root **rīn-* connotes “mystery” is provided by the many derivatives of the word in Old Norse which have nothing to do with “writing” or “carving”, e.g. (with ablaut) → *raun*: ‘trial; experience’, (with i-umlaut) → *reyna*: ‘to try, prove; experience’, and (with i-umlaut) *rýna*: ‘to investigate’. These examples could be expanded further. Additionally, the parallel uses of the word in Old Irish must be brought to bear: *rúine* or *rún*: ‘abstract mystery’; *rúinech*: ‘mysterious’; *rúid*: ‘a confidant’; *rúnda*: ‘mystical, figurative’; *rundiamair*: ‘hidden, mysterious’. The fact that in Germanic the etymon is more active, with more variations and nuances, appears to provide some evidence that the word is at least as indigenous to the Germanic world as to that of the Celts.

Current anthropological theories provide yet another reason to suspect that the runes were involved with sorcery, or operative behavior, from the beginning. It has been noted⁹ that populations on the periphery of significantly more powerful cultures, e.g. Africans in the New World, or Jews in medieval ghettos, develop what might be called more sorcerized features. This is understandable

8 Polomé (1991) provides a convenient review of the evidence for the rune-names.

9 This was perhaps first discussed in a strict anthropological framework by Lewis (1971).

in human terms as the relatively powerless attempt to balance the scales of power by symbolic or operative means. Clearly the Germanic peoples found themselves in that kind of relationship with the Roman Empire, which also became the source for at least some of the symbolic and iconographic signs with which the Germanic peoples could effect a balance of spiritual power.

Ultimately, however, our evidence is not nearly old enough to prove conclusively that the mythic qualities surrounding the runes are not later accretions grafted into the system even hundreds of years after the runes were first used.

Semiotic Theory of Performative Acts

The remainder of our questions is best addressed in the context of a theory of performative acts and in the discussion of the practical application of the theory to a specific inscription. In the main it can be said that the academic researchers who specialize in the theory of what is commonly called “magic” have made no appreciable breakthroughs over the last fifteen years. The semiotic theory of this aspect of human life has only been deepened and made more applicable to archaic evidence, notably by Classicists and Egyptologists.¹⁰ The significant work by Klaus Düwel (1988) and Günter Müller (1988) in bringing the evidence of the older runic inscriptions into a common theoretical orbit with that of the contemporaneous Greek magical papyri is also to be commended.

The whole topic of “magic” must be redefined in a larger theoretical context. Historically, “magic” has come to denote operative acts of which one disapproves. While the study of socially acceptable and unacceptable, legal and illegal, forms of operative communication is interesting and essential to a complete understanding of culture – ancient or modern – this is secondary to the purpose of this paper. “Magic”, “religion”, “cult”, and other such apparent categories must be understood as parts of a greater semiotic whole.

10 The work of John Gager (1992) in analyzing the lead tablets of the classical world is most useful in comparing that material to the runic evidence, while the more theoretical work of Te Velde (1969–70) and Ritner (1993), although focused on the more remote Egyptian culture, nevertheless provides useful insights into the theory of “magic”.

An operative act is one by which meaningful and real communication is effected between a sender and a receiver in a relationship in which the original sender is ordinarily relatively powerless. Extraordinary effects can be caused by such communication. Through operations of what has been called “practical theology” (Te Velde 1969–70) communication takes place between members of this world and a supersensible realm. It is worth remembering that the runes were thought to be derived from the divine realm.¹¹ As in the case of any type of communication the form in which the information is encoded must be clearly intelligible to the receiver. This is the functional importance of the idea that the runes are “derived from the gods.”

There are various types of aims for communications of this kind. Continuity in the natural or cosmic order, usually in harmony with a higher paradigm, is one common type. This is often what can comfortably be called “religion”. But other types include changes in the natural order – which can be effected in accordance with some greater paradigm (such as a god) or in accordance with the individual will of the operator. Understandably, this last kind most often runs the risk of arousing the disapproval of society as a whole because it can be carried out against the interests of the collective whole. In this regard it is no different from ordinary acts of individuals. They may be commendable, or even heroic, but they also have the potential of being criminal.

As regards formulaic methods of effecting these types of communication, Christopher Faraone (1991: 5), in commenting on early Greek “bindingspells”, identifies four basic modes of operation:

1. *Direct formulas*, employ a first-person singular verb that acts directly. (“I bind NN.”).
2. *Prayer formulas*, invoke and urge gods or daemons in a second-person imperative to perform the act. (“Bind NN!”)

11 The previously cited runic evidence from the Noleby stone which refers to the rune(s) as being *raginakundo*, can also be seen in the light of the later mythic evidence which describes how the god Óðinn received the runes. See, for example, the *Hávamál* stanzas 138–145. Human rune-masters could have conceived of the runes being of divine origin in that a god might have been seen as an agent or conduit for the transmission of their knowledge to humans.

3. *Wish formulas*, in which the target is the subject of a third person optative. (“May NN be bound!”)
4. *Similia similibus formulas*, which employ a persuasive analogy. (“As this corpse is cold and lifeless, in the same way may NN become cold and lifeless.”)

It is noteworthy when comparing the Greek to the Germanic material that the earliest Greek examples tend to be simple, and become progressively more complex and theistic as time goes on. The earliest examples simply have the name of the target inscribed on a lead tablet which might then be buried in a pre-existing grave, or dropped down a well shaft (Gager 1992: 18–21). In either case, it is sent to a necrotic or chthonic realm as a completion of the communicative act. In the Greek material prayer formulas are extremely prevalent, whereas in the Germanic material prayer formulas are almost non-existent.¹² Instead, the direct first-person formula predominates in the Germanic corpus.

All of these types of formulas constitute different forms of discourse¹³ between the operator and the universe – directly, or indirectly through deities or other supersensible entities. In these forms of discourse, the power to perform the critical act may be centered in the performer (demonstrated by the direct, anthropocentric, first-person formula) or centered outside the performer in the cosmos, or some potent entity (demonstrated by the indirect, cosmocentric, formulas).

What has usually been defined as “magic” has therefore been redefined in a more refined and precise sense as performative speech acts which effect inter-reality communication. This can also be called “practical theology”. Once the basic concept of practical theology has been grasped and viewed in the context of contemporary cultures it still requires application to specific examples of runic artifacts in order to see whether these can thus be made to yield more of their secrets.

12 Conspicuous examples of technical prayer formulas in the younger runic tradition are provided by the famous Þórr-inscriptions: **Pur uiki þasi runar** (e.g. DR 209, cf. DR 220 & DR 110) and the Canterbury charm (DR 419).

13 For the general theory of a discourse-centered approach to culture and religious ritual, see Urban (1991).

Application of the Theory Lindholm “Amulet” (DR 261/KJ 29)

Theoretical generalities must be demonstrated against specific examples. Here I will apply the theory of performative communication, or, practical theology, to the Lindholm “amulet.”¹⁴ This object has been much discussed in the context of “rune-magic”.¹⁵ It is a piece of animal bone carved to resemble a rib-like shape and provided with zoomorphic features.¹⁶ The shape is not unlike other amuletic objects found in various cultures and among other runic inscriptions. The object had apparently been deposited in a moor sometime around 500 CE. It was accidentally cut in half when it was discovered in 1840 in the course of cutting peat from the bog. This damaged one of the runes to such an extent that it can no longer be read. Besides this unfortunate accidental problem the only peculiarity of the forms of the runic characters is that they are all made with three (and in one place four) parallel lines. This is a multiple-stroke graphic tradition shared by the Kragehul inscriptions (KJ 27; 28) which date from the same time as the Lindholm bone.

The runes read:

A: **ekerilarsawilagarhateka:**

B: **aaaaaaaaarrrnnn-bmuttt:alu:**

Line A has been variously interpreted as *ek erilar Sawilagar ha(i)teka* (“I, ‘the eril’ am called PN”) (cf. Antonsen 1975: 37) and *ek erilar sa wilagar ha(i)teka* variously translated as either (“I ‘the eril’ here am called the crafty [Listig] one”) (cf. Krause 1966: 70) or (“I ‘the eril’ am called the one who knows magic

14 Technically an amulet has a protective function, what is called in Greek a phylaktērion, or a safeguard against harm. It is not certain that this was the function of the Lindholm object, and therefore the word “amulet” must be qualified.

15 E.g. Olsen (1916), Linderholm (1918 *passim*), Sierke (1939: 98–99), Krause (1966: 69–72), Nielsen (1985), Flowers (1986: 265–266, 338–339 *et passim*).

16 The rib-like shape of the object reminds one of the practice of creating a *tilberi* from a human rib for the purposes of stealing milk from one’s neighbors as reported in Icelandic folk lore, see Árnason (1954–56: 453ff.).

[trolddomskyndige]”) (DR 1942: 317). I favor the latter interpretation for reasons which will become apparent. Line B obviously consists of a series of 21 runes which are not intended to be natural language concluded with the familiar formulaic word *alu*.¹⁷

In structural terms we have a first-person emphatic self-designation which consists of two parts: *ek erilar* plus a modifying, or further defining, *sa wīlagar haiteka*, followed by a complex runic formula, concluded with *alu*. There are therefore three distinct main parts, or phases, of the inscription – each marked with distinguishing signs, i.e. three points, two points and finally three points.

ek erilar sa wīlagar haiteka : aaaaaaaARRRRnnn-bmuttt: alu:

If we make use of Germanic evidence alone to interpret the performative aspects of this inscription, a fairly compelling picture emerges. When this is combined with comparative evidence from the contemporaneous Mediterranean world the situation is even further clarified.

The emphatic first-person singular pronominal self-designation *ek* + PN + PN + *haiteka* is familiar from other runic inscriptions¹⁸ and is a formula similar to that used by the god Óðinn to characterize himself under his many bynames in the “Grímnismál” (e.g. st. 46). The title *erilar* occurs so often as a self-designation for the rune-carver, or rune-master, that it is clear that the word denotes a runic performer with a special title (Flowers 1986: 199). Evidence presented subsequently will help support the etymology of *erilar* which connects it to PIE **er-* “to set in motion; rise up”.¹⁹ In any event it appears to be a word at home in the realm of archaic spirituality. The byname *wīlagar* is in line with what might be expected of such functional bynames found in other inscriptions such as *fārawīsa* (IK 98), *ūbar* (KJ 70), etc. The rune-master calls himself “crafty” or “tricky”, or “deceitful” because he is about to perform an act for which this characteristic of his constitution must be called up and focused. The fact that bynames, or *heiti*, of this sort are so common in relation to the god Óðinn can be seen as further evidence for that god’s patronage of the rune-

17 The functional importance of the formulaic word *alu* is undoubtedly connected with its etymology which links it to archaic magico-religious ideas, see Polomé (1954, 1996) and Flowers (1986: 243–247).

18 For a general discussion of this type of formula, see Flowers (1986: 188ff.).

19 See de Vries (1961: 290; 295) and Antonsen (1975: 36).

master's skill. *Víli*: 'very crafty one' is an *Óðinsheiti* which reminds us of *wīlagar*. *Víli* may be derived from PGmc. **wih-l-*, a term connected with sorcery and religion in Germanic. It is not unthinkable that *Wīlagar* actually refers to a god (**Wōðanaz?*) and only secondarily to the rune-master.

The runic formula which follows the rune-master formula is of a particular analytical type. It is non-sequential, i.e. it is not based on the fuþark order, and it can not be pronounced as inscribed. But it is not "gibberish" as it repeats characters in a somewhat predictable manner. Parallels can be drawn between this repetitive formula and passages in Norse literature. For example in the "Skírnismál" (st. 36) we find *Purs ríst ek þér / ok þrjá stafí* ("A purs-rune I carve for you / and three staves..."). There are even closer parallels with a passage from spell no. 46 of the 16th century *Galdrabók: Skriff desser staffer a kalfskind huit med blod þinum . . .og mæl, Rist æg þ(ier) Otte ausse, naudir Nije, þossa ðretten*, etc. ("Write these staves on white calfskin with your own blood...and say: I carve you eight *áss*-runes, nine *naud*-runes, thirteen *þurs*-runes...") (Lindqvist 1921: 72–73) and from Icelandic folk lore where we find an example of *kvennagaldur* which reads: *Risti ég þér ása átta, naudir nú, þussa þrettán* ("I carve you eight *áss*-runes, nine *naud*-runes, thirteen *þurs*-runes...") (Árnason 1954–56: I, 435). These latter two are most conspicuous for their affirmation of the practice of using eight **ansuz*-runes in operative contexts. Perhaps even more important are the numerous *-istil* inscriptions and literary attestations. The importance of these for understanding the Lindholm-formula lies in the structural similarity between them, i.e. repeated elements combined with unique isolated runes (Flowers 1986: 267). The *-istil* formula is found in at least seven younger inscriptions, the most important of which is perhaps the Gørlevstone (DR 239) where we see:

þmkiiissstttiilll

In this type of formula unique elements (**þmk**) are isolated and repeated elements analytically grouped together in repetitious clusters. The formula can be decoded to mean: *þistill*: 'thistle', *mistill*: 'mistletoe,' and *kistill*: 'little-box'(?). These words seem to have served an operative function similar to that of formu-

laic words such as *laukaR* or *alu* in the older period. It is tempting to speculate that the Lindholm-formula contains an encoded message of this kind – perhaps with three words or names ending in *-anaR*.

The most intriguing example of the *-istil* formula is contained in the *Bósa saga* (ch. 5) which in no uncertain terms indicates that the target of the curse must: “Ráða nú þessi nöfn, svá at rétt sé, elligar hríni allt þat á þér, sem ek hefi verst beðit...” (“Interpret these names correctly or else all my curses will affect you badly...”). So as reading runes can often be said to have a beneficial effect, not being able to read them could be equally detrimental. From an operative perspective therefore it is not altogether impossible to conclude that what we have in the Lindholm-formula is a riddle the very insoluble character of which ensures its efficacy.

The third and final part of the formula consists of the word *alu* which occurs well over a dozen times in the corpus of the older runic inscriptions in all sorts of contexts. The word clearly belongs to the technical operative vocabulary of the Germanic peoples and originally referred to an ecstatic mental state as transferred to a potent drink (*alu(b)*:- ‘ale’) used in religious rituals (Polomé 1996). The formulaic word seems best understood in the inscription as an operative utterance meant to infuse the inscription (or object) with power, and to separate it from the profane world – to render it sacrosanct.

If we were to stop here we would have a significant picture of how the runemaster who created the Lindholm “amulet” was able to do something with his runes. But comparative evidence from the Mediterranean world further clarifies the operative or performative aspects of the inscription. The Greek magical papyri²⁰ and “magical” inscriptions, gems, amulets and other objects from the Mediterranean region²¹ contain formulas which function in ways virtually identical to those of the runic inscriptions. The papyri mostly date from between the first and fifth centuries CE, while the other epigraphic material goes back as far as the middle of the first millennium BCE.

20 Most of the texts of the Greek magical papyri were edited by Preisendanz & Henrichs (1973–74) and were translated into English, with additional material and notes by Betz (1986).

21 The most important recent study of this material has been provided by John Gager (1992). Gager’s study is also noteworthy for its anthropological and semiotic approach.

The direct first-person performative verbal act, whereby the operator asserts the potency of his ego, is found in the Greek magical papyri in ways very reminiscent of the rune-master formulas. A few examples include:

PGM IV.1018: "I am the one who is from heaven."

PGM V.109: "I am Moses."

PGM XII.236: "I am SOUCHOS [who appears as] a crocodile...I am about to call on the hidden and ineffable name ..."

More explicit still are the formulas of mutual identity with a god (usually Hermes). In addressing the god Hermes, the magician in PGM VIII.49–50 says: "I am you and you are I, your name is mine and mine is yours. For I am your image". A similar formula is found in PGM XIII.795. These formulas appear to be reflections of an operative process technically known to the Egyptians as *phntr* 'to reach a god' or 'to employ the magical powers of a god', which is further compared to Gk. *systasis*: 'communication between a man and a god' (Ritner 1993: 214). This communication took place so that the operator, instead of asking a god to cause a miraculous event, could himself *employ the magical powers of a god*.

As regards the second and third parts of the Lindholm-formula, the comparative Mediterranean evidence is also useful to our understanding of how these work. This southern body of material contains seven different categories of non-standard forms of discourse (Gager 1992: 7–8):

1. palindromes;
2. *caractères*;
3. vowel series;
4. triangles, squares, "wings," and other geometric shapes made up of letters;
5. names ending in *-êl* and *-ôth*, clearly built on Jewish and Hebrew models;
6. *voces mysticae* – words not immediately recognizable as Greek, Hebrew, or any other language in common use at the time;

7. recurrent formulas (called *logoi* in PGM) consisting of several *voces mysticae*; these are often abbreviated recipes, for example, “the abc-formula”.

The runic corpus makes use of at least five of these seven categories. Two of these non-natural forms of discourse, the *voces mysticae* (also called *voces magicae*)²² and the recurrent *logoi* (also called *ephesia grammata*), are especially interesting to us. *Vox mystica* could be used to designate “all non-standard forms of discourse in spells and charms” (Gager 1992: 267). For example in the Mediterranean the many streams of vowel-formulas so prevalent in the Greek magical papyri or other repetitious formulas would qualify, while in the runic corpus such formulas as found on the Lindholm-amulet, the **suhurah:susi** of Noleby (KJ 67), and the **aadualia** of the Fyn I-C bracteate (IK 58) would be analogous. An *ephesion grammaton*, on the other hand, is more narrowly defined as one of a set of terms said to have been inscribed on the great statue of Artemis at Ephesus, i.e. *askion*, *kataskion*, *lix*, *tetrax*, *damnameneus* and *aision* (Gager 1992: 267). By extension this term can be applied in a technical sense to all set formulaic words (*logoi*). For example in the Mediterranean such terms as *iaô*, *ablanathanalba*, or *pakerbêth* could qualify in this category, while in the Germanic world such well-known formulas as *alu*, *laukar* or *salu* might qualify.

In the study of such formulas among Classicists and Egyptologists the idea that the *voces mysticae* are mere nonsense or gibberish has been once and for all rejected. By applying some of the same anthropological research as I used in *Runes and Magic* (1986),²³ Gager concludes that the *voces mysticae* are forms of precise communication with beings of a higher order than man. Furthermore he points out that “the use of unintelligible forms of speech...signaled the passage from the lower mundane realms to the sphere of true spiritual conver-

22 On the variation and relations between the terms and ideas *magica* and *mystica*, see on Betz (1991).

23 The most important studies for the anthropological approach to a semiotic theory of operative communication are provided by Austin (1962), Tambiah (1968, 1973), and van Baal (1971). The important concept of the “frame of reference” in which operative acts of communication (= “magic”) take place is also studied in a Norse context by Grambo (1975).

sation with higher orders of being” (Gager1992: 9–10). This idea corresponds perfectly with the communicative model whereby the speaker must conduct discourse in a code which the hearer will understand.

There are numerous ancient pagan and Christian accounts which show that this theory is not the creation of modern scholars. Clement of Alexandria (ca. 200 CE) wrote: “Plato assigns a special discourse to the gods and he reaches this conclusion from the experience of dreams and oracles but most of all from those possessed by *daimones*, for they do not speak their own language or discourse but rather the language of the *daimones* who possess them” (*Stromata* 1,43.1). Indeed many of the ancient ideas of how the alphabet and its *stoicheia*: ‘elements’ → ‘letters’ could be used for operative purposes seem to have been based upon the dialogues of Plato, especially the *Phaedrus* and *Cratylus*. The *stoicheia* were seen as phantoms of elemental reality, which could be organized and reorganized to influence phenomena. “It is this recognition of the creative and destructive functions of language, which weaves and unweaves meaning with every word, that is so well captured by the alphabetical language under consideration here. Using language against itself by breaking it down into its elemental parts and then reconfiguring those parts into endless permutations and combinations, the magical prayers constitute an iconoclastic piety” (Miller 1986: 487). Evidence seems to indicate that the Germanic rune-masters, and more especially the self-designated Erulians, were concerned with the same problems of language and symbolism as were the Mediterranean creators of lead tablets, amulets, phylacteries and magical papyri. Whether we are witnessing the result of cultural diffusion or parallel development is a matter best left to another study.²⁴

Clearly the Lindholm-formula seems to indicate a complex ritual process condensed into a series of 47 (or 48?) runes. The operator first asserts himself as one qualified to perform the operation and communicate at an effective level (*ek erilar*), then modifies or directs his being into a specific functional model

24 This same problem is raised by Düwel (1997a: 36). I would venture to say that both diffusion and parallelism are at work, and only with further meticulous structural and contextual studies of both the runic corpus and the corpus of other magical artifacts and texts from adjacent cultures will any further answers be forthcoming.

(*sa wiṭagar haiteka*:). He can now operate within the crafty skill of a god. There follows the analytical formula **aaaaaaarrrrrnnn-bmuttt**: which is the specific operation itself in a higher symbolic form of discourse known to the gods. The operation concludes with *alu*ᚿ, an ephesian grammaton which both seals the operation and empowers it with effective force. That the inscription was placed on an object resembling a fish or serpent and deposited in a bog would indicate that it was being “sent” to a place where the formula could best be “read” – and thus have its operative effect. This is how things are done with runes.

When certain people say specific things performative effects are obtained. By writing them, however, the same performatives are achieved in a more perfect and permanent way and hence are brought into greater resonance with the realm of the gods which is relatively more perfect and more permanent than our own. The symbolic significance of writing is much greater in semi-literate societies,²⁵ and so its operative effect will always be greater in such societies. A great deal remains to be clarified in this kind of study. But by the very nature of the objects being studied it is not likely that anyone will be able to reduce our understanding to clearly defined and rational terms or categories. But as for myself, I will continue to seek their mysteries.

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25 The importance that the very act of writing signifies in a society of limited or restricted literacy can not be overemphasized in the attempt to understand how the runes might have been perceived in the ages of the older and younger fuþarks, see Flowers (1986: 26–27).

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Semiotics refers to the explanation of mechanisms and functions of the text as well as visual communicators and gives us a chance of better understanding of the nature of the social processes. It studies how the signs produce meanings while presuming that such meanings depend on structural alignment of signs that comes into existence through the processes of signification.Â Jarmila DoubravovÃ; points out that visual semiotics has not been fully implemented as a semiotic movement yet [8]. Not only Umberto Eco or the Prague Linguistic Circle, but also filmmakers and film theorists dealt with it in the first half of 20th century.Â Several things are important for advertising. For. 213.