

Ráð Rétt Rúnar:

Reading the Runes in Old English and Old Norse Poetry

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Abbreviations

For abbreviations used in citing individual runic inscriptions, see Appendix.

<i>ASE</i>	<i>Anglo-Saxon England</i>
ASPR	Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records
<i>ASSAH</i>	<i>Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology & History</i>
<i>BT</i>	<i>An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary</i> , ed. J. Bosworth and T. N. Toller. London: 1930 and <i>Supplement</i> , ed. T. N. Toller and A. Campbell. Oxford: 1921.
<i>CV</i>	<i>An Icelandic-English Dictionary</i> , ed. Richard Cleasby, Gudbrand Vigfusson and William R. Graigie. 2 nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1874/1957.
EETS	Early English Text Society
<i>JEGP</i>	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology</i>
<i>KJ</i>	Wolfgang Krause and Herbert Jankuhn, <i>Die Runeninschriften im älteren Futhark</i> . Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1966.
<i>MLR</i>	<i>Modern Language Review</i>
MS(S)	Manuscript(s)
<i>MSE</i>	Phillip Pulsiano, <i>et al.</i> , eds, <i>Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia</i> . London: Taylor and Francis, 1993.
<i>N&Q</i>	<i>Notes and Queries</i>
<i>NOR</i>	<i>Nytt om runer</i>
OE	Old English
<i>OE Bede</i>	<i>The Old English Version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People</i> , ed. Thomas Miller. London: EETS, 1890.
ON	Old Norse
<i>PLL</i>	<i>Papers on Language and Literature</i>
<i>SamRun</i>	<i>Samnordisk runtextdatabas</i>
<i>SBVS</i>	<i>Saga Book of the Viking Society</i>
<i>SN</i>	<i>Studia Neophilologica</i>
<i>SR</i>	<i>Sveriges runinskrifter</i> . Vols I-IV. Stockholm: Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, 1900-1981.
<i>ZfdPh</i>	<i>Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie</i>

Introduction

Ráð rétt rúnar!

Variations on the call to ‘read the runes correctly’ appear frequently in runic inscriptions from medieval Scandinavia, sometimes in reference to an important piece of information, but often simply issued as a challenge to the ingenuity of the reader.¹ Indeed, the exhortation to *ráð rétt* seems to have become something of a stock phrase. It was certainly common enough to be abbreviated as **ra(þ)rt** by one Ulfríkr, plying his trade in Rogaland,² and for a rune-writer in Hopperstad Church to sign off his inscription with a particularly curt **rrrar**.³

This plea for correct interpretation is also echoed in the literature of medieval Iceland. In one oft-cited episode the poet-hero Egill rebukes a farmer’s son for his poor command of the runic script, uttering a verse chastising incompetent rune carvers and pointing out the dangers of miswriting:

‘Skalat maðr rúnar rísta,
nema ráða vel kunni.
Þat verður mǫrgum manni,
es of myrkvan staf villisk.’⁴

¹ Notable examples include DR 222, U 847, U11, N 352 and N 575, this last inscription from Gol stave church simply reading **raþ rett ru(n)ar þesar**, *Ráð rétt rúnar þessar*, ‘Interpret the runes correctly!’, *SamRun*. Exhibiting what one might call rather ‘meta-scriptural’ characteristics, many of these exhortations to ‘read correctly’ seem only to refer back to the exhortation itself. See Terje Spurkland, *Norwegian Runes and Runic Inscriptions* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2005), 180. For the conventions used in representing runic inscriptions, see conventions section below, pages 16 and 17.

² N 237, *SamRun*.

³ Inscription XIX, N 408, *SamRun*.

⁴ ‘A man should not cut runes unless he knows how to interpret them correctly; it happens to many a man that he goes astray with an obscure rune-stave.’ *Egils saga Skalla-Grímssonar*, Íslenzk fornrit II, ed. Sigurður Nordal (Reykavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933), St. 48, 230.

This half-strophe expresses in no uncertain terms the importance of reading runes correctly, and although this episode, like many treatments of runes in the sagas, is somewhat fanciful, the sentiment at least seems to be authentic, and is even paraphrased on a rune stick from Trondheim.⁵ The importance of not going ‘astray’ when reading runes is also expressed in the myth cycle: after a strange self-sacrifice carried out in order to gain knowledge of the runes, Óðinn is said to enquire ‘Veiztu hvé rísta skal? Veiztu hvé ráða skal?’, ‘Do you know how to carve? Do you know how to interpret?’ Correct reading is situated here as a celestial concern.⁶

In the poetry of the Anglo-Saxons we also find an implicit challenge to read the runes accurately through their use as clues in riddles, *Riddle 58* even describing them as ‘ryhte runstafas’, ‘true rune-staves’ (l. 15), the epithet echoing the term *rúnar réttar* referred to in Viking Age inscriptions, and suggesting a similar concern with correct practice. For Cynewulf certainly, the ability to solve the runic puzzle was a matter of considerable import; not only his memorial to posterity, but also the salvation of the reader was bound up with the implicit challenge to read the runes correctly.

The type of reading called for by the rune carvers, stressed by Egill and demanded by Cynewulf, has its roots in correct apprehension of the runic characters and interpretation of the message. As any runologist knows, this practical concern is certainly warranted, the varying conventions of orthography, punctuation and layout, along with the vicissitudes of the material text, meaning that the misconstruing of runic inscriptions even at the level of transcription is a very real risk. However,

⁵ James E. Knirk, ‘Runes from Trondheim and a Stanza by Egill Skalla-Grimsson’ in *Studien zum Altgermanischen. Festschrift für Henrich Beck*, ed. Heiko Uecker (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1994), 411-20. The half-strophe is recast as a positive statement, but otherwise bears remarkable similarity to Egill’s composition; indeed, it is ‘most likely that the runic verse preserves an older half-stanza that was remoulded by tradition or by the author of *Egils saga*’, 418.

⁶ *Hávamál*, st. 144. Note that translations are placed in single quotation marks to conform to the runic conventions.

there is clearly another dimension to these pleas for correct reading in the poetry. Egill is referring to the effects of runes carved wrongly, which in this literary representation are granted the power to heal or harm; *Hávamál* goes on to refer to sacrifice and to Thund carving ‘fyr þjóða røk’, ‘before the history of men’ (st. 145); and Cynewulf demands that the reader not only identifies the runes, but also interprets their message in terms of personal salvation, and in the wider context of the poem.

There is certainly more to reading the ‘runic imagery’, to borrow Seth Lerer’s term,⁷ in these literary contexts than simply avoiding mistakes of transcription: as literary critics we need to interpret the literary and cultural value of the runes, and read their conceptual as well as linguistic meaning, appreciating the way they operate as signs (both graphical and literary) within the hermeneutical framework of poetic texts. This is a distinction between the sense of reading as a technical process of construing linguistic meaning from written signs, and reading as a broader interpretative endeavour: a sense carried by ON *ráða*⁸ and OE *rædan*.⁹ If we fail to pay attention to the particularities of the poetic context when reading these literary runes, we are perhaps as culpable as runologists who offer an interpretation of an inscription without recourse to the material or archaeological context. It is necessary, in short, to recognise the distinctiveness of the poetic medium, and of poetic language in particular, which is ‘popularly regarded as the most creative of discourses’, and which encourages allusion, circumlocution and abstraction.¹⁰

⁷ Seth Lerer, *Literacy and Power in Anglo-Saxon Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 16.

⁸ The meanings of *ráða* include, of course, ‘to advise, counsel’ or ‘to rule’, as well as ‘to explain, read’, *CV*, 485-6.

⁹ Including ‘to consult’ and ‘to explain’, as well as to ‘read’ both text and, for example, riddles or dreams, *BT*, 782.

¹⁰ Katie Wales, *A Dictionary of Stylistics* (Harlow: Pearson, 2001), 303.

The abstract nature of this medium should warn us of the futility of trying to map poetic runes directly onto the epigraphical tradition, something that runologists are sometimes as guilty of as amateur readers. Sven B. Jansson is certainly not alone in turning to literary references as support, though acknowledging they have their ‘own special interest’,¹¹ and it is symptomatic of both scholarly and esoteric introductions to runes to refer to the poetic ‘evidence’ in a singularly offhand and uncritical manner.¹² For New Age fraudsters attempting to recreate a lost tradition, the poetry provides a space for speculation to run wild, only encouraged by the success of the Internet as a forum for disseminating runic stupidity. For more sceptical runologists, on the other hand, the dismissive and cursory treatment probably stems from a deep suspicion of the evidence. Unless, that is, the poetic reference happens to support the particular argument being put forth, when it becomes a useful tool for comparison. Both approaches, however, share a misplaced assumption that there is no other way to read literary runes than as a reflection or distortion of historical practice. This thesis, in contrast, seeks not only to read the runes in relation to the runic tradition, but as a category in their own right: as literary topoi functioning within the context of poetry.

The value of the poetic rune and the current state of scholarship

As Shelley remarks in his essay ‘A Defence of Poetry’, ‘Reason is the enumeration of quantities already known; Imagination is the perception of the values of these quantities’, and this truism

¹¹ Sven B. Jansson, *The Runes of Sweden* trans. Peter Foote (Stockholm: A. Nordstedt, 1962), 152.

¹² See R. W. V. Elliott, *Runes – An Introduction* (Manchester: MUP, 1959). Whilst he admits that literary references ‘can of course be regarded as pure fiction’, he alludes to the *Edda* and OE poetry in support of ‘Germanic custom’ throughout, 81.

might also be used in defence of this endeavour.¹³ Whilst there is little value in reading the poetic ‘image of life’¹⁴ to reconstruct runic practice, the imaginative realm of poetry might help us to understand the value that the rune, and the written word more generally, held in the cultures of Anglo-Saxon England and medieval Iceland. We should be wary of equating this poetic image of runes with the perception of the practitioners themselves, particularly when the poetry postdates the runic tradition concerned, but it can certainly tell us something about how the rune was re-imagined at the time the poems were written down, and the role of runic imagery in mediating and mythologizing the contemporary culture of letters. These early literary engagements with runes are, after all, where the legacy of misreading has its roots, only confirming the need for a reappraisal.

There is, of course, a further reason why reading these literary runes correctly is so imperative. Not only does their (mis)reading have implications for runic studies, but our understanding of the runes is also vital to the critical interpretation of the literary works in which they appear. Students often approach runes in literature with preconceptions about what these strange characters signify: the mysterious; the esoteric; the pagan; even associating them with Tolkien’s Middle-earth, or worse, with the iconography of Aryanism. The context in which most students of literature (outside of Scandinavia at least) come across the runic tradition itself is through allusions in Old English and Old Norse poetry: a runic colophon at the end of one of Cynewulf’s poems or a rune in an Anglo-Saxon riddle; a passing reference to an engraved hilt in *Beowulf* or to the Ruthwell Cross; an obscure allusion to Óðinn’s secret knowledge or a runic taming-wand in the *Edda*. It might not seem of

¹³ Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘A Defence of Poetry’ in *The Complete Works of Shelley: VII*, ed. R. Ingpen and W. E. Peck (Ernest Benn: London, 1965), 105-40, 109.

¹⁴ Shelley, ‘A Defence of Poetry’, 115.

much consequence if students come away with a patchy and distorted understanding of the runic tradition after encountering it in these contexts, but learning to read the runes correctly should not be regarded as an academic indulgence, as these poems are some of the most canonical of their respective periods. In the case of Cynewulf's *Elene*, *Skírnismál* or, indeed, the *Dream of the Rood*, it is no exaggeration to claim that reading the runes correctly means reading the poem correctly.

In such instances, the runes are usually assumed to be operating as a book script, and entirely within the terms of a Latinate textuality. It has thus largely been left to literary critics to interpret them, and literary critics, not having much insight into the runic tradition, have for the most part sidestepped this responsibility, or worse, made sweeping statements about the runes that simply will not stand up to scrutiny.¹⁵ René Derolez, author of the seminal work on Anglo-Saxon *Runica Manuscripta*, was himself rather dismissive of the poetic material, but he was conducting an empirical study into runes in manuscripts, particularly *futhorc* and runic alphabets, and it is hardly surprising that he devotes only a single closing chapter to the unsystematic use of runes by Anglo-Saxon poets.¹⁶ Runes might certainly be described as 'marginal to general editorial interests':¹⁷ the standard ASPR editions of the Exeter and Vercelli books provide only cursory comments to the

¹⁵ The Eddic material, whilst being favoured by pedlars of New Age rune lore, has also received the most rigorous critical attention, and both Ursula Dronke in her published volumes of *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford: OUP, 1969-2011) and the compendious *Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda*, ed. von See *et al.*, 5 Vols (Heidelberg: C. Winter University Press, 1997-2006) make informed comments about the runic script. Seth Lerer also makes a foray into the Anglo-Saxon runic tradition in his thought-provoking study *Literacy and Power*, dealing knowledgeably and sensitively with the runic legacy. The same, unfortunately, cannot be said of many other treatments of runes in poetry.

¹⁶ René Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta* (Brugge: De Tempel, 1954). All non-alphabetic *runica manuscripta*, including reference marks, abbreviations, scribal notes, signatures and poetic runes are treated together in his final chapter.

¹⁷ R. I. Page, 'Runic writing, Roman script and the scriptorium' in *Runor och ABC*, ed. Staffan Nyström (Stockholm: Sällskapet Runica et Mediævalia, Opuscula 4, 1997), 119-136, 134.

runic strategies on display, and even the latest edition of the Old English *Solomon and Saturn I*, whilst tracing every conceivable source in the Latin tradition, fails to engage properly with the runic Pater Noster.¹⁸ Neither Orchard, Larrington or Hollander have much space to explore the place of runes in their recent translations of the *Edda*, beyond the occasional useful footnote, a great improvement on the minimalist textual apparatus of Neckel and Kuhn and the misleading speculation of Bellows. Dronke's edition of the *Edda* is as insightful with regards to the runes as it is to most aspects of Old Norse culture, but only a selection of the poems are included in her published volumes, and older editions of the *Edda* such as Finnur Jónsson's *Die Gamle Eddadigte* and Detter and Heinzel's *Sæmundar Edda* are rather outdated, to say the least, though they do at least make some reference to the runic tradition. The student must turn to Evans for a (slightly runically challenged, but otherwise sound) analysis of the *Rúnatal* section of *Hávamál*, or to von See *et al. Kommentar zu den Liedern der Edda* for a comprehensive discussion of such slippery concepts as 'victory-runes' and 'ale-runes', but even here there is little attempt to draw these isolated references together and make sense of them as a whole. There are, of course, a number of critical engagements with runes in Old Norse and Old English literature, both from the runologist's perspective, and the literary critic's perspective. Some of the most recent treatments of runes in Old English literature include Seth Lerer's inciteful *Literacy and Power*—which sets runic literacy in the wider context of Anglo-Saxon learning—and articles by Bragg, Dewa, DiNapoli, Fell and Niles,¹⁹

¹⁸ Daniel Anlezark, ed., *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2009), 28-9.

¹⁹ Lois Bragg, 'Runes and Readers: In and Around "The Husband's Message"', *SN* 71:1 (1999), Roberta J. Dewa, 'The Runic Riddles of the Exeter Book: Language Games and Anglo-Saxon Scholarship' *Nottingham Medieval Studies* 39 (1995), 26-36.34-50, Robert DiNapoli, 'Odd Characters: Runes in Old English Poetry' in *Verbal Encounters – Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse Studies for Roberta Frank*, ed. Antonia Harbus and Russell Poole (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 145-162, Christine E.

whilst in the Old Norse tradition Bauer's fine edition of the rune poems as well as recent articles by Bauer, Dillman and Macleod, have helped to revive an interest in Icelandic *runica manuscripta*.²⁰

Whilst useful in themselves, these studies do tend either to focus on a narrow grouping of texts, or to treat the poetic runes simply as footnotes to the respective runic traditions. There is no comparative study of the poetic rune in Old English and Old Norse literature, and it is hard even to define a corpus of runes in poetry from the existing literature.²¹ Indeed, it is sometimes difficult to pinpoint the exact sense of the word 'rune', as it carries the secondary meanings of 'counsel' or 'secret', though in the literature references to runic writing are usually made clear, either by reference to *rúnastafas* or *rūnstafas*, or by the poetic context.²² In this thesis I take the definition of the poetic rune to include these clear references to the runic script, in addition to the employment of runes as a book script within poetic manuscripts; together they certainly provide enough material

Fell, 'Runes and Riddles in Anglo-Saxon England' in *'Lastworda Bets' – Essays in memory of Christine E. Fell with her unpublished writings*, ed. Carole Hough and Kathryn A. Lowe (Donnington: Shaun Tyas, 2002), 264-77, John D. Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poetry and the Play of the Texts* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006).

²⁰ François-Xavier Dillmann, 'Runorna i den fornisländska litteraturen: En översikt', *Scripta Islandica* 46 (1995), 13-28, Alessia Bauer, 'Die späten *Runica Manuscripta* aus Island. Was versteht man unter *málrúnir*?', *Futbark* 1 (2010), 197-223 and Mindy Macleod, 'Bandrúnir in Icelandic Sagas' in *Preprints to the 11th International Saga Conference* (2000), 252-63. Reproduced <http://sydney.edu.au/arts/medieval/saga/pdf/252-mcleod.pdf>. Some older studies of manuscript runes include Finnur Jónsson's survey of 'Runerne i den norsk-islandske digtning og litteratur' *Aarbøger for Nordisk Oldkyndighed og Historie* (1910), 283-308, Anders Bæksted's treatment of literary references in *Målruner og Trolldruner: Runemagiske Studier* (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1952) and manuscript runes in *Islands runeindskrifter* (Kobenhavn: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1942).

²¹ In the early-twentieth century Bruce Dickins attempted to gather certain texts together under the misleading heading *Runic and Heroic Poems of the Old Teutonic Peoples* (Cambridge: CUP, 1915), whilst A. Hacıyan made a start on a more reasoned collection with 'The Runes of Old English Poetry', *Revue de L'Université d'Ottawa* 43:1 (1973), 53-76. Both Page and Elliott also give some space to runes in poetry in their respective introductions to Anglo-Saxon runes.

²² It is also important to point out that OE *run* and ON *rún* may have carried rather different nuances, a point stressed by Christine Fell in her study of 'Runes and Semantics' in *Old English Runes and their Continental Background*, ed. Alfred Bammesberger (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1991), 195-229, though her argument is flawed somewhat by her reliance on rather outdated material. In recent years inscriptions have come to light where the word *run* certainly does mean runic character.

to talk about a distinct context, if not a distinct ‘corpus’. One of the aims of this study will thus be to further define and circumscribe this poetic context, as all too often the individual poems are referred to without a clear understanding of where exactly they fit in to the wider picture.

Methodology (or Type of Argumentation)

It is clear that the endeavour of reading runes in poetry is positioned between two disciplines, which pull in somewhat different directions. Though always informed by the study of runology, this thesis is not concerned primarily with the transliteration, transcription and interpretation of inscriptions. Reading runes in poetry involves a certain degree of informed speculation, befitting a genre that is never interpretatively unequivocal, and as such it cannot adhere to all the strictures levelled at runologists by Barnes in his important essay ‘On Types of Argumentation in Runic Studies’.²³ Barnes understandably favours a systematic approach to runic inscriptions which simply describes when it cannot interpret, an approach also taken by Derolez in his study of Anglo-Saxon *Runica Manuscripta*. His remarks that whilst ‘many tasks await today’s runologists’ this should not include ‘the launching of interpretations neither whose correctness nor whose falseness can be demonstrated’ are certainly valid with regards to the interpretation of inscriptions.²⁴ However the whole business of literary criticism is premised on argument and reasoned speculation, and we should certainly expect runes operating within a fictional medium to be used in creative ways.

²³ Michael Barnes, ‘On Types of Argumentation in Runic Studies’ in *Proceedings of the Third International Symposium on Runes and Runic Inscriptions* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 1994), 11-29.

²⁴ Michael Barnes, ‘New Runic Studies’, *Scandinavica* 30:2 (1991), 223-32, 232.

Whilst recognising the different terms of the endeavour, Barnes' central tenets that the 'urge to fill the vacuum of ignorance at all costs' should be avoided, that allowance should be given to other interpretations, that terminology should be consistent and methodology made clear, are all useful for the present study.²⁵ The statement of purpose in this introduction is intended to address the evident (but not always self-evident) need to outline the position taken in the thesis, and to justify the approach.

Whilst philology will always be the primary concern of the runologist, and whilst it is true that 'until an inscription is properly published and its meaning firmly established, the text cannot be utilised by other scholars',²⁶ it has increasingly been recognised that runology is an interdisciplinary endeavour which draws on expertise from a variety of fields, and which is part of a wider discourse within the humanities. In recent years greater attention has been paid to the terms in which runic literacy operated, the type of texts that runic inscriptions represent, and the way in which contexts—material, ornamental, textual, locational—contribute to the meaning of the utterance.²⁷ My contention is that the empirical, philological approach favoured by runologists working with the epigraphical material is also not in itself an adequate toolkit with which to fully understand runic

²⁵ Barnes, 'On Types of Argumentation', 15.

²⁶ Henrik Williams, 'Runes' in *The Viking World*, ed. Stefan Brink (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008), 281-90, 287.

²⁷ For recent discussions of runic literacy see John Hines, 'Functions of Literacy and the Use of Runes' in *Runor och ABC*, ed. Staffan Nyström (Stockholm: Sällskapet Runica et Mediaevalia, Opuscula 4, 1997), 79-92; Judith Jesch, 'Still standing in Ågersta: Textuality and literacy in late Viking-Age rune stone inscriptions' in *Runeninschriften als Quellen interdisziplinärer Forschung - Proceedings of the Fourth International Symposium on Runes and Runic Inscriptions in Göttingen, 4-9 August 1995*, ed. Klaus Düwel (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 462-475; Terje Spurkland, 'Scandinavian Medieval Runic Inscriptions—an Interface between Literacy and Orality?' in *Roman, Runes and Ogham*, eds J. Higgitt et al. (Donington, Lincs: Shaun Tyas, 2001), 121-28 and 'Literacy and "Runacy" in Medieval Scandinavia' in *Scandinavia and Europe 800-1350* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2004), 333-344; and the collection of essays in *Literacy in Medieval and Early Modern Scandinavian Culture*, ed. P. Hermann (Aarhus: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2005), 21-46.

strategies in verse, or the representation of runes in mythical and heroic poetry. The ‘intellectual rigours’ of literary criticism are as imperative to the reading of runes in poetry as those of runology, and just as ‘it is important for the philologically-minded runologist . . . to become at least acquainted with other aspects of the monument than just its linguistic ones’, so can literary theory, textual criticism and palaeography—the tools of the literary critic—help to elucidate runes in the context of literature.²⁸

Working on this principle, and with the aim of providing a series of complementary approaches to reading runes in their particular context, I will make recourse to a variety of literary-critical perspectives throughout the thesis. If there is one critical outlook that could be said to inform the thesis as a whole, however, it is the poststructuralist style of thinking which first began to destabilise the binary between spoken and written language. Indeed, the very idea that there are multifaceted ways of approaching and reading an open text is perhaps itself a legacy of this intellectual movement, and both the concept of textuality and the discourse on writing and difference instigated by Barthes and Derrida have much to recommend them in the study of early manuscript culture, so long as we are careful to avoid retrojecting modern sensibilities onto the past. Indeed, one of the many legacies of Derrida’s work, and *Of Grammatology* in particular, was the attention it drew to writing as a distinct process, which could be studied on its own terms, and all these readings reflect this in their own way, serving to highlight the particularities of written communication: the graphic, the visual and the symbolic.

²⁸ Judith Jesch, *Ships and Men in the Late Viking Age: The Vocabulary of Runic Inscriptions and Skaldic Verse* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2001), 37.

It is clear, then, that in its focus on the runic script as a system of visual signs, the thesis also engages with the orality/literacy debate in medieval textual studies, and that to a certain extent it serves to deconstruct the oft-perceived primacy of the oral signifier in early medieval texts: the use of runes in the Exeter Book riddles, for example, problematises A. N. Doane's characterisation of Old English poetry as 'never intended to feed into a lineage of writing' and 'extrinsic to its main existence in ongoing oral traditions', whilst the internal references to runic writing in Eddic poetry put paid to the idea that these texts originate from a purely oral society.²⁹ The mediation of oral poetry by Latin textual models has certainly been a fruitful area of enquiry, Pasternack and O'Brien O'Keefe in particular bringing the concepts of 'inscribed texts' and 'visible song' to our attention,³⁰ and it is certainly true that 'Latin texts and textuality supplied the models for most English texts', even those judged to be composed within the native oral tradition.³¹ The runic tradition, on the other hand, undoubtedly developed its own textual conventions and material associations which diverged somewhat from the classical model. Though the runic script is alphabetic and functions in much the same way as the Latin alphabet, the textual fabric of the runic tradition, the types of utterances, the technology and the material associations were particular, and we are right to talk of runic literacy and runic textuality as entailing something different to that demonstrated in manuscript culture. The legacy that this alternative textual tradition, this 'other' manifestation of

²⁹ A. N. Doane, 'Oral Texts, Intertexts and Intratexts: Editing Old English' in *Influence and Intertextuality in Literary History*, ed. E. Rothstein and J. Clayton (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 86.

³⁰ See Carol Braun Pasternack, *The Textuality of Old English Poetry* (Cambridge: CUP, 1995) and Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse* (Cambridge: CUP, 1990).

³¹ Martin Irvine, 'Medieval Textuality and the Archaeology of Textual Culture' in *Speaking Two Languages*, ed. Allen J. Frantzen (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 181-210, 186.

literacy, had on Old English and Old Norse poetry incorporating or evoking the script is harder to judge, but this tantalising meeting of two textual cultures in the poetry informs every approach in the thesis. When I am talking about the associations runes may have carried, and which are manifested in the literature, I am essentially still talking about an aspect of runic textuality, a particular code of textual reception, whether inherited from an earlier tradition, or reconfigured in terms of the Latinate *dialogic*. In my exploration of the opposition between the logos of the Latin alphabet and the *fubark*, and my contention that the written sign has significance in itself, I take much inspiration from Roy Harris's recent work, though I diverge from the 'integrational' approach to writing that he espouses in certain key respects, not least in the fact that when I refer to writing, I am talking about glottic writing, or writing linked to language, and not to related sign systems such as musical or mathematical notation.³²

One criticism often levelled at poststructuralist criticism is its tendency towards indeterminacy, which can at times represent nothing more than a 'hedonist withdrawal from history'.³³ This is certainly not a tradition I wish to follow. The various approaches in the thesis attest to the fact that there are a number of ways of reading the runic motif, but there are certainly ways of reading that are more suitable to the unique context than others. It is the literary critic's responsibility, after all, to be discriminating. The readings I offer are intended to be illuminating and constructive, not to further mystify a discipline already overburdened with speculation.

³² Roy Harris, *Signs of Writing* (London: Routledge, 1995) and *Rethinking Writing* (London: The Athlone Press, 2000).

³³ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983/1996), 130.

The Approaches

The thesis is broken down into five chapters, each of which represents a discrete but complementary reading of a selected group of poems. Chapter 1 explores the idea of runic writing as a puzzle to be deciphered, from the embryonic implied challenge of the Brandon Antler inscription to the sophisticated enigma that is the Franks Casket. These epigraphical riddles are compared with the runic riddles of the Exeter Book, highlighting the importance of naming and vocalisation, material transformation and the explicit challenge posed to readers. The runes in these playful and deconstructive contexts are best appreciated as points of heightened attention to the terms of literacy in late Anglo-Saxon England.

The following chapter deals with the corollary of the riddlic association and the idea of interpretative concealment, reading literary runes as representing moments of disclosure, and the keys to unlocking meaning. This is an association underscored by the famous reference to the *alysendlic* rune in Bede's story of Imma, perhaps the single most influential reference to runes in OE literature. I focus on the use of runic abbreviations in Anglo-Saxon poetic manuscripts, and look to the poetic context in order to explain their sporadic and apparently arbitrary employment. The association with unlocking is used to shed further light on Cynewulf's signatures, which are read as revelatory conceits, with the reader, rather than the author, in the spotlight.

Chapter 3 continues this attention to runes as moments of reflection on the writing process, focusing in this instance on the visual alterity of the runic script, and expressions of form, texture and materiality in the poetry. In *Solomon and Saturn I* runes become the focus for the representation of graphic, personified, tactile letters. In the *Old English Rune Poem* the written

characters serve as the visual locus for each riddlic stanza, the structure of the *fuþorc* in turn shaping the construction of the poem itself. In the *Norwegian Rune Poem* this connection between the form of the runic character and the poetic description is even more apparent, many stanzas referring to the shape of the rune. In each case the runes introduce a heightened attention to writing as writing, to the texture, appearance and material context of the written word.

The historicity or otherwise of literary references to runic practice is a topic of some importance to literary critics, historians and runologists alike. Chapter 4 explores depictions of runes in the heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda*, and compares them with what we know of runic practice in the Migration Period, looking in particular at the list of exotic rune-types in *Sigrdrífumál*. I argue that the poems are engaged in a process of historicising the runic script and establishing a heroic precedent that was suitably exotic and detached from the everyday engagement with runes that characterises the Bryggen material. The chapter ends with a discussion of the runic message in *Atlamál in grænlenzko* and its reflection of contemporary anxieties about long-distance written communication: a reading of runes not in the context of the events they purport to represent, but in the context of the society in which the heroic material was revised and written down.

The final chapter looks at the mythologizing of runes in the mythical poems of the *Edda*. I take the view that myth often mediates social anxieties and concerns, and the myth of origin and sacrifice in *Hávamál* is thus read not as the etiological ritual of a credulous culture, but as a crucial means of coming to terms with the possibilities and threats associated with literacy. The social impacts of this revolutionary technology are explored in *Rígsþula*, whilst the role that writing plays in the power and gender dynamics of *Skírnismál* is explored in a similar vein. *Sólarljóð* is included in this exploration

of writing and myth, as it represents the assimilation of one social discourse, and technology of writing, into the dominant ideology of book-learning and written Christian revelation. Read in this way, the treatment of runes in the mythological cycle serves to remind us, as unconscious literates, about the social impact of written language and the power and potential of this technology of writing to shape our lives.

Conventions

This thesis follows runological conventions when referring to runes in manuscripts, and when making reference to inscriptions for comparative purposes. It follows the Swedish (*Samnordisk runtextdatabas*) standards, and this also applies to the English inscriptions; the system devised by R. I. Page specifically for the Anglo-Saxon material is not followed. Transliterations are thus given in **bold**, with a single hyphen, - , indicating an unreadable rune, an ellipsis, ... , indicating a longer portion of missing text, round brackets, (), for damaged runes which can still be read, and square brackets, [], for runes which cannot be read but can be conjectured from early readings. The *SamRun* conventions for indicating punctuation and dividers are also followed, but bind-runes are indicated by underlining the letters. As is conventional, the transcribed normalised text is written in *italics*, and an English translation given in single quotation marks. The Junicode font is used throughout, with the special runic fonts ‘Gullskoen’, ‘Gullhornet’, and ‘Anglo-Saxon Runes’ employed for the runic characters, the last of these used to approximate the calligraphic runes employed in the Exeter Book.

The readings followed are for the most part that of the *Samnordisk runtextdatabas*, for inscriptions in the younger and medieval *fubarks*,³⁴ Wolfgang Krause and Herbert Jankuhn, *Die Runeninschriften im älteren Futhark* for inscriptions in the older *fubark*, supplemented by Tineke Looijenga, *Texts and Contexts of the Oldest Runic Inscriptions*,³⁵ and awaiting completion of the Eichstätt Old English Runes Project, Page's transcriptions in *An Introduction to English Runes* are used for most of the Anglo-Saxon *futhorc* inscriptions, supplemented by John Hines, 'The Runic Inscriptions of Early Anglo-Saxon England'.³⁶ The *SamRun* database, whilst not fully comprehensive (new finds are, after all, always being added) is perfectly adequate for my purposes in this thesis; the various corpuses to which *SamRun* refers are listed in the appendix.

The main editions used for the poetry are the ASPR editions for the Exeter and Vercelli Book poems and Ursula Dronke ed., *The Poetic Edda* for the Eddic poems, with Gustav Neckel ed., *Edda – Die Lieder des Codex Regius* used for certain poems not covered in Dronke's published volumes (*Sigrdrífumál*; *Helgakviða Hjörvarzsonar*; *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*; *Guðrúnarkviða I*; *Guðrúnarkviða II*). Editions of other poems are referenced in the text. In the footnotes, references are given in full the first time they appear and by author's surname and short title thereafter. Full details can be found in the Bibliography. All translations of Old English and Old Norse are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

³⁴ <http://www.nordiska.uu.se/forskn/samnord.htm>. The most recent (2008) edition of the database is used, and *Rundata* 2.5.

³⁵ Tineke Looijenga, *Texts and Contexts of the Oldest Runic Inscriptions* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

³⁶ John Hines, 'The Runic Inscriptions of Early Anglo-Saxon England' in *Britain 400-600: Language and History*, ed. A. Bammesberger (Heidelberg: Carl Winter 1990), 437–456.

Chapter 1

The Enigmatic Rune: Old English Riddle Poetry and the Runic Script

[The Ruthwell Cross and Franks Casket, Exeter Book Riddles 24, 42, 58, 64, 75, 91 (runic riddles), Exeter Book Riddles 5, 6, 7, 13, 14, 17 (runic clues), *The Husband's Message*.]

Autoreferential Inscriptions

The Caistor-by-Norwich astralagus is generally considered to be amongst the very oldest of the runic inscriptions discovered in the British Isles, dated by Hines to c. 425-75.¹ The text exhibits the brevity typical of runic inscriptions from the early period, and simply reads **raīhan**, or 'roe-deer'.²

The astralagus was found in a cremation urn alongside a number of sheep bones, but whatever the motivation behind the carving of these six runes, it was almost certainly not for reasons of taxonomy, or undertaken with the intention of informing later readers that this particular object was once the talus-bone of a living deer. There is no doubt that the inscription is capable of communicating information, as its decipherment one and a half millennia later testifies to, but the additional complex of meanings surrounding the deer in early Anglo-Saxon society elude us, and the inscription cannot be described as fully communicative in the absence of this wider system of signification. It may be, as Bammesberger suggests, a 'playing piece' in a now obscure game,³ or it

¹ Hines, 'The Runic Inscriptions of Early Anglo-Saxon England', 442.

² Page, *An Introduction*, 179 and fig. 6.

³ Alfred Bammesberger, 'Ingvaenic Sound Changes and the Anglo-Frisian Runes' in *Old English Runes and their Continental Background*, ed. Alfred Bammesberger (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1991), 389-408, 403.

might serve as a figurative representation of the whole animal, or animals, in a funerary context.⁴ In either case, it clearly ‘belongs to a group of inscriptions in which the naming of the material or object plays an important role’.⁵

The impulse to name is as old as language itself, and in this inscription, brief as it is, we can perhaps identify some of the other central properties, and paradoxes, of early literacy. The inscription provides information which has been proven by experts in osteology to be correct: that this is indeed a roe-deer bone. This is of course the primary function of a declarative utterance: to inform and communicate. Yet it is also clear that divorced from its original context, the information provided by this ‘autoreferential label’⁶ is almost entirely meaningless. As Hines observes of these early inscriptions, ‘one cannot imagine that they had much utilitarian value in interpersonal transactions’, and there is clearly a functionality to the inscription beyond the purely informative, perhaps bound up with the *process* of naming itself.⁷

Being self-referential, the meaning of the utterance may well also be codependent on the material or object upon which it is written. This is an important consideration, and one that we often overlook from the vantage point of our developed literacy. As Zimmermann points out, the material context ‘is of special importance for early literate communities in which utterances are not written

⁴ This astralagus was the only inscribed piece amongst a collection of similar bones, but is one of a number of objects from the Caistor-by-Norwich site inscribed with forms resembling the **tiwaz* rune. Page, *An Introduction*, 92 and 179.

⁵ Looijenga, *Texts and Contexts*, 285. Other inscriptions Looijenga mentions in this group include the Hamwick knucklebone, reading *katæ*, or ‘phalanx’, and the late tenth century deer’s antler from Dublin (IR 12) reading *hurn : hiartaR * la : a ys aR*, ‘the deer’s antler lay at the river’, as well as the Brandon Antler and Frank’s Casket inscriptions dealt with here.

⁶ John Hines, ‘Some Observations on the Runic Inscriptions of Early Anglo-Saxon England’ in *Old English Runes and their Continental Background*, ed. Alfred Bammesberger (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1991), 61-83, 74.

⁷ Hines, ‘Some Observations’, 74-5.

down on neutral objects such as today's paper.'⁸ We may not be able to reconstruct its significance, but it is clear that 'the [writing] surface is not semiologically inert',⁹ and that the object itself is part of the written utterance, part of the complete meaning of the text; indeed, the inanimate object has been given something of a voice, through which it speaks its own material nature. It would not be perverse to say that there is something akin to an anthropomorphic riddle strategy at work in this embryonic written utterance.

Some forty miles inland from Caistor-by-Norwich, at Brandon in Suffolk, another inscription was found written on deer bone. This inscription, carved on part of an antler, dates from the late-seventh to early-ninth century, and may be transliterated as **wohswildumde-ran**, *wōhs wildum dēoraē an*, 'grew on a wild animal'.¹⁰ Much has changed in the period between the writing of these two inscriptions—even the script employed is different, using runes of the extended Anglo-Saxon *futhorc*—and something of a 'runological watershed' might be said to have occurred in the uses to which runes were put in the intervening years, under the influence of Latin literacy.¹¹ By the late-seventh century the kingdom of East Anglia had been exposed to the written culture of Christianity for at least half a century, and probably longer, and coins were being produced with mixed Latin and runic script from the mid-eighth century, testifying to the contact and exchange between these two

⁸ Christiane Zimmermann, "How to Do Things with Runes": Illocutionary Forces and Communicative Purposes behind the Runic Inscriptions in the Older *Futhorc*, *Futhorc* 1 (2010), 85-107, 92.

⁹ Harris, *Signs of Writing*, 113.

¹⁰ Page, *An Introduction*, 169. See also Alfred Bammesberger who postulates a triple rune for the final ligature, 'The Brandon Antler', 131. The meaning of the inscription is not affected by this transcription.

¹¹ Hines, 'Some Observations', 77.

writing systems.¹² The referent of the inscription is, however, remarkably similar to that of the astralagus. It refers to the object itself, or to what it once was. This time it is fairly clear even to the untrained eye what the material is, and the inscription cannot be read as a straightforwardly informative label. It refers obliquely to the living, wild animal that once sported the antler, to the growth and formation of the bone, and hence to its further transformation by man into something useful. The particular animal is not named, and one has to answer the implied puzzle using knowledge of the object itself.

Not only does it represent ‘the perfect opening half-line for a riddle on the subject’,¹³ but it might also be said to ‘play on the idea of the free life of the creature and its second life as an object formed by human skill’, an observation Fell makes of the Franks Casket.¹⁴ Brief as this inscription is, its four words do more than just communicate: they are contemplative, referential, and, in avoiding the name itself, they pose an implicit question for the reader of the inscription to answer, a challenge to ‘say what I am called’. As Parsons has pointed out, this inscribed object represents a kind of object-riddle,¹⁵ a material-textual challenge only implied in the embryonic prosopopoeia of the astralagus.

This chapter represents an approach to reading runes in literature that is bound up with writing as interpretative challenge, with the visual puzzle, and with the process of vocalisation of an object through the written word, all key tenets of the Old English riddle form. Mindful of Fell’s

¹² Mark Blackburn, ‘A Survey of Anglo-Saxon and Frisian Coins with Runic Inscriptions’ in *Old English Runes and their Continental Background*, ed. Alfred Bammesberger (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1991), 137-189, 166.

¹³ Fell, ‘Runes and Riddles’, 276.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 273.

¹⁵ David Parsons, ‘Runic Finds from Brandon, Suffolk’, *NOR* 6 (1991), 8-11, 11.

observation that ‘links between runic and riddling traditions . . . have been insufficiently considered’,¹⁶ it will trace the idea of writing as a puzzle to be deciphered, from the embryonic implied challenge of the Brandon Antler to the sophisticated material enigmas of the Franks Casket and the Ruthwell Cross, and into the ciphers and strategies of the runic riddles of the Exeter Book. I want to suggest that an association of runes with a riddling mode of communication was a significant factor in their use and representation in literature, and one that may in turn inform the way we read the runes in these contexts.

The Franks Casket

This thesis is concerned with the representations of runes in literature, and not primarily with the corpus of epigraphical runes. There are two Anglo-Saxon texts, however, that lie very much on the borderline between inscription and literary text, and which cannot be omitted from the discussion. These are, of course, the Franks Casket and the Ruthwell Cross, both of which represent an amalgamation of object, artistry and poetic text, and both of which have been linked to the Old English riddling tradition.¹⁷ Indeed, the small ivory chest acquired by Sir Augustus Wollaston Franks in the eighteenth century, now known as the Auzon or Franks Casket, might well be described as the superlative expression of the riddle form in Anglo-Saxon England. The object is carved on all four side panels and the remaining portion of the lid both with images and with lines of text, most of which appear to relate to one another, some of which are mysterious and actively

¹⁶ Fell, ‘Runes and Riddles’, 276.

¹⁷ See Peter Orton, ‘The Technique of Object-Personification in *The Dream of the Rood* and a Comparison with the Old English Riddles’ *Leeds Studies in English* 11 (1980), 1-18.

conceal the meaning and all of which demand elucidation. It is thus hardly surprising that this enigmatic and intricate object has posed an irresistible challenge to scholars over the years, generating a great deal of learned discussion, and no small amount of fanciful, and unlearned, speculation. Despite some valiant and thought-provoking attempts to read the Casket as a unified whole,¹⁸ it is almost certain that it has still ‘not yielded all its secrets’, including, of course, the original contents of the casket.¹⁹ Without contextual knowledge, a definitive reading will always remain out of our grasp, and my purpose here is not to furnish another reading of the object/text as a whole. Rather it will focus on some of the riddlic strategies used within the puzzle; in particular the use of the runic script.

The runes are an integral component of the riddle of the Casket. Whilst reading the runes may not have posed many difficulties in certain communities in the eighth century, the manner in which they are set out—sometimes reading from left to right, sometimes right to left; upside down on the lower left panel; cryptically concealing vowels with non-runic symbols on the right panel; adding up in all three inscriptions to 72 characters in what may be a deliberate employment of numerology—²⁰ cannot be said to facilitate a fluid reading process or smooth transfer of information. It is also clear that this deeply syncretic object, combining Germanic legend with complex Judeo-Christian

¹⁸ See, for example, Marijane Osborn, ‘The Seventy-Two Gentile Nations and the Theme of the Franks Casket’, *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 92:3 (1991), 281-88, L. Peeters, ‘The Franks Casket: A Judeo-Christian Interpretation’ in *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik* 46 (1996), 17-52, L. Webster, ‘The Iconographic Programme of the Franks Casket’ in *Northumbria’s Golden Age*, ed. J. Hawkes & S. Mills (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999), 227-246, and Alfred Becker, *Franks Casket. Zu den Bildern und Inschriften des Runenkästchens von Auzon* (Regensburg: H. Carl, 1973).

¹⁹ Peeters, ‘The Franks Casket’, 17.

²⁰ Osborn states that ‘[as] each of the three inscriptions contains precisely seventy-two items, there can be no question of us introducing a symbolism that was not intended’, ‘The Seventy-Two Gentile Nations’, 285.

iconography, is certainly not in the business of concealing unsavoury pagan secrets. Indeed, it is very likely that it was produced within a monastic community, a product of a dynamic and learned Northumbrian milieu.²¹ Rather than hiding any kind of parlous knowledge, the casket presents an explicit intellectual challenge to the reader, to overcome the difficulties and make sense of the relationship between text and image, which arise from an ‘ostentatiously erudite’ blend of different sources of eighth-century learning and culture.²² An important component in this complex of influences, is, of course, the runic tradition.

It would be wrong to assume that the use of runes within this context implies that the script is riddling in itself, or indeed, that it provided the impetus for the material riddle of the casket. The runes may simply have been chosen because of the tradition of inscribing them on material objects; because of what we might call their epigraphical currency, or indeed, because it added ‘elements of crypticism and decoration’.²³ There are, however, a number of constructs particular to the runic tradition that can be highlighted, and which do serve somewhat to bridge the gap between the world of epigraphy and the use of runes in the scriptorium, and particularly in riddling poetry.

We saw how both the Caistor-by-Norwich astralagus and the Brandon antler inscriptions maintained a connection between the material object and the text, and played with the idea of transformation and loss. This close connection between text and material is developed into an

²¹ See for example Webster, ‘The Iconographic Programme of the Franks Casket’, 245 and James Lang, ‘The Imagery of the Franks Casket: Another Approach’ in *Northumbria’s Golden Age*, ed. J. Hawkes & S. Mills (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1999), 247-55, 251.

²² Leslie Webster and Janet Backhouse, eds, *The Making of England: Anglo-Saxon Art and Culture AD 600-900* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991), 103.

²³ Elizabeth Okasha, ‘Script-Mixing in Anglo-Saxon Inscriptions’ in *Writing and Texts in Anglo-Saxon England*, ed. Alexander R. Rumble (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006), 62-70, 68.

intricate riddle on the front panel of the casket, which ends with the solution *bronæs ban*, ‘whale’s bone’. The inscription, following Page’s transliteration and normalisation, reads as follows:

*fisc flodu ahof on fergenberig
warþ gasric grorn þær he on greut giswom.*²⁴

These two alliterating lines present some problems of interpretation (not least the precise meaning of *gasric*) but the sense is clear enough. The fish is beached from the *flod* onto the *fergenberig* (‘mountain slope’, perhaps referring to the shore beneath mountains and almost certainly drawing on the associations of *beorg* as a term for burial mound), and the *gasric* (a poetic reference to the whale, perhaps ‘terrible beast’, perhaps ‘arch-gusher’)²⁵ became sad or agitated when it swam on the beach. The riddle ends with the reference to whale-bone in the left margin, but this is somewhat superfluous, as the material itself speaks the solution.

As with the best of literary riddles, this conceit casts new light on the object or process it treats. Here we are given the history of the object before it comes into human hands, in the form of a living, mobile creature that delivers up its body on the liminal border between sea and land. As with the inscription on the Brandon antler, the wildness of the animate creature and its crossing between environments is stressed, the fluidity of its movements providing both a thought-provoking contrast to the now inanimate object, and putting in motion the further transformations that were needed to create utility and beauty out of the raw material; to re-animate it, in other words. It is perhaps no

²⁴ Page, *An Introduction*, 174. ‘The sea raised up the fish on to the mountainous slope, the terrible beast became mournful when it swam on to the beach.’

²⁵ Osborn, ‘The Seventy-Two Gentile Nations’, 282.

coincidence that one of the images this riddle surrounds is that of the master craftsman, Weland, who was known in the Norse tradition for a rather more sinister crafting of bone, turning both the skulls and teeth of Niðuðr's children into jewellery, the latter a deliberate perversion of the walrus ivory (actually the tusk) prized by iron-age craftsmen.²⁶ The panel also echoes the prosopopoeia of the antler, this riddle even introducing the idea of emotion, a wistful sadness, as well as motion, into the conceit. The reader is indeed 'caught up in a mournful life history',²⁷ and there is loss as well as creation implied in the conversion from bone to casket, the solution *bronæs ban* running vertically up the side of the casket even suggesting visually the beaching of the whale that allowed the casket to come into being. The fact the runes run retrograde when referring to the fate of the whale may also represent the fact that this leviathan 'runs against nature' as Webster suggests, offering a 'verbal and visual commentary' on the scene and 'designed to be decoded using techniques familiar to the Anglo-Saxon tradition of embedding condensed and riddling messages in images'.²⁸ At its heart this is a riddle about transformation, about the mutability of life. Like the Brandon antler, these two short lines manage to say an awful lot.

The most complex connection between material, image and script perhaps comes not in this famous riddle, however, but in the inscriptions found within the image on the right panel, now

²⁶ 'Sneið af höfuð / húna þeira . . . en þær skálar, / er und skörom vóro, / sveip hann útan silfri, / seldi Niðaði. / En ór augom iarnasteina / sendi hann kunnigri / kono Niðaðar. / En ór tönnom / tveggja þeira / sló hann brióstkringlor, / sendi Bøðvildi.', 'He struck off the heads of those young boys . . . and the skulls that were beneath the hairline, he cast in silver, gave to Niðuðr; and from their eyes fashioned precious stones, he sent them to the knowing wife of Niðuðr; and from the teeth of the two of them he beat out brooches, and sent them to Bøðvildr.' *Vplundarkviða*, st. 25.

²⁷ Fell, 'Runes and Riddles', 273.

²⁸ Leslie Webster, 'Visual Literacy in a Protoliterate Age' in *Literacy in Medieval and Early Modern Scandinavian Culture*, ed. Pernille Hermann (Aarhus: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2005), 21-46, 42.

housed in the Museo del Bargello, Florence. The alliterative poem on this panel has never been adequately interpreted, and the fact that the scene probably depicts a lost legend adds considerably to the difficulties. Within the image itself, and surrounding the horse-like creature in the middle of the panel are three words: **risci**, **wudu** and **bita**, meaning ‘reed’, ‘wood’ and either the noun ‘bit, morsel’ or the proper noun ‘Biter’ from the verb *bitan*:



Franks Casket, Right Panel. Copyright Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence.

Page suggests the word ‘Bita’ could be the name of the horse or the man depicted in the scene, but there is, to my mind, another, more satisfying, possibility: it could be referring to the prominent object which the man is holding, a slender rod which points straight at the word.²⁹ It would make sense to refer to a weapon, rather than its wielder, as ‘biter’. Indeed, a ‘great and good’ sword carried by Geirmundr in *Laxdæla saga* is named *fótbítr*, ‘foot-biter’,³⁰ and the great warrior-poet Egil is

²⁹ Page, *An Introduction*, 178.

³⁰ *Laxdæla saga*, Íslenzk fornrit V, ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson (Reykavik: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1934), Ch. 29. The sword is also described as ‘tannhjölt at’, ‘hilted with walrus tusk’, perhaps lending another dimension to the name.

given a famous sword named *Dragvandill*, meaning ‘slicer’, the saga author praising it by claiming ‘var það allra sverða bitrast’, ‘that was of all swords the most biting’.³¹ These are both literary references from medieval Iceland, not eighth-century Northumbria, of course, but there was certainly a precedent for labelling weapons for their effects in early medieval Europe; indeed, one of the earliest runic finds is a lance point inscribed with the word *rannja*, probably meaning ‘assailer’.³²

The words ‘wood’, ‘reed’ and ‘biter’ could, in fact, all be referring in a riddling manner to this same object depicted on the panel: the staff or rod that the cloaked figure is holding. If we accept this possibility it means that not only is there an integration of script and image on this panel, but a further level of materiality woven into the scene. We might imagine the staff to be made of reed, wood or ivory, or the words could hint towards something that shares attributes with all three of these potentially periphrastic material clues. Most importantly, it endows the object with a voice in the same way as the casket as a whole, the rod speaking its nature as a ‘biter’ whose main purpose is to wound. This is a riddle which combines image, word and material into an integrated whole, a microcosm of the casket itself.

Of course, what this all means precisely, and how it relates to the rest of the scene, is bound to remain somewhat beyond our grasp. Who the characters Hos and Ertæ are is a complete mystery, as is the identity of the figures on the panel, including the curious monster in the left-hand corner. As was clear in the case of the Caistor-by-Norwich astralagus, being able to reconstruct the utterance does not grant us access to the social context, and the full meaning of the inscription. That said, the riddlic nature of the surrounding inscription cannot be in doubt. Even with a sound grasp of the

³¹ *Egils saga Skalla-Grimssonar*, Íslensk fornrit II, ed. Sigurður Nordal (Reykavik: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1933), Ch. 62.

³² The Dahmsdorf-Müncheberg lance, KJ 32.

story depicted, the cryptic nature of the runes—whereby nonstandard or arbitrary symbols are used to represent the majority of the vowels—would have ensured it posed a challenge to its contemporaries, even though similar substitution ciphers are relatively common in manuscripts. Perhaps we could even read them as signalling ‘the unnatural nature of this grim scene’.³³

In the Franks Casket we can perhaps see a point of crossover between the literary riddle and the embryonic runic ‘vocalisation’ represented by inscriptions which name themselves and their materiality. As Christopher Ball points out, we can perhaps never be sure that ‘any runic text dated after 650’ is original and not influenced by or even ‘transliterated’ from a manuscript,³⁴ and it is clear that the Franks Casket is the product of a meeting of Latinate Christian culture and native tradition. Indeed, even the Latin script used to render the statement *bic fugiant bierusalim*, ‘here they flee from Jerusalem’ has been described as a skilful display of different manuscript letter forms, and as reflecting a local pronunciation of Latin.³⁵ Yet clearly it was not only in manuscripts, and after runes had ceased to be widely used, that riddling and the runic script came to be associated. Indeed, when talking about the perception of the script and its representation in poetic texts, whether or not the Franks Casket inscription represents a ‘genuine’ or adapted runic tradition is essentially a tangential issue; the employment of runes in such contexts of crossover would undoubtedly influence how the script was perceived and used in later Anglo-Saxon England. It also bears enough similarity to the prosopopoeic antler inscriptions to suggest that the idea of material inscription as a

³³ Webster, ‘Visual Literacy’, 42.

³⁴ C. Ball, ‘Inconsistencies in the Main Runic inscriptions on the Ruthwell Cross’ in *Old English Runes and their Continental Background*, ed. Alfred Bammesberger (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1991), 107–123, 121.

³⁵ Thomas Klein, ‘Anglo-Saxon Literacy and the Roman Letters on the Franks Casket’, *SN* 81 (2009), 17–23.

riddle, and reading as a process of active interpretation of meaning rather than unconscious assimilation of information, was by no means taking the script in an entirely new direction.

The Ruthwell Cross

A great deal of critical attention has been paid to the syncretism of the singular poem *The Dream of the Rood*, in particular the manner with which it draws on heroic conventions to represent the crucifixion of Christ. The influence of the riddlic mode on the composition of the poem has also been examined, with particular focus on the depiction of the previous life of the cross and the anthropomorphism of the speaking object. The dream-frame exhibits its own affinities with the enigmatic mode of expression characteristic of the riddles, particularly those that open with the statement *ic seah* and represent an observer's perspective on an object or process. The conjoining of runes and Christian iconography on the Ruthwell Cross perhaps represents the most tangible expression both of the meeting of cultures in the poem, and the conjoining of material puzzle with Christian exposition: in this way 'the poem raises riddle language to the level of sacred mystery' and the 'empathetic play' becomes a vehicle for redemption.³⁶

The composition of *The Dream of the Rood* seems to me to be bound up with the inscribing of an object, materiality being vital to its full expression. The Ruthwell Cross, upon which the runes are rather awkwardly arranged, almost certainly does not itself represent the conceptual origin of the poem, the material referent of which is actually one of scored and fashioned wood. It does, however, retain the essential connection between the nailed and wounded cross of the poem and the

³⁶ Craig Williamson, *A Feast of Creatures: Anglo-Saxon Riddle-Songs* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 42.

monument cut with runes and standing before the reader, an object riddle that could be understood even by illiterates. Indeed, the intertwined foliage that forms the centrepiece of the north and south panels only enhances the contrast between the living tree and the cross, fashioned by the cruel minds and tools of men.³⁷ The visual-textual riddle and the anthropomorphism that is a key feature of Anglo-Saxon material culture has been raised to its ultimate expression in the rune-engraved Christian cross.

The runes which run around the borders of these two foliate panels represent by far the longest surviving Anglo-Saxon runic inscription. The runes are for the most part skilfully carved, but the text is by no means easy to comprehend; in fact, the arrangement of the runes on the cross in small lines of between two and four characters running down the narrow margins of the vine-work panels is, as Page points out, ‘maddeningly hard to read’.³⁸ A sample from phrasal unit four, which approximates Vercelli poem line 62b, illustrates this frustrating division of the half-line:

m i | þ s | t r e | l u | m g | i w | u n | d æ d |
*mīþ strelum giwundad*³⁹

Although the characters in this section are graphically clear and distinct, and only a single ‘dubious’ bind-rune is used throughout the whole inscription,⁴⁰ there is little punctuation to speak of,⁴¹ and

³⁷ Webster, ‘Visual Literacy’, 39.

³⁸ Page, *An Introduction*, 147.

³⁹ Richard J. Kelly and Ciarán L. Quinn, *Stone, Skin and Silver – A Translation of ‘The Dream of the Rood’* (Midleton, Co. Cork: Litho Press, 1999), 37-8.

⁴⁰ Mindy MacLeod, *Bind-Runes: An Investigation of Ligatures in Runic Epigraphy* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 2002), 82.

⁴¹ Another convention of Scandinavian runic practice, the use of a single rune to represent doubled characters, does not seem to have been followed by Old English rune-writers. R. I. Page ‘The Use of Doubled Runes in Old English Inscriptions’, *JEGP* 61 (1962), 897-907, 907.

the uppermost rows of runes are situated well above head height.⁴² A version of *The Dream of the Rood* may have been circulating in oral tradition, which would have made the feat of apprehending what the runes say a good deal easier, but even standing before the cross with a copy of the Vercelli poem in your hands, the process of reading is by no means straightforward. The reader first has to recognise the four phrasal units on the cross, that is, which sections of the larger poem are being quoted, and then match what was known to the continuous string of unpunctuated runes, some of which are situated high on the cross. It suggests that the Ruthwell runes were created ‘with other motives in mind than the conveying of information to a reading public’,⁴³ but this does not necessarily imply it was ‘addressed to the Redeemer himself’, as Wormald suggests.⁴⁴ The reading process would demand a significant investment of time and effort in the presence of the cross, by a dedicated reader, in order to successfully interpret the inscription. As well as being a riddlic utterance, where the object speaks its own story, the layout of the inscription frustrates the reading process to such an extent that it represents a significant interpretative challenge in itself. And it may be the challenge, in the end, which is important.

It has been suggested that the runic inscription was an afterthought, carved whilst the cross was already in situ, and thus exploiting the only space available, though Page concedes that this is ‘a heretical view and not shared by art historians’.⁴⁵ But whether planned from the outset as part of the

⁴² According to Baldwin Brown’s measurements the cross now stands 17ft 4 in. high, or some 5.3m. The uppermost row of runes stand at just under 4 meters, well above the height of even the tallest Anglo-Saxon! G. Baldwin Brown, *The Arts in Early England: Vol. 5* (London: John Murray, 1921), 105.

⁴³ Elizabeth Okasha, ‘Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England: The Evidence from Inscriptions’, *ASSAH* 8 (1995), 69–74, 88.

⁴⁴ C. Wormald, ‘The Uses of Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England and Its Neighbours’, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 5:27 (1977), 95–114, 96.

⁴⁵ Page, *An Introduction*, 147.

design of the cross, or carved later, the inscription still has the same effect of demanding that the reader participate actively in an interpretative process, something that may have served ‘to rouse a medieval community to purposeful effort’, and to participate in the supreme riddle of how humanity is able to apprehend the divine.⁴⁶ The Ruthwell inscription, I suggest, represents an exercise in Christian worship, whereby the reader is forced to actively engage with the text, revealing the meaning of the runes and incorporating them into the iconographic scheme of the monument. Rather like the transformation of the Franks Casket from living bone to speaking object, the reader is made to think in terms of a riddle of transformation: from the natural state of the tree to the aberrant cross, and then from the bloodied symbol of man’s cruelty, to the symbol of sacrifice and redemption. It is a symbol that, like the jewelled cross that appears to the dreamer in the Vercelli poem, is inlaid with its own transformative story. This manoeuvre also has the effect of prompting the reader to think beyond the crucifixion to Christ’s incarnation, and the Ascension that is soon to follow. The runes thus participate in a series of meditations on changes of state: material, linguistic and spiritual.

This is, after all, perhaps not so much an intellectual as a spiritual challenge, which appropriates the engagement needed to read a runic text to aid in the salvation of the reader. It is just such a process of adaptation—of the particular mode of reading represented by runes, of the tradition of material riddling, and of the engagement of the secular riddle for spiritual ends—that I believe underlies the use of runes in the Exeter Book riddles.

⁴⁶ L.F. Orton and I. N. Wood, *Fragments of History: Rethinking the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Monuments* (Manchester: MUP, 2007), 45.

The Riddles of the Exeter Book

... Ic monigum sceal,
 wisdom cyþan; no þær word sprecan
 ænig ofer eorðan . . . ⁴⁷

Despite a great deal of scholarly attention being paid to the anthropological function of the riddle, and centuries of learned interest in the Old English riddles, a workable definition of what constitutes a literary riddle is surprisingly difficult to find. Avoiding the involved classification of riddle types proposed by Lehmann-Nitsche⁴⁸ and Taylor,⁴⁹ and sidestepping Wittgenstein's 'fairly awkward proposition' that 'the riddle does not exist',⁵⁰ we could do worse than follow Abbot's concise definition of a riddle as 'a periphrastic presentation of an unmentioned subject, the design of which is to excite the reader or hearer to the discovery of the meaning hidden under a studied obscurity of expression'.⁵¹ This definition is, however, too narrow to allow for the fact that Anglo-Latin *enigmata* are often accompanied or preceded by solutions, or to incorporate the material riddles of the Brandon antler or Franks Casket where the subject is hardly 'unmentioned', and may even reside in the object itself. With such exceptions in mind, we might say that in even in its most basic form, the literary riddle is a text that involves the reader in a process of realignment and

⁴⁷ 'I shall reveal wisdom to many, though I speak no words there upon the earth'. Exeter Book *Riddle 95*, ll. 8b-10a. I follow Krapp and Dobbie's ASPR edition *The Exeter Book* throughout, including their convention of numbering the riddles. I also make extensive use of Williamson's superb edition, *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977).

⁴⁸ Robert Lehmann-Nitsche, 'Zur Volkskunde Argentinien, I: Rätsel', *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Volkskunde* 24 (1914), 240-55.

⁴⁹ Archer Taylor, *English Riddles from Oral Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1951).

⁵⁰ Kevin Crossley-Holland and Lawrence Sail, eds., *The New Exeter Book of Riddles* (London: Enitharmon Press, 1999), 1.

⁵¹ H. H. Abbot, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Cambridge: The Golden Head Press, 1968), i.

clarification, raising the implicit disconnect of poetic expression to the level of formal structure, and obscuring the poem's referent to such an extent that the concept of a 'solution' becomes tenable. It may not directly challenge us to come up with an answer, or to see the world anew, but there is always an implied interpretative demand on the reader. Working on such a premise, we can see that even the laconic Brandon antler inscription fulfils the criteria of a riddle, both concealing information (the nature of the animal), and engaging the reader in a process of realignment that may move them to thinking about the object in a different way.

Two additional and important observations should perhaps be made before continuing. The first is a distinction between 'charms and riddles' made by Northrop Frye in his essay of the same name:

. . . just as the connections of charm are closer to music, so the riddle has pictorial affinities, related to ciphers, acrostics, rebuses, concrete and shape poetry, and everything that emphasises the visual aspect of literature.⁵²

Frye goes on to suggest that 'Hieroglyphics and Chinese characters have a large element of riddle-reading built into them' and that 'alphabetic systems also have it, though less noticeably'.⁵³ Runes, an alphabetic script system, but used out of their usual context amongst the Latin alphabet text, surely also have a large element of 'riddle-reading', a visual expressiveness, built in to them.

The second observation comes from the Finnish folklorist Elli Kögäs Maranda, who in this case defines riddles in opposition to myth:

⁵² Northrop Frye, 'Charms and Riddles' in *Spiritus Mundi – Essays on Literature, Myth and Society* (London: Indiana University Press, 1976), 123-147, 124.

⁵³ Frye, 'Charms and Riddles', 124.

The primary function of riddles is to question at least certain kinds of established order . . . riddles make a point of playing with the conceptual borderlines and crossing them for the intellectual pleasure of showing that things are not quite as stable as they appear.⁵⁴

This is another key dynamic of the runic riddles of the Exeter Book, which play with the conventions of the oral and the written; the spoken and the visual; sometimes involving the reader in a destabilising paradox that continues well beyond the putative solving of the riddle. A related ‘conceptual borderline’ that both the naming inscriptions and many of the riddles take pleasure in crossing is that between the inanimate, silent object, and the use of prosopopoeia in vocalising this object. Again, this is essentially a manoeuvre that highlights the particular physical dimension of writing, and connects the world of epigraphy to the manuscript use of runes.

In moving to a discussion of runes used in the Exeter Book, we are at some remove, both geographically and chronologically, from the material riddles of eighth-century Northumbria, and dealing for the first time with a truly literary, as opposed to epigraphical, deployment of runes. Runes were rarely used in Wessex even in the heyday of the script, and had almost certainly ceased to function as a formal epigraphical script by the time the Exeter Book was produced, Parsons pointing out that ‘no Anglo-Saxon portable object bearing runes is dated later than the ninth century’.⁵⁵ However, both Derolez and Parsons have made it very clear that we should be wary of the assumption that the runic tradition was simply reinvented in the scriptorium.⁵⁶ Indeed, it seems

⁵⁴ Elli Köngäs Maranda, ‘Theory and Practice of Riddle Analysis’, *Journal of American Folklore* 84 (1971), 51–61, 53.

⁵⁵ David Parsons, ‘Anglo-Saxon Runes in Continental Manuscripts’ in *Runische Schriftkultur in kontinental skandinavischer und angelsächsischer Wechselbeziehung*, ed. Klaus Düwel (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1994), 195–220, 198.

⁵⁶ René Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta* and ‘Epigraphical Versus Manuscript English Runes: One or Two Worlds?’, *Academiae Analecta* 45:1 (1983), 69–93.

somewhat perverse to suggest that the tradition which preserved the alphabet, rune names and formal conventions of the script did not also carry a package of scriptural associations and a more abstract legacy of runic usage. Despite Blomfield's conclusion that scholarly curiosity 'incidentally brought the remains of ancient runic nomenclature within the sphere of literature',⁵⁷ a platitude shared by many later scholars, moving from a discussion of the Franks Casket to a consideration of the use of runes in manuscript riddles is a fairly smooth transition. Although Musset points out that 'il existe, entre runes épigraphiques et runes manuscrites, un sérieux décalage chronologique',⁵⁸ he is careful to distinguish between the representation of runes as curious alphabets or a-semantic reference marks in what tend to be prose texts written on the continent, and the conversant, even 'très subtils' use of runes within vernacular poetry. Runes which are being employed rather than recorded or discoursed upon may still have a claim to be part of a working tradition, and it certainly does not seem to me 'incidental' that runes should come to be deployed so often in riddling contexts, particularly contexts with a playful, and often material referent. If nothing else, their deployment in riddles can tell us a great deal about the way in which the Anglo-Saxons re-interpreted the tradition they inherited.

A total of seven riddles make use of the runic script, the interpretation of the characters or rune names for the most part being essential to the solving of the puzzle.⁵⁹ The sheer variation in the way in which the runes are deployed in these poems is perhaps the first indication that this is a living

⁵⁷ Joan Blomfield, 'Runes and the Gothic Alphabet', *SBVS* 12 (London: University College, 1942), 516.

⁵⁸ 'A serious time lag exists between epigraphical runes and manuscript runes'. Lucien Musset, *Introduction à la Runologie* (Paris: Aubier-Montaigne, 1965), 195.

⁵⁹ *Riddle 91*, which uses a single rune as an abbreviation, will be considered in the following chapter.

tradition, not simply an antiquarian dredging up of a largely forgotten script for a specific and completely ‘alien’ purpose. Jan Ragnar Hagland, referring to the use of runes in sixteenth-century Swedish military communiqués, is correct to point out that when a script can ‘serve the purpose of cryptography’ without the need for ciphering or graphical tampering, ‘its ordinary function as a means of communication, must, of course, have been phased out’.⁶⁰ It is perhaps significant, therefore, that whilst the runes are not used in the Exeter Book as the primary script of communication, neither are they cryptographic simply by virtue of being an obscure writing system. In fact, not a single one of the runic riddles spells out the solution in complete, linear runic lines, instead relying on a variety of obscuring strategies: spelling out the word backwards, rearranging the letters, using pairs of characters to represent the first letters of a series of words, and so on. These are rather similar to the cryptographic strategies used on the Franks Casket, implying, I suggest, that a similar level of competence was expected from the reader.

The shortest runic riddle in the collection is the much anthologised and discussed *Riddle 75*, in which the solution is written backwards:

Ic swiftne geseah on swaþe feran

𐌺𐌹𐌸𐌺⁶¹

Beneath this short poetic utterance, or perhaps dividing two lines of what may represent a single riddle, appears the four-letter ‘solution’ to the poem, written in runes. Whether this represents an original adjunct to the riddle, or was added by a later scribe pleased at his own solution or thinking

⁶⁰ Jan Ragnar Hagland, ‘Runic writing and Latin literacy at the end of the Middle Ages: A Case Study’ in *Runes and their Secrets*, ed. Marie Stoklund *et al.* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006), 141-158, 152.

⁶¹ ‘I saw a swift-one go along the path. **dnuh.**’

the riddle too succinct to be correctly guessed, a simple transcription of the solution in runes was deemed to be too obvious, and the letters were inverted to further challenge the reader. Indeed, whilst most editions silently emend the solution to *hund*, or ‘dog’, the runes actually read **ᚳnlh** (so ‘hlnᚳ’). The **ᚳ** is perhaps the result of a mistake by the scribe in transmission of the not wholly dissimilar **ᚱ** rune, but more likely represents a further obscuring of the solution, or even an abbreviation of the word *hælend* with the vowels removed, a cryptographic practice similar to that used on the right-panel of the Franks Casket.⁶² Indeed, both this and the following, equally laconic *Riddle 76*, as well as riddles 68, 69 and 79, have more in common with the brief riddlic statements encapsulated in inscriptions, perhaps representing an influence of native tradition on the Latin practice of composing *enigmata*, particularly as *Riddle 69* refers to the material process of water turning to bone,⁶³ and 79 refers to a ‘prince’s possession’ and seems to mimic anthropomorphic inscriptions such as that on the Wheatley Hill ring or the Alfred Jewel.⁶⁴

Riddle 24 presents its runic conundrum in wholly anagrammatic form, the cryptic answer appearing at the end of this short riddle about the imitative Jay:

Ic eom wunderlicu wiht, wræsne mine stefne,
 hwilum beorce swa hund, hwilum blæte swa gat,
 hwilum græde swa gos, hwilum gielle swa hafoc,
 hwilum ic onhyrge þone haswan earn,
 guðfugles hleoþor, hwilum glidan reorde
 muþe gemæne, hwilum mæwes song,

⁶² Stephen Pollington, *The Rudiments of Runelore* (Hockwold cum Wilton: Anglo-Saxon Books, 1995), 64.

⁶³ ‘Wondor wearð on wege; wæter wearð to bane’, ‘A wonder occurred on a wave; water turned to bone’.

⁶⁴ *Ic eom æpelinges æht ond willa*, ‘I am a prince’s possession and joy’. This riddle is essentially unsolvable without a material referent.

þær ic glado sitte. ·X· mec nemnað,
 swylce ·F· ond ·R· ·F· fullestæð,
 ·H· ond ·I· Nu ic haten eom
 swa þa siex stafas sweotule becnaf. (ll. 7-10)⁶⁵

The poet rather mischievously suggests that the solution **higoræ**—the name of a bird, possibly a jay, or magpie, glossing Latin *picus*⁶⁶—is easy to come by, fully aware that these six staves do not by any means *sweotule becnaf* or ‘clearly show’ the answer (l. 10), especially as one of the runes is here masquerading as a Latinate numeral <x>. The level of manipulation of the answer suggests an audience not only fully conversant in the script, but engaged in a sophisticated interplay of lettering and language. The ability of the magpie to imitate car alarms and human voices is famous, and the riddle concerns itself with just such a ‘wunderlicu wiht’, changing its voice in imitation of various animals and birds, and employing a string of verbs with a distinctly onomatopoeic character: *beorce*, *blæte*, *græde* and *gielle*, ‘bark, bleat, cry and yell’. The bird is here represented as appropriating these different verbal registers, literally speaking with another creature’s voice in its mouth (l. 6), and when the poem is read aloud the vocalisation of these onomatopoeic terms imitates that the ventriloquism of the creature described.

The solution, highlighted by the distinctiveness of the runic characters, complements in visual form this concept of multi-vocality. The poet is dissembling in a similar way to the *higoræ*, not only

⁶⁵ ‘I am a strange creature, alter my voice, sometimes bark like a dog, sometimes bleat like a goat, sometimes screech like a goose, sometimes yell like a hawk, sometimes I mimic the ashen eagle, the war-bird’s cry, sometimes with a kite’s call in my throat I speak, sometimes with a seagull’s song, where I sit in happiness. g they name me, likewise æ and r. o supports h and i. Now I am named, as these six staves clearly show.’

⁶⁶ *BT*, 535.

changing register from the alphabet to the runic script, but playing with the very notion of oral expression emphasised in the body of the poem. The runes at once demand expansion and vocalisation in order to support the alliteration—indeed, the convention of placing points before and after the rune explicitly calls for their expansion—and yet (and this is the deeply problematic feature of this poem) the runes cannot be expanded in recitation without rendering the poem completely nonsensical. If the poem were to be recited with the names expanded, the performer would be forced to adopt a strategy more dissembling even than the magpie or jay, imitating script with non-sequential spoken words. Though we shouldn't underestimate the ability of an Anglo-Saxon audience attuned to oral poetry to pick up on clues in performance, this tantalisingly vocal poem can only work on the page, where the essential difference between speech and writing can play out. The runes fix the riddle to a visual, written register even as the bird bleats and barks in imitation of oral expression. We might well wonder if the poem is hinting towards a different kind of 'wunderlicu wiht' at its heart; a poet who is able to change not only their voice in imitation of the world, but also their visual register, from alphabet to *futhorc*, in imitation of speech.

Runes, as used in the Exeter Riddles, have come to represent not only a visual form of the riddle, perhaps grounded in a material precedent, but also an acutely self-aware form of writing, writing which highlights its own graphic nature. *Riddle 19*, describing a hunter on horseback with the aid of a series of runic cryptograms, similarly problematises the poetic register, and highlights the particular character of the written word. The poem again represents a series of names written in runes, with their characters reversed, but this riddle takes the integration of script and metrics one stage further. Not only are the initial sound values of the reversed names integrated with the scheme

of alliteration, but in thoroughly mind-taxing fashion, the runic words are twice split between lines, with the initial character of the second half of the word also complementing the alliteration in the new line. The opening lines of the riddle demonstrate this strategy:

Ic on siþe seah ·𐌺𐌹𐌺·
 𐌺·hygewloncne, heafodbeorhtne,
 swiftne ofer sælwong swiþe þrægan.⁶⁷

The swift creature is, of course, *bors*, and as the layout of the poem in lines demonstrates visually much better than my explanation, the **sro** cluster of runes completes the alliterative half-line following ‘siþe seah’, whilst the lone **h** forms part of the alliterating pair with *hygewloncne*. In this case the individual runes are not enclosed by points, and thus should not be expanded to their full names, only alliterating *conceptually* and on the page. In a paradox more commonly associated with Derrida’s deconstructionism than with Anglo-Saxon poetry, the separateness of written language is highlighted: the reversed words both demand expansion to their phonemic value to aid the alliteration, and resist a voicing of this expansion in anything but purely graphical terms. Indeed, as DiNapoli points out, ‘to solve the riddle is . . . to shatter the poem as a metrical construct’.⁶⁸ The conventional challenge ‘saga hwæt ic hatte’, spoken by the creature, must be deployed in this context in full awareness that the challenge is indeed to make the graphic play of the text speak, to transform an utterance that resists vocalisation.

The four solutions to this riddle are **soꝛh**, **noꝛm**, (r)**agew** and **cofoah**, which reversed read *bors*, *mon*, *wegar* and *haofoc*, immediately suggesting a hunting diorama, a solution favoured by most

⁶⁷ ‘On the road I saw **s r o h**, proud of mind, bright of head, running very swiftly over the plains.’

⁶⁸ DiNapoli, ‘Odd Characters’, 158.

critics. However, a suggested alternative solution has been vindicated by the recent discovery of a further dimension to the complex runic cryptogram. The first letters of each of these reversed words actually spell *snac*, referring to a small swift-sailing warship, and lending support to Williamson's proposal that the whole poem refers to a ship, the horse being the *sæmearb*, the *nægledne* object a 'nailed clinker' and the hawk representing the sail.⁶⁹ Mark Griffith, who recognised this acronym, is right to point out how unlikely it is that 'a random permutation of letters' would coincidentally spell out a solution already accepted by a number of scholars on the basis of the imagery alone.⁷⁰ The runes thus work on a series of different levels: semantically and syntactically, as individual clues to the different components of the riddle's solution, and combined to give an overall solution.

Although dismissed by some early critics as a redundant and facile exercise in reading backwards—Tupper described the runes as 'pointless logogriphs',⁷¹ whilst Wyatt opined that the riddle was 'not worth the time and ingenuity that have been expended on it'—this complex deconstruction of written language situates this poem one of the most complex and intellectually rewarding of all the riddles: indeed, of *any* riddle.⁷²

The same cannot perhaps be said of *Riddle 64*, although this may well be because certain individual elements of the riddle have not yet been solved, or as successfully integrated into a whole. The riddle once more enacts a process of what Dewa refers to as 'linguistic dislocation',⁷³ employing a variety of cryptograms in which pairs of runes form the initial two letters of the word, a form of

⁶⁹ Williamson, *The Old English Riddles*, 186.

⁷⁰ Mark Griffith, 'Riddle 19 of the Exeter Book: SNAC, an Old English acronym', *NeQ* 39:1 (1992), 15-16, 16.

⁷¹ Frederick Tupper Jr., *The Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1910), 108.

⁷² A. J. Wyatt, *Old English Riddles* (Boston: Heath, 1912), 78.

⁷³ Dewa, 'The Runic Riddles', 28.

puzzling for which there is no known epigraphical runic precedent. Although there have been a variety of solutions proposed for this riddle, it is generally accepted that the poem ‘is a companion to *Riddle 19* and deals with the same tropes of horse, man and hawk.⁷⁴ Whether this also means it should be read as a ship riddle is unclear:

Ic seah ·ᚦ· ond ·l· ofer wong faran’
 beran ·ᚼ·ᚱ·, bæm wæs on sibþe
 hæbendes hyht ·h· ond ·f·
 swylce þryþa dæl, ·ᚦ· ond ·ᚱ·
 Gefeah ·ȝ· ond ·f· fleah ofer ·ȝ·
 h· ond ·c· sylfes þæs folces.⁷⁵

Again, the poem toys with the discontinuity between the necessity of the runic sound values to the alliterating scheme on the one hand, and their resistance to vocalisation on the other. The written ‘ᚦ· ond ·l·’ needs to be solved, and transformed into the expanded *wicg* before the poem conforms both to the rules of spoken and written language. The graphical puzzle needs to be tackled on the page before it can be spoken aloud, once more throwing the essential difference between the two media into relief. There is a further duality of meaning, and indeed clue to how the conceit works, in the way the images are linked together. The *wicg* bears the *beorn*, they are happy in ‘holding’ the next pair of runes, whilst *þ* and *e* ‘join forces’. In addition to the conjoining of the separate clues in the poem into a whole, the conceit quite aptly refers to the construction of the written riddle and to the relationship between the written characters. It might even be possible to read a subtext of

⁷⁴ See Krapp and Dobbie, *The Exeter Book*, 368.

⁷⁵ I saw *w* and *i* travel across the plain, bearing *b* and *e*; *h* and *a* was for both on that expedition the holder’s hope, likewise a part of the force, *þ* and *e*. *f* and *æ* rejoiced, flew over *ea s* and *p*, the people’s own’.

written production in this riddle's conceit, as Eliason does, interpreting the horse, man and hawk as three fingers and the tip of the pen crossing the manuscript plain.⁷⁶ Even if this particular interpretation is not watertight enough to be conclusive, I think the phrase 'swylce þryþa dæl' may well offer an internal clue as to the way in which this unusual runic puzzle should be solved: conjoining pairs of runes together, and thus 'joining forces' into a complete whole.

Although the riddle shares certain similarities to *Riddle 19*, leading Williamson to suggest a companion ship riddle,⁷⁷ Dewa is right to point out that in contrast to the earlier poem the anthropomorphised object does not utter the conventional instruction 'saga hwæt ic hatta', which may preclude a single object solution. As to the particular words the poem refers to, it is 'generally agreed' that **wicg**, **beorn** and **hafoc** represent the correct expansions of the first three words.⁷⁸ As for the following pair, I think the widely accepted **þegn** is most appropriate, a variation on the *wicg* previously referred to, whilst Holthausen's variation *þeow*, a or 'servant' serving an accessory role in the hunt, is possible, but raises the difficult question of whether a *þeow* would be involved in this aristocratic pursuit.⁷⁹ The posited **fælca** is also a reasonable enough suggestion, and generally accepted, but I think Holthausen was closer to the mark with his suggestion that the **ea** should represent *eard* (or *eardas*) 'land', rather than *ea*, 'river'. In the OE *Rune Poem* at least, the name of this rune appears to mean earth rather than water, and describing the land, rather than the river, as 'sylfes þæs folces' (l. 6) makes more sense. Indeed, the term *eard* is often used in a social sense,

⁷⁶ Norman E. Eliason, 'Four Old English Cryptographic Riddles', *Studies in Philology* 49:4 (Oct., 1952), 553-565, 560.

⁷⁷ Williamson, *The Old English Riddles*, 326.

⁷⁸ See Krapp and Dobbie, *The Exeter Book*, 368.

⁷⁹ F. Holthausen, 'Zu altenglischen Denkmälern', *Englische Studien* LI (1917), 180-88, 187.

meaning ‘country, region, native land’ or ‘dwelling place’ rather than simply ‘land’, both concepts relying on the implication that *folc* and the land they inhabit are intimately connected.⁸⁰ The **ea** rune may stand on its own rather than in a pair like the rest of the clues because, as a diphthong, it was already regarded as representing the initial two sounds of the word.

Finally, it should be recognised that a point is absent between the **ea** rune and the next ‘pair’ of initials: a ‘single exception’ to a rule adhered to throughout the manuscript.⁸¹ Krapp and Dobbie suggest that this is simply an oversight by the scribe, but it is very conspicuous in its absence on the page and may well be a signal as to how we are to read the final answer.⁸² Williamson, noting this anomaly in the pointing, suggests that we read these characters as the first three letters of the word, coming up with the unattested *easpor*, or ‘water-track’, which fits with his contention that this is a ship riddle.⁸³ The pointing suggests to me that we are, in fact, dealing with a compound word in which **ea** forms the opening letters of the first element, but not necessarily the complete element (signified by the missing point following the rune), and **sp** the initial letters of the second element. An appropriate compound might be something like the attested *ealdspell*, ‘old-story’, or **eardspell*, ‘story of the land’ or perhaps even **ealdspil*, ‘old-pastime’, from the verb *spilian* ‘to play’, fitting both with the idea of the hunt being ‘the peoples’ own’ and with the subtext of riddling. This is conjecture, however, engaged in simply to illustrate the sort of construction that the pointing of the

⁸⁰ *Dictionary of Old English: A to G* online, ed. Angus Cameron *et al.* (Toronto: Dictionary of Old English Project, 2007).

⁸¹ Krapp and Dobbie, *The Exeter Book*, xxiii.

⁸² *Ibid.*, xxiii.

⁸³ Williamson, *The Old English Riddles*, 329-30.

cryptogram suggests. It should demonstrate, if anything, the interpretational flexibility of the conceit.

Clearly, this is a difficult riddle, and one that may well have outwitted even the most capable Anglo-Saxon reader. Indeed, if Page is correct, the dry-point runic message scratched in the margins of this riddle, and reading **bunrþ**, may constitute an exasperated reader's comment on the difficulty of the adjacent puzzle: if non-initial vowels are added, we can reconstruct the phrase *Beo unreþe*, 'be merciful!'⁸⁴ Whether or not Page's clever suggestion is correct, the strange inscription is almost certainly not a simply case of copying, as the culprit uses runes that are not included in the adjacent riddle. It is, however, certainly lacking in vowels, and makes little sense as it stands. Even in this rough scribble, complaining about the 'absurd difficulty' of the riddle, a cipher of some kind is employed.⁸⁵ It seems that the default position for runes in the tenth century is one of riddling and interpretative challenge.

There are at least four more riddles that are accompanied by marginal runic clues, although not of the complexity of the dry-point **bunrþ**. Interestingly enough, three of them occur in sequence in the manuscript, a similar ʝ rune occurring beneath both *Riddle 5* and *Riddle 6*, whilst a character resembling a ʞ or perhaps ʟ accompanies *Riddle 7*. It is unclear whether these marks were made by the main scribe, or indeed, whether they were all made by the same hand.⁸⁶ Rather than representing 'just the initial letter of a name' and contributing nothing to the context, as is Hacıyan's rather blinkered suggestion, the **s** runes both above and beneath *Riddle 6* quite obviously

⁸⁴ R. I. Page, quoted by Williamson in *The Old English Riddles*, 327.

⁸⁵ Williamson, *The Old English Riddles*, 327.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 151.

refer to *sigel*, the name of the rune, confirming that this riddle is to be solved as ‘sun’.⁸⁷ The rune beneath *Riddle 5* could also be referring to the solution of the following riddle, as is the contention of Tupper, but it may well represent the first letter of the solution *scyld* or ‘shield’. Williams and others point out that both runes could also be referring to the Latin answers, *sol* and *scutum*, although why the rune would be directed to the Latin name, particularly when one of the clues reflects the Old English rune-name, is hard to fathom.⁸⁸ This is a vernacular manuscript, one perhaps intended for educating the young laity spoken of in the preface to the translation of Pastoral Care. Certainly, its register is vernacular throughout, with the one exception of the Latin *Riddle 90*. Perhaps this Latinate connection stems from the fact that the generally accepted solution of the following riddle is ‘swan’, which would correspond with Lat. *cygnus*, and the runic *ᵛ* which follows. However, this is not the only possibility. I would suggest that the *s* rune which occurs between riddles 6 and 7 refers to the solution of both the riddles, as may be the case with the former rune. *Swan* or *swon* is the Anglo-Saxon name for the mute swan *Cygnus olor*, a species that makes a louder noise in flight than the whooper swan *Cygnus cygnus*, OE *ilfete*, and which therefore fits with the description in the poem of a plumage which ‘swogað hlude ond swinsiað’, ‘rustles loudly and sings melodiously’ in flight (l. 7).

What we have here is a sequence of three riddles with solutions all beginning with <*s*>—*sigel*, *scyld* and *swan*—the runic clues referring both to the riddle above and below. The character which resembles a *c* rune therefore most likely refers to the solution of *Riddle 8*, perhaps *ceo* ‘chough’ as Mackie suggests, or *cuscote*, ‘wood-pigeon’, although the solution is usually given as ‘nightingale’

⁸⁷ Hacikyan, ‘The Runes of Old English Poetry’, 57.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 147 and 151.

because of the reference to singing in the evening. It is this reference to the creature as *eald æfensceop* that leads Williamson to suggest that this could be a **u** rune, representing a conjectured solution of OE *ule*, ‘owl’, known of course as a night bird, although he concludes that the strange sign probably represents a post-medieval attempt at a ‘rune-like’ letter <n> for nightingale.⁸⁹ Indeed, it is important to remember that these marginal clues are not authoritative, and may at times be misleading, giving clues only to the reader’s own conjecture.

What I think is clear is that there is no reason to suppose that any of the runes refer to Latin names as solutions, which makes sense for riddles in a vernacular collection using a script associated strongly with a native tradition.⁹⁰ I am therefore somewhat doubtful about Williamson’s connection of the character resembling runic **ƿ**, *ēoh*, to *Riddle 12* in the collection, which is usually solved as ‘leather’. He suggests that this rune refers to the Latin for ‘ox’, *Iuencus*, following Aldhelm’s riddle *De Bove sive de Juvenco*.⁹¹ The sound value represented by this rune is notoriously hard to pin down, perhaps representing ‘an intermediate high front vowel lying between *e* and *i*’ in the common Germanic *fubark*.⁹² Although, as Page points out, there is ‘some case’ for situating it as ‘a vowel rune in the region of *i*’ in some Anglo-Saxon contexts, it is more often used to represent the Latin letter <e> and even the diphthong <eo> in manuscripts.⁹³ If we accept that this rune could approximate the initial sound of *Juencus*, in all the above cases the rune stands as a graphic as well as a phonetic

⁸⁹ Williamson, *The Old English Riddles*, 156.

⁹⁰ *Riddle 90* is the only riddle that should certainly be given a Latin solution, being the only poem in the Exeter Book written in Latin.

⁹¹ Williamson, *The Old English Riddles*, 168.

⁹² Elliott, *Runes – An Introduction*, 16.

⁹³ R. I. Page, ‘The Old English Rune *Eoh*, *ih*, ‘Yew Tree’, *Medium Ævum* 37:2 (1968), 125-136, 131.

clue, representing the initial letter if the word were *spelled out* in runes. The riddle-solver would be rather misled if they assumed, as is usual for the clues, that the rune stood for the grapheme <e> or sequence <eo>, following its name *ēoh*. As important as this graphical consideration is the positioning of the clues on the manuscript page. A further clue, a runic **h**, occurs further down the margin at the following boundary between poems, and in this case almost certainly corresponds with the solution to *Riddle 14 of born*, a solution ‘accepted by all scholars’.⁹⁴ This strongly suggests to me that the *ēoh* rune, placed in the margin between riddles 12 and 13, also follows the pattern on this page and applies to the riddle it precedes—*Riddle 13*—a strange poem referring to the ‘disrobing’ of ten brothers and sisters.

Riddle 13 lacks the usual spoken challenge, ‘saga hwæt ic hatte’, which raises the possibility that the solution lies not in the name or the creature, or creatures, but in the process that is being described. This is often said to be the hatching of chicks, based on the reference in line 7 to them being *reafe birofene*, ‘deprived of garments’, so leaving behind the shell, yet in other details the riddle does not seem to be very well suited to this image.⁹⁵ It is hard to explain why eggshells would be hanging ‘on seles wæge’, or ‘on the wall of the hall’ (l. 4), and this image seems much better suited to an insect of some kind, something like a caterpillar. I would modify Klipstein’s early solution ‘Butterfly Cocoon’,⁹⁶ which fails to account for the fact that the creatures are said to tread the turf after emerging, in favour of the pupation of caterpillars into adult form, most species shedding their

⁹⁴ Krapp and Dobbie, *The Exeter Book*, 329.

⁹⁵ Tupper favours the solution ‘ten fingers’. The division of the fingers into six larger brothers, and their four sisters (being the little fingers and the thumbs), seems to be rather arbitrary, and the awkward matter of the leaf eating mouths is brushed aside with the comment that ‘in popular riddles the fingers are always browsing animals’ (1910), 97.

⁹⁶ L. F. Klipstein, *Analecta Anglo-Saxonica Vol. II* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1849), 343.

skins a number of times before reaching their adult stage and undergoing a final pupation and transformation into a butterfly. This also makes better sense of the statement that they emerge to ‘muþum slitan haswe blede’, ‘slit dark leaves with their mouths’ (ll. 8-9). Indeed, the common Old English word for caterpillar is *lēafwyrm*, literally ‘leaf-serpent’.⁹⁷ Whilst the solution *lēafwyrmas* does not fit the runic clue, it may not, as previously mentioned, be the creature that is being referred to in the clue. Whilst I am unaware of what the Anglo-Saxon term for pupae, or pupation was, it might be significant that the generic word for enclosure is *eodor*. This word is used in compounds such as *eodor-wīr*, ‘wire-enclosure’, as in *Riddle 17* (l. 2), and the term *eodorbrecð* refers to the breaking of an enclosure, which might well fit the runic clue and the breaking out of the creatures, both from their ‘garments’ and the hall in which they were hanging.⁹⁸ Whilst this is by no means a definitive solution, the position of the rune certainly suggests that the marginal *ēoh* rune refers to the solution of this ambiguous riddle, rather than the fairly straightforward riddle about the ox.

My contention that the marginal runes refer to Old English rather than Latin clues is supported by the recent ingenious elucidation of the runes ᚠ and ᚢ which appear above *Riddle 17*, a poem treating a strange object that is both filled with treasures and spits out darts from its swollen belly. Previous solutions included ‘Ballista’, proposed by Dietrich,⁹⁹ to which the runes may be said to have some relevance, Holthausen’s *bæcern* or *bæchus*, to which the **b** rune seems to be the only rationale, and the almost appropriate *blæchorn*, Shook believing that the riddle refers to an inkhorn

⁹⁷ *BT*, 624. The term *mælsceafa*, literally ‘meal-shaver’ or ‘spot-cutter’ is also used by Ælfric, apparently referring to a caterpillar.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 252.

⁹⁹ Franz Dietrich, ‘Die Räthsel des Exeterbuchs’, *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum* XI (1859), 448-490, 465. Tupper later expanded this solution to *ballista liðere*, ‘ballista sling’ based on the runes.

swallowing spears and spitting out ink.¹⁰⁰ As Williams argues, Shook was certainly on the right track when thinking of a figurative rather than literal solution, although he fails to explain why both **b** and **l** are needed as a clue.¹⁰¹ The same problem attaches itself to the solution ‘bee-hive’ proposed by Bierbaumer and Wannagat,¹⁰² although this has been overcome in a recent article by Osborne which refines this solution to **beoleap* or ‘bee-basket’, the fact that this is a compound word making sense of the fact there are two runes in the clue.¹⁰³ In a further development of this theme, Patrick J. Murphy argues rather convincingly for a connection with ‘the enigma par excellence in the Christian tradition’ that is Samson’s lion and bee riddle, going on to propose the solution ‘*leo* and *beo*’. As he points out, this solution has the advantage of reading the runes in the correct order in the manuscript, the **l** being placed above the **b**.¹⁰⁴ It also gives the final statement ‘men gemunan þæt me þurh muþ fareð’, ‘men remember what passes through my mouth’ (l. 11) an additional range of meanings, referring to the riddler and ultimately perhaps to Samson himself.

The final two riddles treated employ rather different conceits. The runes do not appear written out in the manuscript, and thus do not signal themselves as visual or graphic constructions. Instead, the riddle names the runes, and engages the reader in a process of graphical word-play supplementary and external to the text, suggesting the use of runes outside the manuscript context,

¹⁰⁰ Laurence K. Shook, ‘Riddles Relating to the Anglo-Saxon Scriptorium’ in *Essays in Honour of Anton Charles Pegis*, ed. J. Reginald O’Donnell (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1974), 215–36.

¹⁰¹ Williamson, *The Old English Riddles*, 181.

¹⁰² Peter Bierbaumer and Elke Wannagat, ‘Ein Neuer Lösungsvorschlag für ein Altenglisches Rätsel (Krapp-Dobbie 17)’, *Anglia* 99 (1981), 379–82.

¹⁰³ Marijane Osborn, ‘“Skep” (Beinenkorb, **beoleap*) as a Culture-Specific Solution to Exeter Book Riddle 17’, *American N&Q* 18 (2005), 7–18.

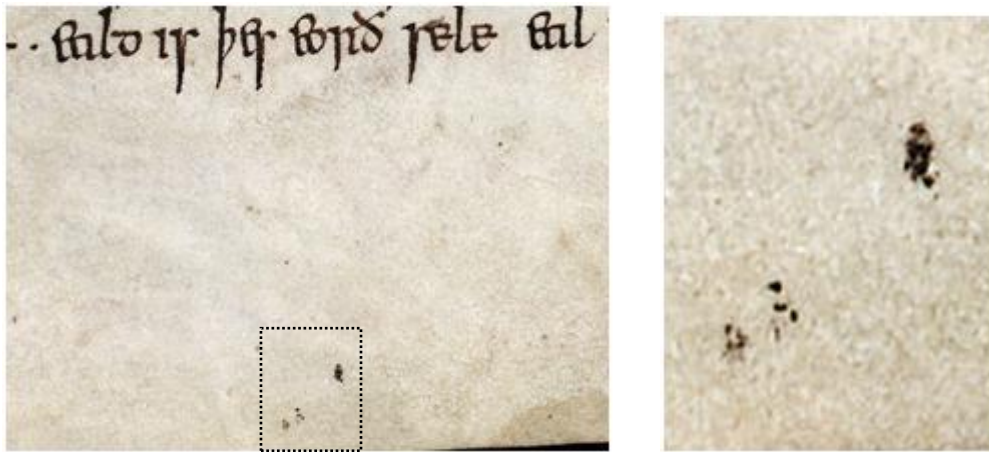
¹⁰⁴ Patrick J. Murphy, ‘Leo ond beo: Exeter Book Riddle 17 as Samson’s lion’, *English Studies* 88:4 (2007), 371–387, 384.

and further problematising the idea that runes had completely ‘died out’ as a working script. *Riddle 58* of the collection ends with a clue as to the name of the curious creature which ‘wætan ne swelgeþ’, ‘swallows no water’, but which ‘fereð lagoflod on lyfte’, ‘carries the water-course into the air’ (l. 12):

Þry sind in naman
ryhte runstafas, þara is Rad foran.¹⁰⁵ (ll. 14b-15)

This ‘clue’ not only constitutes a literary puzzle in itself rather than furnishing a solution but it also demands that the answer be conceived of in runes, the writing down and arrangement of the , solution directed towards the runic script. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, the conceit draws on the logographic character of runes—what might be termed the essential duality of the script—enabling the name to become fully integrated with the syntax of the poem. Secondly, it might suggest that the script is so strongly associated with the idea of puzzling and word-play, that it was only natural to direct the reader towards this script, particularly if a solution could be fathomed out by scratching runes on the nearest wooden surface, or indeed in the manuscript itself. At the bottom of fol. 115r, the page facing this runic riddle, there are three curious and very indistinct inked marks, the uppermost of which resembles a very small runic *rad*, or *ᚱ*, on close inspection. The marks below could be another *ᚱ* followed by the outline of another rune. Is this perhaps a reader trying out the solution, but reluctant to write his workings in full-size characters?

¹⁰⁵ ‘In the name are three true rune-staves, of which *Rad* is first.’



The Exeter Book, fol. 115r. Copyright Exeter Cathedral Library.

There is, of course, a precedent for similar types of word play in Latin and using the alphabet, most famously the salutation commonly attributed to Cicero ‘*mitto tibi navem prora puppique carentem*’, ‘I send you a ship without a bow or a stern’, which yields the answer *ave* once the ‘bow’ and ‘stern’ of *navem* are removed. There is also a case within the Exeter Book of a solution given in alphabetic characters, although this clue to *Riddle 23* is something of an anomaly, being followed by the explanatory statement that the strange word ‘*agof*’ is *min noma eft onhwyrfed*, ‘is my name back-to-front’ (l. 1). It seems that the poet, unsure whether the reader would know what to do with this simple clue, decided to spell it out in no uncertain terms. As there is no such direct elucidation of the runic ciphers in the Exeter Book, it suggests to me that there was a certain *expectation* of graphical play being part and parcel of the process of reading runes. In other words, the runes signal the fact that they may have to be read in reverse or rearranged simply through the associations attached to them; as a script closely connected with graphical riddling. Incidentally, the ‘*agof*’ solution does not, in fact, spell out the name, the proper solution undoubtedly being *boga* rather than the unattested *foga*. This either represents a mistake in transmission, perhaps by a scribe

perplexed by the use of Anglo-Saxon minuscule for the cipher, or a deliberate (and rather appropriate) bending of the solution, again possibly by a scribe who had read further and realised how easy the following instruction made the solving of the *searoseled* or ‘cunningly-bound’ riddle.

In the context of these riddles at least, it seems that graphical word-play is associated predominantly with runes and not with the dominant writing system of the scriptorium. Dietrich, who first proposed the solution ‘draw-well’ to *Riddle 58* was therefore misguided to answer the riddle without reference to the runes, the solution demanding to be answered in its own script as well as tongue, as Niles does, providing the solution first as ‘**R-RFH**’ or **rād-rōd*, meaning ‘draw pole’.¹⁰⁶ The characters are signalled as ‘ryhte runstafas’, ‘true rune-staves’ (l. 15), because they behave as runes in the fullest sense, not simply in transliteration of alphabetic equivalents, the logographic character of the rune named *rād* playing a key role in the solving of the puzzle.

If the draw-pole riddle hints at the solving of the runic puzzle on the script’s own terms, then the intriguing *Riddle 42* actively demands it, dramatising the solution of the puzzle in the context of the drinking hall (l. 16):

Ic seah wyhte wrætlice twa
 undearnunga ute plegan
 hæmedlaces; hwitloc anfeng
 wlanc under wædum, gif þæs weorces speow,
 fæmne fyllo. Ic on flette mæg
 þurh runstafas rincum secgan
 þam þe bec witan, bega ætsomne
 naman þara wihta. Ðær sceal Nyd wesan

¹⁰⁶ Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poetry*, 143.

twega oþer ond se torhta Æsc
 an an linan, Acas twegen,
 Hægelas swa some. Hwylc þæs hordgates
 cægan cræfte þa clamme onleac
 þe þa rædellan wið rynemenn
 hygefæste heold heortan bewrigene
 orþoncbendum? Nu is undyrne
 werum æt wine hu þa wihte mid us,
 heanmode twa, hatne sindon.¹⁰⁷

This riddle is the closest thing we have in Old English to a portrayal of the runic script in use, and though brief, is thus invaluable for elucidating the relationship Anglo-Saxons had to the script in the centuries after it was superseded by the Latin alphabet. The first thing to note is that the script is deployed in an informal and impermanent manner, the poet spelling out the runes that make up the solution HENA and HÆN, cock and hen, *on flette* or ‘on the floor’ (l. 5). However we may envisage this happening, perhaps scratched into the dirt with a stick, it is a temporary ‘inscription’ envisaged as taking place as the riddle is being performed, similar to those ‘ephemeral texts, low cost literacy that did not use parchment’ that Parsons suggests may have been lost to us.¹⁰⁸ It is certainly interesting that the one description of rune-writing we have points to a practice that would have left no trace or archaeological record. This is not the portrayal of a monumental inscription, an intricate engraving of a prestige object or a formal state-sponsored imprint on a coin: all these forms of runic

¹⁰⁷ ‘I saw two wondrous creatures openly, in outdoor play, fornicating; the fair-haired one gathered proud under her skirts, if this ruse worked, a female fullness. I may, on the floor, through rune-staves reveal to men, to those that are book-wise, both the names of those creatures together. There shall be Need twice, and the bright Ash, once in the line, two Oaks, Hail twice too. Who may the door to the hoard, with key’s craft, unlock those fetters that hold the riddle craftily against rune-men, its heart concealed by cunning bonds? Now it is divulged to men at wine how by us the two downcast creatures are named.’

¹⁰⁸ Parsons, ‘Anglo-Saxon Runes in Continental Manuscripts’, 208.

writing had died out many years before. This is a script portrayed as being used in an informal social context, albeit to ‘þam þe boc witan’ (l. 7), and leaving no trace behind. It has more in common with the dry-point clues inscribed beside the riddles, or, indeed, with the hastily incised *rúnakefli* found at Bryggen, than with more rarefied forms of epigraphy. It raises the intriguing possibility, and it is only a possibility of course, that something of a tradition of carving runes on perishable materials survived, or was revived, many years after the end of the practice of inscribing monuments and prestige items with runes. There is little reason to be suspicious of the poet’s portrayal, as it had to be intelligible to the reader, and indeed, in its use of the first person and a colloquial register, looks like it may have been intended to have been acted out in a social setting.

We may also learn something of the audience of both these riddles and the runes in this poem, which talks of ‘those that are book-wise’, and more specifically *rynemenn*, in a curiously oral and social context. One would assume reading the opening to this riddle that we are dealing with a *volkrätzel*—characteristically bawdy, dealing with everyday creatures engaged in ‘ute plegan’ (l. 2) and presented as if read to ‘werum æt wine’ (l. 16)—and yet it later refers explicitly to bookishness and to the intricate *orþoncbendum* (l. 15) of the riddle, and demands literary competence from its audience. It could be that a once learned riddle perhaps suffered ‘modification to fit popular taste’,¹⁰⁹ but I would argue that this riddle actually works through a deliberate juxtaposition of these expectations, of oral and visual puzzles, of private reading and social performance, of the bawdy and the intellectual. The image of ‘cægan cræfte’ (l. 12) is a perfect expression of this mutability, lewd in that it puns on the intercourse of the two creatures, material in its depiction of unlocking the bonds

¹⁰⁹ Paull F Baum, ed., *Anglo-Saxon Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1963), ix.

of the riddle, and employing a vocabulary of intellectual dexterity taken from ‘a learned, and possibly monastic conception of understanding’.¹¹⁰ The fornication in the riddle extends beyond the ‘splicing’ of the *hena* and *hæn* or indeed the literal conjoining of the graphemes that make up their names. It gives birth to a riddle that brings together and is poised indefinitely between these categories, representing a very Anglo-Saxon adaptation of the riddlic tradition, one focused, as Lerer suggests, on ‘interpretation itself’.¹¹¹

The question of the extent to which the Exeter Book riddles are dependent on the Anglo-Latin tradition of riddling represented by Aldhelm, and to what extent they incorporate native influences, is a vexed one. The tradition of trying to find a Latin source for each OE riddle has certainly been discredited, but equally, one cannot deny ‘the benefits to be gained from seeing Old English and Anglo-Latin texts as intimately connected parts of the same literary tradition’, and it is clear the differences have also at times been overstated out of a misguided insularism, as Orchard points out.¹¹² Indeed, it would be perverse to deny the debt that the Exeter Book riddles owe to Symphosius, Aldhelm, Alcuin and later Anglo-Latin poets, particularly as three of the riddles appear to be direct translations or adaptations of Aldhelm’s *Enigmata*,¹¹³ and others clearly show the influence of Symphosius, although as Williamson points out, ‘in the case of Anglo-Latin writers, it

¹¹⁰ Seth Lerer, ‘The Riddle and the Book: Exeter Book Riddle 42 in its Contexts’, *PLL* 25:1 (Winter 1989), 3-18, 10.

¹¹¹ Lerer, ‘The Riddle and the Book’, 4.

¹¹² Andy Orchard, ‘Enigma Variations: The Anglo-Saxon Riddle Tradition’, *Latin Learning and English Lore: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature for Michael Lapidge*, ed. Andy Orchard and Katherine O’Brien O’Keeffe (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 284-304, 300.

¹¹³ In addition to these three riddles, Aldhelm’s ‘De lorica’, ‘De iuvenco’ and ‘De cretura’, we might also include the incorporation of a translation of the Latin riddle ‘Mater me genuit . . .’ in the Exeter Book’s treatment of an iceberg, *Riddle 33*. Nancy Porter Stork, *Through a Glass Darkly: Aldhelm’s Riddles in the British Library MS Royal 12.C. xxxiii* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1990), 73.

is often impossible to say of comparative Latin and English passages, which was the likely source and which the derivative'.¹¹⁴ Some disparities between such source texts and the OE riddles may conceivably be a result of missing intermediary stages in the transmission and adaptation of Anglo-Latin sources into Old English,¹¹⁵ but the fact that the OE riddles are on the whole more developed as poetic treatments of the subject, more empathetic and imaginative, and treat the everyday world of Anglo-Saxon England, certainly suggests that their link to the Anglo-Latin riddles which 'parade without play' is one of influence and interaction rather than dependence.¹¹⁶

Assessing the impact of epigraphical or material riddles such as the Franks Casket on the Exeter Book riddles is made additionally problematic because of the influence Mediterranean artwork and Christian Latinate culture may have had on such objects themselves. There is, however, an indisputable interest in the riddle form in the Anglo-Saxon milieu, and a willingness to adapt, localise and develop that goes beyond simple imitation, and suggests an interaction with native forms of puzzling. Indeed, kennings, the distinctive circumlocutions so prevalent in OE poetry, are themselves condensed linguistic riddles, and readers are often 'struck by the prevalence of kennings' within a single riddle,¹¹⁷ some of them unattested elsewhere in the corpus of OE poetry. Often the use of this poetic device appears to add to the playful misdirection being carried out in the poem. Indeed, in poems such as *Riddle 26*, where the poet describes the production of a book in otherwise relatively unambiguous terms, it is the kennings such as *fugles wyn* (l. 7) 'bird's joy', for the feathers

¹¹⁴ Williamson, 'A Feast of Creatures', 8.

¹¹⁵ See Orchard, 'Enigma Variations', 297.

¹¹⁶ Williamson, 'A Feast of Creatures', 8.

¹¹⁷ Wim Tigges, 'Snakes and Ladders: Ambiguity and Coherence in the Exeter Book Riddles and Maxims' in *Companion to Old English Poetry*, ed. Henk Aertsen and Rolf H. Bremmer Jr. (Amsterdam: VU Uni Press, 1994), 95-118, 99.

of the quill, and *beamtelge*, ‘tree-dye’ (l. 9) for the ink, that actually constitute the poem’s most appreciably riddlic elements. Furthermore, many OE poems, whilst not incorporating the explicit challenge ‘saga hwæt ic hatte’, are undeniably enigmatic.¹¹⁸ The runic riddles undoubtedly fit into what we might call the native poetic heritage, which interacts with, but is not dependent on, the Anglo-Latin tradition, and which stresses the transformative process of writing and the visual dimension of the riddle on the page.

The Husband’s Message

It is hard to gauge the precise impact of the runic script and the tradition of epigraphic riddling on the Exeter riddles, and perhaps even harder to separate the cryptographic methods used for the runes from the Latin tradition of cryptography and the scholarly penchant for word-games. There is, however, a poem in the Exeter Book itself which may further help us to understand the terms in which runic inscriptions were envisaged, and the hermeneutic processes with which they were associated. *The Husband’s Message* follows an isolated riddle in the collection, *Riddle 60*,¹¹⁹ which treats a reed instrument that is worked with ‘seaxes ord’, ‘the knife’s point’ (l. 12), and which ‘ofer meodubence muðleas sprecan’, ‘speaks mouthless over the meadbench’ (l. 9). *The Husband’s Message* is itself undoubtedly riddlic in temperament, containing an ‘implied challenge to the reader’, and

¹¹⁸ See Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poetry* and Rafał Boryśławski, *The Old English Riddles and the Riddlic Elements of Old English Poetry* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, 2004).

¹¹⁹ *Riddle 60* follows so-called *Riddle 30b*, a variation on the earlier *Riddle 30*, and appears in a sequence between the two main blocks of riddles, including such short poems as *Alms-Giving* and *Pharaoh*, as well as longer poems such as *Resignation* and *The Descent into Hell*. This is one of the hardest sequences in the manuscript to rationalise in terms of an anthologising principle, although the pairing of *The Husband’s Message* and *Riddle 60* suggests in itself that the sequence is not entirely without design.

demanding participation in unlocking the message.¹²⁰ The scribe himself seems to have been unsure quite what to do with this generically slippery poem, copying it out as if it were three separate riddle-length texts, and we are perhaps not in much of a position to criticise this decision. Indeed, a number of scholars have put forward the argument that the poem is a continuation of *Riddle 60* with its portrayal of a reed-pipe, or indeed, reed-pen.¹²¹ The poem may well be a companion piece to the preceding riddle, the poems' two 'speaking' objects being conceptually related, but it is clear that in *The Husband's Message* we are dealing with the vocalisation of an inscribed message, possibly a *rúnakefli*, from the relation of the *treocyn* or 'kind of wood' (l. 2) it started life as, to its engraving (l. 13) and the representation of the runic message itself. The fact that the poem refers to the engraving of a *beam*, a word usually used for a large piece of wood such as a tree or cross, need not imply either that the poem is referring to the engraving of the mast of the ship on which it arrives, as is Niles' contention,¹²² or that the author was necessarily ignorant of earlier runic practice as Bragg suggests.¹²³ We have to remember that this poem shares many characteristics with the riddle form, where objects are usually referred to indirectly.¹²⁴ *Riddle 17* mentioned above does not refer to bees but to *hyldepilas*, 'protecting arrows'; not to a straw *skep* or 'hive', but to *eodorwirum fæst*, 'a strong enclosure of wires' (l. 2).

¹²⁰ John D. Niles, 'The trick of the runes in the Husband's Message', *ASE* 32 (2003), 189-223, 213.

¹²¹ See for example J. C. Pope, 'Palaeography and Poetry: Some Solved and Unsolved Problems of the Exeter Book' in *Medieval Scribes, Manuscripts & Libraries Essays presented to N R Ker*, ed. M. B. Parkes and A. J. Watson (London, 1978), 42-63 and Margaret E. Goldsmith, 'The Enigma of *The Husband's Message*' in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation*, ed. Lewis E. Nicholson and Dolores Warwick Frese (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 242-63, 243.

¹²² See Niles, 'The trick of the runes', 189-223.

¹²³ See Bragg, 'Runes and Readers', 34-50.

¹²⁴ Indeed, in *The Dream of the Rood* the cross itself is described as *beama beorhtost*, or 'brightest of woods' l. 6., and as a *sigebeam*, or 'victory-beam', l. 13.

If *The Husband's Message* is indeed configured as a riddle, there are two solutions demanded: the recognition that this object is a rune-stave, and the reading of the cryptic message itself. It would be strange indeed, in the context of a poem so embedded in the tradition of enigmatic poetry, to name the object in the text, the poem instead alluding to a generic word for wood. Bragg's doubts as to whether the monastics who wrote the Exeter Book poems would have knowledge of *rúnakefli* inscriptions, known to us from medieval Scandinavia, are certainly valid, although the suggestion that they were only aware of early runic inscriptions through plundered grave-goods seems to me to have problems of its own. Surely if the only knowledge of runic practice was acquired in this way, the poet would have represented the engraving of a grave-good object, a weapon or a prestige item.¹²⁵ Certainly the poet may be trying to make contemporary practices appropriate to the early, possibly legendary, setting of the poem, what Bragg calls the 'retrojection of later uses of runes into the prior age of runic epigraphy'.¹²⁶ However, we should always bear in mind that the conditions needed to preserve wood are extremely rare, and that 'organic materials such as wood or bone survive only in tiny quantities and in exceptional circumstances'.¹²⁷ It is of course impossible to argue that inscriptions on wood were a common means of communicating during the later Anglo-Saxon period on this basis alone. But equally, the continued use of more perishable media is certainly not to be dismissed out of hand.

¹²⁵ See Bragg, 'Runes and Readers', 44-5.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹²⁷ John Hines, 'Grave Finds with Runic Inscriptions from Great Britain' in *Runeninschriften als Quellen interdisziplinärer Forschung - Proceedings of the Fourth International Symposium on Runes and Runic Inscriptions in Göttingen, 4-9 August 1995*, ed. Klaus Düwel (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 184-96, 187.

Recognising what object the poem is referring to is not, of course, the end of the riddle. There is also the cryptic message itself to be deciphered: certainly the more challenging of the two puzzles.

The message which ends the poem reads as follows:

Ofer eald gebēot incer twēga,
 gehyre ic ætsomne ·H· R· geador
 ·Y· P· and ·M· aþe benemnan,
 þæt he þa wære ond þa winetreowe
 be him lifgendum læstan wolde,
 þe git on ærdagum oft gespræconn.¹²⁸

This runic message has been read in many different ways, the most important contributions summarised by Anne E. Klinck.¹²⁹ These include applying most of the cryptographic strategies used in the riddles, including reading the runes as an anagram for *sweard*—a variant spelling of ‘sword’—or for the unattested personal name *Dwears*, or with vowels removed and a substitution of *s* for *c* to render ‘Eadwacer’ (a somewhat desperate attempt to link this poem emphatically with *Wulf and Eadwacer*). Elliott, on the other hand, suggests reading them as logograms, which the pointing does suggest, although his ‘Follow the sun’s path across the ocean, and ours will be joy and the happiness and prosperity of the bright day’¹³⁰ or Borysławski’s variation ‘follow the sun s road r to reach the land ea of joy w with the man m you love’,¹³¹ both represent significantly ‘telescoped’ messages. The

¹²⁸ ‘Concerning the old vow between the both of you, I hear joined together *s* with *r* and *ea*, *w* and *m* to name an oath, that he will keep the agreement and pledge of friendship whilst he lives, that which you two often spoke of in days past.’

¹²⁹ Anne L. Klinck, *The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992), 207-8.

¹³⁰ Ralph W. V. Elliott, ‘The Runes in *The Husband’s Message*’, *JEGP* 54:1 (1955), 1-8.

¹³¹ Borysławski, *The Old English Riddles*, 201.

fact that they ‘involve reading a considerable amount into the runes’ is not necessarily a valid criticism, but it is true that almost any message could be recreated using this technique, and it does not quite chime with the cryptographic practices used in the riddles.¹³² Pairs of runes representing compound words or concepts have also been proposed, Kock suggesting **s** and **r** should be expanded and joined as *sigelrad*, **ea** and **w** as *earwynn* and **m** as *mon*.¹³³ The rune sometimes read as a poorly made **m** (perhaps influenced by the fact that the word *mon* seems appropriate to include in a ‘husband’s’ message) is actually **ᚱ**, or **d**, and we thus have the pairs ‘sun-road’ and ‘joy of the earth’, and then the word ‘day’, three concepts which could conceivably represent the elemental witnesses to the oath as Kock suggests, or alternatively a *dæg* between earthly joy and heaven, perhaps conceptually representing marriage. This seems a more plausible way to decode the runes than Elliott’s miniature narrative, but again it involves reading beyond the characters and into abstraction. It may simply represent a fundamentally inscrutable sign of ‘the authority of the message’¹³⁴ as Page suggests, stressing and confirming the oath, and meaning more in its rightful context than its meagre components suggest. It is legitimate to see the runes here simply as a poetic image, which are only supposed to be read as emblematic of writing and context dependent reading, or indeed of textual riddling itself. However, its affinity to the runic riddles, which certainly do demand a solution, also means that we should try our hardest, in this instance, to read the runes as more than just a poetic image. The following reading I propose involves doing less of an injury to the text, and also incorporates the idea that the runes serve as an emblem of the written message itself.

¹³² Klinck, *The Old English Elegies*, 208.

¹³³ Ernst A. Kock, ‘Interpretations and Emendations of Early English Texts’, *Anglia* 45 (1921), 105-31, 122-3.

¹³⁴ Page, *An Introduction*, 101.

Prosopopoeia is a common enough feature of Anglo-Saxon poetry, but there is an additional nuance to this device in *The Husband's Message*, which links it to the material riddles: as a message, the object literally speaks and contains its own story, and the anthropomorphism becomes an extension of its capacity to communicate, specifically through the written word. Indeed, the object speaks, but does so *onsundran*, 'privately', and it refers back repeatedly to the instigator of the message, 'se þisne bēam āgrōf, 'he who carved this wood' (l. 13) and who bids the rune-stave to speak (l. 13 and l. 31). Not only is materiality stressed, in the origin of the object, the adornments of the lady and the promise of worked treasure, but vocality is also emphasised: through the lovers' oaths, the mournful sound of the cuckoo and the speech of the husband lying behind the inanimate message. This poem in a sense personifies written communication itself, playing with the absence of the speaker, with the different registers of oral and material expression. It is a message which speaks as a message and dramatises the artifice of written communication, and it is this guiding conceit which underlies my interpretation.

The runes we have are **s r ea w** and **d**. I read the final character as the rune *dæg* on the basis that if it looks like a **𐌺**, then it probably is, even if the scribe is clumsy with his **m** runes elsewhere.¹³⁵ A rearrangement of these letters could give us **searw[a]d[e]**, or *searwade*, with the final two vowels removed. The removal of vowels is an attested cryptographic strategy (see, for instance the **bunrþ** inscription above) and more importantly this is a well attested word; indeed, it is found in the Exeter Book itself, namely line 37a of *The Riming Poem*, in the phrase *sinc searwade* which appears to mean either 'treasure did treachery' (Mackie) or 'skillfully made treasure' (Lehmann). *BT* give the

¹³⁵ Derolez points out that it has exactly the same form as the runes in *The Ruin* and *Riddle 19*, but as there is no **d** rune in the Exeter Book to compare it to, this proves very little, *Runica Manuscripta*, 398.

additional possible meaning of ‘left its possessor’, so it is a somewhat slippery term.¹³⁶ The root *searu* certainly means ‘cunning’ or ‘design’, usually with emphasis on artifice and crafting, as in Grendel’s glove ‘searubendum fæst... orðoncum eall gegyrwed’ (l. 2086), although it is often ‘uncertain whether the word is used with a good or bad meaning’, as the alternative translations of *searwade* in *The Riming Poem* evince.¹³⁷

If the cryptogram is solved as *searwade*, it gives us the message ‘I hear joined together **searwade** [skillfully crafted] to name an oath that he will keep the agreement...’, the cryptogram referring perhaps not to the oath itself so much as to the method of fashioning the oath and the message. This statement appears to lack an object, but the object could simply be represented by the runes or message as presented on the page, the message being both an object in itself and a description of its artifice: ‘I hear joined together [the runes] skilfully crafted, to name an oath that he will keep the agreement’.

As we have seen, it is not unusual in the riddles for the runes to perform two roles at once, here representing themselves as a runic message in the first instance, and the adjective ‘skilfully crafted’ in the second. The message is self-referential, referring back to the artifice which has been stressed throughout the poem, to the stratagem devised by the lover and to the writing of the runes. We might be reminded of a passage earlier in the Exeter Book, stating that God’s gifts include that ‘sum mæg searolice wordcwide wītan’, ‘some men may write words with skill’ (*Christ*, ll. 672-3). In a sense this message is the very embodiment of written cryptography, a puzzle which when solved only refers back to its own ingenuity.

¹³⁶ *BT*, 853.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 852.

Conclusion

It is clear that the runes in *The Husband's Message* constitute a developed exploration of the possibilities of riddling and written word play, and that we have moved some way from a 'naturalistic' depiction of runic communication on a *rúnakefli*. Indeed, runes in the Exeter Book have become an embodiment of riddling, a cipher on which to pin an interest in the way that writing both communicates and dissembles. Where runes appear in the codex they invariably signal a literary intensification, a moment where the dichotomy between speech and writing is cast into greatest relief.

In this sense the characters of the runic script have indeed been adapted and reconfigured to speak to the concerns of Anglo-Saxon scholars and scribes. Emphasis is placed on the alternative nature of the runic system and its interpretative peculiarities, aspects of the writing system which would not have been so prevalent in the world of runic epigraphy. In the Exeter Book riddles, and indeed, in many other of the enigmatic poems treated in the following chapter, individual runes act as miniature textual conundrums, which involve the reader in a form of literate play, an association that may well have intensified as the runic script became more obscure. However, at the point at which the runic riddles of the Exeter Book were written down, there is also clear evidence of a community of readers familiar with the runic script, aware of its conventions of linguistic representation, and conversant enough both to engage in complex disassembling within the riddles, and to extend the runic play into the margins of the manuscript. We must credit these adaptive rune-writers with more than just an antiquarian relationship to the script, and perhaps assume a degree of continuity, not just in the way the script works as a writing system, but in terms of what it

signifies and the reading processes with which it is associated. Runes may well have been associated with an involved and engaging process of reading at a time when the script was still current as a writing system in England.

This chapter began by invoking two early runic inscriptions from East-Anglia, both concerned with the materiality of the object they inscribed and representing brief meditations on the previous life of the object: embryonic riddles, in other words. It will close with reference to a further two inscriptions discovered in recent decades, in this case not connected with riddling, but lending support to the idea that the Exeter Book may be representing traditions that persisted throughout a protracted afterlife of the script. The first of these was uncovered during excavations on the site of the National Portrait Gallery in London, where it was found in an Anglo-Saxon rubbish-pit dated to the eighth or ninth century.¹³⁸ This small sheep vertebra is inscribed with two personal names, in different hands, on two sides of the bone. One side reads **tatberht** and the other **dric**, this second inscription, according to Brown *et al.*, employing the first character ideographically to stand for *dæg* in the personal name *Dægric*. Now, this is not a literary deployment of runes; it is more in the vein of an informal piece of after-dinner amusement. However, it does suggest that the use of runes ideographically, and the duality of expression this allows—a possibility so intriguing to the Exeter Book poets—was not entirely limited to the manuscript milieu. Furthermore, it demonstrates the sort of ‘disposable’ runic literacy that is stressed in the riddle dramatizing the marking of runes on

¹³⁸ Gary Brown, Elisabeth Okasha, Ray Page and Chris Pickard, ‘A Middle-Saxon runic inscription from the National Portrait Gallery and an inscribed fossilised echinoid from Exeter Street, London’, *Medieval Archaeology* 45 (2001), 203–9.

the floor. It represents ‘casual work, produced for fun and not information’ perhaps centuries prior to the playful runes of the Exeter Book.¹³⁹

The second object is a bone writing-tablet from Blythburgh in Suffolk, of the type which is covered with a layer of wax, and inscribed with a stylus. A similar tablet is treated in Aldhelm’s riddle, *De Pugillaribus*, where he explains that ‘my inner part came from the honey-bearing bees’ and goes on to describe how ‘a goad of iron cuts my pleasant face’.¹⁴⁰ Now, runes were identified on the rim of the Blythburgh tablet at the time it was discovered at the turn of the twentieth century, but it was not until more recently that the ‘traces of extremely lightly incised runic lettering, arranged in three lines along the long axis’ were identified.¹⁴¹ These marks on the surface of the tablet were probably carved through ‘successive wax “pages”’, and it is unclear if they represent single sequences, or traces of numerous different runic messages.¹⁴² But here we have the faint shadows of a tradition of using runes to compose disposable messages, or as Page suggests, ‘the remnants of the continued use of the runic script for everyday transitory purposes, most of the evidence lost simply because it *was* transitory’.¹⁴³ Such finds should make us wary of completely disassociating the runes of the

¹³⁹ Brown *et al.*, ‘A Middle-Saxon runic inscription’, 206. The gap between the writing of this inscription and the *composition* of the poems may not be quite so wide, if we follow Norman F. Blake in his contention that ‘the poems in the four poetic codices were composed in the Alfredian period’, ‘Dating Old English Poetry’ in *An English Miscellany presented to W. S. Mackie*, ed. Brian S. Lee (Oxford: OUP, 1977), 14-27, 27.

¹⁴⁰ Nancy Porter Stork, trans., *Through a Glass Darkly: Aldhelm’s Riddles in the British Library MS Royal 12.C.xxxiii* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1990), 138.

¹⁴¹ Webster and Backhouse, *The Making of England*, 81.

¹⁴² Parsons, ‘Anglo-Saxon Runes in Continental Manuscripts’, 195–220.

¹⁴³ Page, *An Introduction*, 217.

Exeter Book riddles from the tradition of runic writing in Anglo-Saxon England, which may have continued for specific purposes long after its decline as a monumental and formal script.¹⁴⁴

In his closing discussion of manuscript runes, Page asks what sort of ‘literacy event’ these uses of runes represent.¹⁴⁵ In the contexts we have seen so far, we might answer that they represent acutely self-referential literacy events, where the textual, graphical and hermeneutical aspects of writing are foregrounded, and where the disparities between written and spoken language are set into revealing opposition. This playful foregrounding of literacy represents an important means by which these runic conceits might be read and understood. We have also seen that whilst the runes are deployed in riddling contexts, the runic script does not obscure, as has so often been maintained, in order to hide secret information. These puzzles are not, as *Riddle 33* puts it, *heterune bond*, ‘bound with hostile secrets’ even if they are *sægde searocræftig*, ‘spoken with cunning craft’ (l. 7). Riddles are posed to be solved; indeed, the runic sequences, whilst representing conundrums in themselves, invariably offer a clue to the solving of the riddle, and often represent the very point where the solution is located. As Williamson recognizes, ‘disguise and disclosure are the twin movements of metaphor and riddle.’¹⁴⁶ So whilst this chapter treated the riddlic associations of runes, and interpretative concealment, the chapter which follows suggests a reading of runic conceits through the corollary of this association, where they represent disclosure and the keys to unlocking meaning.

¹⁴⁴ See Parsons, ‘Anglo-Saxon Runes in Continental Manuscripts’.

¹⁴⁵ Page, *An Introduction*, 221.

¹⁴⁶ Williamson, *A Feast of Creatures*, 26.

Chapter 2

The *Alysendlic* Rune: Runic Abbreviations and Bede's Story of Imma¹

[Runic abbreviations in *The Ruin*, *Riddle 91*, *Elene*, *Waldere*, *Solomon and Saturn II*, *Beowulf*, the Old English *Orosius*, Junius Psalter *Psalm 99*, *Vercelli Homily XVIII*, and the glosses to the Durham Ritual and the Lindisfarne Gospels, the runic Pater Noster in *Solomon and Saturn I*, Cynewulf's runic signatures in *Christ II*, *Elene*, *Juliana* and *The Fates of the Apostles*.]

The Mind as Enclosure

In the Anglo-Saxon poetic tradition the mental processes associated with intellectual challenge, in particular the posing and solving of riddles, are often configured in material, physical terms, to the extent that the lexis of handicraft and *mōdcræft* are almost interchangeable. Indeed, the concept of the mind as enclosure 'must have been part of the standard hermeneutic repertoire for many insiders to the culture of Old English poetry' and the ancillary idea of locking and releasing will have played a key role in the poetic realisation of the mind.² The poet of *The Wanderer* compares the mind to a stronghold or treasure chamber, and relates how the lonely exile must 'modsefan . . . feterum sælan', 'seal his mind enclosure with fetters' (ll. 19a and 21b), whilst the idea of unlocking a word-hoard is ubiquitous and extends the metaphor of mechanical binding and releasing into the realm of mental

¹ A condensed version of this chapter has been published online as 'The 'Alysendlecan' Rune: Runic Abbreviations in their Immediate Literary Context' in *Preprints to the Seventh International Runic Symposium* (Oslo: 2010), <http://www.khm.uio.no/forskning/publikasjoner/runenews/7th-symp/preprint/birkett.pdf>, 1-8.

² Britt Mize, 'The Representation of the Mind as Enclosure in Old English Poetry', *ASE* 35 (2006), 57-90, 90. See also Malcolm Godden, 'Anglo-Saxons on the Mind' in *Learning and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England: Studies presented to Peter Clemoes on the Occasion of his Sixty-fifth Birthday*, ed. M. Lapidge and H. Gneuss (Cambridge: CUP, 1985), 271-98.

process, demonstrated in *Andreas* by the chief priest having unbound his *hordloca*, ‘treasure-enclosure’, or ‘inner thoughts’ and thus *wroht webbade*, ‘wrought enmity’ (ll. 671b–672a). But perhaps the best expression of cognition as a mechanical process has already been treated in the previous chapter, appearing in *Riddle 42*, a poem that makes use of both the concept of the mental enclosure and the image of the key, expressing the solving of the puzzle in terms of an elaborate metaphor of unlocking:

Hwylc þæs hordgates
 cægan cræfte þa clamme onleac
 þe þa rædellan wið rynemenn
 hygefæste heold heortan bewrigene
 orþoncbendum? Nu is undyrne
 werum æt wine hu þa wihte mid us,
 heanmode twa, hatne sindon.³

The fetters are here configured as the dissembling strategies adopted by the poser of the riddle, and this barrier is presented to, rather than by, *rynemenn*. This reinforces the notion that the riddle is to be solved through the runic clue, and suggests the possibility that the written rune itself might sometimes be associated in this poetic construct with the apparatus of unlocking: with disclosing information, rather than enclosing or concealing it. The solution is specifically *undyrne*, ‘revealed’, through the runic key, and runes also specifically ‘name’ the creature (l. 17), in a process with certain affinities both to the anthropomorphic conceits of certain self-referential inscriptions, and the more famous signature puzzles of Cynewulf.

³ ‘Who may, with key’s craft, unlock the door to the hoard, those fetters that hold the riddle craftily against rune-men, its heart concealed by cunning bonds? Now it is divulged to men at wine how by us the two downcast creatures are named.’

There is a further Exeter Book riddle, *Riddle 91* in the collection, which might be called runic in addition to the seven riddles mentioned in the previous chapter, and which makes the process of mechanical unlocking the very subject of the poem. It contains a single runic abbreviation or logogram, where the rune stands in the text for its whole name rather than the phonetic value it represents. The challenge, such as it is, only extends to recognising the whole word the character stands for. There is no more to it, one might think, than the use of a Tironean nota, particularly as it is the rune *wynn*, one of the two runes (*þorn* being the other of course) that any user of the Anglo-Saxon alphabet, with its additional letters borrowed from the runic system, might be expected to recognise instantly. It is not, therefore, an appreciably riddlic conceit. The literary context in which the abbreviation appears, and the extraneous manner in which it is used, is, however, rather interesting. The rune appears in a riddle with the solution *cæg* or ‘key’, the second of two poems in the Exeter Book treating this object:

Min heafod is homere geþuren,
 searopila wund, sworfen feole.
 Oft ic begine þæt me ongean sticað,
 þonne ic hnitan sceal, hringum gyrded,
 hearde wið heardum, hindan þyrel,
 forð ascufan þæt mines frean
 mod ·ᚦ· freoþað middelnihum.
 Hwilum ic under bæc bregde nebbe,
 hyrde þæs hordes, þonne min hlaford wile
 lafe þicgan þara þe he of life het
 wælcræfte awrecan willum sinum.⁴

⁴ ‘My head is forged by a hammer, wounded by a skilfully made tool, scoured by a file. Often I swallow that which sticks against me, when I shall thrust the aperture in the rear, girded by rings, hard against the hard, shove forward that which protects my

This poem is certainly not as lewd as the earlier key riddle, which puns on a ‘pierced thing’ dangling by a man’s side, and is concerned primarily with the process of forging and unlocking, although there is still an appreciable sexual register to the mechanics of apertures and penetration, a euphemistic subtext perhaps unavoidable when treating an object that was traditionally hung from the belt.⁵ Aside from the extended sexual pun, however, the conceit is a relatively straightforward one; the personified key is created, girded with rings, and enters a lock to reveal the hoard. The final statement is perhaps a little more elusive; the ‘memories of men’ could be translated as ‘legacies’, and refer suggestively to sexual conquest, or to the wives and kinswomen of the men the owner has defeated in battle. However, the correct, ‘redeeming’ answer, bearing in mind the initial image of forging with hammers and files, must be that this is a legacy unlocked with a key, representing the spoils of war that the key-holder keeps locked away. Interestingly, the rune appears as part of the compound representing exactly that which is hidden, and subsequently unlocked by the key in the poem: the lord’s *mod-wyn* or ‘heart-joy’.

The word *wynn* is a relatively common one. Takuji Oda in his *Concordance to the Riddles of the Exeter Book* lists two occurrences of the word *wynn* standing alone, in riddles 26 and 53, and at least six compounds or inflected forms, including twice in *Riddle 84*. In none of these cases is the word abbreviated. Indeed, the compound *wynnstapol* occurs in the riddle immediately following the key

lord’s heart joy in the middle of the night. Sometimes under my beak I draw back the guardian of the hoard, when my lord wants to take hold of the remains of those whom at his will he ordered to drive out from life by slaughter.’

⁵ Interestingly, Lea T. Olsen in her discussion of ‘Magic and Charms’ in *Women and Gender in Medieval Europe: An Encyclopaedia*, ed. Margaret Schaus (New York: Routledge, 2006) writes that ‘Impotence was understood to be a sort of magical binding, for which unbinding words or a ritual of unlocking was the best remedy’, 504-505. This includes an account of an actual lock and key found in separate wells, and brought together to cure the man’s sexual problems. The symbolism of locks and keys is undoubtedly complex and multi-layered, with sexual connotations never very far from the surface.

riddle in the collection and is not abbreviated despite its proximity.⁶ To put the use of this abbreviation in a wider context, according to my count the word *wynn* appears 105 times in the Exeter Book, and only here in *Riddle 91* is it abbreviated: an exceptional occurrence indeed. Moreover, the rune is, in fact, singularly redundant as an abbreviation; the serifed character with points before and afterwards that signal by convention that it is to be expanded to its name rather than read phonetically ensure that this ‘abbreviation’ takes up about as much space as the word *wynn* written out in full, and it would certainly require as much effort to write. This is a very important consideration, as it undermines the primary function of an abbreviation: to act as a short-hand and to save time and space. We certainly have sufficient cause, therefore, to look for an alternative reason why this rune might be employed here, amongst a set of riddles in which runes are otherwise used pointedly, as clues to unlocking the various solutions.⁷ To begin to shed light on this intriguing runic intrusion, and to better understand the properties which Anglo-Saxons writing and copying manuscripts in the ninth and tenth centuries attributed to runes, we might look at an episode in ‘one of the most popular history books in any language’: Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*.⁸

⁶ The solution to this riddle is usually given as *boc*, and as such plays with the fact that this word can refer to either ‘beech tree’ or ‘book’. There is nothing in the conceit that points to unlocking or releasing.

⁷ This rune, used in the body of the text, is most certainly not, as Hacikyan contends, employed for the purpose of identifying the scribal hand, an unwarranted and unexplained supposition, perhaps arising from the exceptional nature of this abbreviation. Hacikyan, ‘The Runes of Old English Poetry’, 60.

⁸ Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors, eds., Introduction to Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), xvii.

Bede's Story of Imma

Of all the illustrative anecdotes in the *Historia*, one of the most intriguing is the story of the young Northumbrian *militem* named Imma and his uncanny ability to unlock chains. This has in part to do with Bede's judicious blending of contemporary politics with miracle story, and with the particular vividness of his account of these events, which are of a miracle type not common amongst contemporary hagiographical writings. However, much criticism has been concerned specifically with the interface between the pagan past and the Christian present, and the obscurity of his reference in this account to 'litteras solutorias' (4:22), generally translated as 'loosening letters' or 'written spells' and associated in the Old English translation with knowledge of the *alysendlic*, or 'unbinding' rune. What follows is a summary of the story, highlighting its important features.

In the year 679, Bede relates a battle that took place between the Northumbrian King Egfrid and King Ethelred of the Mercians near the river Trent. During the battle a youth by the name of Imma is wounded and left for dead. His wounds are, however, superficial, and after coming to on the deserted battlefield he heads off in search of his departed kinsmen. He does not get far before he is captured by the Mercians and taken to an earl of King Ethelred's. He is understandably wary of admitting that he is a soldier, perhaps even amongst the personal retinue of the Northumbrian king,⁹ and instead passes himself off as a lowly peasant. The earl treats him well, tending his wounds, feeding and entertaining him. Once he is recovered, however, the earl orders him to be bound to prevent his escape. This cannot be accomplished, as each time the bonds are placed upon

⁹ Edward James, in his *Britain in the First Millennium* (London: Arnold, 2001) reads this particular episode for what it can tell us about rank in Anglo-Saxon England, suggesting that the warbands of Bede's time were largely composed of young aristocrats.

him they miraculously fall off. His captor is confounded, and asks Imma whether he has about him any 'written charms', such as are spoken about in fabulous stories:

Interea comes, qui eum tenebat, mirari et interrogare coepit, quare ligari non posset, an forte litteras solutorias, de qualibus fabulae ferunt, apud se haberet, propter quas ligari non posset. *HE* (4:22).¹⁰

Imma tells them that he knows nothing of these things, but that he has a brother who is a priest, and who regularly performs masses for the absolution of his soul. Realising that Imma is no peasant, his captor brings him before the earl, and Imma confesses to his real status. The earl, still somewhat upset at the losses he suffered in the recent battle, sells Imma to a London trader, who is similarly exasperated by his inability to bind his captive, all fetters he puts on the Northumbrian coming undone at around the third hour of the morning. Imma eventually obtains a ransom, and is released, to find that his brother, believing him dead, had of course been singing masses at exactly the time the bonds were wont to fall off.

Bede, concerned to rationalise his selection of material for inclusion in the *Historia*, informs the reader that he has decided not to pass over this extraordinary episode in silence, 'because the relation of the same will be conducive to the salvation of many' (4:22). Its continued importance, however, owes rather less to its purported demonstration of the efficacy of prayer, but rather to its dramatisation of the replacement of one cultural hermeneutics by another. In effect, Bede substitutes a superstitious interpretation of the loosening bonds being caused by written spells with the recitation of the mass and divine intervention, perhaps an equally irrational explanation, but one

¹⁰ 'Meanwhile the nobleman, who kept him prisoner, was astonished, and asked him why he could not be bound, and whether he possessed any written charms to protect him from binding, like those mentioned in fables.'

which teaches us how to read the miraculous from a Christian perspective. The credulous captors have been hearing too many *fabulae*, or ‘fabulous stories’, and such a primitive means of explaining the world through operative human agency, through ‘a power occult in its operations, but worldly in its ends’,¹¹ is firmly relegated to the past in his historical schema.

Whilst Bede surely believed in the veracity of his account, he uncharacteristically vague about his sources for this miracle: he claims to have heard the story from an anonymous ‘someone’ who himself heard it first hand: the time-honoured displacement of responsibility onto a friend of a friend. Unlike other extraordinary miracles such as the appearance of an angel on horseback, related in Bede’s *Life of St Cuthbert*, the author makes no attempt to justify this miracle, as is usually the case when it is especially improbable or one of the less common or well documented miracle ‘types’. Colgrave points out that this is one of only a handful of extravagant, or ‘mere fairy-tale wonders’ in the *Historia*, and whether or not Bede was responsible for Christianizing the miracle, its inception was undoubtedly popularist, the decision to include it perhaps prompted by the threat of the contrary, folk interpretation that lies at its heart.¹² I cannot help thinking with Lerer that the whole episode represents a rather staged process of cultural appropriation, dramatising the meeting of two

¹¹ DiNapoli, ‘Odd Characters’, 147.

¹² As Colgrave points out in his discussion of ‘Bede’s Miracle Stories’ in *Bede: His Life, Times, and Writings*, ed. A. Hamilton Thompson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1935), 201–29, these events are, ‘from the first, popular creations’ which ‘satisfy the craving for tales of marvels’, 204. The miracle of unlocking chains seems to have been acceptable for an Anglo-Saxon audience, perhaps due to the patristic precedent of the unlocking of the Apostle Peter’s chains, perhaps due to underlying folk beliefs. The unlocking of chains is an ability credited to Óðinn in *Hávamál*; a broader attribution of ‘releasing’ skills is also suggested by Snorri in *Ynglingasaga* when he mentions the opening of mounds to reveal treasure and, rather more prosaically, lost cattle, *Heimskringla*, Íslenzk fornrit XXVI–VIII, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson. 3 vols. (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1941–51), I, Ch. 7.

world views, and writing the Christian into the ascendancy,¹³ and not only the Christian, one might add, but the Northumbrian Church specifically. Whilst suffering defeat in the battle, a fact skilfully skirted around by Bede, the Northumbrians are richly compensated with a spiritual victory in its aftermath, and the enduring example of Imma and his brother, a Northumbrian monastic. One cannot help being reminded of Gregory's oft-quoted letter to Augustine, related in Book I of the *Historia*, in which Gregory, with admirable pragmatism, suggests that temples should be re-consecrated as churches and traditional practices altered but not eradicated, as 'there is no doubt that it is impossible to efface everything at once from their obdurate minds': evidently, the process of appropriation was an open-ended one.¹⁴ The phrase 'litteras solutorias' is itself somewhat indistinct, 'referring to a letter or document, or characters or words',¹⁵ and it may well be deliberately vague, perhaps amounting to 'an act of literary suppression' as Seth Lerer suggests.¹⁶ Bede certainly did not want to give voice and substance to those very fables he was denouncing, and his reference does not give us much to go on in reconstructing the Anglo-Saxon attitude to runes; indeed, runes are not even mentioned in the Latin.

There are, in fact, very few references to the use of runes in Anglo-Saxon writings, if we discount those expository *runica manuscripta*, including the so-called *ísrúnar* tracts, written on the continent in the ninth century, most surviving copies of which are in continental hands and of a decidedly antiquarian character. The paucity of references to literacy in general (and to runes in particular) in

¹³ Lerer, *Literacy and Power*, 37-40.

¹⁴ *HE*, 1:30.

¹⁵ Page, *An Introduction*, 22.

¹⁶ Lerer, *Literacy and Power*, 39.

the literature of Anglo-Saxon England, is precisely the reason the episode referring to ‘*litteras solutorias*’ has become both ‘commonly quoted and highly valued’.¹⁷ Even in this instance the original reference in Latin has no firm connection to runes, and it is not clear if the native script is indeed what Bede had in mind when he made this obscure allusion to ‘releasing letters’. It was, however, translated into Old English during or shortly after the reign of King Alfred, and here the connection with runes is more explicit:

Ond hine ascode hwæðer he ða alysendlecan rune cuðe, and þa stafas mid him awritene hæfde, be swylcum men leas spel secgað and spreocað, þæt hine mon forþon gebindan ne meahte.¹⁸

The explicit reference to runes does not seem to represent a whimsical association made by the late-ninth or early-tenth century translator. Ælfric, writing over a century later, also uses the story of Imma, in a homily on the efficacy of the mass in releasing the souls of the living and interceding for those in purgatory.¹⁹ According to the most recent editor of *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies* ‘the Old English translation of Bede’s work seems here to have had no influence on his rendering’, meaning that he extrapolated the runic connection independently from the reference to *litteras solutorias* in the Latin text.²⁰ Page is also of the opinion that Ælfric worked directly from the Latin translation to produce his version of events, the ealdorman asking the captive ‘whether he broke his bonds asunder through sorcery or rune-staves’. Ælfric’s homily brings the magic hinted at in the earlier

¹⁷ R. I. Page, ‘Anglo-Saxon Runes and Magic’, *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 27 (1964), 14-31, 21.

¹⁸ ‘And he asked him whether he knew the releasing rune, and had with him the letters written out, such as men tell idle tales of and speak about, so that he could not be bound’, *OE Bede*, 4:22.

¹⁹ *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies* Vol. II, ed. Malcolm Godden (London: OUP for the EETS, 1979), 204-205.

²⁰ Malcolm Godden, *Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies: Introduction, Commentary and Glossary* (Oxford: OUP for the EETS, 2000), 538.

accounts to the foreground, although this need not necessarily represent an instinctive association of runes with magic in general, as Elliott suggests, but rather with the very particular concept of unlocking.²¹ What it clearly shows is that the association of runes with loosening, releasing and unbinding, whether actively superstitious or merely conceptual, was current enough to be referred to without any further explanation in the late-tenth century.

The influence Bede's *Historia* had on later readers is hard to overestimate, particularly following its translation into the vernacular. The story of Imma, one of the most memorable of the anecdotes in Bede's *Historia*, particularly by dint of its deviation from the 'standard' miracle type, would have become widely known, even if it was originally a local legend. Ælfric's use of it, with his casual allusion to runes and sorcery, suggests that the story retained its currency until late in the Anglo-Saxon period, and that the association between runic writing and unlocking became, if anything, more entrenched over time. It is no great exaggeration to say that this story would have formed part of the intellectual and cultural *baggage* of almost every Anglo-Saxon involved with the writing of manuscripts from the mid-eighth century onwards, and the attention paid to the episode by critics is certainly warranted.

As Page points out, Ælfric's allusion to sorcery is the one place in Old English literature where runes were unquestionably associated by Anglo-Saxons with magic.²² There are very few inscriptions of English provenance that are demonstrably cultic or amuletic, or even 'neutrally secular',²³ in

²¹ R. W. V. Elliott, 'Runes Yews and Magic', *Speculum* 32 (1957), 250-261, 250.

²² Page, 'Anglo-Saxon Runes and Magic', 30.

²³ Maureen Halsall, 'Runes and the Mortal Condition in Old English Poetry', *JEGP* 88:4 (Oct 1989), 477-86, 477. The Spong Hill Urns with their mirrored *alu* runes are a rare example of an unambiguously magic inscription of Anglo-Saxon provenance.

marked contrast to the continental material, and the epigraphical evidence tends to suggest that runes were only rarely endowed with magical or pagan properties by those that used them. No right-minded scholar can see the runes on Cuthbert's Coffin or the stone crosses of Dumfries and Galloway and dispute this fact. It should be stressed that whatever superstitious associations the script carried, they were associations only, inherited as *fabulae* rather than practised.²⁴ Indeed, Ælfric may well be projecting an image on to a script that only really came to be associated with paganism as it became progressively archaic.

However, the lack of evidence for any incising of *alysendlic* runes (whatever form these might take) in the world of epigraphy does not alter the fact that associations can be very influential indeed, even when divorced from any practical or practised belief. Just as an otherwise rational individual in our own time might instinctively touch wood when making a provocative claim, and not stop to consider the origins of this superstition, so an Anglo-Saxon might strongly and unconsciously associate runes with unlocking, without professing any belief in their actual ability to release chains. Bede has unintentionally codified the connection between runes and unlocking, which is rather ironic considering that it was in Bede's own milieu that runes saw their heyday as a practical script in England, and their most successful integration with the Latin alphabet.

It is the intimate association with the *concept* of unlocking, perhaps garnered originally from the reader's ability to release meaning from a sequence of marks inscrutable to the illiterate, and

²⁴ Peter Orton suggests that the reference is to *tanas*, or rune-inscribed sticks, and that the translator is attempting a reconstruction of runic magic. I think the reference is simply too vague to amount to a reconstruction, though he is probably right that this reference refers to runes as written characters. Peter Orton, 'Sticks or stones? The story of Imma in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 41 of the Old English Bede, and Old English tan ('twig')', *Medium Ævum* 72:1 (2003), 1-12.

certainly exploited by those involved in a riddling form of poetry, that I will be concerned with in the remainder of this chapter, and how this association with the *alysendlic* rune may have impacted on the way in which runes were used in poetic manuscripts. We have seen how the ‘key’ riddle may be making use of the connection between runes and unbinding or releasing in its unlocking conceit. Abbreviations are simply used too infrequently and sporadically in the Exeter Book for the appearance of a rune in connection with a ‘key’ riddle to represent an associative coincidence. And there may be more than one rationale for the use of a rune in *Riddle 91*. The very shape may have had a certain appeal to the scribe, reflecting in visual form the object which is being riddled upon. The two images below, both taken from the Benedictional of St Æthelwold, depict St Peter, identified by the keys of heaven which he carries. Rather than those ‘massive keys, terminating in geometric patterns’ which are often found depicted in insular artwork,²⁵ including the highly stylised key and cross icons depicted twice in the Benedictional, these small, unadorned, naturalistic keys clearly resemble the iconic key shape we recognise today. The use of such a shape in the iconography of the Benedictional strongly suggests that this shape of key had already become the iconic key type in the second half of the tenth century.²⁶ The *wynn* rune, ƿ, used in *Riddle 92* reflects this shape. It is itself a species of key, carrying associations that further the solving of the

²⁵ Victoria Thompson, *Dying and Death in later Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 2004), 205.

²⁶ Keys dating from the mid to late Anglo-Saxon period exhibit a variety of shapes and sizes, the type of key depending on the mechanism of the lock, rudimentary latch-lifters being amongst the most basic kind. The majority of hollow stem or casket keys ‘common in contexts of the late 8th-11th centuries in Britain and northern Europe’ are, however, remarkably similar in appearance to the traditional key shape, Patrick Ottaway, *Anglo-Scandinavian Ironwork from 16-22 Coppergate* (London: Council for British Archaeology, 1992), 669 and Fig. 286. Whether this iconic shape was already established enough for the ƿ rune to call them to mind, is somewhat difficult to gauge, but the illuminations of *The Benedictional of Æthelwold*, where such a key shape is chosen as the identifying mark of St Peter, suggests this is a distinct possibility.

riddle and the metaphorical unlocking of the solution. The rune serves as an additional reference to the process of unlocking in the poem, drawing on the same cultural construction of the runic script as the translator of Bede's story of Imma.



St Peter, identified by the small key he carries. The Benedictional of St. Æthelwold (British Library Additional MS 49598), fols 67v. and 102v, from the plates depicting the Pentecost and the Dormition of the Virgin Mary. Copyright British Library.

The one-off use of a *wynn* abbreviation within a poem dealing explicitly with the theme of unlocking raises the possibility that runic abbreviations, and other runic incursions into Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, may occasionally have a relation to the literary context in which they appear. After all, it has long been noted that runic abbreviations appear only sporadically in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, and that there is little practicable utility evinced in such an erratic deployment. This chapter will explore this apparently erratic use of runic abbreviations, or logograms, in light of the concept of an 'unlocking rune', before suggesting how we might use this evidence to inform our understanding of Cynewulf's signature passages.

Runic Abbreviations

The use of runes as manuscript abbreviations constitutes something of a curiosity in runic studies, a footnote in the practical afterlife of the script, as it were, transferred from the epigraphical world to the scriptorium. Most editors silently expand the rune as they would a Tironean nota, and they function in much the same way, relying on the logographic component of the script, whereby each character bears a meaningful name, whose initial sound typically corresponds with the phonetic value of the rune. Although the earliest witness to such a comprehensive naming system is the *Abecedarium Nordmannicum*, usually dated to the mid-ninth century,²⁷ there is little doubt that this is actually a very early tradition, supported by cognate names in North Germanic sources,²⁸ and possibly also by the use of logograms in certain older *futhork* inscriptions, including the proposed deployment of the **opala* rune on the Pietroassa neck-ring to represent the concept of possession,²⁹ and the use of the rune named **jara*, or ‘harvest/bountiful year’ on the Stentofte Runestone in the phrase **hAþuwolAfz gAfj**, *Haþuwulfz gafj[ar]*, ‘Haþuwulfar gave a bountiful year’.³⁰ The deployment of an ideogram is by no means certain in either of these cases, and there are certainly few ‘convincing’ examples in Old English inscriptions.³¹ Indeed, the whole concept of a discrete category

²⁷ B. Bischoff, ‘Eine Sammelhandschrift Walahfrid Strabos (Cod. Sangall. 878)’ in *Aus der Welt des Buches. Festgabe für G. Leyh* (Leipzig: O. Harrassowitz, 1950), 30-48, 45 and Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta*, 82-3.

²⁸ Maureen Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem: A Critical Edition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1981), 3.

²⁹ KJ 41. Klaus Düwel, *Runenkunde* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1968/1983), 28.

³⁰ DR 357, *SamRun*. This is the usual reading, see for example Elmer H. Antonsen, *A Concise Grammar of the Older Runic Inscriptions* (Tübingen: M. Niemeyer, 1975), 87, *KJ*, 209-14, and Erik Moltke *Runes and their Origins – Denmark and Elsewhere* (Copenhagen: The National Museum of Denmark, 1985), 140, but it has recently been questioned by Bernard Mees in ‘The Stentofte dedication and sacral kingship’ (Unpublished article, 2010) and personal correspondence. The rune N may also be used as a logograph on the Thorsborg shield boss, DR 8, Antonsen, ‘A Concise Grammar’, 30.

³¹ Page, *An Introduction*, 79.

of *Begriffsrunen* probably owes much to the dubious romantic nationalist or ‘germanicist’ scholarship of the early twentieth century, and we should be wary of positing an ideogram whenever an inscription resists straightforward interpretation.³² However, the *potential* for using ideograms existed from the moment the runes bore meaningful names, perhaps from the very first inception of the *futhork*; scribes are thus not so much distorting, as exploiting an original feature of the script.

Only a small number of runic characters are used as abbreviations. The *mǫðr* rune is found regularly in Icelandic manuscripts, the *fē* rune occurring somewhat less frequently, whilst in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts the runes *mon*, *dæg*, *wynn* and *eþel* are all used on occasion. These are some of the most functional of the rune names, occurring relatively often in written language, unlike the elusive *peorð*, for example, a hapax legomenon appearing only in the *Anglo-Saxon Rune Poem* and being of little or no use as an abbreviation because of its obscurity. Thus, the second part of the name Solomon could be written with an **m** rune at the end to designate *mon*, just as in a runic inscription excavated from beneath the National Portrait Gallery the name Dægric is designated by a **ᛞ** rune followed by the suffix **-ric**.³³ This is similar in many ways to the use of the numeral 8 in text language, and like all abbreviations is primarily a space-saving feature, not a means of concealment, although one has to be au fait with the conventions of naming. The practicality of using an abbreviation for a familiar noun such as ‘man’ is demonstrated clearly in the Old Norse poem

³² Mees, ‘The Stentoften dedication’, 3-4.

³³ The scribe responsible for the gloss to the Rushworth Gospels, whilst not employing ideograms, also signs his name, **farm**, *Farman*, using the **ᛞ** rune to represent the second syllable. Page, *An Introduction*, 221.

Hávamál, where the *maðr* rune is used a total of forty-five times, saving a significant amount of space and effort.³⁴

It is clear, however, that unlike their counterparts in medieval Iceland, Anglo-Saxon scribes never fully exploited the abbreviations at their disposal, and no individual text makes use of all four runes. What is more, a single abbreviation may appear in a manuscript in which the word is used scores of times, a prime example being the single occurrence of the rune *wynn* in the psalms of the *Junius Psalter*, in which joy and rejoicing are, of course, especially prominent themes. Whilst runic abbreviations occur across a surprisingly large number of important texts, including *The Ruin*, *Riddle 91*, *Elene*, *Waldere*, the poetic *Solomon and Saturn*, *Beowulf*, the Old English *Orosius*, the *Junius Psalter*, *Vercelli Homily XVIII*, and in the glosses to both the *Durham Ritual* and the Lindisfarne Gospels, only in the glosses are they used systematically. The *Durham Ritual* is the earliest surviving collect or prayer book from England, and was glossed sometime in the early tenth century by an individual of Northumbrian extraction.³⁵ The rationale for the use of runes in the *Durham Ritual* and the Lindisfarne Gospels is clear enough, both texts being glosses, and thus rather different to the majority of other texts under consideration. The restricted area available for writing and the desire to keep the gloss concurrent with the Latin text make abbreviations something of a necessity in these contexts.³⁶ Non-runic abbreviations are also used extensively, both for inflectional or case

³⁴ Finnur Jónsson and L. F. A. Wimmer, eds, *Codex Regius af den Ældre Edda* [Facsimile Edition] (Copenhagen: S. L. Møllers Bogtrykkeri, 1891), 5-14.

³⁵ See U. Lindelöf, *Rituale Ecclesiae Dunelmensis*, Surtees Society 140 (1927), and 'A New Collation of the Gloss of the Durham Ritual', *MLR* 18:3 (June 1923), 273-280, for a detailed discussion of the language and collation of the gloss. See also *The Durham Ritual*, ed. J. Brown *et al.* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1969).

³⁶ The Latin text of the Lindisfarne Gospels is spaced rather luxuriously, leaving, it might seem, ample space for a gloss and little pressing call for abbreviations. However, it is clear that the tenth-century glossator, Aldred, is concerned throughout to

endings and for whole words such as *hælend*, indicated by <h> in the gloss. According to Ann Squires, there are also numerous cases of misabbreviation that may indicate grammatical confusion on the part of the scribe, or indeed confusion at using quite so many abbreviations in a vernacular text.³⁷ The runic abbreviations for *dæg* and *mon* must be seen here as simply one of the many strategies by which the glossator (it is the same glossator, Aldred, in both cases) attempted to save space, and were systematised due to requirement.

As Derolez points out, aside from the experiments of this innovative glossator, in all other contexts abbreviations using runic characters are ‘exceptional’, neither applied consistently within a manuscript, nor demanded by constraints of space, appearing unexpectedly in the middle of a text and subsequently being abandoned.³⁸ It is, according to Bitterli, ‘nothing more than a shorthand practice, employed only sporadically by some scribes’,³⁹ a conclusion reached by the majority of commentators. This, of course, raises the question of why such a sporadic and essentially pointless shorthand is deployed at all, and used in this singularly erratic fashion across such a diverse range of manuscripts. Indeed, the only unifying characteristic of the texts employing runic abbreviations is that they are all written in the vernacular, as is to be expected. It is only when we look closely at the literary context in which the runes are found that something of a pattern begins to emerge, their

space the gloss so that it corresponds as closely as possible with the Latin text. This sometimes involves leaving wide spaces between the words of his gloss so that they appear above the Latin word in question, and sometimes necessitates a compression of the Old English text so that words almost appear to run into one other. The runes, alongside those extensive and sometimes ‘unparalleled’ abbreviations compiled by A. S. C. Ross in ‘Prolegomena to an Edition of the Lindisfarne Gospels’, *JEGP* 42 (1943), 309-21, thus prove an invaluable aid to the glossator in his efforts to manipulate the space available.

³⁷ Ann Squires, ‘Some Curious Abbreviations in the Durham Ritual’, *NeQ* 20:11 (Nov 1973), 403-409, 409.

³⁸ Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta*, 401.

³⁹ Dieter Bitterli, *Say What I Am Called: the Old English riddles of the Exeter Book and the Anglo-Latin riddle tradition* (London: University of Toronto Press, 2009), 83-4.

use more often than not seeming to coincide with moments when the idea of unlocking or releasing is raised in the passage in which they are embedded.

Elene

It is understandable that a scribe or poet might draw on the loosening associations of the runic script in a poem as obviously, and literally, concerned with unlocking as the ‘key’ riddle. The previous chapter illustrated the many ingenious runic strategies employed by the riddles, and within this playful medium the reader was primed for the pertinent, and sometimes quite ingenious, placement of runes. The poem *Elene* is another text where the use of runic abbreviations is rendered somewhat unremarkable by the more elaborate use of runes elsewhere in the Vercelli manuscript, namely in the famous runic signature with which the poem closes. The runic signature may thus provide us with a general indication of why runic abbreviations appear in this poem, and not, say, in *Andreas* or *The Dream of the Rood*. As the scribe seems to be ‘a mechanical recorder of the texts before him’, if somewhat careless at times,⁴⁰ it may well be that his exemplar for *Elene* contained the runes, and that he copied them in, not thinking to replicate this practice elsewhere.

It is perhaps all the more surprising in light of the runic precedent set by Cynewulf’s signature that whilst there are numerous instances where the abbreviation for *wynn* could have been used in the poem, only two runic logograms actually occur. There is nothing exceptional about the palaeographical context of these particular abbreviations, and no obvious reason why this shorthand

⁴⁰ Paul E. Szarmach, ‘The Scribe of the Vercelli Book’, *SN*, 51:2 (1979), 179-188, 187.

should be employed in the two lines in question.⁴¹ Indeed, whilst the scribe uses the Tironean nota and the ubiquitous abbreviation for final ‘m’, he neglects to use the common abbreviation for *þæt* anywhere in the manuscript, and seems more inclined to vary the size of his script in order to fit the various texts to the manuscript page, rather than to resort to abbreviations. The runes are widely spaced in the poem, so it was also clearly not the case that the scribe remembered to use the abbreviation for a short while, before lapsing back into the unabbreviated form. The deployment of the runes is thus thoroughly perplexing, unless, that is, we accept that fact that the literary context of this poem structured ‘by multiple revelations and revelation’ may have had a role to play in their erratic appearances.⁴²

The first use of the abbreviation appears in a prayer by Judas, later known as Judas Cyriacus of Jerusalem, shortly after he has been released from prison, in which in penitential mood he asks the Lord to reveal to him the site of the crucifixion, just as, he says, the bones of Joseph were revealed to Moses from where they were hidden in the ground:

Swa þu gehyrdest þone halgan wer,
 Moyses, on meðle, þa ðu, mihta god,
 geywdest þam eorle on þa æðelan tid,
 under beorhhliðe ban Iosephes,
 swa ic þe, weroda 𐛦; gif hit sie willa þin,
 þurg þæt beorhte gesceap biddan wille,
 þæt me þæt goldhord, gasta scyppend,
 geopenie, þæt yldum wæs

⁴¹ The runes do not, for example, occur at the edge of the page, or in a line that would otherwise run into the margins, both reasons why the scribe might have recourse to an abbreviation.

⁴² Jackson J. Campbell, ‘Cynewulf’s Multiple Revelations’ in *Cynewulf: Basic Readings*, ed. Robert E. Bjork (New York: Garland, 1996), 229–250, 249.

lange behyded. (ll. 784-792).⁴³

His exact entreaty to the ‘weroda *wyn*’ is ‘þæt me þæt goldhord, gasta scyppend, / geopenie, þæt yldum wæs / lange behyded’, ‘that the creator of souls will open that treasure hoard to me, which has long been hidden from men’ (ll. 790-92). Here, as in the *Riddle 91*, we have an explicit connection with unlocking, couched in terms very similar to the key riddle: a hidden hoard is opened and revealed in both these passages. That the rune should appear at this very point in the manuscript, and not before, certainly suggests a connection with the specific context of ‘revealing’ in which it is found.

The second runic abbreviation occurs some three hundred or so lines later on in the poem, after an interval in which the runic abbreviation for *wyn* could have been employed on a number of occasions, and was passed over. The context is again a prayer for revealing, this time in the follow-up search for the nails used to crucify Christ. In this case the connection is perhaps even more explicit, Elene asking her apostle to send up his prayer into the ‘wuldres *wyn*’, the ‘joy of heaven’, with a specific entreaty to reveal the hoard beneath the earth which has long been concealed from men:

Wolde ic þæt þu funde, þa ðe in foldan gen
 deope bedolfen dierne sindon,
 heolstre behyded. A min hige sorgað,
 reonig reoteð ond geresteð nu,

⁴³ ‘Just as you listened to Moses, the holy man, in his entreaty, when you, mighty God, revealed to that leader the bones of Joseph under that mountain slope, in that noble time; so I entreat you, by that sublime creation, **joy** of the host, creator of souls, that you will open that treasure hoard to me, which has long been hidden from men, if it is your desire.’

ærþan me gefylle fæder ælmitig,
 wereda wealdend, willan minne,
 niða nergend, þurh þara nægla cyme,
 halig of hiehðam Nu ðu hrædlice
 eallum eaðmedum, ar selesta,
 þine bene onsend in ða beorhtan gesceaft
 on wuldres **ƿ**, bide wigena þrym,
 þæt þe gecyðe cyning ælmitig
 hord under hrusan, þæt gehyded gen,
 duguðum dyrne, deogol, bideð. (ll.1080-93)⁴⁴

In this case the phrase *wuldres wyn* in which the abbreviation occurs is a relatively common one, occurring interestingly enough, some forty lines earlier in the poem, in the context of the decision of Judas Cyriacus to become a Christian (l. 1039: 95). Here the rune is not used.

Whether it is the scribe, responding to an unconscious association between runes and the unlocking conceit, or the poet himself who is responsible, is hard to determine. We might, however, expect a poet as sensitive to runic play as Cynewulf to be more than capable of leaving such signposts in his verse in order to engage the intellectual faculties of the reader. These abbreviations may even serve to get the reader thinking about the value of runes as logographs, and as symbols associated with revealing, in anticipation of the runic signature puzzle which ends the poem.

Certainly, the appearance of the abbreviation in this context of opening hoards and revealing hidden

⁴⁴ 'I wish you to find them that are still hidden in the earth, deeply buried, concealed by darkness. Always my heart will grieve, mournfully lament and never rest until the Almighty Father, Ruler of Hosts, Saviour of men, Holiness from the heights, fulfils my will for me, through the appearance of these nails. Now, best of messengers, speedily send your prayers in all humility into that bright creation, into the joy of heaven, entreat the glorious Lord of men, almighty king, that he reveal the hoard beneath the earth, that still remains hidden, secret and concealed from people.'

treasure implies that runes were associated more generally with unlocking and breaking open than the specific reference to loosening chains in the *OE Bede* suggests.

The Old English *Orosius*

The true extent of the frame of reference becomes apparent when we turn to look at the OE *Orosius*, a translation, or abridged adaptation,⁴⁵ of Paulus Orosius' *Historiarum Adversum Paganos Libri VII*, an early-fifth century text written at the request of Augustine, and intended to demonstrate that Rome's adoption of Christianity had not been the cause of its decline, by surveying the calamities and barbarism of pre-Christian history. The Old English translation was made in the ninth century, probably at the behest of King Alfred, and the work survives in two manuscripts, the earliest of which, the Lauderdale or Tollemache *Orosius* (BL, Additional 47967) is dated to 'the quarter century immediately following upon the literary activity of King Alfred and his circle'.⁴⁶

This manuscript contains a single runic abbreviation, approximately two thirds of the way through the MS, on p. 103 of the facsimile.⁴⁷ The rune in question is *epel*, and the abbreviation is looping and rounded rather than serifed, but the scribe otherwise obeys the convention of the Exeter and Vercelli Books by enclosing the rune in points to indicate that it is to be expanded.

⁴⁵ Bately suggests that although it is normally thought of as a translation 'a more accurate description would be paraphrase, a rendering of sense for sense not word for word, by an author who . . . had no hesitation in making radical but unacknowledged alterations to his primary source.' *The Old English Orosius* (London: OUP for the EETS, 1980), xciii.

⁴⁶ Alistair Campbell, ed., *The Tollemache Orosius: British Add. MS. 47967*, Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile III (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1953), 18. Bately dates the MS to the first half of the tenth century, and notes that it is written by a single scribe who is probably the second scribe of the Parker Chronicle; he may also be responsible for the Latin of the Junius Psalter, *The Old English Orosius*, xxiii-iv. The mid-eleventh century Cotton MS does not include this abbreviation.

⁴⁷ Campbell, *The Tollemache Orosius*, 103.

There is nothing particular about the palaeographical context of the rune to suggest space was at a premium; indeed, the word *þæt*—abbreviated consistently throughout the manuscript—is written out in full later in the same line, suggesting that space-saving was certainly not at the forefront of the scribe’s mind. If we look to the literary context, however, the rune does appear to be used at a very specific point in the manuscript. The index or title to the section in question reads as follows:

Hu Himeolco, Cartaina cyning, for mid fierde on Siciliae; ond hu Hanna an mon wæs onwaldes giernende; ond hu Cartaine hierdon þæt se mæra Alexander hæfde abrocen Tirum þa burg.⁴⁸

The breaking, or conquest, of the city of Tyre is highlighted from the outset as an important event, even though the siege itself is nowhere related in much detail in the *Orosius*. The term *abrocen* used to describe the fall of the city is often translated simply as ‘captured’, although its primary meaning is ‘to break’, as in the line from the *Finnsburg Fragment* ‘hæleð . . . sæde þæt his byrne abrocen wære’ ‘the hero . . . said that his mail shirt was broken apart’ (l. 44).⁴⁹ Elsewhere concerning the siege of Tyre *abrocen* translates the Latin *captam euersamque*, ‘captured [and] destroyed’, with the emphasis, I would suggest, on destruction.⁵⁰ It is certainly more of an emotive term than the more common phrase ‘he þa burh gewann’, ‘he conquered the city’, and the variations ‘geode Persipolis þa burh’, ‘took the city of Persepolis’ (3/9), and ‘begatan Cartaina þa burh’, ‘seized or took the city of Carthage’ (4/4), also used of Alexander’s conquests, and it singles out the assault on Tyre as

⁴⁸ ‘How Himilco, king of the Carthaginians, went with an army to Sicily; and how a certain man Hanna was eager for control; and how the Carthaginians heard that Alexander the Great had broken the city of Tyre.’ *OE Bede*, Index: 4.

⁴⁹ Donald K. Fry, ed., *Finnsburh: Fragment and Episode* (London: Methuen, 1974).

⁵⁰ Paulus Orosius, *Historiarum Adversum Paganos Libri VII*, ed. Carolus Zangemeister (Vindobonae: Apud C. Geroldi Filium Bibliopolam Academiae, 1882), 4:6:21.

particularly decisive. Indeed, in the summary of Alexander's campaigns we are told that 'Tirus seo mære burg eall toworpenu', 'the great city of Tyre was completely destroyed' (3/9).

Ancient Tyre, a city of forty thousand, was situated on an island half a mile from the coast, and according to a number of accounts, including that of the Roman historian Arrian, it was virtually impenetrable as its high walls ran right to the water's edge.⁵¹ The city reportedly held out for seven months against the Macedonians, and Alexander was said to have been incensed by this stubborn defiance and the protracted nature of the siege. On conquering the city he ordered almost the whole population to be sold into slavery.⁵² The final assault on the stronghold involved battering the walls from ships and from the end of a causeway leading out from the mainland, which was constructed for the purpose of bringing his artillery in range. This causeway silted up soon afterwards and 'entrained a complete anthropogenic metamorphosis of the Tyrian coastal system', eventually coming to link the island to the shore.⁵³ He thus not only breached the city, but forever compromised its protected island situation, and in many ways the siege of Tyre represents the superlative image of resistance, impenetrability and breaking.

How well acquainted the Anglo-Saxons were with the campaigns of Alexander is somewhat hard to gauge, but as Orchard points out, 'clearly there was no shortage of material relating to Alexander

⁵¹ Arrian, *Anabasis Alexandri: Vol. I, Books I-IV with an English Translation*, ed. A. Brunt (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1976), II:18:2 and 21:4. It is clear from the prologue to Arrian's *Anabasis* in which he lists his sources, including Ptolemy and Aristobulus, that he was working from contemporary accounts of Alexander's campaign, although as N. G. L. Hammond points out 'we are to a great extent dependent on the judgement which he exercises' in choosing which source to follow when these earlier writings are not in agreement, *Sources for Alexander the Great* (Cambridge: CUP, 1993), 190.

⁵² Arrian gives the rather arbitrary number of 30,000. *Anabasis*, II:24:5.

⁵³ Nick Marriner, Christophe Morhange, and Samuel Meule, 'Holocene morphogenesis of Alexander the Great's isthmus at Tyre in Lebanon', *PNAS* 104:22 (May 29, 2007), 9218-9223.

the Great in Anglo-Saxon England, reflecting a range of traditions',⁵⁴ although whether this material included the *Life of Alexander* translated into Latin by Julius Valerius Alexander Polemius in the fourth century, is uncertain. Within the OE *Orosius* itself there is perhaps some evidence that the translator may have possessed an additional source dealing with the siege of Tyre. In the Latin work the reason given for the defiance of the Tyrian people is 'fiducia Carthaginiensium sibi cognatorum', 'because of confidence in the Carthaginians, kinsmen to them';⁵⁵ whilst in the translation not only is this statement left out, but the information that the city was destroyed because the Tyrian people 'him lustilice anfon noldan', 'would not gladly accept him' [ie. Alexander] is added (3:9), a detail found nowhere in the Latin source.

This seemingly incidental emendation in fact hints towards other sources which claim that Alexander demanded that he be allowed to perform a sacrifice at the temple of Heracles within the city walls, a request that the Tyrians refused, suggesting that he sacrifice in the old city on the mainland instead, and so refusing to accept him gladly into the city.⁵⁶ The translator, happy elsewhere to add to and emend his source,⁵⁷ including incorporating a lengthy account of the north

⁵⁴ Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 120.

⁵⁵ Orosius, *Historiarum*, III:16:11.

⁵⁶ Arrian, *Anabasis*, II:16.

⁵⁷ Following on from Bately's discussion of the extensive reworking of the larger source text in her edition, William A. Kretzschmar Jr. has attempted to understand the rationale behind the 'wholesale chopping of events' and addition of material including 'circumstances and rationalizations taken from secondary sources or from his own whimsy' in 'Adaptation and *anweald* in the Old English *Orosius*', *ASE* 16 (1987), 127-145, 127, whilst Godden has more recently pointed out the emphasis placed on the importance of the sack of Rome by the Anglo-Saxon translator, not least by his rewriting of Alaric's fate following the event. M. R. Godden, 'The Anglo-Saxons and the Goths: rewriting the sack of Rome', *ASE* 31 (2002), 47-68, 59-61. There is no doubt about the extent of the revisions; as Bately herself notes, 'the liberties taken by these ninth-century authors are quite

in his vernacular adaptation, obviously thought it reasonable to correct Orosius in this matter. But whether or not the translator knew the specifics about the siege of the city from other sources is not a prerequisite for his recognition that this was a conquest of some importance: there are enough references in the *Orosius* itself to make this clear. The most extensive reference to Alexander's siege again stresses the physical destruction, Orosius stating that he besieged the walls '7 siþþan tobræc 7 mid ealle towearp', 'and afterwards broke and completely smashed them down' (3:9). Later in the summary of Alexander's campaigns, Tyre is again singled out, the Old English stating that 'Tirus seo mære burg eall toworpenu', 'the great city of Tyre was completely destroyed' (3:9:70).

There is certainly enough here to furnish the essential details; that Tyre was a great stronghold, that it was besieged, and that it was eventually broken in to and destroyed. Bearing in mind the apparent strong association between the use of a rune and the context of opening up a hoard in *Elene*, and indeed, the conceptual overlap between the breaching of physical enclosures and the processes of mental revelation played with in the riddles, it is perhaps not overly surprising that of all the places in the manuscript where a rune might have been employed, it should occur in the section stressing the Carthaginian response to the news that their ancestral city had been broken:

Æfter þæm hierdon Cartainenses þæt se mæra Alexandra hæfde abrocen Tirum þa burg, seo wæs on ærdagum heora ieldrena Ƿ, 7 ondredon þæt he eac to him cumin wolde. (4/5: 90)⁵⁸

extraordinary'. Janet M. Bately, 'The Literary Prose of King Alfred's Reign: Translation or Transformation?' Inaugural lecture reprinted in *Old English prose: basic readings*, ed. Paul E. Szarmach and Deborah A. Oosterhouse (New York: Garland, 2000), 3-28, 21.

⁵⁸ 'After that, the Carthaginians heard that Alexander the Great had broken the city of Tyre, which was in former days the **homeland** of their ancestors, and feared that he would also come to them.'

Eþel is certainly a less common word than *wynn*, but there are at least three cases in the Old English *Orosius* where this word is employed and written out in full, including the section in the same book in which the tribune Africanus reacts passionately to the plan to flee from Italy, the translator telling us that ‘he his sweorde gebræd 7 swor ðæt him leofre wære þæt he hiene selfne acwealde þonne he forlete his fæder oepel’, ‘he drew his sword and swore that he would rather kill himself than abandon his paternal country’ (4:9). One has to ask, therefore, why this solitary rune occurs where it does, in a prose text associated in no way with riddling or concealment, and in a case where space was clearly not limited. The answer, again, seems to be that the context of the physical breaking open of the city occasioned the use of the rune. That both the original translator and the scribe of the Tollemache *Orosius* were aware of the story of Imma is unquestionable. Indeed, as Campbell points out, both the Tollemache *Orosius* and the Parker MS. of the Old English Chronicle associated with the same scribe constitute ‘supplements to Bede’s *Historia*’, the *Orosius* setting Bede’s text ‘in a background of universal history’.⁵⁹

The Tollemache manuscript also has a further interesting connection with a practical interest in runes. A runic cipher, written in a hand ‘of about 1000’ appears on an unnumbered leaf preceding the index to the *Orosius*, alongside labelled representations of the evangelists and a rectangle filled with a decorative foliate pattern:⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Campbell, *The Tollemache Orosius*, 13.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 19.



The Tollemach Orosius, British Library, Add. 47967 (First unnumbered leaf).


As Campbell points out, the Caroline minuscules added above the runes do not transliterate them, but ‘were probably added by some ignorant person who believed the runes to be an alphabetic series.’⁶¹ We should perhaps not be too critical of this ignorance; Page admits that he has ‘no idea what their significance is’, and I am not aware that anyone has convincingly deciphered their meaning.⁶² Whatever the sequence means, the significance of this use of a runic cipher at a date slightly later than the abbreviation is perhaps in the impression it gives that an interest in runes, and perhaps even a culture of runic learning, existed in the milieu in which the manuscript was produced and read, and that the abbreviation would have been recognised and treated as a runic character rather than just an arbitrary logogram. In other words, it would not have been a symbol devoid of associations, however ‘inauthentic’ these associations may have become in the late-tenth century, influenced as they were by literary allusions such as Bede’s *alysendic* rune.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁶² Page, *An Introduction*, 198.

The Ruin

This episode in the *Orosius* can be compared to *The Ruin*, another poem in which a single runic abbreviation is employed. The use of a rune in this poem has led some critics to stress its affinity to the riddles, either reading the arbitrary abbreviation as characteristic of the riddle poems in general, or situating it as an actual clue to the ‘solving’ of the poem.⁶³ There are, however, certain problems with reading this primarily descriptive poem as a conventional riddle, and the evidence of the unlocking properties of runes provides a much better rationale for the appearance of the abbreviation, this time of the word *mon*. The immediate context of the rune in the poem is a passage comparing the previous splendour of the city to its present decay:

. . . swiftne gebrægd
 hwætred in hringas, hygerof gebond
 weall walan wirum wundrum togædre.
 Beorht wæron burgræced, burnsele monige,
 heah horngestreon, heresweg micel,
 meodheall monig  dreama full –
 oþþæt þæt onwende wyrd seo swiþe. (ll. 21-24)⁶⁴

⁶³ James Anderson, for example, takes the rune to be the solution to a riddle, the ‘man’ symbolised by the rune being ‘a creature now ruined by death, but heir through Christ the God-Man to a fullness of joys’, *Two Literary Riddles in the Exeter Book* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986), 181. See also William C. Johnson, Jr, ‘*The Ruin* as Body-City Riddle’, *Philological Quarterly* 59:4 (Autumn 1980), 397-411.

⁶⁴ ‘. . . One quick, determined and bold of mind wondrously bound the wall together with bands of wire into rings. Bright were the city buildings, the many bathing halls, the wealth of lofty pinnacles, the great martial sound, many a mead-hall full of the joys of men – until fate, the mighty one, transformed that.’ This translation follows Klinck’s suggested reading of MS *weall walan wirum* as *wēall wālanwīrum*, rather than Krapp and Dobbie’s *weallwalan wirum*, ‘wall strips with wires’. Anne L. Klinck, ‘A damaged passage in the Old English *Ruin*’, *SN* 58: 2 (1986), 165-168, 166.

Line 24, in particular, represents a turning point from the recollection of the living city to a focus on its present decay, with fate as the agent of destruction.⁶⁵ The process by which the city crumbles is lingered upon, the focus shifting between different minutiae of physical wasting; the site of the city crumbles, the tiles peel away from the masonry, the buildings are ‘gebrocen to beorgum’ or ‘broken into piles’ (l. 32). In *The Ruin* we have a destruction more comprehensive even than Alexander’s assault on Tyre, with a similar emphasis on the contrast between the once solid, vaunting and unassailable character of ‘þas beorhtan burg bradan rices’ or ‘this bright stronghold of a broad kingdom’ (l. 37), and the breaking of the city, in this case long drawn out, and leaving signs of its former splendour in the moss-stained walls. The perspective throughout the description of the city in its heyday is one of elevation and stature, focusing on the ‘enta geweorc’ ‘work of giants’ (l. 2), on the *torras* or ‘towers’ (l. 3), the *horngestreon*, or ‘wealth of lofty pinnacles’ (l. 22), and the *teaforgeapa*, ‘red-gapped roofs’ (l. 30). The poet draws the mind’s eye continually upwards in a great sweep of imagination, only to make the *eorðgrap* or ‘grip of the earth’ (l. 6) that holds the crumbled masonry and bodies of the inhabitants all the more poignant and levelling an image.

The rune occurs at the central point of this poem, marking one of a number of breaks between the splendour of the imagined past and its present state of decay. My thoughts that the rune is deployed with the idea of breaking and unbinding those walls ‘bound by wires’ are compounded by the emphasis throughout the short poem on enclosure versus exposure, a technique almost as prevalent as that of the shifting vertical perspective. The walls are described as being ingeniously bound together with wires ‘in hringas’, ‘into rings’ (l. 19), whilst amongst the damaged lines we can

⁶⁵ Calder notes that such juxtapositions of temporality ‘become a dominant technique throughout’. D.G. Calder, ‘Perspective and movement in the Ruin’, *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 72 (1971), 442-5, 443.

make out the phrase ‘orþonc ærsceaft’, ‘ingenious ancient work’ (l. 16), and ‘lamrindum beag’, ‘ringed with a rind of loam’ (l. 17). When the city bath becomes the focus of the poem it is described as ‘hringmere hate’, ‘a hot ringed pool’ (l. 45), the poet telling us that ‘weall eall befeng / beorhtan bosme’, ‘the wall entirely surrounded it, within its bright breast’ (ll. 39b–40a). In contrast, we have images of gaping open space and ‘westen staþolas’, ‘deserted places’ (l. 27), whilst the *brimgeat* or ‘frost-covered gate’ is *berofen*, or ‘unbarred’ (l. 4), and the walls ‘wyrde gebræcon’ ‘shattered by fate’ (l. 1). That the rune appears at the very point where fate is said to transform the city from a secure stronghold bound by intricate devices to a shattered shell, suggests to me that the poet is drawing on the very same impulse that causes a rune to appear at the point at which the stronghold of Tyre is ‘abrocen’.

One could, of course, argue that the rune appears here because it is suggested by the use of runes in the preceding poem in the MS, *The Husband’s Message*. However, the word *mon* itself occurs a total of three times in the *Husband’s Message*, and not once did the scribe or poet think to abbreviate it using the rune, despite the entire momentum of that poem being towards the runic message with which it closes. Indeed, the word *mon* occurs some 78 times in the Exeter Book, and there are numerous common compounds such as *moncynne* and *mondryhten* which often appear in close succession, yet only in this poem is the word represented by a rune. The runic abbreviation in *The Ruin* must be a deliberate one, intended for a particular effect: to accord with the images of unbound masonry, collapsing walls and broken roofs. It also subtly serves to highlight the position of ‘man’ in this process, as creator, inhabitant and elegist, adding a further layer to the system of signification in the poem.

Beowulf


The appearance of the rune *epel* three times in the *Beowulf*MS, though commented upon even by the earliest editors, has yet to be properly explained. Derolez was content to note that the use of the abbreviation in only three cases, when *epel* is used eleven times in the MS, made it ‘exceptional’,⁶⁶ and although Senra Silva made some headway in using the runes to speculate on the transmission of the poem, and suggested a reason for the use of the particular rune *epel* in a poem ‘where the continental homeland is most deeply depicted’, she concludes that there is ‘no clear explanation’ for the ‘very non-systematic way’ in which the runes are employed within the poem itself.⁶⁷ In terms of a contextual trigger, the poem hints at a complex of interlocking associations, and there appears to be no clear-cut shared element in the three appearances. In each individual case, however, it is evident that there *is* a contextual stimulus at work which inspires the rune, supporting the contention that these runic abbreviations are rarely of an entirely random distribution. These three occurrences are widely spaced in the manuscript, but are all the work of the first scribe, which is an interesting observation in itself, as it suggests that scribes working in the same locale at this time may have evinced rather different practices with regards to abbreviations, though presumably all could recognise and interpret them.⁶⁸ The last occurrence of this ‘exceptional’ abbreviation in *Beowulf* occurs at line 1702, and is easiest to rationalise in terms of context, as it appears in the

⁶⁶ Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta*, 401.

⁶⁷ Inmaculada Senra Silva, ‘The Rune *Ēpel* and Scribal Writing Habits in the *Beowulf*MS.’, *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 99.3 (1998), 241-7, 242 and 44.

⁶⁸ See Senra Silva for a more involved discussion of the copying techniques of the two *Beowulf* scribes.

speech immediately following Hrothgar's scrutiny of the runic sword hilt, upon which, the poem tells us, it is written in runes for whom the sword is made:


swa wæs on ðæm scennum sciran goldes
 þurh runstafas rihte gemearcod,
 geseted ond gesæd hwam þæt sweord geworht,
 irena cyst, ærest wære,
 wreoþenhilt ond wyrmfah. ða se wisa spræc
 sunu Healfdenes - swigedon ealle -:
 þæt, la, mæg secgan se þe soð ond riht
 fremed on folce, feor eal gemon,
 eald  weard, þæt ðes eorl wære
 geboren betera! (ll. 1694-1703)⁶⁹

The scribe was clearly primed to remember a runic abbreviation because of the events of the poem and the explicit reference to runic writing only a few lines prior to the runes. Whilst not connected in any explicit way with revealing or unlocking, its appearance at this point in the text should reinforce the impression that the use of these unusual abbreviations is more often than not triggered by the literary context in which they are found. It should be stressed again that there is no restriction of space on the manuscript page, which is, of course, the primary consideration when seeking to rationalise the use of an abbreviation.

The first use of the *epel* abbreviation in the poem occurs at line 520, and may also have been triggered by a reference to the word 'rune' in the text, specifically the statement some nineteen lines

⁶⁹ 'So on that plate of metal of shining gold it was rightly marked through runic characters, set down and said for whom that sword, best of irons, was first made with twisted and serpent-decorated hilt. Then the wise one spoke, son of Healfdane – all were silent – "That, indeed, may one say (he that truth and right effects amongst the people, remembers all from far back, old guardian of the **native land**) that this warrior was better born!"'

prior to the abbreviation that Unferth ‘onband beaurūne’, ‘unbound his hostile runes’ (l. 501). It is interesting to note that there is a connection with unbinding encapsulated in this very phrase; one wonders if these two images belonged together naturally in the poetic lexis. It is also perhaps worth recognising the lines which immediately follow the runic abbreviation, with its reference to the fortress ‘þær he folc ahte / burh ond beagas’, ‘where he had his people, stronghold and rings’:

þa hine on morgentid
 on Heaþoræmas holm up ætbær;
 ðonon he gesohte swæsne ,
 leof his leodum, lond Brondinga,
 freoðoburh fægere, þær he folc ahte,
 burh ond beagas. (ll. 518-523)⁷⁰

Its relevance becomes apparent when we compare it to the next runic abbreviation occurring at line 913. There is no reference to runes or to writing at this point in the poem; indeed, the word *epel* is written out in full both shortly before and shortly after this point (l. 410 and l. 616). The abbreviation is not used in a similar lexical unit to the previous rune at l. 520, something that might ostensibly trigger an unconscious recourse to an abbreviation used in an earlier phrase. In fact, the only conceivable trigger for this particular rune is the reference, once again, to ‘folc gehealdan, hord ond hleoburh’ (l. 912), guarding the people, hoard and fortress, expressed in different terms, but conceptually remarkably similar:

⁷⁰ ‘When in the morning the sea bore him to the Heathoream shore; from there he sought his own sweet **native land**, beloved by his people, the land of the Brondings, the beautiful stronghold, where he had his people, his castle and rings.’

Swylce oft bemearn ærran mælum
 swiðferhþes sið snotor ceorl monig,
 se þe him bealwa to bote gelyfde,
 þæt þæt ðeodnes bearn geþeon scolde,
 fæderæþelum onfon, folc gehealdan,
 hord ond hleoburh, hæleþa rice,
 ✘ Scyldinga.⁷¹ (ll. 907-913).

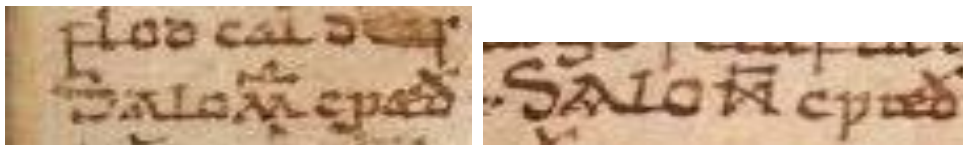
If this is indeed the trigger, it could, of course, simply be a matter of the scribe unconsciously recalling the earlier literary context in which a rune was used, and there is a further possibility that must be entertained: that the similar literary context of these two abbreviations is a coincidence, undoubtedly an under-credited factor in literary transmission. If the abbreviations in the *Beowulf* MS do not lend much weight to the proposed *alysendlic* association of runes, they do, however, seem to support the contention that runic abbreviations usually have a specific and context-dependent reason for being.

The Poetic Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn

The text known as *Solomon and Saturn I* is a fitting text with which to round off the discussion of runic abbreviations in this chapter, as it expands the *alysendlic* association to incorporate that literary frame of reference which was so important in promulgating conceptions of the script. *The Poetic Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn* survives in two manuscripts, CCCC 422, or the ‘Red Book of

⁷¹ ‘Many a wise man in earlier times also lamented often over his headstrong way of life, they who counted on him as remedy from affliction, that the prince’s son should prosper, receive his father’s nobility, guard the people, hoard and fortress, kingdom of heroes, the Scylding’s native land.’

Darley', containing the larger portion of the poem and the runic Pater Noster, whilst CCCC MS 41 is more fragmentary and contains the opening to the poem, squeezed into the rather wide margins of the Old English Bede. There is no substitution of the personified letters of the Pater Noster for runes here, as there is in the other manuscript, but a runic abbreviation is employed in the rendering of Solomon's name. Because of the obvious constraints of space, and the fairly consistent rendition of the name in this way, one has an immediate practical rationale for the use of the rune, the scribe settling on a practical solution to the limitations imposed on the manuscript page. The scribe actually uses a large number of abbreviations, most of them common enough, including the ubiquitous bar for doubled <n>, 's' shaped abbreviation for final <m>, the common abbreviation for *þæt*, *noster*, and *dryhtnes*, amongst others. However, even in this context of fairly extensive abbreviation, the rune is still not quite used consistently. The first of the abbreviations of Solomon's name is not actually a rune, but resembles an insular letter, with a rather tentative abbreviation mark provided to make the expansion clear, resembling a flattened <Ω>. By the next reference to Solomon, the scribe has, however, settled on the rune, although still supplying an abbreviation mark, perhaps due to his own confusion or the archaism of the system he was resorting to:



CCCC MS 41, Copyright Parker Library, Cambridge.

After his first attempt at abbreviating the name, the scribe may have simply remembered that the rune *mon* could be used instead of his inventive mark of abbreviation. However, it is interesting that

the second dialogue marker ‘Solomon cwæð’, the first in which the rune is used, is immediately preceded by a question asking who of all created things may most easily the holy door of the bright kingdom of heaven ‘ontynan on gatales rīme’, ‘open in quick succession’ (ll. 36-8), and followed by the famous answer that the palm-twigged Pater Noster opens the heavens.⁷² If there was indeed, as I have been suggesting, a strong association of the script with this property of unlocking and revealing in the minds of tenth- and eleventh-century Anglo-Saxons, what better prompt to remember the runic abbreviation than this particular question and response, identifying a written incantation as the key to a metaphorical opening of a passage to heaven.⁷³ It is small wonder that the second longer portion of the poem we possess chooses to represent these ‘releasing’ letters as runes alongside their alphabetic counterparts.

The evidence of the literary context in which runic abbreviations appear seems to suggest that there may have been a strong association between runes and unlocking properties in later Anglo-Saxon England. There are, of course, certain instances where there is another rationale for the use of a runic logogram, or no discernible rationale whatsoever. The rune that begins *Psalm 99* of the Junius Psalter, (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 27), one of the earliest manuscripts employing a runic abbreviation,⁷⁴ may well simply be employed as a kind of pseudo capital, a runic historiation. Its initial position is the only thing that sets it apart from the numerous unabbreviated instances of

⁷² Robert J. Menner, ed., *The Poetical Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn* (London: OUP, 1941), 82.

⁷³ There is a reference to the palm-twigged Pater Noster earlier in the poem, before the first non-runic abbreviation, but it lacks the context of unlocking or opening.

⁷⁴ The Psalter is generally held to have been written in the first quarter of the tenth century, at Winchester, c.f. N. R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford: OUP, 1957), 408-9, E. Temple, *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts 900-1066* (London: Harvey Miller, 1976), 38, and Mechthild Gretsch, ‘The Junius Psalter gloss: its historical and cultural context’, *ASE* 29 (2000), 85-121.

this word in the psalms. The rune used in the Old English *Waldere* is rather hard to place in context as it appears in the last line of the first fragment of the poem, which according to Norman is separated from the second fragment by a single leaf, or a lacuna of ‘a minimum of 30 lines’.⁷⁵ It seems from comparison with the Latin *Waltharius* that this is a point in the poem in which Waldere and either Guðhere or Hagano engage in a flyting between bouts of combat, and a speech concludes when we rejoin the action in the second fragment, probably spoken by Hagano.⁷⁶ Whether there was anything in this speech that might have occasioned the use of a rune is impossible to tell. The rune may, for all we know, have been used systematically throughout the rest of this manuscript. Finally, in this short but fairly comprehensive survey of runic abbreviations in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, there is Vercelli Book *Homily XVIII* dealing with the life of St Martin. Here a single rune for *mon* appears in a passage praising the saint (fol. 99v), in which the word occurs three times. There is nothing in the context that suggests a rationale for its inclusion, and should make us wary of trying to place all the runes within a single schema for their use. It would be remarkable indeed if every use of a runic abbreviation across manuscripts of varying provenance were to be the result of a single unified impulse. What the connections identified here *do* show is that the story of releasing runes that the translator of Bede inadvertently canonised should be regarded as an important component of a complex cultural perception of runes, as it may have influenced the use of runic logograms in more than half of the surviving occurrences.

In order to understand why such a conception of the script might have appealed to the Anglo-Saxons, particularly those involved in the production of manuscripts and dissemination of texts, we

⁷⁵ F. Norman, ed., *Waldere* (London: Methuen, 1933), 3.

⁷⁶ Arne Zettersten, ed., *Waldere* (Manchester: MUP, 1979), 5.

could do worse than turn to the passage in *Solomon and Saturn* in which Solomon explains how the word of God is to be apprehended as a physical and performative entity:

Gylden is se Godes cwide, gimum astæned,
 hafað silfren leaf; sundor mæg æghwylc
 ðurh gastes gife godspel secgan:
 he bið sefan snytro and sawle hunig;
 and modes meolc, mærdā gesæligost;
 he mæg ða sawle of sinnihte
 gefeccan under foldan; næfre hie se feond to ðæs niðe
 feturum gefæstnað, ðeah he hie mid fiftigum
 clusum beclomme, he ðone cræft briceð,
 and ða orðancas ealle tosliteð.⁷⁷

In keeping with the poem's subsequent representation of the letters of the Pater Noster as physical entities with properties at least partly linked to their shape, this account draws very much on the visual aspects of the written word, particularly the ornamentation associated with ornate illuminated manuscripts, the Lindisfarne Gospels being the superlative example of this exquisite art. Each letter, or word, Solomon explains, is a vehicle for revelation, capable of speaking a gospel, and crucially, associated with unlocking the soul from the bonds of the devil. This close association of script with the property of transmitting religious truth is much easier to distinguish in the Islamic tradition, where written Arabic, often in the form of an elaborate calligraphy, is still closely associated with,

⁷⁷ 'Golden is the word of God, set with precious stones, [it] has silver leaves. Each one alone may through the spirit's gift speak a gospel. It is wisdom of the breast, and honey to the soul, and milk of the heart, most blessed of famous exploits. It can fetch back the soul from perpetual darkness under the earth; the devil never fastens it with fetters so deep, though he bind it with fifty bolts, [yet] it sunders the craft and completely breaks open the cunning devices.'

and venerated as, the vehicle for the word of God; as a primarily religious art form. The passage in *Solomon and Saturn* reflects a similar fetishisation of the written word as a vehicle for preserving and transmitting divine truth, and it is probably right to assume that this was a conception that was shared by many of those individuals involved in writing and copying religious texts. That the runes served to focus this idea of unlocking the truth from written signs, and in turn releasing the soul from bondage, probably has much to do with their visual distinctiveness, the way they stand out on the page from the surrounding text, as discussed in the following chapter. The durability and permanence of the epigraphical milieu with which they were strongly associated may also have played in to the idea of a resistant, enduring and even tactile script. Despite Bede's attempt to consign the concept of *litteras solutorias* to the pagan past, the idea of releasing and revealing letters must have appealed to the Anglo-Saxon mindset, particularly those engaged in translating and transmitting the written word, precisely because of its relevance to textual interpretation and the Christian commitment to unlocking the truth from scripture.

Throughout this chapter I have been arguing for a close association of the runic script in the minds of Anglo-Saxons with the properties of loosening and unlocking. Whilst this may have certain implications for our understanding of contemporary attitudes towards the script, it certainly does not entail a return to the search for Anglo-Saxon paganism, a largely futile and rightly discredited endeavour.⁷⁸ It is unlikely that this association with unlocking reflects earlier perceptions of the script as *reginkunni*, 'derived from the gods', and it does not support the contention that the

⁷⁸ Eric Stanley, *The Search for Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1975).

‘magic power of the rune was a deep-seated belief’ as one editor of *Solomon and Saturn* suggests.⁷⁹

There are some interesting hints in ON poetry that the releasing power of runes—in childbirth, for example, or in Óðinn’s ability to unlock mounds and release chains, mentioned earlier—was also an element in the pre-Christian mythical treatment of the script. But as we shall see in chapters 4 and 5, these abilities probably themselves arise from a conceptual engagement with writing, and such analogues only attest to the widespread recognition that reading is a process of unlocking meaning from visual signs.

As Eaton sensibly points out, ‘as more people became familiar with runes and were able to read them, their connotations derived more and more from the experience of reading and from the nature and interpretation of texts than from any inherent magical power that runes were thought to contain’.⁸⁰ As the context in *Solomon and Saturn* suggests, the unlocking property may well have developed primarily as a literary association, pertaining as much to the idea of revealing meaning as to releasing chains, a metaphor as useful for Christian revelation as it is for secular riddling. The story of Imma, may, rather ironically, have played a greater role in promulgating this association than the continuation of any popular superstition from the early-eighth century when runes were still being used as an epigraphical script. Whether or not the unlocking properties had some precedent in earlier conceptions of runes, it is in the connection with a Christian, monastic literacy and text-centred culture that the strength of the association undoubtedly lies.

⁷⁹ Menner, *The Poetical Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, 48.

⁸⁰ R. D. Eaton, ‘Anglo-Saxon Secrets: Run and the Runes of the Lindisfarne Gospels’, *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik* 24 (1986), 11-27, 26.

Cynewulf's Signatures Reconsidered

Identifying the association between runes and unlocking as a functioning literary motif in later Anglo-Saxon England allows us to view some of the more famous runic episodes in Old English texts in a different light. If students of Old English encounter runes nowhere else, they are certain to come across the runic signatures of Cynewulf, a conceit often misunderstood, and misrepresented by established scholars. The poems of the so-called Cynewulf 'canon', once stretching to encompass a whole host of 'stylistically similar' Old English poems, but now generally confined to the four signed works *Christ II*, *Elene*, *Fates of the Apostles* and *Juliana*, have been subjected to a scrutiny virtually unparalleled in Anglo-Saxon studies. As Lerer points out, any new treatment of his poetry is thus 'fraught with unique problems',⁸¹ particularly as much of the interest of the past years has been generated by the novelty of their status as authored poems, perhaps betraying an enduring insecurity amongst critics as to the standing of anonymous and unstable early medieval texts in English literary history. Cynewulf is, after all, the only poet from the period with a body of work to his name, a beacon of familiarity in an anonymous literary landscape, ensuring an Anglo-Saxon presence in the roll-call of English poets.

Whilst criticism of Old English poetry has of course become steadily more progressive, and the complex intertextuality of Anglo-Saxon poetry has rightly been celebrated in recent decades, the approach to the Cynewulf 'canon' appears to have largely escaped the movement to free the text from the tyranny of the antiquated 'author-centred' model of criticism, and statements on the 'passing of the old anonymous poetry' in favour of a more 'sophisticated idea' of authorial possession

⁸¹ Lerer, *Literacy and Power*, 197.

still abound.⁸² Critics are still tricked into seeing a bibliography behind the signature, and the ‘rollercoaster of speculation behind this mystery man’ instigated in the nineteenth century continues.⁸³ As a result, criticism of these poems tends to be marked as much as anything by its ‘tiresomely repetitious similitude’,⁸⁴ much of it resting on the premise that Cynewulf wove a name into the text in order to be remembered as an individual personality and to maintain control over his poetic expression; as an author with a runic copyright, as it were. These assumptions are based on the anachronistic post-Romantic notion of poetic personality, and are often made with little or no reference to the runic signatures themselves. The very endeavour of trying to bring this ‘shadow of a name’ to light needs to be challenged by reconsidering the role of the runic acrostic.⁸⁵

My first contention is that these runes represent a moment of engaged revealing in the text, rather than a point of obfuscation, the poet drawing in part on the association of the script with unlocking. This is by no means a radical idea, and the necessity of solving the acrostic in order to satisfy the demands of the poem has been noted by many critics, Sisam noting that Cynewulf ‘would surely not take the risk of losing one prayer’⁸⁶ and Niles labelling it as ‘a cryptographic challenge that is meant to be overcome’.⁸⁷ Crucially, however, there is a simple fact overlooked in most discussions of the signature passages, which is that the challenge actually has nothing to do with discovering the

⁸² Rosemary Woolf, *Cynewulf's Juliana* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1993), 8.

⁸³ Jacqueline A. Stodnick, ‘Cynewulf as Author: Medieval Reality or Modern Myth?’, *John Rylands University Library of Manchester Bulletin* 79:3 (Autumn 1997), 25-39, 25.

⁸⁴ Dolores Warwick Frese, ‘The Art of Cynewulf's Runic Signatures’ in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation*, ed. Warwick Frese and Lewis E. Nicholson (London: University of Notre Dame Press, 1975), 312-334, 313.

⁸⁵ Charles W. V. Kennedy, *Early English Christian Poetry* (Oxford: OUP, 1963), 17.

⁸⁶ Kenneth Sisam, *Studies in the History of Old English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), 25.

⁸⁷ Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poetry*, 287.

name Cyn(e)wulf in the poem. His name stands out, immediately and strikingly, and is the first thing the eye is drawn to on the page. We only have to transcribe the neatly pointed runes, which could hardly be more prominent, particularly when they are in sequential order, as they are in three of the four colophons.

What is actually revealed through the process of reading the runes is not the name, which is easily apprehended, but precisely that which the name, the individual personality, obscures: the correct elucidation of the passage in which it is contained. We must solve the passage by expanding or integrating each rune, reading behind and beyond the name in order to complete the message of salvation contained in the colophon. Whilst Calder is right that there is ‘an emblem of spirit entrapped in flesh’ encapsulated in this textual conceit, the ‘intellectual dissection’ here is not so much about freeing the name from the context, as it is about the dissolution of the worldly name *into* this context, as a striking emblem of mutability.⁸⁸ Each of the colophons is concerned with the essential mutability of man and the ephemeral nature of worldly trappings, setting up a clear contrast between what lies on the surface—the ‘engraved’ name—and what must be apprehended beyond the authorial conceit. And it is in light of this context of physical dissolution and divine revelation that we should read the signatures themselves.

There are clearly a number of reasons why runes in particular are chosen as the vehicle for the message of the colophons. Their logographic nature allows them to serve a dual purpose in the poem, to be seen as one thing, and expanded to their correct meaning in the context, enabling the poet to enact his theme of looking beyond the signifier, and to move the reader from a passive

⁸⁸ Daniel G. Calder, *Cynewulf* (Boston: G. K. Hall & CO, 1981), 38.

reception of the poetry to the model of engagement needed in order to take personal responsibility for the fate of the individual soul. It is not just that ‘the prayers of a reader who went to the trouble to work out the puzzle might be “better” prayers’,⁸⁹ the signature passages actually lead the reader into a state of guided revelation where they are involved in constructing and construing the meaning of the eschatological passages themselves. That this also serves to lock the lines in to a particular form is, I believe, a secondary and inevitable consequence of the conceit, not the primary reason they were chosen. Chaucer might admonish Adam Pinkhurst, ‘his own scriveyne’, to copy his words after his own ‘makinge’, but it is anachronistic to project such a sentiment back on to an Anglo-Saxon poet who makes no such appeal to the integrity of his composition, or to the fate which awaits his poetry.

There may well also be something of an epigraphical association at work in the runic signatures, Cynewulf perhaps drawing on the ‘centuries old custom... to runically engrave the signature of the artificer’.⁹⁰ Whether the poet was aware or not of a custom of naming the artificer or commissioner on prestige objects, there may have been a literary reflex of this practice current at the time he was writing, as evinced by the reference to naming for whom the runic hilt was made in *Beowulf*. Asking readers to remember him ‘bi noman’ (*Juliana*, 1.720) in their prayers, is, of course, also a conventional request that also ‘appears everywhere in the Latin letters of his time’.⁹¹ What we should acknowledge, however, is that such an impulse does not imply ownership or biography in the

⁸⁹ Roger Lass, ‘Cyn(e)wulf Revisited: The Problem of the Runic Signatures’ in *An Historic Tongue: Studies in English Linguistics in Memory of Barbara Strang*, ed. Graham Nixon and John Honey (London: Routledge, 1988), 17-30, 27.

⁹⁰ Warwick Frese, ‘The Art of Cynewulf’s Runic Signatures’, 313.

⁹¹ Sisam, *Studies in the History of Old English Literature*, 23.

sense that it is understood today. Indeed, the passages surrounding these stamps of finite origin, a common name with little accompanying autobiographical context, really tell us exceptionally little about the identity of the poet, and the lack of identifying information certainly ‘suggests evasion as much as self display’.⁹²

The most important association here, and the one that I believe speaks to the true purpose of the colophon, is surely that of the unlocking conceit. The runes immediately signal to the reader that this is a point where the hermeneutical crux and essential message of the poem lies. The association of the script with solutions to riddles, and more broadly with the idea of the *alysendlic* rune, primes the reader to look beyond the letters themselves, and to apply themselves in order to unlock the truth of the passage. The primacy of the unlocking conceit is made most clear in the colophon of *Elene*, which begins by relating the poet’s past in terms of binding, and the liberation afforded by poetry:

Ic wæs weorcum fah,
 synnum asæled, sorgum gewæled,
 bitrum gebunden, bisgum beþrunge,
 ær me lare onlag þurh leohtne had
 gamelum to geoce, gife unscynde
 mægencyning amæt ond on gemynd begeat,
 torht ontynde, tidum gerymde,
 bancofan onband, breostlocan onwand,
 leoðucræft onleac. þæs ic lustum breac,
 willum in worlde. (1242b-51a)⁹³

⁹² DiNapoli, ‘Odd Characters’, 156.

⁹³ ‘I was stained by my deeds, fettered by my sins, afflicted by sorrows, bound by bitterness and beset with troubles, before the mighty King lent learning to me in illuminating manner, to console me in old age, bestowed his unblemished grace and

The catalogue of binding and unlocking imagery in this passage is reinforced by the internal rhyming pairs throughout; *gebunden-bebrungen*, *onband-onwand*, *onleac-breac*. It is clearly a very highly wrought passage, the form justifying the poet's claim 'ic . . . wordcræftum wæf ond wundrum læs', 'I . . . wove with word-craft and gathered with wonder' (l. 1237).

The signature which follows this intricate passage provides a simulation of this process of unlocking through poetic craft. The name Cynewulf is clear enough, the letters standing out from the page in correct sequence, but the recognition of the name is not what the colophon calls for; rather it is the outward display that must be transformed in order to make sense of the passage. The challenge has to be the disassembling of the name, breaking it down so that each individual element contributes to a meaningful whole. It represents a very clever demonstration of both the act of reading beyond the words on the page, a skill necessary for the Christian exegete, and more importantly dramatises the abnegation of our physical presence on earth, the passing away of corporality that the poem stresses in this signature passage. The colophon ends with a recapitulation of the temporary nature of this loaned life:

Nu synt geardagas
 æfter fyrstmearce forð gewitene,
 lifwynne geliden, swa ·Ŧ· toglideð,
 flodas gefysde. ·Ŵ· æghwam bið
 læne under lyfte; landes frætwe
 gewitaþ under wolcnum winde geliccost,
 þonne he for hæleðum hlud astigeð,
 wæðeð be wolcnum, wedende færeð

embedded it in my mind, revealed its brightness, amplified it at times, unbound my bodily frame, loosened the heart's enclosure, and unlocked the craft of poetry. This I have with purpose and pleasure made use of in the world.'

ond eft semninga swige gewyrðeð,
 in nedcleofan nearwe geheaðrod,
 þream forþrycced . . . (ll. 1266b-1276a)⁹⁴

Fæob, and the name which this rune ends, are both ‘læne under lyfte’ and pass away like the dispersing wind. The poem offers a tantalising prospect of heaven as the imagery of the poem sweeps towards the clouds, only to end with a sudden stillness, and an image of forced constraint that sits in direct contrast to the unlocking conceit of the signature passage.

Arguing that Cynewulf is stressing the enduring nature of his name and personality at the very same point at which he writes with such poignancy about the passing of all earthly trappings, is to my mind to seriously confuse the purpose of the signature, and to force it into a modern schema of authorship and ownership. Cynewulf is enacting the unlocking of his earthly name, and as the reader expands each letter they are similarly engaged in a process in which they harmonise the personal with the wider context. The ‘truth’ unlocked through the signature is the necessity of the dissolution of personality, and the need to read beyond the earthly signifier to achieve salvation.

In the opening to the colophon, we learn that Cynewulf, or the Cynewulf persona, is apparently writing in old age; he is ‘frod ond fus’ (l. 1236), ‘old and ready to depart’, and some lines later he relates how knowledge served ‘gamelum to geoce’ or ‘to comfort in old age’ (l. 1246). Unfortunately, this apparently autobiographical statement and the accompanying reference to pondering in the small hours, has led to a great deal of ‘unprofitable guessing’ about the poet’s personal history, often

⁹⁴ ‘Now the former days are passed away after the appointed hour, the joys of life have drifted as I [water] flows away with the sea’s tides. The f [wealth] of each person, the treasure of the land, is ephemeral beneath heaven, passes away under the clouds, most like the wind, when it rises loud before men and wades through the clouds, travels raging, and then afterwards all of a sudden grows still, narrowly confined in its prison, forcibly contained.’

overshadowing the extent to which the motif of old age and corporeal degeneration help to highlight the prison-like state of mortality.⁹⁵ Stressing the constraint of the physical being in order to emphasise the liberation provided by the cross is a very successful poetic strategy. The body is even described as ‘þæt fæcne hus’ (l. 1236) translated appropriately by Kennedy as ‘that mouldering house’, and even the reference to the poet’s agonising, pounced upon by critics looking to construct a poetic personality from the poetry, is marked by its reference to being carried out ‘nihtes nearwe’ or ‘in the constraint of the night’ (l. 1239). As Warwick Frese made clear, there is a great deal of artistry involved in this authorial conceit, the nocturnal musings of Cynewulf ‘subtly evocative of the nighttime anxieties and resolutions of Constantine with which Elene begins’ and the story of his conversion connected to the adult conversions of the poem’s protagonists.⁹⁶ Whilst it is pleasing to think of the venerable Anglo-Saxon author communicating the process by which he composed his poetry directly to us, and whilst some degree of autobiographical inspiration cannot be discounted, it is important not to lose sight of the construction of this persona, it being integral to the dichotomy of earthly, physical constraint and the liberation afforded by understanding. A poet with salvation rather than self-commemoration as his aim might well stress the idea of corporeal frailty to complement his sapiential message.

Readers of the signature passage in *Christ II* are often, I believe, similarly misled into an autobiographical fallacy by the abrupt transition to the first person in the opening to the colophon, the poet-persona apparently turning to his own life as an example of the repentant sinner. This is indeed a strikingly effective poetic manoeuvre, which ‘draws the reader into the sphere of penitential

⁹⁵ Woolf, ed., *Cynewulf’s Juliana*, 8.

⁹⁶ Warwick Frese, ‘The Art of Cynewulf’s Runic Signatures’, 333-4.

meditation’, engaging us on a personal level before proceeding to discourse on the fate of mankind in terms of a universal judgement.⁹⁷ However, this autobiographical manoeuvre actually tells us nothing about the poet as a persona; it simply illustrates the correct way to approach the following passages. The ‘I’ of the poem tells us that ‘ic ne heold teala þæt me hælend min / on bocum bibead’, ‘I did not hold faithfully that which my saviour instructed me in books’ (l. 792-3a) but there is no elaboration on this sinning motif, and little point speculating on the misdemeanours of Cynewulf. It is simply a poetic conceit; an example of every sinning man looking with dread upon the judgement. It should not encourage us to read the following signature as a further manifestation of a ‘real’ personality within the poem. The stress is, once again, on the judgement of mankind, the deconstruction of earthly name and fame, and the fate of the soul:

Þonne ·N· cwacað, gehyreð cyning mæðlan,
 rodera ryhtend, sprecaþ reþe word
 þam þe him ær in worulde wace hyrdon,
 þendan ·N· ond ·T· yþast meahtan
 frofre findan. Þær sceal forth monig
 on þam wongstede werig bidan
 hwæt him æfter dædum deman wille
 wraþra wita. Biþ se ·P· scæcen
 eorþan frætwa. ·N· wæs longe
 ·T· flodum bilocen, lifwynna dæl,
 ·P· on foldan. þonne frætwe sculon
 byrnan on bæle . . . (ll. 797-811a)⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Robert C. Rice, ‘The penitential motif in Cynewulf’s *Fates of the Apostles* and in his epilogues’, *ASE* 6 (1977), 105-120, 113.

⁹⁸ ‘Then c [torch] will tremble, will hear the King, the ruler of the heavens, proclaim and speak fierce words to those that earlier in the world obeyed him poorly, whilst they might most easily in y [bow] and n [need] have found comfort. There shall many a man, afraid and exhausted on the plains, have to await what terrible punishments he will adjudge to him according to

The riddlic nature of the signature, once again, comes not from recognising the letters of the name, which appear in sequence and are easily apprehended: rather, it is in deciding how to expand the runes to best complement the passage. Whether or not we accept Niles' reading of the runes for best sense, disregarding at times the conventional rune names, his contention that these runes can occasionally represent initialisms, 'breaking the rules of conventional runography', is borne out by the fact that the \aleph rune does not refer to its recorded name $\bar{u}r$, or 'aurochs', but to the homophone $\bar{u}r$, the personal pronoun 'our', both here, in *Elene* and in *Fates*.⁹⁹ I see little difficulty in reading *cen*, 'the torch' (and by extension the flame, or even the soul) as trembling or flickering, particularly in light of Hill's identification of analogues for this metaphor in the medieval Latin riddle tradition,¹⁰⁰ and there is perhaps also a case to be made for the reading of $\bar{y}r$ as an initialism for a word such as *yfel*,¹⁰¹ rather than the conceptually implausible $\bar{y}r$ or 'bow'. Whilst Rice is correct to highlight the temptation to satisfy our own sense of poetic completeness in the substitution of arbitrary rune names, there is actually a precedent for these kinds of initialisms in the riddles, and it seems somewhat pedantic to insist on conventional names when they make no sense.¹⁰²

In those cases where the established name cannot be made to fit, the challenge for the reader is to integrate the rune with the meaning of the passage, prioritising the integrity of the salutary message itself. And as with the 'signatures' in *Elene*, in order to unlock the meaning of the passage

his former deeds. The w [joy] of earth's riches will be gone. u [our] portion of life's pleasure have long been enclosed by the l [water] of the seas, our f [wealth] on the earth. Then riches shall burn in the fire . . .

⁹⁹ Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poetry*, 292.

¹⁰⁰ Thomas D. Hill, 'The Failing Torch: The Old English *Elene* 1256–1259', *N&Q* 52:2 (June 2005), 155–160.

¹⁰¹ Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poetry*, 292.

¹⁰² Rice, 'The penitential motif in Cynewulf's *Fates*', 20.

we must read *away* from the name as it stands on the page and expand the individual runes so that they become part of the message of the impermanence of worldly things. We do not read towards Cynewulf at all. An emphasis on the role of the signature as an appeal to posterity, or, indeed, as fixing the author's name to the poem, is thus very hard to reconcile with the process by which the riddle is solved, and with the tone of the passage in which it occurs, the central appeal being to 'georne biþencan' on the 'gæstes wlite', to 'think earnestly' on the 'appearance of the soul' (l. 848-9).

The signatures of *Juliana* and *Fates of the Apostles* are singled out by their direct appeal to the reader to remember the poet by name, and to intercede for him through their prayers. In these contexts the signature might, therefore, be said to express a degree of individuality. After all, there is little merit in intercessory prayers that have no subject. It could be argued that all we are unlocking in these colophons is the name of the poet for whom we are to pray, especially as the opening to *Fates* explicitly poses the challenge to discover 'hwa þas fitte fegde', 'who composed this poem' (l. 98a). Indeed, the challenge of reading the name might be said to be rendered slightly more difficult in the case of these two poems by the arrangement of the runes, the name written in disjointed order in the case of *Fates*, and broken into groups of runes in *Juliana*. It is perhaps no coincidence that these two poems are usually considered on stylistic grounds to be earlier and less conceptually developed than *Elene* and *Christ II*;¹⁰³ a revelation focused on the name itself would tend to bear this judgement out. However, it is essential not to lose sight of either the unlocking conceit, or the way in which the runes must similarly be integrated with the sapiential passage in order to 'solve' the poem.

¹⁰³ Woolf offers the alternative suggestion that the 'comparative lack of ingenuity' in *Juliana* actually represents the 'uninspired competence' of a poet in the twilight of his years, *Cynewulf's Juliana*, 7.

The colophon of *Juliana* presents the runic signature as three groups of runes that combine to make up the name Cynewulf:

‘Geomor hweorfeð
 ·ᚱ·, ·ᚱ· ond ·ᚦ·. Cyning biþ reþe,
 sigora syllend, þonne synnum fah
 ·ᚱ·, ·ᚦ· ond ·ᚱ· acle bidað
 hwæt him æfter dædum deman wille
 lifes to leane. ·ᚦ·ᚦ· beofað,
 seomað sorgcearig.’ (ll. 703b-709a)¹⁰⁴

This signature is the most appreciably riddlic of the four colophons, and there is still some debate as to exactly what the runes signify within the passage. One solution is that the three groups stand as words, the first and second using the runes phonetically to spell *cyn* ‘mankind’ and *ewu* ‘ewes, or more generally ‘sheep’,¹⁰⁵ and the third pair ᚦ ᚦ perhaps a denoting a compound word. Elliott’s suggestion that we abide by the conventional rune names *lagu* and *feoh*, and what he deems to be their attendant conceptual associations, is rather more convincing in this case than in his treatment of certain other signature runes, as the ‘link between water and wealth’ has indeed been ‘carefully established’ in the poem itself.¹⁰⁶ If we want to regard them as departing from their conventional

¹⁰⁴ ‘Miserably **c**, **y** and **n** [Cynewulf/mankind] will depart. The King, granter of victories, will be fierce when stained with sins **e w u** [ewe/Cynewulf] waits fearfully for what he will adjudge to him according to his deeds as loan for life. **I f** [beloved ones/Cynewulf] will tremble and sway, afflicted by sorrow.’

¹⁰⁵ Lass does not think this slight bending of the semantics of *ewu* represents an ‘insuperable difficulty’ in light of the difficult conditions, and this view is shared by most critics, ‘Cyn(e)wulf Revisited’, 23.

¹⁰⁶ R. W. V. Elliott, ‘Coming Back to Cynewulf in *Old English Runes and their Continental Background*, ed. Alfred Bammesberger (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1991), 231-47, 236.

names, perhaps something along the lines of Trautmann's *lic-fæt* might suffice, although any number of arbitrary compounds might be substituted.¹⁰⁷

There has, however, also been a suggestion, first aired by Grein, that each group stands for the whole name Cynewulf, which does indeed make sense of the passage ('Cynewulf will tremble', for example) but appears somewhat clumsy in terms of integrating the runes, and 'some uncertainty of concord in the original might be expected'.¹⁰⁸ It may well be the case that the poet intends for both meanings to come across, playing with the fact that the name Cynewulf contains the two meaningful elements *cyn*, mankind, and *ewu*, sheep, which can both stand in for mankind as the flock of the Good Shepherd, whilst also stressing the individual's fate. This is a rather ingenious manoeuvre, as it emphasises both the universality of judgement, and the individual responsibility that must be taken. A term for the final pair which continues this image of people under the care of God might, therefore, be *leof* or *leofan* (nsm. 'beloved one', as in 'leofa, swa ic þe lære' (*Genesis A* 2306a) or npm. 'beloved ones', as in Caedmon's address to 'Mine broðor mine þa leofan'.¹⁰⁹ The solution *leof* has the advantage over such constructions as *lic-fæt* in that it obeys the rule observed in many of the riddle clues, and ciphers more generally, that the vowels alone are dropped, and the first and last letters indicated. With such a convention in mind, and two general terms for 'people' preceding it, it would surely not have taken long to arrive at this construction. The fact that the declension of the noun is not indicated, and the singular only suggested by reference to the following verb *beofað*, plays again with the idea that the address is both universal and particular.

¹⁰⁷ Moritz Trautmann, *Kynewulf der Bischof und Dichter* (Bonn: Hanstein, 1898), 49.

¹⁰⁸ Kenneth Sisam, *Cynewulf and His Poetry*, Proceedings of the British Academy 18 (London: H. Milford, 1932), 31.

¹⁰⁹ *OE Bede*, IV:25.

The name Cynewulf, in each of its constituent parts in *Juliana*, is representative of everyman. Are we really to read Cynewulf as asserting his individuality, his authorship, in this colophon? His expression of the need for saintly intercession and judgement of his own deeds is a platitude which again tells us nothing about the ‘I’ persona of the poem, the statement that ‘Sar eal gemon...þe ic siþ oþþe ær geworhte in worulde’, ‘I shall be mindful of all the pain . . . which recently or long ago I created in the world’ (l. 709b-711a) sounds like a conventional expression, rather than an autobiographical admission of past and recent misdeeds, whilst the statement that it was ‘an tid to læt’, ‘too late an hour’ to have regretted his sins, ‘þenden gæst ond lic geador siþedan / on sund on earde’, ‘when spirit and body together travelled in the world’ (l. 714-5a) strikes a note of detachment, as if the speaker is already addressing posterity from a place of experience. As with the other signatures which ‘exist on a symbolic level only’, the Cynewulf persona is constructed in order to best fit the poem’s heartfelt plea to be mindful of judgment.¹¹⁰ The individuality of this author is sacrificed to serve the purpose of the poem, to represent the fate of ‘monna gehwone / gumena cynnes’, ‘every man of the race of men’ (l. 718b-19a) and to serve as an exemplar for *cynn*, the *ewu*, or ‘flock’ of the world.

In the signature passage of *The Fates*, which is badly damaged and only partly reconstructable, Cynewulf explicitly sets up the conceit of the signature, telling the reader that they may learn who wrote the poem. And yet, this apparent call for recognition is countered by the poet’s depiction of leaving behind the body, the ‘eorðan dæl’ (l. 94), to be a comfort to worms. When the signature passage closes with the statement ‘Nu ðu cunnon miht / hwa on þam wordum wæs werum oncyðig’,

¹¹⁰ Stodnick, ‘Cynewulf as Author’, 37.

‘now you may know who was made known to men’ (l. 105b-106), the simple answer is that it is of course Cyn(e)wulf. But in its enactment of the breakdown of the name to reveal the message of temporality and ‘læne lices frætewa’, ‘the body’s fleeting adornment’, the passage also makes known to us our own fate. Cynewulf has from the outset been on display on the page, so what has actually been ‘made known’ is the appeal to the reader. Cynewulf’s identity is not stressed by the runes, but subordinated to both the wider context of meaning, and to the ultimate authority of God, this being the central salvific message of each poem.

As Warwick Frese points out, each signature is different, and requires a renewed engagement by the reader to solve its artful, participatory conceit.¹¹¹ Not only do the signature passages recapitulate major ideas in the body of the poem, but in all cases the runes serve as the hermeneutical crux. They signal the moment where the story told becomes directly applicable to the reader engaged in unlocking the meaning of the passage, and thus represent a progression to an anagogical understanding of how the passage, and the poem, may relate to the fate of the individual soul. As a literary conceit, we are not revealing the name at all: even an engraved epitaph could hardly be more obvious! Rather, in the process of reading the name, and expanding the letters, we are breaking this surface display down so that it reveals its true meaning, erasing the author in the process. Whoever Cyn(e)wulf was, or was not, the name **ᚱᚾᚠᚱᚱᚱᚱᚱᚱ** is simply a vehicle for this process of revealing the message of salvation, a key which is designed to disappear in the very act of unlocking the colophon’s true message.

¹¹¹ Warwick Frese, ‘The Art of Cynewulf’s Runic Signatures’, 324.

Conclusion

The picture emerging of the literary conception of runes is a complex one, and as readers and critics of Anglo-Saxon literature we should not be tempted into easy platitudes about what runes ‘meant’ to the poets and scribes of the time. Essentially, the *alysendlic* association might be fully compatible with the idea of runes being appropriate for riddling; indeed, a rune might signal evasion at the very same time as representing the focal point at which the poem releases its meaning. Both might also be used with a heightened awareness of the graphical nature of written language, as the following chapter will explore. Other critics have made interesting connections between the important memorial function of runic inscriptions and the contexts in which runes are used in manuscripts, Halsall in particular linking the signature runes with mortality and memorialising,¹¹² while some have, mistakenly in my opinion, stressed the association of runes with the pagan religion, and thus with unlocking on a more operative level than argued for here.¹¹³ It should also be remembered that we only have the merest traces of literary engagement with which to reconstruct the attitude of later Anglo-Saxons towards this script. But understanding the unlocking associations that might be attached to runes appearing on the manuscript page provides us with another facet to the complex literary construction of the script, and it is certainly an association to bear in mind when runes are encountered in Old English texts. Contrary to received opinion, a rune on the page of a poetic manuscript may well represent the point where the woven words begin to loosen and reveal their meaning, rather than the point where the poem becomes most archaic and obscure.

¹¹² Halsall, ‘Runes and the Mortal Condition’, 484.

¹¹³ Woolf, for example, suggests lingering traces of ‘ancient magical associations’ and that Cynewulf might have considered the act of writing his name in runes to be ‘in itself an auspicious action’, *Cynewulf’s Juliana*, 9.

Chapter 3

The Visual Rune: Ornamental Textuality

[The Runic Pater Noster in *Solomon and Saturn I*, *The Old English Rune Poem*, *The Norwegian Rune Poem*, *The Icelandic Rune Poem*, *The Abecedarium Nordmannicum*]

Introduction

The medium through which a text is presented, be it an illuminated manuscript, a printed book or an online hypertext edition, affects the way in which we read the words before us, an aspect of textuality that has gained increasing prominence since the arrival of the electronic publication and the ‘newly revived interest in editing and the material text’.¹ After all, whilst a text is often characterised by the information it communicates, it is ‘the weaving together of its elements, with careful and meticulous attention to *how* something is articulated, preserved and transmitted’ that actually distinguishes a text from a spoken utterance, the crucial factor being that they ‘elicit our attention to the precise terms of their presentation.’²

When interpreting a runic inscription, which represents a particular textual event, the way in which it means as well as what it means must be taken into account, and runologists have been

¹ Carol Braun Pasternack, ‘Post-Structuralist Theories: The Subject and the Text’ in *Reading Old English Texts*, ed. Katherine O’Brien O’Keefe (Cambridge: CUP, 1997), 170-91, 174. The collection of essays *Voice, Text, Hypertext: Emerging Practices in Textual Studies*, ed. R. Modiano *et al.* (London: University of Washington Press, 2004) represents a useful survey of current thinking about text and textuality.

² Leroy F. Searle, ‘Emerging Theory – Text and Theory in Contemporary Criticism’ in *Voice, Text, Hypertext* (2004), 3-21, 4.

paying increasing attention to both the underlying structures of their discipline,³ and the influence of Latin textuality on the runic milieu.⁴ It is not hard to see how the experience of reading a medieval *rúnakefli* or a Viking-Age runestone in the Ringerike or Urnes style—and perhaps reading is not even an appropriate term, as Spurkland points out—might differ somewhat from the reading of a line of text from a manuscript page.⁵ We must take in to account the design in which the text operates, the way the text is laid out within this design, and the physicality of the material itself as part of the meaning of the inscription.⁶ As Jesch points out, a memorial stone is defined by the durability of the message, and its capacity to long outlast the commemorated, each incised letter still communicating its memoriality to us over a millennium after the runes were carved.⁷

We might also understand how the spatial constraints of *rúnakefli* affect the utterance, and doubtless advances in our understanding of the way writing adapts to the contemporary context of

³ For examples of the advancement of this discourse within the field of runology, see Jesch, ‘Still standing in Ågersta’, Spurkland, ‘Literacy and “Runacy”’ and ‘Scandinavian Medieval Runic Inscriptions—an Interface between Literacy and Orality?’ in *Roman, Runes and Ogham*, eds J. Higgit *et al.* (Donington, Lincs: Shaun Tyas, 2001), 121–28, Henrik Williams, ‘Read What’s There: Interpreting Runestone Inscriptions’, *Futhark* 1 (2010), 27–39, and Kristel Zilmer, ‘Viking Age Rune Stones in Scandinavia: The Interplay between Oral Monumentality and Commemorative Literacy’ in *Along the Oral-Written Continuum: Types of Texts, Relations and their Implications*, ed. Slávica Rankovic *et al.* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 135–162.

⁴ See, for example Else Rosedahl, ‘Jellingstenen – en bog af sten’ in *Menneskelivets mangfoldighet: Arkæologisk og antropologisk forskning på Moesgård*, ed. Ole Høiris *et al.* (Århus: Århus Universitetsforlag, 1999), 235–44. The influence of Latinate textual practices on mixed runic and Latin monuments is obvious, and as Ball points out in his discussion of the Ruthwell Cross, we can perhaps never be sure that any runic text dated after 650 ‘is original and not influenced by or even transliterated’ from a manuscript, ‘Inconsistencies in the Main Runic Inscriptions’, 121.

⁵ Spurkland suggests that ‘reading’ is a term oriented towards Latin literacy, and that we would do better to refer to ‘interpreting’ runic inscriptions, ‘Scandinavian Medieval Runic Inscriptions’.

⁶ Jesch draws our attention to the fact that in the case of memorial inscriptions ‘the utterance consists of the whole monument, its physicality and visibility, its location and durability, and its text’, ‘Still standing in Ågersta’, 473, a concern echoed by Zilmer, whose study of Viking Age Rune Stones ‘underlies the importance of looking at various levels of expression’, ‘Viking Age Rune Stones’, 136.

⁷ Jesch, ‘Still standing in Ågersta’, 464.

instant messaging and the spatial limitations of the mobile screen will have impacts on how we understand certain strategies of runic representation, particularly nonstandard forms of abbreviation. It is also clear that the writing system used, even particular typefaces, can carry strong associations, from Gothic blackletter scripts to the faux-Gaelic scripts adorning Irish pubs, from liquid-crystal displays to the engraved authority of the Copperplate typeface favoured by law firms, dental practices and investment banks. Not only the textual medium, but the script itself can have a bearing on the meaning of a text.

Runic writing is particularly pertinent to the form/function debate within textual studies due to the fact that its development has been explained in terms of material considerations, the angular characteristic of runes and near absence of horizontal lines suggesting that it was developed specifically for carving on wood, where the horizontal risks being lost in the grain. As possibly the first literary reference to runes in an epistle by Venantius Fortunatus reads:

Barbara fraxineis pingatur runa tabellis
quodque papyrus agit, virgula plana valet⁸

Epigraphical runes are defined here by their textual medium, and crucially, their textuality is also defined in relation and in difference to the writing practices of the Classical world: to Latin and to Greek. Indeed, the verb *pingatur* (inf. *pingere*) means ‘to decorate’ or ‘embellish’, as well as to stain, colour or paint, relating runes to the visual arts rather than to Latinate literacy. As Spurkland has argued, this characterisation may not be entirely unwarranted, the runic script representing a

⁸ ‘Let the barbarous rune be painted on tablets of ash-wood, and what papyrus can do, that a smoothed stick is good for’, *Carmina vii. 18.*, trans. Page, *An Introduction*, 100.

‘literate, visual means of communication while the decoding of the Latin alphabet still stood with one foot in orality’, and runes themselves ‘mediated from eye to eye.’⁹ Indeed, it might be that even illiterates could ‘read’ the runes to a certain degree, and perhaps ‘it was simply enough that they were seen’, the ‘visual impact of the word . . . itself a symbol’.¹⁰

In the English epigraphical tradition, though the corpus is limited, we can also talk about an ‘alternative’ textuality. Runes appear to have been appropriate for particular textual expressions and not for others. For example, the practice of using runes for moneyers’ names and Latin text for the individuals under whom coins were issued had become ‘well established’ by the end of Offa’s reign in Mercia, demonstrating the appropriateness of different scripts for different textual expressions.¹¹ In other cases runic and Latin script seem to be interchangeable, as on memorial inscriptions such as St Cuthbert’s coffin, or on the stone crosses of Northumbria. However, just because the *futhorc* and the alphabet are used in the same textual space, on the same material, does not necessarily imply that there were not markedly different textual associations being brought to bear. Runes may well add something to the expression of an object such as the Ruthwell Cross simply by fact of being runes, signalling for one thing ‘that it is a message in the vernacular with a different story to tell’,¹² and hinting at the way in which the text should be read or interpreted.

As we saw in Chapter 1, self-referentiality might well have been an important component of such uses of runes, just as a runic memorial stone might simultaneously be ‘conscious of itself as both

⁹ Spurkland, ‘Scandinavian Medieval Runic Inscriptions’, 128.

¹⁰ Webster, ‘Visual Literacy’, 38.

¹¹ Blackburn, ‘A Survey of Anglo-Saxon Coins’, 160.

¹² Webster, ‘Visual Literacy’, 39.

text and object' and make explicit the act of writing.¹³ Indeed, in the same way that 'modern experiments with such visual features as layout, different typefaces and images undoubtedly foreground the text as more than a direct or transparent vehicle for communication', so the difference of having two scripts on the same object, and perhaps also the close association between runes and their textual medium, highlights the ornamental features of writing: its aspect, appearance and materiality.¹⁴

The concept of a particular runic textuality, in the sense of distinctive structures underlying textual meaning, might also be apparent in the case of manuscript runes. Runes are by their very nature graphically distinct within manuscripts, as the body text is always a Latin script and the runes necessarily 'other'.¹⁵ They thus have an intrinsic ornamental value, the angular nature of runes giving them a markedly different aspect to the Latin book-hands. Indeed, sometimes their appearance seems to be the sole criterion for their employment. This is certainly so in the case of scribes writing on the continent, who used runes on occasion to number quires, or as reference marks that would not be confused with Latin letters.¹⁶ Here their appearance becomes their whole reason for being: they are simply shapes, and in those cases where they are not even employed alphabetically, wholly devoid of a linguistic referent. Runes also appear to have been used in a

¹³ Jesch, 'Still standing in Ågersta', 467.

¹⁴ Judith Still and Michael Worton, eds, *Textuality and Sexuality – Reading Theories and Practices* (Manchester: MUP, 1993), 4.

¹⁵ The Codex Runicus, written entirely in runes, along with a runic translation of *Planctus Mariae* in another Danish MS, are the only exceptions. Even in these cases the runes are undoubtedly chosen in full awareness of their novelty at this late date.

¹⁶ See Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta*, 402-3, and also some more recently identified ornamental colophons in 'Runic Manuscripta Revisited' in *Old English Runes and their Continental Background* ed. Alfred Bammesberger (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1991), 85-106, 94.

number of manuscripts as a kind of exotic historiation in certain short titles and superscriptions,¹⁷ making an appearance in the display letters of the Gospels of St Chad, where they certainly seem to be used as a script ‘suited to decoration rather than ease of reading’.¹⁸

In the literary contexts I am concerned with in this thesis the ornamental value of runes is also apparent. Runes may be deployed in riddles partly because they stand out from the surrounding text as clues, and runes may often be deployed in MS contexts where they ‘depend on being seen for their effect . . . directed to (silent) readers, not hearers.’¹⁹ The contrastive ornamentality of the runes on the page plays a crucial role in leading the poet or reader to think about the nature of the written word simply by de-familiarising the process of signification; this may be one reason why certain of the riddles using runes ponder the distinction between spoken and written, or encode ‘like the display scripts of the Northumbrian gospel books, a striking perception of the word as image.’²⁰ Runes appearing in the body text provide a visual disconnect, a moment where the texture of written language is foregrounded.

There are, however, certain poetic texts where we can see the manifestation of a distinctively runic textuality on a more conceptual level. The signatures of Cynewulf may be one place to look, if we follow Halsall’s suggestion that the runes are employed because of their strong association with memorial inscriptions, with the preservation of a name in an enduring medium.²¹ In the first of his *Lausavísur* the skald Rognvaldr Kali Kolsson professes nine skills, including the facts that ‘týnik

¹⁷ See for example the large ornamental inscription in London, BM, Harley MS. 1772 (4). Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta*, 404.

¹⁸ Page, ‘Runic Writing, Roman Script’, 124.

¹⁹ Lass, ‘Cyn(e)wulf Revisited’, 28, note 4.

²⁰ Webster, ‘Visual Literacy’, 39.

²¹ Maureen Halsall, ‘Runes and the Mortal Condition in Old English Poetry’, *JEGP* 88 (Oct. 1989), 477–486.

trauðla rúnum; / tíð er bók ok smíðir’, ‘I hardly ever misplace runes; the book and smith-craft are customary for me’ (1:3-4), and one has to wonder if the skill of smith-craft was not associated with the writing of runes even within the environment of the book.²² As Spurkland points out, ‘handling runes one was still conscious of the handicraft, you were “carving” or “incising”’, and this ‘different mentality’ may also have received expression on the page: runes might imply engraving, setting in stone (to use an expression of permanence that has entered the popular idiom), even when used on vellum.²³

There are moments, however, where the ornamental value of the runes may actually be encoded in the internal texture of the work. The runic Pater Noster in *Solomon and Saturn I* represents an unusual literary context in which the shape and form of the written letters becomes the central conceit, and where runes contribute to the expression of a visual, personified script. The rune poems of the Anglo-Saxon and Norwegian traditions also engage with the shape and appearance of the script, which is in turn bound up with the material in which they were developed to be incised. As texts that preserve demonstrably old traditions—in the case of the Anglo-Saxon poem even reflecting the correct division of the *fubark* into *ættir*, or sections of eight—these important poems provide us with the best opportunity to recognise more generally the particularities of a runic textuality reflected in literature, in terms of the distinctive aspect of the script system, the appearance of the runic characters, and the material medium with which the engraving of runes was associated.

²² Judith Jesch. ‘Rognvaldr jarl Kali Kolsson’ in *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages II:2*, ed. Kari Ellen Gade (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 575-609, 576.

²³ Spurkland, ‘Scandinavian Medieval Runic Inscriptions’, 127.

Solomon and Saturn I

The runes which accompany the personification of the Pater Noster in the more complete version of *Solomon and Saturn I* are dismissed by Page as a late, decorative addition, and have not been given the critical attention they deserve in any edition of the poem to date.²⁴ Kemble, whilst providing extensive source material and background information for the first English edition of the dialogues of Solomon and Saturn, does not attempt to rationalise the inclusion of runes, simply referring the reader to his general discussion of the script elsewhere.²⁵ Menner devotes somewhat greater attention to the runes, describing them as ‘the last vestige of an ancient pagan Germanic tradition’, and suggesting that their deployment is due to a deep-seated belief in their magical potency, the power of the rune apparently being ‘as familiar a tradition to the English as the power of the letter had been to the Hebrews’.²⁶ It is true that the poem explicitly rejects the tradition of inscribing ‘wælnota heāp’, ‘a mass of malignant marks’ upon a weapon (l. 324)—perhaps a reference to the putative pagan runic tradition, and specifically the carving of ‘victory runes’ upon a weapon²⁷—and suggests replacing the carving of these ‘bealwe bocstafas’, or ‘baleful letters’ (l. 325) with the recitation of the Pater Noster when drawing a sword for battle.²⁸ So there are perhaps some grounds for seeing a re-alignment of the runic tradition to serve Christian superstitions, though this is insufficient evidence to support Elliott’s sweeping assertion that the personified runes represent ‘a

²⁴ Page, ‘Runic Writing, Roman Script’, 126.

²⁵ John M. Kemble, *The Dialogue of Solomon and Saturnus* (London: The Ælfric Society, 1848), 132.

²⁶ Menner, *The Poetical Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, 49.

²⁷ See the following chapter for a detailed discussion of ‘victory-runes’.

²⁸ All quotations are from Menner, ed., *The Poetical Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*.

learned adaptation to Christian use of the age-old belief in the magic efficacy of runes'.²⁹ As Menner himself makes clear, there is quite enough of a tradition of inscription magic in the Hebrew and Christian traditions,³⁰ and we certainly do not need to look to runes for the impulse to fetishise the power of the written word. The main rationale for the use of runes in this poem is, I would argue, a textual one.

Anlezark, in his recent comprehensive edition, *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, to his great credit both advises against the 'counsel of despair' concerning the obscurities of the poem, and, in his source-based analysis, all but rejects the influence of rune-magic on the dialogues, being sceptical of much Germanic influence on the poem at all. However, his avowal, following Page, that the runes 'were not a feature of the poem as originally written', and were simply 'a symptom of transmission in circles interested in alternative alphabetical systems' is overly dismissive of the important contribution this alternative script makes within such a visually and graphically oriented poem.³¹ The suggestion that they are appended for their ornamental value is certainly a valid consideration; indeed, the visual aspect of the runes is absolutely central to the conceit. There is almost certainly more going on, however, than simply the fanciful introduction of a different script because it looks odd. The poet, or scribe, might have been expected to append Hebrew or Greek characters if decoration and ornamental obscurity were his only aims, particularly bearing in mind the poem's embedding in an Old Testament world and its preoccupation with Oriental learning, with 'the lārcræftas . . . Libia and Grēca, swylce ēac istoriam Indēa rīces', 'the learning of

²⁹ Elliott, *Runes – An Introduction*, 56.

³⁰ Menner, *The Poetical Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, 45-8.

³¹ Anlezark, *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, 28-9.

Libya and Greece, and also the history of the kingdom of India' (ll. 3-4). Hebrew, Greek and exotic 'Saracen' alphabets were certainly circulating in late Anglo-Saxon England, sometimes alongside the runic script, as in London, British Museum, Cotton MS Domitian A 9.³² If runes were chosen for their appearance, we should ask why this should be so.

In the context of a conceit that highlights the form and shape of the letters as personified agents of Christian struggle with the devil, the runes are almost certainly used for a particular association with visual representation. We might want to see this as akin to a native form of alphabet magic, as Menner does, but it might be more productive to read it as the expression of a particular runic textuality. In considering this visually-oriented textuality, we might even be able to rationalise the 'extraordinary' and unparalleled 'tendency to hypostatize the Pater Noster itself, and consider it capable of a person's actions', the runic script perhaps being integral to the development of this unusual conceit rather than representing an ornamental afterthought.³³

The conceit of the Pater Noster dialogue in the poem is certainly driven by a concern with the shape and form of the written letters. In fact, the sole preoccupation of the *First Dialogue of Solomon and Saturn* is with the description of the Lord's Prayer in terms of its physical appearance and ability to engage the devil in a very visual and vivid combat.³⁴ The poem opens with Solomon's expression of his desire to be taught 'hwylc wære mōdes, oððe mægenþrymmes, / elnes oððe æhte [oððe]

³² Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta*, 3-6.

³³ Menner, *The Poetical Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, 42.

³⁴ The *Prose Solomon and Saturn* personifies the Pater Noster to an even greater extent, focusing on its physical appearance, including dress and hair colour, and on the binary opposition between the forms the devil will take and the opposing manifestations of the Pater Noster, but there is little discernible textual reference. *The Prose Solomon and Saturn and Adrian and Ritheus*, ed. James E. Cross and Thomas D. Hill (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1982).

eorlscippes, / se gepalmtwigode Pāter Noster’, ‘what was the mood or power, strength or possession or nobility of the palm-twigged Pater Noster’ (ll. 10-12), immediately situating the prayer in terms of its character, rather than its effects. Saturn reinforces this concern with outward form by questioning Solomon about how the Pater Noster should be conceived of in the mind, the response stressing the beauty and the tactile physicality of ‘Crīstes līnan’, ‘Christ’s line’ (l. 17). Solomon develops this concern in his discussion of the material effects of the Pater Noster, from the opening of doors, to the quenching of fire, with a particular emphasis on the tactility and visual nature of written script:

Hē (i)s modigra middangearde,
 staðole strengra ðonne ealra stāna gripe.
 Lamena hē is lāce, lēoht wince(ndr)a,
 swilce hē is dēafra duru, dumbra tunge,
 scyldigra scyld. (ll. 75-9)³⁵

This description of the Pater Noster is interesting on a number of levels. Firstly, the image of being ‘stronger in its foundation or placement’ than ‘ealra stāna gripe’ ‘the grip of all stones’ (l. 76) is unusual. We might imagine this to refer to the grip a heavy rock appears to have on the ground, but the specific reference to written text and stones might lead us rather to envisage the grip the stone exerts on letters incised upon its surface. The noun *staðol* might refer in more than just an abstract way to the ‘foundation’ or ‘placement’ of the written word, pointing towards the physicality of inscribed monuments. Earlier in the poem reference is made to the Pater Noster which ‘him stede



³⁵ ‘It is more courageous than the earth, stronger in its setting than the grip of all stones. It is physician to the lame, light to the short-sighted, and also door to the deaf, tongue to the dumb, and shield of the sinful.’

healdeð', 'holds its place' (l. 51), the solidity and endurance of the written word also developing as a key concern in the personification of certain letters, as we shall see. The passage also leads us to think in terms of the interface between the oral element of language, and the visual message which is the focus of this poem. It is a light to the *wincendra* (literally 'the winking'), a door to the deaf, and tongue for the dumb. As well as representing various unlockings, pertinent to the discussion in the previous chapter, I would suggest that all are also expressions of the tactility of written language, which speaks its message visually but also via the sense of touch. Runes, particularly when incised on stone, are relatively easy for partially-sighted readers to trace with their fingers; certainly in the context of the physicality of words, the appropriate textual referent might well be an object incised with the Pater Noster rather than the less tactile manuscript page, or the illuminated letters Jonassen identifies as the primary influence on the poem.³⁶

We have already seen how the Pater Noster is described as golden, and adorned with precious gems, in the manner of a decorated book-cover, or material object, rather than a page of vellum, and how it is configured in similarly physical terms as the key to unlocking the door of heaven. The recurring key imagery, as well as expressing the *alysendlic* associations attached to runes, may bear some relation to the curious description of the Pater Noster as *gepalmtwigode*, an image not clearly paralleled in any patristic source. As 'the symbol of victory over the Devil', the palm branch has obvious figurative import, but the notion that such a close connection between the letters of the

³⁶ Frederick B. Jonassen, 'The Pater Noster Letters in the Poetic *Solomon and Saturn*', *MLR* 83:1 (Jan 1998), 1-9. See also Laura Kendrick, *Animating the Letter: The Figurative Embodiment of Writing from Late Antiquity to the Renaissance* (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1999) for a discussion of the medieval tradition of investing letters with 'the bodily trace of a living . . . presence', 35.

Pater Noster and the palm symbol may have come about because an inscribed tablet was ‘decorated with the actual branches of Palm Sunday’ is very questionable, particularly as the connection is so close that the reader is exhorted to pray to ‘ðæt palmtrēow’, the associated image actually standing in for the Pater Noster itself.³⁷ The unique ‘palm-twigged’ descriptor is clearly one of appearance, not merely conceptual association, focusing our mind upon the written form of the letters being like the branches of the palm tree.

This provides the first clue that we should look to the runes as not merely fulfilling a secondary, ornamental role in the poem. The aspect of the runic script is quite distinctive, being variously described as angular, branched or twig-like. The form of a runic character is conventionally described in terms of staves and branches, and this is a natural descriptor for a script based predominantly on upright marks with appended diagonal protrusions. The non-phonetic stacked bind-rune found on the Kylver stone (G 88)  is often described as a Christmas tree symbol, for obvious reasons, and the type of cryptic rune where lateral strokes issue upwards from the main stave, , are referred to in Icelandic treatises as *kvistrúnar*, or ‘twig-runes’. The central characteristic of the palm branch is, of course, the shape of diagonal fronds issuing from a central stem, and the recourse to this highly unusual and specific image must surely bear a relation to the distinctive aspect of the runic script. There is no tradition of referring to the Latin or Greek alphabets as ‘palm-twigged’, and the appellation would not make much sense. The aspect of Latinate letters, even the epigraphical scripts based on majuscules and predominantly straight lines, is very unlike that of the runes, as a comparison of the initial letters of the two script systems demonstrates:

³⁷ Menner, *The Poetical Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, 43 and footnote 41.

ABCDEF / ƿNÐƿŕk

There is also a clear tradition of evoking the Pater Noster in runic inscriptions from the medieval period, from numerous exhortations to ‘say a Pater Noster for the soul’ on grave monuments and in stave church inscriptions, to *rúnakefli* with the prayer itself inscribed, such as N 615 from Bryggen in Bergen, dated to ca. 1198. There are no such Pater Noster inscriptions surviving from Anglo-Saxon England; indeed, there is little evidence beyond the problematic reference in the *Husband’s Message* to runes being inscribed on *rúnakefli*. However, the Bryggen, Trondheim and Tønsberg runes, written centuries after the last native use of runes in England, only survived due to very particular conditions, and it would be extremely unwise to posit that runes were not carved on *rúnakefli* in Anglo-Saxon England: runes were, after all ‘made to be cut in wood’.³⁸ It is not hard to see how such an inscription of the Pater Noster in runes could have inspired the epithet *gepalmtwigode*. If the repeated reference to the written ‘palm-twiggod’ Pater Noster is making reference to the prayer inscribed in runes, then we might entertain the possibility that a specifically runic textuality has some bearing on the personification of the letters of the canticle in the poem.

The central conceit of *Solomon and Saturn I*, the personification of the letters of the Pater Noster, is notable for its very physical and graphical depiction (in both senses) of the battle between the letters and the agents of the devil, relating in some detail the injuries the individual letters may inflict, as the opening lines serve to demonstrate:

. . . prologa p̄rīma ðām is .ᚠ. p. nama:

³⁸ Spurkland, ‘Scandinavian Medieval Runic Inscriptions’, 123.

hafað gūðmæcga gierde lange,
 gyldene gāde, and ā ðone g(rim)man fēond
 swiðmōd sweopað; and him on swaðe fylgeð
 .ƿ. a. ofer mægene and hine ēac ofslihð.
 .↑. t. hine teswað and hine on ðā tungan sticað,
 wræsteð him ðæt woddor, and him ðā wongan brieceð.
 .M. e. Hiene yflað, swā hē ā wile
 ealra fēonda gehwane fæste gestondan.' (ll. 89-97)³⁹

This passage exhibits a corporality akin to the grotesque and masochistic portrayal of the body in *Soul and Body II*, and the poet appears to get carried away with the thrill of excessive violence, and with the mortification of the flesh, describing a bodily mutilation that surpasses anything in the heroic model he appears to imitate at times. Not only do the letters stand fast against the enemy, show courage and deal strong strokes, but they trip the fiend and dash his cheek against *strangne stān* so that his teeth scatter (l. 114), and shatter his limbs on the flint floor, the letter even being said to scourge the devil 'tuigena ordum / sweopum seolfrynum . . . oððæt him bān blicað, blēdað ædran', 'with the points of twigs, with silver rods . . . until the bone blinks through and the veins bleed.' (ll. 142-44). We might even think of the palm-twigged letters as being akin to the 'silver scourges' that were used in extreme forms of self-mortification, the ninth-century Trewhiddle scourge being a good material parallel, as Anlezark points out, and evidence of an undercurrent of violent asceticism within the Anglo-Saxon church.⁴⁰

³⁹ 'Prologa Prima that is named P: the warrior has a long staff, a gold goad, and always stout-hearted swipes at the grim fiend; and A follows on his track with overpowering might and also strikes him down. T also injures him, and stabs him in the tongue, wrings his neck, and breaks his jaw. E harms him, as he will always stand fast against every fiend.'

⁴⁰ Anlezark, *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, 109.

Of course, within this violent portrayal it is easy to lose sight of the graphical; the fact that these are personified letters, the word made tangible in an expression of the physicality of written script. There are certain clues that the violence perpetrated is not simply an undirected exuberance, or an expression of the severe aesthetic of self-mortification, but pertains to the particular textuality of the prayer. The letter <t>, for example, attacks the devil's mouth, spearing his tongue and breaking his jaw, which is surely a pertinent image of the victory of the written word over the speech of the devil, particularly in light of the reference to the Pater Noster being 'dumbra tunge', 'tongue for the dumb' in the earlier exposition. Similarly, the actions of the letter <s> make a statement about the physicality of the written word:

ƿonne. **Þ** s. cymeð, engla gerāswa,
 wuldores stæf, wrāðne gegripeð
 fēond be ðām fotum, lāteð foreweard hlēor
 on strangne stān, and stregdað tōðas
 geond helle hēa Hȳdeð hine æghwylc
 æfter sceades sciman . . . ' (ll. 111-116a)⁴¹

This portrayal is full of the imagery of a tactile writing system. The letter is described as 'wuldores stæf, 'the staff/stave of glory' (l. 112), playing on both the staff of office that may be thought of as a weapon in the battle with the devil, and the secondary meaning of 'letter' or stave. Again, the focus of the assault is the mouth, the fiend's teeth being scattered amongst the denizens of hell. This is perhaps a more literal conception of the 'violence of the letter' than Derrida had in mind, but it may represent a similar expression of the negative potentialities of the written word that he finds

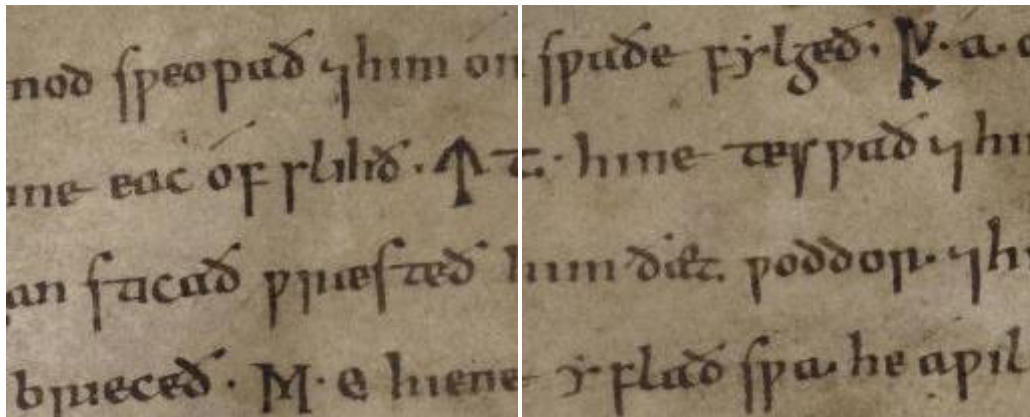
⁴¹ 'Then S comes, leader of angels, staff/letter of glory, grips the wrathful fiend by its feet, propels his cheek forward against strong stone, and strews teeth around the host of hell. Each one shall hide himself in the shadow's half-light'.

expressed in the writings of Rousseau and Levi-Strauss:⁴² words that literally become sticks and stones to hurt us, though the latent violence of writing is appropriated here in the service of the Church. There is certainly an allusion being made here to the ability of the written prayer to silence the speech of the devil, a clear expression of Christianity as a religion of the book, and the word of God as indomitable and permanent.

It is interesting that at this point we also have a recurrence of the image of the ‘strong stones’, as a foundation against which to smash the cheek of the devil. The particular textuality of this imagined script stresses its permanence through the medium of stone, perhaps leading us to think again of the runic connection, which stands in direct contrast to the ‘sceades sciman’ (l. 116) translated nicely by Kemble as ‘the indistinctness of shadow’, which is the preserve of those who have failed to recognise the permanence of God’s word. In fact, the lexis of the Pater Noster passage as a whole is one of pronounced materiality, of *flint* (l. 100), *stān* (l. 114), teeth and bone, shafts and spears, blades, arrows, silver scourges, and ‘twigena ordum’, ‘the points of twigs’ (l. 142). Set against this is the corporeal fragility of the devil, the oral register of mouths and tongues, and the mutability of hell and its servants, who change colour and plumage (ll. 150-1), shatter at the assault of the letters, and flee backwards into the shadows. In this context we can perhaps read the graphic scourging of the devil and the ‘dēorra dynta’ (l. 122) inflicted by the letters on the bodies of the fiends as a kind of triumphant textuality, a victorious ‘body writing’ to use a term with Barthesian overtones, incising God’s written word on the shifting registers of the devil.

⁴² Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 101-40.

As the runes appear alongside the roman letters in the poem, and are ‘supplementary’ in semantic terms, they have often been placed amongst the ‘fairly trivial’ and ill-informed use of runes in later manuscripts.⁴³ However, such a designation ignores the striking material personification of the characters and unusual emphasis on the extra-linguistic attributes of the graphemes, both of which are central to the poem’s conceit. The runes, though seemingly written in the same ink as the body text, certainly stand out from the page because of their size, the space afforded to them, and their angular aspect. The difference between the Latinate characters, mostly indistinguishable from the surrounding text, and the bold and visually distinct runes, is perhaps a distinction not only of form but of textual function:



CCCC MS 442, 4. Parker Library on the Web.

As Halsall points out, ‘much of the effect of any Old English poem containing runes depends upon the distinctive appearance of the rune symbols in contrast to the ordinary insular script on a manuscript page,⁴⁴ and as the crudest analyses point out, the runes are indeed used here for their ornamental value. But this ornamentality, this graphical physicality, is not supplementary in the poem but *primary*. This conceit represents more than simply a superstition about the efficacy of

⁴³ Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta*, 426.

⁴⁴ Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem*, 46.

written script: it represents as Anlezark suggests, ‘a highly literate playfulness’,⁴⁵ and, I would suggest, an expression of the unique physicality and materiality that characterises the written word.

The actual form of the written letter seems, moreover, to have influenced the personification of certain of the Pater Noster characters, most notably ‘g se gēapa’, ‘the crooked g’ (l. 134). Kendrick has made us aware of the animate and corporeal qualities of illuminated letters,⁴⁶ and Jonassen points out that the practice here may have been inspired by perusal of the beautiful personified letters of the Book of Kells. However, we have seen that one of the primary textual referents in the poem is to engraving, and in certain cases it may be the attributes of the runic letter that are being exploited. Jonassen himself makes the case for the breaking of the Devil’s feet being inspired by the ‘diagonal leg’ of <r>, whilst crucially failing to acknowledge that it is the Anglo-Saxon minuscule <r> that is used in the manuscript alongside the runic character **R**.⁴⁷ If Jonassen is correct in his interpretation, the visual referent here would appear to be the runic character. Similarly, it is clear to me that the pointed head of <t> which ‘on ðā tungan sticað’ (l. 94) refers to the spear like rune-stave rather than the flat topped and rather un-menacing Anglo-Saxon majuscule <t> (pictured above). The **T** rune, here looking distinctly arrow shaped, visually reinforces the personification of the character as a weapon. The fast standing **M** or ‘e’ (again pictured above) might draw this characteristic from the twin staved nature of the rune (a feature of only four of the Anglo-Saxon runes), the mirror image **H** also, rather interestingly, sharing the characteristic of being ‘steady’ (l. 137).

⁴⁵ Anlezark, *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, 29.

⁴⁶ See Kendrick, *Animating the Letter*.

⁴⁷ Jonassen, ‘The Pater Noster Letters’, 1.

In other cases the description seems to have no apparent reference, or incline towards the attributes of the alphabetical symbol. The <H> character is designated *lifgetwinnan* ‘the twins of life’ (l. 141)—surely due to its two joined staves rather than simply ‘to meet the demands of alliteration’⁴⁸—and is only represented by the alphabetic character, probably due to the close similarity in form between <H> and **℥**; the designation of *prologa prima* as a rod with a golden goad might pertain to the bulbous headed Latinate <P>, if it pertains to the shape at all, whilst the designation of **℥**/*<c>* and **ƿ**/*<g>* in both cases as ‘geāp stæf’ (l. 124) probably refers to the bent Latinate letters: as Anlezark points out, ‘whilst Latin ‘G’ is *geap* in shape, the rune *ger* (or *gar*) is not’.⁴⁹ It is somewhat disingenuous, however, to suggest that because it is the *ger/gar* rune rather than the expected *gifu* rune that is used it ‘might suggest that the scribe who included the runes was insensitive to the kind of verbal games enjoyed by the poet’; if the ornamental appearance of the runes is what interested the scribe (or the poet) in this context, then **ƿ** might make a better choice *graphically* both because of its weapon-like appearance and relation to the homograph *gar*, meaning ‘spear’ or ‘dart’.⁵⁰

As well as an occasional connection to the physical appearance of the runes, there may also be a conceptual influence discernible in the very conceit of treating the letters as words they begin, a conceit Anlezark suggests is invited by the first letter <p> being referred to as ‘Prologa Prima’.⁵¹ The naming of <h> as *habitus* may, for example, account for the association between this letter and its

⁴⁸ Anlezark, *The Old English Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*, 109.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 107.

elaborate apparel. He also recognises that such bilingual punning is developed in the OE *Rune Poem*, but does not allow a connection between the naming of the runes and this conceit.⁵² I would suggest that the influence can be seen quite clearly in the designation of the letter <s>, bearing the runic name *sigel* or ‘sun’, as ‘prince of angels’ (l. 111). It would also explain the fact that in response to this letter, each fiend ‘hydeð . . . æfter sceades sciman’, ‘hides . . . in the shadow’s half-light’ (ll. 115b-116a). The naming conceit of the *Rune Poem* and the graphical personification of *Solomon and Saturn I* may be more closely connected than has been allowed for in the past.

I think it is clear that the poet had runic letters in mind when composing the poem, and it is perhaps significant, both in terms of the importance of the runic shapes and the primacy of the visual, graphical referent of the poem, that despite being ‘supplemental’, they precede the Latin letters on the page. I would suggest that in the fragment of the Pater Noster found in CCCC MS. 41 they are actually left out, by a scribe writing in the margins with very limited space, and that far from ‘having nothing to do with the original composition’ they may have provided an important stimulus towards the particular visually oriented textuality represented in the poem.⁵³

In this poem the runes are configured as a script still used in consciousness of the operative power and possibilities of the written word, ‘separating each signifier from its alphabetic function’ in contravention of the codified Latin tradition, and the everyday familiarity that characterises our response to the written word in the twenty-first century.⁵⁴ Whether or not we recognise the runes as playing a formative role in this unusual expression of textuality, their presence in the poem

⁵² *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵³ K. Sisam, ‘Review of Menner ed., *The Poetical Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*’, *Medium Ævum* 13 (1944), 28-36, 35.

⁵⁴ Marie Nelson, ‘King Solomon’s Magic: The Power of a Written Text’, *Oral Tradition* 5:1 (1990), 20-36, 29.

certainly helps to reinforce the material aspect of the text, particularly if the runes were still associated primarily with the epigraphical milieu. The Latin alphabet was of course used in epigraphical contexts, the difference being that in the early Middle Ages the Latin alphabet was first and foremost a script of vellum and ink, whilst for the *futhorc* the manuscript page was only ever a secondary adaptation. Using runes in this poem would thus have highlighted the material with which they were principally associated, emphasising visually and figuratively the physical dimension of language, and its very particular tactile qualities.

The Old English Rune Poem

As Jonassen argues, the personification of the letters in *Solomon and Saturn I* is not so very different from the guiding conceit of the *Old English Rune Poem* ‘in which letters can stand for individual humans or [their] activities’.⁵⁵ The hypostatization of the *futhorc* in the rune-poem tradition is conceptually rather different, of course, with the runes defined by their traditional names, and their ‘characters’ determined by the associations these names carry. There is less recourse to the actual appearance of the letter in their characterisation, although, as we shall see, the shape of the runic character may occasionally have a bearing on the name itself, as well as influencing the way in which the poet describes the rune. Jonassen is right, however, to recognise the essential connection between the impulse to personify the Pater Noster letters, and the implicit characterisation of letters through their names in the rune poems. Both are essentially anthropomorphic conceits, where the object (in this case the letter) is given some form of self-expression. He might have gone further

⁵⁵ Jonassen, ‘The Pater Noster Letters’, 6.

and identified a connection between the visual and material focus of the palm-twigged Pater Noster conceit, and the concern in the OE *Rune Poem* with both runes as symbols, and the overall structure of the runic system, reflected in the poem's particular textual construction.

There are numerous ways in which this interesting poem might be approached and analysed within a thesis dealing with literary runes, it being essential to the study of the runic tradition in England. Indeed, in terms of runic nomenclature, it might well be considered 'the most instructive . . . of all documents we possess', and it is undoubtedly a well-crafted piece of literature in its own right.⁵⁶ Read as a series of riddles, the Rune Poem might support the association of runes with riddling and play, as outlined in Chapter 1. The poem might be read as an expression of gnomic wisdom, or compared directly with what we know of the epigraphical tradition, as the following chapter attempts to do in relation to the heroic poems of the *Edda*. It might also be read simply for what it tells us about the inheritance of rune lore in later Anglo-Saxon England. All these approaches have valid things to say about the poem, and about the runic tradition in England. However, one neglected aspect of the poem, and the approach I will take in the following analysis, is a concern with its form and structure, both in terms of the influence of the form of the runic character on the accompanying characterisation, and the broader structures of the *futhorc* as reflected in the construction of the poem.

The textual history of the OE *Rune Poem* is a story of triumph over the great many historical and material odds stacked against it. The original manuscript, Cotton MS Otho B.X, was damaged

⁵⁶ J. M. Kemble, *Anglo-Saxon Runes* (Pinner: Anglo-Saxon Books, 1991), 28.

beyond recognition in the disastrous fire at the Cottonian Library in 1731.⁵⁷ Thankfully, the poem had already been copied, and a version printed in George Hickes' *Linguarum Septentrionalium Thesaurus*, mistakenly described by the author as a poetical description of 'runarum Danicarum'. Hickes makes it clear that the text had been updated, stating somewhat evasively that '*Latinis additis ex adverso elementis, ad ostendendam runarum potestatem, una cum iis nominibus quibus appellantur ipsae runa*',⁵⁸ but whether these 'additions' were his work or already a feature of the text he copied is unclear. However, as Halsall points out, 'Hickes appears to have made no attempt . . . to perform any of the usual editorial tasks' and it therefore seems unlikely that he deviated to any great extent from the copy provided by Wanley, who was himself 'an extraordinarily skilled palaeographer with a habit of making, not merely copies, but what amounted to hand drawn facsimiles of Old English texts'.⁵⁹ Halsall goes on to suggest that the rune names were already appended to the original poem when the eighteenth-century copyists set to work, in all likelihood added by an individual with access to, or knowledge of, a list of the rune names.⁶⁰ Hickes' belief that the rune names were appended is an important consideration, as the absence of such 'solutions' in the original poem strongly suggests the enigmatic character of the poem, and focuses attention on the runic characters as they appear on the page. Coming to the name through the description is thus 'both a test of knowledge and a real challenge to ingenuity', a process very much akin to the

⁵⁷ Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems* (London: George Routledge & Sons, 1942), xlvi.

⁵⁸ 'Latin letters having been added beside them to show the force of the runes, together with those names by which the same runes are called.' George Hickes, *Linguarum Veterum Septentrionalium Thesaurus Grammatico-Criticus et Archaeologicus* (Oxford, 1705), 134, trans. Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem*, 24.

⁵⁹ Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem*, 26-7 and 23.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 26.

solving of a riddle, with the runes acting as both clues and the focal point of the discourse.⁶¹ The following reproduction, based on Halsall's edition, attempts to highlight the importance of the runic character by putting the rune-name 'solution' at the end of each stanza. It also emphasises the varying stanza lengths, which would have been readily apparent to readers more attuned to the nuances of Old English metre:

ƿ byþ frōfur fira gehwylcum;
 sceal ðēah manna gehwylc miclun hyt dǣlan
 gif hē wile for Drihtne dōmes hlēotan. (Feoh)⁶²

Ń byþ anmōd and oferhyrned,
 feलाfrēcne dēor, feohτεþ mid hornum, 5
 māre mōrstapa; þæt is mōdig wuht! (Ūr)⁶³

ƿ byþ ðearle scarp, ðegna gehwylcum
 anfengys yfyl, ungemetun rēþe
 manna gehwylcun ðe him mid resteð. (Dorn)⁶⁴

ƿ byþ ordfruma ælcra sprāce, 10
 wīsdomes wraþu and witena frōfur
 and eorla gehwām ēadnys and tōhiht. (Ōs)⁶⁵

⁶¹ Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poetry*, 262.

⁶² 'Wealth is a comfort to all men, though every man ought to deal it out generously, if he desires to gain in glory before the Lord.'

⁶³ 'The aurochs is steadfast and set with horns, a very fierce animal, fights with its antlers, a famous moor-strider; that is a courageous creature!'

⁶⁴ 'The thorn is exceedingly sharp, painful for any warrior to take hold of, extremely cruel to any man who rests amongst them.'

⁶⁵ 'The mouth is the source of every speech, the prop of wisdom and comfort of wise men, and the pleasure and delight of every noble.'

R byþ on recyde rinca gehwylcum
 sēfte, and swīþhwæt ðām ðe sitteþ onufan
 mēare mægenheardum ofer mīlpaþas. (Rād)⁶⁶ 15

K byþ cwicera gehwām cūþ on fýre,
 blāc and beorhtlīc; byrneþ oftust
 ðær hī æþelingas inne restaþ. (Ċēn)⁶⁷

X gumena byþ gleng and herenys
 wraþu and wyrþscype; and wræcna gehwām 20
 ār and ætwist, ðe byþ oþra lēas. (Ġyfu)⁶⁸

P ne brūceþ ðe can wēana lýt,
 sāres and sorge, and him sylfa hæfþ
 blæd and blysse and ēac byrga geniht. (Wyn)⁶⁹

H byþ hwītust corna; hwyrft hit of heofones lyfte, 25
 wealcaþ hit windes scūra; weorþeþ hit tō wætere syððan. (Hægl)⁷⁰

† byþ nearu on brēostan; weorþeþ hī ðēah oft niþa bearnum
 tō helpe and tō hǣle gehwæþre, gif hī his hlystaþ āror. (Nýd)⁷¹

⁶⁶ 'Riding is comfortable for all men within the hall, and very active for the one who sits astride a very powerful horse along the mile-paths.'

⁶⁷ 'The torch is known to every living thing by its flame, bright and shining; it burns most often where nobles rest indoors.'

⁶⁸ 'Gift-giving amongst men is a support of honour and praise and distinction; and for all the wretched an aid and means of subsistence, when they lack other means.'

⁶⁹ 'Joy he possesses who is little acquainted with suffering, hurts and sorrow, and has for himself riches and happiness and also the peace of mind of the stronghold.'

⁷⁰ 'Hail is the whitest of grains; it whirls from the loftiness of heaven, and flurries of wind blow it around; it is then transformed into water.'

⁷¹ 'Need is a constraint on the heart; yet for the children of men it is often transformed into a help and a source of healing, if they attend to it early enough.'

| byþ oferceald, ungemetum slidor;
 glisnaþ glæshlúttur gimumm gelícust; 30
 flōr forste geworuht, fæger ansýne. (Īs)⁷²

† byþ gumena hiht, ðon God læteþ,
 hālig heofenes cyning, hrūsan syllan
 beorhte blēda beornum and ðearfum. (Ġēr)⁷³

† byþ ūtan unsmēþe trēow, 35
 heard hrūsan fæst, hyrde fýres,
 wyrtrumun underwreþyd, wynan on ēþle. (Ēoh)⁷⁴

† byþ symble þlega and hlehter
 wlancum . . ., ðār wigan sittap
 on bēorsele bliþe ætsomne. (Peorð)⁷⁵ 40

† -secg eard hæfþ oftust on fenne,
 wexeð on wature; wundaþ grimme,
 blōde brēneþ beorna gewylcne
 ðē him ænigne onfeng gedēð. (Eolx)⁷⁶

⁷² 'Ice is overly cold and extremely slippery; it glistens glass-bright, most like gems; a floor created by frost, beautiful to behold.'

⁷³ 'The harvest is the hope of men, when God, the holy king of heaven, causes the ground to give forth bright fruits for both princes and poor men.'

⁷⁴ 'The yew is outwardly not a smooth tree, fast and hard in the ground, the shepherd of fire, under-set with a stock of roots, a joy on the homestead.'

⁷⁵ 'A (table game, instrument?) is always a game and an amusement to proud . . . where warriors sit together cheerfully in the mead hall.'

⁷⁶ 'Elk-sedge has its place most often in the fens, grows up in water; it wounds badly, stains with blood all men who try to grasp it.'

ᚠ sēmannum symble biþ on hihte, 45
 ðonn hī hine ferialþ ofer fises beþ,
 oþ hī brimhengest bringeþ tō lande. (Sigel)⁷⁷

↑ biþ tācna sum; healdeð trȳwa wel
 wiþ æþelingas; ā biþ on færylde
 ofer nihta genipu; nāfre swīceþ. (Tīr)⁷⁸ 50

ᚷ byþ blēda lēas; bereþ efne swā ðēah
 tānas būtan tūdder; biþ on telgum wlitig,
 hēah on helme, hrysted fægere;
 geloden lēafum, lyfte getenge. (Beorc)⁷⁹

ᚃ byþ for eorlum æþelinga wyn, 55
 hors hōfum wlanc, ðær him hæleþas ymb,
 and biþ unstyllum āfre frōfur. (Eh)⁸⁰

ᚃ byþ on myrgþe his māgan lēof;
 sceal þēah ānra gehwylc oðrum swīcan, 60
 for ðām ðryten wyle dōme sīne
 þæt earme flāsc eorþan betācan. (Mon)⁸¹

⁷⁷ 'The sun [sail] is always a source of hope for seamen, when they set forth (towards it? set it forth?) over the fish's bath, until the sea-steed brings them to land.'

⁷⁸ 'Tir is a certain sign; it holds its trust well towards princes; it is always on course, above the gloom of night it never wavers.'

⁷⁹ 'The birch lacks fruit; though even without seed it bears branches; it is beautiful in its boughs, lofty in its helm, attractively adorned; laden with leaves, close to the sky.'

⁸⁰ 'The horse is the joy of princes in the presence of nobles, a steed proud on its hooves, when heroes, wealthy and mounted, exchange speech concerning him; it is always a comfort to the restive.'

⁸¹ 'Man in his mirth is loved by his kinsmen; yet every person shall deceive the other, because the Lord will, in his judgement, give over that wretched flesh to the earth.'

† byþ lēodum lansum geþūht,
 gif hī sculun nēþun on nacan tealtum,
 and hī sǣyþa swyþe brēgaþ, 65
 and se brimhengest brīdles ne gȳmeð. (Lagu)⁸²

✕ wæs ārest mid Ēast-Denum
 gesewen secgun, oþ hē siððan ēst
 ofer wæg gewāt; wæn æfter ran;
 ðus hearingas ðone hǣle nemdun. (Ing)⁸³ 70

✎ byþ oferlēof āghwylcum men,
 gif he mōt ðær rihtes and gerysena on
 brūcan on bolde blēadum oftast. (Ēþel)⁸⁴

M byþ Drihtnes sond, dēore mannum,
 mære Meotodes lēoht, myrgþ and tōhiht 75
 ēadgum and earmum, eallum brīce. (Dæg)⁸⁵

† byþ on eorþan elda bearnum
 flǣsces fōdor; fereþ gelōme
 ofer ganotes bæþ; - garsecg fandaþ
 hwæþer āc hǣbbe æþele trēowe. (Āc)⁸⁶ 80

⁸² 'Water appears endlessly abundant to folk, if they must venture on it in an unstable vessel, and the sea-anger greatly unsettles them, and the ocean-steed takes no heed of the bridle.'

⁸³ 'Ing was first among the East-Danes recognised by men, until he later went eastwards over the wave, the carriage followed after; thus the hard-ones named the hero.'

⁸⁴ 'The native homeland is very beloved by every man, if he might there continually possess in the homestead everything that is right and suitable in abundance.'

⁸⁵ 'Day is send by the Lord, dear to mankind, the Creator's great light, mirth and delight to the prosperous and to the poor, profitable for everyone.'

⁸⁶ 'The oak on the land is the feeder of flesh for the children of men; often it journeys over the gannet's-bath – the spear bearing ocean tests whether the oak nobly holds its faith.'

ᚠ biþ oferhēah, eldum dýre,
 stīþ on staþule; stede rihte hylt,
 ðēah him feohtan on fīras monige. (Æsc)⁸⁷

ᚱ byþ æþelinga and eorla gehwæs
 wyn and wyrþmynd; byþ on wicge fæger, 85
 fæstlic on færeldre, fyrdgeatewa sum. (Țr)⁸⁸

* byþ ēafīxa; and ðēah brūceþ
 fōdres on foldan; hafþ fægerne eard,
 wætre beworpen, ðær hē wynnum leofþ. (Īar)⁸⁹

Ț byþ egle eorla gehwylcun, 90
 ðonn fæstlice flæsc onginneþ
 hrāw cōlian, hrūsan cēosan
 blāc tō gebeddan; blēda gedrēosaþ,
 wynna gewītaþ, wēra geswīcaþ. (Ēar)⁹⁰

Setting out the poem without the appended rune names stresses the riddlic nature of the text.

Indeed, the relatively self-contained stanzas of the poem, each dealing with a different object or concept, lend themselves to riddlic exposition, a fact which has not escaped the attention of earlier critics, including Wrenn, who states emphatically that the stanzas were ‘intended as riddles, the

⁸⁷ ‘The ash is exceedingly tall, dear to the race of men, strong in its foundations; it holds its place as is proper, though many people attack it.’

⁸⁸ ‘The bow/saddle is a pleasure and a mark of distinction for all nobles and princes; it is beautiful on a horse, and steady on a journey, a type of war-gear.’

⁸⁹ ‘The eel/newt is a river-fish, and yet always partakes of its food on land; it has a beautiful home, wreathed by water, where it dwells in pleasure.’

⁹⁰ ‘Earth is hateful to every noble, when steadily the flesh, the corpse, begins to grow cold, the pallid one chooses soil to bed down with; blooms fade, joys depart, bonds of friendship lapse.’

answers to which were the respective rune-words'.⁹¹ Niles refers to the original poem, devoid of rune names or critical apparatus, as 'a true example of cryptography' with 'a strongly riddle-like character',⁹² whilst Paul Sorrel outlines the many stylistic affinities between the *Rune Poem* and the Old English riddles.⁹³ The riddlic character of the poem is important for our consideration of textuality, as we have seen that operating within this mode raises certain expectations: a nuanced, even misdirecting treatment of a subject, playful allusion, anthropomorphosis, and a focus on the material object. We have also seen how runes often serve as locus points within the Exeter Book riddles for a consideration of language and text. We might, therefore, expect to see similar concerns operating here. The runes certainly have a visual impact by virtue of their difference to the surrounding text, and because the individual characters are highlighted in such a striking way by opening each stanza of the poem, they may serve to reinforce the image being portrayed in verse. Their form may serve as a further play with the idea of animate, named characters.

The shape of the *þorn* rune, þ, is the clearest example of this visual reinforcement, its physical resemblance to the thorn 'ðearle scearp' (l. 7) even posited as the rationale behind the adoption of this name in preference of the Germanic *þuriaz, or 'giant', the *þurs* rune of the contemporary Norse tradition.⁹⁴ Certainly, in alighting on a new 'Christianized' name for the rune, the shape may have played an important role, and we might also see such a rationale behind the designation of the name *cen* for the sixth letter of the *futhorc*, ƿ, there being at least a passing resemblance between its shape

⁹¹ C. L. Wrenn, *A Study of Old English Literature* (London: Harrap, 1967), 163.

⁹² Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poetry*, 263.

⁹³ Paul Sorrel, 'Oaks, ships, riddles and the *Old English Rune Poem*', *ASE* 19 (1990), 103-16.

⁹⁴ Elliott, *Runes – An Introduction*, 46.

and a torch, particularly the sort of bracketed or wall-mounted torch that would be found ‘oftust / ðǣr hī æþelingas inne restaþ’ (ll. 17-18). There may also be some correspondence between the runes with ‘traditional’ names and their characterizations. Working systematically through the stanzas of the poem, further connections between shape and name or characterisation of the rune can be seen. The shape of the *feob* rune, ƿ, suggests the horns of the cattle from which the word stems, and with which it was still associated in late Anglo-Saxon England. Whilst the ‘phallic appearance of the rune’ is somewhat questionable,⁹⁵ the shape of *ūr*, ƿ also suggests the horns of the aurochs, and this may explain why the stanza makes reference to the horns twice: the creature is both *oferhyrned* and ‘feohteþ mid hornum’ (l. 5). The fact that the Anglo-Saxon poet had almost certainly only seen trophies of the horns of this continental beast, and not the animal itself⁹⁶ only reinforces the applicability of the rune shape to the associated object.

The name of the character *eolx*, ƿ, is similarly drawn from a world outside the experience of most Anglo-Saxons, and is defined here as part of the compound *eolx-secg*, ‘papyrus / water-reed’, or perhaps ‘elk-sedge’. The exact way in which *eolx* should be construed is somewhat problematic, but it probably goes back to the Germanic root **albiz* ‘elk’ and hints at the name of this rune in the older *futhorc* rune row. This rune in the fifteenth position had the value /z/, an important inflectional ending in Proto-Scandinavian but one that was essentially redundant in Old English.⁹⁷ It may be that the rune name was indeed originally ‘elk’, *eolb*, inherited from the older *futhorc*, and

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

⁹⁶ See Dickins, *Runic and Heroic Poems*, 12, and Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem*, 106. The aurochs was still hunted in the forests of continental Europe at this time, and the horns were greatly prized.

⁹⁷ See Page, *An Introduction*, 71, and the extensive discussion in David Parsons, ‘Anglo-Saxon Runes in Continental Manuscripts’.

that the new value of the rune in the Anglo-Saxon alphabet, /x/, was simply appended to the name as Page suggests,⁹⁸ raising difficulties for the poet trying to define this now essentially ‘useless fossil name’.⁹⁹ If this rune was indeed called ‘elk’ in the older *fuþark*, then form may also have influenced its original name, the defining characteristic of an elk being its branched horns. The Anglo-Saxon poet, in seeking a meaningful compound and describing the rune in the poem, may have followed a similar rationale of name-form congruence: the shape of the ʝ rune certainly resembles a barbed plant or reed that ‘wundaþ grimme’ (l. 42). Critics have noted the fact that parts of the description could apply to the elk as well as the barbed plant, in particular the wounding of men that try to lay a hand on it, the connection being between the antlers of the animal and the barbs of the plant, both visually emphasised in the shape of the rune. In the case of such archaic words as *ūr* and *eolx*, the form perhaps becomes especially pertinent to the direction in which the poet seeks to take the description.

The designation of the character ʞ, *tȳr*, as ‘tācna sum’, ‘a certain sign’ (l. 48) is an adaptation which may have been intended to defuse some of the rune’s pagan associations; it may originally have been named after the Norse god Týr, the martial deity prepared to sacrifice his hand to Fenrir. Both Scandinavian rune poems clearly associate the rune with the god, and mention this important episode from the myth cycle. In the Anglo-Saxon context, whilst the common meaning of *tȳr* as ‘fame’ or ‘honour’ could have been riddled upon—a strategy of redirection used in the stanza

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁹⁹ Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem*, 130.

pertaining to $\bar{o}s$ ¹⁰⁰—here the description appears to refer to ‘a guiding star or constellation perhaps named after the God’,¹⁰¹ an association with Mars perhaps reinforced by the ‘marked similarity of the rune \uparrow to the symbol for the planet’, now used as the common symbol for the male gender.¹⁰² However, there is perhaps a further influence of form on the description here, which characterises the celestial object almost exclusively in terms of its use as a sign, particularly the way it directs and points the way: not only is it a guiding sign, but it ‘healdeð trýwa wel’, ‘holds its faith well’ (l. 48) and ‘ā byþ on færylde’, ‘always holds its course’ (l. 49). Osborne is right to point out that this most likely pertains to ‘the planet Mars as it holds dependably to its path along the ecliptic’, but the repeated emphasis on direction and guiding in the description may have been influenced by the shape of the rune, which Osborne herself points out resembles an ‘upward pointing arrow’, a graphic indication of direction and constancy.¹⁰³ The arrow may not have been adopted as the universal directional symbol until the advent of the compass, but it is certainly intuitive to see the arrow shape as having a directional impulse.¹⁰⁴ The fact that we are dealing with a sign, a *tācn*, only makes this recourse to the shape of the runic symbol itself more natural.

¹⁰⁰ The original meaning of $\bar{o}s$ was ‘god’, as referred to in the Icelandic rune poem tradition, but the near homonym of Latin *os* provides a neat way for the poet to sidestep the pagan associations of this archaic word.

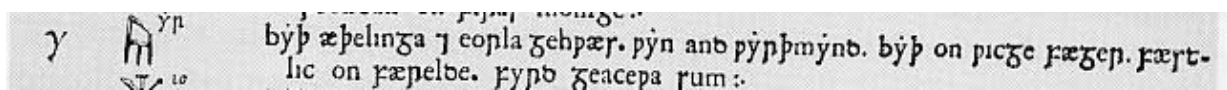
¹⁰¹ Page, *An Introduction*, 72.

¹⁰² Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem*, 136. A number of versions of the *Icelandic Rune Poem* gloss the rune *Týr* with Latin *Mars*. The Venus symbol is of course conventionally used for the female gender.

¹⁰³ Marijane Osborn, ‘Tir as Mars in the *Old English Rune Poem*’, *ANQ* 16:1 (Winter 2003), 3-13, 4 and 10. The arrow was, however, not used to indicate direction in manuscripts – a pointing finger performed that function.

¹⁰⁴ Indeed, the arrow symbol is used on the famous Pioneer plaques to indicate the trajectory and origins of the spacecraft, and though inadvertently ‘anthropocentric’, is intended to be decipherable to any intelligent life forms. Carl Sagan *et al.*, ‘A Message from Earth’, *Science* 175:4024 (Feb. 25, 1972), 881-884, 881.

The final three runes in the Anglo-Saxon *fuþorc* are all additions to the common Germanic *fuþark*, and the names of two, at least, seem to show some link to the form of the rune. The rune *ȝr* is a rune invented ‘to represent the vowel resulting from the fronting of *u* by following *i*’, and may have developed originally as a form of ligature between the *ŋ* and *l* runes.¹⁰⁵ The name *ȝr* is obscure: it is certainly a ‘type of war gear’, as the poem makes clear, but the riddlic stanza does not really fit comfortably with any proposed solution. A ‘saddle’ may look beautiful on a horse, and be steady on a journey, but it is less likely to be described as a type of war gear than weapons or armour, particularly bearing in mind the Anglo-Saxon tradition of dismounting to fight, though admittedly it may have formed part of the martial gift-package. The suggestion that it is linked to the name for the Norse rune *ȝr* or ‘yew bow’ is probably most tenable, if we acknowledge that these stanzas are riddlic, with all that implies about the use of metaphor and misdirection: the journey referred to might well be the flight of the arrow. But what of the form? The rune initially consisted of a single line within the u-shaped character, *ŋ*, as on the Franks Casket, but by the time the Rune Poem was written down it had developed a cross-bar, as reproduced in Hickeys’ *Thesaurus*:



Might we see in this adaptation a desire to reflect more closely the adopted name? The character represented by Hickeys certainly resembles a stylised bow and arrow, the cross-bar being the string, as it were. I think that in the case of a rune where the name is clearly adapted, and the meaning still debated, we should not avoid looking to the shape for supporting evidence.

¹⁰⁵ Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem*, 155.

This also seems to be the case with the next new rune, the *īar* rune, whose riddlic description has left much room for debate concerning its name, from Blomfield's suggestion that it is 'completely phonetic', in which case the stanza would simply represent a personification of a random word beginning with this sound, to such disparate solutions as hippopotamus, fish and sea. Niles' solution *īg*, or 'island in a river' is certainly elegant, but still leaves some issues unresolved.¹⁰⁶ The statement that this object 'belongs to the river fish', cannot really be said of an island, nor can it really be said that the creature 'wynnum loefab', 'dwells in pleasure' (l. 89). Schwab's suggestion of 'horse', imagined in both the white crests of the waves and as a land-dwelling mammal also leaves something to be desired,¹⁰⁷ whilst Elliot's suggestion that the description refers to the following rune-name *ēar*, which can mean either 'sea' or 'earth', is clever but unnecessarily complicated. Why the poet would want to describe any rune with a known sound value in terms of another is not clear, and the description of the sea always taking its food on land is, again, hard to explain. I agree with Griffith that the central conceit of this stanza is the 'paradoxography' of 'the fish out of water eating on land', which he points out is also a marked characteristic of Pliny's *Historia naturalis*.¹⁰⁸ We are surely looking for an amphibious creature, and perhaps the simplest solution is to settle on one of the two alternatives that Dickins suggests; taking *īor* to mean either 'lizard' or 'newt' would resolve the incongruity, particularly as the character, *†*, resembles a long creature with four legs viewed from above. In settling on this name, which is essentially arbitrary and certainly not part of the systematic portrayal of a world view some (unfortunately) still read into the naming of the inherited Germanic

¹⁰⁶ See Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poetry*, 273.

¹⁰⁷ Ute Schwab, *Die Sternrune im Wessobrunner Gebet* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1973), 68.

¹⁰⁸ Mark Griffith, 'A possible use of Pliny's *Historia naturalis* in the *Old English Rune Poem*', *NeQ* 57/1 (2010), 1-3, 2.

rune row, recourse may have been made to the form: essentially finding a word that begins with the sound value and is also reflected in the shape. This would certainly have made the new name easier to codify, and helped to ensure its successful adoption into the extended *futhorc*. After all, when adopting and naming a new character, the character itself, the graphical aspect, is always going to be at the forefront of the mind.

Research into the pictographic roots of many Chinese characters has shown that the visual element introduces certain additional cognitive processes into the act of recognition and reading.¹⁰⁹ To suggest that such visual reinforcement plays a part in the hermeneutic system of the poem and the solving of the riddle is not to suggest anything so outlandish as the development of runes as pictograms, or that they constitute a species of northern hieroglyphs, both popular eighteenth-century views. It simply raises the possibility that shape and form may have been one factor behind the allocation of names to new runes when the *futhorc* was modified to meet the needs of users of Old English, and, more importantly, that the appearance of the rune may have influenced the poetic descriptions of the runes in the OE *Rune Poem*. When confronted with symbols of any kind that are cast in relief and discoursed upon in a poetic manner, the mind inevitably latches on to form as an essential hermenutical apparatus, particularly when it is the symbol that opens each stanza of the poem.

The ornamental aspect of the script is thus clearly important to the conceit of the poem: indeed, the visual distinctiveness of the runes on the page helps to characterise it as a rune-poem, the unique logographic component of runes also making the conceit possible. There is, however, even

¹⁰⁹ Steven Roger Fischer, *A History of Writing* (London: Reaktion, 2001), 173.

within this poem, another important aspect of runic textuality at work, reflecting the conventional ordering of the *futhark* into *ættir*, or groups of eight characters. The structure of the poem is unusual, in that it is broken into clearly defined stanzas, not by any means a standard feature of Old English poetry. This stanzaic form is suggested, no doubt, by the conceit of treating each letter in turn, or as Acker puts it, the ‘unavoidably subdivided nature of an *abecedarium*’.¹¹⁰ However, the stanzas are even more peculiar as they vary in length throughout, the shortest having two lines, whilst the stanza closing the poem has five. Halsall points out that the varying length of stanzas in the poem seems to be linked to the division of the *futhark* into groups of eight, a tripartite division that ‘certainly goes back to the original alphabet’ according to Dickins, as it is indicated on a number of early inscriptions, including the sixth-century Vadstena and Mariedamm bracteates.¹¹¹ The correspondence of this unusual feature of the script with the pattern of stanzas in the poem is most apparent in the initial division, the first eight stanzas all being made up of three metrically conventional lines, thus mimicking the grouping of the first *ætt*. The ninth and tenth stanzas then diverge quite noticeably from this pattern, both consisting of two hypermetric lines. There can be little doubt that this glaring and quite deliberate structural change marks the division between *ættir*. The end of the final *ætt* appears to be indicated by another pair. Finally, the last stanza concludes the poem with a unique set of five alliterating lines. This division and its relation to the *ættir* may be represented as follows, with pairs underlined:

3333333 | 22333343 | 34444433 | 43335

¹¹⁰ Paul Acker, *Revising Oral Theory: Formulaic Composition in Old English and Old Icelandic Verse* (London: Garland, 1998), 36.

¹¹¹ Dickins, *Runic and Heroic Poems*, 2. C-Type bracteates, KJ 2 (IK 377, 1 and 2).

It is interesting to see that there is a change in stanza length at the beginning of the second *ætt*, the pair of two-line stanzas diverging from the regular three-line stanzas and marking the division. The change from a sequence of four-line stanzas to a pair of three-line stanzas also marks the end of the third *ættir*, mirroring the stanza length of the opening lines of the poem, whilst the pair of three-line stanzas in the middle may also indicate a division, though they appear to straddle the divide between the second and third *ættir*. The concluding stanza of the poem is also highlighted quite clearly by its five-line length, not only giving the poet additional space to drive home his portrayal of human mortality and the return of the body to the earth, but also indicating structurally the marked change in direction from the portrayal of worldly objects and sensations to their inevitable passing (ll. 91-92). Indeed, this transformation is couched in very direct terms, the final line recasting the concept of *wynn* in terms of loss, whilst the reminder that ‘blēda gedrēosaþ’, ‘blooms fade’ (l. 94) reverses the bounteous portrayal of the harvest and oak tree, and the final breaking of men’s covenants (l. 95) undoes concepts of earthly bonding found in the portrayal of *gyfu*, *ōs* and *epel* dealt with earlier in the poem. The structural incongruity of the final stanza emphasises the weight of the Christian contract relative to earthly bonds, and the terrible finality of death for the physical being. The poet was even prepared to adjust the traditional order of the runes to end on this transformative, moralising note,¹¹² rather than finishing with the rather didactically unprepossessing ‘eel’ (or indeed, ‘newt’).

Other than recognising the divisions of the *ættir* reflected in the stanza length and the structural weight of the final stanza, it is difficult to further unpick the structural riddle of the poem.

¹¹² Alessia Bauer, ed., *Runengedichte* (Wien: Studia Mediaevalia Septentrionalia, 2003), 94.

However, its sheer complexity demands our attention, and as Shippey points out that in the context of riddling ‘speculation may have been a part of the response from the beginning’, I feel justified in offering a number of conjectural points.¹¹³ It has been suggested, for example, that the pair of hypermetrical two line stanzas in the poem were considered two of the most negative of the rune names,¹¹⁴ possibly carrying sinister meanings in some applications of the script because of their association with negative abstractions of *hægl* and *nyd*. It is clear that the two runes *are* paired in some way, perhaps simply because of this shared negative characterisation in the poem. The hypermetrical construction of the *hægl* stanza fits the change in pace according to Halsall, the ‘crowded couplet’ perhaps ‘intended merely to accentuate the rapid movement and change involved as hail goes through its various manifestations’.¹¹⁵ However, it is difficult to apply the same argument to the following stanza, with its didactic message about how ‘need’ can be transformed to ‘helpe and tō hæle’ (l. 28). It is possible that the poet is stressing the definition of need as ‘physical constraint’ by the short length of the stanza on the page, but it may also be that the poet is attempting to remain faithful to an aspect of received rune-lore, signalling a traditional pairing of these two runes, whilst adapting their message to serve his Christian world view. This would fit with the scheme of ‘Christian bowdlerisation’ at work elsewhere in the poem.¹¹⁶

We might also detect a rationale behind the structural unity of the first eight stanzas. Whilst the poet was no doubt capable of writing stanzas of three lines throughout, and does so sporadically

¹¹³ T. A. Shippey, ed., *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English* (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 1976), 19.

¹¹⁴ Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem*. 119.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹¹⁶ In the recasting of runes such as *Týr* and *Ing* which had clear pagan associations, for example. Shippey, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning*, 19.

through the latter part of the poem, the first eight stanzas are conspicuous because of their stanzaic unity, perhaps reflecting the importance of the *ætt* opening with *fuþorc*. Indeed, the opening sequence of the *fuþark* is the part most often and consistently reproduced in an epigraphical context, perhaps simply because the memory begins to fail the carver after the initial sequence. However, it must be remembered that the particular sequence of the runic writing system has no precedent, and follows no identifiable linguistic or phonemic rationale. It is not absurd to suggest that the arrangement of the sequence was prioritised in some way in light of the appended names, and that the opening *ætt* was therefore considered the most conceptually important. Clearly, any conceptual ‘unity’ of the first eight rune names has been lost in this poem, *þorn* certainly representing a Christianisation of the original name, and *cen* an Anglo-Saxon substitution in the original *fuþark* sequence. However, perhaps the paradigm of the priority and unity of the first eight runes remained, and was faithfully represented by the Anglo-Saxon poet drawing on received rune lore he did not necessarily always fully understand.

Any further discussion of structural particulars is liable to involve further conjecture, and it is enough to note that there appears to be much in this complex variation of stanza length that is deliberate rather than incidental. The degree of structural awareness necessary simply to signal the *ættir* is unprecedented elsewhere in Old English verse, and is surely inspired by the unique structuring of the *fuþorc*, the poet incorporating further riddles into the very fabric of the poem. A concern with form and shape is manifested not only at the level of individual characters, but with regards to the structure of the writing system itself.

The Norwegian Rune Poem

The *Norwegian Rune Poem* is generally regarded as inferior to its Old English counterpart in terms of overall poetic accomplishment. However, recognising a concern with shape and form of the runes in the poem helps to make sense of some of its more perplexing imagery, and the numerous transitions between apparently unconnected concepts that have in the past either been forced into strained semantic relationships or put down to the apparently frivolous nature of the poem.

The original early thirteenth-century manuscript,¹¹⁷ or manuscripts, suffered a similar fate to Cotton MS Otho B.X, being destroyed by a fire in the University Library of Copenhagen in 1728.¹¹⁸ Copies were made in the seventeenth century by Árni Magnússon and Jón Eggertsson, Ole Worm publishing a slightly earlier transcript of the poem that differs in certain details, raising the possibility that he was working from a different manuscript. Alessia Bauer in her laudably methodical edition of the rune poems, and Page in his essay ‘On the Norwegian Rune Poem’ have both drawn attention to a number of seventeenth-century manuscripts that offer ‘alternative and quite early readings that link loosely . . . to [Worm’s version] but seem unlikely to derive from it’.¹¹⁹ By calling into question the existence of a definitive text of the poem, both Bauer and Page have problematised certain readings used by literary critics and practitioners of reconstructed rune lore. Any analysis of the poem should be aware that these variants may indicate the existence of several related rune poems, rather than a single piece of codified lore.¹²⁰ However, as Page points out, ‘most

¹¹⁷ K. Kålund, ‘Et gammel-norsk rune rim og nogle islandiske rune-remser’ in *Småstykker 1-16* (Copenhagen: S. L. Møllers Bogtrykkeri, 1884), 1-22, 6.

¹¹⁸ Dickins, *Runic and Heroic Poems*, 7.

¹¹⁹ R. I. Page, ‘On the Norwegian Rune Poem’ in *Runica, Germanica, Mediaevalia* (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 2003), 553-66, 558-9.

¹²⁰ Page, ‘On the Norwegian Rune Poem’, 565.

verses in the standard editions can be relied upon for substance', and the few significant variants will be acknowledged in the following analysis.¹²¹

The Norwegian poem treats the younger *fuþark*, and therefore consists of sixteen stanzas, each of two lines. The metre relies upon both alliteration and rhyme, and according to Clunies Ross constitutes 'a variant of the group that Snorri Sturluson termed *runhendur*' or 'end-rhymed'.¹²² The following is based on Dickins' edition in *Runic and Heroic Poems*, though with the aim, again, of giving the runes rather than their names prominence:

ƿ vǽldr frǽnda róge;
fōðesk ulfr í skóge. (Fé)¹²³

ᚱ er af illu jarne;
opt løypr ræinn á hjarne. (Úr)¹²⁴

ᚷ vǽldr kvinna kvillu;
kátr værðr fār af illu. (Þurs)¹²⁵

ᚦ er flæstra færða
fōr; en skalpr er sværða. (Óss)¹²⁶

ᚱ kveða rossom væsta;
Reginn sló sværðet bæzta. (Ræið)¹²⁷

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 566.

¹²² Margaret Clunies Ross, 'The Anglo-Saxon and Norse Rune Poems: A Comparative Study', *ASE* 10 (1990), 23-39, 31.

¹²³ '(Wealth) causes discord among relatives; the wolf grows up in the forest.'

¹²⁴ '(Slag) is from bad iron; the reindeer often lopes over the compacted snow.'

¹²⁵ '(Giant) causes sickness in women; few celebrate bad luck.'

¹²⁶ '(River mouth) is most often the way of journeys; but a scabbard is for swords.'

¹²⁷ '(Riding), it is said, is worst for horses; Reginn forged the best sword.'

Ǫ er barna bǫlván;
bǫl gǫrver nán fǫlván. (Kaun)¹²⁸

* er kaldastr korna;
Kristr skóp hæimenn forna. (Hagall)¹²⁹

ǫ gerer næppa koste;
nøktan kælr í froste. (Nauðr)¹³⁰

Ǫ kǫllum brú bræiða;
blindan þarf at læiða. (Ís)¹³¹

† er gumna góðe;
get ek at ǫrr var Fróðe. (Ár)¹³²

ᚿ er landa ljóme;
lúti ek helgum dóme. (Sól)¹³³

↑ er æinendr ása;
opt værðr smiðr blása. (Týr)¹³⁴

B er laufgrønstr líma;
Loki bar flærða tíma. (Bjarkan)¹³⁵

¹²⁸ (Ulcer) is the curse of children; death makes a corpse livid.'

¹²⁹ (Hail) is the coldest of grains; Christ fashioned the heavens in former times.'

¹³⁰ (Need) presents little choice; the naked-one is chilled by the frost.'

¹³¹ (Ice) we call the broad bridge; the blind one needs to be led.'

¹³² (Harvest) is a benefit to men; I see that Fróði was generous.'

¹³³ (Sun) is the light of the land; I bow before divine judgement.'

¹³⁴ '(Tyr) amongst the gods is one-handed; the smith often has to blow.'

¹³⁵ '(Birch) is the most green-leaved of limbs; Loki bore prosperity in deceit.'

ʏ er moldar auki;
 mikil er græip á hauki. (Maðr)¹³⁶

ǫ er, fællr ór fjalle
 foss; en gull ero nosser. (Lǫgr)¹³⁷

ʰ er vetrgrønstr viðá;
 vænt er, er brennr, at sviða. (Ýr)¹³⁸

A number of the stanzas do appear to represent rather superficial treatments of the runes in question, incorporating platitudes about everything from bad luck to the manner in which yew wood burns. It is hard not to get the impression that content may well have been sacrificed to form, in the manner of a children's rhyme. Indeed, the rather clunky end-rhyme used in this poem tends to be avoided by many practitioners of Icelandic poetry, and is not a feature of its most celebrated forms, such as *fornyrðislag*, *ljóðabáttr* or the elaborate *dróttkvætt* measure. When end-rhyme is used by the protagonist of *Egils saga* in *Höfuðlausn*, a poem of praise for his captor Eirik Bloodaxe, it may well be employed in mockery of the king, although like the *Norwegian Rune Poem*, *Höfuðlausn* is certainly 'undervalued', as Hines has demonstrated.¹³⁹ In any case, the use of a verse form commonly (though perhaps mistakenly) regarded as unsophisticated, as un-skaldic, has only reinforced the notion that the poem constitutes little more than a piece of doggerel verse, along the lines of the nursery rhyme beginning 'A was an Archer who shot at a frog' which Bruce Dickins rather

¹³⁶ '(Man) is the augmentation of earth; great is the claw of the hawk.'

¹³⁷ '(Water) falls in a waterfall from the mountainside; but ornaments are made of gold.'

¹³⁸ '(Yew) is the greenest of woods in the winter; it is to be expected that when in burns it crackles.'

¹³⁹ John Hines, 'Egill's *Höfuðlausn* in Time and Place', *SBVS* 24 (1995), 83-104, 83.

dismissively offers for comparison with the rune-poem tradition.¹⁴⁰ It is not hard to see how such a conclusion might be reached; occasionally, the reader is hard pressed to find a connection of any kind between platitudes, in the relationship between the statements ‘(úr) er af illu jarne’, ‘(Slag) comes from bad iron’ (l. 3) and ‘opt løpr ræinn á hjarne’, ‘the reindeer often lopes over the compacted snow’ (l. 4), for example. These lines appear to be connected only in the most tangential manner, possibly exhibiting some shared idiomatic value that a contemporary reader would recognise, an association between brittle slag and hard frozen or impacted snow, for example. It also is hard to see what immediate relevance the image of the running deer has to the *úr* rune, although, as we shall see, the connection is actually delightfully simple, linked to the shape of the rune, rather than its name.

Although certain couplets appear to exhibit little continuity of sense, there are some notable exceptions to the rule that should immediately suggest a more developed poetic sensibility. A number of apparently unrelated lines exhibit subtle connections when viewed as balancing or probing contrasts rather than sequential lines, relying on the pointed ‘juxtaposition of apparently disparate material’ for their effect, which Clunies Ross points out is in the manner of the *bjástælt* or ‘abuttal’ technique outlined by Snorri in his *Skáldskaparmál*.¹⁴¹ The qualification of the statement that ‘wealth causes discord amongst relatives’ in the first line of the poem by the truism that ‘fóðesk ulfr i skóge’, ‘the wolf lives most often in the forest’ (l. 2) is a thoughtful one, the implication being that though wealth and civilization (and indeed, relatives) may be a source of strife, it should be weighed against the primordial dangers of the forest, the haunt of the lonely wolf. This contrasting

¹⁴⁰ Dickins, *Runic and Heroic Poems*, v.

¹⁴¹ Clunies Ross, ‘The Anglo-Saxon and Norse Rune Poems’, 31.

image is positioned to speak to the initial gnomic statement, to give us pause for thought about the absolute value of the initial piece of received wisdom. Similarly, the fact that ‘Kristr skóp hæimenn forna’, ‘Christ fashioned the heavens in former times’ (l. 14) tempers the negative imagery of hail as the coldest of grains by the recognition that it is part of the divine scheme of creation, counterpart to the *sól* of strophe 11, which is also associated with divine judgement. Even the statements that ‘(kaun) er barna þolvan’, ‘(The Ulcer) is fatal for children’ and ‘þol gørver nán fólvan’, ‘death makes a corpse livid’ (ll. 11-12) are connected beyond the obvious relationship of illness causing death; the colour of the ulcer may be likened to the livid appearance of the corpse, the one paleness prefiguring the other, as it were.

We might also look for a mythical or literary context to explain certain non-sequential lines. A relationship between the seemingly unconnected statements that riding is worst for horses, and the following piece of information that ‘Reginn sló sværðet bæzta’ (l. 10) can perhaps be provided by the clear reference in *Fáfnismál* to Sigurðr’s loading of his horse Grani with treasure shortly after dispatching Reginn with his own sword. Snorri explains in the *Prose Edda* that this is the origin of the kenning ‘byrðr Grana’ or ‘burden of Grani’,¹⁴² the importance of this image reinforced by the central depiction of Sigurðr’s horse loaded with treasure on the famous Ramsund Carving. The mention of Reginn’s sword brings to mind a particular episode where riding was hard on a horse, reinforcing the gnomic statement with a specific and well-known image. There may also be a connection in stanza xiii between the birch as ‘laufgrønstr líma’ (l. 25) ‘the greenest of limbs’ and a particular deception of Loki, in which he kills Baldr using a dart fashioned by green mistletoe, an

¹⁴² Snorri Sturluson, *Edda: Skáldskaparmál*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1998), 47.

association first made by Dickins.¹⁴³ The oblique nature of both connections forces the reader to actively interpret rather than passively receive stanzas which can be appreciated best as variations on the poetic riddle.

Despite evidence of deeper poetic strategies than the haphazard conjoining of rhyming lines, a number of the stanzas do contain images or platitudes that appear irreconcilable, either with one another, or in the case of the B-line, with the rune name itself. The evidence of a developed poetic sensibility should, however, make us wary of dismissing these lines as mnemonic gobbledygook. It is clearly worth considering the shape and form of the rune and its potential impact on poetic composition. This is a theory that has been mooted by Aslak Liestøl¹⁴⁴ and Bernd Neuner,¹⁴⁵ amongst others, and most recently championed by Jonna Louis-Jensen.¹⁴⁶ The following analysis agrees with her contention that in a number of cases there is an element in the stanza which suggests the shape of the character, providing some additional evidence to support this theory. However, it takes issue with her identification of a so-called ‘pictographic principle’ at work in the poem, above all the suggestion that the role of the poem was to help recall the shapes through recitation.¹⁴⁷ Rather, I see the characters on the page serving as the locus for a series of riddles on form, name and nature.

¹⁴³ Dickins, *Runic and Heroic Poems*, 35.

¹⁴⁴ Aslak Liestøl, ‘Det norske runediktet’ in *Maal og Minne* (1948), 65-71.

¹⁴⁵ Bernd Neuner, ‘Das Norwegische Runengedicht – was sich hinter den zweiten Zeilen verbirgt’ in *Runes and their Secrets: Studies in Runology*, ed. Marie Stoklund *et al.* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, 2006), 233-245.

¹⁴⁶ Jonna Louis-Jensen, ‘The Norwegian Runic Poem as a Mnemonic Device: The pictographic principle’ in *Preprints to the Seventh International Runic Symposium* (Oslo: 2010), <http://www.khm.uio.no/forskning/publikasjoner/runenews/7th-symp/preprint/louis-jensen.pdf>, 1-5.

¹⁴⁷ Louis-Jensen, ‘The Norwegian Runic Poem’, 2.

One B-line that is particularly difficult to reconcile with the image preceding it occurs in the stanza dealing with the *maðr* rune. The statement that ‘mikil er græip á hauki’, or ‘great is the talon of the hawk’ (l. 28) simply has nothing to do with the statement that ‘Maðr er moldar auki’ (l. 27) ‘man is an augmentation of earth’, or indeed with the rune name itself. However, as Liestøl first suggested, it is possible that the second image, or the B-line, could be referring to the shape of the rune *maðr*, Ψ , as an outstretched talon, rather than to the rune name itself, providing a comment about the form of the rune in question. Liestøl also refers to the stanza treating the *sól* rune, which refers to the light of the world and kneeling before a shrine (ll. 21-2). Here he suggests, less convincingly this time, that the rune resembles a man kneeling in prayer, if, that is, it is rotated 90°. Again, a reference to the shape of the runic character helps to explain the strange reference to ‘kneeling’, which seems to have nothing to do with the name of the rune. The third of his examples has a more solid foundation, and explains the rationale behind the ‘unrelated’ B line in the couplet ‘* (Hagall) er kaldastr korna, / Kristr skóp hæiminn forna.’, ‘Hail is the coldest of grains, Christ created the ancient world’ (ll. 13-14). Rather than representing a benign platitude, a poetic space-filler as it were, the (doctrinally erroneous) reference to Christ creating the world might well have to do with the rune’s affinity to the Christogram, a ligature of Greek letters <X> and <P>, for which it appears to be substituted in inscriptions at, for example, Maeshowe and Urnes stave church.¹⁴⁸

Neuner built upon Liestøl’s discovery by proposing a further link between the B-line and three other runic characters; *ís*, *ræið* and *týr*. The first of these rune stanzas, describing ice in terms of a bridge, and then referencing a blind man who must be led, ‘l (Ís) kǫllum brú bræiða. / Blindan þarf

¹⁴⁸ Liestøl, ‘Det norske runediktet’, 67.

at læiða' (ll.17-18) exhibits some continuity of sense between the A and B lines—a blind man would indeed find it hard to walk across a bridge—but Neuner is right to look to look to the shape for a closer association. He suggests that the 'einfachste bildliche Assoziation' is to 'der Stab oder Stock', and particularly to the walking stick used by the frail and the blind.¹⁴⁹ The reference to R, *ræið*, being 'kveða rossom væsta', 'worst for horses' (l. 9), followed by the seemingly unconnected statement that 'Reginn s[ló] sværðit bæsta' (l.10) might work conceptually, as I suggested earlier, but Neuner also suggests that the rune resembles a severed anvil,¹⁵⁰ a bizarre contention, but one that becomes slightly more attractive when reference is made to the representation of the anvil on the Ramsund Carving, again depicting the Sigurd legend.¹⁵¹ Nor would such an association invalidate the connection between Grani and Regin in the legendary cycle, and the mythical link between the lines. There is no reason I can see that the references in the poem cannot work on multiple levels, the stanza perhaps alluding both to Grani's burden and the chopping of Regin's anvil, both images represented on the Sigurd stones.

The stanza accompanying the runic character Týr provides us with another fusion of apparently disparate ideas, the clear reference to the god in the first line, '1 (Týr) er ænhendr ása;' appears to be unconnected to the second line 'opt værðr smiðr blása.' (ll. 23-4). There is no clear association between Týr and smithing, unless it is the oblique connection between war and the art of forging weapons. Neuner suggests, again rather unconvincingly, that the reference is to the forging of

¹⁴⁹ Neuner, 'Das Norwegische Runengedicht', 238.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 240.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 240, note 20.

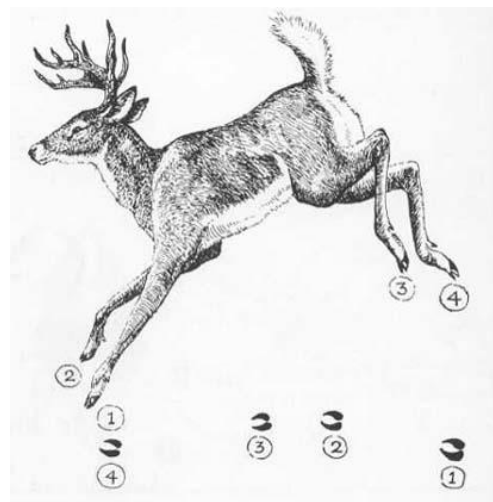
Thor's hammer Mjöllnir, a shape which could conceivably be seen in the rune.¹⁵² However, the platitude that a smith 'often has to blow' is hardly enough of a stimulus to bring this episode to mind, and the purported mnemonic principle needs to give the reader at least something to go on in order to serve its purpose. Louis-Jensen also disagrees with this interpretation, questioning whether a reader would be inspired to recall Mjöllnir over any other forged object, instead offering the interpretation that this rune represents the wooden part of a pair of bellows, a shape I find very hard to see reflected in the rune. There are much clearer ways to describe such a distinctive shape, and I wonder if the forged object that might be referred to is not simply a spear head or arrow, both requiring much blowing from the smith in order to shape them, particularly with the need to forge multiple arrowheads. A closer connection with shape, however, may actually be seen in the characterisation of the god by his one-handed appearance in the A-line, representing a subtle allusion, what Liestøl terms 'eit slags teiknspel', to the fact that the *týr* rune, ᚏ, represented in all manuscripts is the single branched, or *æinendr* (l. 23), form of the long-branched ᚏ.¹⁵³ If we see the reference to shape not as a description of the rune for those with only a rudimentary knowledge of the *futhork*, but as a reference to and reinforcement of the image on the page, then such allusions cannot be completely dismissed.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 239.

¹⁵³ Liestøl, 'Det norske runediktet', 70. The *Norwegian Rune Poem* does not, of course, reflect the runic system in use at the time the poem was written down in the late thirteenth century, which would have been the extended medieval *futhork*; it refers to the younger *futhork*, of which there were two variants, so-called short-twigged (or Norwegian/Swedish) and long-branched (or Danish) runes. There has been much debate concerning the contexts in which the two variants were used, but they certainly coexisted throughout the Viking Age. The rune used to represent the unvoiced alveolar plosive [t] in the medieval *futhork* is identical with the short-twigged rune.

Louis-Jensen has made three additional suggestions that she believes conform to the pictographic principle she sees at work in the poem. One of these concerns the U rune, *úr*, which as mentioned appears to join two unrelated ideas, the fact ‘slag comes from bad iron’ and that ‘often the reindeer lopes over the compacted snow’ (ll. 3-4). Connecting the reference to smithing in the A-line to the purported reference to shape in the B-line, she suggests that the allusion is to the horseshoe, which the reindeer lacks, taking the verb *løypr* itself to mean ‘slip’,¹⁵⁴ rather than making reference to Worm’s (suspect?) variant reading ‘Opt sliepur Rani a hiarni’, most likely a distinctive Icelandic variant version which Page translates as ‘often the ski slithers on the frozen snow’.¹⁵⁵

Whilst the connection between iron-smelting and the reindeer is an ingenious one, I think it is too complicated to support the ‘pictographic principle’. In actual fact, the reindeer print itself closely resembles the *úr* rune, leaving a distinctive mark wherever it passes ‘á hjarne’, as illustrated below. Compacted snow in particular preserves a clear imprint of animal tracks. There is no need to look further for a connection between the unexpected image and the rune shape.



Drawing by Luis M. Henderson from *Animal Tracks* (Harrisburg: Stackpole, 1954).

¹⁵⁴ Louis-Jensen, ‘The Norwegian Runic Poem’, 4.

¹⁵⁵ Page, ‘On the Norwegian Rune Poem’, 564.

Louis-Jensen's suggestion that the B-line of the first stanza, which relates to ƿ (*fē*), and reads 'føðesk ulfr í skóge', 'the wolf dwells in the forest', makes reference to the shape of the trees in the forest, is tenuous, possible only as a riddlic allusion to a shape before the reader. It is, after all, difficult to see how this reference to the wolf in the forest (not even to the trees) could inspire one to recall the shape of a rune which only vaguely resembles a tree. Similarly, working on a new reading of the stanza relating to the B (*bjarkan*) rune, and translating 'Loki bar flærða tíma' as 'Loki bore/gave birth to the breed of deceit', Louis-Jensen has 'no doubt' that 'the association meant to be called forth by the B-line is to the silhouette of a pregnant woman as a symbol of female fertility.'¹⁵⁶

I do not so much want to question the validity of her reading, as the principle that an oblique reference such as to Loki birthing the foal Slepnir could help you to remember the shape of the rune when recited, which seems very far-fetched. If the runic character appears on the page, and the play of the poem is to unravel the allusion, then I think such proposals are tenable. The poem may well have had some mnemonic function with regard to remembering the rune names, but the subtle and suggestive allusions to shape are surely directed towards an audience that is already well acquainted with their form, and which can thus enjoy un-riddling the oblique connection.

There are, as far as I can see, two more stanzas that might be said to work in this connection. The relationship between ǫ (*óss*), here 'river mouth', and the twin statements that 'Óss er flæstra færða fōr / en skalpr er sværða', 'the river mouth is the way of most journeys, but a scabbard is for swords' (ll. 7-8), is again an obscure one, perhaps relying on the way in which a scabbard opening resembles a mouth, thus playing with the way in which a commonality can be wrought from

¹⁵⁶ Louis-Jensen, 'The Norwegian Runic Poem', 4.

dissimilar images.¹⁵⁷ The connection is perhaps made more tenable by the shape of the rune, ᚠ, which could be construed either as a river opening into the sea, or the hilt, or mouth, of a scabbard. Again, the image is not really distinctive enough to serve as a guide to the shape of the rune, but it is a pertinent allusion when you have the rune before you on the page.

Similarly, when treating the rune ᚢ (*logr*), we should recognise that water cannot be said to most often be ‘fællr ó fjalle foss’, ‘a waterfall which falls from a mountain’ (l. 29) and the choice of this very particular image may stem from the greater resemblance of ᚢ to water cascading rather than flowing or lying still. Working from the premise that the shape of the character was known, and that these stanzas function in the same mode as the OE *Rune Poem*, as visually oriented riddles, it is important not to dismiss the form of the rune as a reinforcement of the poetic description. The connection with the statement in the B-line ‘en gull ero nosser’, ‘but beaten ornaments are made of gold’, or Worm’s variant ‘Fost en gul eru nalli’, translated by him as ‘Aurum peculium preciosum’¹⁵⁸ is a hard one to fathom. Runolphus has a variant ‘Fasta eign gull er Jalle’, ‘a prince is resolute with his gold’, that helps to associate the two statements as thematical contrasts between the mutable and the constant, though this may well be due to his endeavour to show how ‘the two lines of the stanza have a common theme despite their dysfunction’.¹⁵⁹ Bauer suggests a connection with the gold hidden in the water in the Eddic tradition, which later became popularised in the Nibelungenlied

¹⁵⁷ The variant produced by Runolphus Jonas in 1651, ‘Os er flaustr ferda/Føt eru skalpur Suerda’ perhaps conveniently creates a semantic association between ships secure in the river mouth and a sheathed sword, as ‘each has its own place of safety’, Page, ‘On the Norwegian Rune Poem’, 562. I suspect that this variant has its origins in the editor’s desire to impose sense on lines he found difficult to associate with each other.

¹⁵⁸ ‘Gold is a precious commodity’, Page, ‘On the Norwegian Rune Poem’, 558. Page admits to being baffled by this translation which may be a ‘desperate attempt at something he found incomprehensible’.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 559.

tradition as the ‘Gold des Rheins’, and such a connection may indeed be tenable considering the allusions to the Sigurd legend earlier in the poem.¹⁶⁰ But it is possible that the reference might also be a material one, particularly bearing in mind the noun used, derived from *hnossian*, ‘to hammer’.¹⁶¹ The † rune appears on a number of gold bracteates, a type of adornment popular during the Migration Age, either as the first character in the amuletic sequences *laðu* or *laukr*, or alone, perhaps as an abbreviation of these words.¹⁶² Is it possible that some reflex of this material context survived in the poetic tradition? This epigraphical context could well be the connection between the rune form and its association in the poem with ‘gold ornaments’. Either way, the material world and shape of the rune may both be given expression beneath these apparently benign platitudes.

To sum up, rather than stressing the poem’s embodiment of a ‘pictographic principle’, whereby the primary purpose of the poem is to act as an aid to remembering the shapes of the runes, it is sensible to recognise a characterisation of the runes on a number of different levels. The theory that there is a mnemonic principle at work in the poem is undoubtedly attractive, but the references to shape are simply not systematic enough to work in this respect. Neuner suggests that the systematic connection between shape and B-line may have been lost in transmission of the poem, but if that is the case we would still expect those couplets that *do* still preserve this tradition to exhibit more than just an oblique connection.¹⁶³ Referring to a man kneeling in prayer that must then be inverted, or to a severed anvil by relation to the forging of the sword that cleaved it, or indeed to the silhouette

¹⁶⁰ Bauer, *Runengedichte*, 158.

¹⁶¹ *CV*, 277.

¹⁶² See the following chapter for an extended discussion of such amuletic formulae.

¹⁶³ Neuner, ‘Das Norwegische Runengedicht’, 243.

of a pregnant woman by allusion to Loki's antics, are references that are simply not direct enough to aid in the recollection of rune-shapes. If you are not able to remember the forms of the 16 runes of the younger *fupark*, you would be unlikely to be helped much by an oblique reference that left room for misinterpretation, for the drawing of a sword rather than an anvil, an upright hawk's claw rather than a descending one, or the wooden parts of a bellows rather than the products of the blacksmith.

Rather than being composed to elucidate systematically all the shapes of the runes for the person reciting the poem, this conceit should be understood as a riddlic discourse on the runes as characters. In fact, regarding the poem as a poorly functioning mnemonic piece still represents, I believe, a rather reductive view. If we choose instead to view it as a more complex literary work, rather like the OE *Rune Poem*, where each couplet represents an allusive and sometimes enigmatic characterisation of the runic character on the page, then it is much easier to account for different influences: for the fact that in certain cases the prime allusion is to the shape, and to the material world with which runes were primarily associated, in others to the place the rune-name has in the complex of Old Norse myth, or that they represent obscure *idéassosiasjoner*, the poetic connections between images stressed by Magnus Olsen.¹⁶⁴ The task for the reader is to unravel the allusion in each case, to work out what the connection is, and to reconcile apparently disparate or unconnected images. Viewed in this way, there is not a single stanza that remains wholly unfathomable, and none that can be dismissed as a poetic space filler. Essentially the poem functions, I believe, as a series of miniature riddles, riddles that take much of their inspiration from the shape, form and function of the runes as written characters.

¹⁶⁴ Magnus Olsen, 'Bemerkninger til det Norske Runedikt' in *Maal og Minne* (1948), 72-5, 72.

Conclusion

Textuality is at once a simple concept, and one that is curiously difficult to pin down, carrying overlapping meanings within different disciplines. In the simplest sense, however, it refers to that which defines a text as a subject for study, the focus being on form or construction rather than content. Indeed, the etymology of the word ‘text’, Latin *textus*, from the root *tex-ĕre* ‘to weave’ (and related, of course, to texture), stresses its material, constructed nature.¹⁶⁵ And that is the sense in which I have been using it here, stressing the ornamental attributes of the text, and focusing on the external structures of written language: the material from which a text is constructed, the script used, and the visual and tactile dimensions of writing.

Runes, as we have seen, can have a number of effects when they appear in literary works, at the most basic level having a bearing on the way the text presents written language and thus conveys meaning. They also carry certain conceptual associations, as we have seen in the preceding chapters, and these associations may contribute to the complete construction of meaning in the poem. But on a more tangible level, the use of runes in a manuscript can also introduce a body of textual associations external to the textual environment of the book, evoking what Spurkland terms the mentalities of ‘literacy’ and ‘runacy’ in the same textual space.¹⁶⁶

In *Solomon and Saturn I* the ornamental runes become the focus for the representation of graphic, personified, tactile letters. In the *Old English Rune Poem* not only do the written characters serve as the visual locus for each riddlic stanza, but also in certain cases the form of the rune can be shown to influence its portrayal, and the structure of the *futhorc* in turn shapes the construction of

¹⁶⁵ text, *n.*¹. *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: OUP, 1989). OED Online, <http://www.oed.com>.

¹⁶⁶ Spurkland, ‘Literacy and “Runacy”’, 334.

the poem itself. In the *Norwegian Rune Poem* this connection between form and literary content can also be clearly traced, many stanzas alluding to the shape of the rune. In all cases the script is positioned as ‘other’ because of its manuscript context, defined against the *logos* of the Latinate body text. It is clear that we cannot talk about the textuality of runes in poetry without reference to this dominant, normative tradition. It is clear also that the presence of runes in a Latinate manuscript often introduces a productive moment of difference, a visual disconnect within a text of ‘regularly formed characters lined up like bricks in a wall’¹⁶⁷ that allows for contemplation of how writing functions as a visual medium, introducing a heightened attention to the texture, appearance and material context of the written word. They are clear examples, I would argue, of what Barthes refers to as the ‘double sign’, a signifier ‘which gestures to its own material existence at the same time as it conveys a meaning’.¹⁶⁸

Neither the *Icelandic Rune Poem(s)*, best characterised as a ‘rhetorical lexicon’,¹⁶⁹ nor the earliest surviving manifestation of a rune-rhyme, the *Abecedarium Nordmannicum*, show any clear attention to the form of the characters or writing practices associated with the runic script. In the case of the Icelandic tradition, the names are preserved in the context of a culture of skald-craft, where old traditions are maintained in order to understand archaisms in poetry, and to furnish poets with the necessary tools to compose within this tradition; as a result it is the names themselves which take priority.¹⁷⁰ The *Abecedarium Nordmannicum*, on the other hand, is a piece of mnemonic ‘doggerel’

¹⁶⁷ Kendrick, *Animating the Letter*, 38.

¹⁶⁸ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 118.

¹⁶⁹ Marijane Osborn, ‘Hleotan and the Purpose of the *Old English Rune Poem*’, *Folklore* 92/2 (1981), 168-173, 168.

¹⁷⁰ The Icelandic poem is not, as has been asserted by Page and others, devoid of literary value, but it is perhaps only a *rune* poem ‘by courtesy’. R. I. Page, *The Icelandic Rune-Poem* (London: The Viking Society for Northern Research, 2009), 1.

that does not really deserve to be called a poem at all.¹⁷¹ It is found in a ninth-century manuscript, St Gall, Stiftsbibliothek, ms 878, is composed in an admixture of Low and High German, and probably originates from a missionary school at Fulda.¹⁷² It treats the Norse *fuþark* from a distance, and belongs with other continental representations of the runes outside their working context; as Halsall rightly argues ‘there is no significant resemblance between this inept alliterative jingle and any of the other three rune poems’.¹⁷³

However, in a chapter so closely concerned with runes as manifestations of writing as a process, a closing comment should be made about the Anglo-Saxon runic note inserted in the manuscript below the opening line of the rhyme. This sequence might be transcribed as Þᚱᚷ↑, **wreat**, and it has been suggested that this may constitute an unusual form of the verb *writan*, ‘to write’, perhaps corresponding to the form *uuritan* which appears later in the rhyme itself.¹⁷⁴ If this is so, it may itself represent an embryonic piece of meta-writing, a statement that encapsulates a common reader’s response to the ornamental qualities of runes in manuscripts: a heightened awareness of writing as a process. Whether knowledgeable about the runic tradition or not, the presence of the alternative script on the page seems to have inspired this individual to refer to writing in the very act of expressing himself in runes.¹⁷⁵ In many ways this marginal comment serves to neatly characterise a textuality defined as much by the outward appearance of writing as by the utterance itself.

¹⁷¹ Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta*, 73.

¹⁷² *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁷³ Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem*, 35.

¹⁷⁴ Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta*, 79. There is some debate about the first character of the transcription: if the first character is read as þ rather than w this gives us the word *þreat*, ‘troop, violence’ for which no adequate rationale has been offered.

¹⁷⁵ An interesting analogy to this is the runic *abcd* penned in the margins of Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 41, which Page suggests may have been inspired by the reference to *ure stafa* ‘our letters’ in the text, ‘Runic writing, Roman script’, 133.

Chapter 4

The Ancient Rune: Re-Scripting the Past in the Heroic Poems of the *Edda*

[*Helgakviða Hjörvarzsonar*: St. 29. *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II*: Sts 12, 34. *Grípisspá*: St. 17.

Sigrdrífumál: Sts 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19. *Guðrúnarkviða I*: St. 23

Guðrúnarkviða II: St. 22, *Dráp Niflunga*, *Atlamál in grænlenzko*: Sts 4, 9, 11, 12]

Introduction

As a body of work the mythological and heroic poems of the Codex Regius of the *Poetic Edda* (Royal Library, Copenhagen GkS 2365 4^{to}) undoubtedly constitute the superlative source for contemporary literary engagement with the runes, dealing with everything from the mythical origins of the script to the skills deemed necessary for the rune-carver. Whilst the Codex Regius manuscript dates from the second half of the thirteenth century,¹ the poems themselves are of varying provenance, and much ink has been spilled attempting to date and locate them.² Even in the early twentieth century Bellows was cautious enough about the dating to suggest that ‘the years between 900 and 1050 saw the majority of the Eddic poems put into shape’.³ The current consensus

¹ The date of c. 1270 given by Jónsson and Wimmer in their *Codex Regius*, LXXII, has been accepted by the majority of later scholars. The Codex Regius shows some signs that it is a copy of an earlier manuscript, the ‘careful use of space on the last few leaves’ and ‘irregularities in the second Helgi section’ suggesting that a written exemplar may have been used. Andreas Heusler, *Codex Regius of the Elder Edda* (Copenhagen: Levin and Munksgaard, 1937), 16.

² For a historical survey of attempts to date Eddic poetry see Bjarne Fidjestøl, *The Dating of Eddic Poetry* (Hafnia: C. A. Reitzels, 1999).

³ Henry Adams Bellows, *The Poetic Edda* (New York: The American-Scandinavian Foundation, 1923), xvii.

allows somewhat more leeway, Hallberg suggesting that ‘the genesis of the Eddic poems covers a considerable space of time, perhaps from the 9th to the 13th century’.⁴

It is possible, therefore, that certain of the poems were composed at a time in which the myths related still had something of a social and religious currency. It is also likely that some of them—*Atlamál in grænlenzko* for instance—represent late reworkings of the material, and that many poems ‘reveal the hand of the creative literary artist’.⁵ All that can be said with confidence is that ‘the traditions underlying Eddic poetry were widespread in Scandinavia’, and that one or more individuals considered them to be worth recording in thirteenth-century Iceland.⁶

The distinction between the mythological poems of the Codex Regius and the so-called heroic lays, a distinction recognised in the following chapters, is one of degrees rather than absolutes, the traditional labels suggesting a division that is ‘unwarrantably sharp’.⁷ That is not to deny that there is a clear evolution in the manuscript between the first sequence of poems which deal almost exclusively with the gods, and the sequence of poems beginning with the three Helgi lays and ending with *Hamðismál*, which treat the heroic past, or that the poems in these discrete sequences share certain characteristics.⁸ The redactor was apparently concerned to present a historical progression ‘from the sacred prehistory of the gods to the human prehistory of the heroic poetry’,⁹ and clearly conceived of two variegated assemblages of poetry. However, the two genres bleed into

⁴ Peter Hallberg, ‘Eddic Poetry’ in *MSE*, 149–52, 149.

⁵ R. G. Finch, ed., *Völsunga saga* (London: Nelson, 1965), xxxiv.

⁶ Hallberg, ‘Eddic Poetry’, 152.

⁷ E. O. G. Turville-Petre, *Myth and Religion of the North* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1964), 9.

⁸ Dronke, *Poetic Edda: I*, xii.

⁹ John Lindow, Entry for ‘Mythology’ in *MSE*, 423–6, 424.

one another at numerous points, the protagonists of *Völundarkviða* occupying a space somewhere between the mythological and the legendary and ‘difficult to place in either of the two main categories of Eddic poetry’,¹⁰ whilst the poem *Sigrdrífumál*, which falls squarely into the heroic section, is dominated by mythological material that might well have belonged originally to a poem such as *Hávamál*.¹¹

Any literary analysis must be wary of rigidly circumscribing material such as this, and in reading the runic episodes in the heroic lays from a different perspective to that used to treat the mythological poems in the following chapter, I am not suggesting that we can take these references in critical isolation, and detach the runes portrayed here from a cultural mythologizing of writing, simply because they are not presented within mythological poems. Indeed, the re-scripting of history—the construction of a past that used runes through a literate present—could itself be construed as part of a wider social mythology. Rather, these final chapters serve as alternative critical lenses through which to view the runic material of the *Edda* as a whole.

That said, it has ‘long been an axiom that all Germanic heroic poetry derives from some historical event’,¹² and a concern with the occasional vague relation the heroic cycle bears to real events and individuals, including the ‘remarkable resemblance’ of Atli’s death to death of Attila the Hun recorded by the historian Priscus, does in some way serve to differentiate it from the mythological material.¹³ It does not necessarily follow that vestiges of historical practice will

¹⁰ Peter Hallberg, *Old Icelandic Poetry: Eddic Lay and Skaldic Verse* trans. Paul Schach and Sonja Lindgrenson (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1975), 61.

¹¹ Bellows, *The Poetic Edda*, 388.

¹² Finch, *Völsunga saga*, xxxii

¹³ Dronke, *Poetic Edda: I*, 32.

accompany the use of historical characters and settings, of course, but it is the different expectations that are important. The heroic landscape is, after all, a human landscape, however ‘ancient’ and fantastical, and the runic topoi at work in these poems may also be premised on this semblance of history. A critical comparison of the runes represented in the heroic poems with the surviving corpus of runic inscriptions, something that has been implicit in all the approaches in this thesis, may be particularly apposite to this genre, and contribute to one of the prevailing discourses.

The purpose of this exercise in reading literary references to runes for their historical resonances does not, of course, have as its aim any kind of rehabilitation of the misplaced nineteenth-century view that the Eddic poems represent a more or less reliable historical source, nor will it stray into the fallacy particular to the twentieth century, and attempt a reconstruction of runic ritual as practiced by our ‘ancient forbears’. It is certainly not my contention that there is any latent historical truth or ‘Spirit of the Germanic North’ encoded in *Sigrdrífumál* or any of the other heroic poems.¹⁴ Antonsen’s warning that ‘nearly 1000 years separate the manuscript from the inscriptions’ is to be heeded at all times; indeed, that curious historical lag will be at the forefront of the following discussion.¹⁵ In this chapter I will simply examine those indistinct and fleeting moments where the poetry and the material evidence for writing runes appears to overlap, in order to gauge the particular historical awareness the composers of these poems either possessed, or professed. In doing so I hope, ultimately, to highlight the literary accomplishment of the heroic cycle.

¹⁴ As Lee M. Hollander summarises the speculations of the Romantics, *The Poetic Edda*, 2nd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1962), xvii.

¹⁵ Elmer H. Antonsen, ‘Rengði þær Vingi (Am. 4.2) ‘Vingi distorted them’: “Omitted Runes” – A Question of Typology?’ in *Language Change and Typological Variation: Vol. I*, ed. Edgar C. Polomé and Carol F. Justus (Washington: Institute for the Study of Man, 1999), 131–38, 135.

Sigrdrífumál

Allar vóro af scafnar, þær er vóro á ristnar,
 oc hverfðar við inn helga mið (St. 18:1-2)¹⁶

Of all the heroic poems, *Sigrdrífumál* is the most cited by runologists in their discourse on the epigraphical uses of the script, and has been used in support of a variety of interpretations of inscriptions.¹⁷ Indeed, the poem presents such a varied catalogue of uses for runes that evidence can be found to support almost any argument that one cares to put forward. The runic catalogue is, however, rarely analysed as a whole, with the poem as the starting point.¹⁸ This may be due to a number of factors. First of all, it is a decidedly untidy text, containing two of the most reproduced stanzas in Old Norse (the so-called prayer of Sigrdrífa), but also much that is unconnected, or only tangentially linked to the narrative framework, and recognised as ‘an extraordinary piece of patchwork’ even by early translators.¹⁹ Furthermore, it has lost its ending, and any poetic resolution, in the great lacuna of the manuscript. It is also fair to say that because of the enthusiasm with which it has been read by neopagan groups with wild ideas about the efficacy of the runes, it has become something of a poetic minefield, the literary equivalent (to borrow Jesse Byock’s analogy) of the snake pit in which Gunnar was forced to play the harp with his toes.²⁰ It is particularly imperative,

¹⁶ ‘All were scraped off, that were carved on, and mixed with the sacred mead.’

¹⁷ Indeed, Bernard Mees suggests that the pervasive connection between ale and the common runic formula *alu* in the critical discourse is an anachronistic projection based primarily on references to *qlrunar* in this poem. ‘Alu and hale’, *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association* 5 (2009), 107-131.

¹⁸ One relatively recent engagement with the material is Tom Markey’s article ‘Studies in Runic Origins 2: From Gods to Men’, *American Journal of Germanic Linguistics & Literatures* 11.2 (1999), 131-203.

¹⁹ Bellows, *The Poetic Edda*, 387.

²⁰ Jesse Byock, *The Saga of the Volsungs* (London: Penguin, 1999), 11.

therefore, that the rune-lore it purports to transmit be examined with a critical eye, and read in relation to the historical use of runes.

The sequence of runic pedagogy that comprises thirteen of the poem's thirty-seven stanzas is quite obviously not integral to the heroic narrative that runs throughout the Sigurðr cycle, and at no point does the hero put into practice the runic advice given here.²¹ Rather, the waking of Sigrdrífa appears to offer the poet an excuse for incorporating material that did not originally belong with this portion of the narrative sequence, which Andreas Heusler termed the *Erweckungslied*, or 'awakening song'.²² This in itself betrays something of the historical understanding of the poet, who considered the heroic past of the Migration Age to be an appropriate setting for such outlandish material. The inspiration for the inclusion of this runic lesson, which begins with the charming of the mead in stanza 5,²³ may have been the handing of a memory drink to Sigurðr, or it may have been brought to mind through the Valkyrie's dealings with Óðinn, the ostensible father of runic writing. There may also be a poetic foreshadowing of the runic discourse discernible in the visual imagery of Sigurðr cutting the corselet from the sleeping valkyrie in the prose introduction, the verb *rista* also used, of course, of the incising of runic inscriptions.

The incorporated runic material runs from stanzas 6 to 19, with stanzas 5 and 20 framing the runic lesson and providing a transition to the final section of the poem, which consists of gnomic

²¹ Hollander notes that the bulk of the poem's stanzas 'manifestly have no internal connection with the fate of Sigurth', *The Poetic Edda*, 233.

²² Andreas Heusler, *Die Lieder der Lücke im Codex Regius der Edda* in *Germanistische Abhandlungen Hermann Paul zum 17. März*, ed. Heusler et al. (Strassburg, 1902), 1-98, and *Kleine Schriften*, ed. von Stefan Sonderegger (Berlin, 1969), 223-291, 228.

²³ In *Vǫlsunga saga* a series of verses, approximate but not identical to the runic stanzas of *Sigrdrífumál* 5-21, appear in the prose narrative, with the effect that the discrete nature of the material is even more pronounced. These verses are sometimes referred to as *Brynildarljóða* to distinguish them from the Eddic verses.

wisdom in the manner of *Loddfáfnismál* or *Alvíssmál*. In neither the runic nor the gnomic material is the hero mentioned by name, or his past or future deeds referred to, and the poet has actually done very little to integrate the material into the heroic narrative, beyond providing the somewhat clunky framework. Where the runic material originates from, and in what context it first appeared, is a question that is impossible to answer, but a number of critics have noted its affinity to the mythical-gnomic wisdom dealt with in *Hávamál*.²⁴

The first reference to script in the poem is to runes used in the enchanting of beer. The drink is not only ‘magni blandinn oc megintíri’, ‘blended with magic and great glory’ (st. 5), but it is also full of ‘lióða oc líknstafa / góðra galdra ok gamanrúna’, ‘Spells and comfort, good charms and runes of pleasure.’²⁵ There is little in this stanza that points towards any knowledgeable reconstruction of runic charms, though as Judy Quinn suggests, the runes may have a conceptual role to play in this knowledge-giving ‘emulsion’, which combines verbal formulations with the ‘graphic representations of words’, blending writing technologies into the traditional conception of knowledge transmission through liquids.²⁶ It might be the case, however, that the impulse for adding runes to the mix came from the need to link the story of Sigrdrífa with the runic discourse that follows, and that the stanza was adapted by a later redactor for this purpose. Indeed, the runes

²⁴ See, for example, von See *et al.*, *Kommentar zur den Liedern der Edda*, V:526.

²⁵ *Gamanrúnar* (lit. pleasure-runes, but elsewhere ‘joyful conversation’) also appear in *Hávamál* in connection with the advice of a woman, st. 130.

²⁶ Judy Quinn, ‘Liquid Knowledge: Traditional Conceptualisations of Learning in Eddic Poetry’ in *Along the Oral Written Continuum: Types of Texts, Relations and their Implications*, ed. Slávica Rankovic *et al.* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 183-226, 190.

are only explicitly mentioned at the very close of the stanza, acting as a segue to the following catalogue of runic applications.

The account that follows is more specific as to the application and effect of the characters, and it is at this point, and not before, that I think we can start making certain comparisons with the runic tradition. The treatment of runes in the poem may be broken down as follows: victory-runes, ale-runes, ship-runes, healing, limb and speech runes, mind-runes and the myth of the appropriation of the runes, the catalogue of objects to be carved (apparently related by Mim's head), and the final summary paraphrasing the advice and introducing a few further categories. The following analysis will treat these rune-types in the order they appear in the poem, paying particular attention to any putative overlaps with Migration Age runic practice.

Victory-runes

Sigrúnar þú skalt kunna, ef þú vilt sigr hafa,
 ok rísta á hialti hiðrs,
 sumar á véttrimom, sumar á valbøstom
 oc nefna tysvar Týr (st. 6)²⁷

Victory-runes, to be carved on the sword, are one rune type mentioned in the poem that has at least some basis in the early history of the script. The tradition of inscribing swords with runes was evidently practiced from a very early period: Looijenga lists eleven weapons or weapon-parts in her

²⁷ 'Victory-runes you should know, if you want to have victory, and carve them on the sword-hilt, some on the ridge of the sword and some on the flat-parts, and name Týr twice.'

continental corpus, the second most common class of object after the brooches.²⁸ Even allowing for the fact that weapons are more likely to be preserved in grave contexts than more perishable items, they clearly represent a significant proportion of the inscribed objects from the Migration Age.

The carving of runes on the hilt, blade, and plates of a sword, all have a precedent in the early use of the script. Two of the Vimose finds include a third-century sword-chape which refers explicitly to the blade itself,²⁹ a sheath-mount,³⁰ as well as an inscribed spearhead.³¹ This is interesting in light of the reference later in *Sigrdrífumál* to engraving ‘á Gungnis oddi’, ‘on the point of Gungnir’ (st. 17), Óðinn’s spear. There are a number of spearheads dating from the second to the fourth century which are engraved ‘á oddi’. Some of these even seem to refer to the name or characteristic of the weapon, and may be intended to enhance its efficacy. The Dahmsdorf-Müncheberg lance has the word **ranja** clearly marked, meaning ‘router’ or ‘thruster’,³² whilst the early third century Kovel Spearhead reads **tilarids**, meaning ‘thither-rider’,³³ perhaps referring to the flight of the thrown spear, and the Øvre Stabu spear has **raunija(z)**, ‘tester, tryer’.³⁴ Indeed, if we include the Moos spear with its inscription **gaois** (barker?),³⁵ as Harris suggests, ‘then four of

²⁸ Looijenga, *Texts and Contexts*, 269. This corpus does not include the bracteates, of which over two hundred have been found.

²⁹ DR 205. Side A of the chape reads **makija**, ‘easily made out as the accusative singular of an ia- stem meaning “sword”’, Moltke, *Runes and their Origins*, 100.

³⁰ DR 207A. The inscription ... /awiñs/lw?(k) may incorporate the personal name *Awings*.

³¹ DR MS1995;334B . The inscription reads **Wagnijo**, referring to the tribe of the Vangiones from the Middle Rhine area. Tineke Looijenga, *Runes around the North Sea and on the Continent AD 150-700* (Groningen: 1997), 44.

³² KJ 32.

³³ KJ 33. This is the interpretation given by Krause, *KJ*, 79, and accepted by the majority of runologists.

³⁴ KJ 31.

³⁵ G 269.

Krause's five early lance heads are engraved with agent nouns of threatening import'.³⁶ It is certainly intriguing that the poet should refer to a practice of engraving inscriptions of agency seemingly characteristic of the script's early use. The reference to inscribing on shields in stanza 15 is also applicable to the Migration Period. Indeed, one particular shield mound from Illerup bog dates from the early third century,³⁷ making it 'one of the oldest inscriptions on a weapon of any kind',³⁸ whilst the Thorsberg shieldboss, dated to 200 A.D, has the inscription **aisgzh**,³⁹ which may use the ᚱ rune logographically to mean *bagalas*, 'of hail', Antonson suggesting the reading *aisgz h*, 'Challenger of the hail [ie. of spears and arrows]'.⁴⁰

The *týr* rune mentioned in the poem would seem an appropriate rune to carve for victory, due to the position of Týr as god of war,⁴¹ and the connection between Týr and smithing in the *Norwegian Rune Poem* does hint at a more tangible link between the god and weapons. A stacked or repeating **tiwaz* rune occurs in several epigraphical contexts, probably as a repeated invocation of the god,⁴² and as Simek points out, 'in Migration Age runic inscriptions . . . the T-rune frequently appears as a sign of magical significance.'⁴³ Yet few of these *týr* runes actually occur on weapons, and the nearest

³⁶ Joseph Harris, 'Old Norse Memorial Discourse between Orality and Literacy' in *Along the Oral Written Continuum: Types of Texts, Relations and their Implications*, ed. Slávica Rankovic *et al.* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), 119-133, 121.

³⁷ This is one of three shield mounts found in this Jutland bog, part of a deliberate weapon deposit, as at Vimose and Nydam, Looijenga, *Texts and Contexts*, 184.

³⁸ The inscription is designated DR MS1995;334C in *SamRun*, and reads **swarta**, or 'black', which may be a nickname for the owner, Moltke, *Runes and their Origins*, 95.

³⁹ DR 8, *SamRun*.

⁴⁰ Antonson, *A Concise Grammar*, 30.

⁴¹ Snorri Sturluson, *Edda – Prologue and Gylfaginning*, ed. Anthony Faulkes. 2nd ed. (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2005), 24.

⁴² On the fourth century Kylver Stone (G 88), for example.

⁴³ Rudolf Simek, *Dictionary of Northern Mythology* trans. Angela Hall (Cambridge: Brewer, 1993), 337.

approximation of this practice on the continent is a twice repeated *týr* rune on one sword chape from Vimose, reading ... /**ttǫþ**.⁴⁴ This is not, perhaps, a phonetically oriented inscription, and might conceivably be said to agree with the pronouncement to ‘nefna tysvar Tý’, but it hardly provides compelling evidence. In fact, the closest we get to a verifiable concept of *sigrúnar* in the continental corpus occurs on another sword-chape from Vimose, interpreted by Looijenga as reading ‘may the lake have Aala sword’ and referring to a war-booty offering, and here it is the content of the inscription that suggests its purpose, not any particular rune or rune-type.⁴⁵

In the Anglo-Saxon corpus, on the other hand, we have not only the famous ninth-century Thames Scramasax, inscribed with a nearly complete Anglo-Saxon *futhorc*,⁴⁶ perhaps an operative inscription harnessing the putative power of the *futhorc* row, but also a number of early sword fittings inscribed with runes, including the Chessell Down scabbard plate with its largely unintelligible inscription, and most intriguingly, a late-sixth century sword pommel from Faversham ‘on each of the two sides of which occurs the pattern |↑| engraved and blackened with niello’.⁴⁷ Although there are a number of objects where this shape seems to occur as part of a decorative pattern, including on the Holborough spear, in this particular case there appears to be a ‘remarkable coincidence’ between the twofold cutting and the ‘two-fold invocation to Týr for victory in the Scandinavian poem’, a discovery that no doubt made more than one runologist reach for their copy of the *Poetic Edda*.⁴⁸

⁴⁴ Vimose sword-chape (II), DR MS1995;334A, *SamRun*.

⁴⁵ DR 205. Looijenga, *Texts and Contexts*, 114.

⁴⁶ Page, *An Introduction*, 80.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 80.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 92. Page also references a ‘t-like form’ on the Ash/Gilton Sword-pommel. A runic inscribed hilt is, of course, also mentioned in *Beowulf*. For an illuminating interpretation of this episode, see Lerer, *Literacy and Power*, 158-94.

Where might such a ‘remarkable coincidence’ between early practice in England and medieval Icelandic poetry leave us? It is possible that the idea of weapons inscribed with *týr* could be a back-formation based on the name of the rune: a reasonable conjecture about early runic practice, in other words. The poem’s apparent accuracy with regard to the parts of weapons that were engraved could similarly represent a lucky guess: the apparent specificity of the constructions *vétrimom* and *valbostom* might well result from the demands of alliteration, as von See *et al.* suggest.⁴⁹ And listing the spearhead, the flat parts of the blade, and the sword-hilt as the weapon parts carved is perhaps not as specific as it seems, these being the obvious writing surfaces on a weapon.⁵⁰ The other possibility is that some reflex of early practice was encoded in the poetic idiom, and survived intact along with other aspects of heroic society. This is one of those rare and unsettling moments where poetic abstraction and historical practice overlap, leading us to wonder what else amongst this strange catalogue might also echo a lost tradition. Whilst *Sigrdrifumál* is clearly inventive in its portrayal of runes, and represents for the most part ‘an index of of magical possibilities rather than a guide’,⁵¹ if we become too inflexible in our avowal that poetry bears no relation to practice, we run the risk of missing the few curious overlaps. Such connections are, however, *never* straightforward, and are always mediated by the poetry, as demonstrated by the following bizarre association between beer, leeks and runic amulets.

⁴⁹ von See *et al.*, *Kommentar*, V:554.

⁵⁰ A weapon part the poem neglects to mention is the scabbard mount; such pieces were certainly suitable to be inscribed with runes, as in the case of the Chessell Down scabbard plate, Page, *An Introduction*, 10-11.

⁵¹ Carolyne Larrington, *A Store of Common Sense* (Oxford: OUP, 1993), 88.

Ale-runes and the *alu* formula

Qlrunar scaltu kunna, ef þú vill, annars qvæn
 vélit þic í trygð, ef þú trúir;
 á horni scal þær rísta oc á handar baki
 oc merkia á nagli Nauð. (st. 7)⁵²

The reference to *qlrunar* in this poem is one of the few places where Migration Age practice and medieval poetry have consistently been used to inform one another, with inevitably misleading results. The connection is between the category of ale-runes and a formula word *alu*, seemingly exclusive to early inscriptions, and found on weapons, stones, ceramics and particularly bracteates. The only things that can be said for certain about the word are that, firstly, it was used across a wide area, and secondly, that it bears a significance beyond that of an everyday appellation. The etymology of the word is fraught with difficulties, and whilst the common connection of *alu* with ON *ol*, OE *ealu*, PDE ‘ale’ has often been contested, most recently in studies by T. L. Markey⁵³ and Bernard Mees,⁵⁴ none of the alternatives have as yet found a consensus of acceptance amongst scholars.⁵⁵ Suggestions include Polomé’s connection of the term with Hittite *alwanzabh*, ‘to bewitch’ and Greek *aluein* meaning ‘to be beside oneself’;⁵⁶ a suggestion that it represents an agent noun derived

⁵² ‘Ale-runes you should know, if you don’t want another’s wife to deceive you in your faith, if you trust; they should be cut on the horn and on the back of the hands, and *Nauð* marked on the nail.’

⁵³ See Markey, ‘Studies in Runic Origins 2’, 131–203 and 190 in particular.

⁵⁴ Mees points out that ‘a connection of runic *alu* with Old Germanic ale seems more to represent philological near-enough-is-good-enough guesswork than it does a formally developed linguistic postulate’, ‘Alu and hale’, 109.

⁵⁵ See Jonathan B. Conant, ‘Runic ALU – A New Conjecture’ for a summary of various possibilities. *JEGP* 72 (1973), 467–73.

⁵⁶ This is the essence of Polomé’s argument, which connects such ecstatic states with a ritual of intoxication. His philological methodology has since been somewhat discredited, ‘Notes sur le vocabulaire religieux du Germanique’, *La Nouvelle Clío*, 6 (1954), 40–55.

from Germanic **alan* and meaning ‘thriving’ or ‘growth’;⁵⁷ the contention that it relates to the precious mineral alum;⁵⁸ and most recently Mees’ suggestion that the curiously uninflected word may represent a dedicatory term borrowed originally from Rhaetic, and meaning something along the lines of ‘written dedication that brings luck’.⁵⁹

One suggestion that offers a possibility of reconciling some of these disparate views is that two homonyms, one of them meaning ‘beer’, were confused at some point, and that in certain contexts the formula may be referring to drink, whilst in others it has a protective function.⁶⁰ Whatever the anthropological basis for connecting intoxication with ritual,⁶¹ it is certain that the enduring nature of the connection between *alu* and ‘ale’ is due in no small part to the references to ‘ale-runes’ in *Sigrdrífumál*, a case of literary allusion having directed the course of philological enquiry. What is seldom pointed out in the brief references made to the poem, is that there is actually a fundamental disparity between the conception and function of *qlrúnar* in *Sigrdrífumál*, and the connections made between ale and ritual with regards to the *alu* formula.

The term used in the poem should be read in the context of such compounds as *limrúnar* and *biargrúnor* alongside which they are found, all poetic terms which make reference to a particular target or effect of the operations of runes. ‘Ale’ runes are so named because of their connection with protecting or affecting the drinking horn, just as *brimrúnar* are connected with protection at sea and

⁵⁷ Theodor v. Greienberger, ‘Neue Beiträge zur Runekunde’, *ZfdPh* 32 (1900), 292. Karl Schneider, *Die germanischen Runennamen* (Meisenheim am Glan: A. Hain, 1956), 498.

⁵⁸ See, for example, Looijenga, *Texts and Contexts*, 194.

⁵⁹ Mees, ‘Alu and hale’, 121.

⁶⁰ Conant, ‘Runic ALU’, 470-473.

⁶¹ See for instance, Høst Hyderdahl, “Trylleordet” alu’ in *Det Norske Videnskaps-Akademi Årbok 1980* (Oslo: 1980), 35-49.

sigrúnar (rather than Týr-runes) with victory. Looijenga's assertion that *qlrúnar* should not be translated as ale-runes, but rather refer to 'the actual writing in runes of the formulaic word *alu*' ignores this poetic convention.⁶² It is true that there is a more sustained preoccupation with *qlrúnar* in the poem than with most other types of rune, and there is a confusing reference to 'allar qlrúnar' in *Sigrdrífumál* which suggests that this is a blanket designation for various sub genres of runes and formulas applicable to a wider frame of reference than drinking.⁶³ However, this might be accounted for by the fact that elsewhere in ON literature runes are portrayed as having a variety of different operations with regard to drink, the protagonist of *Egils saga* revealing poisoned drink with his runes, but the runes on the horn proffered to the heroine in *Guðrúnarkviða II* apparently intended to enhance its potency. In all cases the primary referent of these ale-runes is to the drinking vessel, and it is surely this particular operation that gives them their name, rather than a recasting of the charm word *alu* which seems to have had a much wider frame of reference, found on objects such as arrowheads, a comb and a cremation urn.

This is a rather simple observation, but it is important in distinguishing the poetic tradition from the world of epigraphy. If *alu* did derive from the word for beer (for whatever reasons) in the world of runic inscriptions it usually meant something quite different, only indirectly connected to drink, whereas the concept of *qlrúnar* in poetry seems to trace its descent from the very particular application of runes in enhancing and exposing poisoned drinks. As McKinnell *et al.* point out, even if *qlrúnar* are linked to *alu* etymologically 'it does not prove that this interpretation was the original

⁶² Looijenga, *Texts and Contexts*, 196.

⁶³ Conant's conjecture is that the homonym shared with *alu* (beer) may actually have been *allu*, 'all', 'Runic ALU', 472.

one'.⁶⁴ Connections with the supposed etymology of the *alu* formula, if they exist at all, can only be made via a faint and complex web of cultural associations, and have clouded the water for too long.

One further aspect of the *olrunar* in the poem needs to be clarified, namely the association in stanza 7 with preventing beguilement by another's wife, a connection not immediately associated with drink, and leading some to posit a wider frame of reference for these runes. However, whether read in light of the poisoning of Sinfiǫtli by Borghildr earlier in the legendary cycle, or referencing a generic association with women's role in the rituals of drinking culture, the connection is not a difficult one to make. Whilst *Oddrúnargrátr* suggests that preparing drink for a man before marriage was somewhat scandalous (st. 12), there is ample evidence to suggest that a central role performed by women in Norse, and indeed Germanic, society was the offering of a ceremonial cup or drinking horn to guests: the cultural significance of this role evinced, for example, by the kennings for 'woman' that refer exclusively to this ritual. Indeed, Sigrdrífa is herself portrayed on a runic stone in Drävle, U 1163, offering a horn to the dragon slayer. It was presumably the prerogative of the woman proffering drink to ensure the integrity of the beverage. In a highly ritualised and formal environment, the proffered horn would be difficult to refuse, and poison apart, the damaging consequences of drinking are outlined in no uncertain terms later in the poem, ale and songs characterised as 'sumom at bana, sumom at þǫlstǫfom', or 'killers of some, calamity for some' (st. 30). The role of Borghildr in the poisoning of Sinfiǫtli, and his apparent duty to take the proffered horn have already been touched upon. Queen Gunnhild is also instrumental in the attempt to poison Egill, and Guðrún distorts this role in the most macabre manner in *Atlakviða in grænlenzka*,

⁶⁴ John McKinnell *et al.*, *Runes, Magic and Religion: A Sourcebook* (Wien: Fassbaender, 2004), 91.

the poet punning on her approaching Atli with a goblet ‘at reifa giǫld rognis’, ‘to render the prince his reward’ (st. 33). A great deal could be written about the exploitation of this central role by women marginalised in other ways from the heroic comitatus (or, indeed, exaggerated anxieties about this role amongst male authors), but it suffices here to recognise that the connection of *ǫlrunar* with beguilement by women probably stems from the role of ‘another’s wife’ in a ritualised drinking culture.

The application of runes to prevent such beguilement is fairly straightforward: ‘á horni skal þær rísta oc á handar baki / oc merkia á nagli Nauð’ (st. 7).⁶⁵ The runes are to be cut on a horn, presumably the one to be drunk from, and on the hand, presumably the hand that holds the horn in order to maintain a connection with it. Interestingly, rather than being marked on the palm, as might be expected for a charm that worked privately, the rune is to be marked ‘á handar baki’: on display, and out of contact with the drink itself. If this is indeed a genuine tradition, one might speculate that the efficacy of this particular application had more to do with an outward show of prevention than a private operation: a signal, as it were, that the drinker was prepared for mischief and not one to be tricked! The reference in *Guðrúnarkviða II* to the horn, reading ‘Vóro í horni hvers kyns stafir / ristnir oc roðnir – raða ec ne máttac –’,⁶⁶ (st. 22) is perhaps slightly less abstract; at least here the runes are confined to the horn itself, and the idea of reddened runes is not, in itself, that sensationalist. There is ample evidence that inscriptions on Viking Age rune stones were often picked out with red pigment, and this is not necessarily a late development; indeed, the verb often

⁶⁵ ‘They should be cut on a horn, and on the back of a hand, and *nauð* marked on the nail.’

⁶⁶ ‘There were in the horn, various kinds of runes, carved and reddened - I could not read them.’

used to refer to writing runes in early inscriptions is *fá*: ‘paint’ or ‘colour’.⁶⁷ Again we have reference to ‘various kinds of runes’, imagined as having different operations, or perhaps just as different runic characters.

As for the historicity or otherwise of either reference, it is very hard to determine. There is evidence, of course, that bone was a material that was regularly carved upon, and we have evidence of runes carved on drinking horns. Most of these are medieval, and simply name the owner or maker,⁶⁸ but there is a very early bronze fitting from a drinking horn, found at Illerup alongside a number of inscribed weapons, which is too illegible to make much of, but provides some evidence that drinking horns were at least a suitable object for runes during the Migration Period.⁶⁹ There is also the very famous example of runes carved on one of the Golden Horns of Gallehus, although this inscription is almost certainly of the craftsman’s signature variety.⁷⁰ The most compelling candidate for a protective sequence occurs on a medieval horn from Hamarøy, reading **rooo**: this is certainly nonsense, though whether a protective variety of nonsense, it is impossible to tell.⁷¹ If we take Guðrún’s statement that ‘ráða ek ne máttak’ at face value, it might well reflect the linguistic implausibility of such an inscription, but may equally reflect an Icelander’s own attitude to a tradition that belonged in the past, and which they had difficulty reading themselves.

⁶⁷ The Rö runestone, for example, includes the pronouncement that **stainawarijar fahido**, ‘Stainawarijaz coloured’, KJ 73.

⁶⁸ Such as N 455 reading A: **inga** B: ... **s ÷ asmundar÷son ÷ a mik**, *Inga . . . Ásmundarsonr á mik*, ‘Inga . . . Ásmundr’s son owns me’ or X ItUOÅ1979;229, known as ‘Gänge-Rolfs Drikkehorn’ reading *Andrés gerði mik*. *SamRun*.

⁶⁹ It may be transcribed as A: **fū.z** B: **fra**. The first element could be *funiz*. DR MS1995;339, *SamRun*.

⁷⁰ The horn reads [**ek hlewagastiz ÷ holtijaz ÷ horna ÷ tawido ÷**], ‘*ek Hlewagastiz Holtijaz horna tawido*’, ‘I Hlewagastiz Holtijaz (son of Holt?) made the horn’ *SamRun*, DR 12. The brackets round the entire inscription are, of course, owing to the fact this famous object was stolen and destroyed in the early-nineteenth century.

⁷¹ N 538, *SamRun*.

The incising of a nail also does not seem too farfetched; it represents, after all, a human variation on horn, but the reference to runes carved on the back of the hand, and later on the palms (st. 9) is perplexing. Did the poet envisage that they were incised, and drew blood, or were they simply to be painted on the skin? Either way, this is not an application that would leave any evidence, and it is not sensible to draw any conclusions about runic practice on the basis of this reference alone. I would argue that the poem's ambiguity as to this process suggests evasion on the part of the poet. In contrast, the rune to be inscribed on the nail is at least specified, as *nauð*. What little we know about this rune comes from the rune poems, and the various stanzas concerning it have been dealt with in Chapter 3. The association is a negative one, as you would expect from the name, which Cleasby and Vigfusson define first of all as 'need, difficulty or distress', with the secondary meanings of 'bondage', (as in 'seldr i nauð', or *nauð-kván*; an 'unwilling wife') and 'labour, of women'.⁷² This semantic range is unified by the word's generic association with constraint.

One has to ask what the poet imagined the purpose of carving a rune with such associations on your nail might denote. I think that a clue may be found in the many compounds in which the component *nauð* functions not only as constraint, but also as a compelling element, a constraint to act as it were, as in *nauð-gjald*, 'forced payment' and *nauð-oka*, 'to force or compel',⁷³ McKinnell *et al.* suggesting its secondary meaning may have been 'strong (sexual) compulsion'.⁷⁴ The superstitious man with a *nauð* rune on his nail is essentially attempting to compel the would-be poisoner to desist. There is perhaps a further nuance to the poetic associations of this rune discernible in the

⁷² *CV*, 446.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 446.

⁷⁴ McKinnell *et al.*, *Runes, Magic and Religion*, 140.

Icelandic *Rune Poem*, which refers to *nauð* as ‘þyjar þrá’, or the ‘suffering /constraint of the bondswoman’.⁷⁵ Unlike the Norwegian poem, which refers to the need of a naked man, and the OE poem which talks in general terms of the constraint of ‘niþa bearnum’, ‘the children of men’ (l. 27) the earliest manuscripts of the Icelandic poem very pointedly refer to *nauð* in terms of female enslavement.⁷⁶ Do we have here another rune, like *þurs*, that carried poetic associations particular to a woman? It is perhaps interesting that McKinnell *et al.* suggest this sexual aspect, ‘referring particularly to the sexual dependence of a woman’ most likely ‘arose only during the high Middle Ages’,⁷⁷ a clue, perhaps, that its use to constrain the mead-bearing woman in this poem might be a later association.

What is clear is that in this context the poet was drawing on extra-linguistic associations connected to the name of the rune, not on its signifying the alveolar nasal sound /n/. This may simply be an inference by the poet, who settled on the rune of ‘constraint’ as an apt symbol with which to give his runic wisdom an air of veracity. However, the *nauð* rune does appear rather frequently in repeated sequence in early inscriptions, and reference is made to **niu nōþir**, *níu nauðr* or ‘nine nauðs’ to combat sickness (envisaged as wolves) on the 11th century Sigtuna amulet,⁷⁸ which may be conceived of as nine *nauð* runes, a phrase repeated on the Ribe Healing Stick, dating to c. 1300.⁷⁹ Von See *et al.* also refer to a ‘Tierhorn’ on which is written a thrice-repeated n-rune;⁸⁰ this is

⁷⁵ Page, *An Introduction*, 36.

⁷⁶ Page translates ‘þyjar þrá’ generically as ‘servant’s grief’ (1999), 36, yet *þyjar* is defined by Fritzner specifically as ‘Træl-kvinde’ or ‘slave-woman’, *þyborinn* meaning ‘født af en ufri kvinde’ ‘born of an un-free woman’, Johan Fritzner, *Ordbog over det gamle norske sprog* – third volume (Oslo: Den Norske Forlagsforening, 1896), 1060.

⁷⁷ McKinnell *et al.*, *Runes, Magic and Religion*, 141.

⁷⁸ U Fv1933;134, *SamRun*.

⁷⁹ DR EM1985;493, *SamRun*.

referring to the much discussed Lindholm Amulet, an object of clear cultic significance, which also includes a repeated sequence of *nauð* runes in an inscription by a ‘crafty erill’, and which ends with the charm word *alu*.⁸¹ Even Bæksted concedes that this inscription must have a magical import.⁸² There may, therefore, be some evidence for a tradition of sorts pre-dating medieval Iceland, in which the *nauð* rune was carved for magical/coercive ends. Whether this was dependent on its name, and was a conclusion reached independently by earlier practitioners of the runic script and by those reworking the heroic material in Iceland, is not easy to determine, but is entirely possible.

Ale-runes and *laukr*

Full skal signa oc við fari síá
 oc verpa lauki í lög:
 þá ec þat veit, at þér verðr aldri
 meinblandinn miððr. (st. 8)⁸³

The signing over or consecration of a cup is another elusive reference to what may again have been a superstitious means of preventing poisoning,⁸⁴ and brings us to the rather complex issue of the leek’s role in this maddeningly suggestive blend of runic tradition and literary fabrication. As

⁸⁰ von See *et al.*, *Kommentar*, V:560.

⁸¹ A: *ek erillaz sa wilagaz hateka* B: *aaaaaaaaazznnn-b-mutt* : *alu*, A: *Ek erillaz sa Wilagaz haite'ka* B: ... *alu*, A: ‘I the erill am called the wily B: ... *alu*’, DR 261, *SamRun*.

⁸² Anders Bæksted, *Målruner og Trolldruner: Runemagiske Studier* (Copenhagen: Gyldendalske Boghandel, 1952), 40.

⁸³ ‘The full cup should be signed over, and protected against mischief, and a leek thrown into the drink, though I know this: that for you there will never be mead blended with harmful intent.’

⁸⁴ von See *et al.* discuss the term *signa*, suggesting that it may represent a syncretic magic process influenced by consecration with the sign of the cross, *Kommentar*, V:562.

mentioned, the poisoning or drugging of drink is a reoccurring theme in the heroic lays, and was presumably a very tangible danger in early medieval society. *The Annals of Ulster*, for example, record that ‘The coarb of Peter and twelve of his courtiers perish along with him after drinking poison that the coarb who had previously been banished gave them’⁸⁵ and Asser’s somewhat fanciful *Life of King Alfred* refers to the accidental poisoning of Beorhtric of Wessex by his wife in c.802, who, according to Asser, intended the poison for his rivals.⁸⁶ *Völsunga saga*, and the prose summary of the death of Sinfiötli, *Frá dauða Sinfiötla*, relates how Borghildr poisons Sinfiötli in revenge for the death of her brother; the hero realises his drink has been poisoned by its cloudy appearance, but is honour-bound to drink it after his father taunts him and offers the presumably rather impractical advice ‘Lát grön siá, sonr’, ‘Let your moustache strain it, son!’ (Ch.10). However implausible the idea of a constitution able to withstand poison, this depiction is otherwise surprisingly naturalistic; the young hero uses very ordinary skills of perception to work out that this cloudy drink is what in *Sigrdrífumál* is termed ‘meinblandinn miðör’, ‘mead blended with ill intent’ (st. 8).

Sigrdrífa’s runic wisdom also includes the presumably common sense advice that the cup should be ‘við fári siá’ ‘protected against mischief’ (st. 8), and the instruction that *laukr*, or ‘leek’, should be thrown in the mix (st. 8), probably represents another homely piece of advice, albeit approximate in its efficacy to straining poison through the beard. *Laukr*, translated as ‘garlic’ by Larrington,⁸⁷ seems to have been a blanket designation for members of the *Allium* family, including onion and leek, as

⁸⁵ Theodore William Moody *et.al.*, *A New History of Ireland: Vol. 1* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2008), 887.

⁸⁶ Asser, *De Rebus gestis Aelfredi*, Ch. 14, in *Life of King Alfred: together with the Annals of Saint Neots erroneously ascribed to Asser*, ed. William Henry Stevenson (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1959), 12-13.

⁸⁷ Carolyne Larrington, *The Poetic Edda* (Oxford: OUP, 1996), 168.

well as garlic. These pungent vegetables, the scourge of vampires and demons, have been invested with protective properties by many cultures, perhaps most famously those of central Europe. In Old Norse literature the leek in particular has great symbolic import, sometimes standing in for vegetation in general, as in *Vǫluspá*,⁸⁸ and testified by the designation *laukagarður* for a monastic ‘herb-garden’.⁸⁹ Sometimes it appears to symbolise virility, as in the reference to Sigurður standing out from his peers in *Guðrúnarkviða II* as ‘græn laukur ór grasi vaxinn’.⁹⁰

Perhaps because of its phallic appearance, a connection exploited by the lewd Exeter Book *Riddle* 25, the leek also seems to serve as a symbol of fertility, and to be exploited as a charm word in some circumstances. Macleod and Mees suggest that *Vǫlsa þáttr*, in which linen and a leek are used to preserve and support a horse’s penis, is a fetish which conveys ‘a general sense of fertility’, similar to that of *Vǫluspá*,⁹¹ but Simek points out that ‘in this particular case the leek would appear to have been used as an antiseptic recommended in medieval Icelandic medicinal works, and the linen as a bandage’,⁹² reminding us that there may have been more than one association at play. The use of leeks for pseudo-medicinal purposes is clearly referred to in Snorri’s *Heimskringla*, in a rather revolting practice whereby wounded soldiers are made to eat a leek stew, and their wounds later smelled in order to detect any pungent aroma that would indicate the stomach had been pierced.⁹³

⁸⁸ ‘þá var grund groin grænom lauki’, or ‘then the ground was grown over with green leeks/vegetation’ (st. 4).

⁸⁹ Guðrún Helgadóttir, ‘Laukagarður’, in *Speculum Norroenvm – Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, ed. Ursula Dronke *et al.* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1981), 171-184.

⁹⁰ ‘A green leek grown up from the grass’. In *Guðrúnarkviða I* the same expression is used, but with *geirlaukur*, ‘garlic’ (literally ‘spear-leek’) in place of *græn laukur*.

⁹¹ Macleod and Mees, *Runic Amulets*, 103-4.

⁹² Simek, *Dictionary*, 187.

⁹³ Snorri, *Heimskringla*, II, ch. 234.

As McKinnell *et al.* point out, though the supposed anti-venom properties of garlic are an obvious fallacy, members of the allium family were also used to ‘treat all sorts of fractures, ruptures, swellings and inflammation of limbs’,⁹⁴ and there is actually some medical basis for using garlic as an antimicrobial.⁹⁵ Furthermore, there may be a rather more prosaic association of leek and beer attested in the anonymous skaldic verse known as *Sveinsflokkur* in which the homely serving of ‘lauk eðr ǫl’ is used as a pointed contrast to the bloody Sunday morning encounter between Tryggvi Ólafsson and Sveinn Úlfsson.⁹⁶ The impact of this poem in part lies in its juxtaposition of everyday ‘recreations in the hall’ and that which is out of the ordinary—the feeding of the ravens after battle—suggesting that ‘lauk eðr ǫl’ was a rather common combination.⁹⁷ There is, therefore, some precedent for the unlikely partnership of pungent *laukr* and ale, the last example cited here suggesting its routine use. There is certainly nothing sexual or ‘productive’ about putting a *laukr* in a

⁹⁴ McKinnell *et al.*, *Runes, Magic and Religion*, 97.

⁹⁵ For example, F. Groppo *et al.*, ‘Antimicrobial activity of garlic against oral streptococci’, *International Journal of Dental Hygiene* 5 (2007), 109–115. Accessed Feb 12, 2010.

⁹⁶ The poem in full reads:

*Vasa sunnudag, svanni,
(seggr hné margr und eggjar)
morgin þann sem manni
mærlauk eða ól í bæri,
þás Sveinn konungr sína
saman tengja bæð drengi
(brátt gafsk hold at slíta
brafni) skeiðar stafna.*

[On that Sunday morning, lady, it was not like when a woman brings a man onion and ale (many a warrior sank down under the blades), when King Sveinn commanded his men to fasten together ship-prows. Raw flesh was given to the raven to tear.] Trans. Townend, ‘Knútr and the Cult of St Ólafr: Poetry and Patronage in Eleventh-Century Norway and England’, *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 1 (2005), 251–279, 255.

⁹⁷ Townend suggests that there is a dual contrast with the battle set up here, between both the serving of beer and leek and the attending of Church, an activity suggested by the Sunday morning setting, 255.

drink, and this is one place in the Eddic poems where the reference would probably be left alone as a diverting piece of gnomic wisdom if it were not for evidence of a cultic connection with *laukr* in the world of rune carving.

There are a number of runic inscriptions, almost exclusively bracteates from the Migration Period,⁹⁸ that refer to *laukaz*, either as a term standing alone, as for example in the case of the Års bracteate⁹⁹, or in combination with other meaningful words or elusive sequences of characters, such as the *alu* formula. In his study of bracteates Axboe lists a total of nine which contain *laukaz* or an abbreviation of this word,¹⁰⁰ which represents ‘relatively many’ bracteates according to Looijenga.¹⁰¹ This rather suggests it was a popular protective word, similar to the sequence *alu*, alongside which it is found in a number of inscriptions. The term is also found in abbreviated form, such as on the Hammenhög-C bracteates,¹⁰² and with letters inverted as in DR BR58. It is less clear whether ʀ standing alone, as in Nebenstedt (I)-B,¹⁰³ or in a sequence, as with the Fyn bracteates,¹⁰⁴ can be

⁹⁸ A notable exception is the Fløktstad Meat Knife, which evidences an early connection between linen and leeks in its inscription **lina laukaza** interpreted as meaning ‘linen (and) leek’, Looijenga, *Texts and Contexts*, 354. It may date from as early as the fourth century AD.

⁹⁹ DR BR29.

¹⁰⁰ Morten Axboe, ‘Die innere Chronologie der A-C-Brakteaten und ihrer Inschriften’ in *Runeninschriften als Quellen interdisziplinärer Forschung - Proceedings of the Fourth International Symposium on Runes and Runic Inscriptions in Göttingen, 4-9 August 1995*, ed. Klaus Düwel (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 231-252, 249-50. This compares with six occurrences of the word *lapu* and fourteen of *alu*.

¹⁰¹ DR BR67 contains the words *Lapu*, *laukaz* and *alu*, as well as an undetermined sequence **gakaz**, which Krause suggests may refer to a cuckoo (1966), 256. Looijenga is probably right to characterise these as ‘an enumeration of formulaic words with a positive intent’, *Texts and Contexts*, 127.

¹⁰² DR IK267.

¹⁰³ KJ 133.

¹⁰⁴ DR BR43.

regarded as abbreviations of *laukaz*, or indeed whether the rune was ever named such.¹⁰⁵ I would consider *laukaz* as being in the same vein as *alu*: a word with superstitious import written in runes, perhaps intending to confer the health-giving properties of the leek onto its owner, rather than a concept associated with any single rune, or indeed, rune-type.

The central question here is whether we read the reference to leeks in ale in *Sigrdrifumál* in light of the early runic evidence, which suggests a magical, cultic and, most importantly, *runic* connection, or whether we consider it to come from a literary frame of reference where the connection has more of a homely, pseudo-medicinal character. In other words, was the reference to *laukr* in the poem inspired by the runic context, or by the context of poisoned drink? This seemingly peripheral question actually has consequences for dating the material of the poem, as the latest reference to *laukaz* in the epigraphical milieu is from the sixth century, after which point there is no evidence for continued use of this runic charm.¹⁰⁶ As is so often the case, however, the truth probably occupies an indistinct place between the two alternatives that this represents either the unadulterated transmission of Migration Age rune lore, or a wholesale medieval fabrication.

The cultural importance of leeks and beer was probably well established before the introduction of the runic script, and seemingly continued in permuted form without reference to runes, whilst the connection between runes and protecting beer may have been promulgated independently. Of course, we should not discount the fact that runes and leeks were also associated in oral tradition;

¹⁰⁵ If this was indeed the case, it is remarkable that all of the rune poems give the name as *lagu* or 'water', when ON *laukr* and OE *l̥eac* were still acceptable sound values.

¹⁰⁶ This discarding of the *laukr* formula occurs around the same time as the transition to the younger *futhark*, which could be used as an argument for the name of the ᚠ rune changing from *laukaz* to *lagu*.

indeed, in an interesting analogue from the sagas, Egill, after correcting the illiterate efforts of a would-be runic magician, recites a verse admonishing incompetent rune-carvers and listing ten secret staves, stating ‘þat hefr lauka lindi lang ofregga fengit’, ‘from them has the leek of the linden girdle [the woman] received her long trouble’.¹⁰⁷ The kenning used for the woman is a rather unusual one, and it may not be entirely coincidental that the spectre of *laukr* is raised in connection with runes, or, indeed that runes should be associated with a woman’s illness (as we will see in *Skírnismál*). It is likely that such murky connections were entrenched in the poetic idiom, even if they had lost their original meaning. That all three elements—runes, *ól* and *laukr*—all exhibiting a connection to bracteates, should all come to be entangled in *Sigrdrífumál* is not, therefore, necessarily an indication that the poem and the runic advice it contains dates from the Migration Period itself. Rather, it represents a tissue of connections that are authentic in as much as they are drawn from oral tradition and echo earlier beliefs, such historical resonances giving the passage the disconcerting appearance of maintaining a direct link to the distant past.

Sea-runes

The historical resonances are less apparent with regards to other rune types in the poem, which can best be characterised as an educated retrojection of contemporary runic practice into the heroic world. The *brimrúnar*, to be carved ‘á stafni’, ‘on the prow’, ‘á stíornar blaði’ ‘on the rudder’ and ‘leggja eld í ár’, ‘set with fire into the oar’ (st. 10) represent another plausible reconstruction. Indeed, there is a supporting reference to an oar inscribed with verses in *Flóamanna saga*, and, more

¹⁰⁷ *Egils saga*, Ch.73, 230.

importantly, reference made to a rune-inscribed oar that washed up in Greenland.¹⁰⁸ In both these cases, the runes seem to represent verses, perhaps rowing chants, carved by the oarsman, and not protective symbols, and there is little evidence of the technique of burning of runes into wood. The idea of fire being involved is, in actual fact, probably just a poetic counter-balance to the water the oar will be contending with. It is a curious fact that the name of the rune *ár* in the younger *futhark*, taken to mean ‘year, fertile season’ in the *Norwegian Rune Poem* is a homonym for ‘oar’ or ‘rudder’ in both ON and OE.¹⁰⁹ Perhaps the idea of a category involving rune-inscribed oars was inspired by the name of the tenth rune, or indeed by the so-called *skiprúnar*, a variety of cryptic runes that seems to have been popular in medieval Iceland.¹¹⁰

The fact that the evidence, such as it is, for the practice of carving oars seems to be associated with Iceland and Greenland, rather suggests that this was a contemporary use of the script which might be projected back into the heroic past, with the emphasis placed on protection. Of course, as with all these supposed uses of runes, the lack of evidence does not prove that they were *not* used in this connection in the Migration Period. It is just that the balance of probability rather tends towards a later tradition in which runes seem to have been used in a much wider variety of contexts.

¹⁰⁸ Bishop Þorður Þorláksson, *Grønlands Beskrivelse* cited by Bæksted in *Islands runeindskrifur*, 31.

¹⁰⁹ Looijenga notes this in connection with the OE rune name *iar*, *Texts and Contexts*, 145.

¹¹⁰ For example, below the A-text of the Icelandic Rune Poem in MS AM 687 d4^o fols 1v-2r, *skiprúnar* are drawn out and named amongst other inventive cryptic runes.

Help-runes, limb-runes and speech-runes

The same observation might be made of stanzas 9, 11, and 12, progressing, as Larrington suggests, ‘to a more abstract kind of rune’, and dealing variously with *biargrúnar*, *limrúnar*, *málrúnar* and *bugrúnar*.¹¹¹ In stanza 9 we have a bodily engraving similar to those envisaged as being operative against beguilement, this time in relation to childbirth. More or less the same considerations apply. The marking of the midwife’s palms presumably allows the rune to be in contact with the newborn, but what the significance of the clasping of the *liðo*, or ‘joints of the body’, refers to is unclear. Perhaps it is intended to ameliorate the significant number of foetal birth injuries involving mechanical trauma. The clasping of the joints to determine such injuries as fractures and dislocations, or even paralysis from more severe peripheral nerve damage, may well be a practical procedure. But bearing in mind the significant risk of infant mortality, it is not surprising that after recourse is made to runes and experienced hands, a prayer is then to be offered to the *dísir*, expressing, ultimately, the limited scope of any practical interventions. A rune-stick written in Latin and currently on display in the Bryggen Museum is also probably intended to help with a difficult birth, appealing in this case to Mary and Elizabeth, perhaps representing a Christianised version of these *biargrúnar*.¹¹²

¹¹¹ Larrington, *A Store of Common Sense*, 88.

¹¹² A: *maria ÷ peperit ÷ cristum ÷ elisabet ÷ peperit ÷ iohan=nem ÷ baptistam ÷ in ÷ illarum* / B: *u=(e)nerac(i)o-(e) ÷ sis ÷ absoluta ÷ ÷ æcsi ÷ inkalve ÷ dominus te ÷ uacat ÷ ad ÷ lu*, A: *Maria peperit Christum, Elisabet peperit Johannem Baptistam. In illarum* / B: *veneratio[n]e sis absoluta. Exi, incalve. Dominus te vocat ad lu[cem]/lu[men]*., A: ‘Mary bore Christ, Elisabeth bore John the Baptist. Receive redemption in veneration of them.’ / B: ‘Go out, hairless one (= child). The Lord calls you into the light.’ N 631, *SamRun*.

The category of *limrúnar* similarly relies on deferral of healing to an external power, the tree of the wood ‘þeim er lúta austr limar’, ‘whose branches bend east’ (st. 11). Hollander suggests this represents a practice of transferring the illness to another living object, what he calls ‘sympathetic magic’.¹¹³ The association of runes with healing is a longstanding one; reference is made to *lifrúnar* and *bótrúnar* on an eleventh century copper plate from Skänninge,¹¹⁴ whilst Sigtuna alone has provided us with three healing charms: an eleventh-century copper amulet containing an elaborate curse against wound-fever and the ‘þursa drottin’;¹¹⁵ a second amulet from roughly the same period against some kind of distraught mental state;¹¹⁶ and a rib-bone from c. 1100, which seems to refer again to fighting *riðu*, or ‘fever’, and according to MacLeod and Mees at least, to ‘fucking’ the sorcerer involved.¹¹⁷ The Canterbury Rune Charm ‘viðr æðravari’, ‘against blood-vessel pus’ dates from roughly the same period, whilst numerous inscriptions from the early and high Middle Ages refer to healing, often with a Christian dimension.¹¹⁸ The concept of runes used in healing is thus well established in the epigraphical corpus, and some of the examples collected by Macleod and Mees do appear to be based on transfer of disease to the object, as in the poem. But what these few examples make clear is that the conceit of healing runes was a popular one throughout Viking Age and medieval Scandinavia, and not by any means particular to early runic sensibilities.

¹¹³ Hollander, *The Poetic Edda*, 236.

¹¹⁴ Ög NOR2001;32, *SamRun*. The runes appear to be late medieval forms. Reference to *bótrúnar* (as well as *bjargrúnar*) is also made in the so-called skag-valkyrie stick inscription, dating from the early fourteenth century, N B257, *SamRun*.

¹¹⁵ U Fv1933;134, *SamRun*.

¹¹⁶ U AST1;166, *SamRun*. This is one of the inscriptions discussed in relation to the runes of *Sigrdrífumál*.

¹¹⁷ MacLeod and Mees, *Runic Amulets*, 121. This inscription is designated U NOR1998;25.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 162.

Whilst this conceit is neither indicative of continental, Viking Age or medieval practice in particular, the reference to *málrúnar* which follows has a distinct flavour of Iceland about it. The term *Málrúnar* occurs in the heading to a number of late versions of the Icelandic rune poem, presumably referring to the mnemonic function of these verses.¹¹⁹ It is also used in a single inscription, found at Lund in Denmark and dating from perhaps as early as the late-eleventh century.¹²⁰ It is generally taken to read *Bóndi risti málrúnu, árar ara eru fjaðrar*, ‘Bóndi carved runes of speech, eagle’s oars are the feathers’,¹²¹ and the association with expounding a kenning may hint at the poetic or elucidatory nature of the term. Such ‘spoken runes’, or ‘speech runes’ may be envisaged here in *Sigrdrífumál* as runes which are carved in order to manipulate the *þing* in session,¹²² or which somehow invest the user with preternatural eloquence, drawing inspiration from the reference to Bragi’s tongue in stanza 16. This would correspond with their abstract use in *Guðrúnarkviða I*, where they seem to refer to the protagonist’s unlocking of her (rather extensive) word-hoard (st. 23). This is a connection made by Boer, who suggests that great influence may be exerted through ‘Das gewandte reden und das finden der richtigen worte’.¹²³ Indeed, the reference could well be rather prosaic, in line with the later use of the word in Icelandic to refer to ‘plain-language runes’,¹²⁴ that is referring to a communicative sphere in which the weaving and placements

¹¹⁹ Page, *The Icelandic Rune-Poem*, 16.

¹²⁰ DR Til5, *SamRun*.

¹²¹ *SamRun*.

¹²² von See *et al.* suggest that the reference may be explained by relating it to the description of an assembly in *Egils saga*, Ch. 57, where runes are carved on hazel poles used to mark out the sanctuary area, *Kommentar*, V:571.

¹²³ ‘Skilful talk and finding of the correct words’, R. C. Boer, ‘Sigrdrífumál und Helreidh’, *Zeitschrift für deutsche Philologie* 35 (1903), 289-329, 325.

¹²⁴ Moltke, *Runes and their Origins*, 460.

of words was highly regarded; indeed, Snorri refers to *málrúnar* as the most important kind of runes, suggesting that even in Iceland, where runes were not much in use, the association outside the literature was above all a prosaic one.¹²⁵ The reference to ‘þingi, er þjóðir scolo / í fulla dóma fara’, ‘the assembly, where people must go in full judgement’, is what suggests this is a late conceit however, the apparent reference to ‘taking part in a lawsuit’,¹²⁶ or the procedures of a court hearing,¹²⁷ more likely a local colouring from Viking Age or medieval Scandinavia, although the *þing* itself almost certainly has early roots.¹²⁸ Early inscriptions very rarely have any legal or inheritance function, however,¹²⁹ unlike the numerous Viking Age monumental inscriptions which often appear to document inheritance claims and property ownership,¹³⁰ and this tends to suggest a conflation of medieval uses of literacy with the ancient past of the poem.

Following reference to *hugrúnar*, an abstract concept that it is tempting to link to the theory that writing ‘restructures consciousness’ and overlays patterns on the way that we think about the world,¹³¹ the poem blends into the myth of Hroprtr and Mim’s head. This material is very much

¹²⁵ ‘þetta er dróttkvæðr hátr . . . Þessi er upphaf allra háttar sem málrúnar eru fyrir öðrum rúnum’, ‘This is dróttkvætt meter . . . This is the basis of all meters, just as speech-runes are before other runes.’ Snorri Sturluson, *Háttatal*, ed. Anthony Faulkes (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 4-5.

¹²⁶ Larrington, *A Store of Common Sense*, 88.

¹²⁷ This last part of this line ‘bezieht sich wohl auf den Gang der Prozessteilnehmer und der übrigen Mitglieder der Versammlung zu einer Gerichtsverhandlung.’ ‘probably refers to the movement of the participants in the trial and of the other members of the assembly at a hearing.’ von See *et al.*, *Kommentar*, V:572.

¹²⁸ Simek suggests that ‘the origins of the Germanic Thing lie far back in history’, pointing out that the sanctity of the *þing* is recorded as early as the second century, although Tacitus suggests such an assembly was only open to the cult community, *Dictionary*, 313.

¹²⁹ The Pietroassa neck-ring (KJ 41) with its reference to the inheritance of the Goths, is one possible exception.

¹³⁰ A famous non-monumental legal text is the ninth-century Forsa rune ring (Hs 7), generally regarded as ‘the oldest law-rule in Scandinavia’, Stefan Brink, ‘Law and Society’ in *The Viking World* (London: Routledge, 2008), 28-29.

¹³¹ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy* (London: Routledge, 2002), 77-114.

distinct in the patchwork of the poem, although whether stanzas 13/3 to 18 represent a complete sequence borrowed from elsewhere, or a further collation of disparate sources is unclear. My contention is that the next block of runic advice—which is in *fornyrðislag* metre, and metrically distinct from the majority of the poem—is interpolated material. It may have originally been part of a mythical sequence, and is distinguished in the poem from Sigrdrífa’s earlier advice.

Mim’s Runic Catalogue

Á scildi qvað ristnar, þeim er stendr fyr scínanda
 á eyra Árvacs oc á Alsvinnz hófi . . . (st. 15:1-2)¹³²

This runic sequence represents a veritable catalogue of the obscure and arcane, ranging from the near-plausible to the grotesque. Added to the category of conceivable uses of runes might be those carved on the wheel of a chariot, the hoof of a horse, on an animal’s tooth, claw or beak, on the harness or strap band, on the arch of the bridge and seat-back, and of course ‘á gleri oc á gulli oc á gumna heillom’.¹³³ The runic corpus of inscriptions in the older *futhark* exhibits a similar range of materials, although only in a few cases do they overlap with those represented in *Sigrdrífumál*, most notably the ‘amulets of men’ which can be linked to Migration Age bracteates, of which a large number have been found, many with clear amuletic function.¹³⁴ The reference to carving ‘á brúar sporði’ may also be of interest, due to the connection between writing runes and raising a bridge in

¹³² ‘On a shield [he] pronounces them cut, that which stands before the shining one; on the ear of Arvaks and on Alsvinnr’s hoof . . .’

¹³³ ‘On glass and on gold and on the amulets of men’.

¹³⁴ Looijenga lists over 200 in *Texts and Contexts of the Oldest Runic Inscriptions*.

Viking Age memorial contexts. The building of a bridge was a charitable act that benefited the community, as well as suitably representing the passage of the soul to heaven, and a number of runestones refer to the construction of a nearby *brú*, or ‘bridge’. If any connection can be drawn here, it might again point to a later tradition influencing the poem, although Jesse Byock suggests that this particular image is ‘probably a reference to Bifrost’, more in keeping with the mythological tone of this sequence.¹³⁵

As interesting as such points of connection are, it is hard to escape the manifestly picturesque nature of most of these objects, and the wholly bizarre nature of some. Indeed, as there is a clear mythological framework to stanzas 13-19, it is to be expected that at this point the runes should become most clearly poetic fabrications, such as the runes carved on the ears of Árvakr and the breast of Grani, as well as the thoroughly peculiar reference to runes carved on Sleipnir’s teeth.¹³⁶ Whilst this last object at least represents a plausible writing material (although it would be a rather perilous procedure if Sleipnir was still in possession of his teeth at the time!), a number of images are clearly nothing more than abstractions, such as the carving of runes ‘í víni oc í virtri’ (another reference to runes on the drinking vessel perhaps), on bloodied wings (for which I can offer no explanation), and carved on Bragi’s tongue.

Bragi, as characterised by Snorri, was the son of Óðinn and ‘ágætr at speki ok mest at málsnild ok orðfimi’, ‘famous for wisdom, and most of all for eloquence and his way with words’.¹³⁷ This reference obviously gestures towards his poetic abilities and charmed tongue. Indeed, what becomes

¹³⁵ Byock, *Saga of the Volsungs*, 118.

¹³⁶ *Tǫnnom*, ‘teeth’, is replaced by *taumum*, ‘reins’, in the MS of *Vǫlsunga saga*, a mistake in Finch’s opinion, *Vǫlsunga saga*, 38.

¹³⁷ *Gylfaginning*, 25, 20-21.

apparent from this list of carved objects is that the rune is more often than not simply associated with that which is most important or representative of the creature or material on which it is carved: the claw of the bear, the wheel of the chariot, the arch of the bridge, the point of the spear, and so on. This is interesting in so much as it points to what was deemed essential about a character; it might suggest, for instance, that the ears of *Árvakr* had a certain importance in the complex of Old Norse myth. The connection of the fingernail to the *norns* is also understandable if read in relation to the infant releasing *biargrúnar* of stanza 9, bearing in mind the reference in *Fáfnismál* to the *norns'* direct role in childbirth.¹³⁸ On the other hand, it could simply represent a convenient alliterating pair.

As guides to the actual uses of runes, however, none of these references appear to have much to recommend them, although the fact that some of the animals concerned belong to a world of experience outside of Iceland might point to a relatively early date. These include references to the wolf, bear and owl, none of which are native to Iceland.¹³⁹ We might also add runic amulets to this category, although Hallberg is right that 'such touchstones can only be used with the utmost care'.¹⁴⁰ A more intrinsic piece of evidence for an early date, and one that should also be treated cautiously, is the fact that the twenty-four situations for carving related here seem to correspond to the twenty-four characters of the older *futhork*.¹⁴¹ If this is more than just coincidence, it gestures

¹³⁸ 'hverjar ro þær nornir / er nauðgonglar ro / ok kjósa mœðr frá mögum', 'which are those *norns* who help women in need and favour mothers over infants?' (st. 12). The attribute of *nauðgonglar* might be connected in some way to the *nauð* inscribed on a nail.

¹³⁹ Stags and nuthatches are two other non-native species that appear in the heroic poems. Terry Gunnell, 'Eddic Poetry' in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 82-100, 94.

¹⁴⁰ Hallberg, *Old Icelandic Poetry*, 28.

¹⁴¹ von See *et al.*, *Kommentar*, V:580.

towards a period in which the older alphabet was still in use, although it is clear that the twenty-four character system was still known about in the Viking Age, as evidenced by its use on the ninth-century Rök Stone.¹⁴² How long such knowledge persisted is unclear, but it is notable that the rune poems all refer to younger alphabets, and it would be to the sixteen rune *fuþark* that a late composition would surely refer. Whilst this catalogue might represent one of the very oldest parts of the poem, it is clearly concerned with mythical abstraction rather than history and can tell us little about Migration Age practice, the one exception perhaps being the aforementioned ‘gumna heillom’, the only object type explicitly associated with mankind.¹⁴³

Indeed, it should be noted that there is a tacit recognition of the inappropriateness of certain of these rune-types to human use even within the poem itself, the following stanza switching to the past tense, and relating the scattering and sharing out of runes amongst different races:

Allar vóro af scafnar, þær er vóro á ristnar,
 oc hverfðar við inn Helga mið
 oc sendar á víða vega.
 Þær ro með ásom, þær ro með álfom,
 sumar með vísom vǫnom,
 sumar hafa menzcir menn.¹⁴⁴ (St. 18)

¹⁴² The Rök stone bears nine lines written using the older alphabet, as well as cryptic runes. They are clearly used to challenge the reader and to display the carver’s virtuosity. Reference is also made to Migration Age history in the inscription, specifically to *Þjóðríkr* and the *Hreiðgotar*, Ög 136, *SamRun*.

¹⁴³ Amulets may, however, represent something of an interface between the human and the divine; note the many bracteates believed to depict Óðinn, K. Starkey, ‘Imagining an early Odin. Gold bracteates as visual evidence?’, *Scandinavian Studies*, 71-4 (1999), 373-392.

¹⁴⁴ ‘All were scraped off, those which were carved on, and stirred with the sacred mead, and send about on disparate paths. They are amongst the Æsir, they are amongst the elves, some are with the wise Vanir, some with mankind.’

This is an account of inception rather than of application; indeed, if we are to take the catalogue of preceding runes as bound up with a conception of runes prior to distribution amongst gods, elves and men, then the poem is in fact signalling that they do not have a human referent; some are imagined as operating solely in the mythical-poetic sphere. I take the stanzas from 13 to 18 to constitute a myth of runic transmission retold by Sigrdrífa, and with the catalogue of runic carving representing a paraphrase of the ‘sanna staff’ spoken by Mim’s head. This would explain the otherwise awkward transition between tenses, and perhaps the slightly discordant recasting of certain tropes found elsewhere in the poem, such as hands which deliver, and runes written on a fingernail. The fact that it seems to be interpolated material with a mythical rather than a heroic referent may also account for the fact that it is not quoted in *Völsunga saga*, even though the saga clearly betrays a ‘fascination with the mysticism of runes’ as well as an ‘interest in the enunciation of wise counsel’, and includes the fifteen stanzas of runic advice given to Sigurðr.¹⁴⁵

Whether the originator of this utterance is configured as Sigrdrífa, the disembodied head, or the shield itself,¹⁴⁶ does not alter the fact that this catalogue belongs to a preternatural frame of reference, explicitly signalling to the reader that the runes belong rather in the world of myth than the legendary-historical realm. It is perhaps worth noting that the scraping clean of runes is not only a theoretical conceit, employed both here and in *Skírnismál*, but a verifiable historical reality; after all, one of the troubling characteristics of writing is that divorced of speaker-listener context

¹⁴⁵ Judy Quinn, ‘Trust in words: Verse quotation and dialogue in *Völsunga saga*’ in *Fornaldarsagornas struktur och ideology*, ed. Árman Jakobsson, Annette Lassen and Agneta Ney (Uppsala: Institutionen för nordiska språk, 2003), 89-100, 91.

¹⁴⁶ Bellows’ translates the line ‘said on the shield graven’, with the explanatory note ‘in runes’, adding that the stanza ‘hardly contains Mimir’s prophetic words’, *The Poetic Edda*, 236-7.

the utterance can be defaced, changed or even erased. Looijenga makes reference to an early-sixth century stone column from Breza in Bosnia which contains a nearly complete *fubark*. She notes that the column is badly scratched and that ‘there were at least two more inscriptions that have been deliberately scraped off.’¹⁴⁷ This is paralleled in *Atlamál in grænlenzko*, in which the runic message sent by Guðrun as a warning is defaced and its meaning changed. In addition, whilst *Helgakviða Hundingsbana II* appears to cultivate obscurity in its brief reference to *valrúnom*, or ‘slaughter-runes’, the context suggests that this is, in fact, also a communicative message giving news of the battle, the line in question reading ‘er í valrúnom vígspiðll segir’, ‘the tidings of war were told in slaughter-runes’ (st. 12). There is a notable absence of runic ‘correspondence’ in the corpus of early inscriptions, whether defaced or otherwise, and such references to runic correspondence are probably late. It is perhaps worth mentioning that manuscripts could also be scraped clear of text, a practice Chaucer famously complains he has to employ all too often in correcting his errant scribe. The allusion to scraping clean is therefore applicable to all periods of the script’s use, and historical only in the sense that a concern with the mutability of writing may have been shared with early practitioners of runes.

Book-runes, runes of power and concluding remarks

The poet concludes the runic exposition in *Sigrdrífumál* with a summarising stanza, introducing various other categories of runes with the demonstrative *þat*, suggesting, perhaps, a performative

¹⁴⁷ KJ 5. Looijenga, *Texts and Contexts*, 232.

referent.¹⁴⁸ Here the concept of *bókrúnar* is introduced; a type which may represent either ‘beech-tree runes’ or ‘book-runes’.¹⁴⁹ If the second of these is the intended meaning, then the reference is undoubtedly late. There can have been no association of runes with books before the introduction of a Latinate writing culture to the Anglo-Saxons, and there is no evidence even in this connection before the runic treatises of the eighth century. There are, however, a number of runes which appear in Icelandic manuscripts, as abbreviations for *mǫðr* and *fé*. If this is what the poem is referring to, it demonstrates that parts of this stanza at least represent late interpolations, as Bellows concluded for different, and seemingly intuitive, reasons.¹⁵⁰ In this same passage we have the singularly confusing reference to ‘allar qlrúnar’, and similarly vague references to helping-runes and ‘mætar meginrúnar’, ‘valuable power-runes’ (st. 19), followed by some prosaic advice about writing, in the same vein as the *rǫð rétt!* formula and Egil’s admonishing of those who confuse their letters and do evil through careless writing. The reference to ‘mætar meginrúnar’ is paralleled in *Grípisspá*, in the prediction about what Sigrdrífa will teach the hero, but this confirms nothing except that *Grípisspá* is a late derivative poem which ‘seems to have been deliberately composed in the thirteenth century to serve as a framework for the poems that follow’.¹⁵¹

The runic section of *Sigrdrífumál* concludes with the direct address ‘Nú scaltu kíosa’, ‘now you must choose’, a challenge directed to the listening hero but also, by proxy, to the wider audience of the poem. The valkyrie offers a simple choice; ‘sögn eða þögn’, ‘speech or silence’ (st. 20). The hero

¹⁴⁸ See Terry Gunnell, *The Origins of Drama in Scandinavia* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer 1994).

¹⁴⁹ Sometimes this reference is emended to *bótrúnar*, ‘cure-runes’, as in Byock’s translation, *Saga of the Volsungs*, 70.

¹⁵⁰ In a note to his translation of this passage he suggests ‘lines 3, 6 and 7 look like spurious additions, but the whole stanza is chaotic’ (1923), 395.

¹⁵¹ Gunnell, *Origins of Drama*, 89.

answers, of course. Without the prerogative of speech he would be no properly functioning hero, and without the oral tradition that disseminated such legendary material, the hero would long have faded into complete obscurity. After being taught *húgrúnar* and *málrúnar* Sigurðr is equipped with the necessary skills of cognition and eloquence, and is told ‘hafðu þér síalfr í hug!’, ‘you can make up your own mind’ (st. 20).

As runologists we might wonder if it would have been better if the poet had been silent about the runes in this context, and had let those misleading echoes preserved in oral transmission to die out. But as critics we have been given the same prerogative as Sigurðr to make up our own minds, and to be discerning about the way we read this poetic material. It can tell us much about the agglomerative nature of the poems, about the transmission of legend and about attitudes to history and the written legacy, even if it tells us little about the actualities of Migration Age society. From a literary perspective, then, we cannot be anything but thankful that the poets of thirteenth-century Iceland chose to treat such alien material and to speak not only about the heroes of the distant past but also about the legendary social fabric that they viewed as commensurate with the story.

To sum up, the runic material of the Sigurðr cycle might be said to correspond in historicity with the treatment of the semi-legendary characters that appear in the narrative: Ermanaric, Attila, Theodoric and Gundharius. The correct label may be applied, certain echoes of tradition preserved, but the characters (in both senses) have been invested with properties and perversions that could only develop through detachment. A period of time ‘half as long again’ as anything that can be envisaged separates the two worlds. Through the fossilisation of certain poetic expressions and associations in the legendary cycle we encounter both ‘archaeological objects which would not

necessarily have been known to the scribes'¹⁵² and more unsettling moments where the poet seems to have actively tapped into a connection with the distant past, such as in the accurate depiction of runic engraved weapons, associations with *laukaz* known to us only through the obscure sequences of characters on bracteates, and apparent reflections of a twenty-four character *fuþark*. Of course, the runic material has been overlaid in certain instances by a veneer of contemporary practice, of carvings on ships and oars, of *málrunar*, even the use of runes as a book script.

And yet, it is perhaps remarkable how *little* the rune-lore presented here has taken on the colouring of medieval runic practice. Where, we might ask, are the homely objects in the catalogue of inscriptions, the communicative and transactional rune-sticks found in such abundance in Bryggen,¹⁵³ the monumental runestones that any travelled Icelander would surely be aware of? Indeed, throughout the whole Eddic corpus the only connection made between runes and stone is the transformation of Hrímgærðr into stone through *helstgjom*, or 'baleful letters'.¹⁵⁴ It is as if contemporaneity has been deliberately eschewed.

The notable absence of such Viking Age or medieval runic conventions almost certainly has less to do with the preservation of a distant continental tradition, or with lack of knowledge of the flourishing runic tradition in other parts of Scandinavia, than with the keen interest Icelanders seem to have taken in creating a credible history, whether it be the age of settlement in Iceland, or the distant imagined heroic past, populated by savage, hyperbolic heroes. It is the interaction of a

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 93–4.

¹⁵³ Thirteenth-century Icelanders may well have been part of this textual community: indeed, 'Norwegian runes from Bergen and Trondheim sometimes apparently attest to the use of runes by Icelanders who traded in Norway', James Knirk, 'Runes and Runic Inscriptions' in *MSE*, 545–52, 551.

¹⁵⁴ *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, st. 29. The reference to striking with baleful letters clearly refers to the flyting.

consistent aesthetic of plausibility which avoids the most obvious anachronisms, to borrow O'Donoghue's characterisation of 'saga-society',¹⁵⁵ with the fossilisation of long-forgotten traditions in oral transmission, which can give the misleading appearance of historicity. This illusion is only compounded by our limited knowledge of the period concerned, and the scarcity of extant runic inscriptions, so that it is tempting to agree wholeheartedly with Larrington's assertion that 'the literary notion of practical applications for runes cannot be connected with their historical uses as evidenced by surviving rune inscriptions', although as this survey has shown, the deeper into the snake-pit you descend, the more complicated and unsettling the view becomes.¹⁵⁶ Ultimately, perhaps the most that can be said about the historicity of these runic references is that the antecedent to the script used in thirteenth-century Iceland has, after all, been correctly linked to the Age of Migrations, to continental Europe, and to human hands.

¹⁵⁵ Heather O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Short Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 41-2.

¹⁵⁶ Larrington, *A Store of Common Sense*, 88.

Afterword: The ‘missing’ runes in *Atlakviða*

The poem *Atlakviða* is often compared with the later treatment of the same heroic sequence in *Atlamál in grænlenzko*. The compiler of the Codex Regius believed (or at least wanted to claim) that both these poems originated in Greenland: whilst the attribution of *Atlakviða* to this outpost of the Old Norse world is highly unlikely, impossible if the poem is to be attributed to the skald Þorbjörn hornklofi as suggested by Genzmer,¹⁵⁷ there are elements in the latter poem which make the ascription to Greenland credible at least,¹⁵⁸ thus setting *Atlamál in grænlenzko* at a geographical as well as temporal remove from its counterpart in the MS. There is much in *Atlamál* that suggests the adaption of the narrative to the realities of the Norse colonies, including the insular environment, the landscape and fauna, and to a certain extent also the morality of the protagonists: the trembling slave Hialli is released through the mercy of Hǫgni, for example, rather than being anatomised to reveal his un-heroic heart, as in *Atlakviða*. These two versions of the heroic deaths of Gunnar and Hǫgni, along with the skilful conglomeration of both narratives in *Vǫlsunga saga*, have been of much interest to critics, not least because they help to give a sense of what exactly is archaic in the older Eddic poems, providing a historical referent by which to judge the antiquity of the collected poems. Indeed, *Atlakviða* is judged to be one of the oldest of the Eddic poems. It is elusive and disjointed, skilful and strange; perhaps updated by a Greenlandic poet for these very reasons.

¹⁵⁷ This Norwegian skald, responsible for *Hrafnsmál*, was active in the ninth century, whilst Greenland was only colonised in the latter half of the tenth century. See F. Genzmer, ‘Der Dichter der Atlakviða’, *ANF XLII* (1926), 97-134, Dronke, *Poetic Edda I*, 42-3 and Bjarne Fidjestøl, ‘Þorbjörn hornklofi’ in *MSE*, 668-9.

¹⁵⁸ R. G. Finch, ‘*Atlamál*’ in *MSE*, 24. The most compelling bit of evidence is probably the very naturalistic depiction of the polar bear in St. 16-17. As Dronke points out, where else but Greenland would Hǫgni automatically assume his wife was describing a *hvítabiörn*? *Poetic Edda: I*, 110.

Part of the recasting of the sequence of events in *Atlamál* involves the introduction of runes, more precisely a narrative sub-plot involving the writing, defacement and interpretation of a runic message. Through this narrative embellishment we can perhaps glimpse the historical consciousness of the poet, and shed some further light on the re-scripting that is taking place throughout the *Edda*. Bragg is emphatic in her avowal that this runic motif ‘suggests nothing so much as monastic enthusiasm for cryptography retrojected onto a legendary cast of characters’, but the situation, as always, is not as straightforward as it first appears.¹⁵⁹

The runes are certainly an addition to the story, replacing the symbolic wolf-hair that serves as a warning in *Atlakviða*, but to what extent this represents an attempt at ‘modernisation’ as Finch suggests, or the influence of a different source text, is somewhat hard to judge.¹⁶⁰ Andersson posits a ‘lost north German or Saxon lay’ as a source for *Atlamál* which he attempts to reconstruct through a comparison of **Niflunga saga* and the *Nibelungenlied*, suggesting that a key element of this story was the dispatching of a letter by Grimhild to the Nibelungs.¹⁶¹ This archetype would have provided the inspiration for the written message occurring in the later poem, the concept not, therefore, simply having been invented by the poet. Having said that, Andersson is clear that other elements of the runic message—its reconfiguration as a warning, the defacement of the writing, the character of Kostbera who reads the runes correctly—are to be thought of as later ‘flourishes’ by the poet of

¹⁵⁹ Bragg, ‘Runes and Readers’, 43.

¹⁶⁰ Finch, ‘*Atlamál*’, 24.

¹⁶¹ Theodore M. Andersson, ‘Did the Poet of *Atlamál* Know *Atlaqviða*?’ in *Edda: A Collection of Essays*, ed. Robert J. Glendinning and Haraldur Bessason (University of Manitoba Press, 1983), 243-57, 247-9.

Atlamál.¹⁶² Once again there appears to be a curious mix of invention and, if not exactly historicity, then at least the possibility of an earlier, more contiguous source.

If the idea of a written message is something inspired by a lost German source, the development of this conceit into the narrative sub-plot that exists in *Atlamál* is, however, something the Norse poet is alone responsible for. A brief comparison with the corpus of older runic inscriptions only serves to reinforce this impression. There is nothing that really qualifies as runic correspondence written in the older *futhork*, and although what survives is certainly not representative of every use of runes in the Migration Age, the script was clearly decidedly limited in its uses. Though there is certainly evidence that older *futhork* inscriptions were defaced, as mentioned earlier, this is something that is not indicative of a particular age, and does not even imply the defacer was literate. The idea of a runic message, whether serving as a warning or otherwise, certainly has more relevance to the late Viking and early medieval Age, the age of settlement, colonisation and North Atlantic trade. A number of very interesting runic messages, including business correspondence and personal letters, have been uncovered amongst the finds at Bryggen, and it is to this tradition of everyday communication that we should ascribe the reference in *Atlamál*. The poet is correct in projecting the use of the runic script back into the heroic past, but the manner in which the script is used in the poem is almost certainly anachronistic. We might better ask what the portrayal tells us about the twelfth or thirteenth-century use of the script, and what effect the poet intends in his employment of runes. A comparison with the earlier poem provides a useful starting point.

¹⁶² Andersson, 249.

The wolf's hair in *Atlakviða* itself represents a message, a communiqué, but one whose semiotics are not fixed. In fact, it is a warning that backfires spectacularly. The brothers, who are offended by the implication that they, who possess the wealth of Sigurðr, should be enticed to Atli's court by the promise of treasure, change their attitude on seeing the wolf's hair, reading it as a challenge underlying the otherwise unappealing invitation. The warning, and their sister's 'officious fears', have as Dronke points out, actually 'forced them to accept'.¹⁶³ The twisted message is as wolfish as the threat itself, and turns upon its sender's intentions when it is received.

In *Atlamál*, the message is far more precise, using written language as the medium of communication, and lacking the inherent danger of the ambivalent sign. Instead, in order to twist and change the message in a similar way, a 'human by-play' is introduced by the poet; the defacing of the message and the decipherment by an astute reader.¹⁶⁴ This does indeed seem to fit with a scheme of domestication in the later poem, more concerned with personal and familial interaction than with the clash of kingdoms. But it also introduces the process of reading and writing into the poem as an additional theme, expanding on the idea of mutable signs in *Atlamál*. In doing so it makes the same anxieties expressed in *Atlakviða* relevant to a textual community, perhaps specifically to an isolated colony, dependent to such a great degree on long-distance exchanges and regular supply of goods from the mainland.

We have three main agents involved in this written exchange. First there is the writer, Guðrún (the fact her name literally translates as 'god-rune' may well have given support to the poet's conceit). Then there is the villain Vingi who defaces the inscription, and finally Kostbera, the most

¹⁶³ Dronke, *Poetic Edda: I*, 14.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 100.

astute of readers, who recognises the treachery in the message. We are not told at the time how the messenger defaces the runes, only that ‘rengði þær Vingi’, ‘Vingi distorted them’ (St. 4), but it is important that the runes are not discarded, not just because they might be envisaged as being inscribed on one of the proffered gifts, but because the poet intends the deceit to be conceived of as more complex, more troubling, than that furnished by a simple interception and destruction of a message. Vingi plays on the absence of the speaker, and on the qualities of longevity and permanence associated with script, in effect appropriating the voice of Guðrún and using it to help trap the brothers. It is a message as wolfish as that of the hair in *Atlakviða*, but it plays instead with the particular dangers of written signs, signs that are read all too easily without questioning the interpretive context, and without understanding the inherent ‘danger’ of written correspondence: the disconnect between the author and the reader.

Kostbera is the antidote to this danger: she is not only a skilled reader, the poet telling us that ‘hon . . . inti orðstafi / at eldi líosom’, ‘she spelt out the letters of the words, by the shining fire’ (St. 9), but she also goes beyond the reading of the words and knows ‘skil rúna’, ‘the meaning of runes’ (St. 9). I suggest that the poet is not simply implying that she is more skilled with letters, but that she understands the *process* and *nature* of writing. She is able to comprehend that words can be altered, that signifier and speaker are not one and the same, and that words detached from context may be duplicitous. Indeed, she actively resists the simple attribution of the qualities of speech to the runes, holding her tongue ‘í gómi báða’ ‘behind clenched teeth’ (St. 9). She recognises that something has come between the simple transfer of Guðrún’s utterance into written form.

We might wonder if the misconstruing of messages was not a common problem in the world of medieval rune writing. Often we come across inscriptions that appear to mimic writing, but lack meaning, the many coins that wrongly replicate runic inscriptions being a case in point. There are numerous inscriptions that are contentious in their readings, and many more that are completely unfathomable. Whilst many are undoubtedly due to ‘illiterate rune-writers’ slovenly habits’ as Moltke suggests,¹⁶⁵ it is disingenuous to put all these instances down to sloppy copyists: many undoubtedly rely on textual conventions or contexts we are not privy too. Even with this proviso, however, there are still many instances of runes carved amiss; even on as carefully planned and executed a monument as the Ruthwell Cross we still find the occasional mistake. In the early period, in which the uses for runes were rather limited and where the act of writing perhaps took precedence over the information provided by the message, one might think this was not such a great problem, but in a society using runes for business transactions, and commercial dealings, the confusing of a message by the missing of a letter or carving of erroneous runes was likely to have very real impacts; this is a ‘dangerous supplement’ indeed.¹⁶⁶

To this end, a number of attempts have been made to identify the runes carved.¹⁶⁷ Most use Kostbera’s statement that ‘vant er stafs vífi’, ‘the woman is missing a letter’ (St. 12) as the basis for their investigations, the linguist Winfred P. Lehmann even offering the rather wild proposal that a widespread tradition of omitting letters to indicate treachery existed from an early date, translating

¹⁶⁵ Moltke, *Runes and their Origins*, 80.

¹⁶⁶ Derrida uses this phrase, expressing what Rousseau saw as the unsettling and subversive nature of writing, as a basis for his deconstruction of the binary of ‘full’ speech and ‘supplementary’ writing in *Of Grammatology*, II:ii.

¹⁶⁷ Bæksted gives an overview of the various attempts to solve this puzzle, some of which make for interesting reading, *Målruner og Trolldruner*, 99-101.

vant in this case as ‘omitted’.¹⁶⁸ The majority of interpretations work on the equally misplaced assumption that Vingi was supposed to have changed the warning into an invitation, an additional detail emphasised in *Volsunga saga*.¹⁶⁹ The statement in *Atlamál* that ‘biqt hefir þér eigi / boðit í sinn þetta’, ‘the bright one has not invited you this time’ (St. 11) need not imply that the inscription has literally become altered to act as an invitation, it is simply an emphatic statement of the contrary state of affairs. In fact the runes are so distorted that ‘vant var at ráða’, ‘they were hardly able to be fathomed out’ (St. 9), and it is clear that the message ‘was modified by Vingi to make it incomprehensible’.¹⁷⁰ If the runes are taken as an invitation it is because those less astute readers have read what they expected to see in the message, a state of affairs not uncommon amongst twentieth-century runologists. An interpretation such as that provided by Olsen, involving runic ciphers and a word which changes its meaning when a single letter is altered, is really nothing more than an exercise in scholarly ingenuity. The message is *not* related in the poem and the inscription is entirely hypothetical, lacking even the clear performative context of a poem like *Skírnismál*.

I would suggest with Bæksted that rather than being envisaged as a particular inscription and specific alteration, the message in fact represents only a ‘vague suggestion’,¹⁷¹ or more precisely a distillation of all the anxieties of miscarving and tampering; distorted characters, missing letters, runes ‘svá viltar’, or ‘so confused’ (St. 9) that they cannot be made out, and runes ‘vilt rísta’, ‘wrongly

¹⁶⁸ Winfred Lehmann, ‘Vant er stafs vífi – Am. 12.9: “The woman omitted a stave” in *Festschrift für Karl Schneider*, ed. Kurt R. Jankowsky and Ernst S. Dick (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 1982), 43–48, 47.

¹⁶⁹ The statement reads ‘sá Vingi rúnarnar ok sneri á aðra leið ok, at Guðrún fýsti í rúnum at þeir kvæmi á hans fund’, ‘Vingi saw the runes and changed them around in such a way that Guðrún urged them in runes to come and pay a visit to him [Atli]’. Ch. 35, 65, but leaves us no wiser as to how the runes were altered.

¹⁷⁰ Antonsen, ‘Rengði þær Vingi’, 136.

¹⁷¹ Bæksted, *Málruner og Trolldrúner*, English summary, 323, and 110.

cut' (St. 12). It takes a model reader like Kostbera, attuned to the vagaries of the script and able to read through the confusion, to make out the real intention of the message, and to recognise that a competent rune carver would not make such a hash of things. It is realistic in the sense that it represents a complex of real problems, not a specific inscription that has been altered, and should remind us that reading runes is not just about apprehending a linguistic message, but also about understanding the context; it is a process of interpretation.

Not only the potential for misunderstanding context, but the consequences of miswriting would have been magnified by the geographical isolation of Norse colonies, relying heavily on trade and contact with more populated settlements. In a community such as Greenland, the distance between the writer and reader would surely give rise to anxieties about the integrity of the message; with messages sent between widely dispersed communities in the Western and Eastern settlements, or with the recipient potentially hundreds of miles away in Norway, who could question the veracity of a received message? Indeed, one of the key changes to the heroic sequence is that the protagonists' journey between households is configured as a crossing of the sea, the poet telling us that the heroes must 'um sæ sigla' (St. 3), whilst the messengers at one point cross 'um fiqrð Lima', 'over Limfjord' (St. 4), relocating the action in a Scandinavian, specifically Danish, setting.

As for the particular Greenlandic connection, runes were certainly used in the colony for a variety of purposes. The majority of inscriptions are of the brief mark of ownership variety, but the corpus includes longer inscriptions on memorial stones and grave-slabs, and also on portable items such as bone and wooden objects. We may assume that such objects passed between Norse-speaking communities; indeed, we should properly regard the later runic finds in Greenland as 'a normal

means of communication within this whole Norse complex'.¹⁷² Whilst runic correspondence of the sort found in Bryggen and documented by Aslak Liestøl is not paralleled in the material from Greenland,¹⁷³ (indeed, it is hardly paralleled anywhere) it is notable that Bergen was the main supply port for the colony.¹⁷⁴ We can certainly expect that correspondence of a commercial, personal and even political nature, reflecting the range of finds at Bryggen, passed between such communities. Something that might suggest an additional anxiety of communication in Greenland are the slight variations in the script that seem to have developed in the settlement. These divergences are perhaps not as great as once stressed,¹⁷⁵ but such anomalies as the Greenlandic u-form with its dropped intersection between stave and branch (somewhat resembling an Anglo-Saxon h rune) and the collection of divergent r-forms would certainly have served to compound concerns about written communication with the mainland.¹⁷⁶ This would, of course, have been more of a source of confusion for those receiving communication *from* Greenland, and a merchant maintaining contact with the settlement would perhaps have been most aware of the potential for miscommunication.

If there can be no final consensus about the Greenland connection, the composition of *Atlamá* should at least be localised in a society where transactions over long distances were carried out using runes. But though the attitude to runes and the anxieties expressed certainly suggest a late date for

¹⁷² Marie Stoklund, 'Greenland Runic Inscriptions' in *Proceedings of the First International Symposium on Runes and Runic inscriptions* (Michigan: University of Michigan, Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures, 1981), 138-147, 144.

¹⁷³ Aslak Liestøl, 'Correspondence in Runes', *Medieval Scandinavia* 1 (1968), 17-27.

¹⁷⁴ Stoklund, 'Greenland Runic Inscriptions', 144.

¹⁷⁵ Stoklund notes 'a tendency toward isolating the Greenland runes' when first published, perhaps 'influenced by the tragic fate of the Norse society in Greenland', *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁷⁶ Both of these forms are illustrated on a whale-bone handle from Vatnahverfi reading **gunnar a**, *Gunnarr á*. GR 67, *SamRun*.

the introduction of the rune-reading episode, it is perhaps problematic to talk about the poem reflecting runic practice, either that of Migration Age Europe, *or* medieval Scandinavia. The poet's attitude towards history and his sources for the heroic sequence is a creative, adaptive one, localising the action in a familiar world, but embellishing and fictionalising other aspects, such as Gunnar playing the harp with his toes, and the various dream interpretations that precede the brothers' departure. In light of the rather perceptive engagement with the problems of writing and runic communication in the poem, it is hard to agree with Bragg's dismissive comments that the poet of *Atlamál* 'seems not to have grasped the concept of functional runic literacy';¹⁷⁷ it is not a question of runic writing being accurately represented, but being developed into a thematic concern which is played out in the deep past of the heroic world. It is clear that the runes better reflect the situation at the point at which the poem was reworked, rather than an ancient practice fossilised in verse. But even their relationship to the contemporary tradition is not straightforward: rather than imitating historical practice, the runes serve as a literary device to explore anxieties about writing, about human interactions in a geographically disparate society, and about the mutability of the material text, the exact meaning of which always threatens to escape the control of the author.¹⁷⁸ The role of poetry in engaging with the perils and the social value of writing, of writing as a cultural phenomenon, becomes much clearer when we turn to look at the mythological poems of the *Edda*.

¹⁷⁷ Bragg, 'Runes and Readers', 43.

¹⁷⁸ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 113.

Chapter 5

The Mythical Rune: Writing and Mythopoeia in the *Edda*

[*Hávamál*, *Rígsþula*, *Skírnismál*, *Sólarljóð*]

We have seen just how complicated the relationship between practice and literary representation can be in considering the heroic poems of the *Poetic Edda*. The distinction between myth and practice is, of course, of a rather different order. This is not because myth bears no relation to real-life customs—myth, like literature, can of course have ‘a specific social function’,¹ even a ritual application—but because the relationship between myth and the existential world is of a different order. A myth may not even occupy the same temporal or spatial landscape as the world in which we live, or deal exclusively with supernatural agents. The social function of myth is often mediatory, in dialogue with reality: something that a formalist interpretation of mythological poems as expressions of cultural practice often fails to acknowledge.² Indeed, individual myths often treat a concept or object that is used dispassionately in the sphere of everyday life, the two schemes of recognition quite capable of coexisting, and interacting with each other in a variety of ways. Mead may be associated with the divine origin of the poetic arts in the myth cycle, and at the same time be

¹ Northrop Frye, ‘The Mythical Approach to Creation’ in *Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays 1974-1988*, ed. Robert D. Denham (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 238-54, 238.

² See, for example, the oft quoted statement by the social anthropologist Sir James George Frazer that ‘myths stood to magic in the relation of theory to practice’, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion VII:II* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), 88: according to Clunies Ross such ideas ‘to some extent continue to be influential in the study of Old Norse myth’ and are certainly taken literally by those neo-pagan revivalist groups who view the *Poetic Edda* as a sacred text. *Prolonged Echoes: Old Norse myths in medieval Northern society: Vol. 1* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1994), 12.

imbibed without any recourse to poetry, and the widespread veneration of trees in pre-Christian religions, including, of course, Yggdrasill in the Old Norse tradition, probably had little impact on the practicalities of constructing houses. We run a similar risk of not being able to see the wood for the trees when attempting to read the runes in these poems: we cannot claim that because runes are portrayed in a certain way and have particular associations in the myth cycle, these associations dictated their use on a day-to-day basis. Those practitioners of runes writing inscriptions of ownership on prestige objects may well have valued the runes as *reginkunnr*, ‘derived from the gods’, but applied them in an entirely practical manner.

Learning to read these mythical expressions of the rune, or even identifying them with a particular conception of writing may seem like an impracticable task, having to navigate not only the vagaries of myth itself, but also the associations that have accrued throughout centuries of distorted interpretations. Indeed, as Wills points out, the earliest scholars ‘were not particularly interested in Old Icelandic myths about runes, even though they were interested in almost anything to do with their uses’, being more concerned with the magical application of runes than stories which pertain to their social function.³ This chapter will be concerned with exactly these stories, attempting a reading of the mythological rune informed by the formal qualities of writing as a technology, and examining the role of the script in the creation of a social myth of writing.

This approach is based on the assumption that myth pertaining to a technology such as writing not only serves to explain its origins and reflect real-life practices, but is ‘socially and intellectually engaged’, expressing the value of this construct within the society, and in turn helping to construct

³ Tarrin Wills, ‘The Reception of Myths Concerning Literacy and Poetry’ in *Preprints of the 11th International Saga Conference* (2000). Reproduced online at <http://sydney.edu.au/arts/medieval/saga/pdf/572-wills.pdf>. Accessed Jan 2011. 572-8, 575.

that reality.⁴ Encoded within the runic myths are social truths about the nature of writing and the revolution it represents, as well as concerns about the impact of this technology. Myth after all, ‘often articulates the illicit or controversial in social and moral terms as much as patterns of correct moral and social behaviour’.⁵ If read without the preconception that this Eddic material represents a primitive, superstitious engagement with script, it might also serve to throw some further light on what the technology of writing has come to mean to us.

Hávamál

Nam ek upp rúnar,
œpandi nam. (St. 139)⁶

It is probably true to say that every literate culture has developed a myth of origins which explains the ascendancy of their particular writing system in very different terms to the reality of borrowing, adaptation and exchange.⁷ It is hardly surprising that an aetiological myth should develop to explain as important a cultural innovation as writing, especially when the technology is introduced to a society for the first time.⁸ Not only does it serve to explain the phenomenon, but to a certain extent

⁴ Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, 15.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 15.

⁶ ‘I took up the runes, crying out I took them.’

⁷ For the debate concerning the origins of the Runic script, see for example Moltke, *Runes and their Origins*, 38-69 and Richard L. Morris, *Runic and Mediterranean Epigraphy* (Odense: Odense University Press, 1988).

⁸ The commonly held view is that alphabetic writing was invented only once. See Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 88.

helps to assimilate and claim control over this important aspect of cultural capital.⁹ Myths of origin typically situate writing as a divine creation, it being quite natural 'to seek a relationship between language and religion' and for a script subsequently to be envisaged as a gift from a divine being, in many cases serving to reconfirm and solidify spiritual truth.¹⁰

Thus, the Sumerians believed writing to be one of the central divine arts brought to Earth by the god Enki, the Egyptians credited the scribal deity Thoth with teaching hieroglyphs to mankind, and the Maya believed that the foremost of their gods, Itzamna, was responsible for creating writing, his impressive resume also including the invention of timekeeping and the dividing and naming of the world.¹¹ Similar associations are also found within the Western tradition, the Greek historian Diodorus Siculus portraying the alphabet as a gift from Zeus to the muses,¹² whilst the myth that Hermes/Mercury was responsible for the invention of writing was common across the Greco-Roman world.¹³ There is also a rather fanciful story in which the letters of the alphabet are said to be invented by Palamedes on seeing cranes in flight and observing the shapes their wings made, the nickname 'Palamedes' birds' used to refer to the crane in *Riddle 26* of Symphosius' collection.¹⁴ Even within the Judeo-Christian tradition, writing was associated variously with Adam, Enoch, Noah and

⁹ Roy Harris makes reference to the Blackfoot Indian legend that developed to account for the acquisition of writing, its purpose being 'to snatch a mythical last-minute victory over the white man' and to authenticate the script as culturally valid, *The Origin of Writing* (London: Duckworth 1986), 11.

¹⁰ Wayne M. Senner, *The Origins of Writing* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 10.

¹¹ Kay Almere Read and Jason J. González, *Mesoamerican Mythology - A Guide to the Gods, Heroes, Rituals, and Beliefs of Mexico and Central America* (Oxford: OUP, 2002), 196.

¹² Senner, *The Origins of Writing*, 14.

¹³ Rolf H. Bremmer, 'Hermes-Mercury and Woden-Odin as Inventors of Alphabets: A Neglected Parallel' in *Old English Runes and their Continental Background*, ed. Alfred Bammesberger (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1991), 409-419, 417.

¹⁴ Elizabeth Hickman du Bois, *The Hundred Riddles of Symphosius* (Woodstock, Vt: The Elm Tree Press, 1912), 71.

Moses, leading theologians from Augustine to Aquinas entrenching the misplaced theory that all scripts ultimately evolved from Hebrew.¹⁵

Such fables and historical misconceptions are, however, largely overlooked when talking about the Latin alphabet's rise to ascendancy. The idea that the alphabet is somehow innately superior, the foundation of rational Western thinking, and the end product of a series of false starts and half-scripts hobbled by their association with cult and myth, perhaps lies at the root of this apparent absence of a popular mythology. The narrative of scriptural evolution requires that the Latin alphabet be perceived as free from such 'primitive' invented traditions from the outset.¹⁶ Somewhat paradoxically the most pervasive 'alphabet myth' of the present age may well be one of denial, subsuming any mythical history in the service of a narrative of rational Western progress.

The fact of the matter is that myth or superstition has little or no bearing on the functionality of the script to represent spoken language, even if it sometimes influences the uses to which writing is put. That the runic script is accompanied by a myth of divine origin, at least in the Old Norse tradition, is therefore neither exceptional nor itself indicative of a primitive conception of writing. As Spurkland points out with typical acuity, it is not altogether different from Blake's depiction of writing in his iconic *Jerusalem*.¹⁷ It has, however, come to dominate the later reception of the runic

¹⁵ Senner, *The Origins of Writing*, 16.

¹⁶ Kipling's story 'How The Alphabet Was Made' is interesting in that it credits an inventive child with creating 'noise pictures' resembling the shapes of her father's mouth as he produces certain sounds – a suitably phono-centric myth. Interestingly, the runes themselves appear in a picture following the previous story in the collection, 'How The First Letter Was Written'. Kipling explains that 'the letters round the tusk are magic - rune magic', in marked contrast to the rational story of alphabetic writing that follows. *Just So Stories* (Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 140-1.

¹⁷ 'God . . . in mysterious Sinai's awful cave / To man the wond'rous art of writing gave'.

script, and the collection of ‘fairly obscure and incoherent stanzas’¹⁸ in *Hávamál* to which we owe our knowledge of this enigmatic myth are some of the most quoted in Old Norse:

‘Veit ek, at ek hekk
vindga meiði á
nætr allar nío,
geiri undaðr
ok gefinn Óðni,
siálfr siálfom mér,
á þeim meiði,
er manngi veit
hvers hann af rótum renn.

Við hleifi mik sældo
né við hornigi.
Nysta ek niðr.
Nam ek upp rúnar,
œpandi nam.
Fell ek aptr[a]ð[r ú]tan.’ (138-39)¹⁹

These two stanzas, the first of the eight known collectively as *Rúnatal*, or *Rúnaþáttur*, occur towards the end of *Hávamál*, an abstruse poem of some 164 stanzas dealing with gnomic wisdom and secret knowledge. The date and provenance of the poem are somewhat contentious,²⁰ but at least one

¹⁸ David A. H. Evans, *Hávamál* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1986), 29.

¹⁹ ‘I know that I hung on a windy tree for nine whole nights, wounded with a spear and given to Óðinn – myself to myself – on that tree which none know from which roots it rises. They gave me no bread, or drink from a horn. Downwards I gazed. I took up the runes, crying out I took them. I fell back from without.’

²⁰ Eugen Mogk, for example, suggests that parts of the poem date back as far as the early ninth century, *Geschichte der Norwegisch-Isländischen Literatur* (Strassburg: Karl J. Trübner, 1904), 87.

stanza seems to date back to the tenth century or earlier, as it is echoed by the skald Eyvindr skaldaspillir in his praise poem *Hákonarmál*.²¹ The poem has long been recognised as lacking internal unity, and as Larrington summarises, it is probably ‘a redaction of several different poems united by the theme of wisdom and by the central figure of Odin’.²² *Rúnatal* is one of these constituent parts, and was recognised and named as such by Müllenhoff along with five other distinct subdivisions of the poem.²³ It presumably had a life independent of the poetic context in which it has come down to us, perhaps excerpted from a longer poem, or as a popular myth about Óðinn’s self-sacrifice which may have been adapted and transmitted in a variety of ways. Indeed, a number of runic inscriptions, including the Sparlösa and Noleby stones, the latter dating from the sixth century, use variations on the phrase ‘runes derived from the gods’,²⁴ suggesting that the basis of this myth was well established, and as Larsson points out, not confined to West Scandinavian literary culture.²⁵

²¹ Hollander, *The Poetic Edda*, 14.

²² Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 14.

²³ Karl Müllenhoff, *Deutsche Altertumskunde V* (Weidman: Berlin, 1891), 250-88.

²⁴ Side A of the Noleby stone (Vg 63) reads **runo fahi raginakudo toj-a**, *runo fahi raginakudo toj[ek]a*, ‘[I] paint the suitable rune derived from the gods’, *SamRun*. In *Hamðismál* (25/2) the compound *reginkunngi* is also used to refer to Iqrmunrekkr, king of the Goths. Translations of this word vary from Dronke’s ‘god-descended’, to ‘divinely inspired’ or Larrington’s ‘versed in powerful magic’. In *Vǫlsunga saga* Óðinn himself appears in order to instruct the king, suggesting the alternative translation ‘divinely advised’ might be appropriate. The distinction between ‘descended’ and ‘inspired’ is a very important one in relation to the runes, descent suggesting a mythical origin, whilst inspiration suggests a continued influence and association when carving. In the case of the runic inscriptions, both readings would make sense, and ‘inspired’ may be a valid interpretation, particularly as both the Noleby and Sparlösa stones include non-formulaic and inventive elements, the latter also including alliteration and possible versification according to MacLeod and Mees, *Runic Amulets*, 213.

²⁵ Patrick Larsson, ‘Runes’ in *A Companion to Old Norse-Icelandic Literature and Culture*, ed. Rory McTurk (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 403-26, 418. Both these inscriptions are from Västergötland, Sweden. The association of Óðinn/Wotan with the statement in the *Prose Solomon and Saturn* that ‘Mercurius se gygand’, invented letters (ss. 58) has been problematised in recent years, however, and perhaps refers directly to the Roman myth. See Bremmer, ‘Hermes-Mercury’, 409-419.

The myth itself certainly stresses the esteemed value of writing within the society in which it circulated, an innovation of such importance that Óðinn is willing to endure terrible suffering in order to obtain it, hanging for ‘nætr allar nío’, ‘for nine whole nights’ (st. 138) on a tree exposed to the elements, wounded with a spear and deprived of food and water. Many critics have seen a direct parallel with the crucifixion in this self-sacrifice,²⁶ although others have argued convincingly that such similarities are fortuitous.²⁷ In stark contrast to Christ’s altruistic suffering, with mankind as its object, this episode is rather more self-reflexive, portraying Óðinn in a lone struggle for hidden knowledge. In this respect it perhaps bears more in common with the story of Buddha’s meditative enlightenment beneath the Bhodi tree. The isolation and introspective nature of this episode certainly seems to be stressed by the poet, Óðinn dedicated rather cryptically ‘siálfr siálfom mér’, ‘myself to myself’ (st. 138). It may even tell us something, however indirectly, about the perception of writing of those who established or mediated this myth, and the way in which we might read this etiological account.

Clunies Ross treats this myth in a similar way to that of the mead of poetry and Mímir’s well, Óðinn acquiring various ‘intellectual raw materials’ and bringing ‘certain “this world” skills to bear upon them so that they become socially useful’, runes granting the gods ‘the now accepted

²⁶ S. Bugge was perhaps the most vehement advocate of Christian borrowing, see for instance *Studier over de nordiske Gude og Heltesagns Oprindelse* (Christiania: A. Cammermeyer, 1881), 219. Hollander also agrees that ‘the conception of the first two stanzas . . . is ultimately derived from the crucifixion scene of the Bible’, although he does not elaborate greatly on this statement, *The Poetic Edda*, 36.

²⁷ Evans argues convincingly against Christian influence on this episode, suggesting that the spear used to wound Óðinn has a long association with the god, that there are a number of references to Óðinn and hanging throughout Old Norse poetry, and that there is no parallel in the Christian story either to gaining secret knowledge, or to hanging for such a long duration. He instead suggests the influence of shamanic practices and Finno-Ugric mythology, *Hávamál*, 29-34.

advantages of literacy: the recording, storage and reorganisation of information for later use'.²⁸

Reading the sacrifice in terms of technological advancement provides a useful model, one that is further encoded in the details of the episode. Spoken communication, at least until the advent of recording technology, always required a speaker to be present. It is a communal, social activity: inherently public. Writing, on the other hand, 'entails the complete loss of the actual situational context of the spoken utterance':²⁹ it may be composed alone, and read alone, and can represent a solitary activity, or even, on a cognitive level, an 'inward turn' towards 'interiorized stages of consciousness', something that one is aware of when redrafting an academic thesis.³⁰ Although much recent work has focused on the interface between the oral, the written and the mediating 'aural' of visible speech,³¹ the fact is that the technology of writing allowed for certain astounding revolutions in human interaction, possibilities that contemporary practitioners could not have been entirely insensitive to. Runes may have been read aloud, or interpreted in a communal setting, but a literate individual could also sit and ruminate, or receive communication, with nobody else present.

Whilst this may seem of little consequence to us today, it represents something of a sea change in the transfer of knowledge, even perhaps in the structuring of thought through the 'new linguistic operations that writing permits',³² a revolution being recognised, however obliquely, in this poem. The ritual enacted is a private one, not needing communal approbation, and essentially conducted

²⁸ Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, 224.

²⁹ Zimmermann, 'How to Do Things with Runes', 91.

³⁰ Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 174-5.

³¹ See for example O'Brien O'Keefe, *Visible Song*, and an interesting recent study by Mats Malm, 'Skalds, Runes and Voice', *Viking and Medieval Scandinavia* 6 (2010), 135-46.

³² Jack Goody, *The Interface Between the Written and the Oral* (Cambridge: CUP, 1987), 270.

between the initiate and the written word itself, with no audience present. This situation may also be referred to in st. 141, in the rather cryptic statement ‘orð mér af orði / orðs leitaði’ or ‘a word from a word sought another word for me’. The exchange is configured exclusively between the word and the individual, the word having an agency of its own. Indeed, the other ‘word for me’ which is said to come out of this revelatory process perhaps represents the written form of the word, the engraved name, which would make some sense of an otherwise obscure passage.³³

Although this process is associated explicitly with becoming wise, quickening and prospering (st. 141), one cannot escape the sense of privation and sacrifice, of progress bought at a terrible cost. We might be tempted to regard this as an expression of anxiety at the cultural upheaval wrought by writing, amongst which might be counted a weakening of collective memory,³⁴ a loosening of the bonds of oath and oral history, and the privileging of a literate elite. The idea that writing wrenches us from our origins and natural state, interposing a secondary system of signs between feeling and expression is still a prevalent one, despite being critiqued very successfully by Derrida. We might want to read this episode as an expression of the dictum that writing ‘seems to favour rather the exploitation than the enlightenment of mankind’, and to understand it in light of Lévi Strauss’s famous account of the ‘writing lesson’ given to the Nambikwara tribe, whose leader was immediately sensible of the potential to use writing to consolidate his social superiority.³⁵ Read in this way it

³³ Dronke suggests this phrase plays on a legal cliché, demonstrating ‘Óðinn’s ‘control of word and deed’, *Poetic Edda: III*, 62.

³⁴ In a dialogue with Phaedrus on the subject of writing Plato has Socrates recount a story about the King of Egypt and his reaction to Thoth’s invention of writing. The king utters the rejoinder that ‘[writing] will introduce forgetfulness into the souls of those who use it . . . you have not discovered a potion of remembering, but of reminding’, an example that is used to highlight writing as the dumb image of spoken discourse. Plato, *Phaedrus*, trans. by Alexander Nehamas and Paul Woodruff in *Plato: Complete Works*, ed. John M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 506-56, 551-2.

³⁵ Claude Lévi-Strauss, ‘A Writing Lesson’ in *Tristes Tropiques* trans. John Russell (New York: Atheneum: 1961), 288-97, 292.

might represent an expression of the threat posed by writing to the culture of oral wisdom stressed elsewhere in *Hávamál*, and the need to defuse this threat by granting it divine origins.

However, it is also possible to view the trauma and violence experienced in this episode simply as a measure of the esteem in which writing is held, and the high price that is set against it in the ritual of enlightenment. Indeed, Óðinn's sacrifice is 'expressly for an intellectual purpose'³⁶ and he is willing to pay a corporal price for such enlightenment more than once, the poem *Völuspá* and an elaboration by Snorri in *Gylfaginning* relating how he sacrificed an eye at Mímir's well in order to gain wisdom and knowledge from its waters, the physical loss of sight a rather apt sacrifice in an exchange for inner wisdom.³⁷ Not only that, but, as Clunies Ross points out, if the episodes are related, the loss of an eye might be an expression of the fact that 'writing provides a spatial coordinate for language, and a temporal dimension for it', recognising that 'the visual sense becomes of paramount importance in learning.'³⁸ This analogous episode should serve as a reminder not only of the high regard in which intellectual progress is held in the *Edda*, but also of how myth often encodes cultural attitudes towards particular aspects of cultural capital, the loss of an eye here 'explaining' inner vision, and an apparent sacrifice by Heimdallr of an ear, or hearing, undoubtedly related to his ability to sound the gjallarhorn at Ragnarøk.³⁹ Indeed, it might not be unreasonable to suggest that the physical wounding with a spear is a trauma equally pertinent to runic engraving, as is the wood from which he hangs. This sacrifice is curiously apt, Óðinn interposing himself between

³⁶ Dronke, *Poetic Edda: III*, 47.

³⁷ *Völuspá* st. 28 and *Gylfaginning*, 15.

³⁸ Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, 224.

³⁹ *Völuspá*, st. 27.

the material and the blade, and literally becoming incised in the process of ‘taking-up’ writing. Furthermore, the fact that Óðinn is said to cry out as he takes up the runes is not only a reflex of the idea that ‘the carrier of information . . . holds a voice that can be set loose’,⁴⁰ but is also surely a reminder of the most primitive form of communication, language-less and infant-like, as the next stage of language evolution is dramatised. If he ‘falls back’ from somewhere outside, or ‘beyond’ ordinary perception, we might think of it in terms of the panoramic insight afforded by his liminal position, where the beginnings of language and the progressive possibilities of written communication, and all it can transmit from the unremembered past, are poised in sharp relief.⁴¹

It is a statement of how familiarised we have become with the technology of writing that the spectre of magic is always raised when faced with an expression of its revolutionary character. The fact that this sacrifice is typically read as a cosmic power struggle, or a violent, clandestine act of creation, rather than an expression of writing’s great worth, is, on the other hand, perhaps a measure of the hold that the metaphysics of presence still has on the imagination. It may be noted, as Van Hamel does, that the god does not actually create the runes; he is not engaged in a process of invention, rather ‘they are there...and Óðin desires to submit them to himself.’⁴² Van Hamel uses this observation to further his argument that Óðinn’s hanging is a self-actualising martyrdom in which he conquers the power of the runes, and wins his place as All-father and ruler of the gods, a view which tends towards the logocentricism outlined above, and which introduces a direct

⁴⁰ Malm, ‘Skalds, Runes and Voice’, 142.

⁴¹ I do not follow Fleck in seeing this episode as a coherent and replicable ritual, although his argument that Óðinn is hanging by his feet and has his hands free to ‘take-up’ the runes is a compelling one, ‘Konr-Óttarr-Geirroðr: A Knowledge Criterion for Succession to the Germanic Sacred Kingship’, *Scandinavian Studies* 42 (1970), 39-49.

⁴² A. G. Van Hamel, ‘Óðin Hanging on the Tree’, *Acta Philologica Scandinavica* 7 (1932), 260-288, 266.

antagonism between the god and the writing system itself that is not evident in the poem. But his initial observation is certainly an important one. This is not, in truth, a myth of creation, but of reception. The runes are received by the god from an external source, perhaps through connection with the spiritual spheres, reaching down into the underworld from where so much of cultural value to the gods seems to have been obtained.⁴³ If we were to follow a euhemerist process of argumentation, we might conclude that this myth reflects the historical fact of borrowing from the Latin alphabet, of taking up or learning runes from a pre-existing script system. Indeed, perhaps even the idea that Óðinn had invented the runes might be borrowed from the crediting of Mercury with the invention of the alphabet in the Romanized world.⁴⁴ Even if nothing more than a fortuitous concurrence with historical fact, it will perhaps come as some surprise to those that credit the runic script as an independent Germanic creation that even the mythology of its practitioners seems to reflect the inheritance of the concept of writing from elsewhere.

It may be noted that up to this point the runes have only been explicitly associated with sought-after knowledge, not with magic. In the following stanza (140) the nine spells that the protagonist learns from Bólþorn, a shadowy character who appears to be Óðinn's maternal grandfather,⁴⁵ are received in addition to the runes (not, it should be stressed, through them), along with the 'precious mead' of poetry. The spells, runes and mead seem to be three distinct but complementary elements

⁴³ Henning Kure, 'Hanging on the World Tree: Man and Cosmos in Old Norse Mythic Poetry' in *Old Norse Religion in Long Term Perspectives: Origins, Changes and Interactions*, ed. Anders Andrén *et al.* (Lund: Nordic Academy Press, 2006), 68-71, 69.

⁴⁴ Bremmer, 'Hermes-Mercury', 419.

⁴⁵ Bólþorn does not appear in any other Eddic poem. Snorri appears to have taken his information in *Gylfaginning* directly from *Hávamál* and tells us nothing more than is mentioned here. Simek, *Dictionary*, 40.

in the initiation to sacred knowledge: spoken, written and ‘liquid knowledge’ transfer.⁴⁶ The technological aspects of writing are again stressed in the following stanza of the poem, the overall impression being reverential rather than numinous:

‘Rúnar munt þú finna
ok ráðna stafi,
miðk stóra stafi,
miðk stinna stafi,
er fáði fimbulþulr
ok gørðo ginnregin
ok reist Hroptr rognar’ (142)⁴⁷

Referring to runic letters as ‘interpretable or meaningful’, ‘large’ and ‘strong’ does not immediately imply supernatural power, and certainly leaves room for interpreting them as operative on a purely scriptural level,⁴⁸ as another expression of the characteristics and possibilities of the written word. Indeed, even the gods and the ‘great sage’ are only said to stain, make and carve the runes, all prosaic processes that reflect the reality of runic practice.

The identification of a named runemaster amongst each ‘race’ of gods, elves, dwarves and giants immediately follows this account (st. 143), and again perhaps reflects the social dimension of rune carving; of the existence of a status position associated with runic writing. It is tempting to refer to the title *erilar* found on a number of early inscriptions in relation to this prominent position,

⁴⁶ For a detailed discussion of this important motif, see Quinn, ‘Liquid Knowledge’, 183–226.

⁴⁷ ‘Runes you must find and the interpretable letters, very grand letters, very strong letters, which the great sage stained and the mighty gods made, and Hroptr of the gods carved out.’

⁴⁸ Dronke’s choice to translate *stinna stafi* as ‘stiff letters’ emphasises their physicality and the permanence of the written word *Poetic Edda: III*, 31.

although there is some contention about whether this is a title exclusively used in connection with runes, or a social title related to English *earl* and Old Norse *jarl*.⁴⁹ Whether or not such a position is implied, naming is the first impulse of the literate, and the fixing of authorship remains a singularly powerful facet of the written word, the signature itself representing ‘the reflexive sign *par excellence*’ and having ‘no counterpart in the domain of speech’.⁵⁰ The vast majority of runic inscriptions include a personal name, whether it be a memorial for the dead, a mark of ownership, or simply a statement that a certain person can write. Naming these individuals in the poem perhaps gestures towards this important characteristic of the ‘potent letter’.

The process of delineating the characteristics of the runic script is continued in st. 144, which takes the form of a series of rhetorical questions. It clearly begins by talking about the practicalities of the script—carving, interpreting, staining, testing out—but then appears to descend into cultic abstraction, in the form of asking, sacrificing, sending and destroying. In fact, these questions are so strongly associated with a pagan world view that one umbrella organisation for American neo-pagans, the Ásatrú Alliance,⁵¹ announces dramatically that ‘the following are not recommendations, Alfater *commands* [my emphasis] that you know the following if you are Ásatrúar’:⁵²

‘Veitsu hvé rísta skal? Veitsu hvé ráða skal?
 Veitsu hvé fá skal? Veitsu hvé freista skal?
 Veitsu hvé biðja skal? Veitsu hvé blóta skal?’

⁴⁹ Spurkland gives a good overview of the possibilities (2005), 49-51. See also Bernard Mees, ‘Runic erilaR’, *North-Western European Language Evolution* 42 (2003), 41-68.

⁵⁰ Harris, *Rethinking Writing*, 162 and 182.

⁵¹ Michael Strmiska, *Modern Paganism in World Cultures* (ABC-CLIO, 2005), 133.

⁵²The Ásatrú Alliance, Official Website, <http://www.asatru.org/runes.php> (2011). Accessed May 2009.

Veitsu hvé senda skal? Veitsu hvé sóa skal?’ (144)⁵³

I think it is worth, however, pausing to question the ritualistic credentials of this particular stanza. This seems to me to be a rather poetic conceit, conceived of by those very literate individuals to whom it would have been most advantageous to promote the cult of the father of poetry, and I want to suggest an alternative way of reading it that privileges writing over rite. Whilst Liberman is right to point out that ‘all the verbs in the stanza do not have to belong to the same sphere of activity’⁵⁴ it would seem plausible to me that a stanza dealing with runes at its beginning, and the skills needed to write them, should continue with this theme throughout. The degree of cultic or ritual significance one places on the final four commandments actually depends very much on the force of meaning one attaches to the verb in question. Indeed, there appears to be a rather studied duality at work in most of these statements.

The first of these ambiguous verbs, *biðja*, means ‘to ask’ or perhaps ‘to pray’, the first sense complementing the skills necessary for learning writing and interpretation of the written word, whilst the second fits more firmly into a scheme of cultic manipulation. Similarly, the verb *senda*, if meaning simply ‘to send’ or ‘to deliver’ can fit well within a framework of written messages, a view expressed by F. Detter and R. Heinzel, although it may have an extended connotation of ‘offering’ in the context of sacrifice, the meaning preferred when looking at this as a ritual use of runes.⁵⁵ The

⁵³ ‘Do you know how to cut? Do you know how to interpret? Do you know how to colour? Do you know how to try out? Do you know how to ask? Do you know how to sacrifice? Do you know how to dispatch? Do you know how to destroy?’

⁵⁴ Anatoly Liberman, ‘Germanic Sendan ‘To Make a Sacrifice’, *JEGP* 77 (1978), 473–88, 473.

⁵⁵ Liberman suggests that *sendan* means ‘to make a sacrifice’, drawing on an analogous use of the OE verb *sendeþ* with relation to Grendel’s treatment of the Danes, and a disputed reference in *Atlakviða* to distributing pieces of butchered children at a feast, ‘Germanic Sendan’, 473.

translation ‘dispatch’ favoured in a number of editions perhaps achieves a similar balance between registers, allowing for sacrificial connotations without demanding them. This may well be the tone that the poet is trying to strike, associating the runes in an indistinct way with ritual, whilst retaining their primary scriptural association. The verb *blóta* is translated as ‘sacrifice’ by Larrington, and is usually used to refer to cultic sacrifice, or to worship through sacrifice.⁵⁶ The final verb is of the same ilk, meaning as it does to ‘destroy’, ‘sacrifice’, or more rarely, to ‘squander’. We could of course be dealing here with the runes’ ‘proper use in sacrifice and magic’,⁵⁷ yet this ‘destruction’ may once have a secondary connotation, arising from an awareness of the writing process, and referring to scriptural elision and erasure, or to the discarding of what Heaney terms ‘trial pieces’.⁵⁸ This is certainly a key feature of writing as a material process, particularly so for the medium of *runakefli*, sticks that could easily be scraped clean with a blade, burned or defaced, as is evidenced from a number of inscriptions, and dramatised in the poem *Skírnismál*, as we shall see.

I do not want to labour the point, or to suggest that there is no cultic association whatsoever in this passage, which may even have had a ritual function of some kind at the time the poem was composed. We know that runes did sometimes (although quite rarely) have an association with ritual from the epigraphical evidence, and the runes would be truly extraordinary in the history of writing if the script was never used for such purposes. Furthermore, we have to wonder why Snorri did not include this myth in his great work on Icelandic poetics, particularly as the first stanza of

⁵⁶ For example in *Ynglinga saga*, where Snorri relates that a sacrifice was to be given to Óðinn for a good year, a good harvest and for victory in battle, each at the appropriate time of year, *Heimskringla*, I, Ch. 8.

⁵⁷ Hollander, *The Poetic Edda*, 37.

⁵⁸ Seamus Heaney, ‘Viking Dublin: Trial Pieces’ from *North* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975).

Hávamál is quoted in the *Prose Edda*, and as he clearly drew heavily on the material.⁵⁹ Possibly he saw Óðinn's sacrifice as a central pagan ritual best left unrecorded, or perhaps he was wary of such an enigmatic sequence, one that confuses the sacred and the prosaic to such a profound degree.

It should, however, be acknowledged that the enigmatic effect of this 'obscure and difficult' section of *Hávamál*⁶⁰ is perhaps not due entirely to our lack of knowledge about the pagan past, or the obscurity of the 'ritual' referred to, but is at least partly contrived by the poet, who carefully selects words that can work in two different registers. It is, in short, poetry: verse inspired by the practicalities, peculiarities and mystique of the written word. We may even ask if it was not in the interests of poets and scribes, the primary producers and disseminators of the written word, to infuse their craft with a certain air of mystery, whilst retaining an explicit connection with writing and composition. It should be noted as a final point that this account does prioritise the practicalities of rune writing, listing them first in the sequence, even the poetry serving to further vindicate Moltke's reasoning that a script is necessarily learned and used foremost as a script, and that magic applications are 'always secondary'.⁶¹

The final stanza of *Rúnatal* cannot be anything other than a directive pertaining to sacrifice and offering, even though it echoes the 'skills' outlined above. It seems to follow on from the preceding stanza because of their shared allusions, though it is actually composed in a different metre, and it is impossible to tell if they were composed together or not. These instructions, to sacrifice or slaughter in moderation, are cast as maxims carved by Thund 'fyr þjóða røk', 'before the history of men' (st.

⁵⁹ *Gylfaginning*, 8.

⁶⁰ Wills, 'The Reception of Myths', 575.

⁶¹ Moltke, *Runes and their Origins*, 69.

145). Two things may be said about this. Firstly, despite the cultic content of these lines, the runes are simply portrayed as recording devices for this advice, symbols that allow the transmission of Óðinn's knowledge across a great time span. This is their magic. They do not bring anything into being, and their cultic character is purely one of association.

Secondly, the reference to carving 'before the history of nations'⁶² or 'before the close of men's history'⁶³ (l. 145), may be more than just a poetic remark. The written word is, as we know, the great enabler of recorded history, allowing the speaking of things past, and the power of Óðinn's words comes from their ability to transcend the limited memories of men. Again, the power of writing as a concept is foregrounded. The statement that Thund (or Óðinn) carved 'þar hann upp um reis, er hann aprt kom', 'there where he rose up, when he came back' (st. 145) probably refers back to Óðinn's sacrifice and descent from the tree in st. 139, and brings this rather confusing, though by no means wholly impenetrable sequence to a close.

Before summarising the portrayal of runic writing in this mythological poem, and offering some tentative conclusions, it is worth looking briefly at the handful of passing references to runes that occur throughout its five other constituent parts. The section that follows *Rúnatal* has often mistakenly been portrayed as a list of runic charms, and the operations that runes can perform, with the eighteen stanzas read as somehow mirroring the sixteen runic characters of the younger *fuþark*. In fact, they are clearly referred to as *líoð*, defined accurately in this context by Zoëga as either 'a verse or stanza of a song' or 'a ditty or charm in verse'.⁶⁴ A number of stanzas clearly refer to reciting

⁶² Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 35.

⁶³ Dronke, *Poetic Edda: III*, l. 145.

⁶⁴ Geir T. Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), 276.

a spell, such as st. 156 ‘undir randir ek gel’, or ‘under their shields I chant’, and there is no reason to suppose the meaning intended here is any different. The confusion is no doubt engendered by the unambiguous reference in the twelfth spell to runes, which can be carved and coloured to raise a corpse from the dead so that he walks and talks (157). This particular runic ability may refer back to the self sacrifice in st. 138, and Óðinn’s survival of the hanging, but there can little doubt of preternatural application here. If we are seeking to understand the origins of this association however, it may be useful to consider the special attribute of writing to make the dead speak, in the sense that written words can outlive the writer and still communicate. It is a small step from the wonder at conversing with a person long dead through runes, to fashioning a ritual (or a poetic conceit) whereby the dead are made to talk. Either the instigators of such a ritual, or the author of the poem may be echoing such a connection.

The very first reference to runes in the poem, though rather more elliptical, is similarly out of place, more properly belonging in a list of charms like the *Ljóðatal*.⁶⁵ It paraphrases elements of the later stanza in *Rúnatal* (st. 142), talking of the ‘potent famous ones’ and again referencing the making of runes by *ginnregin* and their staining by *fimbulþulr* or ‘the mighty sage’. The opening statement ‘þat er þá reynt / er þú at rúnom spyr’, ‘that is now proved, what you asked of the runes’ (st. 80) appears rather unexpectedly, and does not seem to follow on from what precedes it. Even if the concept of *rúnar* is being used here to refer more broadly to gnomic wisdom, as Spurkland contends it is in the account of Óðinn’s sacrifice,⁶⁶ there is no clear subject asking the question, and how the previous maxims about love, wealth and the importance of an enduring reputation ‘prove’

⁶⁵ Bellows, *The Poetic Edda*, 45.

⁶⁶ Spurkland, *Norwegian Runes*, 14.

anything runic or otherwise is hard to fathom, unless to demonstrate simply that the transmission of knowledge is important. This stanza is probably an interpolation from another poem, or alternatively *Hávamál* in the form we now possess it lacks the material that would help us make sense of this passage. The concluding line of this stanza, counselling silence, is only slightly more informative, suggesting that this knowledge of the importance of runes, now gained, is to be kept secret.⁶⁷ It may also, of course, be referring to that central facet of the written word which allows for nonverbal communication, what we might call a productive, rather than a restrictive silence.

The image of the rune also appears in the series of gnomic directives aimed at Loddfáfnir in the section of the poem immediately preceding *Rúnatal*. Much of the wisdom is fairly commonplace, such as the advice to be civil to guests, not to trust wicked men and to be well fed before a journey, but the section known as *Loddfáfnismál* ends with a rather abstruse stanza that details certain misfortunes and the elements or objects that can be used to counteract them, fire against sickness, oak against constipation, earthworms against a bite or sting (st. 137). Some of these are clearly more practical than numinous. The communal space of the hall is bound to be a corrective to household strife, and earth is certainly good against a flood if it takes the form of a dyke or levée. Runes are mentioned in this context as a corrective against evil, a rather broad designation; one which leaves open the practical interpretation of writing as a technology of enlightenment, and which no doubt served as a reasonable segue into the account of how Óðinn acquired the runes.

The opening to *Loddfáfnismál* also briefly mentions runes, this time in the context of listening to wisdom in the High-One's hall, 'Háva hǫllo í' (st. 111), the listener hearing talk of runes amongst

⁶⁷ For the etymology of ON *rún* and the connection between sounds and secrets, see Malm, 'Skalds, Runes and Voice'.

the counsel and the speech of men. It is noteworthy that despite the fact that runes are being spoken about, suggesting that the more abstract meaning of ‘counsel’ or ‘secret knowledge’ is being employed, the context in which they appear suggests that the reference refers to the script, the listener stating that ‘of rúnar heyrða ek dœma / né um ráðom þogðo!’, ‘I heard judgement of runes, nor were they quiet in interpreting meanings!’ (st. 111). A reference to runes as writing would make a certain amount of sense here, as the following statement refers to ‘reading’, or ‘interpreting’ meanings. Indeed, the listener is said to see, be silent, ruminate, hear speech, hear talk of runes and hear about reading meaning. These activities seem to be representative of a generalised learning process, or the essentials of gaining knowledge through observation, listening, talking, considering, reading, and writing. Such a pedagogical statement makes a fitting preface to the instruction of Loddfáfnir, with the teacher’s repeated insistence that such advice ‘njóta mundo ef þú nemr’, ‘might be useful if you take it’ (st. 115). Again, the runes are associated with a process of knowledge transmission, however socially restricted, rather than purely with obfuscation and concealment.

Hávamál as a whole, and the *Rúnatal* section in particular, are elusive amalgamations of poetry, myth and natural law, resisting clear-cut conclusions and encouraging misguided speculation. We might be reasonably safe in suggesting that in terms of the composition, or compilation of the poem, the concept of writing, and the concept of knowledge designated by the word ‘rune’, are factors that link otherwise incongruous sections together, perhaps as important a compositional factor as the figure of Óðinn who is inextricably linked with writing, sorcery and secret knowledge of all kinds. With regards to the external referent or meaning of the poem, we are on much shakier ground. One valid way of explaining *Rúnatal* is as a dramatisation of ritual bound up in an initiation

into the written word, although this reading tends to marginalise the poetic form, situating the poem as ritual history rather than a poetic interpretation of mythical history. In my view it is far more profitable to pick apart the ritual mosaic in order to get a sense of how it relates to the perception of writing than to attempt to reconstruct it.

It is clear that within *Hávamál* writing is portrayed as more than simply an ordinary event, and is associated in various ways with semi-secret knowledge, enlightenment and enchantment.⁶⁸ The sense we get of runes in this poem is of a script that has a certain prestige and power, one that originates from the world of the gods but speaks to human concerns. If a rune-carver had poetic accounts such as these in mind when plying their craft, they would not, I believe, have been constrained to use them in any particular way. As this analysis has shown, the basis of the portrayal does lie in the actualities of writing. Underlying many of the apparently superstitious associations are the fundamental characteristics of writing as a technology, such as its ability to name and immortalise, to record history and transcend the present, and perhaps most importantly, to communicate in a solitary, introspective manner, writing mediating between the word and the reader without another individual needing to be present. Paying such close attention to writing as a process is something that resonates with both the self-reflexive tendencies of the epigraphical milieu and the complex graphical play we came across in the Anglo-Saxon tradition. Through close analysis

⁶⁸ This is perhaps not so very different to the linking of developed Latin literacy with magic practices in twelfth-century England, as explored by David Rollo in *Glamorous Sorcery: Magic and Literacy in the High Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

of these mythical events we can recognise a culture negotiating the role that writing performed in their society, and coming to terms with the revolution in communication it represents.

Rígsþula

Þá ǫðlaðiz
ok þá eiga gat
Rígr at heita,
rúnar kunna.’ (46:5-8)⁶⁹

Rígsþula cannot strictly speaking be called an Eddic poem, as it is found curiously stripped of poetic context in the Codex Wormanius,⁷⁰ rather than in the Codex Regius manuscript itself.⁷¹ The cultural myth that the poem deals with is treated nowhere else in the surviving Old Norse corpus, beyond certain vague references to Heimdallr as progenitor and kinsman of men,⁷² and there are few

⁶⁹Then he got possession, and then gained the right to be called Rígr, to have knowledge of the runes’.

⁷⁰The Codex Wormanius contains Snorri’s *Prose Edda* and the four Grammatical Treatises, and is dated to c.1350. With regards to the poem itself, Sigurðr Nordal suggests that it seems ‘reasonable to fix the date rather far back’, to around 1230-50, in which case it would have been written down at approximately the same time as the poems preserved in the *Codex Regius*. Introduction to *Codex Wormanius* (Copenhagen: Levin and Munksgaard, 1931), 13. The fraught question of the original date of composition of the poem is dealt with further below.

⁷¹Several leaves of the manuscript have been lost, including the stanzas that conclude the poem, which finishes abruptly with a crow’s admonition of Rígr that is neither answered nor acted upon. Karl G. Johansson has helped to bring the poem out of its isolation by suggesting that *Rígsþula* has been engineered somewhat to fit the context of the Codex Wormanius as a manual of rhetoric and poetics, its lists of poetic terms for the various estates providing the initial rationale for its inclusion in the manuscript between the preceding *Háttatal* and following *ókennd heiti* section taken from *Skáldskaparmál*, ‘*Rígsþula* och Codex Wormianus: Textens function ur ett kompilationsperspektiv’, *Alvíssmál* 8 (1998), 67–84.

⁷²*Vǫluspá* opens with the lines ‘Hlióðs bið ek allar / [helgar] kindir, / meiri ok minni, / mǫgo Heimdal[l]ar’ or ‘I ask for the ear of all hallowed kin, high and low, sons of Heimdallr’ (st. 1), whilst *Hyndluljóð* refers to him as being born ‘rammaukinn miðk, ragna kindar’ or ‘with great influence of the race of men’ (st. 35). Neither reference sheds much light on the myth portrayed in *Rígsþula*, beyond providing a precedent for his relationship with mankind.

poems that deal so intimately with the relationship between mankind and the gods.⁷³ Despite these caveats, it is usually included in editions of the *Poetic Edda*, and fits the criterion of an Eddic poem in respect of its treatment of mythological material and in many aspects of its style, including the predominant use of *fornyrðislag* metre.⁷⁴

Rígsþula undoubtedly draws on long established traditions; the division of humanity into estates in particular is often said to reflect an early stage of Scandinavian cultural development. Indeed, Dumézil suggests that the colour symbolism of the various estates in the poem represents an ancient social order ‘almost superimposable on the Indo-Iranian structure’, although he achieves this superimposition with some shifting or displacement of the Norse ‘castes’ and their respective deities.⁷⁵ Irrespective of whether we posit a tenth- or thirteenth-century date for the poem’s composition, the two poles between which criticism appears to fluctuate,⁷⁶ it is clear that the guiding conceit of *Rígsþula* is somewhat older than the poem itself.

Unfortunately, the apparent antiquity of the social myth does not necessarily confirm that the runic lore hinted at in the poem is ‘genuine’, or as old, as the story itself. Indeed, Dronke presents a

⁷³ Bellows suggests that ‘the cultural nature of the poem, quite foreign to Norse poetry in general’ is due to the influence of Celtic ‘literary spirit’, *The Poetic Edda*, 202.

⁷⁴ The treatment of stanzas is less traditional however, their lengths varying considerably, often clearly for poetic effect. See von See *et al.*, *Kommentar*, III:502-3 and Dronke, *Poetic Edda: II*, 211-4.

⁷⁵ Georges Dumézil, ‘The *Rígsþula* and Indo-European Social Structure’, in *Gods of the Ancient Northmen*, ed. Einar Haugen, trans. John Lindow (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 118.

⁷⁶ One view suggests composition in thirteenth century Norway, with the power struggle between Jarl and Konr ungr supposedly reflecting the fraught succession of King Hákon Hákonarson by his son, whilst the ‘peaceful domestic atmosphere’ of the poem can be construed as more fitting for this post civil war period, according to Frederic Amory, ‘The Historical Worth of *Rígsþula*’, *Alvíssmál* 10 (2001), 3–20, 5. Those that settle on an earlier tenth or eleventh century date often point out that the myth of the engendering of the first king is more pertinent to the unification of Norway under Haraldr hárfagri. It is certainly significant that Birger Nerman dates the poem to around the year 1000 on the basis of the material culture it portrays, ‘*Rígsþula* 16:8 *dvergar á oxlum*, arkeologiskt belyst.’, *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 69 (1954), 210–13.

lively picture of an archetype ‘frequently adapted and augmented to fit prevailing politics and fashions’, whilst other critics have noticed connections with Celtic and Hiberno-Norse society, as well as the influence of Anglo-Saxon biblical commentary.⁷⁷ *Rígsþula* is a culturally diverse and conglomerative poem, the simple conceit of Rígr’s journey between households belying a complex and dynamic text. Even the emphatic social taxonomy on display is somewhat deceptive. Despite Hill’s instinctive aversion to a poem that seems to him both ‘brutally aristocratic in its ideology’ and implicitly racist, there may also be a degree of satirical humour, even irony, underlying the portrayal of the three types and their conventional accoutrements and mannerisms, a humour that is directed as much towards the idle aristocrat as the sunburned thrall.⁷⁸ The estates are rigidly circumscribed, and do not interact, but the poem’s fluid movement between these households seems to raise the possibility of social mobility. After all, the estates are all of the same divine parentage, a concept somewhat inimical to notions of innate superiority. What is more, there is also a clear sense of the collective historical progression of mankind, from the venerable Ái and Edda of the thrall class, to the grandparents of the *karl* estate and the younger aristocratic Faðer and Móðer.

If *Hávamál* enacts the taking up of runes by the gods of the Norse world, *Rígsþula* might be said to dramatize the transmission of this knowledge to the human world, and the myth of writing may well, therefore, pertain to social uses rather than to writing as a concept. As Amory points out, ‘most Old Norse poets, skaldic or Eddic, were, if anything, historically naïve’, and therefore more likely to record the culture of their day than to faithfully recreate an authentic setting for a poem set

⁷⁷ Dronke, *Poetic Edda: II*, 204.

⁷⁸ Thomas D. Hill, ‘*Rígsþula*: Some Medieval Christian Analogues’, in *The Poetic Edda – Essays on Old Norse Mythology*, ed. Paul Acker and Carolyne Larrington (London: Routledge, 2002), 229–43, 231–2.

in the distant past.⁷⁹ As such, even in verses illustrating the very engendering of Norse social structures, the runic imagery in the myth might well pertain to current social constructs and the status of writing in tenth- to thirteenth-century Scandinavia, something that the following analysis will explore.

Rígr, after engendering the three ‘castes’ is not content to let alone the child he has brought into being with *Móðer* and *Faðer*, but returns to the young and warlike Jarl and teaches him runes, declaring that he is his son and giving him his own name. The runes therefore only make their appearance in the second half of *Rígsþula*, with reference to the third and highest estate of man envisaged in the poem. This fits with both the association of the father of runes with an Odinic elite in *Hávamál*, and with what little we know of early runic practice. The association of those versed in runes with a particular degree of social status has already been mentioned in the discussion of *Hávamál*. The fact that early inscriptions are found predominantly on high-status objects, as we saw in Chapter 4, itself suggests that literacy was socially restricted in its use, though the association with an elite is certainly ‘not unproblematic’, and we should always be aware of the restricted nature of the surviving evidence.⁸⁰ It is worth pointing out again that the common epithet *erilar* found in early inscriptions may well be related etymologically to both English *earl* and Old Norse *jarl*, the estate in question here. Of course, inscriptions containing this particular label are all written in the older *futhork* (the designation *erilaz* is, after all, a proto-Scandinavian term). A number of Viking age inscriptions contain the title *jarl*, although in none of these is the *jarl* explicitly identified as the individual who himself carved or commissioned the runes. Two stones refer to an Earl Hákon, one

⁷⁹ Amory, ‘The Historical Worth of *Rígsþula*’, 6.

⁸⁰ Hines, ‘Grave Finds with Runic Inscriptions’, 188.

raised in memory of a marshal, a certain Vrái,⁸¹ and one in memory of the son of an earl, named Ôzurr.⁸² Another medieval inscription mentions the death of Earl Erlingr in Nidaros,⁸³ whilst a ‘stubborn earl’ is spoken of in a lengthy piece of correspondence from Bryggen,⁸⁴ and a battle involving the followers of an unspecified earl is recorded in a rather fragmentary inscription on a bone from Oslo.⁸⁵ Perhaps of most interest here is an inscription from Maeshowe in the Orkneys which may be normalized as *Jórsalafárar brutu Orkhaug. Hlíf, matselja jarls, reist* ‘Jerusalem-travellers broke Orkhaugr. Hlíf, the earl’s housekeeper, carved’.⁸⁶ Whilst the ‘housekeeper’ of the Earl may have been a position of some status, the fact that the *jarl* is only mentioned in reference to a subordinate who himself carves, strongly suggests that mastery of runes was no longer associated with an aristocratic elite, as it seems to be in *Hávamál* and again here in *Rígsþula*.

In stark contrast to the expectations created by such poems, a number of Viking Age runestones contain marks of lower status, including references to *karlar* such as a rune stone dated to the tenth century which refers to *góðr karl Gulli*, a man who begot five sons,⁸⁷ and an Uppland rune stone which is raised after *GæiRmund karl*.⁸⁸ The runes from Bryggen were most certainly carved by a merchant class, again more readily comparable to the *karl* estate, and it is probably fair to say that by

⁸¹ Sm 76, *SamRun*. This Earl is generally accepted to be Hákon Eriksson, Earl of Lade, later ruler of Norway and Earl of Worcester under Knut the great. The Earls referred to in these two inscriptions are probably different individuals.

⁸² U 617, *SamRun*.

⁸³ N 564, *SamRun*.

⁸⁴ N B368, *SamRun*.

⁸⁵ N A33, *SamRun*. Side A ‘I have kept vigil all night, and not . . .’ Side B ‘battle now, as the earls men . . .’

⁸⁶ Br Barnes24, *SamRun*. ‘Jerusalem-travellers broke Orkhaugr. Hlíf, the earl’s houskeeper, carved’. This inscription probably refers to breaking into the barrow at Maeshowe. Michael Barnes, *The Runic Inscriptions of Maeshowe, Orkney* (Uppsala: Uppsala Universitet, 1995).

⁸⁷ Ög 81, *SamRun*.

⁸⁸ U 659, *SamRun*.

the early middle ages runes were used by a much broader section of the community, or that a larger number of people could claim to be masters of the craft. Indeed, a late inscription even refers to Óli, the son of a slave, carving runes, apparently commissioned by his master, Bótgeirr.⁸⁹ Whilst the social divisions of society are still obviously very much in place, perhaps even more entrenched in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Scandinavia,⁹⁰ there is little lingering association of runes with privileged knowledge or with an Odinic upper class detectable in this situation.⁹¹ I would argue that the poem's reference to an elite in possession of runic knowledge is a demonstrably old tradition, certainly archaic at the time that the poem was written down, and in all likelihood already old-fashioned during the Viking age.

Not only are the runes consistently associated with the highest estate in the poem, they also become the most important defining characteristic of this ruling class, and the means by which a leader comes to be selected. There is little that could straightforwardly take their place in an earlier version of this story; a sign of divine favour, possibly, or a more abstract indication of knowledge and aptitude. But this would not resonate as well with the particular strand of knowledge that the poem seems to be promoting, or with the king earning his right to be named, suggesting that the runes are an integral part of the poem's conceit. Indeed, the teaching of runes to Jarl is immediately followed in the poem, without so much as a conjunction, by this process of naming: 'sitt gaf heiti'

⁸⁹ G 36, *SamRun*.

⁹⁰ Amory, 'The Historical Worth of *Rígsþula*', 5.

⁹¹ For references to the rune carver as skald or poet, see Jesch (2001), 6, Note 2. See also Jan Paul Strid, 'Runic Swedish thegns and drengs' in *Runor och runinskrifter –Föredrag vid Riksantikvarieämbetets och Vitterhetsakademiens symposium 8-11 september 1985*, ed. Helmer Gustavson *et al.* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1987), 301-316, for another discussion of social rank expressed in runic inscriptions.

(st. 37). The teaching of runes precedes and is essential to this act of naming, raising the possibility that the runes referred to are of a scriptural nature, representing the means by which a name may be set down and attain concrete form, rather than the secrets they are generally taken to represent.

Whatever the precise connotations of runic knowledge are in the poem, it is once again the sole criterion that singles out a leader from amongst the sons of Jarl, leading to a (not wholly unprecedented) case of ultimogeniture. Stanza 43 refers to the twelve sons collectively learning the skills of war, growing out of the more leisurely pursuits of playing and swimming together as children. There is no differentiation between them at this point, no suggestion of an individual more adept than the others at breaking in horses and brandishing the spear. But this equality is emphatically breached by the conjunction of exception which begins the following stanza, 'En Konr ungr / kunni rúnar', 'but Konr ungr knew runes' (st. 44). Konr's superiority is clearly marked out by his knowledge of runes, despite the youthfulness also highlighted in the first line. This fits in with the trend of the poem as a dramatization of human progress, development and innovation associated with the youngest, or most recent generation. It also militates somewhat against reading the runic knowledge as representing purely ritualistic knowledge; we are dealing with progressive innovation in this context, not with ancient secrets.

Most commentators have extrapolated that the *ævinrúnar* and *aldrúnar* that the young Konr is said to know are magic characters which preserve life; protective charms, in other words. It is interesting, however, that they have also been the focus of attention for those looking for Christian

influence on the poem, as the term *ævin* is often used to refer to the eternity of the afterlife.⁹² It is also not hard to see how the former connection is arrived at, as Konr is said to know how to blunt swords, to allay the ocean, to quell fires and to calm sorrows. However, an attentive reading must take into account that these abilities are presented *in addition* to his knowledge of runes, introduced with the expression ‘meirr kunni hann’, ‘he knew more’ (st. 44). Indeed, without the modifying context of the seemingly magical abilities which Rígr also possesses, it would be quite possible to read the two types of runes rather differently. *Ævinrúnar* or ‘runes of eternity’ could well refer not to the ability to *grant* eternal life, (a reading perhaps influenced by Christian doctrine), but rather to the potentially enduring, even everlasting, nature of a written or incised inscription in opposition to the spoken word. The two terms are used together in a number of instances, for instance in the stock phrase ‘um aldr ok ævi’ meaning ‘for ever and ever’, and whilst the prefix *aldr-* often refers to the circumscribed period of life, it can also mean simply ‘age’ or ‘time’, as in the term *aldræði* ‘elderly’ and ‘allan aldr’ or ‘through all time’.⁹³ The poet may actually be stressing the age or longevity of the runic message, and the enduring nature of inscribed words.

We know that longevity was an attribute of monumental writing recognized by runecarvers, due to the existence of such inscriptions as the Runby Stone, which refers to the monument standing *at minnum manna, meðan menn lifa*, ‘in memory of the men while man lives’.⁹⁴ Indeed, the ability of

⁹² Dronke states that these compounds are unique, *Poetic Edda: II*, 200. Whilst this is true for the term *aldrúnar*, a reference to **iuin-runaR**, *ævinrúnar* can be found on a rune stone from Malt in Jutland, DR NOR1988;5. This ninth century inscription is badly damaged, but contains reference to *teitirúnar ok ævinrúnar*, ‘runes of gladness and runes of eternal friendship’, *SamRun*.

⁹³ Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary*, 8.

⁹⁴ U 114. This impressive inscription from Uppland was commissioned by a certain Ingríðr in memory of Ingimarr, her husbandman, and her sons Danr, and Banki/Baggi. The inscription also mentions that she had a causeway raised, and that the family owned the estate in Runby, *SamRun*.

runic writing to survive the memories of men and to connect with generations past represents just the sort of attributes needed to invest a claim to inheritance, or indeed a claim to kingship, with authority. If the runes also represent the power to preserve life, this may also be an abstract notion connected to writing as a social phenomenon. Konr ungr is in the process of progressing beyond the warlike basis for kingship represented by his father, and all the skills that are attributed to him are conciliatory: blunting swords and quelling fires, rather than bringing his people to war. Jere Fleck has already acknowledged the existence of an important ‘knowledge criterion of significance’ in the poem’s dramatization of succession, and brought attention to the significance of the phrase ‘rúnar kendi’.⁹⁵ However, he designates this knowledge as ‘numinous lore’, necessary for initiation into the secrets of sacred kingship, and perhaps overlooks a more obvious knowledge criterion; that of literacy and learning. Of course, Konr inherits more than just an everyday script from his divine grandfather, and the poet is drawing on the ‘implication of all arcane knowledge’ attached to the runes.⁹⁶ But in the light of a poem that concentrates so heavily on lists of names, on the intimate connection between naming and social position, and most crucially, on the etymology of the term *konungr* itself, the criterion of linguistic authority is exceptionally prominent.

The progression towards a more complex literate culture in medieval Scandinavia may actually be incorporated in the poem’s dramatisation of human advancement, culminating in Konr ungr’s runic investiture. In the first household, Thrall is depicted, and his position encapsulated, by the cruel task of carrying home kindling throughout the day (st. 9). Progressing to the next estate, Rígr enters the household of Afi and Amma, and the poem tells us ‘Maðr telgði þar / meið til rífiar’,

⁹⁵ Fleck, ‘Konr-Óttarr-Geirroðr’, 49.

⁹⁶ Dronke, *Poetic Edda: II*, 234.

‘there the man was carving wood for a cross beam’ (st. 15), whilst Karl is also portrayed fashioning wood, making a wooden plough and constructing a barn. In the noble household, the *búsgumi* is bending a bow of elm when the god enters (st. 28), and Rígr is pointedly said to appear ‘ór runni’ or ‘from the woodland’ to teach Jarl runes. Finally, the concluding action of the young noble sons collectively is the use of ‘scraped’ or ‘smooth-planed’ arrow-shafts, ‘skeyti skófu’, and the brandishing of *aska* or ‘spears of ash’ (st. 43). Immediately following this image is the statement that the youngest son knew runes, gained the right to be named, and ‘rúnar deildi’ ‘disputed in runes’ (st. 46). We have been primed to expect the next stage in the evolution and technological advancement of mankind to develop the image of wood being fashioned in ever more skilful ways, suggesting to the audience the use of wood for runic writing without needing to make this connection explicit. Again, reading *rúnar* as representing scriptural knowledge in particular as well as sacred knowledge in general makes for a more cohesive paradigm of cultural development.

Read in this light, Konr’s runic disputation with his father, teasing him with tricks and superior knowledge, ‘brögðum beitti / ok betr kunni’ (st. 46), may constitute a contest of knowledge in a narrow sense, with technical prowess at the fore. Although Dronke has misgivings about the fact that we have no other record of such a competition in the runic corpus, it may well function simply as a literary trope involving written runes; Konr may be imagined as visibly demonstrating his skill in runes, and out-playing his father in a written contest.⁹⁷ This has some literary affinities with *Grettis saga*, which uses runes as part of ‘a conscious meditation on saga textuality’, and where

⁹⁷ Dronke, *Poetic Edda: II*, 234.

Grettir's skill with runes is turned against him by the sorceress Þuriðr.⁹⁸ Moreover, Konr would be proving himself through an attribute that has a direct bearing on his right to rule: that of inscribing, codifying and naming. By out-writing his father in a contest of runic skill, perhaps simply interpreting inscriptions that his father cannot, Konr proves that he possesses the means by which to control language, to read the past and to preserve for the future. He demonstrates not only the intellectual attributes of the scholar king, committed to peaceful progress as well as the path of war, but also appropriates some of the divine prerogative to link character with language, and to name things into being. Indeed, Konr ungr comes to runic knowledge of his own accord, 'aus eigener Kraft',⁹⁹ or at least without the intervention of the deity, seemingly representing a stage in which mankind begins to learn for itself and to recognize its agency.

Rígr brings offspring to each of the three estates through *ráð*, not, one would think, a typical manoeuvre for a fertility god, and the mark of the youthful, 'modern' king is in turn one of learning and *ráð* rather than physical dominance. It is not merely idleness that the poem is demonstrating when Konr ungr is said to have ridden through the forest firing arrows that 'kyrði fugla' or 'silenced the birds' (st. 47)—a phrase referred to again in the admonition of the crow—it is a direct counterpoint to the preceding stanza in which he gains the right to know the runes and to name:

⁹⁸ Lawrence de Looze, 'The Outlaw Poet, The Poetic Outlaw: Self-consciousness and Poetic Process in *Grettis Saga Ásmundarsonar*', *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 106 (1991), 85-103, 98.

⁹⁹ von See *et al.*, *Kommentar*, III:646.

control of language means he can also deprive others of speech, the poem rightly positioning the right to voice and to silence as the superlative indicator of power.¹⁰⁰

Johansson was right to emphasize how apposite the inclusion of *Rígsþula* was to a codex of poetics and rhetoric. It is worth remembering that the poem is classed first and foremost as a *þula*, or list, and that it provides a folk etymology for a number of terms, most prominently *konungr*, but also the names *Rígr*, *Danr* and *Danpr* (a patrimony seemingly invented to account for the Danes) and the various lists of personified offspring. Not only does it furnish a myth for the divisions of society, it is, according to Meissner, a rather learned fiction, demonstrating amongst other things the vital role that language, and specifically the written word, plays in the process of recording and signifying agency.¹⁰¹ Indeed, though we might take issue with Ong's statement that writing itself is necessarily 'a particularly preemptive and imperialist activity that tends to assimilate things to itself', writing has certainly been *used* to extend authority and consolidate power, and is still not a technology that all are able to benefit from.¹⁰² Placed towards the end of the manuscript, *Rígsþula* was perhaps included not so much as a demonstration of poetic method or rhetorical trope, but as a demonstration of the cultural importance of language and literacy itself, particularly for the ruling classes, serving a theoretical rather than a practical role.

We might expect the same learned inventiveness used in the poem's etymological discourse to be applied to the runes, and for them to fulfil a similar conceptual role with regard to the development

¹⁰⁰ An explicit connection between power and speech is made in *Helgakviða Hjörvarðssonar*, when Helgi is admonished by a Valkyrie with the words, 'Síð mundu, Helgi, hringom ráða . . . ef þú æ þegir, / þóttu harðan hug, hilmir, gialdir', 'Late will it be, Helgi, before you can deal out rings . . . if you are always silent, even if, prince, you have a hard disposition.' St. 6.

¹⁰¹ R. Meissner, 'Rígr', *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* 57 (1933), 109-30.

¹⁰² Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 12.

of language. The runes in this poem certainly function as more than simply a functional script, fulfilling a key role in a discourse on the direction in which kingship, and mankind, was progressing. This represents neither an ‘authentic’ representation of runic practice (indeed, there is no explicit reference to the carving or practical application of runes beyond the tantalising suggestion of a runic contest) nor a wholesale archaising of the script in the direction of magic and cult. Whether the incorporation of runes with the cultural myth is inextricable from the conceit of the poem and relatively early, or represents a later engagement with the script as it was evolving and being superseded by the Latin alphabet, this much at least is clear: the reason for the inclusion of runes should be sought in the surviving poem’s conceptualising of linguistic agency.

Skírnismál

Þurs ríst ek þér
 ok þriá stafi,
 ergi ok æði
 ok óþola;
 – svá ek þat af ríst,
 sem ek þat á reist,
 ef gøraz þarfar þess. (st. 36)¹⁰³

Skírnismál is a poem that has generated almost as much debate as the heavily redacted and obscurantist poem *Hávamál*, though for rather different reasons. Whilst *Hávamál* is clearly a

¹⁰³ “‘Giant’ I write on you, and three staves, Yearning and frenzy and insufferable lust. I can scratch it off, as I scratched it on, if this becomes necessary.’

conglomerate of various earlier source texts, and thus inspires endless comment on the provenance and relationship of these constituent parts, *Skírnismál* represents one of the most internally coherent and succinct of the episodes related in the *Edda*. Whilst it is not impossible that it was composed as late as the mid-thirteenth century, it is hard to reconcile the familiar and dextrous manipulation of pagan mythology in this poem with such a late date, and Dronke's view that such a lucid lay, comfortable in its own skin, 'must have developed before the imaginative vitality of pagan traditions had died away in Norway and Iceland' seems a reasonable premise with which to work from.¹⁰⁴ In any case, there are few textual gaps that need to be filled or riddlic passages pertaining to secret knowledge, and as such, critics have been able to proceed relatively swiftly to the task of criticism, much of which focuses on the mythical significance of Skírnir's expedition to woo Gerðr, and the extent to which it reflects and reinforces social and cultural conventions, particularly gender roles.¹⁰⁵

The spell or curse which Skírnir resorts to in order to coerce the giantess, which strikes to the 'very core of her female identity'¹⁰⁶ and confronts her with the prospect of sterility, uncontrollable sexual desire, madness and universal censure, whilst imprisoned beneath the world of the living, has also received a great deal of comment, most recently by Alaric Hall.¹⁰⁷ The runes appear only once in the poem, deployed at the close of Skírnir's curse. As such, and in contrast to *Hávamál*, they

¹⁰⁴ Dronke, *Poetic Edda: III*, 402.

¹⁰⁵ See Lars Lönnroth, 'Skírnismál och den fornisländska ätenskapsnormen' in *Opuscula Septentrionalia: Festskrift til Ole Widding*, ed. bent Chr. Jacobsen *et al.* (Copenhagen: C.A. Reitzels Boghandel, 1977), 154-78 and Carolyne Larrington, "What Does Woman Want?" Mær und munr in *Skírnismál*, *Alvíssmál* 1 (1992), 3-16, as examples of these respective, and often overlapping, critical concerns.

¹⁰⁶ Larrington, *The Poetic Edda*, 19.

¹⁰⁷ Alaric Hall, "Þur sarriþu þursa trutin": Monster-Fighting and Medicine in Early Medieval Scandinavia'. Available online, <http://alarichall.org.uk>. Accessed June 2009.

seem to represent a device with which to forward the plot, rather than a thematic concern. We must, therefore, be alert to the possibility that the runes are simply fulfilling a narrative function, their use dictated by the literary context rather than drawn from a world of real experience. The runes appear in response to a particular circumstance, namely Gerðr's reluctance to cede to Freyr's demands, and it is clear that they represent the crux and climax of the myth, the narrative building towards the scene and prefiguring their deployment in a number of ways.

The first thing to note is that the objects which Freyr's emissary proffers before resorting to the curse are all material in nature, the apples and ring being rejected as gifts, whilst the sword is rejected as the manifestation of a physical threat. The sword is said to be *málfán*, or 'inlaid with characters', though presumably, powerful as these letters might be in rendering the sword into a seeker out and slayer of giants,¹⁰⁸ they are ineffectual in this particular courtship situation. First by gift, and then by the sword, the exchange is premised in terms of a material incentive to secure the vow of the giant woman. The attentive reader is thus primed to expect a material resolution to the curse, a final object which provides the incentive for Gerðr to relent.

Skírnir suggests what this object might be even before he begins the curse, announcing that 'tamsvendi ek þik drep', 'with a taming wand I hit you' (st. 26) and later interrupting the curse in order to raise the spectre of this deal-sealing object once again, gleefully telling his victim that 'Til holtz ek gekk, / ok til hrás viðar, / gambantein at geta – / gambantein ek gat', 'I went to a forest, and to a living tree, to get a powerful stick. I got a powerful stick' (st. 32). The living branch is cast in direct contrast to the image of the dead thistle in the previous stanza, perhaps explaining why this

¹⁰⁸ Skírnir asks for 'þat sverð / er síalft vegiz / við iqtna ætt' or 'the sword, that by itself can fight / against the race of the giants' (st. 8). This is that same sun-sword which is in possession of the giants at Ragnarøk, as referred to in *Völuspá*, 50:3-4.

excursus occurs where it does in the poem, the vital branch of a thriving tree mocking the spectre of Gerðr as a dead and disposed weed, a thistle discarded after the harvest. The fast-paced repetition of the lines and the movement from the infinitive *at geta* to the resolution of the past tense *ek gat* heightens the sense that this will be the object that resolves the exchange. The outcome is predetermined, the false ‘choice’ that Gerðr must make is between blossoming under subjugation with the god of fertility, or complete and utter ruination as a woman and an individual. Her terrible fate will be set, indelible, if she does not cede to the demands of the god, but the alternative is only a more muted form of this absolute subjugation, her autonomous identity wiped away. In cosmic terms the fate may also be predetermined, the curse deliberately raising the spectre of a barren and chaotic world where nature remains untamed, a disorder that must, in this interpretative schema, be avoided through union and control.

The rune-inscribed stick functions as both the object that finally triumphs in the mythical exchange and the physical manifestation of Skírnir’s threat, the spoken word made tangible. The poem demands that there be a material resolution which the runes provide: writing, after all, ‘materializes language’,¹⁰⁹ here transforming Skírnir’s spoken threat into a physical object. In this respect, the characters which he writes could be anything that represented the essentials of his threat. Indeed, it is perhaps not even the utterance itself that matters, but the topos of writing as a technology of order and control, ‘a cultural artefact based not in nature . . . but sprung from the human mind’.¹¹⁰ Indeed, the whole episode may well be a reflex of the use of writing for administrative and legal purposes, and for property claims in particular. As Clanchy points out with

¹⁰⁹ Hines, ‘Functions of Literacy and the Use of Runes’, 90.

¹¹⁰ Barry B. Powell, *Writing: Theory and History of the Technology of Civilization* (Chichester, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 11.

regards to the English tradition, the privileging of written record in such exchanges was increasingly a feature of the ‘emerging bureaucracy’ in the later medieval period,¹¹¹ but it certainly reaches back to the writing down of the earliest surviving law codes, something which happened in Iceland in 1117-18.¹¹² Indeed, the true origins of this contractual function of literacy perhaps lie even further back, the early-ninth century Forsa Rune Ring clearly representing a type of legal text,¹¹³ and the potential for writing to codify gift exchange and the possession of property receiving tacit recognition even in the very earliest inscriptions of ownership.

The letters chosen for this exchange, whilst symbolising executive agency are also, however, pertinent in themselves: *þurs*, and following it ‘þriá stafi’, namely ‘ergi ok æði ok óþola’ (st. 36). Some attention should, therefore, be given to the particulars of this conceit. The word *þurs*, the name given to the third rune, is usually translated as ‘giant’ or ‘ogre’, and is one of several names given to giant beings in Old Norse, including the familiar designations *jötun* and *tröll*.¹¹⁴ As Schulz points out, the term *þurs* is usually used in a pejorative sense, and its particularly negative connotations are confirmed by its designation in the *Norwegian Rune Poem* as the ‘torment of women’.¹¹⁵ Indeed, the nefarious associations of this rune may account for the changing of the name to ‘thorn’ in the Anglo-Saxon *Rune Poem*, diffusing its threat whilst maintaining an association with danger and physicality, and, as we saw, perhaps also drawing on the shape of the rune.

¹¹¹ Michael Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066-1307* (London: Edward Arnold, 1979), 263.

¹¹² *Íslendingabók, Kristni saga: The Book of the Icelanders, The Story of the Conversion*, trans. Siân Grønlie (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2006), 12 and note 98.

¹¹³ HS 7. See Brink, ‘Law and Society’, 48-9. It may serve as an oath ring, a physical object used to reinforce spoken vows.

¹¹⁴ See Katja Schulz, *Riesen: Von Wissensbütern und Wildnisbewohnern in Edda und Saga* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2004) for a comprehensive study of the giant in Old Norse literature, and particularly her discussion of the lexis of giant names, 29-51.

¹¹⁵ Schulz, *Riesen*, 42-3.

Why exactly *þurs* should represent the torment of women is not made clear in either rune poem. Dronke associates this suffering with menstruation, and its association with the otherworldly and the monstrous in a number of cultures. Menstruation would certainly constitute a torment if it meant ‘confinement hidden away from the light of sun and moon’, and an eternal menstruation would fit with the threat of infertility envisaged by the curse,¹¹⁶ as well as the imprisonment of Gerðr in the nether-realms of the dead, specifically ‘fyr nágrindr neðan . . . á viðar rótom’, ‘down beneath the fenced graveyard . . . at the tree’s roots’ (st. 35). That said, the curse only isolates her to a degree, attended as she is by serfs and by her monstrous mate, who contrary to the menstrual prohibitions of many cultures does not refrain from contact; indeed, the fact that the *þurs* will rape her is made very explicit.¹¹⁷ There is also no firm evidence of banishment during, or superstition concerning, menstruation amongst Germanic tribes, though little in general is known of their cultural practices. The *þurs* rune may well be more generally associated with the torment of women, coming to represent a wide range of threats and prohibitions, many of which are laid out in the curse. The nature of giants in Norse mythology is not nearly as straightforward as the popular image of oversized, lumbering oafs with voracious appetites for small children, and as Schulz points out, being large is not the decisive category for giants in the Poetic Edda.¹¹⁸ However, the association with monstrous excess, particularly in terms of distorted scale, is a common feature, the *þurs* in this poem having, for example, three heads. The peril of the *þurs* to women in particular surely

¹¹⁶ Dronke, *Poetic Edda: II*, 393–4.

¹¹⁷ For a detailed cross-cultural survey of menstrual myths and prohibitions see *Blood Magic: The Anthropology of Menstruation*, ed. Thomas Buckley and Alma Gott-Lieb (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988).

¹¹⁸ Schulz, *Riesen*, 62.

encompasses the threat of rape by these agents of excess, part of this curse against Gerðr being for her to be possessed, raped, by the *þurs* named Hrímgrímnir: the verb ‘að hafa’ in the phrase ‘þik hafa skal’, ‘shall have you’ (st. 35) is clearly used in a sexual sense here. There is also an overtly phallic register running through the threat, with its reference to the taming wand, the ‘shining serpent’ (st. 27), the thistle and tree roots, heightening the sense of violent sexual intimidation. The designation of *þurs* as the ‘torment of women’ may encapsulate the particularly monstrous act of rape, the ultimate expression of male physical domination.

The character, þ, which Skírnir carves, whatever its disturbing nuances of meaning, is clearly positioned to encapsulate the threat that he is making, distilling the curse into a potent visual symbol and representing graphically the torment she will suffer. The words *ergi*, *æði* and *ópola* which follow are also deeply negative sexual terms, particularly *ópola* which occurs earlier in the sequence ‘Tópi ok ópi / tíqsull ok óþoli’, ‘madness and weeping, / desperate affliction and insufferable lust’ (st. 29). All three certainly serve to paraphrase the concept of ‘kvenna kvǫl’ laid out in the poem, *ergi* glossed by La Farge and Tucker as ‘sexual aberration or abnormality, inordinate sexual desire, lasciviousness’, *æði* as ‘madness or frenzy’ and *ópola* as ‘unbearable sexual torment’.¹¹⁹

It is difficult, however, to find a clear connection between these concepts and the three runic characters that are said to be carved, unless of course the poem references three runes ‘we have no other record of’, a rather unlikely scenario, to say the least.¹²⁰ For a start, in the sixteen-rune younger *futhork* the sound values /œ/, /ó/ and /e/ were not represented by individual graphemes, and

¹¹⁹ Beatrice La Farge and John Tucker, *Glossary to the Poetic Edda* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1992). Although *æði* appears to mean ‘intelligence’ or more broadly ‘disposition’ in other contexts (e.g. *Hávamál*, st. 4) its use here is clearly negative.

¹²⁰ Dronke, *Poetic Edda: II*, 413.

as Düwel points out, suggesting that the poem is referring to the extended medieval *fuþark* which did distinguish the long vowel /ø/ and distinguished /e/ from /i/ using the dotted character, <†>, has certain implications for the dating of the poem, placing it firmly in the thirteenth century.¹²¹ We could at this juncture depart on a lengthy discussion of the exact point at which the graphemes concerned first came into existence, but whilst interesting in itself, such a debate is essentially irrelevant here. There is simply no evidence that any of the medieval runes were named *ergi*, *æði* or *óþola*. It will suffice to direct the reader to Düwel's brief but informed discussion of the matter, and to consider other more sensible possibilities.¹²²

It is possible that these terms are simply paraphrases of *þurs*, or extended connotations of the idea of 'kvenna kvøþ', and that the † rune is simply carved another three times. There are a number of examples of the *þurs* rune being carved in a repeating sequence, sometimes with other repeated runes, such as on the Gørlev Stone¹²³ where the †, ƿ and † runes are each repeated three times following a memorial inscription, and sometimes as the only repeating element, as in an inscription from Lund in Skåne.¹²⁴ The rune is carved four times on a piece of rib bone from Sigtuna,¹²⁵ although a sequence of three runes is far more common. Indeed, von See *et al.* suggest that the term *ok* in the phrase 'ok þriá stafi' is used in the sense of 'und zwar' or 'namely, in fact' rather than as its most common designation 'and', and that three staves are carved in total rather than four.¹²⁶ This

¹²¹ Düwel, *Runenkunde*, 33.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 33.

¹²³ DR EM85;239.

¹²⁴ DR Fv1993;226. This inscription may be transcribed as **þþþþþþ**, and probably has an invocatory or magical significance. Both inscriptions are dated to around the year 1000 on *SamRun*.

¹²⁵ U Fv1992;164B. Transliterated as **þþþþ(i)**, *SamRun*.

¹²⁶ von See *et al.*, *Kommentar*, II:135.

does fit somewhat better with the epigraphical evidence, and it was perhaps even the case that the *þurs* was particularly associated with the number three. References to a giant with three heads in this poem (st. 31), and to the prophetess in *Baldurs draumar* as ‘þrigga þursa móðir’, ‘the mother of three giants’ (st. 13) do not alone provide greatly compelling evidence, but the existence of a runic inscription, the so-called Valkyrie curse, in which *bótrúnar* and *bjargrúnar* are carved ‘þrífalt við þu[rsum]’ is slightly more indicative of such an association.¹²⁷ It is possible, therefore, that the runes are envisaged as a sequence of *þurs* runes, the repetition perhaps increasing their potency. Only one of the surviving incantatory inscriptions could be said to have definite sexual connotations, a pin from Bryggen having a triple þ followed by the message **-u mik man ek þik**, [þ]ú mik, man ek þik, ‘You me, I love you’,¹²⁸ most of these inscriptions being short and wholly incomprehensible.

The carving of three named runes, or the carving of a succession of *þurs* runes, are not, however, the only possibilities. Departing from the critical consensus, Bæksted suggested that the *stafir* referred to in the poem could refer to the writing of whole words, and that the concepts that follow are written out in full.¹²⁹ This idea is rightly dismissed by Düwel, though without making the most obvious point that the carving of four successive words would take up a considerable amount of time, rather longer than the accompanying dialogue allows for. There is another possibility, however, which circumvents both problems, and that is that the three runes carved complete the word *þurs*, the initial letter representing the concept as a whole and the three staves that come afterwards expanding the concept both conceptually and graphically to represent the whole word.

¹²⁷ Aslak Liestøl, ‘Runer frå Bryggen’, *Viking - Tidsskrift for norrøn arkeologi* XXVII (1964), 5-54, 41.

¹²⁸ NB 556, *SamRun*.

¹²⁹ Bæksted, *Målruner og Trolldruner*, 76.

Thus *ergi*, *æði* and *óþola* would simply represent restatements or expansions of the concept of *þurs* as ‘kvenna kvǫl’. Skírnir’s comment that ‘ðurs ríst ek þér’ would then have a double reference, to the first of the letters and to the inscription as a whole, which represents the torment of women in a single expanded word.

This mythical episode may be dismissed as a late interpretation of rune-lore, poetic in its depiction and deliberately non-committal in terms of the actual characters used. Indeed, seeking to reconstruct the runes might be thought of as a rather misplaced endeavour, slipping into the trap of confusing poetry for practice. It may be, however, that this runic episode could not always hide behind the poetic text. If, as a number of critics have suggested, the poem is meant to be acted out, either as a ritual dramatization or simply an entertaining drama,¹³⁰ this moment surely represents the climax in the performance, the moment in which Skírnir brandishes his tree branch, and, sensing his will is about to be imposed, carves the runes which will seal Gerðr’s fate. Rather like Exeter Book *Riddle 42* which dramatizes the spelling out of runes upon the floor and calls for the writing down and rearrangement of a sequence of staves, this episode perhaps transcends its textual moment and points to a performance of runic literacy, where the runes would be carved before an audience perhaps less inclined to settle for runic ambiguity.

It is clear, however, that in the wider context of the myth it is the *act* of written imprecation itself that is symbolic, and the runes as an emblem of this cultural capital. The runes explicitly label the taming wand as an implement for the torment of women, designating its purpose and determining its use. The act of carving on the living branch also represents a visual precursor for the

¹³⁰ Whilst many have advanced the theory that this was a ritual dramatisation of a fertility myth, Lönnroth suggests that ‘de kan också ha framförts som vanlig underhållning’, ‘they may also have been performed as normal entertainment’, ‘*Skírnismál*’, 178.

acts of violence promised to Gerðr if she refuses the advances of Freyr. But it is also the emblem of writing itself, above and beyond the meaning of individual characters and the performance of violent engraving, that serves to enact the will of the gods in the poem, and to express the agency of man.

In scraping the *tamsvǫndr* clean once Gerðr relents, Skírnir is visually reinforcing to the audience the state into which the giantess has entered. The written threat is removed, rather like the cliché in legal drama of tearing up an imprecating testimony, but Gerðr is tamed, her identity all but annihilated, a blank canvas to be written on by man. As with any technology, writing represents a force for order, law and stability, a foil to the chaos of the natural world. But it has also been used to constrain and reinforce social inequalities, to codify laws that maintain the status quo and to write the dispossessed out of history, a fact clearly capitalised on by the Normans in England, and symbolised most clearly by the Domesday Book.¹³¹ Derrida's calls to liberate writing from the 'tyranny' of logocentrism do tend to sidestep the historical uses of literacy as a tool of oppression. We should recognise, however, that 'what enslaves is not writing per se but *control* of writing', and, we might add, control of the myths that underpin and reinforce the uses to which it is put.¹³² The unspoken truth of *Skírnismál* is that the *tamsvǫndr* and the threat of the runes remains in the hands of Skírnir even after Gerðr accedes, reminding us where the agency lies, and expressing a tacit anxiety not to let this technology of agency fall into the hands of the 'other'.

¹³¹ Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record*, 18.

¹³² Barbara Johnson, 'Writing' in *Critical Terms for Literary Study*, ed. Frank Letricchia and Thomas McLaughlin (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), 39-49, 48.

Sólarljóð

Sól ek sá, setta dreyrstöfum¹³³

Sólarljóð is the final poem that I will consider in this discussion of runes and mythopoeia, and in this thesis as a whole. It is a fitting poem with which to close, or rather open up, the discussion about the reading of runes in mythical poetry, as it dramatises the crossing of the runic script into another frame of reference, that of verse on an explicitly Christian theme. The ‘mythic process’ certainly did not stop with the conversion to Christianity, either in terms of the ways in which post-conversion poets making use of pagan myth ‘found such traditions meaningful in their own lives’,¹³⁴ or indeed in terms of the narratives which came to fulfil the roles of the older myths in framing our perception of the world. In my view the Christian arch-narrative is simply a more codified and enduring myth cycle, myth being ‘the only vehicle for what has traditionally been called revelation’.¹³⁵ This is a mythology that was by no means wholly inimical to runes, but which nevertheless necessitated a certain rehabilitation of the poetic associations the script carried to accord with the scriptural ideology of Church, centred on the writing cultures of the Mediterranean and Near East.

¹³³ ‘I saw the sun, set with bloody staves’. All quotations are from Carolyne Larrington and Peter Robinson, eds., *Sólarljóð* in *Skaldic Poetry of the Scandinavian Middle Ages VII:1*, ed. Margaret Clunies Ross (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), 287-357.

¹³⁴ John Lindow, ‘Mythology and Mythography’ in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. Carol J. Clover and John Lindow (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985), 21-67, 53.

¹³⁵ Northrop Frye, ‘The Mythical Approach to Creation’ in *Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays 1974-1988*, ed. Robert D. Denham (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 238-54, 241.

There is, of course, absolutely no doubt that this appropriation of runes to Christian ends was successful in practical terms. Ultimately, it was not the hostility of the Church to runes, but the cultural dominance of the technology of the book that spelled the end for the runic tradition, vellum and ink representing a superior technology for the dissemination of the written word, just as the printing press would later supplant the manuscript. As a script devised for carving in wood, runes were ill-suited to adapt to this technological revolution, and, more importantly, they lacked the cultural capital to make such an adaptation desirable. Next to the culture of book writing, runes could only ever play a supplementary or supporting role within a literate society. It is in this sense that the adoption of the religion of the book, the religion of Latin, Greek and Hebrew, sounded the death knell for the runic script, its demise only coming after centuries of coexistence and interaction.

If the epigraphical milieu adapted quickly to the realities of the new religion, poetry may also have played its role in mediating this transition, and interrogating its terms. *Sólarljóð* is perhaps one of these surviving mediatory texts.¹³⁶ The earliest manuscripts of the poem date to the seventeenth century, but we can be reasonably sure that the poem was composed in the thirteenth century, by a cleric ‘as sensitive to the poetry of Old Norse paganism as he was devout in the Christian faith’.¹³⁷ The poem not only draws upon the native genre of Eddic wisdom poetry, but more particularly

¹³⁶ Editions of the poem include Hjalmar Falk, ed., *Sólarljóð* (Kristiania: Jacob Dybwad, 1914), Bjorn M. Ólsen, ed., *Sólarljóð* (Reykjavík: Prentsmiðjan Gutenberg, 1915), Bjarne Fidjestøl, ed., *Sólarljóð: Tydning og Tolkningsgrunnlag* (Bergen, Oslo and Tromsø: Universitetsforlaget, 1979), Njörður Njarðvík, ed., *Sólarljóð* (Reykjavík: Bókmenntafræðistofnun Háskóla Íslandsog Menningarsjóðr, 1991), and Larrington and Robinson, eds, *Sólarljóð* (2007).

¹³⁷ Frederic Amory, Entry for ‘*Sólarljóð*’ in *MSE*, 607-8, 608.

employs characters and conventions from Old Norse mythology ‘for rhetorical effect’.¹³⁸ This conscious weaving of pagan tropes into the Christian framework of the dream vision is summed up in the reference to the ‘mála-dísir . . . dróttins’, ‘The Lord’s *dísir* of counsel’ (st. 25), and is, as Larrington points out, on the whole rather picturesque, a ‘late pastiche of paganism’¹³⁹ rather than an attempt to actively combine belief systems. Indeed, most of the characters in the poem associated with the pagan world cannot be verified from any other source, and are probably invented for the purpose of this pastiche.

This presents a problem as to how we are to read the runes. Both formal similarities, such as the use of *ljóðabáttr* metre, and stylistic affinities such as the extensive use of gnomic material and seemingly deliberate cultivation of the arcane, have led a number of critics to stress the affinity of *Sólarljóð* to *Hávamál*, ‘its artistic model in the older pagan poetry of Iceland’.¹⁴⁰ Whilst Clunies Ross is right that concentrating on this link to the exclusion of other influences leads to ‘an overvaluation of the similarities between the two poems’, it is nonetheless tempting to read the runes in *Sólarljóð* in the light of the earlier poem.¹⁴¹ It might be argued, for example, that the runes in *Sólarljóð* represent a mockery of the myth in *Hávamál*, and specifically the divine inception of the runic script. The central issue in terms of reading the runes in this poem, is whether they function as

¹³⁸ Larrington and Robinson, *Sólarljóð*, 287.

¹³⁹ Carolyne Larrington, ‘Freyja and the Organ-Stool: Neo-Paganism in *Sólarljóð*’ in *Germanisches Altertum und christliches Mittelalter: Festschrift für Heinz Klingenberg zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Bela Brogyanyi (Hamburg: Verlag Dr. Kovač, 2002), 177–196, 192.

¹⁴⁰ Amory, ‘*Sólarljóð*’, 607.

¹⁴¹ Margaret Clunies Ross, ‘Review of Bjarne Fidjestøl, *Sólarljóð*’, *SBVS* 21 (1982–3), 111–4, 113.

more than just symbols of otherness which belong in the diabolical heathen landscape, or whether they engage with the change in the technology of writing that followed in the wake of Christianity.

If it is to be expected that the runes are identified with the pagan past and the landscape of the hellish otherworld in the poem, it is perhaps surprising that they first appear as part of what can only be described as an overtly Christian symbology. The part of the poem we are concerned with is not the instructive material that makes up the bulk of the first half of the poem, but the section in which the narrator recounts his otherworldly journey, particularly that part which Falk edits under the title ‘Hvad sjælen saa i seierheimerne’, ‘what the soul saw in the victory-realms’.¹⁴²

The very first reference to runes occurs on the deathbed of the narrator, who appears to be dying from an illness, his shivers envisaged as being the work of ‘heljar meyjar’, ‘Hell’s maidens’ (st. 38). Racked by fever, in a strikingly envisaged death scene, he sees on the one side the sun, the ‘sanna dagstjörnu’, ‘true day-star’ (st. 39) setting over the noisy world, and on the other Hell’s gate ‘þjóta þungliga’ ‘creaking heavily’ (st. 39). Many critics view the sun, a recurring image in the poem, as Christ, ‘det nye Jerusalems sol’,¹⁴³ an image which has a ‘lengthy exegetical history in Western Christianity’.¹⁴⁴ Others, such as Ólsen, have read this *sól* more literally, as the sun setting in the world the dying man leaves behind,¹⁴⁵ but to adopt a position that is so ‘perversely anti-symbolic’¹⁴⁶ is rather at odds with the narrator’s own statement here that ‘sól ek sá; svá þótti mér, / sem ek sæja

¹⁴² Falk, *Sólarljóð*, 31. As in *Hávamál* the runic script is a trope that reappears throughout the second half of the poem, perhaps, incidentally, reinforcing the case for a direct influence.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 22.

¹⁴⁴ Frederic Amory, ‘Norse-Christian Syncretism and Interpretatio Christiania in *Sólarljóð*’, *Gripla* 7 (1985), 251-66, 254.

¹⁴⁵ Ólsen thus interprets *dreyrstöfum* as nothing more than ‘geisla kvöldsólarinnar’, ‘the evening sun’s rays’ (1915), 42.

¹⁴⁶ Amory, ‘Norse-Christian Syncretism’, 255.

á göfgan guð’, ‘I saw the sun: it seemed to me that I looked upon worshipful God’ (st. 41). It is clear that the sun represents more than simply an image of the world left behind.¹⁴⁷ How we read the runes that appear in the following passage largely depends, then, on how the sun is to be interpreted:

Sól ek sá, setta dreyrstøfum;
 mjök var ek þá ór heimi hallr;
 máttug hon leiz á marga vegu
 frá því, sem fyrri var. (st. 40)¹⁴⁸

The phrase *setta dreyrstøfum*, ‘set with bloody staves’ need not refer to the runic script—Ólsen reads them as denoting the rays of the setting sun for example¹⁴⁹—but it is generally assumed that the staves appear on the sun itself, and the use of the verb *setja*, also used for ornamentation, reinforces the impression that the sun is inlaid with letters. These staves are almost certainly to be envisaged as runes, as they appear in more explicit connection later in the poem, again in relation to blood. The reddening of runes is something we have come across in a number of contexts, so the appellation *dreyrstafir* may quite legitimately be translated as ‘bloody runes’,¹⁵⁰ although there is no reason why the poetic associations here cannot also encompass the rays of the sun; indeed, the image of the cloud-streaked sky at sunset being etched with reddened runes is an arresting one.

¹⁴⁷ Njarðvík, *Sólarljóð*, 72.

¹⁴⁸ ‘I saw the sun, set with bloody staves. I was then inclining greatly away from home. Mighty it seemed, in many ways beyond that which it was before.’

¹⁴⁹ Ólsen, *Sólarljóð*, 42.

¹⁵⁰ *CV*, 106.

A further indication that we are dealing with runes is the statement in stanza 44 that ‘tunga mín var til trés metin’, ‘my tongue seemed like wood’, this stanza closely linked to stanza 41 with its reference to *dreyrstafir* by the repetition of the phrase ‘mjök var ek þá ór heimi hallr’ in the second line. This material reference may be linked conceptually to the runic reference, and represents a rather intriguing image of the negation of the narrator’s voice as well as the physical manifestation of his illness. His ability to speak has been curtailed, the bare stave of the tongue standing in direct opposition to the sun, set with runes. There is certainly a contrast of agency being expressed here through the runes, drawing on the same associations of script and executive power we saw at work in *Rígsþula* and *Skírnismál*: the power to author the fate of the individual lies with the celestial image of Christ in Judgement.

Unlike many of the remnants of Norse myth in this poem which are clearly and deliberately aligned with the denizens of Hell—the mysterious Bjúgvör and Listvör dripping ferrous blood from their nostrils (st. 76), ‘Óðins kván . . . móðug á munað’, ‘Óðinn’s wife . . . bent on lust’ (st. 77), or the ‘gýgjar sólr’, ‘the ogress’s suns’ (st. 51)—the runes, at least in their first appearance in the poem, are aligned with the Christian complex of imagery, positively assimilated in the same vein, perhaps, as the ‘Dísir . . . dróttins mála’ (st. 25).¹⁵¹ It could be argued that this is an example of that pagan-Christian syncretism that Amory sees at work in the poem, but they are not necessarily imported from the complex of pagan mythology. Indeed, the runes, whilst certainly to be read as fateful symbols in this context, are perhaps described as *dreyrstafir* because of their portentousness, because of the fact they symbolise Christ’s devastating judgement. They may be used simply to underscore

¹⁵¹ Amory, ‘Norse-Christian Syncretism’, 258.

the fact that the seer's actions in the world have been recorded, set in stone by the seer's actions in life, playing on the same characteristic of the indelible and enduring seen at work in *Solomon and Saturn I* and further explored in *Hávamál*. The narrator's tongue is the wooden tablet on which this judgement is to be codified.

We should at this point take into account Larrington's useful distinction in the poem between the 'set of positively-valued signifiers which nevertheless carry pagan resonances' and the signifiers, such as the heathen gods, which cannot be rehabilitated.¹⁵² It is even possible that, by associating runes with the Christ symbol, the poem is recognising the reality of the script's prompt appropriation to serve functions within the Scandinavian church and Christian society. Indeed, whilst the poetic associations may have needed a degree of rehabilitation, there was nothing in the practicalities of the script that prevented it from being used in Christian inscriptions, or for continued benign, secular employment.

There is, however, something of a contradiction between the identification of the runes as a signifier associated with Christ, and the 'absolute opposition between heavenly and diabolic tropes' that Larrington sees most clearly in the dichotomy of bloody runes and heavenly script in the next reference to runes in the text.¹⁵³ These runes are encountered in the description of Hell, as the seer journeys through the *sigrheimr*, or 'victory realms' and recounts various symbolic and harrowing sights, including the unfortunates being punished in hell. The various groups of sinners appear to carry visible tokens of their misdeeds, the 'blóðgu hjörtu' or 'bloody hearts' of the 'dark women' literally hanging out of their breasts (st. 58) whilst the maimed men are all 'rýgjar blóði roðin',

¹⁵² Larrington, 'Freyja and the Organ-Stool', 189.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*, 189.

‘reddened with a woman’s blood’ (st. 59). In a similar manner those men who died without receiving the sacrament carry a token of their sin: a pagan star stands over their head painted with *feiknstafir*, ‘awful’ or ‘baleful’ staves:

Marga men sá ek moldar gengna,
þá er ei máttu þjónustu ná;
heiðnar stjörnur stóðu yfir höfði þeim
fáðar feiknstöfum. (st. 60)¹⁵⁴

If we were to read this reference to runes in isolation, we might well assume the script is simply a fittingly pagan technology with which to signal out their sin, ‘baleful’ by its very nature. However, we should not discount the possibility that the runes are described as *feiknstafir* because of what they record, or because they are pagan in this particular context, unlike the runes associated with Christ.

In a similar way to those who did not receive the sacrament, men guilty of the sin of envy are signalled by runes:

Menn sák ek þá, er mjök ala
öfund um annars hagi;
blóðgar rúnir váru á brjósti þeim
merkðar meinliga. (st. 61)¹⁵⁵

It is again difficult to identify the symbolism behind these markings – to decide whether the runes are employed because of an association with heathenism, or because they are appropriate to a bodily

¹⁵⁴ ‘I saw many men gone into the ground, those who weren’t able to obtain the sacrament; heathen stars stood over their heads, painted with baleful runes.’

¹⁵⁵ ‘I saw men then, who greatly harbour envy of another’s doings; bloody runes were marked painfully on their breast.’

engraving. As we saw in *Sigrdrífumál*, there is certainly a poetic precedent for runes carved upon the body, and it may well be the semiotic value of the runes as symbols that is being stressed in both these cases, as markers which, as Njarðvík points out, signal the complete exclusion of the sinners.¹⁵⁶ What is more difficult to determine is whether the runes have some relation to the sin of the group in question, as appears to be the case with some of the groups described. Individuals who tricked others out of property, for example, carry burdens of lead, ‘the hellish equivalent of the gold which the avaricious coveted in life’,¹⁵⁷ and proud men have their clothes ‘kýmiliga / eldi um slegin’, ‘entertainingly set on fire’ (st. 66). The specific sin of the men marked with runes is to ‘mjök ala / öfund um annars hagi’, ‘greatly harbour envy of another’s doings’ (st. 61). Envy is by its nature a rather private emotion: it may provoke external actions against the target of the envy (as in the story of Cain and Abel), but it is harboured internally and is a singularly self-destructive emotion, as pointed to in Proverbs where it is described as ‘the rottenness of the bones.’¹⁵⁸ This conception of envy may lie at the root of this particular punishment, which represents a public exposure of an introspective sin. Runes may again be used in their capacity as written labels.

There is, however, undoubtedly a dichotomy being set up in the poem between the runic symbols carried by these unfortunates, and the symbols that signal out the blessed: pure candles burn brightly over the heads of the generous (st. 69), and in the case of those who aided the poor in life, ‘lásu englar helgar bækr / ok himna script yfir höfði þeim’, ‘angels read holy books and the writing of the heavens over their heads’ (st. 70). If there is a scriptural mythopoeia at work in the

¹⁵⁶ Njarðvík, *Sólarljóð*, 91.

¹⁵⁷ Larrington and Robinson, *Sólarljóð*, 341.

¹⁵⁸ Proverbs, 14:30.

poem, it might be the aligning of these ‘visual tokens’ in ‘absolute opposition’; runes with the symbols of a miserable fate, and the book with salvation.¹⁵⁹ There is no doubt that the *himna script* referred to are the scripts of Classical and patristic learning. The runes are not inappropriate to be associated directly with Christ, but the direction in which they tend, the message they transmit is a doleful, fateful one, not of salvation but of etched sins and miseries, of Christ in judgement rather than benediction. And yet the final stanzas of the poem, the section Amory refers to as the ‘runic epilogue’ to the poem, suggest that this dichotomy was not a simple one, even in the binary landscape of the Christian afterlife:

Arfi, faðir einn ek ráðit hefi,
 ok þeir Sólkötlu synir
 hjartarhorn, þat er ór haugi bar
 inn vitri Vígdvalin.¹⁶⁰
 Hér eru þær rúnir, sem ristit hafa
 Njarðar dætr níu,
 Böðveig in elzta ok Kreppvör in yngsta
 ok þeira systur sjau. (sts 78-9)¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁹ Larrington, ‘Freyja and the Organ-Stool’, 189.

¹⁶⁰ ‘Heir – except for the sons of Sólkötlu, I alone, the father, have interpreted the hart’s horn, that which the wise Vígdvalinn bore from the barrow.’

¹⁶¹ ‘Here are the runes which the nine daughters of Njarðar have carved, Böðveig the eldest, and Kreppvör the youngest, and their sisters seven.’ The interpretation of the first of these stanzas is vital in understanding the narrative framework of the poem. I follow Larrington and Robinson in reading it as a direct address by the father to his son, the ‘I’ of the first line and the father being one and the same. This reading negates the need to emend *faðir* to gen. sg. *fǫður*, which would be necessary if the *fǫður arfi*, ‘the father’s inheritance’ was the object of the sentence; the conceit of the seer as a father communicating with his heirs also undoubtedly works better as a framing device. As Larrington and Robinson point out, ‘the convention of a father addressing his son is frequent in wisdom poetry’ and fits the rather personal nature of his counsel, *Sólarljóð*, 352.

Some critics have had a problem with reading this inscribed *hjartarhorn* as a Christian symbol, even choosing to separate the two images of the horn and the carved runes.¹⁶² It is clear, however, that the runes belong with the horn, and as we have seen, this is a fairly naturalistic, and certainly poetically consistent association. It is also clear that the horn is to be related to the sun-stag that appears earlier in the poem as an image of Christ, and that it is an object with deep symbolic import. Amory points out the regenerative power of the horn in the medieval *Physiologus*, and suggests that it is representative of Christ's resurrection; the runes on the inscribed object thus 'spell out in mystical characters the Christian message of sin and damnation'.¹⁶³ Amory even identifies Vígdvalinn with the apostle Peter, and the barrow with the empty tomb of Christ. The inscribed horn is thus representative of the teachings of Christ 'communicated through the Roman Church to the faithful in Iceland'.¹⁶⁴ These 'mystical characters' play a vital role in this allegory of transmission, but not only are the runes appropriate to the reconciliation of pre-Christian culture with the new faith, the poem is even constructing a myth of scriptural transition and transmission, almost re-inscribing the pagan world with the truth of the Christian story, and situating runes as both the cultural and technological precedent to scripture. The runes are not chosen simply because they are 'mystical', but because of the absolutely central place of writing in the Christian religion, and the desire to assimilate this important aspect of the mythical past.

¹⁶² George S. Tate, "Heiðar stjörnur" / "heiðnar stjörnur": The Confrontation of Paganism and Christianity in *Sólarljóð*, *Sixth International Saga Conference Workshop Papers 28.7-28.8* (Copenhagen: Det arnamagnæanske Institut, 1985), 1021-35, 1032-3. Referenced by Larrington and Robinson, *Sólarljóð*, 354.

¹⁶³ Amory, 'Norse-Christian Syncretism', 261-3.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 263.

Perhaps the difficulty of reading the runes in this poem actually stems from a conflict between two registers: the poetic rune acquired by a poet ‘widely versed in Eddic tradition’,¹⁶⁵ and the realities of the runic script as used in the thirteenth century. The runes both belong in the vision of Hell, as diabolical characters inspired by details in the Eddic texts,¹⁶⁶ and function as the script which transmits the message of Christian salvation in the poem, having played a practical role within the Scandinavian Church. The poet recognises that runes, and their associations with wisdom, with native composition, history and learning, could not be banished to the heathen past, expressing the dilemma of appropriation.

In assimilating the runes in this way, the poet not only combines in his diorama the central dichotomy between the poetic and the practical explored in the previous chapter, but dramatises the appropriation of writing by the Church, and the dominance of the *himna script*. As Frye points out ‘once Christianity had come to power in both spiritual and temporal areas, the bible became the basis for a cosmology that helped to rationalise the existing structures of authority’;¹⁶⁷ ultimately the power dynamics explored in *Hávamál*, *Rígsþula* and *Skírnismál* are re-expressed as the Catholic faith’s domination of mankind’s most revolutionary technology: the written word.

¹⁶⁵ Larrington, ‘Freyja and the Organ-Stool’, 183.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 184.

¹⁶⁷ Northrop Frye, ‘Blake’s Bible’ in *Myth and Metaphor: Selected Essays 1974-1988*, ed. Robert D. Denham (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1990), 270-86, 275.

Conclusion

The poems covered in this chapter represent four distinct mythical constructions of the runic script.

Hávamál is an arch-narrative pertaining not only to the origins of runes, but to the peculiar nature of script itself, encoding within its mythical framework the process of coming to terms with writing as a technology and a social phenomenon. *Rígsþula* can be read not only as a myth pertaining to the engendering of social orders and the reception of writing by mankind, but as an exploration of the role writing has to play within a framework of social progression. In *Skírnismál* the runes exist within a narrower frame of reference still, with the rune-engraved stick acting as a contractual motif within a discourse on personal, gendered relationships of power. *Sólarljóð* draws on the representation of the script in the mythological poems of the *Edda*, using the rune as an emblem of pagan otherness, but also assimilating it into the scriptural mythopoeia of the Scandinavian Church, a dichotomy that is perhaps indicative of the gap between the poetic representation of the rune and the realities of the use of the script.

All four poems encode within their individual treatments of Norse mythology a dialogue about the role that writing plays within society, and the cultural importance of writing as a technology. In this respect, they not only represent important moments of literary engagement with the runic script, but are involved with the wider construction of a mythology of writing, which serves both to interrogate the impact this technology has on society, and to appropriate the social capital that it commands. Read without attention to this literate discourse, these poems will be found to contain all the elements of what we might call a conventional mythical history of the runic script: associations with sacrifice, divinity, secret knowledge and magic. This is undoubtedly how they were

read by early antiquarians and runologists. It is this mythology of *feiknstaffir* and diabolical potency which underpins the popular vision of runes as a script of magic, and which led scholars to dismiss these myths as primitive expressions of awe by a people 'barbarous enough to think there was something supernatural in writing'.¹⁶⁸ But as this targeted reading of these episodes has helped to highlight, these texts together constitute a rather nuanced discourse on writing as a process.

Such allegorical myth making concerning the written word actually speaks to much that has been repressed in our own alphabet-centric society, in that it is fundamentally and constructively self-conscious about the written word even as it is being used. There is an understanding that writing is a system of signification with its own constructs, rules and particular outcomes. It took the development of semiotics as a discipline, and the consequent deconstruction of the dualism of speech/writing in order to reawaken us to this discourse. In a sense, the credulous readers of this mythology of writing in the early days of specious runology got one thing right in their interpretation of these poems: that writing *is* portrayed as special and powerful. What they failed to pinpoint was the fundamental difference between the realities of a script as it is used by its practitioners, and the way that literature and myth mediates this, in full awareness of the peculiar, magical, essential character of the written word. This is a myth not just for what the rune signifies, but what writing itself signifies. It is an exploration of literacy that we, for the most part unconscious of the parameters of our highly literate culture, and the revolutions in the written word taking place within our own society, would do well to pay attention to.

¹⁶⁸ Thomas Percy, *Northern Antiquities Vol. II*. (1770). Reprinted in facsimile (New York: Garland, 1979), 216.

Conclusion

Ræd sceal mon secgan, rune writan

The Old English Maxim that ‘counsel should be spoken, runes written’¹ is one of many binary structures evident in wisdom poetry. Even if we take the word *rune* here to mean ‘secrets’ or ‘counsel’,² there is still an implicit contrast being set up between the public counsel appropriate for the communal sphere of spoken language, and the private, even surreptitious, discourse appropriate to writing. It represents, we might say, a view embedded in Western thinking since Classical times: that writing is a supplement, a technology that is at best subservient and at worst inimical to speech. And if we take *run* here to refer to the runic script, as I believe it does, we also see an expression of the status of the rune within this binary construct, as indicative of the other.

This otherness, Lerer suggests, is constructed in opposition to Christian concepts of the word as a vehicle for revelation, and inheres in the act of inscription itself, and as such we might say that ‘runes . . . are not “symbols” of anything, but may instead be thought of as a power of their own’.³ Yet surely we should qualify this statement somewhat: rather than representing something outside and ‘other’ to the inherited culture of letters, what runes symbolise within the poetic metaphysics of presence often seems to be the ‘other’ of writing itself, in its most emblematic and self-signalling form. The rune, in the poetic mindset, is writing incarnate.

¹ *Maxims I*, l. 138

² See Page, *An Introduction*, 107.

³ Lerer, *Literacy and Power*, 16-17.

When we encounter the poetic rune in Old English and Old Norse texts, we are not dealing with a ‘recoverable practice of runology’ encoded in the literature, as Lerer has also effectively demonstrated.⁴ Even when the traditions overlap, as they do in medieval Iceland, literature is always involved with the interrogation of the real world. The runes in poetry not only represent points of engagement with the runic past and a specific textual tradition external to the book, but as poetic emblems of written language, they represent a heightened attention to writing itself, as a technology (or technologies), a concept, and a cultural phenomenon. Around this ‘runic imagery’ are gathered the wider discourses on literacy and textuality in Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse literature.

In his article ‘Functions of Literacy and the Use of Runes’, Hines draws attention to the fact that one of the most notable effects of literacy is that it ‘promotes a self-consciousness in respect of language itself, pointing out that writing systems may themselves be thought of as metalanguages which ‘both reflect and affect the analysis of the language’.⁵ When reading the runes in Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse poems, we might like to think of the script in terms of a poetic metalanguage, or as a form of metawriting: a system of signs adopted to help write about the structures of writing itself. Through the play of runic traces in Anglo-Saxon riddles attention is drawn to the different conventions of spoken and written language, the transformation of states and the vocalisation of inanimate objects, as well as the crafting of the cryptographic puzzle. We have also seen that runic abbreviations often constitute ‘unlocking’ events, moments where the cultural construction of the runic character as *alysendlic* plays into the literary context, ultimately reflecting the ability of written characters to release meaning, and to reveal spiritual truths. The concrete visual and material aspects

⁴ *Ibid.*, 16.

⁵ Hines, ‘Functions of Literacy and the Use of Runes’, 90-91.

of writing are foregrounded in *Solomon and Saturn I* and the Old English and Norwegian rune poems, the alternative textuality of the runic tradition, and of epigraphy in general, encoded in these poems' concern with form, ornamentality and material. In the case of the heroic poems, any link with Migration Age practice was found to be problematic, and the verse engaged in a process of re-scripting the past to reflect current anxieties about written communication. The idea of the runic topos becoming a metalanguage for theoretical and conceptual engagement with writing is also evident in the mythological poems of the *Edda*, which probe the origins of writing, the nature of writing as a technology, and the social revolution it represents, some of the poetry deemed most fabulous and esoteric actually engaged in a complex exploration of this cultural phenomenon.

These are texts that are united by their complex engagement with their own medium, and are without doubt some of the most difficult poems to interpret: to use Barthes' terminology, they are *texte scriptible*, or 'writerly texts', whose indeterminacy, attention to process, and demand for active participation ultimately makes them more profitable and pleasurable for the reader willing to invest in them.⁶ It is thus clear that we should regard the runes as an essential component of the poetic conceit, even when seemingly 'ornamental', and recognising that they are not neutral symbols, but that they carried a host of associations both borrowed from the runic tradition and constructed in contrast to the Latin alphabet. To read correctly we also, of course, need to be aware of the epigraphical conventions, and have a clear understanding of the runic tradition. But this relationship, the comparing of like with unlike, should not be the focus of the discourse: the rune in literature needs to be read on its own terms. To loosen, if not break, this chain of connection

⁶ Roland Barthes, *S/Z* trans. Richard Miller (London: Jonathan Cape, 1975).

allows us to interpret the poetic runes within the hermeneutics of poetry, to use the poetic evidence critically, and to avoid the pitfalls of reconstruction.

Anglo-Saxon and Old Norse: Worlds Apart?

There are many nuances to the poetic rune, as I hope this thesis has served to demonstrate, and the context of each individual poem is unique. As long as we pay attention to these unique structures of meaning, there is no compelling reason why the runic topoi of Anglo-Saxon England and medieval Iceland cannot be read alongside one another and used to shed light on the respective poetic traditions. One of the distinctions to emerge from the OE and ON material, however, is that between the use of runes as physical characters in the body of the text, and of poetic allusions to runes: references to their use, the tradition, or their mythical origins. This is not a solid distinction, and the idea of ‘runic imagery’ neatly covers both conventions, but it is one that, of course, alters the textual function. With regards to the material referred to here, there is a fairly clear separation between the employment of runic characters in the Anglo-Saxon material, and reference to runes in the Norse. This is partly due, of course, to the selective nature of the thesis. There are, for example, runic abbreviations used extensively in ON poetic texts, including the Codex Regius manuscript of the *Edda*, and there are certain *runica manuscripta* in the Icelandic tradition where runic characters are employed within literary texts, the curse in *Bósa saga* being the most famous example.⁷ In OE literature there are also references to runes, though whether any of these refer explicitly to the script, and not to the secondary meaning of rune as ‘counsel’ or ‘mystery’ is unclear. Lerer reads the

⁷ *Fornaldar sögur Norðrlanda III*, ed. Guðni Jónsson (Reykjavík: Íslendingasagnútgáfan, 1959), 281-322, 295.

runic writing on the wall in Genesis, however, and makes a convincing analysis of the runic hilt in Beowulf as a poetic image, so allusions similar to those in the *Edda* do exist in Old English.⁸

However, the distinction is not completely artificial. There are very few allusions to the runic tradition in OE literature and a great many in ON, particularly if we broaden our scope to take in the skaldic references and the *Íslendingasögur* and *fornaldar sögur* motifs. This relative weighting of the traditions towards poetic *employment* of the script and poetic *representation* of the script respectively, deserves some additional comment.

The distinction might well reflect a rather obvious difference between the two literary cultures. In medieval Iceland the runic script still had a currency within the wider culture in which Iceland interacted. Iceland was on the edge of this tradition, however, preserving the poetry and the myth associated with runes, but apparently not greatly interested in practical applications for the script outside the manuscript tradition. In addition, the myth and culture of pre-Christian times retained some significance for Icelandic poets, enshrined as it was in the skaldic diction and reworked as a literary motif in some of the most celebrated Icelandic sagas. Indeed, rune names with pagan associations, though ‘purged’ in England, were retained by the Icelanders,⁹ and there is certainly ‘no reason . . . to think that this change of religion deprived traditional myths of all their truth value’.¹⁰

The combination of this marginal contact with runes, and tendency to preserve and rework myth and history as part of Iceland’s extraordinary literary flourishing, may well account for the fact that it is *stories* about runes that are preserved for the most part, rather than sequences of runic characters.

⁸ See Lerer, *Literacy and Power*.

⁹ Musset, *Introduction*, 135.

¹⁰ Clunies Ross, *Prolonged Echoes*, 18.

Their removal from a tradition happening ‘elsewhere’ would account for many of the apparent distortions of practice, but also perhaps the preservation of earlier conceptual engagements with runes. It certainly gave the Icelanders the freedom to appropriate the rune as a literary topos, and to use it to throw light on the technology of book writing they embraced so wholeheartedly.

In Anglo-Saxon England the poets and scribes using runes were themselves at some remove from the epigraphical tradition, though perhaps not as far as once thought, if we allow for the fact that runic writing may have persisted on perishable media within certain communities.¹¹ Whilst runic coin legends suggest ‘that in East Anglia as late as 800 an ability to write in runes was fairly widespread’,¹² a scribe writing in Winchester or Glastonbury in the tenth century, far from the historical centres of runic practice in England, could perhaps never claim to be the inheritor of any local tradition, and certainly could not claim to be at the interface with a continuing tradition, in the same way that thirteenth-century Icelanders maintaining close contacts with Norway could.¹³ The Anglo-Saxons were also further removed from the myth and folklore of the runic tradition, and the script was certainly distanced from overtly magic or ritual associations at a very early date, Page arguing convincingly that few inscriptions of demonstrably pagan character exist amongst the Anglo-Saxon corpus, and that the insular tradition was largely unencumbered by cultic practice.¹⁴

¹¹ See Parsons, ‘Anglo-Saxon Runes in Continental Manuscripts’.

¹² D. M. Metcalf, ‘Runes and Literacy: Pondering the Evidence of Anglo-Saxon Coins of the Eighth and Ninth Centuries’ in *Runeninschriften als Quellen interdisziplinärer Forschung*, ed. Klaus Düwel (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1998), 434–438, 438.

¹³ The importation of Scandinavian runes into the British Isles might be said to represent an interface of sorts, but it is clearly not the tradition, or the alphabet, that the poets are drawing upon. See Barnes and Page, *The Scandinavian Runic Inscriptions of Britain* (Uppsala: Uppsala universitet, 2006).

¹⁴ See Page, ‘Anglo-Saxon Runes and Magic’, 14–31.

The tenth-century Anglo-Saxon poet or scribe was thus free to use the script without a) being on the margins of an ongoing tradition b) acting as a custodian of myth involving runes, or c) being concerned that the script was inappropriate for use in Christian contexts. Indeed, it should be remembered that all the Old English texts in which runes appear are demonstrably and wholeheartedly Christian, in a way that the poems of the *Edda* are not. The script, in and of itself, thus became the focus, its 'otherness' determined in a large part by its difference on the page, and its association with epigraphical practices. This perhaps goes some way to explaining why in the Anglo-Saxon texts the focus is on what we might call the concrete terms of runic textuality—the material legacy of the script, its association with picture riddles, its form and aspect—and the fact that runes often serve as points of heightened attention to writing as a process when they appear in poetry. The Norse runic imagery, as we have seen, more usually pertains to the social dimension of textuality, to writing as a concept.

This distinction can only be taken so far, and it would not be sensible to labour the point, particularly when there is much additional work to be done on the Icelandic manuscript runes. The runic imagery in the two bodies of literature actually has much in common. Both poetic traditions use the *fuþark* as more than just a supplementary book script, and exploit its alterity, its historical associations and its particular textual conventions in order to engage with the written word within a written medium. And in this sense of harnessing an alternative tradition to act as a critical discourse within the literature, the cultural responses are, I think, quite comparable.

Omissions and Openings

There were certain unavoidable omissions made in order to circumscribe this study, and aspects of the poetic rune that did not fall within its scope. References to runes in skaldic verse is one key area for further research, including, of course verse within sagas, such as Egill's *lausavísur* rebuking sloppy rune-carvers, mentioned at the opening to this thesis, and indeed the 25 stanza *Sonatorrek* which is said to have been carved in its entirety on a rune-staff!¹⁵ A critical study of the runic imagery in prose would also have much to contribute to our understanding of the literary rune,¹⁶ as would a reappraisal of the Scandinavian *runica manuscripta*, a preliminary survey of which has been undertaken in the latest edition of *Futbark*, and which reveals quite how neglected this material has been.¹⁷ Within the Anglo-Saxon tradition, the focus might be broadened to re-examine expressions of writing and literacy more generally, following Lerer, or to re-appraise the use of Anglo-Saxon runes in continental manuscripts, following Derolez and Parsons. Finally, the approaches used in this thesis are not exhaustive, and are intended to serve as a springboard to further critical consideration. I deliberately avoided looking at runes as representative of the esoteric, but a sober examination of the 'magical rune' as represented in literature might be of some value, as would a reading of runic writing as a statement of national identity in continental manuscripts, a motivation Page identifies behind the Anglo-Saxon graffiti inscriptions found in Italy.¹⁸ Different approaches

¹⁵ *Egils saga*, ch. 78.

¹⁶ See Macleod for an interesting discussion of the references in *Bósa saga* and *Egils saga*, which certainly seem to be 'of literary rather than historical interest', '*Bandrúnir* in Icelandic Sagas', 260.

¹⁷ Alessia Bauer, 'Die späten *Runica Manuscripta* aus Island. Was versteht man unter málrúnir?', *Futbark* 1 (2010), 197-223.

¹⁸ Page, 'Runic Writing, Roman Script', 133.

can only bring us closer to a correct reading of runes in poetry, and enhance our understanding of the role runes played in the literary imagination.

It is, in the end, not surprising that runes came to play an important role in Anglo-Saxon and Norse conceptions of the written word, even after losing their status as a practicable script. Writing is, after all, a central and enduring literary concern, implicit in the very medium of written poetry. This self-referentiality also makes it a singularly difficult topic to write about,¹⁹ particularly ‘since the means of appraisal are influenced by the media’.²⁰ We need a metalanguage for writing in order to see that which would otherwise be obscured by its own terms, and to move outside this ‘unclosable loop’.²¹ Employing the runic script as a literary topos allowed poets to engage with the idea of writing within written texts: the runes, and the tradition with which they were associated, were different enough to defamiliarise the process and call attention to the terms of its use. This could be an attention to the particular characteristics of written as opposed to spoken language—its tangible nature and material basis, its ability to transcend temporality and be released from the intention of the speaker,²² and its visual dimension—or to the impact of this technology on human interactions, history and social constructs. Runes, I suggest, were a perfect metalanguage for poets because by their difference they immediately signalled to the reader that they are written characters, representative of ‘the single most important technology in human life’.²³ The rune in the manuscript environment thus constitutes a ‘healthy sign’, defined by Eagleton as ‘one which does

¹⁹ Powell, *Writing: Theory and History*, 11.

²⁰ Harold Innis, *Empire and Communications* (Victoria: Press Porcépic, 1950/1986), 6.

²¹ Johnson, ‘Writing’, 39.

²² Of course, with the advent of recording technology, this function ceased to be the exclusive preserve of writing.

²³ Powell, *Writing: Theory and History*, 11.

not try to palm itself off as “natural” but which, in the very moment of conveying a meaning, communicates something of its own relative, artificial status as well.²⁴

This meta-linguistic effect can only be a result of distance from practice, and the interaction of a dominant system with the less familiar ‘other’, and it reinforces the impression that these literary engagements are at some remove from the runic tradition proper. As with all uses of history, they draw on the literate past to make sense of the literate present. And in the case of glottic writing systems, which are essentially an adaptation of the same underlying concept using different technologies (and not an evolution towards better and more functional systems, as was once thought), there is much in these earlier manifestations of literacy that is of immediate relevance to us. As Johnson points out, ‘images of writing in writing testify to an enduring fascination with the mechanics and materiality of the written word’,²⁵ and enable us to re-read our own culture’s engagement with writing, and our reliance on a technology that is no more innate than the computer chip or the scientific advances that took us into space: in other words, the poetic rune has the potential to continue serving as a metalanguage in our own lettered culture.

Writing is all around us, pervading every aspect of modern life. Even if we never sit down to read a book or an academic thesis, our entire Western culture is premised on the ability to process written information. Billboards, contracts, menus, cash points, texts, tweets, emails, keypads, computer literacy itself: there are a thousand functions of writing that underpin our lives. Literacy is perhaps the most valuable skill that we acquire in our early education, and a key concern of educationalists and policy makers the world over. And yet, writing, the very *matière* of literacy, has

²⁴ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 117.

²⁵ Johnson, ‘Writing’, 39.

become so unconscious that we rarely stop to consider what it means, and how it constructs our perception of the world: to pause and ‘rethink’ writing, as Harris puts it.

Once this ‘strange’ innovation is learned,²⁶ it is not in our nature to de-familiarise it once more, unless we come up against a new script, or are faced with a similar juxtaposition—an inventive SMS abbreviation, an unusual character—that calls attention to the written sign itself. At this juncture in modern life, when writing in digital format is again re-animating the letter and revolutionising communication, the value of taking a step back and thinking about what the process involves, and how the technology evolved, cannot be questioned. Perhaps we need a different perspective to remind us what writing actually *is*, to become conscious of its operations and to strive towards that stage of ‘full literacy’ ‘which arguably no society has yet reached’.²⁷ The metalanguage of runes in the poems of the Anglo-Saxons and the Norse can help us to do just that: to read and to re-interpret the remarkable invention that we share.

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²⁶ Lévi-Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, 291.

²⁷ Harris, *Rethinking Writing*, xi.

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