

**An example of Nordic Magic Healing:
Discovering and "galdoring" the Mystical Origin of Sickness
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(this is an expanded version of a paper that appeared in "Idunna")

What kind of magic to study?

I deal with what has been seen as a very special kind of magic, magical healing. In fact, I do not consider there is much of a difference between magical healing and any other kind of magic. It all comes from the same place, slightly twisting our physical reality in order to allow something magical to creep out (at least, to the extent of my moderate strength, this how I feel!). In this paper I will explain how to perform two specific steps of Nordic healing, which I identify as the third and fourth steps of physical healing, that is, discovering the deep cause of the sickness and using galdr to address it. In order to perform this feat, we need to master all the well-known techniques of Nordic magic: seidr, rune magic, and galdr (called "galdor" in Old English, hence my invention of the verb "to galdor" as in the title of this paper). I only recognize one kind of magic, but I would be blind not to acknowledge the existence of two opposed attitudes towards learning it. One is that the purpose of learning magic is the increase of the magician's knowledge and power over others (including healing, which can also be a subtle way of asserting our power over other humans). The other belief is that the magician learns in order to increase his or her knowledge and power over himself or herself.

(note: in order to avoid awkward speech, in the rest of this paper, the patient will always be called "he," and the healer "she".)

The first approach is often called "black magic," and the second one "white magic". Even though I use these words for the sake of simplicity, I must warn against the blind belief that white magic is good, and black magic is evil, just as I warn against making a sharp difference between Good and Evil. For centuries, christianity has been hammering the belief that there is sharp difference between them into us, and it is very difficult for us to think otherwise nowadays.

Therefore, I do not claim I am practicing "good white" magic, I claim that I am practicing a form of Nordic Magic Healing which is more devoted to the increase of my self-control and knowledge, than to the increase of my power over other people. As a consequence of this choice, I do not provide healing the way a caterer provides food. I do not believe that I am, strictly speaking, able to magically heal other people. I can help them, and the Spirits or the Gods can heal them if they listen to the pleas that both healer and patient address to them. As a matter of fact, this kind of humility in front of the Gods is perhaps the most distinguishing feature I see in the Nordic healer. She does not boast of being powerful, she boasts of being able to address the Gods in a manner closer to that of a priest(ess) than that of a warrior.

Runes for healing

Why use runes for healing at all? Most modern rune users use them as a kind of elaborate tea leaves or tarot cards, in order to foresee the future. I do not want to spend too much place criticizing this choice here (see a detailed argumentation on my site:

<http://www.teaser.fr/~lfontaine/nmh>), but I want to illustrate my opposite choice by two examples of a description of an early use of the runes. One dates around 350, and the other more than a thousand years later. It is of course a question to know if « runes » was used in

our present meaning or as meaning « secret operation ». The only answer I give to this kind of scholarly remark is that, at any rate, from the 4th to the 16th century, we know that people did speak of the same runes-staves since primitive Old Futhark and Medieval rune-staves don't look the same, nor were they calling to exactly the same Gods.

Jordanes, in his history of the Goths (8th chapter), written during the 6th century, relates a fact that happened in the 4th or before (Filimer is the 5th king in succession to the mythic first Goth king, Berig.)

“Filimer rex Gothorum ... reperit in populo suo quasdam magas mulieres, quas patrio sermone Aliorumnas ipse cognominat ; easque habens suspectas, de medio sui proturbat, longeque ab exercitu suo fugatas in solitudinem coegit terrae. »

“Filimer the king of the Goths ... spotted among his people some sorcerer women, called by the public rumor Aliorumnas; and suspecting these, he banished them, and far away from his army he forced them to flee in the solitudes of the earth.”

Aliorumnas, Aliorunnas, All-runn (qui cuncta novit = « that all transform into each other »)

This is my word-for-word translation, which keeps the same general meaning as a more academic one, like the one given at :

www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~vandersp/Courses/texts/jorddgeti.html

This indicates that these women were using a magic named after the runes, and that they were of use in the Goth army at this time. The importance of these sorcerers is reflected by the amount of place given to them in the « Malleus Maleficarum » written around 1490 by Kramer and Sprenger, a book which later became the classical manual for witch hunting. Chapter 16 of Part 2, Question 1, explains carefully how to spot these army sorcerers (that are then men only, and called “witch-archer”), and how to punish the war chiefs that use them. It is also explained in passing that these sorcerers help to win victory.

I hope you see the thread of my argument : women call « all-runn » were with the armies of the Goths until Filimer, and the custom of having sorcerer help has been lasting until the 16th century at least. My guess is that these ladies were using something like the runes to fight with the army, not to foresee the future.

Strangely enough, I found an allusion to rune healing in the same « Malleus Maleficarum ». As good christians should, Kramer and Sprenger believed in the difference between holy and malicious magic, and they describe the use of runes for healing as non demoniac, if unlawful. In Summers' translation, part 1, question 2, they say :

" ... if they superstitiously employ natural things, as, for example, by writing down certain characters or unknown names of some kind, and that then they use these runes for restoring a person to health, or for inducing friendship, or with some useful end, and not at all for doing any damage or harm, in such cases, it may be granted, I say, that there is no express invocation of demons ; nevertheless it cannot be that these spells are employed without a tacit invocation, wherefore all such charms must be judged o be wholly unlawful. " This text has been written in medieval Latin which has a non ambiguous word for "runes". As a side issue, this text shows that, since I recommend explicit invocation of the Nordic Gods, I would have been burned by the two good monks. But the main issue here is to show that persons of Germanic culture (they were born in the Rhine valley) were still aware at the end of the 15th century that runes could be used for healing.

Steps in healing in the Kalevala

The Kalevala is a collection of legends and songs gathered from the beginning of the 19th century in Finland and in the region of Saint Petersburg by a Finnish doctor, Elias Lönnrot. In it, I found several healing cases which constitute in my opinion the last trace of an ancient healing methodology. I will not go into any details about this methodology here since it is already described in my forthcoming book on Nordic Magic Healing. [For information, see

my website, above]. Lönnrot collected many folk songs while completing his field work in Finland, but instead of publishing them as they were, he put them together into a coherent epic. Hence, the ordering of the steps involved in healing as given in the Kalevala does not represent ancient medical knowledge, so much as it does Lönnrot's good sense. Inversely, even modern ethnologists acknowledge Lönnrot's respect for the content of the songs he gathered. We can therefore believe that the poems linked to each step, irrespective of the ordering of the steps, reflects ancient Nordic medical knowledge.

I have noticed that the healing of the mind is very different from the healing of the body. Magical methods for the healing of the mind often oppose some modern schools of psychotherapeutic practice, while the magic used in the healing of the body simply complements modern practice, almost without problems. This is why I choose to speak here of body healing, which is less subject to argument. Of the twelve steps for obtaining a complete physical healing, the first two, namely attempting to heal oneself and finding a healer, are very important. They should never be under-estimated. Nevertheless, they do not need work from the healers but from the sick, and this is why I do not apologize for skipping them here. The next step can be called 'finding the Origin or the Genesis of the sickness'. It calls for a great deal of rational, or conscious, discussion between the healer and the patient, and it also requires a more mystical contact through Nordic shamanic journeying, called seidr. Once the origin of the problem has been discovered, the healer must address the sickness, in a fourth step, by clearly stating its origin and name, and must ask it to leave the patient alone, supported by some good reasons. This fourth step is performed by composing a song to the sickness, by summarizing the song in a galdr, howling/singing the galdr, and finally writing the galdr on a piece of wood. Let us now see these steps in some more detail.

Finding the origin of the sickness

Do not expect to find "the" origin at once. You will at most find the cause that the patient is able to acknowledge at present. This understanding can evolve over time. The process must be repeated several times during the rational discussion, until the patient really feels that there is nothing more to add, and until the healer gets an overwhelming feeling during the non-rational contact with the patient as well. It is almost funny to see people learning to heal in this manner, they are so surprised by the intensity of the feeling they get after repeating this process two or three times. The healer is then convinced that she has uncovered, if not the ultimate origin of the sickness, at least one of its important aspects, a part that needs healing. What I call "rational contact" is a simple interrogation about the patient's feelings about the causes of his sickness. Do not believe that everything comes from early childhood; it could well be that the deep origin is relatively recent. Try to help the patient to be conscious of the possibly unexpected causes of his ailment. What I call non-rational, or intuitive, contact, is a kind of shamanic journey. It is not done following the beat of a drum as in classical shamanism, but rather by following the "beat of the patient's energy" as a Shiatsu practitioner would say, that is by feeling the life energy of the patient. During this seidr, the patient is explicitly asked to open his soul to the healer in order to allow a deep exchange between the two. The healer must also open her soul to the patient. This kind of non-sexual love exchange can be dangerous when practiced on very sick patients (it is dangerous for the patient when practiced by a very sick healer as well!). It is part of the healer's training to learn how to avoid being contaminated, and this cannot be explained in a paper. My experience is that this exchange happens often, almost unconsciously, when people are practicing any kind of holistic healing (for instance, Shiatsu, Reiki, Hand Healing, massage, etc.), but it is much better to practice it consciously, and be aware of its danger.

Rational versus non-rational attitudes

This alternation of the rational and non-rational steps insures a good relationship between healer and patient. It also avoids the extremes of pure chatter, which can happen when only rational contact is established, and of crazy imagination, possible when only a non-rational approach is used. This alternation is, in my opinion, the second essential feature of Nordic Magic: never forget the importance of the rational world (as happened to European magic from the Middle Ages until the 19th century), on the other hand, never forget the presence of the non-rational world, as happens to a major degree nowadays (this is not an exclusively modern attitude, the purely rational attitude has always had at least a few supporters). I have to insist on this point because I know that many people of the mystical turn of mind claim very strongly that "there is no difference between science and mysticism", which makes my point look almost trivial. I must say that, spending most of my time among strict scientists, I know very well how deeply they despise anything non-rational, and the way they scoff - discreetly when they are polite - at any statement relying on a non-rational view of the world. I have thus two almost opposite recommendations to make.

One is for the mystics. Do not believe that scientists have any respect for your position; you must be intimately aware that, in their eyes you might as well be mentally retarded. There is a long long way to go before you can reconcile your position and theirs.

The other is for those with purely rational minds. Please question your blind belief in rationality, and consider the possibility that what you are propagating, without knowing, is no more than yet another kind of religion. There are things that reason cannot explain, and it is irrational to respond, as you do, by simply closing your eyes to these realities.

Now I must ask both of you to consider the possibility that magic, and, in my opinion especially Nordic magic, very seldom opposes rationality. I mean that purely magical events, similar to an explosion of irrationality, happen extremely seldom, and are not to be expected in our lives. A magical healing, for instance, very seldom occurs in the way of a Lourdes' miracle. The patient does not feel very much changed after the magic healing, he simply feels that he has just lived through a very intense experience. Slowly, slightly unexpected things will begin to happen to him, but none of those things radically violates normality. The healer can even be a bit put out at seeing that her treatment is fast forgotten by her patient, who attributes his recovery to those "slightly unexpected events". But I claim that the magic is then working at full strength. The patient does not attribute his recovery to the power of his healer, but to the good luck he is now having. This is because it is always possible to explain without resorting to magic why the patient has been healing. The rational mind will claim that I am simply imagining some hidden magic behind what is happening to the patient. The non-rational mind will be disappointed that no obvious magic is showing up. My only answer is that with magic there is no easy way, and accepting the incredulity of many and the disappointment of some is part of the job.

Writing a poem to the Origin of the sickness (1) The example of the Ribe stick

Once the cause of the problem has been discovered, and strongly felt by the healer, a poem must be written that expresses as clearly as possible what this Origin is, and what the healer intends to do about it. It is even better if this poem is beautiful; here lies a great deal of the healer's power. If she is unable to poetically express her feelings, I strongly doubt that she will be able to call upon the Gods to help her patient. By "poetry" I do not mean overblown speech, but speech that is beautiful to the one treated, and that affects his feelings. There is no need for the healer to feel as if she is at a poetry competition, since the only real judge is the patient. It is nevertheless obligatory that he should be deeply moved by the poem. I might be wrong, but in general I believe that the best poetry is that which uses the simplest words, and

that conveys its message most accurately. Nevertheless, the style to be used depends on the relationship between the healer and her patient, and some people might need elaborate phrasing in order to feel moved. Again, this is no easy task, and to do it right calls for a great deal of inspiration from the healer. As an example, let us analyze a long poem written in runes, dating from the beginning of the fourteenth century, found on the so-called Ribe stick.

Earth I pray guard
and the heaven above,
sun and Saint Mary
and himself the Lord God,
that he grants me hands to make whole
and healing tongue
to cure the Trembler
when treatment is needed.

From back and from breast, from trunk and from limb, from eyes and from ears; from every place where evil can enter.

A stone is called swart; it stands out of the sea. On it lie nine Needs. They shall neither sleep sweet nor make warm until you are better of it; for whom I have caused runes to utter words.

Amen. And so be it. [ends with the sign of the cross].

The Trembler is the sickness we now call malaria. It identifies a sickness and addresses it poetically, but with simple words. This poem is obviously christian, and cannot be used by us as it stands. This is why I suggest that it can be " re-paganized " as follows (this is only an example) :

Earth I pray guard
and the heaven above,
the sun and shining Freya
And the sovereign couple.
that He and She grant me hands to make whole and healing tongue to cure the Trembler
when treatment is needed.

From back and from breast, from trunk and from limb, from eyes and from ears; from every place where evil can enter.

A stone is called swart; it stands out of the sea. On it lie nine Needs. They shall neither sleep sweet nor make warm until you are better of it; for whom I have caused runes to utter words.

Thor help - me! Thor hallow my charm! Thor protect [name the patient]!

The words "amen, and so be it," and the cross were used as a way to hallow the whole charm, and this is why I call to Thor and to his hallowing hammer to end the charm.

This poem is then declaimed loudly to the patient, who must understand and agree with each of its words.

Creating the galdr

The healer now takes advantage of her deep understanding of the meaning of the runes, and associates some parts of the poem to some runes. The following is an example of what can be done with the above poem. The Gods who are linked to the Earth are Frey (linked to the generosity of the Earth) and Frigg (who is able to command the elements of the earth), leading me therefore to use the runes Jeran and Pertho. The God of the sky is Tyr, associated

to Tiwaz. Sowelo corresponds to the sun, and I replaced the evocation of Holy Mary with that of Freya, and therefore, I link that line to Berkanan. God himself can correspond to Odin (Ansuz) or also, for me at least, to the sacred couple, Nerthus - Njörd (with whom I associate Uruz and Ingwaz). The tongue that heals is the one with the words that heal, which I associate with Ansuz. The Trembler is a sickness giving fever, so I will associate it to Kaunan. The reference to "nine Needs" calls of course for an evocation of Naudiz.

[Note : why I associate each rune with this meaning or this God is discussed in detail in my forthcoming book : Howling, I Gathered Them. It would need pages to explain each of the choices given above.]

In order to be sure that this rather intellectual work is not just a rational creation, its intuitive foundations are checked by a seidr trance focusing on the poem and the runes. It is often the case that some runes will feel not really appropriate to the patient and the sickness' Origin. It is necessary to delete them and to start thinking again. And once again, rational and non-rational steps should alternate several times to reinforce each other. In our example, suppose that no runes are deleted during the trance stage, then the galdr will be built up as follows:

Earth I pray guard
Jeran! Pertho!
and the heaven above,
Tiwaz! Tiwaz!
the sun and shining Freya
Sowelo! Berkanan!
And the sovereign couple.
Uruz! Ingwaz!
that He and She grant me hands to make whole and healing tongue
to cure the Trembler when treatment is needed.
Ansuz! Kaunan!
From back and from breast, from trunk and from limb, from eyes and from ears; from
every place where evil can enter.
A stone is called swart; it stands out of the sea. On it lie nine Needs.
Naudiz! Naudiz! Naudiz! Naudiz! Naudiz! Naudiz! Naudiz! Naudiz! Naudiz!
They shall neither sleep sweet nor make warm until you are better of it; for whom I
have caused runes to utter words.
Thor help - me! Thor hallow my charm! Thor protect [name the patient]!

Hence the text of the galdr, a sort of summary of the poem, could read :

Jeran! Pertho!
Tiwaz! Tiwaz!
Sowelo! Berkanan!
Uruz! Ingwaz!
Ansuz! Kaunan!
Naudiz! Naudiz! Naudiz! Naudiz! Naudiz! Naudiz! Naudiz! Naudiz! Naudiz!
Thor help - me! Thor hallow my charm! Thor protect [name the patient]!

This text is sung or howled to the patient (then it literally becomes a galdr) who must well understand the link between this galdr, the poem, and his sickness.

Writing a poem to the Origin of the sickness (2) Using a few Lithuanian charms

These charms from Lithuania have been translated into French by Neringa Jablonkyte, we both discussed the final French form, and I finally put them into English. The charms I chose to present here are completely Pagan, thus the only change that is still possible, for these poems, is to replace the Lithuanian name of a God with the one of the Aesir. I wouldn't change a single word in these charms. I will, however, add a galdr that can be directly associated to them.

Casting out evil Spirits

Leave, cursed slug, from man,
Because you have already dirtied him,
Now that you live in him,
You are the cause of great pain.
The sun hates you, the moon hates you,
The stars hate you, the stars hate you,
Man hates you, children hate you,
The whole family hates you, and me, I hate you.

The slug evokes the cold. Thurisaz is perhaps the most aggressive of the runes, and the attitude of the giants towards the Aesir can often be seen as hatred. Therefore, Thurisaz can be used as a helper for eradicating the slug. I do not think the galdr should be sung with hatred, but rather sung in a commanding voice to ask that the slug be attacked. This poem can close by invoking Thurisaz three times.

Charm for banishing sickness

Early, I wake,
With bitter dew, I wash,
Uruz!
To the sun, I address myself,
Sowelo!
I glorify God.
*[here, I suggest instead:
I glorify Thor]*
Laukaz!
Sicknesses facing me,
Go in the dry trees,
The deep swamps,
There where no man walks,
There where no animal wades,
There where no bird flies.
Mannaz! Mannaz! Mannaz!

The first verse of this charm calls on the rising day (Dagaz rune), on the dew descending from the sky (Uruz rune), on the sun (Sowelo rune) and then it glorifies God which would be the rune of Tiwaz for the God of the sky, or any other rune dedicated to one of the Nordic Gods. The invocation to Mannaz is obviously not attempting to call the Spirits of dry trees and deep swamps; it wouldn't be very wise. Instead the invocation is to the Spirits of human solidarity, of populated places.

Charm banishing fever

In the name of the sun,
Sowelo!
In the name of Perkunas, [*God of thunder and lightning*]
[*here, also, I would replace Perkunas by Thor, since he has the same functions in the Scandinavian mythology*]
In the name of Thor,
Laukaz!
By thunder,
Thor!
I command you, fever,
Kaunan!
I hunt you from men, from animals, from birds, from each living being,
To the green forest, the deep pools, the somber swamps,
There where the sun does shine,
Where no man walks,
Where no animal wades,
Where no bird flies.
Mannaz! Mannaz! Mannaz!
If you do not obey me,
I will dry you on the rays of the sun,
I will wear you out with the intensity of the sun,
I will drown you in the bitter dew,
I will feed you bewitched bread.
Sowelo! Uruz! Gebo!
I order you to leave [*name the patient*]
To no longer torment him (or her).

The call to Sowelo, Uruz and Gebo is being done in a special way since these runes are being invoked so that they use their power aggressively against the sickness.

Charm to stop bleeding

Valiuli Dievuli, stop the blood!
[*Valiuli Dievuli is best translated as 'all - powerful'*]
Do not hunt the spirit of the body,
So that it does not leave with the blood,
That it does not leave the body alone.
By the hard stone, by the high oak, Valiuli Dievuli, by the blood,
I order, I contain the blood in the veins.

There is neither a rune for stones, nor a rune for blood. However, there are several runes that evoke the idea of life and heat. If we want to invoke the 'joy of life' with the word "blood", then the associated rune would be Wunjo. The stone is hard, and its capacity to break is what is being called on, and this is a property of Hagla. The high oak obviously evokes Yggdrasil. One possible galdr for this poem would be to sing or to shout Hagla! Ihwaz! Wunjo!

Charm to protect against venomous snakes

It is by fate that our difference is born, rue,
Fate has made us meet, rue,

Be not evil, rue,
Do not suffer, rue,
Show proof of your kindness, rue. (*repeat three times*)
Show proof of your kindness from (*present time*)
From this day,
From this sigh.
Show proof of your kindness, rue,
We thank you, rue,
With our beautiful words, rue,
With our beautiful words, rue.

This charm is constantly calling upon the power of the green rue to protect one who crosses an adder on his or her path. The three runes that evoke a certain greenery are Ihwaz (rune of the yew), Berkanan (rune of the birch) and Laukaz (rune of the leek). Therefore, I suggest simply punctuating this beautiful poem with an invocation of these three runes.

(note: The rue is a plant with lots of meaning in Lithuanian mythology. I can explain it best as Neringa did when telling me a personal anecdote. While on a bus, she saw an old woman who was having a difficult time getting off the bus. The old woman turned to her and said, 'Please help me, rue.' So, she helped her, and the old woman said, 'thank you, green rue'. Hopefully, you will now better understand the tenderness that Lithuanian people hold for this herb.)

Activating the magic

All these operations slowly increase the intensity of the relationship between the patient and the healer. Both of them gradually become less aware of the surrounding world, and at the end of the galdr, they reach a stage of mystical ecstasy which has been acknowledged as that of the acting shamans. In my opinion, this opens the gates between the rational and the non-rational world, as if ordinary reality shifts a little to leave a slight opening for magical reality. The magic of the galdr still has to be made active. Following her intuition, the healer chooses the piece of wood, that will be the most appropriate to carve the runes of the galdr upon. Then the carving takes place. This carving must be impregnated by the patient's blood to make the magic complete and active. This last step can be seen as repulsive to the modern mind that is very nervous about bloodletting. We must recall that at the time the runes were widely used, nobody cared very much about seeing oozing blood. For instance, a few centuries after the period of rune use, bleeding a patient became the most common medical treatment. Some patients may find it absolutely sissy to be so afraid of blood, and will casually agree to your request. For those, cut the fleshy part of one of their fingers with a very sharp (and very clean!) knife. There is no need to cut more than 1 or 2 millimeters deep to get enough oozing blood to trace your runes. The patient's finger is put on its side on the wood, position your blade on his finger, and cut very fast. It will give no pain, and will heal very fast (don't forget disinfectant, however!). Other patients may hesitate or even recoil in horror from such a treatment. They can then carry the runic stick with them, until they get wounded and they bleed. They will then use this blood to hallow the runes. If the chore of constantly taking care of the runic stick is too much for them, then who cares about healing them?

Conclusion

The healing is far from ended after these two steps, but they are very important and exemplify the main principles of magic that are: be modest in your expectations, never forget to maintain

a harmonious balance between the rational and the non-rational, expect hard work, ingratitude is possible but gratitude is your best reward.

If you don't feel working magic is your way of honoring the Gods, forget about it, it's safer.