

The Use of Runic Hashtags on Instagram

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Abstract

The runic script was used by the Germanic peoples for around 1500 years, until superseded by the Latin script. From the 1600s, runes have been studied extensively, and in the digital age, they have found a new use on social media platforms. This study investigates the use of runes on the popular social media platform Instagram, focusing on hashtags written in runes. It shows which futharks are the most popular, how extensively runes are used, and the kind of content associated with runic hashtags. In addition to uses linked to Norse and Germanic history and mythology, several everyday uses are also highlighted. The article also argues that the increased popularity of the runes on social media platforms will create new avenues for research into their contemporary functions.

Keywords: Norse, Germanic, runes, futharks, Instagram, hashtags, folksonomy, digital age

Introduction

A general revival in interest in Norse and Germanic history, culture, and religion has taken place over the last few decades (Von Schnurbein 2016; Rudgley 2018; Forssling 2020; Flowers 2021). In popular culture, this interest is reflected in the release of popular television series such as *Vikings* (aired 2013–21), *The Last Kingdom* (aired 2015–20) and *Barbarians* (aired 2020 and 2022), the formation of music groups such as Faun in 1998, Wardruna in 2003, Nytt Land in 2013 and Heilung in 2014, and the release of films such as *Valhalla Rising* (released in 2009), *Northmen: A Viking Saga* (released in 2014), *Pagan Warrior* (released in 2019) and *The Northman* (released in 2022). In addition to this popular interest, academic

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interest has also been rekindled (Simek 2004, 73), alongside a revival of the old Norse/Germanic religion itself (Von Schnurbein 2016, 54). A central focus of this revival has been the runes (Flowers 2021).

Runic characters themselves, introduced in Unicode 3.0 in 1999, with an additional eight characters added in Unicode 7.0 in 2014, are now readable in the digital age. Word processing software such as Microsoft Word, Apple Pages and Google Docs now support runes, and online tools such as the multilingual keyboard of Lexilogos (2025), Valhyr's rune converter tool (2025) and Fontvilla's runic translator (2025) allow users to type in runes, both in the elder and younger futhark, and sometimes in the Anglo-Saxon futhark as well. Smartphone apps such as Rune Keyboard (Orlovsky 2025) and Anglo-Saxon Futhorc Keyboard (Osaka Red 2025) bring this ability to mobile phones, with the former specially geared toward social media posts. This greater accessibility of runes has resulted in their use on digital platforms, including on social media, as investigated in this study.

A popular platform for sharing Norse/Germanic content, Instagram is one of the world's most popular social media platforms, after Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp. Norse and/or Germanic content has been studied on Instagram by Bennett and Wilkins (2020), Downing (2020), Hanssen (2020) and Senekal (2021). The current study also focuses on Instagram but focusses specifically on the use of runic hashtags, investigating the scale of the use of the runes on this platform, including the content and use of hashtags, and comparing the popularity of the elder and younger futharks. A comprehensive list of runic hashtags is compiled and analysed, and the following questions in particular are addressed:

- 1 How popular are runic hashtags on Instagram compared with the Roman script?
- 2 Which futhark is the most popular for hashtag use on Instagram?
- 3 To what extent are runes used ideographically and which runic ideographs are most popular?
- 4 Have runic hashtags been taken up by the Instagram community, or used only by individual users?
- 5 Are runic hashtags used to denote the correct Latin letters, suggesting knowledge of the runes, or incorrectly?
- 6 What is the content and function of runic hashtags?
- 7 What are the most popular uses of runic hashtags?

The article is structured as follows: First, a short background to the contemporary use of the runes is provided in order to place the study in its greater context. This is followed by an overview of the use of hashtags on

social media and Instagram in particular. The third section discusses the methods employed to collect and analyse runic hashtags. The results are then discussed. The article concludes with final remarks and suggestions for further research.

The contemporary use of the runes

At the end of the twentieth century, runes entered the digital age. After initiatives in the early 1990s, the ISO Runes Project (Nordisk Ministerråd 1997) made recommendations on standardising runes with a view towards creating digital versions of them. Runic symbols were introduced in Unicode 3.0 in 1999 and expanded in Unicode 7.0 in 2014, and currently include the elder and younger futharks, the Anglo-Saxon runes, and the mediaeval futhark. As already mentioned, various online transliteration tools are currently available, as well as smartphone applications that allow the user to transliterate Latin to runic script. In addition, numerous runic fonts and keyboards can be installed on various operating systems, as listed by Webb (2017). Like all handwriting, there is considerable variation between the forms of different runes, and hence the Unicode renderings of the runes are to be considered idealised versions (Nordisk Ministerråd 1997, 18).

Runes today are often used in contemporary Pagan religious contexts and a large number of books discuss esoteric rune uses, such as those by Thorsson (2018) or Aswynn (2002). Runes also feature prominently at Pagan festivals, as Dahmer (2019) discusses in terms of the Pagan Edinburgh's Beltane Fire Festival, and it might be noted that the Midgardsblot festival in Norway also makes extensive use of runes. Closely related to Pagan festivals is the rise of Dark Nordic Folk bands such as Wardruna and Heilung, who straddle the divide between folk music and black metal. Both Wardruna and Heilung, along with numerous black metal bands, make extensive use of runes, including on album covers, marketing material and even in their lyrics.

Another major contemporary use of runes is in tattoos, as studied on Instagram by Bennett and Wilkins (2020). The authors discuss posts with the hashtags *#rune* and *#tattoo* and emphasise how runic tattoos are used for self-expression and self-identification with various communities. Taylor (2022) also discusses Viking tattoos, albeit against the backdrop of the *Vikings* television series.

Runes are often used for decoration, with numerous sellers on Etsy offering jewellery, clothing, home and garden decor and stickers that

showcase runes. Taylor (2022, 154) mentions that some Etsy shops even sell temporary Viking tattoos, often related to the *Vikings* television series.

Runes have been adopted by the far right since before World War II, and the contemporary association between runes and the far right is well established. On its list of frequently used hate symbols, the Anti-Defamation League for instance includes runic writing alongside symbols such as the swastika and the apartheid-era South African flag (Dahmer 2019, 142). In 2019, there was a rumour that the Swedish government was considering a ban on the use of runes, which turned out to be false (Juridikfronten 2019). Rune use in the contemporary far right is discussed in Schuppener (2022).

Despite all these contemporary uses of the runes, no attempt has yet been made to study the actual use of runes as a writing system to organise content on social media platforms. The following section discusses the use of hashtags on Instagram.

Background to folksonomy

In order to categorise content on social media platforms, users employ the hashtag (#) to classify posts. Hashtags are a form of *folksonomy*, a term coined by Van der Wal (2007) to denote labelling that is carried out by ordinary people rather than experts in a particular field. Hashtags originated on Twitter in 2007 when Chris Messina suggested that conversations could be grouped around a topic if a # was put in front of a word. Hashtags were officially recognised by Twitter in 2009, and in 2011, hashtags were added to Instagram functionality (Giannoulakis and Tsapatsoulis 2016, 115; Dorsch 2018, 47). Since then, hashtags have become integral to Instagram, which currently allows 30 hashtags per post (Dorsch 2018, 48; Instagram 2024). In fact, research by Sheldon, Herzfeldt, and Rauschnabel (2020, 763) showed that among Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, hashtags are most often used on Instagram, making it a particularly valuable platform for research on hashtag use.

In line with the initial purpose, namely organising content, hashtags enable users to build networks based on common interests, find others who are discussing related issues, and share information using hashtags (Sheldon, Herzfeldt, and Rauschnabel 2020, 759). Hashtags, in other words, serve to indicate the topic of a post. Hashtags are also emergent and collective (Bennett and Wilkins 2020, 1304), meaning that they develop spontaneously within online communities, and operate socially by linking content to communities through their adoption by users. Users are free to

choose or create whatever hashtags they like, which means that a deliberate choice to use runic hashtags implies that the user is in some way familiar with runes.

Although hashtags were initially introduced to help users arrange and organise their content, they have evolved into a much more complicated form of social media communication (Rauschnabel, Sheldon, and Herzfeldt 2019; Zappavigna 2018). Sheldon et al. (2017) identify five factors that influence Instagram use: *self-promotion*, *social interaction*, *diversion*, *documenting*, and *creativity*. Building upon this framework, Rauschnabel, Sheldon, and Herzfeldt (2019, 483–85) identify ten motivations for using hashtags on Instagram. Firstly, *amusing* involves attempting to entertain others through humour. Secondly, *organising* refers to the traditional goal of hashtagging, organising content, by linking it to relevant content. Thirdly, *designing* refers to crafting unique and creative posts that are visually appealing, original and interesting. Fourthly, *confirming* relates to the desire to adhere to the norms of the social media platform or those of the user's friends, meaning that if others are using hashtags, the user wants to follow this convention and use them as well. The fifth motivation, *trendgaging*, derived from *trend* and *engaging*, encompasses the drive to participate in and align with trending dialogue and issues. The sixth motivation, *bonding*, refers to the desire to use hashtags with insider content to connect with and demonstrate membership in a close-knit group of friends; “bonding through hashtagging becomes possible by means of an ‘internal’ language that only members of an insider group would understand and from having shared experiences that inspire bonding-motivated hashtags” (Rauschnabel, Sheldon, and Herzfeldt 2019, 484). The seventh motivation, *inspiring*, entails motivating readers to consider the implications of one's posts. The eighth motivation, *reaching*, refers to addressing those who are interested in a particular topic and spreading a message or perspective. The ninth motivation, *summarising*, involves not only summarising but considering and emphasising the primary message of the post. The last motivation, *endorsing*, refers to promoting subjects or concepts that one finds compelling, such as other individuals, organisations, or events. These motivations are not mutually exclusive and may overlap when hashtags are used.

Hashtagging behaviour also varies across cultures (Sheldon et al. 2017; Sheldon, Herzfeldt, and Rauschnabel 2020). Since no data is available on users in the current study, this aspect is not investigated here.

Hashtags related to Norse or Germanic content on Instagram were studied by Bennett and Wilkins (2020), Downing (2020), and Senekal

(2021), while Hanssen (2020) focused on specific Instagram users. As earlier mentioned, Bennett and Wilkins (2020) studied posts with the hashtags *#rune* and *#tattoo* investigating how people use tattoos to identify with their heritage, specifically in terms of the use of runes in a New Age, Norse Pagan and white nationalist setting. Downing (2020) studied Instagram posts with the hashtags *#norsewitch*, *#heathengirl*, *#seidr*, *#volva*, *#galdr*, *#norsepagan*, *#heathensofinstagram*, *#witch*, *#runes*, *#viking*, *#shamanism* and *#witchesofinstagram*. His focus was on female Instagram users with an explicit Pagan outlook and he discussed how they marketed themselves and their message on this platform. Senekal (2021) studied hashtags related to *#germanic* and found a wide range of historical, mythological, and popular culture references that describe the milieu surrounding this culture. Focusing on users rather than hashtags, Hanssen (2020) found that men who identify as Norse Pagans occupy more traditional male roles than is the case with men who identify as Wiccans, while Wiccans deal with gender roles more flexibly.

None of these previous studies has however investigated how runes are used as a script in hashtags on Instagram, even though most studies illustrate the importance of runes in discussing Norse/Germanic content. The following section discusses the methods used in the current study.

Methods

Bennett and Wilkins (2020, 1305) began their study of runic tattoos with the hashtag *#rune*, which at the time delivered 153,000 hits on Instagram. A cursory review of posts marked with the hashtag *#rune* however showed that very few posts marked with this hashtag actually included runic hashtags (most posts were about uses of runes, using the Roman script). In order to gather runic hashtags, *#rune* could not therefore be used as a departure point, since a large number of irrelevant posts would have been collected, while simultaneously a large number of runic hashtags would be missed, as Instagram users do not necessarily include *#rune* with runic hashtags.

Bennett and Wilkins (2020, 1306) selected only 100 Instagram posts for their study, which was qualitative with no attempt to be comprehensive. The current study aims to provide a more comprehensive overview of the use of the runes on Instagram, and hence all posts made with runic hashtags from the elder and younger futharks were counted. These posts were found by individually searching for hashtags with every rune that occurs in the elder and younger futhark, with a total of 30 runes. The search was conducted on 3 January 2022. Only hashtags that consisted exclusively of

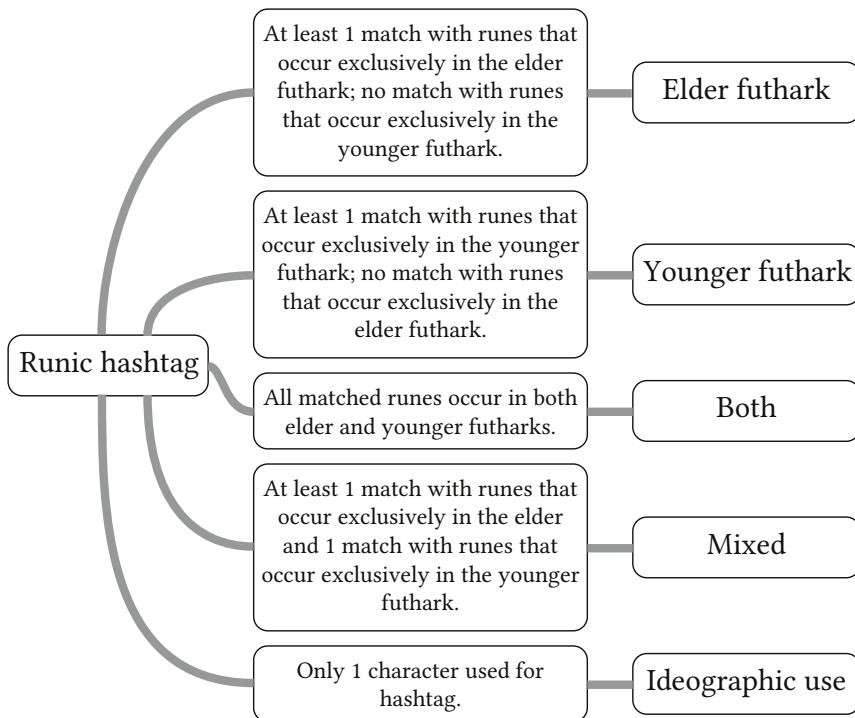


Fig. 1. The classification of runic hashtags

runes were considered, although some users combined runes with Latin and other scripts, e.g. #Mehwaz.

After hashtags and their occurrences were identified and listed, the runes used in hashtags were classified as using the elder or younger futhark if they contained at least one rune unique to that system. Some runes of course occur in both futharks and hashtags were classified accordingly as *both*. If a hashtag included runes from both the elder and younger futharks, using at least one rune unique to either, it was classified as *mixed*. While the use of Anglo-Saxon runes was not investigated in the current study, some runes of course occur in both the elder or younger futharks and the Anglo-Saxon futhark; hashtags that used Anglo-Saxon runes were removed from the analysis. In addition, hashtags that used a single rune were classified as ideographic. The classification of runic hashtags occurred as in figure 1.

Apart from identifying which futhark was used in runic hashtags, it was also important to identify the hashtag themes. A variety of studies

have analysed the content of hashtags and Instagram posts by grouping hashtags and posts into categories (Hu, Manikonda, and Kambhampati 2014; Dorsch 2018; Ichau, Frissen, and d'Haenens 2019; Senekal 2021). Hu, Manikonda, and Kambhampati (2014) used image recognition and annotators to develop categories for Instagram posts based on the data itself, identifying eight categories, namely *self-portraits, friends, activities, captioned photos, food, gadgets, fashion, and pets*. Dorsch (2018) used the categories identified by Hu, Manikonda, and Kambhampati (2014) to group hashtags. These were not considered useful in the current study because it was expected that runes would be used in historical and mythological contexts whereas Hu, Manikonda, and Kambhampati's (2014) categories were based on more popular contemporary Instagram hashtag use. Dorsch (2018) also found these categories too restrictive, adding *architecture, art* and *landscape* and removing the category *gadgets*. Hu, Manikonda, and Kambhampati's (2014) categories were the result of a grounded approach which developed categories based on the data itself, an approach also followed by Ichau, Frissen, and d'Haenens (2019) and Senekal (2021). Ichau, Frissen, and d'Haenens's (2019) grounded approach led to 16 content-relevant categories relating to Jewish content while Senekal's (2021) grounded approach led to the use of 10 categories relevant to discourse on Germanic content. I follow the grounded approach of these studies here by classifying hashtags into categories that emerged from the data. These categories are as follows:

Hashtags were grouped under these categories to provide an overview of the runic hashtag content. The consideration was that while the extent of runic use and the choice of futharks could shed some light on the use of runes on Instagram, the type of use could further illuminate how runes are used on this platform. Hashtags were assigned a single category based on their primary group. Huginn and Muninn would for instance be classified as mythological even though they both are ravens, just as ravens themselves would be classified as animals, although specific instances of ravens could be mythological creatures. It sometimes proved a challenge when hashtags could be classified into more than one category, such as #RÍXᛏÍR (#ragnar), which could be a personal name, a reference to the historical figure or to the main character in the television show, *Vikings*. The small size of the dataset allowed the use of the caption and the picture in the post to determine which category was most appropriate.

A note is required on the ethical use of social media data. It is generally more acceptable to use public profiles than private ones (Senekal 2021, 142), and in the current study, only public posts were considered. Furthermore, the discussion below does not refer to any particular users by name, although the small number of occurrences of hashtags may make it possible to identify users that employed specific hashtags. When user-names were transliterated into runes, these are not mentioned below. Highfield and Leaver (2016, 57) argue that it may be beneficial to shift from the dichotomy of public versus private and instead examine whether conducting research brings to light overlooked material and whether disseminating this material through research and reporting could pose any risks. In my view, none of the uses of hashtags has the potential to cause harm to users, since in most cases users post only about runes or about Norse or Germanic mythology, or they use runes to market their content, and they do so publicly. The exception would be if racist posts were highlighted in the current study but this is not the case. Where it is noted that the use of a hashtag is primarily limited to single users, these post only on innocuous subjects such as book reviews or otherwise may state their opposition to racism.

Results and discussion

Table 1 shows the number of posts that utilise the elder and younger futharks, as well as both or mixed. The majority of posts, 6,912 (65.92%), used hashtags consisting of runes belonging to the elder futhark, 105 (1%) posts used hashtags belonging to the younger futhark, 1,621 (15.46%)

Table 1. The number of posts by futhark

	Elder	Younger	Both	Mixed	Total
Number of posts	6912	105	1621	1847	10485
Number of ideographic posts	1764	30	1496	–	3290

Table 2. The 10 most popular runes used ideographically

Hashtag	Futhark	Posts	% of total
#ᛇ	elder	675	20.52 %
#ᛇ	elder	651	19.79 %
#ᛇ	both	271	8.24 %
#ᛘ	elder	218	6.63 %
#ᚠ	elder	179	5.44 %
#ᛚ	elder	166	5.05 %
#ᛘ	elder	115	3.50 %
#ᚢ	elder	106	3.22 %
#ᛊ	both	103	3.13 %
#ᛇ	younger	80	2.43 %

posts used runes found in both the younger and the elder futhark, and 1,847 (17.62 %) posts used hashtags in a mixed manner. The elder futhark is therefore the most popular in terms of the number of posts on Instagram with runic hashtags, along with the number of hashtags noted above.

In terms of ideographic use, 1764 (16.82 %) posts used runes belonging to the elder futhark ideographically, 30 (0.29 %) posts used runes belonging to the younger futhark ideographically, and 1496 (14.27 %) posts used runes found in both the younger and the older futhark ideographically. The elder futhark is therefore also the most popular for ideographic use in runic hashtags, making it the most popular futhark on Instagram overall. Table 2 shows the most popular runes that were used ideographically. Note that while the elder futhark Υ and younger Υ are almost identical, Unicode distinguishes between the two, following the recommendations

Table 3. The distribution of runes per hashtag across the elder and younger futharks

	Elder	Younger	Both	Mixed	Total
Number of hashtags	378	34	41	62	515
Ideographic use	15	4	11	–	30

of Nordisk Ministerråd (1997, 30). These characters are encoded as 16C9 ALGIZ EOLHX and 16D8 LONG-BRANCH-MADR M in Unicode respectively.

All rune types are used ideographically as hashtags on Instagram, but as is the case with other runic hashtags, their use varies greatly. While #ᛇ is used 675 times, #* is used only once. Note that #ᛇ and #ᛇ together constitute over 40 % of ideographic use, which makes these two runes significantly more popular for ideographic use in hashtags than the other runes. Their popularity may respectively be due to the contemporary association in mythical runelore between ᛇ (*ōþila*) and heritage and ᛇ (*elhaz*) and the connection with the divine. The popularity of #ᛇ is of particular interest since the use of this rune in contemporary Pagan festivals such as those held by Edinburgh's Beltane Fire Society is well attested (Dahmer 2019, 142), showing that this is one of the most popular runes amongst modern day Pagans. However, it should also be noted that these two runes have a far right association and that both were used by the Nazi regime (Schuppener 2022, 111–18). The examination of individual posts during the course of this study showed that these two runes were predominantly used in a Norse Pagan context and never in a far right one.

Table 3 shows the distribution of runes per unique hashtag across the elder and younger futharks. In total, 515 runic hashtags were found on Instagram, occurring in a total of 10,489 posts. Of these hashtags, 378 (73.4 %) used the elder futhark, 34 (6.6 %) used the younger one, 41 (7.96 %) used runes found in both the younger and the elder futhark, and 62 (12.04 %) used hashtags in a mixed manner, incorporating runes exclusive to either futhark. It is therefore clear that the elder futhark is the most popular in terms of hashtag frequency on Instagram.

The popularity of the elder futhark over the younger, whether in consideration of the number of posts, number of unique hashtags, or ideographic use, may be due to the closer resemblance of the elder futhark to the Roman script, making the elder futhark somehow more familiar. The 24 runes in the elder futhark are also more easily comparable to the 26 letters in the modern English alphabet, with the notable examples ᛑ,

ᚦ, ᛁ, ᛖ, and ᛒ while the younger futhark's 16 runes, along with their ambiguity, may make it more difficult for modern social media users to transliterate their hashtags into runes. The popularity of the elder futhark may also be due to its original use over a wider geographical area, which means that a larger contemporary population regards the elder futhark rather than the younger one as part of their heritage.

The majority of runic hashtags, even the most popular ones as listed in table 4, do not occur often: 282 hashtags (54.86 %) occur only once and 426 (82.88 %) occur less than ten times. The most commonly found runic hashtags thus represent a minority and most have not been adopted by the greater Instagram community. This phenomenon is not unique to runic hashtags but is characteristic of folksonomy, where the use of tags generally follows a power law distribution (Lux, Granitzer, and Kern 2007; Munk and Mørk 2007), meaning that a very small number of tags are used frequently while the overwhelming majority of tags rarely occur. However, the small number – 14 hashtags or 2.72 % of hashtags – that occur more than 100 times shows that runic hashtags, when created, are very seldom adopted by other users. In the light of research findings by Rauschnabel, Sheldon, and Herzfeldt (2019), particularly in terms of the motivations they call *trendgaging*, *reaching* and *endorsing*, the runes therefore have a very limited capacity to promote content and align users with trending issues but are instead used as a form of self-expression, creating unique content and engaging with close-knit communities with insider knowledge. The use of runic hashtags therefore is more relevant to what Rauschnabel, Sheldon, and Herzfeldt (2019) refer to as *designing* and *bonding*.

The most popular runic hashtag was #ᛏᚢᚱᚩᚼᚢᚱᚩ #*larshald* (1314 posts), followed by #ᛒᚱᛁᛋ #*bragi*; 861 posts), #ᛚᛘ #*pdm*; 727 posts), #ᛟ #*o*; 675 posts), and #ᛖ #*z*; 651 posts). The hashtag #ᛏᚢᚱᚩᚼᚢᚱᚩ #*larshald* refers to a photographer who is strongly associated with The Bearded Villains, a global charity and association formed around bearded men of any culture, and therefore is not restricted to Norse-themed content. The use of this hashtag can be considered to promote unique content within this community, i.e. what Rauschnabel, Sheldon, and Herzfeldt (2019) refer to as *bonding*, *reaching* and *endorsing*, although the limited number of posts indicate that this endorsement is confined to a close-knit community. The hashtag #ᛒᚱᛁᛋ #*bragi* is mostly limited to a single user and seems to be an attempt to craft unique posts relating to the user's own profile, in other words the use of this hashtag is primarily focused on what Rauschnabel, Sheldon, and Herzfeldt (2019) call *designing*. The hashtag #ᛚᛘ #*pdm*

Table 4. The most popular runic hashtags

Hashtag	Futhark	Posts	Latin transliteration
#ᛏᚠᚱᚠᚫᚫᚱ	mixed	1314	#larshald
#ᛘᚱᚠᚫ	elder	861	#bragi
#ᛚᛘ	elder	727	#pdm
#ᛘ	elder	675	#o
#ᛏ	elder	651	#z
#ᛒᚠᚱ	elder	619	#þyrr
#ᚱᚠᛏ	elder	406	#runa
#ᛘ	both	271	#b
#ᚱᚠᛏᛘ	mixed	266	#runes
#ᛘ	elder	218	#m

is strongly associated with people that wear clothes from the brand *Thor Steinar*, a Viking-themed clothing brand tied to the far right. The use of this hashtag seems similar to that of #ᛏᚠᚱᚠᚫᚫᚱ, namely its use relates to what Rauschnabel, Sheldon, and Herzfeldt (2019) call *bonding*, *reaching* and *endorsing*, with the caveat that this hashtag is used in a small community. This clothing brand, accused of having ties to the far right in Europe and Russia (Rekawek, Ritzmann, and Schindler 2020, 22), has been banned from the German Bundestag (Radke 2008), and one user employs this hashtag in an anti-racist context, apparently targeting what he perceives as a racist hashtag. In any case, the hashtag #ᛚᛘ seems to be employed to market content within this community. The hashtag #ᛒᚠᚱ (#þyrr) is a mistransliteration of #ᛒᚠᚱ (#þorr) and is not the only mistransliteration in this dataset: others include #ᛘᚠᛁᛏ (#omin) for #ᛘᚠᛁᛏ (#odin), #ᛘᚠᛘᚠᚫ (#dfgz) for #ᛘᚠᚫ (#dagaz), #*ᛘᚠᛏ*ᛘᚠᛏ* (#heathens) for #*ᛘᚠᛏ*ᛘᚠᛏ* (#heathens) and #ᛘᛁᛘᚫᚱ (#mldgard) for #ᛘᛁᛘᚫᚱ (#midgard). The first mistransliteration is nevertheless of most interest: ◊ closely resembles the Latin *o* and was likely chosen as the elder futhark symbol most visually similar to the Latin character. Other mistransliterations follow a similar pattern, employing similar looking runes or runes resembling Latin characters. Lastly, the hashtag #ᚱᚠᛏ

Table 5. The most popular categories for runic hashtag use

Classification	Count	Posts
Runes	66	3994
Mythology	119	2455
Names and Instagram accounts	90	2370
Abbreviation	42	824
Sentence	10	220
Meta	32	209
Other	107	155
History	22	73
Popular culture	13	69
Animals	9	29
Nature	8	14

(#runa) usually refers to the name of a particular Czechoslovakian wolf-dog, which might be considered an attempt to create unique content, or what Rauschnabel, Sheldon, and Herzfeldt (2019) call *designing*. Note that *runa* is not a mistransliteration of *rune*; the dog is referred to as Runa using the Roman script as well.

The categories of runic hashtag are shown in table 5. In the interest of brevity, only the largest three categories are discussed below.

Firstly, as might be expected, the largest number of posts using runic hashtags relates to the use of the runes themselves. Examples of the most common runic hashtags using runes, aside from those shown in table 2, include #ᚱᚻᚾᚻ (runa), #ᚱᚻᚾᚻᛘᚻ (runes), #ᚼᚻᚻᚻᚻ (fupark), #ᚱᚻᚾᚻᛘ (rune), #ᚱᚻᚾᚻᛘᛘ (runes), #ᚱᚻᚾᚻᚻ (runas), #ᚱᚻᚾᚻᛘᚱ (runer), #ᚼᚻᚻᚻ (fehu), #ᚼᚻᚻᚻ (algiz), and #ᚼᚻᚻᚻ (uruz). The names of runes are often spelled out, with *fehu* being the most frequent example of this, although *ōpila* (ᛟ) occurs most often in ideographic form. In most cases, runic hashtags that refer to the runes are accompanied by a runic image, whether an artwork, tattoo, or an engraving on an item such as an axe. Like the use of runic hashtags with mythological content (see below), the use of runic hashtags referencing runes can be interpreted in terms of what Rauschnabel, Sheldon, and Herzfeldt (2019) call *bonding* and

Table 6. Gods most frequently referenced

God	Hashtags	Posts
Bragi	1	861
Thor	7	667
Odin	9	264
Heimdall	2	46
Tyr	4	17
Loki	2	17
Freyja	3	11
Ostara	1	3
Idunn	2	2
Hel	1	2
Balder	1	1
Forseti	1	1
Ing	1	1
Skadi	1	1
Frigg	1	0

reaching, although their limited use suggests that a very small, close-knit community is targeted.

Examples of the most common runic hashtags relating to mythology include #þRÍXI (#bragi), #þoRR (#þyrr, sic), #ÓðIN (#odin), #ÝRMÓf (#freja), #MÍGGÍR (#midgard), #*MÍTT*MÍTTÍH (#heathleans; sic), #HMIÐALZ (#heimdalz), #ÍFÝRÍMHÍR (#alfadhir), #ÍXRMÍHÍRÍT (#nordikspirit) and #þRÍR (#þor). Although runic hashtags refer to other mythological creatures, such as #ÝMÍRÍR (#fenrir), #HÚXIÍT (#hugin), #MÚTTÍT (#munin), #ÝRMÍI (#freki), #XMRÍ (#geri), and #TÍMHÍRXX (#nidhogg), the most common ones refer primarily to gods. Various spellings (and mistransliterations as discussed above) and variations on divine names occur; these were therefore standardised to determine which gods were most commonly referenced in the dataset. In total, 15 gods were referenced, as shown in table 6. Thor is referred to by seven

different hashtags, namely #þórr (#þjrr), #þórr (#þor), #þórr (#þor), #þórr (#þonar), #þórr (#þorr), #þórr (#tor), and #þórr (#thor) while Odin is referred to by nine different hashtags, namely #óþiþ (#óþin), #íþadhir (#íþadhir), #íþadhirhátt (#íþadhirhátt), #þórr (#wotan), #þórr (#woden), #þórr (#odin), #þórr (#oden), #þórr (#omin), and #þórr (#óþin). Considering that posts relating to Bragi are largely limited to a single user and no other hashtags are associated with him, it is clear that Thor and Odin are the most popular gods, followed by Heimdall and Tyr. The images that accompany these posts vary from artworks, tattoos, shrines and jewellery to memes, motivational posts, and information on Norse religion. Using the framework established by Rauschnabel, Sheldon and Herzfeldt (2019), the runic hashtags can here be considered attempts to design unique and creative posts and link to other users using inside knowledge (*bonding* and *reaching*).

The third largest category is names and Instagram accounts although for the sake of privacy, examples are not mentioned here. It is however noteworthy that this category ranks third for runic hashtags on Instagram since it shows an unexpected runic use: linking posts to a specific Instagram profile. In the framework established by Rauschnabel, Sheldon, and Herzfeldt (2019), this category can be considered an attempt to design unique and engaging posts as well as to link to small communities with insider knowledge (*bonding*) and promote unique content (*reaching*). Using runic hashtags allows users to ensure that posts are linked to their profiles rather than an unrelated topic. The runes' relative lack of popularity (compared with the Roman script) therefore becomes an advantage while the very use of runes implies an interest in Norse and Germanic topics, which becomes an additional marker of identity.

The remaining categories have far fewer posts with predictable content: references to Vikings and the characters from the eponymous television series or the historical figures that it was based on, references to wolves, ravens and rivers, references to berserkers, warriors and mead, and references to bands such as Heilung and Nytt Land. An interesting outlier consists of two runic hashtags referencing a song by the South Korean boy band SF9, #ᛏᛃᚱᛃᚱᚢᛚ (#teardrop) and #ᛏᛃᚱ_ᛃᚱᚢಲ (#tear_drop). Since the song does not reference specifically Norse or Germanic topics, it appears that the band followed the example of the above-mentioned Instagram accounts, creating a unique hashtag with the elder futhark runes.

With only 10,489 posts, runic hashtags are considerably less popular on Instagram than hashtags that use the Roman script to refer to the

same concepts, e.g. `#odin` (1,634,011 posts), `#thor` (11,292,039 posts), `#runes` (922,838 posts), `#vikings` (5,733,489 posts) and `#germanic` (62,544 posts; as on 3 January 2022). This small number of hashtags and posts show that the Roman script is by far the preferred one for discourse on Norse and Germanic historical and mythological topics although a total of 10,489 posts is hardly insignificant. Less common spelling variants on the themes of Norse and Germanic history and mythology, such as the hashtags `#óðinn` (5,840 posts), `#þórr` (2,064 posts), `#rúnar` (232 posts), and `#víkingr` (889 posts; as on 3 January 2022), are not commonly employed. It is worth remembering that hashtags such as `#thor` – with over 11 million posts – often refer to the Marvel films, which have only a superficial connection with Norse mythology, while `#vikings` may refer to the popular television series. Using runic hashtags suggests a more informed social media user as it requires an understanding of Norse and Germanic history which goes beyond a cursory knowledge of figures like Thor or Vikings. If this higher threshold for background knowledge is taken into account, the use of runic hashtags can be considered modest but nevertheless noteworthy.

Other interesting uses

Beyond their popular uses, some interesting outliers were also found. Users sometimes employed the runes in a playful manner far removed from topics related to Norse and Germanic heritage and mythology. For instance, one user employed a hashtag transliterated as *fuck it* while another referred to friendship with a runic hashtag. Another user tagged a picture with his girlfriend with unique runic hashtags describing her as his dream woman and suggesting that they would be together forever. Posts also referenced animals including, apart from the previously mentioned Czechoslovakian wolfdog, hashtags such as `#ᚼᚻᛏᚼᛖᛒ` (`#hundeliebe`), `#ᛚᚻᛋ` (`#pugs`) and `#ᛚᚻᛋᛏᛄᛖ` (`#puglove`) along with posts about `#ᚼᚻᛏᚩ` (`#kats`). This shows that while the runes were mostly used in the context of Norse and Germanic history, culture and mythology on Instagram, some users incorporated them into their everyday lives. The use of runes in such a humorous, playful manner is particularly striking when set against the framework established by Rauschnabel, Sheldon, and Herzfeldt (2019) and might link to their conclusion that hashtags are often used to amuse, although the insider knowledge required to interpret runic hashtags also connects these hashtags to a very small community.

As already mentioned, runes have an association with the far right and racism, and a small number of such posts did occur. One hashtag, `#ᚱᚻᛁᛏ`

(#white; 165 posts), was blocked by Instagram at the time of writing, with Instagram noting that “the community has reported some content that may not meet Instagram’s community guidelines”. While this statement did not specify the reason, the hashtag itself suggests that some of the posts may have involved what was considered to be racist content. The blocked content meant I could not investigate the extent to which to this hashtag was used in a racist manner. The well-known Nazi use of the runes also occurred in hashtag form, #ᚼᚼ (#ss; 5 times), although the context made clear that posts using these runes were either denouncing racism or not referencing it at all. Nor was *ōbila* (ᛇ), which has had a racist connotation since World War II, used in any overtly racist posts with the rune’s corresponding hashtag. Similarly, the use of #ᛚᛘᛘ (#pdm) noted earlier as linked to people wearing clothes made by a company sometimes considered to have ties with the far right also involved no racist posts. The racist connotations of the runes are therefore very slight in terms of runic hashtags on Instagram. One user however used the hashtag #ᛒᛁᛘ (#blm; 4 posts; black lives matter), thereby bringing the runes into contemporary political discussions. This might recall Rauschnabel, Sheldon, and Herzfeldt’s (2019) finding that one of the motivations for using hashtags is connecting with trending issues: the transliteration into runes of a contemporary issue (#blm) shows that, despite their perceived ties to racism, they could be used for any purpose.

Conclusion

Runes have been in almost continuous use for the past two millennia, continuing into the digital age. This study, investigating the use of runic hashtags on Instagram, showed that while runic hashtags are not comparable in popularity to hashtags in Roman script, they are nevertheless used to a significant extent. It also showed the elder futhark to be significantly more popular than the younger, although both are represented, sometimes even in combination. The runic script’s strong historical association with Norse and Germanic religion is reflected on Instagram as well, indicating that most Instagram users regard runes as inextricably bound to their original cultural context. Nevertheless, other uses of the runes were also highlighted, including linking hashtags to profiles and further unique uses. As shown in Rauschnabel, Sheldon, and Herzfeldt’s research (2019), hashtags are used for many more purposes than simply organising content, and the current study showed that runes are used in particular to create unique social media content and engage with small

communities that have insider knowledge. The runic association with the far right was also confirmed, although this was limited to a hashtag associated with a clothing company.

While runic hashtags remain less popular than Roman script equivalents, the increasing popularity of Instagram and a renewed interest in the Norse and Germanic past will in all likelihood mean an increased use of runic hashtags in the near future. The huge increase in the number of posts marked with the hashtag *#rune* since the study by Bennett and Wilkins (2020) suggests that runes are fast increasing in popularity. This will create the opportunity for future research to investigate new contemporary uses of the runes, such as for expressing identity, promoting religious ideas, and engaging in new ways with history.

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