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The training of most runologists is multidisciplinary, but located in the humanities (principally historical linguistics, archaeology and art history). In order to understand the uses of runes in modern popular culture, though, we need to refer to those disciplines which study other contemporary cultural phenomena, namely, cultural studies and the social sciences. Florian Busch’s book, *Runenschrift in der Black-Metal-Szene*, offers a valuable demonstration of how the study of modern popular culture and subcultures can be brought together with the sort of graphological study that is more familiar to most runologists. The author deploys a range of methods drawing on semiotics, interactional sociolinguistics and corpus linguistics to obtain some original insights into what he sees as a living tradition of rune use, albeit a recent one based on reinterpretations of historical uses of runic script which need not be historically accurate (and indeed, the issue of historical accuracy is a central theme throughout the discussion).

The introduction to the book is followed by an explication of the theoretical background to the empirical study that follows: Busch lays out the foundations of a sociolinguistics of writing, as opposed to speech. Since its foundation in the 1960s, the main focus of sociolinguistics—and of linguistics in general since the early twentieth century—has been on spoken rather than written language. Early sociolinguists associated writing with standard varieties of languages and their principal interest was in “authentic”, non-standard language use. Since the 1980s more attention has been given to written language as a social resource, but the emphasis is still on speech.

The taxonomy of types of script variation (p. 20) will be familiar to runologists, although the approach adopted by Busch is different (and refreshingly so). The major areas of variation are orthography, choice of script (runes vs. roman) and typography. The latter is more salient for modern than historical materials, particularly with the easy availability of fonts and the ease for a modern reader of recognising the motivations behind the use of a particular font or typographical style (such as the widespread use of Fraktur in the metal scene, typefaces resembling graffiti art in hip hop and so on). In the context of the Black Metal scene, it is emphasised that the visual as well as the linguistic characteristics of the text carry social meaning; in order to interpret the written sign, the reader requires an
awareness of these meanings, which can change over time. As an example from German history, Busch mentions the successive “re-enregisterment” of Fraktur (i.e., the changing cultural meanings attached to it over time). This style of script had been identified positively with “Germanness” since the time of Luther, and was later associated negatively with German nationalism and the Third Reich. The connotations of militarism and Wagnerian bombast made it attractive to metal bands in the 1970s, and Fraktur script became conventional in the iconography of metal music, in which context it lost its political meanings (p. 22).

Having discussed the social indexicality of variation in writing, Busch introduces some concepts from the social sciences that are crucial to his study: firstly, the notion of a subculture as a speech community (or, to use a broader term since we are dealing with written and visual modes of communication, a community of practice). Secondly, drawing on other studies of subcultures, Busch stresses the self-conscious positioning of members of the Black Metal scene as a counter-culture, in opposition to a mainstream society identified with Christianity, capitalism and modernity. Individuals position themselves in alignment with a scene or social grouping by use of appropriate social styles, the central question being, “Was müssen wir tun, um ein ‚guter/echter X‘ zu sein; [...]?” (What must we do in order to be a ‘good/proper X’?; Kallmeyer and Keim 2003, 38, quoted by Busch on p. 38, Busch’s ellipsis). Much of the analysis that follows makes reference to the tension between this concept of “authenticity” and “commercialisation”, the idea within the scene being that truly “authentic” behaviour marks one out as being part of a select in-group and thereby distances one from society at large. Appeal to a wider public, on the other hand, involves a compromise or even betrayal of the subculture’s “authentic” values. When particular signs (written or otherwise) become part of commercialised production, the meanings that are salient for members of the “in-group” may be lost or altered. Artists or musicians hoping to make a living from their creations must confront the tension between the values of subcultural authenticity and the need to reach an audience who will pay the artist for their work.

In chapter 3, Busch presents a short account of the historical and modern uses of runes, and a brief history of Black Metal music. The former is impressively concise and, unsurprisingly for a non-specialist work, relies for the most part on general introductions to runology (Düwel 2001; Barnes 2012; and, secondarily, Findell 2014). When dealing with modern reinterpretations of runes, Busch does draw on more specialist work (notably Hunger 1984), as well as some primary sources from the völkisch (romantic populist) occult literature (e.g., List 1908) which has been so influential on modern beliefs about runes.

Given the necessary brevity of this section of the book, it is to be expected that there are some oversimplifications which will not satisfy the specialist. Runic script is characterised as “pre-Christian” and assumed to fall into decline following Christianisation, when the evidence of medieval Scandinavian inscriptions demonstrates widespread use of the script, often in explicitly religious contexts (see, for example, Zilmer 2013). Busch also seems to have misunderstood

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Barnes on some points such as the questionable value of Eddic poetry and sagas as evidence for actual beliefs of medieval Icelanders regarding magical uses of runes. The errors are not major, however, and they do not undermine the analysis of the modern materials which is the focus of the work. While one may criticise the assumptions about the association between runes and heathen magic, the central position of these assumptions in the modern re-enregisterment of runes deserves to have attention drawn to it.

Busch identifies the successive re-enregisterments or recontextualisations of runes in medieval literature (where their uses in magic are depicted in the context of a fictionalised pre-Christian past; Busch does not mention the epigraphical evidence for the use of runes in charms and spells in medieval Scandinavia and elsewhere [see, for example, Spurkland 2005, 11–16, 191–93 et passim; MacLeod and Mees 2006]; in the nationalist discourse of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; in the German völkisch movement, which appropriated them as part of an ancient German cultural and racial heritage; in the National Socialist period where they were adopted as overtly political symbols [some of which are still used by neo-Nazi groups]; in modern esoteric and pagan literature; and in fantasy fiction). All of these are treated cursorily, as background to the discussion of runes in the specific context of the Black Metal scene.

Section 3.3 serves as a sort of primer on Black Metal music, essential for the outsider reading about this topic. Although this reviewer came away from the book still uncertain about some of the distinctions between Black Metal and related subgenres (such as Viking Metal and Doom Metal), it is an instructive introduction that emphasises scene members’ aspiration to “trueness” — authenticity expressed through a rejection of modernity and the lyrical exploration of themes such as Satanism, heathenism and Nordic mythology. Unlike other metal subgenres influenced by fantasy, Black Metal bands have oriented themselves more towards a (supposed) historicity, harking back to pre-Christian mythology, medieval history and European folklore.

In chapter 4, the methodology for the empirical study at the heart of the book is outlined. There are, in essence, three corpora compiled in different ways and used for different but complementary purposes. The first is a corpus of German-language discourse about runes (or at least, containing the search terms Futhark and/or Runen) drawn from online platforms used by Black Metal scene members (webzines and forums). This material was gathered using Google searches, a method which might be cause for concern for two main reasons: first, Google is adaptive, filtering results based on the user’s search history; and second, web designers and marketers are adept at manipulating site content and metadata to improve the search ranking of a site. For fan sites that are not self-consciously marketing their content (and which cater to an audience hostile to the forces of commercialisation), the second problem may be less serious, but the first raises an issue of reproducibility. That said, Busch does acknowledge the problems and since his search strategy is explicit it can at least be tested (the author might be gratified to know that when the reviewer repeated his searches using google.de,
most of the top-ranked links referred to his book). In order to understand patterns of discourse peculiar to the Black Metal scene, Busch has also compiled corpora of discourse about runes from two other domains for comparison: one from national media across a broad political spectrum, and the other from academic literature (the digitised text of Düwel 2001 and of Grünzweig 2004).

The second major corpus consists of two extended interviews with individuals involved in the Black Metal scene, one a critic and editor, the other a musician. The use of these interviews is qualitative, with selected extracts used to supplement the observations from the other corpora. With only two interviewees, there is no guarantee that they are representative of the larger community of practice to which they belong (and it may be worth noting that both are male and of a similar age, in their late twenties at the time of the interviews).

Finally, and perhaps most informative, is the “artefact corpus” taken from the online database Encyclopaedia Metallum (www.metal-archives.com) and supplemented using informants from a number of Facebook groups. This corpus consists of cover art for recordings (which, including cassettes, account for about 45% of the artefacts), isolated band logos, concert publicity material, T-shirts and other merchandise, and so on.

Chapters 5 and 6 contain the results of the empirical investigation, the analysis of (respectively) the discourse corpus and the artefact corpus. Chapter 5 breaks the discourse about runes down into several subcategories: spiritual-magical, political, linguistic, historical or historicising, and discourse about “authenticity” in the use of runes. The last two, the discourse about historicity and authenticity, are the most important for the construction of a Black Metal subcultural identity, on which the other three sub-discourses all depend. In particular, the popular association of runes with pre-Christian religion, magic and mysticism can be seen in the discourse about the esoteric meanings of rune-names and the supposed power inherent in or represented by them. Busch is not really interested in the spiritual practice of modern heathens, but rather in the use of spiritual-magical ideas about runes as part of the construction of a countercultural social identity in which Christianity belongs to the negatively-evaluated mainstream.

Although this positioning is itself political, the label of politischer Teildiskurs (political sub-discourse) is reserved for the association of runes with National Socialism. Although National Socialist Black Metal (hereafter NSBM) is a marginal subgenre within the larger Black Metal scene, and one to which most scene members are hostile, the connection between runes and the Third Reich is sufficiently culturally salient (strongly enough enregistered) that bands and individuals feel obliged to defend their use of runes as apolitical and to reject emphatically what they regard as misuse or abuse of runes for political purposes. Their concern seems well justified by the prominence in the corpus of mainstream German-language media content that mentions runes: the overwhelming majority (90%) of the items in this corpus refer to runes in connection with their use by the Nazis. Busch also relates the story of efforts to ban a 2008 concert featuring overtly fascist pagan metal bands, in which the display of runes was
presented by antifascist activists as part of the justification for the ban (p. 89). This context sheds valuable light on the apparent defensiveness of members of the Black Metal scene. When so much attention is focused on the political extremists and the violent crimes committed by people connected with NSBM (the most notorious being Varg Vikernes) it is hardly surprising that scene members are conscious of being misunderstood as political extremists.

Overtly racist, fascist voices within Busch’s main corpus are only marginally represented, because the corpus is drawn from “apolitical” scene media which consciously reject NSBM. To flesh out this part of the discussion, Busch might have referred to studies of the far-right scene such as Goodrick-Clarke’s *Black Sun* (2002), or Gardell’s (2003) examination of the overlap between neopaganism and white supremacist politics. Modern heathens, like Black Metal enthusiasts, often feel the need to distance themselves from what (again) they regard as an abuse of runic tradition by the Far Right. As recently as August 2016 a large number of heathen/Asatru organisations issued a public statement, “Declaration 127”, condemning the explicitly racist and homophobic stance of the Asatru Folk Assembly (Declaration 127 [website]) and affirming that their religion should be open to anyone.

Busch is right to place this unsavoury element of the Black Metal scene on the fringes, not because of its repellent political views but for the methodologically more satisfactory reason that it is a small element of a much larger scene, and one which is unrepresented in the empirical data. What is noteworthy about the responses to NSBM is that they are oriented towards the key concepts of authenticity and historicity: the use of runes by the Nazis and their modern followers is held to be not only politically objectionable but “inauthentic” and historically erroneous (in that it represents a misuse of runes based on a misunderstanding of their history). Recalling the fundamental question “What must we do in order to be a ‘good/proper [Black Metaller]’?”, scene members in general seem to have judged NSBM to be not “true” Black Metal.

The discussion of the artefact corpus in chapter 6 covers visual as well as textual aspects of a runic text, such as its position on the artefact and its relationship to other design elements—an aspect of artefact study with which runologists are familiar. Viewing runes as texts, Busch looks closely at their orientation to modern writing practices (use of modern language, word spacing, punctuation, computer fonts and so on) versus “historical” practices (such as handwriting or typographical styles intended to resemble handwriting; the use of framing lines; dotted word separators; and the use of pre-modern languages, chiefly Old Norse but occasionally Old English, Proto-Norse [*Urnordisch*] or Proto-Germanic). The use of runes as isolated symbols is common, reflecting widespread belief in esoteric meanings, although there is an important difference which highlights the usefulness of Busch’s multidisciplinary approach: the discursive distinction between NSBM and “apolitical” bands, revealed in the discourse corpus (almost entirely represented from the perspective of the latter—see above), overlaps with differences in the use of runes observable in the artefact corpus. Runes as
isolated symbols are a common feature of both neopagan and National Socialist traditions, and they appear in artefacts connected with both NSBM and Pagan Black Metal bands, but they are far more frequent in the former. Busch mentions the especially frequent use of the algiz-rune in the performance of a far-right identity, often associated with other political symbols such as triskelia and the Black Sun. He does not go into the reasons for this, but this reviewer suspects the prominence of this rune as a “Nazi rune” is connected with List’s explanation of it as a “life rune”. List’s Armanen-runes are based on Viking Age runes, so in this context ought to be read rather than z; but it is common for occult and pagan literature to conflate the two. The esoteric meaning “life” influenced its widespread use in the Nazi period (for example in medical insignia [Hunger 1984, 100 f.]), and a “life-rune” framed by an oak crown (another of the recurrent symbols in the NSBM artefacts) was the logo of the National Alliance, which was very influential in the far-right political scene of the 1980s and 1990s (the same period which saw the birth of Black Metal, including NSBM).

As well as dealing with runes “proper”, Busch also discusses the use of roman letters styled to look like runes (with angular letter shapes, avoidance of horizontal lines and so on), which are a common feature of the Black Metal artefacts. It is easy for scholars to dismiss this phenomenon as a reflection of ignorance, but Busch argues that here too the visual appearance forms part of a graphic resource used to construct subcultural identity. In the chapter on the artefact corpus, the tension between “authenticity” or historicity on the one hand and commercialism or accessibility on the other comes into play. Using runes in ways closer to their medieval or pre-medieval use (such as writing older languages rather than modern ones, and using the conventions of text layout found in runic inscriptions) might be seen as more “historical” and can display a higher level of knowledge about the script, identifying the user as an insider; but the text cannot be understood by a reader without a similar level of knowledge. To gain wider appeal, it may be necessary to compromise this “authenticity”. As an example of how this tension works out, Busch (p. 104) discusses a demo CD released by the band Drautran in 2000, in which the title Unter dem Banner der Nordwinde was written in older runes (in modern German). The band subsequently signed with a record label and re-released the album in 2009, with the same cover art but the title in roman letters (in a Fraktur font).

At times Busch’s points in this chapter are not easily understandable for a reader who is not already familiar with the Black Metal scene and its artefacts. The chapter contains many images which would be helpful if they were better presented, but unfortunately they are for the most part very small, monochrome and rather low resolution, so it is difficult to see the aspects of the design which are being discussed in the accompanying text. This is a shame, because it is this discussion which stands out as some of the most interesting in the book, revealing the motives behind design choices which seem inconsequential at first glance.

In the final chapter, Busch sums up his arguments and concludes that the refunctionalisation of runes in the Black Metal scene (and other areas of popular
culture) should be seen not as a modern aberration but as part of a succession of re-enregistrments of the script (like the adaptation of runes for writing different languages, or their adoption as an exotic or cipher alphabet in medieval manuscripts, for example). This defense of modern uses of runes might seem something of a straw man, but on the other hand runologists are still apt to be wary of studying modern rune use, partly for fear of being seen as endorsing historically inaccurate beliefs or being fooled into “authenticating” modern inscriptions which purport to be older (the Kensington Runestone is the prime example). For the runologist interested in engaging with modern runic practices, Busch’s work offers an intriguing insight into a subculture based on sound methodology, and a useful point of reference for future studies in this area.

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