

Rune Handbook – Elder Futhark

24 runes, c. 150–800 AD (Germanic tribes, Migration Period)

The Elder Futhark is the oldest known runic row, with 24 characters arranged in three aettir. Each rune carries a name, a sound value and an image drawn from nature, myth and everyday life.

Overview

ƿ **Fehu** · **F** – Wealth & Prosperity

ᚱ **Uruz** · **U** – Primal Strength & Health

ᚦ **Thurisaz** · **TH** – Thorn & Protection

ᚦ **Ansuz** · **A** – Word & Wisdom

ᚷ **Raidho** · **R** – Journey & Path

ᚷ **Kenaz** · **K** – Torch & Insight

ᚷ **Gebo** · **G** – Gift & Bond

ᚷ **Wunjo** · **W** – Joy & Harmony

ᚷ **Hagalaz** · **H** – Hail & Change

ᚷ **Nauthiz** · **N** – Need & Will

ᚷ **Isa** · **I** – Ice & Stillness

ᚷ **Jera** · **J** – Year & Harvest

ᚷ **Eihwaz** · **EI** – Yew & Backbone

ᚷ **Perthro** · **P** – Lot-cup & Fate

ᚷ **Algiz** · **Z** – Protection & Elk

ᚷ **Sowilo** · **S** – Sun & Victory

ᚷ **Tiwaz** · **T** – Tyr & Justice

ᚷ **Berkano** · **B** – Birch & Growth

ᚷ **Ehwaz** · **E** – Steed & Trust

ᚷ **Mannaz** · **M** – Human & Self

ᚷ **Laguz** · **L** – Water & Intuition

ᚷ **Ingwaz** · **NG** – Ing & Ripeness

ᚷ **Dagaz** · **D** – Day & Breakthrough

ᚷ **Othala** · **O** – Heritage & Home

The 24 Runes in Detail

ƿ **Fehu** · **F**

Wealth & Prosperity

Interpretation. Fehu, the rune of cattle and gold, stands at the beginning of the Futhark and speaks of movable wealth that grows through diligence and good sense. It reminds us that prosperity only unfolds its true value in sharing and flowing – hoarded gold grows cold. Today it invites you to notice with gratitude what gives you abundance, and to pass it on generously.

Name & Origin. The name literally means ‘cattle’ – and thus movable property, wealth, gold. In an age when prosperity was measured in cattle, Fehu was simply the rune of wealth. It is linguistically related to the German word ‘Vieh’ (livestock) and the English ‘fee’.

In the Rune Poem. The Old English rune poem says: ‘Wealth is a comfort to all; yet everyone must share it freely if they wish to gain honour in the sight of the Lord.’ The Old Norse poems stress the other side: money often sows discord among kin.

Historical Use. As the first rune, Fehu opens the Futhark and even gave it its name (F-U-Th-A-R-K). It stands at the start of many runic rows on bracteates and stones.

Worth Knowing. The old poems already warn: wealth is a blessing only when it is shared rather than hoarded – a strikingly modern thought.

ᚱ Uruz · U

Primal Strength & Health

Interpretation. Uruz carries the untamed strength of the aurochs, the wild primal ox of the northern forests. It is the rune of raw life energy, health and courage – the call to embrace your own strength and to withstand obstacles rather than avoid them. Where might you step up more powerfully and resolutely today?

Name & Origin. ‘Ur’ is the aurochs, the mighty wild ox that roamed Europe’s forests into the early modern age. The rune embodies raw, untamed life force and health.

In the Rune Poem. The Old English poem describes the ‘ur’ as a brave, horned beast that strides wildly across the moor – an emblem of unbroken strength. In the Old Norse poem, by contrast, ‘úr’ stands for drizzle and slag, a hint of how greatly the interpretations varied by region.

Historical Use. The aurochs was seen as a test of manhood; its horns were made into drinking horns. The rune carries this notion of primordial strength onward.

Worth Knowing. The last known aurochs died in 1627 in Poland – so the animal behind this rune is in fact extinct.

ᚦ Thurisaz · TH

Thorn & Protection

Interpretation. Thurisaz is the thorn and the thurs, a raw force that protects and can wound at the same time. It warns against haste and bad counsel, but also calls you to face a threat with a clear head. Pause before you act – some doors should be tested before you step through them.

Name & Origin. The name means the ‘thurs’, the giant or fiend – in Old English it became ‘thorn’. Both images fit: a force that stings from outside, protects and is dangerous at once.

In the Rune Poem. The Old Norse rune poem warns: ‘Thurs is the torment of women and the dweller of the rocks’ – the rune is linked to the hostile giant powers. The Old English poem stresses the thorn, which is sharp and harms anyone who touches it.

Historical Use. Thurisaz is often linked with Thor and his hammer, which keeps the giants in check – protection and threat in a single sign.

Worth Knowing. In later magical instructions the thurs rune appears in curse formulas – it was considered especially powerful and not without danger.

ᚱ Ansuz · A

Word & Wisdom

Interpretation. Ansuz is Odin’s breath, the rune of the word, of wisdom and inspiration. It announces a message – a piece of counsel, an insight, a clarifying conversation – and reminds us that true power often lies in language. Today, listen more closely to what is said to you, and choose your own words with care.

Name & Origin. ‘Áss’ is the god – above all Odin. Ansuz is the rune of the word, the breath, wisdom and divine inspiration.

In the Rune Poem. The Old Norse poem calls ‘óss’ the forefather and prince of Asgard – Odin himself. In the Old English poem, ‘os’ is the mouth, the source of speech and wisdom.

Historical Use. Because Odin won the runes, Ansuz is regarded as the rune of runes – of knowledge passed on through language.

Worth Knowing. Language as a divine gift: this idea links the Norse world with many other cultures in which, in the beginning, there is the word.

ᚱ Raidho · R

Journey & Path

Interpretation. Raidho is the ride and the journey, the rune of movement in the right measure and at the right time. It speaks of setting out, of the path you walk, and of the rhythm that mediates between haste and rest. Trust that the road itself teaches you – every arrival begins with the first step.

Name & Origin. ‘Reið’ means ride, wagon and journey. Raidho is the rune of movement, of the path and of the right rhythm.

In the Rune Poem. The Old English poem observes finely: riding is easy to talk about in the hall, but much harder for the one who must actually cover the long road on horseback. A reminder not to confuse talk with deeds.

Historical Use. In a world without roads, travel was perilous and meaningful; Raidho stood for setting out, pilgrimage and also the journey of the sun across the sky.

Worth Knowing. Some also interpret Raidho as cosmic order – the ordered course of the heavenly bodies by which the whole year is set.

ᚷ Kenaz · K

Torch & Insight

Interpretation. Kenaz is the torch in the dark, the rune of insight, craft and the creative flame. It grants clarity, skill and the ability to call something new into being. Today a light burns for you – use it to learn, to create and to make the hidden visible.

Name & Origin. In Old English ‘cen’ is the torch, the pine-splint – light in the dark. In Old Norse it echoes ‘kaun’, the sore. From this tension comes the meaning: insight, skill, creative heat, but also that which hurts and burns.

In the Rune Poem. The Old English poem describes the torch as a living fire that burns bright where the nobles sit together.

Historical Use. Kenaz is linked with craft and smithing – with the fire that forms metal and makes knowledge visible. For an engraving workshop, an especially fitting rune.

Worth Knowing. The same word lies in the English ‘ken’ (to know) and the German ‘kennen’ – light and knowledge lie close together in language.

X Gebo · G

Gift & Bond

Interpretation. Gebo is the gift, the simple cross of giving and receiving. It stands for generosity, partnership and the bond that rests on reciprocity – giving and taking in balance. True connection arises where both sides give freely; pay attention to this balance today.

Name & Origin. ‘Gebo’ is the gift, the present. The rune has the form of a cross (X) – a sign of mutual giving and taking.

In the Rune Poem. The Old English poem praises generosity: a gift brings a person standing and honour and helps the one who would otherwise have nothing.

Historical Use. In the Viking Age, gifts sealed alliances, hospitality and loyalty. Whoever gave, obligated – and created a bond. Gebo belongs only to the Elder Futhark and is missing from the later Viking row.

Worth Knowing. The Old Norse ideal ran: ‘a gift always calls for a return.’ Giving was no selfless act but a bond that tied people to one another.

𐰇 Wunjo · W

Joy & Harmony

Interpretation. Wunjo is bliss, the rune of joy, harmony and fulfilment. It announces that a wish is ripening and that concord and belonging carry you. Today, allow yourself to rejoice in what is beautiful, and share that happiness with those close to you.

Name & Origin. ‘Wunjo’ is bliss, joy, concord – linguistically related to the German ‘Wonne’ and the English ‘win’. It stands for happiness and harmony in the community.

In the Rune Poem. The Old English poem says, in essence: joy is enjoyed by the one who knows little sorrow, pain and grief and lives in prosperity and security.

Historical Use. Wunjo closes the first of the three groups of eight (Freyr’s aett) – a reconciling conclusion after strength, protection and the journey.

Worth Knowing. Like Gebo, Wunjo too belongs only to the Elder Futhark; in the 16-rune row of the Viking Age it is no longer included.

𐰇 Hagalaz · H

Hail & Change

Interpretation. Hagalaz is the hail that falls unexpectedly from the sky – a rune of sudden upheaval and trial. Yet the hail melts to water that nourishes: what breaks open now clears and makes room for the new. Meet change with composure, for it has its purpose.

Name & Origin. ‘Hagall’ is hail – the grain of ice that falls from the sky. Hagalaz opens the second group of eight and stands for sudden upheaval and the rough forces of nature.

In the Rune Poem. The Old Norse poem calls hail ‘the coldest of grains’. The Old English adds to the image: hail is white, rolls from the sky, is driven by the wind – and in the end turns into water.

Historical Use. Hail destroys the harvest in minutes – yet the ice melts and becomes water that nourishes new growth. Hagalaz carries this double sense of destruction and transformation.

Worth Knowing. In some orderings, Hagalaz is regarded as the ‘mother rune’, from whose form the other runes can be conceptually derived.

𐰇 Nauthiz · N

Need & Will

Interpretation. Nauthiz is need, constraint, but also the will that grows from it. It teaches patience and self-reliance and reminds us that the greatest strength often grows from want. Ask yourself what this challenge wants to teach you – and what inner strength it awakens in you.

Name & Origin. ‘Nauðr/Nyd’ is need, constraint, distress. Yet in the need lies also the will to overcome it.

In the Rune Poem. The Old English poem says: need presses hard upon the breast – yet it often becomes a help and rescue to the children of men, if it is heeded in time.

Historical Use. The need-rune was considered powerful in defence; it stands for the fire-drill on which the need-fire is kindled – from want, through effort, comes the saving fire.

Worth Knowing. The image is striking: only pressure (the rubbing of two pieces of wood) brings forth the spark. Need as the midwife of strength.

ǀ Isa · I

Ice & Stillness

Interpretation. Isa is the ice, the rune of standstill, of stillness and of the clarity that arises only in pausing. It advises forcing nothing, but waiting for the right moment – sometimes the waiting itself is the deed. In stillness you find today what haste conceals.

Name & Origin. ‘Is/Íss’ is ice. A single vertical line – the coldest, stillest, clearest of the runes.

In the Rune Poem. The Old Norse poem calls ice ‘the broad bridge’; the Old English describes it as cold, slippery and glass-clear, beautiful to behold like a gem, a floor of frost.

Historical Use. Frozen rivers became paths and bridges in winter – the ice connected what otherwise divided. At the same time, Isa stands for standstill and rigidity.

Worth Knowing. Isa is the simplest of all rune forms: a single vertical stave. Stillness in its purest form.

Ɔ Jera · J

Year & Harvest

Interpretation. Jera is the good year, the rune of harvest and the natural cycle. It promises the reward of steady effort – what you have sown ripens when you give the course of things time. Good things take their time; today you may trust in the fruit of your patience.

Name & Origin. ‘Jera/Ger’ is the (good) year, the harvest, the cycle of the seasons. Related to the German ‘Jahr’ (year).

In the Rune Poem. The Old English poem says: the year (the harvest) is the joy of people, when God lets the earth bring forth its fruits – for rich and poor alike.

Historical Use. Jera embodies the reward for patient work: sown in spring, harvested in autumn. Its form, with the two interlocking parts, depicts the eternal turning of the seasons.

Worth Knowing. No other rune is so much a promise: what you do in right measure bears fruit in its time.

ǃ Eihwaz · EI

Yew & Backbone

Interpretation. Eihwaz is the yew, the evergreen world tree that joins beginning and end. It stands for steadfastness, transformation and the deep backbone that carries you even through dark places. Rooted and yet changeable – so today you may trust your path, even when it leads through shadow.

Name & Origin. ‘Eihwaz’ is the yew – a tree that grows ancient, stays evergreen, and whose wood is at once poisonous and tough. The best bows were made from yew wood.

In the Rune Poem. The Old English poem describes the yew as a tree rough on the outside, firmly rooted in the ground, keeper of fire, a joy on the homestead.

Historical Use. The yew was regarded as a tree between life and death – evergreen and yet poisonous. Some see in it an emblem of Yggdrasil itself. Eihwaz stands for backbone, endurance and the connection of above and below.

Worth Knowing. Yew bows were Europe’s high-performance weapon for over a thousand years – the material behind this rune decided battles.

Ƿ Perthro · P

Lot-cup & Fate

Interpretation. Perthro is the lot-cup, the rune of fate, of mystery and of hidden fortune. It speaks of the play of possibilities and of the fact that not everything lies in our hands. Stay open to surprises – the hidden reveals itself in its own time.

Name & Origin. The meaning of ‘Perthro/Peorð’ is disputed to this day. The most convincing interpretation is as a dice- or lot-cup – the implement of play and of consulting fate.

In the Rune Poem. The Old English poem links ‘peorð’ with play and laughter in the hall, where merry men sit together – a hint at dice-games and pastime.

Historical Use. The casting of lots and staves to consult fate is attested for the Germanic peoples as early as Tacitus. Perthro is the rune of the hidden, of the lot, of chance that is at the same time fate.

Worth Knowing. Perthro is the most mysterious rune of the Futhark – not least because no one can any longer say for certain what its name originally meant.

Ț Algiz · Z

Protection & Elk

Interpretation. Algiz is protection, the raised elk-antler, the rune of safekeeping and watchful instinct. It lays a sheltering hand over you and advises listening to your gut feeling. Today you may feel secure – and at the same time be alert to where a boundary is needed.

Name & Origin. ‘Algiz/Elhaz’ is usually interpreted as ‘elk’, sometimes as protection or as the sharp-edged sedge. The upward-splayed form recalls a warding hand or an antler.

In the Rune Poem. The Old English poem speaks of the ‘eolh’ sedge that grows in the marsh and cruelly wounds anyone who grasps at it – a natural protection through defensiveness.

Historical Use. Algiz is regarded as the classic protective rune, a sign of warding and preservation. Its form also appears inverted as a ‘death rune’ in later interpretations.

Worth Knowing. The upright Algiz form is today one of the best-known runic signs of all – as an emblem of protection and life.

ᚱ Sowilo · S

Sun & Victory

Interpretation. Sowilo is the sun, the victorious rune of success, vitality and clarity. It breaks through the fog and shows the goal within reach – energy and confidence are on your side. Let your light shine today; you have the strength to complete your undertaking.

Name & Origin. ‘Sowilo/Sól/Sigel’ is the sun. One of the few runes interpreted as wholly positive – light, victory, vitality.

In the Rune Poem. The Old Norse poem calls the sun ‘the light of the world’ and bows before its holy fate. The Old English praises it as the hope of seafarers, carrying them over the sea until they reach land.

Historical Use. For seafarers, the sun was orientation and rescue. Sowilo stands for victory, clarity and the unbroken power of light.

Worth Knowing. How important the sun was is shown by the Bronze Age ‘Trundholm sun chariot’ – the veneration of the sun’s course reaches back millennia in the North.

↑ Tiwaz · T

Tyr & Justice

Interpretation. Tiwaz is the rune of the sky god Tyr, who sacrificed his hand to bind the wolf Fenrir. It stands for courage, honour, justice and the victory won through righteousness. Where uprightness matters today, it gives you steadfastness – a given word weighs more than an advantage.

Name & Origin. ‘Tiwaz’ is the rune of the god Tyr – the old god of sky and war, who stands for law, order and self-sacrifice. The form resembles an upward-pointing arrow or spear.

In the Rune Poem. The Old Norse poem calls ‘Tyr’ the one-handed god and compares him to the guiding star that holds its place in the sky while everything circles around it – an emblem of reliability.

Historical Use. Tyr sacrificed his right hand so that the gods could bind the wolf Fenrir – justice that costs something. Tiwaz was carved on weapons to ask for victory and a just verdict.

Worth Knowing. ‘Tuesday’ bears his name: English ‘Tuesday’, from Tiw/Tyr – as Thursday is from Thor and Wednesday from Woden.

ᚷ Berkano · B

Birch & Growth

Interpretation. Berkano is the birch, the rune of new beginnings, fertility and protective care. It announces growth – a beginning, a healing, a sheltered becoming. Tend today, with patience and gentleness, what has tenderly begun, and it will thrive strongly.

Name & Origin. ‘Berkano/Bjarkan’ is the birch – the first tree to bud after winter. Rune of growth, fertility and new beginnings.

In the Rune Poem. The Old Norse poem describes the birch as a greening branch, the smallest tree with the finest leaves. The Old English praises it as a beautiful, densely leaved tree.

Historical Use. The birch was an emblem of spring and of female, nourishing power. In clearings and on young ground it is often the first tree – a pioneer of new life.

Worth Knowing. Birch bark served as writing material in the North: even medieval runic and everyday letters have survived on it.

ᚱ Ehwaz · E

Steed & Trust

Interpretation. Ehwaz is the horse, the rune of trust, faithful partnership and steady progress. Like horse and rider in harmony, it speaks of the cooperation that carries both forward. Today togetherness counts – in trust you make faster progress together.

Name & Origin. ‘Ehwaz’ is the horse, the steed – related to the Latin ‘equus’. The rune stands for partnership, trust and the well-practised cooperation of rider and animal.

In the Rune Poem. The Old English poem praises the horse as the pride of nobles, highly valued by heroes, a comfort to the restless – a faithful companion that never stands still.

Historical Use. Horses were sacred: white stallions were kept for oracles, and in ship burials like Oseberg sacrificed horses were found. Ehwaz embodies the bond between human and animal.

Worth Knowing. Odin’s eight-legged steed Sleipnir is the most famous horse in mythology – Ehwaz carries something of this magic of the mount.

ᚱ Mannaz · M

Human & Self

Interpretation. Mannaz is humankind, the rune of the self, of reason and of community. It calls you to know yourself and at the same time to respect your place among people. True greatness shows itself in measure – know yourself, and be a reliable presence to your own.

Name & Origin. ‘Mannaz’ is the human – related to the German ‘Mann’ and the English ‘man’. The rune stands for the self, the community and the place of the human in the world.

In the Rune Poem. The Old Norse poem says soberly: ‘man is the joy of man’ – and also ‘the increase of the earth’. The Old English stresses how each is dear to the other, and yet each must one day leave the earth.

Historical Use. The human is conceived here not as an individual but as part of the kin. Mannaz reminds us that we first come to know ourselves in community.

Worth Knowing. The thought ‘man is man’s joy’ is found almost word for word in the Hávamál (stanza 47) – sociability as the highest good.

ᚠ Laguz · L

Water & Intuition

Interpretation. Laguz is water, the lake, the rune of intuition and the flow of life. It invites you to follow the inner current and to listen to the unconscious, rather than fighting against the stream. Today, let your feeling guide you – water finds its own way.

Name & Origin. ‘Laguz/Lögr’ is water, the lake, the flood. Rune of the flowing, of the unconscious, of intuition.

In the Rune Poem. The Old English poem describes water as seeming endless to people when they venture out on a tossing ship and the sea-waves frighten them.

Historical Use. For the Vikings the sea was both lifeline and threat – a road to riches and the grave of many seafarers. Laguz stands for this unpredictable, bearing force.

Worth Knowing. Water was sacred: springs and wells were regarded as places of wisdom – think of Mímir’s well beneath Yggdrasil.

◊ Ingwaz · NG

Ing & Ripeness

Interpretation. Ingwaz is the rune of the god Ing, an emblem of ripeness, completion and gathered power that is released. Like a seed that rests long and then sprouts, it speaks of the close of an undertaking. What has grown long may now bear fruit – rest in this completion.

Name & Origin. ‘Ingwaz’ is the rune of the god Ing (Yngvi-Freyr), the fertility god and forefather. It stands for ripening power, gathering and a happy conclusion.

In the Rune Poem. The Old English poem tells how ‘Ing’ was first seen among the East Danes, then journeyed eastward over the waves – his wagon rolling after him. So the bold warriors named him.

Historical Use. Ing/Freyr stood for peace, good harvest and fertility; the Swedish royal line of the Ynglings derived its name from him. Ingwaz is the rune of stored, ripening energy.

Worth Knowing. The closed, diamond-shaped form of the rune looks like a seed or an enclosed field – power that gathers before it breaks forth.

𐌇 Dagaz · D

Day & Breakthrough

Interpretation. Dagaz is the day, the morning light between night and day, the rune of breakthrough, awakening and hope. It promises that darkness turns to light – a change for the good, a clear moment of insight. Today a door opens; step through it with confidence.

Name & Origin. ‘Dagaz’ is the day, the daylight – related to the German ‘Tag’. Rune of breakthrough, of the turn from dark to light.

In the Rune Poem. The Old English poem praises the day as the Lord’s sending, dear to people, glorious light, joy and hope for rich and poor, useful to all.

Historical Use. The change from night to day, from dusk to morning, was a fundamental experience – Dagaz marks exactly this moment of turning, in which everything clears.

Worth Knowing. Some rune rows place Dagaz at the end of the Futhark – as a hopeful conclusion: after all the dark, the new day.

𐌆 Othala · O

Heritage & Home

Interpretation. Othala is the heritage and the homestead, the rune of home, origin and inherited values. It recalls what endures and sustains: family, roots and what one passes on. Reflect today on your foundation – from it you draw stability and meaning.

Name & Origin. ‘Othala/Óðal’ is the inherited estate, the ancestral property, the homeland. Related to the German ‘Adel’ (originally: inherited property, noble descent).

In the Rune Poem. The Old English poem says: the home (the inherited ground) is dear to everyone, if there, in righteousness, they may enjoy what is custom and constant.

Historical Use. Othala stands for home, family and what is passed down over generations – land and soil as well as values and memory. As the last rune of the Futhark, it closes the circle: from movable property (Fehu) to lasting heritage.

Worth Knowing. From beginning to end an arc is drawn: Fehu is the cattle one acquires – Othala the heritage one passes on. The wealth that endures is the wealth you leave behind.

Note

The runes were first and foremost a script. Today’s interpretations draw on the rune poems and modern practice. © Glanz & Gravur.