

HALIORUNNAS, HELRUNAN, AND LEÓÐRUNAN

As the oldest Gothic history recounts, an Ostrogothic king persecuted seeresses called *aliorunae*: “He discovered among his people several wisewomen [*magas mulieres*] who were called *haliorunnas* in the native language.”⁷¹ The spellings vary, but *haliorunnas* is conjectured to have been the original Gothic form. The word seems to derive from a proto-Germanic **haljo-rūnas*, in which *halja-* was equivalent to Old English *hell*, Old High German *hella*, Dutch and Icelandic *hel*, and to German *Hölle*: “underworld, realm of the dead.” All these descend from a Proto-Indo-European root **kel*, “to cover, conceal, save.”⁷² Thus the *aliorunae* were priestesses of “underworld mysteries”—of the ancestors.⁷³

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The name persisted in cultural memory. In the 12th century, Michael Scot called these women by the latinized form *Alarinas*, and he interposed another name: *Yriagas*.⁷⁴ Where did this word come from? It is intriguingly reminiscent of *Yrias* in the *Indiculus superstitionum et Paganiarum*, 24: “The pagan course, which they call *Yrias*, with torn clothing or shoes.”⁷⁵ Tearing garments is a classic custom of mourners, which accords well with the western Germanic sense of *hellerunes* as women who communed with the dead. Even later, Trithemius inscribed this provocative fragment: “Keen perception (or far-sightedness) through divination they called *Alyrunam*.”⁷⁶ That source dates to about 1500; yet his assessment aligns with the old meanings.

Jacob Grimm brought the heathen concepts of *Runa*, with their long historical trajectory, into wider notice: “I believe it meant in the first place what is spoken softly and solemnly, then secondly a mystery: *sympólion* is secret counsel.” Grimm traced the *rūna*-name back to one of its oldest attestations, the ancient witches of the Ostrogoths: “The wise woman of the ancient Germans is called *Aliruna*... and speaking words not understood of the common folk, has skill at once in writing and in magic; hers is the Gothic *runa*, hers the Anglo-Saxon *runecraft*.”⁷⁷

Centuries afterwards, linguistic counterparts of the *haliorunnas* are

attested in fragments of west Germanic lore recorded by early medieval scribes. Old German and Old English give variants—*helliruna*, *helrun*, *helrune*, *helrynegu*, and *hellraun*.⁷⁸ The *helruna* is related to Hel, Norse goddess of the underworld, and the German underworld (Hölle).

The standard definition of *helrūn* / *hellerūne* / *helrynegu* has been “sorceress, witch.”⁷⁹ But its etymology gives strong indications that the name was rooted in ecstatic ceremonies of ancestor veneration. One suggested definition is “one having knowledge of the secrets of the dead.”⁸⁰ Another translation is “one who knows the secrets of hell.”⁸¹ A third renders it as “those skilled in the mysteries of hell.”⁸² Another suggestion has been “hell-whisperer,” because of the murmuring and secret connotations of *rūna*.⁸³ In all these cases, “hel” means the underworld of the dead, who have returned into the Earth—not the Christian place of fire and punishment.⁸⁴

Medieval Latin sources equated *halioruna* with the calling up of the dead for soothsaying (which they called *necromantia*). They compared the *hellrune* with *hægtesse* (which meant both “witch” and “supernatural hag”) and with *pythonissa*, the main Latin term for “trance oracle.”⁸⁵ So the original *hellrune* (when she was not a supernatural being) looks like a priestess with oracular powers, in touch with the earth and spirits of the dead. Linguistic analysis seems to bear this out, suggesting a Germanic “agent noun” *helliruna* meaning “female necromancer, sorceress.”⁸⁶

Kees Samplonius comments, “Word form and context show that the performers in the Old English and Gothic cases must have been women, but the OHG gloss shows that it was not an exclusively female practice.” No, it was not; but the female preponderance is significant. The *Toller-Bosworth Dictionary* notes that names ending in *-rūn*, *-rūna* were feminine.⁸⁷ The early medieval sources predominantly name women—even though their use of the Latin term “necromancy” projects a distorted view of these ceremonies. The practices of Greco-Roman ceremonial magicians (typically men) were something quite distinct from the ancestral rites of Germanic women, or even from Roman-style ancestor veneration. As Ramsey MacMullan comments “For the Romans and the subjects of their empire, ancestor worship constituted the most important manifestation of religion into the fifth century and beyond.” They did not call this *necromancia*.⁸⁸

More about these ceremonies can be gleaned from archaic words

out of the ethnic cultures. In Old German, funeral rites were called *dotruna*, “mystery of the dead.” Frankish funeral songs, the *dadsisas*, were laments akin to the Irish *caoine* and the Greek *moiralogia*. They would likely have been sung over the ground where the dead were interred, “the lays sung after the heathen fashion on graves and barrows, to make the dead speak or send something out.”⁸⁹ But priestcraft reviled these ceremonies. Around the year 800, the *Indiculus superstitionem* calls *dadsisas* “sacrilege over the dead.”⁹⁰ The collision of values could not be starker.

In spite of the religious repression, positive interpretations of these pagan themes survived. The shamanic herb mandrake was called *Alrūna* in Old High German, and *Alraun* in modern German. The root was harvested and dried, and its human-like form was ceremonially dressed.⁹¹ Alruna may have been the original name of Albruna, the oracular woman of the Germania that Tacitus names in some versions of *Germania* 8:2. Medieval Germans spoke of a mysterious cave of the *Alraun*, which Grimm thought might be linked to the mythical cave of the ancient spinster.⁹²

LEÓÐ-RUNAN, ELVES, AND ANCESTOR VENERATION

Anglo-Saxons once named women who communed with the dead, with ancestors, as *leóð-rūne* (“song-mysteries.”) In Toller-Bosworth’s classic *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, this word means “A witch, wise woman.” It is also compared to “*burh-rūne* ‘furia’; *helle-rūne* ‘pythonissa.’”⁹³ *Burh-rūne* or *burg-rūne* seems to mean “mysteries of the burial mound”; compare with *byrgen-leóth*, “tomb elegy, epitaph, burial song,” and *byrgen-song*, “burial song.”⁹⁴

Burh-rūnan means fates or female ancestors, according to an old gloss in the Cotton manuscripts: “The fates, furies, fairies; *parcae*, *furiae*, *oreades*: *Burhrūnan furiae*, Cot. 92.”⁹⁵ (The *Parcae* were the threefold fates of Rome; *furiae* is a Latin name for the Greek *Erinyes*, who were avengers of wrongs, especially against the mothers; and *Oreades* were female spirits of mountains and wild rugged country.) L.M.C. Weston, speaking of the “awe” toward’s women’s connection to spirit, comments, “*Burgunas* may be wisewomen of the community, but they may also be supernatural guardian spirits.”⁹⁶ Over and over it is made clear that no sharp line can be drawn. The alternation be-

tween witches and fates, seeresses and supernatural hags (or “furies”) recurs throughout early medieval culture. Here reference is made to shamanic women, there to ancestral grandmothers or supernatural hags. Some texts treat *leod-rūne* as a female spirit similar to *hægtesse*, but both words were also translated as “witch” (*pythonissa* or *striga*). Similarly, the Norse tradition conflates giantesses with witches or *völur*, and the other way around (as when Óðinn calls up a dead *völva* to prophesy for him, and ends up cursing her as “the mother of three *thursar* [ogres]).⁹⁷ *Trollkona* can mean a spirit or a human witch.

In France and Britain, the faeries or elves tie in with witchcraft, as well as with ceremonies honoring the dead, the “good women,” or other fateful spirits. In the folk belief of later centuries, the faeries are often indistinguishable from the dead, or from land spirits. They could confer marvelous gifts, but were also the cause of afflictions, even death. Anglo-Saxons regarded the *ælfe* (elves) as causing fevers, boils, and other diseases, including mental illness.⁹⁸ The Old English leechbooks, circa 850-950 CE, prescribed salves and christianized charms to ward off misfortunes caused by the *ælfe*—which they linked with *hægtessen* or nightgoers. Demonization of witches was already well underway. Another change was the shift to literacy; the new christianizing charms were not sung in the old manner, but written.⁹⁹

The Old English Leechbook III, 61, names *nihtgengan* (“nightgoers”) together with the elves as the spirits to be warded off.¹⁰⁰ It is called “a salve against *ælfscynn* (elf-kin’) and against a *nihtgenga* (‘night-goer,’ a common Anglo-Saxon name for a witch or hag-spirit).¹⁰¹ The next charm, against “elf-sickness,” stresses the need to sing over plants before gathering them, and after the gathering.¹⁰²



Urn with breasts, sun signs,
and greenery, England,
6th century

A similar passage in Bald’s Leechbook associates the *leod-rūne* with “elfish magic,” prescribing remedies “against every *leodrune* and *ælfside*n, being a charm, powder, drinks and a salve, for fevers...”¹⁰³ Audrey Meaney views these charms as “examples of mumbo jumbo ... which priests concocted to replace pagan incantations.”¹⁰⁴ This spell demonizes the