The Futhark in Oregon:
an Excursus on Collegiate Onomastics

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VISITORS TO THE WILLAMETTE VALLEY in Oregon may be some-
what dismayed at certain inscriptions and names which only re-
cently have been *unearthed* on the campus of Oregon State Uni-
versity (OSU).[1] Here, for all to behold, are to be found dwelling
halls — each with its own appropriate runic inscription — bearing
such names as the following:

Auer Beork	Kaun Ilix	Sigel Hagall
Ehr Staan	Kaun Raad	Thorn Tyr
Gar Ilix	Kaun Staan Ilix	Tyr Feoh Kaun
Gar Tyr	Naud Ilix	Tyr Ilix Gar
Gar Wyn	Naud Kaun	Wyn Thorn
Hagall Staan	Othil Gar	Wyn Tyr
Ilix Ilix Ilix	Quorth Logar	Yar Ilix Yar
Kaun Eis	Quorth Staan	Yar Yar Logar

It is not to be inferred that these inscriptions and names were
left behind by certain ancient Norse wayfarers who somehow made
their way from Greenland to Markland and thence to the Pacific
Coast by way of Hudson Bay and Minnesota; the curious reader
will look in vain for any such trek in *The Norse Discoveries and
Explorations in America*.[2] Nor, when the visitor hears such a refrain
as "Ye men of Hagall Staan, arise!" chanted within these halls, is
he to assume that this is some latter-day version of a song first sung
by an ancient scop or skald which somehow eluded the able editors
of the *Corpus Poeticum Boreale*[3] or *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*.[4]

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[1] *Nomina mutantur* — by recent legislative action the name Oregon State College
was changed to Oregon State University, effective August 9, 1961 — *et nos mutamur
in illis.*

[2] Edward Reman (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1949).

[3] Gudbrand Vigfusson and F. York Powell, edd. (Oxford, 1883).

[4] G. P. Krapp and E. V. K. Dobbie, eds. (New York, 1931 ff.).

A far simpler explanation for the occurrence of such proud and high-sounding names on the Pacific slope of North America is to be offered. Several years ago a student came to me and inquired as to the feasibility of devising a new system of names that might be used in designating the various men's residence halls here at Oregon State University, saying that he had been assigned to a student committee to study the situation and to make recommendations for a new system. He pointed out that heretofore the names of persons had widely been used in formulating names for such halls; he also recalled that in the United States the names of the letters of the Greek alphabet had been used long and extensively to designate various college and university organizations. He then asked if I could suggest some other alphabet which might serve the same purpose but which would be more novel in the business of collegiate name-giving.

When I suggested the *futhark,* he exclaimed, "Futhark! What's that ?" Thereupon I took down a copy of *Handbuch der Runenkunde*[5] and told him that he would find the answer to his question therein. He took the book, thanked me, and departed. Some weeks later he returned the book, saying that he had perused it duly and that he had devised a system which he intended to recommend for adoption. Thereupon he departed a second time.

Considerable time elapsed, and I thought nothing more of the incident. Shortly after the beginning of the next school year, however, an article appeared in the college newspaper announcing that a new system for naming the men's residence halls had been devised and adopted; in the article, too, a brief explanation of the word *rune* was given, and the symbols also were shown with their names transliterated into the roman alphabet.[6] Later, when talking with my young friend again, I asked him how he and his committee had come to settle upon the names which they finally selected for the local futhark. To this he replied that they had arbitrarily chosen names from the various runic alphabets which they had found recorded, and these — both symbol and name — they had altered here

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[5] Helmut Arntz (Halle/Saale, 1935). — Sometime after this episode occurred, a small book appeared in English which reviews the subject briefly but adequately: R. W. V. Elliott, *Runes: An Introduction* (New York, 1959).

[6] "Germanic Names Are Given to Clubs in Men's Dorms," *Oregon State College Daily Barometer* (Corvallis, Oregon), Sept. 25, 1957, p. 4.

and there to suit their fancy. Their chief concern, besides novelty, was that the symbols should be distinctive and that the names therefor should not easily be confused with other English words and names.

Whereas the common Germanic futhark consisted of 24 runes, the futhark employed on this campus consists of 27 names and symbols respectively, corresponding in the main to the 29-rune futhark as revealed in the *Old English Rune Poem*[7] (with several runes taken from the expanded Old English futhark of 33 runes) rather than to the reduced Scandinavian futhark of 16 characters. It is interesting to note that while most of the runic names employed locally are of Old English origin, several of them are basically Old Norse; the local runic symbols, moreover, are in most instances historically accurate.[8]

For purposes of comparison a table is furnished herewith showing the normalized names of the expanded Old English futhark together with those of the reduced Old Norse futhark; in addition, the names of the runes as adopted locally are listed together with the meanings most commonly accepted for all.[9]

OE	*ON*	*OSU*	*Meaning*
1. feoh	fé	feoh	cattle, wealth
2. ūr	úrr	auer	aurochs
3. þorn	—	thorn	thorn
—	þurs	—	ogre
4. ōs	óss	—	river mouth; god
5. rād	reið	raad	ride, journey
6. cēn	—	—	torch
—	kaun	kaun	ulcer
7. giefu	—	—	gift
8. wynn	—	wyn	joy
9. hægl	hagl	hagall	hail
10. nied	nauð(r)	naud	need
11. īs	íss	eis	ice

[7] Bruce Dickins, *Runic and Heroic Poems of the Old Teutonic Peoples* (Cambridge, 1915), pp. 12–23.

[8] See *The Beaver*. Published by the Associated Students of Oregon State College/ University. (Corvallis, Oregon), vols. 52–56 (1958–62), *passim*.

[9] Cf. Elliott, *Runes*, pp. 48–49. – Karl Schneider, *Die germanischen Runennamen. Versuch einer Gesamtdeutung* (Meisenheim am Glan, 1956), *passim*.

OE	ON	OSU	Meaning
12. gēar	ár	yeer	year
13. ēoh, ēow	ýr	yar	yew
14. peorð	—	perk	(?)
15. eolhx, ilix	—	ilix	sedge
16. sigel	sól	sigel	sun
17. tīr	týr	tyr	the god Tyr
18. beorc	bjarkan	beork	birch
19. eoh, hæc	—	haec	horse
20. mann	maðr	mann	man
21. lagu	lögr	logar	sea, water
22. ing	—	engg	the god Ing
23. dæg	—	daeg	day
24. ēðel, ōðel	—	othil	homeland
25. āc	—	—	oak
26. æsc	—	asck	ash tree
27. ȳr	—	—	yew bow
28. īor	—	—	(?)
29. ēar	—	ehr	sea (?)
30. cweorð	—	quorth	(?)
31. calc	—	—	cup
32. stān	—	staan	stone
33. gār	—	gar	spear

A final word remains to be said. The system of name-giving as here described has been widely accepted by the students of this institution; every year new organizations are founded, and every year new names are added to the list. When one reads *Tri-Ilix* in the student newspaper for *Ilix Ilix Ilix,* one feels that the new system has definitely been accepted by the university community. Having found acceptance on this campus for over four years, the futhark bids fair to persist indefinitely.

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feoh auer thorn asck raad kaun gar wyn hagall naud eis yeer yar perk
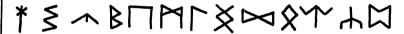
The Runic Alphabet

Runes (the Futhark) are the native Germanic form of the alphabet, and the earliest go back in date to about the second century A.D. The name "rune" means mystery, secret, and shows the sense of mystery which was attached to the infancy of writing everywhere. The great majority of the inscriptions have been found in Scandinavia, Great Britain, and Germany. Since the symbols were made by cutting in wood or stone, the shape of the signs is angular and free from curves. Eventually Runes gave way to the Latin alphabet as the Church of Rome extended its influence.

The use of the Runic Alphabet to name men's living groups in the dormitories at Oregon State arose from a desire to have distinct names, and to allow for future expansion. The present use of the alphabet was developed by members of a committee established by the Inter-Dormitory Council. It was accepted by residents of the dormitories and approved by the Council.

These letters are pronounced almost exactly as spelled. When you try, it is easy.

ilix sigel tyr beork haec mann logar engg daeg othil ehr quorth staan

ᛏ ᛤ ᚫ ᛒ ᚠ ᚺ ᚱ ᛪ ᛥ ᚷ ᛘ ᚦ ᛢ

Brochure Publicizing New System of Names