Pagans, Nazis, Gaels, and the Algiz Rune: Addressing Questions of Historical Inaccuracy, Cultural Appropriation, and the Arguable Use of Hate Symbols at the Festivals of Edinburgh's Beltane Fire Society

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Abstract

Although Beltaners – members of Edinburgh's Beltane Fire Society (BFS) – can trace the immediate origins of their society's festivals to the collaborative efforts of anarchist performance artists and folklorists reacting against the Thatcherite government policies of the late 1980s, the ritual celebrations they routinely re-enact in the present ultimately derive from much older traditions associated with Scotland's highly minoritised Gaelic-speaking population, a cohort to which few modern Beltaners belong. Performers at today's festivals often incorporate runes into their regalia – a practice which does not reflect Gaelic tradition, but which is not unknown among ideologues of the far right. This paper interrogates rune use at BFS festivals, asking whether the employment of Germanic cultural elements in Celtic festivals by non-Celtic-speakers represents a distortion of history and debasement of an embattled ethnic minority, and whether it is ethically acceptable for an explicitly anti-racist organisation to share a symbolic repertoire with representatives of known hate groups. Based on data derived from fieldwork consisting chiefly of participant observation and on the consultation of relevant academic literature, this paper evaluates the potentially problematic nature of BFS ritual performers' rune use and related behaviours by analysing the intentions that underlie their actions, the consequences that have resulted from them, and the historical interaction of runes, ethnonationalism, and the occult that has shaped perceptions of runic meaning among those who use runes in modern times.

Keywords: *Runes, Beltane, Beltane Fire Festival, Gaelic, Algiz, pagan, Nazi, occult, performance*

This research examines the use of runes – especially, the Algiz rune – as a ritual element and aesthetic motif in the festivals of Edinburgh's Beltane Fire Society (BFS): the Beltane Fire Festival and its sister ceremony, the Sam-

huinn Fire Festival. The chief concern of this research is whether one can deem BFS members' use of runes in these events ethically unproblematic in light of the historical and cultural incongruity of the presence of runes at a 'Celtic' festival, and in consideration of the far-right associations now so often ascribed to runes in popular culture.

In the interest of disclosing barriers to objectivity, and in the attempt to accurately cite the sources of all data to be later presented, let it be stated here that a significant portion of the information presented in the following pages – especially that which concerns the beliefs and attitudes of festival participants – derives from the author's own experience of three years as a ritual performer in the Samhuinn and Beltane festivals under examination. While this experience has ultimately served as the fieldwork that provided the basis for this and other articles, it was not with the intention of academic publication that the author originally undertook to participate in the festivals. It should also be stated that the fieldwork in question – insofar as it contributes to this article – was entirely qualitative and based largely on participant observation. Whenever data yielded by the fieldwork features in this paper, it is fully disclosed as such; and – because it stems directly from the author's unpublished original research – will be unaccompanied by in-text citation. When self-reference is necessary, the author will usually do this by means of the sobriquet 'the author', except in instances where – in the interest of both clarity and lexical variation – it seems more prudent to write in the first person.

Edinburgh's Beltane Fire Festival

It seems necessary before initiating further discussion to give a brief description of the history of the Beltane festival itself, and the relationship between what is known of historical Beltane celebrations and the festival as it is practised by Edinburghers at present. Originally, Beltane was one of four festivals reputedly celebrated by Goidelic-speaking Celts in pre-Christian times to mark the stages of the solar year. The earliest known attestation of Beltane comes from the *Sanas Cormaic* (Cormac's Glossary), an Old Irish text composed circa 900 CE (Williams 2005, 123–25). Cormac's very brief account associates the festival with the worship of a pagan deity and mentions the passing of cattle between bonfires (MacLeod 2018, 87). The festival is further attested by folklorists as having survived in various forms in rural and urban communities throughout Scotland and Ireland well into the eighteenth century (Macleod 2018, 78), and in some areas –

including the Lothians, in which Edinburgh resides – later still, although its observance had died out completely by the early years of the twentieth century (Matheson and Tinsley 2014, 2).

In Edinburgh the Beltane festival was revived in the late 1980s in the form of small-scale performance art chiefly enacted by an informal society of anarchists and folklorists (Matheson and Tinsley 2014, 2). Participants at that first revival included the industrial anarchist musician, Angus Farquhar, and the renowned Scottish ethnologist, Margaret Bennet – both of whom have disclosed the fact of their involvement in that festival to the author and attested to their pride at having taken part in organising the event. At the time of the festival's inception, the ritual-performers' purpose was to protest against Thatcherite anti-assembly laws, reclaim Calton Hill as a public space, and revive local interest in Scottish cultural traditions and the natural environment (Matheson and Tinsley 2014, 12f.). Performers counted the initial festival a success, and thus decided both to establish the ritual as an ongoing yearly tradition and, in subsequent years, to stage a revival of the similarly ancient Samhuinn festival as an annually recurring counterpoint to Beltane.

Since the time of their first revivals Edinburgh's Beltane and Samhuinn celebrations have evolved into massive public spectacles, each involving some three hundred volunteers, and no small amount of pyrotechnics and body paint. Growing administrative complexities and intervention by the civic government in the avowed interest of public safety have since vastly increased the amount of time and money required to conduct the festivals, in response to which ritual performers involved in the festival in the early 2000s felt it necessary to reform the then loosely structured performance organisation into a registered charity with a formal board of directors (Matheson and Tinsley 2014, 16f.). Although some participants have looked retrospectively on the formalisation of the BFS as a danger-ous concession to neoliberalism marking a transition away from Beltane's erstwhile tradition of anarchic activism, participation in the festivals has continued to increase, and they have become fixtures on the Edinburgh cultural events calendar (Matheson and Tinsley 2014, 19ff.). Adding to the throngs of newcomers and annual participants are the hundreds of Edinburgh residents who no longer directly take part, but who remain active in social circles structured around their members' current or former involvement at BFS festivals. The community comprising all active and former BFS festival participants resident in Edinburgh – which, in the author's estimation, includes around one thousand people – constitutes

a distinct and highly visible subculture within the broader Edinburgh counter-cultural landscape.

A brief history of runes

Undertaking an investigation of the socio-political significance of 'runes' in a Beltane context necessitates a discussion of the term's definition. The word 'rune' has various meanings in popular culture, but in an academic context it usually denotes a character from any one of several writing systems that derive from an antecedent script developed by Germanic-speaking peoples in contact with the Mediterranean world sometime in the early centuries CE (Barnes 2012, 1–9). The geographical location of runic origin remains a point of contention, as does the precise time of its inception, although runologists have catalogued examples of the script which date to no later than the second century CE (Barnes 2012, 9), and note that similarities between runes and writing systems developed earlier, such as Greek, Etruscan, and the Latin alphabet, strongly suggest runic writing's derivation from one or more Mediterranean originals (Barnes 2012, 10).

Runic writing systems saw extensive use in Germanic-language-speaking areas of northern Europe – especially Scandinavia, Anglo-Saxon England, and Iceland – until the time of their gradual disuse as practical writing systems in most regions by the Late Middle Ages, and in some cases much earlier (Barnes 2012, 129). After their transition away from quotidian use runes became the object of antiquarian interest (Barnes 2012, 133), which on occasion coincided with a propensity towards nationalism and/or the occult (Barnes 2012, 190–96). Polemical and mystical runic research had by the 1930s ensconced runes in some social circles as sacred emblems of Nordic ethnonationalism, which resulted in their incorporation in the iconography of the Nazi regime (Barnes 2012, 195). The same nineteenth- and twentieth-century scholarship's tendency to interpret runes as bearing magical properties also led to a general flowering of runic popularity among European occultists outside the ethnonationalist sphere – a phenomenon which has not diminished between that time and the present (Barnes 2012, 194f.). Thus, as of the mid-twentieth century, runes had already developed the close associations with both white supremacy and neopaganism that they maintain today (Barnes 2012, 190–96).

Runes and the far right

Although certainly spurred by the zeitgeist, the intellectual entanglement of rune lore and German National Socialism in the early twentieth century largely resulted from the scholarship and enthusiastic ideologising of one Nazi intellectual, the German Indo-Europeanist academic and political propagandist Alfred Rosenberg (Strmiska 2005, 24ff.). Rosenberg helped articulate and popularise the now discredited theory that the first Indo-Europeans – an ethnonym at that time synonymous with 'Aryans' – had been essentially Germanic in speech, behaviour, and appearance, and that white speakers of Germanic languages thus represented their 'purest' genetic descendants and cultural heirs. This formulation would be used to justify the territorially expansionist and genocidal policies of the Third Reich on the basis that Europe had become the homeland of the Indo-Europeans through military conquest, and that, as the modern incarnation of that once-great people, Germans had the right both to occupy the entirety of the European continent and to dominate or destroy any ethnic group that represented either a competitor with or a defective offshoot of the Aryan bloodline. Those who subscribed to the theory advocated racial purity not only insofar as it was seen as the genetic component of Aryanism but in terms of its cultural aspects. For Rosenberg and others who supposed the essential Germanness of the Aryans, this entailed the worship of gods known to have been revered by the pre-Christian Germans, and the use of runes – to which, like many runologists of the period, he supposed the ancients to have ascribed numinous properties. Although Rosenberg's opinion that a form of reconstructed Germanic paganism ought to serve as the religion of the National Socialist movement met stiff opposition from those Nazis who instead advocated the use of an altered form of Christianity – and sometimes waned in favour even among its own most ardent proponents (most of whom were Christian by upbringing) – his ideas concerning the use of runes and rune-like symbols as emblems of the regime won general acceptance among his contemporaries (Strmiska 2005, 24ff.).

The association of neopaganism, runes, and Nazism popularised by Rosenberg and perpetuated by the Nazi regime has persisted long after the fall of the Third Reich. To at least some degree modern popular culture assumes the intersection of Germanic neopagan religious observance and white nationalist affinities – a stereotype reinforced by the racist ideologies still openly espoused by some neopagan practitioners. Many adherents of the Nordic neopagan Odinist religion, for instance, uphold racial purity as a tenet of their religious doctrine and fraternise in person and print with

known Neo-Nazis (Strmiska 2005, 27). Runic iconography of the style employed by the Nazi regime remains popular among those groups who lament its defeat, to the extent that the website of the Anti-Defamation League mentions runic writing in its list of widely used hate symbols, among icons such as the swastika and the flag of apartheid South Africa (Anti-Defamation League 2018). That ethnonationalists employ the same symbolic repertoire as Beltaners creates the danger that uninformed onlookers might infer that the latter embrace the racist ideologies of the former, and raises the question as to whether that inference is incorrect. To begin to answer that question, this discussion must offer a description of rune use within the BFS and give at least a brief account of performers' motivations for engaging in the practice.

Rune use at the Edinburgh Beltane festival

Perhaps incongruously for a festival with obviously Celtic roots, runes feature prominently in modern realisations of the Beltane Fire Festival. To some extent, they serve as an artistic motif primarily intended to generate the desired ambiance – displayed on the elaborate costumes of ritual performers to convey to witnesses a general ethos of 'ancientness' and 'otherness', and to aid participants in assuming the personas of their ritual characters (Beltane Fire Society 2017). It would be misleading, however, to suggest that their function is purely a question of aesthetics; many who take part in the festivals are practising neopagans, and some of these practitioners ascribe explicit spiritual meanings – or even numinous properties – to certain runes. Within the context of the Beltane community the so-called Algiz rune – ᛦ – is of special significance, hailed as a protective talisman invocative of divinely sanctioned safety and well-being (Beltane Fire Society 2017). Over the decades the rune's use has become so ritually significant that many long-time festival participants expect highly visible Algiz iconography to adorn the central characters in the ritual performance, including the all-important May Queen and her court, as well as the Blues – the annually recurring performance group whose members don blue paint in remembrance of the purported Pictish tradition of dying the skin with woad[1] on the eve of battle, and who serve as the Beltane community's masters of ritual (Matheson and Tinsley 2014, 10).

The Beltane traditions concerning the Algiz rune and the highly specific interpretations of runic meaning that undergird them invite enquiry into the

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1   A plant endemic to the British Isles and the blue dye derived from it.

origins of such practices. The question as to whether some Beltaners' beliefs about runic meaning are grounded in ancient or modern spiritual praxis springs immediately to mind, along with a further query as to how such beliefs came to have currency among anarcho-socialist performance artists.

The Algiz rune

Much expert discourse about the evolution of runes necessarily tends towards the speculative; inscriptions can provide definitive evidence as to which runes and runic writing systems saw use in a given region and historical period, but phonological values of the various runes at any given period cannot be empirically corroborated beyond what insights can be gleaned from comparative and reconstructive linguistics (Barnes 2012, 21–23). We can know, therefore, that what many today call the Algiz rune definitely featured in the Elder FuÞark – a runic alphabet used between approximately 150 and 800 CE, and a probable ancestor of all subsequent runic writing systems (Barnes 2012, 37). We can further attest that Algiz occurred within that writing system primarily as a word-final consonant (Barnes 2012, 21). With less certainty we may assert that it probably represented a sound similar, if not identical, to that often represented in modern English by the Latin letter 'z' (Barnes 2012, 206).

Evidence from comparative linguistics suggests that in later runic writing systems pervasive sound changes meant that, for most Germanic dialects, the final consonant the Algiz rune is thought to have represented in the Elder FuÞark would have evolved into a range of sounds usually represented in modern Latin-based alphabets by the letter 'r'; while epigraphic evidence demonstrates that in Scandinavia the rune itself came instead to denote the sound represented in modern English by the Latin letter 'm' (Barnes 2012, 60). In the Anglo-Frisian runic system, by contrast, Algiz first became largely redundant and then seems to have come to represent the sound denoted in modern English by the Latin letter 'x' (Barnes 2012, 41).

With academic consensus, but no absolute certainty, as to how the Algiz rune was pronounced – and even less positivity as to its original name (Barnes 2012, 22–23) – it might seem unreasonable to propose that the rune had any definitive ideographic significance among ancient Germanic-speakers, let alone to speculate as to what that meaning might have been. However, it happens that interrogating the meaning of runes has been a pastime of rune enthusiasts since at least the Late Middle Ages, and a small body of evidence soon to be discussed supports the argument that rune-

writers ascribed runic characters significance beyond their graphemic values for many hundreds of years before the present century. Whether – if at all – the early meanings correspond to those which Beltaners have assigned to the runes, however, remains to be seen.

The question of runic meaning

For some Beltaners, as earlier mentioned, wearing the Algiz rune entails either literally or symbolically invoking benevolent supernatural powers to protect one's person (Beltane Fire Society 2017). A ritual witness might wonder whether in upholding this belief Beltaners act as relatively recent meaning makers or as heirs to an ancient tradition. Although the question cannot be answered definitively, some sources suggest both that runic characters could have had an extra-graphemic significance for at least some rune writers in the pre-modern era and that – at least in the case of the Algiz rune – pre-modern meanings ascribed to the runes could have some bearing on their current interpretation by Beltaners. In a particularly salient example the Algiz rune occurs as the rune 'Maðr' ('Man') in the Icelandic Rune Poem – a work which dates in its oldest surviving manuscript attestation to at least 1500 CE, and which might therefore be older still in earlier recensions no longer extant (Page 1998, 1–7). In the text the poet describes Maðr as '*manns g[a]man ok moldar auki ok skipa skreytir*' (Page 1998, 7) – which, in translation,[2] reads 'man's pleasure, earth's increase, and ship adorner'. This description would seem to suggest that even in late medieval or early modern Iceland at least some people literate in runes attributed beneficent powers to the Algiz rune ('man's pleasure') and might have associated the character with the amplification of salutary cosmic energies ('earth's increase') and the protection of those persons or vessels that bore its insignia ('adorner of ships'). On the other hand, 'earth's increase' and 'ship adorner' are somewhat vague epithets. 'Increasing the earth' could entail any number of natural or supernatural processes involving the ground, including simple tilling of the soil by farmers – whom, as men, the poet could have conceptually connected to the Maðr rune by simple virtue of the meaning of its name. As for 'adorner of ships', the title might refer merely to sailors – the men aboard ships, and therefore in some sense their adorners – or even to the cruciform shape of a ship's mast, which bears at least a passing resemblance to the shape of the rune. Even if the poet did intend to imply

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2   The author is grateful for the help of colleagues in the School of Linguistics at Edinburgh University regarding this.

that ancient Icelandic mariners adorned their ships with literal runes, the sailors could have undertaken this project for a variety of reasons other than attempting to protect themselves or their ships against preternatural evil. The above caveats notwithstanding, the similarity between Beltonian and Icelandic interpretations of runic meaning, at least in this instance, seems more than coincidentally similar.

Rune lore for Beltaners

If indeed medieval or early modern interpretations of the Algiz rune's significance did influence the rune's framing by members of the Beltane community, a question arises as to the vehicle of that influence. A person of romantic inclination might be tempted to entertain the hope that the image of the rune itself has maintained a singular continuity of purpose throughout the last several centuries: that either its symbolism is not socially constructed, but absolute, and that it thus is, and has long been, a literal repository of supernatural power; or that the rune's meaning has been conferred faithfully by word of mouth, generation to generation, from the rune-writers of the late medieval Nordic cultural zone to the ritualists of modern Edinburgh. Sadly, neither explanation withstands scrutiny in light of the available evidence. The very nature of symbols as arbitrarily designated representations of objects or ideas to which they otherwise have no concrete connection guarantees that no symbol has a universal, perfectly intuitive meaning; and even if the proverbial 'carrying stream' of folklore were so swift and steadfast as to regularly bear along cultural artefacts without their evolving to at least some degree – which it is not – the Beltane community's links with the rune writers of ages past would be too tenuous to support the hypothesis of Algiz-rune dissemination via a series of master-apprentice or other didactic relationships. Alternatively, while it is not inconceivable that some Beltaners might have obtained the information at the source – that is, that they took it upon themselves to read the relevant Icelandic literature – there remain far more readily accessible founts of information whereby they might have encountered the necessary rune lore.

As earlier mentioned, a great many rune enthusiasts of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries shared an inclination towards the occult. Following the World Wars, however, global interest in the esoteric ebbed somewhat, and the pre-war era's mystical musings on runes were largely set aside. In runic academia, especially, mid-century runologists began to challenge long-held dogmas concerning the supposed use of runes as tools

for practical magic among the ancient Scandinavians (Barnes 2012, 207f.). With the countercultural beat and hippy movements of the fifties and sixties, however, popular discourse on metaphysics again took a turn for the romantic, and public interest in runes and other media associated with the numinous began to resurge in earnest, as evidenced by the immense popularity of esoteric works such as Joseph Banks Rhine's *New World of the Mind* (Rhine 1953), Lyall Watson's *Supernature* (Watson 1973), and Colin Wilson's *The Occult*, subtitled *The Ultimate Book for Those who Would Walk with the Gods* (Wilson 1973). Books written in the pattern of the former two examples sought to examine the paranormal in light of new discoveries in fields like psychology and neuroscience, while the latter demonstrates that by the seventies mainstream authors had become confident enough of audience receptivity towards the occult to delve less guardedly into outright mysticism – including by revisiting previously discarded theories of sacred runology. After examining the available scholarly and general-interest works of turn-of-the-century runic researchers, following the resurgence in public interest in the occult uses of runes, neopagan practitioners in various emerging spiritual traditions had arrived by the mid-1980s at a broad consensus as to the symbology of Algiz and other runes, and have since broadcast this consensus extensively by word of mouth, in print, and online (Barnes 2012, 142).

It is most likely by this means – the exposition of reanalysed pre-war runic mysticism by and to post-war rune enthusiasts via print and electronic media – that Beltaners first arrived at their current shared beliefs concerning runic meaning. At this juncture, as a caveat against academic condescension, it must be emphasised that the relative youth of neopagan rune use and imputed runic meaning vis-à-vis the better-established sacred symbolic traditions of older, more widely practised belief systems does not diminish their perceived validity among those who uphold them, and should not – in and of itself – invite the condemnation of outside observers. The investiture of numinous significance in the Algiz rune, however novel it may seem by comparison to the treatment of symbols such as the Christian cross, represents no less sincere or authentic an act of meaning making by observants of the tradition, no matter what the tradition's age or ultimate origin is.

Why use Germanic script at a Celtic festival?

In any case, having ascertained the most probable means by which Beltaners acquired knowledge of runes, a reader might now wonder why this Ger-

manic script – among all the great panoply of other known cryptic writing systems, including some more popularly associated with the Celts – would become the first choice for use at a 'Celtic' festival. The simple answer is that little distinction is generally made in Beltane culture between Celtic, Germanic, and Slavic cultural traditions – or, for that matter, between traditions well outside the realm of the Indo-European (Beltane Fire Society 2017). It should be noted that this collective indifference to difference does not stem from wilful ignorance: few if any Beltaners have made a conscious effort to ignore the distinction between Celtic cultural artefacts and those of other cultures; and many are already well aware that – despite prolonged periods of interaction in the British Isles in the early Middle Ages – the Gaels and the Norse constituted distinct ethnic groups, and that runes represent a cultural province of the latter to a far greater extent than the former. Information on the BFS website readily acknowledges this very distinction (Beltane Fire Society 2017).

However, although collectively possessed of sufficient knowledge of the differences in rune use between Celtic-speakers and Germanic-speakers to appreciate the incongruity of runes at a 'Celtic' festival, those Beltaners of the author's acquaintance who have seen fit to opine on the subject do not consider it necessary or desirable to emphasise such cultural differences. Some have suggested that intermingling disparate elements from multiple cultures – whether or not such interaction would have been feasible or appropriate in the elements' original contexts – actually constitutes both an artistic and a social good. They feel that conscientious support for the practice of eclecticism – which furnishes the widest possible range of sources from which to draw creative inspiration for the festivals and allows ritual performers to showcase their support for cultural diversity – should far outweigh any consideration for historical accuracy in coordinating BFS events. In the author's experience this attitude prevails among both the general membership and the managerial echelons of the BFS, whether at the level of performers, group organisers, or board members. Reaffirming this anecdotal evidence, a statement on the BFS website declares that Beltaners 'draw […] runes from a range of sources' and 'welcome folks of all backgrounds to share […] the cultural heritage of this northern land while bringing with them their own experiences and symbols' (Beltane Fire Society 2017).

Even so, despite conscious efforts to promote an ethos of inclusivity and eclecticism, not all source materials are welcomed at BFS festivals with equal enthusiasm. Although elements incongruous with Gaelic culture can find general acceptance, tropes that defy the Beltane community's own

cultural traditions can meet with widespread resistance. Overtly Christian elements, for instance, seldom feature – perhaps on the basis that they might reduce the festivals' efficacy in serving as a haven for neopagans and the non-religious, or simply because no one involved tends to propose their inclusion in the first place. Motifs adapted from Graeco-Roman culture also rarely feature – even if solidly pagan – both because the Roman legacy of patriarchy, conquest, and colonisation is seen as anathema to the Beltane values of social justice, pacifism, and anti-capitalism, and because Roman culture is seen by many participants as exerting too great an influence on the modern West to merit inclusion in a festival that attempts to subvert Western social norms. For the same reason overtly 'modern' aesthetic or technical motifs are discouraged – including mobile phones and recognis-ably contemporary clothing – unless either legally required (as in the case of high-visibility attire for festival stewards) or necessary to a production aspect of the festival (as in the case of pyrotechnic paraphernalia).

This desire to distance Beltane from the cultural mainstream provides one impetus for the continued presence of runes: the symbols see little use in day-to-day Scottish life and so exude an air of 'otherness' which – like the extravagant costumes and ritualistic behaviour of the performers – sets the festivals apart from the quotidian and mundane, and advertises this distinctness to witnesses. Essentially, the artistic character of BFS festivals emphasises the non-Christian, the non-Roman, and the apparently ancient to draw a conceptual boundary between the festivals' atmosphere and the routine realities of a Scottish society which is post-industrial and heavily inflected by the legacies of Roman culture and Christianity. Runes very much fulfil these criteria: they have a long history, strong ties with pagan-ism, and few overt connections – at least in aesthetic terms – to the Roman world. These characteristics make runes ideal for BFS festival use despite the characters' absence from the traditional Gaelic cultural practices that have provided the core inspiration for the festivals.

The nature of the allegedly problematic of Beltaner rune use

This paper has thus far discussed the use of runes, both in general history and in the context of the festivals of Edinburgh's Beltane Fire Society. The discussion now turns to the question of whether Beltaners' performative praxis is socio-politically problematic, especially insofar as concerns the use of runes. Arguably, in terms of ethical correctness, Beltaners' conduct at their festivals invites three potential critiques: historical inaccuracy;

cultural insensitivity or appropriation with regard to Gaelic culture; and the furtherance of racism by the normalisation of symbols associated with the far right. Fortunately for the Beltaners the preponderance of evidence upholds their innocence – or at least excuses their conduct to date – in the face of all such accusations.

On the subject of historical accuracy it is certainly true that based on the available evidence, Beltaners fail to faithfully recreate Beltane and Samhuinn observances as they would have been conducted prior to the 1988 revival of the tradition. The Beltane Fire Festival as currently celebrated in Edinburgh – a pyrotechnic extravaganza involving several corps of acrobats, at least one choir, technicolour body paint, theatre-quality costuming, and as many as five drum crews – would scarcely be recognisable to Beltane celebrants from the time of the festivals' extinction in or before the early years of the twentieth century. However, it was only ever the stated intention of Beltaners to revive ancient practice – not to reproduce it in every detail, as the society's website explicitly states (Beltane Fire Society 2017). Indeed, veteran Beltaners of the author's acquaintance have argued cogently that the number and historical diversity of sources of inspiration for the modern fire festivals as practised in Edinburgh would, ironically, preclude the wholly accurate portrayal of any one of their component traditions. Most often cited in defence of this argument is the wilful and longstanding incorporation of authentically Scottish but decidedly non-Celtic cultural practices into the ritual – such as the ritually important but historically novel role played at Beltane by the May Queen (Matheson and Tinsley 2014, 14) – and the inclusion in the Samhuinn festival of narrative motifs from the Lowland Scots and more broadly Anglo-Saxon tradition of the so-called Galoshin plays (Tanaka 2013, 837).

In attempting to incorporate themes not only from various stages in the evolution of the Scottish *Gàidhealtachd* but also the late medieval Scottish Lowlands – all the while maintaining fidelity to the performative innovations of past generations of modern Beltaners – the festival organisers must necessarily discard any stringent notions of historical accuracy, as these could scarcely be applied with any degree of success. Beltaners seem generally to believe that this eclectic approach allows them to pay homage to the maximum number of Scottish and international folkloric motifs, and thereby maximally connect the citizenry of Edinburgh to those historical traditions of their city – both native and imported – that the homogeneity of modernity has denied them (Beltane Fire Society 2017). Thus, on the subject of historical accuracy, the BFS can hardly be criticised for failing to accomplish something it never undertook to achieve.

Beltaners' avowed eclecticism, however, though it largely relieves them of the burden of historical accuracy, opens them to another accusation: infidelity to social justice in their treatment of Gaelic culture. The BFS cannot deny its use of Gaelic tradition as source material for its festivals: their very names – Beltane and Samhuinn – are derivations of Gaelic words denoting Gaelic cultural practices on which BFS events are, however loosely, modelled (Matheson and Tinsley 2014, 10). From a social justice perspective the decision to borrow from Scottish Gaelic culture for the sake of public performance entails certain responsibilities. Foremost among these ranks the obligation to treat Gaelic cultural artefacts in a way that demonstrates respect for the descendants and cultural heirs of the people who originated them, especially in consideration of the fact that, even within Scotland, Gaels are a highly marginalised ethnic group (McKinnon 2007, 200ff.). Dealing with the cultural artefacts of an historically oppressed people should merit special consideration in the minds of anyone interested in the defence of minority rights – a concern which is dear to the hearts of many Beltaners. In light of this some Gaelic-language activists of the author's acquaintance have been disappointed to discover that the Gaelic language features only tokenistically at BFS festivals; that the festivals themselves bear little resemblance to their traditional Gaelic counterparts as they are believed to have been conducted in any attested period of their history; and that few if any native Gaelic-speakers actively participate in the festivals annually.

While Beltaners' conduct with regard to Gaelic culture is less defensible than their disregard for historical accuracy, much can still be said in support of the conduct of BFS and the wider Beltane community – largely because even now some within the society are attempting to rectify the festivals' erstwhile lack of Gaelic visibility. The author can attest to having participated directly in performance groups dedicated to incorporating Gaelic song in the festivals and teaching rudimentary Gaelic-language skills to willing members of the BFS at the Samhuinn festivals of 2017 and 2018, and the Beltane festival of 2018. Furthermore, a similar group has received provisional approval to perform at the Beltane festival of 2019. Each of these iterations of the Gaelic song group has thus far invited its members to attend lectures on the history of Gaelic cultural oppression as part of their festival preparation to impress upon participants the importance of upholding Gaelic cultural traditions in the face of English-language hegemony and according proper respect to the Gaels as members of a minoritised culture. Gaelic use thus shows every sign of slowly increasing within the BFS, and enhanced Gaelic visibility will hopefully signal to members of the Edinburgh

Gaelic community that Gaelic speakers and learners are welcome at BFS events – an implicit invitation which may ultimately result in an increase in the Gaelic-speaking membership of the society.

Having established that Beltaners' lack of concern for historical accuracy is largely justified by their dedication to the simultaneous representation of various historical and cultural contexts, and that the long-time relative absence of Gaelic and Gaels from BFS events – while decidedly problematic in light of the historical marginalisation of Gaelic speakers – is slowly being remedied, there remains the question of the appropriateness of rune use itself at BFS events. With runes having served as an emblem of white eth-nonationalism throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries – most notably in the hands of the Third Reich and its admirers – one might justly question whether it is politically correct, or indeed even morally conscion-able, for leftist neopagan performance artists to employ these symbols unironically as artistic motifs at their modern festivals. In determining whether this usage does or does not further the white supremacist cause, this paper argues that three factors logically merit consideration: foremost, the intention with which the group under scrutiny employs the symbols in question; second, the real-world consequences of the actions in which the group proposes to engage; and, ultimately, the context in which the cultural artefact under scrutiny has been used historically, from the time of its origin to the present. One may appeal to these criteria on the basis that symbols become dangerous because of their weaponisation by the malicious, and that it is the nexus of intention, consequence, and historical context in which this weaponisation occurs.

In terms of intention it can be posited with near certainty that most, if not all, Beltaners who use runes do so for the sake of their mystical associa-tions, both for purposes of scene-setting for the benefit of performers and witnesses to the ritual, and – for some – in metaphorical or literal invocation of supernatural powers they associate with the runes. It is almost equally certain that Beltaners do not use runes as racist dog whistles or to advertise a latent affinity for white supremacist ideology; the author's experiences with Beltaners to date have continually demonstrated their community's explicit devotion to anti-racism and their pride in cultural diversity – values they showcase through their aforementioned openness to cultural eclecti-cism in their selection of performance elements. The BFS even goes so far as to acknowledge on its website the far-right associations of the runes its performers employ and to explicitly disavow the right-wing populism which in some social circles the symbols connote (Beltane Fire Society, 2017).

With regard to the real-world ramifications of Beltaner rune use the ritual-performer's actions thus far seem to have elicited few complaints from either members of the Beltane community or observers from outside it. In the author's three years of BFS involvement no articles in the local press have condemned the society or its members on the basis of rune use, and the only mention of the runic connection to fascism as it might pertain to Beltane occurred in the course of the single, lighthearted conversation among Edinburgh University academics – few of whom had even previously seen one of the festivals – that precipitated the writing of this article. While this seeming absence of critique by the festival-going public concerning BFS rune use does not mean without doubt that the presence of runes at the festivals has offended or endangered no one, it does little in and of itself to problematise that presence.

Finally, the discussion approaches the subject of historical context and asks whether Beltaners – whatever the intentions that underlie their actions or the consequences resulting therefrom – can morally justify their rune use in the face of runes' historical usage by people whose values were completely antithetical to their own, and whose actions caused tremendous harm, up to and including loss of comfort, property, sanity, and life for millions of innocent people. This paper posits that the answer to that question is a definitive 'yes'. As previously mentioned, it is well attested that many German ethnonationalists in the early to mid-twentieth century, including many high-ranking Nazis, had a great affinity with Germanic runes (Barnes 2012, 195). One can assert with equal certainty, however, that runes existed for centuries before the advent of Nazism (Barnes 2012, 9), and that there is nothing inherently racist about runic writing. Thus, it seems safe to conclude that runes themselves are not racist unless wielded with racist intent – an intent wholly absent on the part of Beltaners.

Conclusion

An examination of the history of runes from antiquity to the present reveals the enduring fascination they have held for occultists – some of whom have had ties to Germanic ethnonationalism. Likewise, an examination of the history of Edinburgh's Beltane Fire Festival traces the evolution of an eclectic subculture of bohemians, performance artists, political activists, community organisers, cultural revivalists, and neopagans who in the present day take great liberty in making use of runes – especially the Algiz rune – in their artistic and ritual endeavours, irrespective of both the seeming incongruity

of rune use at Gaelic festivals and the popularity of runes among past and present devotees of the far right.

This paper therefore concludes that the Beltaners are ethically justified in taking such liberties in their use of runes. The Beltaners straightforwardly prioritise cultural diversity over historicity and so may unproblematically mingle Celtic and Germanic elements in their creative oeuvre. Although the BFS has suffered in the past from the under-emphasis of Gaelic traditions within its cultural gestalt, some members of the society have recently recognised this deficit and its incompatibility with Beltaners' general support for the cause of social justice, and the BFS itself has thus far supported these members' remedial efforts at Gaelic promotion within the Beltane community.

The vast preponderance of evidence suggests that Beltane rune use itself has no direct connection to fascism in terms of either ritual performers' intentions or the known public impact of their performances. Only with regard to the historical context of the runes themselves do Beltaners' activities resemble those of the far right, and only insofar as both Beltaners and racial ethnonationalists have attributed similar symbolic meanings to specific runes and have used runes in general as artistic motifs in public performance. The tendency of both groups to draw from the same symbolic repertoire is in this case wholly incidental and therefore no more suspect or significant than Albert Einstein and Adolf Hitler having availed themselves of the same language for the public expression of certain of their ideas. So it is with Beltaners and white supremacists in their use of the runes: following the consensus established by mystics of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and affirmed by those of the post-war era, both groups agree about the meanings they ascribe to individual runes, yet the overall timbre of the messages they choose to convey by their use of them remains completely distinct. Those of a fascistic bent use runes to evince their solidarity with their more powerful ideological predecessors and to signal their purported descent from and desire to restore an imagined, ethnically 'pure' utopia. By contrast, the Beltaners use runes to mark their collective investment in a different utopian vision – one in which the supernatural power of a mythic past imbues tired contemporary urbanity with meaning and beauty, and inspires people of various ethnic backgrounds to surmount their personal and cultural differences to connect with both their fellow city-dwellers and the natural world that sustains them. Both imagined futures are only that – though, fortunately, the latter seems more achievable than the former – and yet to anyone of

conscience the Beltaners' vision must seem vastly preferable to that of the white supremacists.

In attempting to realise their ambitions of self-actualisation and community building through pagan ritual and collaborative performance art, Beltaners not only conduct an arcane rite and enact a public spectacle, they bring inspiration and entertainment to multitudes and foster a sense of benevolent fraternity among people who might otherwise never meet, let alone collaborate. What activists of the far right can only accomplish at the expense of human dignity and minority rights – the fostering of a sense of collective purpose in striving towards a common goal – the Beltane community achieves without attempting to exclude or demean anyone. If, in doing so, they happen to use the same runes as adherents of the far right, this coincidence presents no moral dilemma.

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