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The Names of the *u*-Rune¹

Inmaculada Senra Silva

Introduction

This article seeks to contribute to a better understanding of the name, or rather names, of the *u*-rune. *Ūr(r)* has usually been viewed as one of the most uncertain rune-names since most or all the main sources seem to indicate different meanings. *Ūr* in the *Old English Rune Poem* apparently means ‘aurochs’. The *Icelandic Rune Poem* identifies *úr* as meaning ‘precipitation, drizzle’, and concentrates on its negative consequences for crops. Editors have as a rule translated *úr* in the *Norwegian Rune Poem* as ‘slag’: “dross comes from bad iron” (Dickins 1915, 25); “Schlacke kommt von schlechtem eisen” (Wimmer 1887, 276).

As a starting-point for the analysis of any rune-name, the etymological basis of the “standard” (or traditionally accepted) meaning or meanings ascribed to it is central. Old English *ūr* ‘aurochs’ comes from Germanic **ūruz* and corresponds to Old Norse *úrr*. This does not appear to have been a common word in Old English or Old Norse. There was, though, a word for ‘ox’ in the Germanic languages: **uhsan-* (> Old High German *ohso*, Old Frisian *oxa*, Gothic *aūhsa*, Old Norse *uxi/oxi*), which combines with *ūr* in Old High German to form *urohso*, German *Aurochs*, whence Modern English *aurochs*. The Latin term *ūrus* is a loanword from Germanic.

The Old Norse word *úr* (neuter) means ‘humidity, drizzle’, as in modern Norwegian, cf. Swedish *ur* ‘snowy weather’, Norwegian *yr* ‘drizzle’, Orkney Norn *ūr* ‘fine rain’, Shetland Norn *urek* ‘water from the bottom of a boat’, Latin *ūrīna* ‘urine’. Modern Icelandic *úr* for drizzle is archaic or poetic. The

¹ I would like to thank Professor James Knirk (University of Oslo) who read through earlier drafts of this paper and provided useful criticism and valuable suggestions for improvement. Any shortcomings that remain are my responsibility alone.

normal word for rain is *rigning* or *regn*. A related verb *ýra* is, however, sometimes heard in the construction *það ýrir úr lofti*, meaning that a very fine, light rain is falling. According to Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon (1989, s.v. 1 *úr*), there is a neuter noun *úr* meaning ‘slag, cinders’, cognate with Low German *ur*, Dutch *oer* ‘(bog) ore’.

The Old English Rune Poem

The Anglo-Saxon text differs from the Scandinavian rune poems in that it comprises twenty-nine stanzas against the sixteen of the other two. Eight runes from the Common Germanic *fupark* lacking in the younger sixteen-rune alphabet are included in this text. Furthermore, the Old English *fuporc* has several new runes additional to those found in the original twenty-four-character row. A few names found in the Old English poem, such as *peorð* and *eolhx*, are *hapax legomena*, so their meanings can only be deduced from the context in which they appear. This is most probably because the rune-names preserve earlier Germanic language material, and some of them survive only as relics.

The *u*-stanza reads as follows (Halsall 1981, 86f.):

Ū (ūr) byþ anmōdand	oferhyrned,
felafrēcne dēor	— feohteþ mid hornum —
mære mōrstapa;	þæt is mōdig wuht!

‘The aurochs is courageous and has huge horns,
a very fierce beast — it fights with its horns —
a notorious moor-stalker; that is a brave creature!’

The name of the *u*-rune in the *Old English Rune Poem* is thus *ūr*, understood as ‘aurochs’. On the basis of this stanza the original Germanic name has been reconstructed as **ūruz* ‘aurochs’ (cf. Krause and Jankuhn 1966, 4; Düwel 2008, 7, 198–200). But this word is a *hapax* in Old English. The aurochs survived only in the forests on the Continent and was little known to Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians. Lack of knowledge of the animal and its name could have led to confusion of Old Norse *úrr* ‘aurochs’ with the very similarly pronounced *úr* ‘drizzle’ by Scandinavians learning and using the rune-names or rune poems. The two words developed into complete homonyms in Modern Icelandic, and were perhaps already homonyms or virtual homonyms in the medieval period. Confusion of this kind is by no means improbable since there seems to be another example of the

substitution of homonyms in the Norwegian and Icelandic rune poems, namely *áss*~*óss*. The name of *ᚱ* *α*, the fourth rune in the Germanic *futhorc*, has been reconstructed as **ansur*, meaning ‘heathen god’, Latin *anses* ‘god’ (Krause and Jankuhn 1966, 4; Düwel 2008, 8, 198–200). During the Viking Age, as the result of loss of [n] and compensatory lengthening of the preceding nasal vowel [ã], this word became [ã:sʊr]. Then *u*-umlaut and syncope took place and it became [õ:sʊr] and ultimately [õ:s:]. In the paradigm *-u* did not occur in all endings and there thus came to be variation in the root vocalism between [ã:] and [õ:]. Finally – somewhen in the eleventh century – the root vowel [õ:] became denasalised and further rounded and closed to [o:] (> *óss*), by which time the fourth rune had in many places assumed the shape *ᚱ*. In time this rune lost the value [ã(:)]. From the late Viking Age onwards it seems no longer used to represent any kind of a nasal sound, but instead denotes rounded vowels, especially [o(:)], and occasionally the glide [w]. The variation in the root vowel of the paradigms of the various **ansur* reflexes in the Viking Age and Scandinavian Middle Ages between [a:] and [õ:], or later [a:] and [o:], was often levelled; generally this was in favour of [a:], but [o:] could also be the final product (given the nasal, or historically nasal, environment), yielding *óss*. There was thus variation *áss*/*óss*. In the *Icelandic Rune Poem*, the spelling *oss* is recorded.

There is, though, another Old Norse word *óss*, which derives from Germanic **ōsa-* (cf. Latin *ōs*), with the meaning ‘river mouth’. So in Old Norse – at least after the eleventh century – there existed two homonyms, one coming from Germanic **ansuz* and the other from Germanic **ōsa-*. Gradually *áss* displaced *óss* as the word for ‘god’, but *áss* could not be used as the name of the fourth rune since by then *ᚱ* had come to denote [o(:)]. Hence the Icelandic decision to construe the name as ‘river mouth’ rather than ‘god’. Here may lie the explanation for the different meanings given to *óss* in the Norwegian and Icelandic rune poems.

The Norwegian Rune Poem

Discussion of rune-names as they appear in the *Norwegian Rune Poem* has as a rule relied on standard editions such as the ones by Wimmer (1887) and Dickins (1915). The most recent investigation of the text and its preservation is by Page (2003).

The poem survives in three late copies: the earliest version appears in printed form in Worm’s *Runer seu Danica literatura antiquissima* (1st ed. 1636; 2nd ed. 1651). Worm found the text on the flyleaf of an Old Norwegian

legal codex and had it copied. Another copy appears in MS Bartholiniana D in the Royal Library, Copenhagen. This was made by Árni Magnússon and can be dated between 1684 (when Árni became amanuensis for Bartholin) and 1690 (when Bartholin died; cf. Kålund 1884–91, 2f.). The last copy is found in MS papp. fol. 64 from the second half of the seventeenth century, preserved in the Royal Library, Stockholm. The manuscript is in three different hands: those of Jón Eggertsson, Helgi Ólafsson, and an unknown scribe. It is now agreed that the poem, found on p. 74, was most probably included after 1680, the year in which Jón Eggertsson, who wrote this leaf, went to Copenhagen to work for the Swedish government.

The poem consists of sixteen stanzas of a common pattern, each of them containing two lines. The first describes by circumlocution the name of a rune of the sixteen-character Norse *fupark*, while the second has a statement which by and large seems unrelated to the matter in the first line (but cf. Liestøl 1949, and more recently but inspiring less confidence, Neuner 2006). The *u*-stanza, according to the different copies, goes as follows:

JE	Ŋ. er af illu iarne, oft læyper ræin a hiarne
AM	Ŋ. er af illu iarne. oft læyper ræin a hiarne.
W	Ur er af ellu jarni Opt sleipur Rani a hiarni.

There are various problems here. In the first line, Jón Eggertsson (JE) and Árni Magnússon (AM) have the reading “illu”, ‘bad, of poor quality’, against Worm’s (W) “ellu”, probably for *eldu* ‘heated’. Kålund (1884–91, 7) maintains that, since both Árni Magnússon and Jón Eggertsson have “illu”, this must be what stood in the original. However, he also states that it could well have been a mistake for “ellu” (i.e. “eldu”), which Worm (or his copyist) must then have corrected. So whatever the word *úr* meant in the poem, the line should be read as either ‘Ŋ/Ur comes from bad iron’ or ‘Ŋ/Ur comes from heated iron’.

It has been traditionally claimed that *úr* here means ‘slag’ (‘slag comes from heated/bad iron’). Let us then look at dictionary entries and references for *úr* and see how the word is defined.

Jón Rúgmán in his *Monosyllaba islandica â Jóna Rvgman collecta* (1676) has “Ur Ignis”, that is, *úr* ‘fire’, quite possibly based on material from Ole Worm (1636; 1651). Fritzner (1886–96) gives two definitions of *úr*. The first is “fint Regn, Taageregn” (‘fine rain’), the second “Runen som betegner *u*” (‘the rune which denotes *u*’).

In Sveinbjörn Egilsson (1913–16), *úr* is glossed both as “slakker” (‘slag’; with reference to the *Norwegian Rune Poem*) and “fugtighed, ruskregn, vand” (‘humidity, rain, water’). In *Norrøn ordbok* two different entries are

provided. The first has two definitions, “yr, fint regn” (‘fine rain’) and “namn på runeboekstaven for *u*” (‘name of the *u*-rune’). The second has “sinder, slag av smelta jern” ‘cinders, slag from smelted iron’, which is connected to the rune poem.

Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon (1989) has nine entries for *úr*. The first is marked as neuter, and glossed as “sindur, gjall”, that is, ‘cinders, slag’. As noted above, Ásgeir relates this word to Low German *ur* and Dutch *oer* ‘(bog) ore’. He also associates it with *aur* ‘clay, mud’ (‘leir, for’). He feels that etymologically this might be the same word as the second entry, which means ‘rain’ (“regn, væta, vessi”). It can be masculine, feminine, or neuter. Entry number 3 is a nineteenth-century word; it is marked as neuter and refers to the soft inner parts of crustaceans. Entry 4 (neuter), which is an Icelandic dialect word from the nineteenth century, is a crustacean (a type of crab or other sea-creature). Entry 5 is an eighteenth-century word meaning ‘bad temper’. From that same century comes entry 6, *úr* (neuter), meaning ‘clock, watch’, cognate with German *Uhr* (also neuter). Entry 7 is *úr* (masculine) from Old Norse *úrr* ‘aurochs’ (“úruxi”). Ásgeir discusses the rune-name and believes *úr* ‘aurochs’ to have been the original designation. Entry 8 is an adjective, a reflex of earlier *úrr*. He defines it as ‘fragile, from poor raw material (of iron)’ (“stökkur, úr lélegu hráefni (um járn)”). Entry 9, finally, is the preposition *úr*. So there are five entries which are not ascribed to the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. Only three are defined as nouns, namely the neut. ‘cinder, slag’, the masc./fem./neut. ‘light rain’, and the masc. ‘aurochs’. The noun meaning ‘aurochs’ and the adjective denoting ‘of bad quality’ (Old Norse *úrr*, Modern Icelandic *úr*) were homonyms in Old Norse.

In *Íslensk orðabók* (2002) there are six words spelt *úr*. They are mostly given as neuter. The first entry, however, is *úr* (masc.) “úruxi”. The third is neuter and entails various definitions, among them (1) “suddi, úði” (‘drizzle, fine rain’), and (2) “sindur, neistaflug (af glóandi smíðajárni)”, that is, ‘sparks’. Entry 4 is *úr* (masc. or neut.) “rún sem samsvarar *u/ú, v*” (‘rune corresponding to *u/ú, v*’). Entry 5 is the obsolete adjective *úr* “stökkur, lélegur” (‘brittle, of little worth’), with the example “úrt járn”. Other definitions relate to more recent loanwords, dialect words, etc., conforming to the definitions listed in Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon (1989).

It should be noted that the adjective *úrr* is not listed in Fritzner (1886–96), but occurs in the supplementary fourth volume (1972), with reference to *úr* in Finnur Jónsson’s revised edition of Sveinbjörn Egilsson (1913–16). It is glossed as “slagfullt” (‘full of slag’) in relation to iron, and is followed by the quotation “úrt járn, kvað kerling, ok átti kníf deigan” (‘impure iron,

said the (old) woman, who had a dull knife’). *Norrøn ordbok* also gives this meaning and the same quotation. The adjective is further listed in the Arnamagnæan *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose*, again accompanied by the same single quotation. This is a Wellerism, i.e., a three-part saying consisting of a direct quotation, an identification of the speaker, and a description of the circumstances that make the statement memorable and give it a new emphasis or added depth. The “úrt járn” quotation appears in *Gull-Ásu-Pórðar þáttur* in *Austfirðinga sögur* (Jón Jóhannesson 1950, 348), which follows AM 518 4to (1600–1700). It is not found in the *Morkinskinna* version (text probably c. 1200, preserved manuscript c. 1275) nor in the compilation *Hulda-Hrokkinskinna* (from the fourteenth century), so it was apparently not part of the text in the 1300s. In his edition, Jón Jóhannesson attempts to explain *úrt járn* by comparing it with the *illu járni* of the *Norwegian Rune Poem*. The adjective *úrr* has thus made its way into Old Norse dictionaries in order to explain the one occurrence in AM 518 4to. It is not present in the version of the story preserved in medieval manuscripts, but appears in a modernised and expanded version of the *þáttur* from the 1600s which includes some newer Icelandic words.

To sum up, the dictionary references are to *úr* ‘rain’, and when the meaning ‘slag’ is given, it is almost always with reference to the *Norwegian Rune Poem* (cf. Sveinbjörn Egilsson 1913–16; *Norrøn ordbok*). But Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon (1989) suggests an etymological connection for *úr* ‘slag’ and a derived adjective *úrr* with connotations of impure iron.

From the above discussion, it might be concluded that the meaning ‘slag’ usually assigned to the word *úr* in the *Norwegian Rune Poem* was based on the firm understanding that the author of the poem had this word in mind and not the homonym meaning ‘rain’, as in the *Icelandic Rune Poem*. There are, however, grounds for questioning such an interpretation.

Kålund (1884–91, 7 f.) observes: “Úr er af illu járni’ kunde give mening, hvis man turde tage ‘úr’ i betydningen ‘slagger’ i henhold til hvad Jón Ólafsson lejlighedsvis ytrer i sin *Runologia* (KBAdd. 8, fol. S. 141), ‘Sunnlendíngar kalla smidju wr, þat Nordlingar smidju giall’” (“Úr er af illu járni” could make sense if one allowed oneself to take “úr” as “slag” bearing in mind Jón Ólafsson’s passing comment in his *Runologia* ... “people in the south of Iceland use *smithy úr* of what northerners call *smithy slag*”). It is interesting that the word *smidju/smiðju* ‘smithy’ is included in this “definition”, for one could easily take ‘smithy light-rain’ as a shower of sparks.

In chapter 16 of his *Runer seu Danica literatura antiquissima* (1636; 1651) Worm renders the meaning of all the rune-names followed by an explanation of their significance. In relation to *úr*, he writes:

Aquarum impetu delabentium rivos indicat: ut & nimbium guttis densioribus cum impetu delabentem: inde quoq; per metaphoram ad alia; quandam cum hisce similitudinem habentia accomodatur, ut ad scintillas ex ferro ignito pulsatione exilientes.

‘*Úr* indicates river-waters flowing with full force: likewise a cloudburst of very heavy drops falling with force: hence, also, metaphorically, it is used to refer to other things which bear a certain similarity to these, such as the sparks given off by white-hot iron when it is struck.’

Worm does not overlook the twofold meaning of *úr* in the Icelandic and Norwegian rune poems. He tries to explain the ‘slag’ sense as a metaphorical usage, based on the spray of rainlike sparks that can occur when hot iron is struck.

The archaeologist Arne Emil Christensen has explained what happens when iron is heated (personal communication).

When you forge iron, the heating process has the extra effect of forming a surface layer of iron oxide on the piece as it reaches the red-hot forging temperature. When hammering, this oxide loosens and may well be likened to a spray of rain from the anvil. In large forging operations, quite an amount is formed due to the numerous reheatings necessary. The usual shape of the oxide is flat flakes. If you hammer-weld two pieces of iron together, a flux is needed to get the oxide away from the surfaces to be joined. The old flux was sand, and the oxide-slag mixture may then take the shape of small drops. The modern Norwegian name is ‘hammerslagg’, the modern English is ‘scale’ or ‘hammer scale’.

Úr (‘fine rain’) in the *Norwegian Rune Poem* could thus be a metaphor for ‘sparks’, understood as a spray of rainlike sparks, and this suggests there may have been a misunderstanding of what was meant. I am therefore inclined to agree with Worm’s understanding of *úr* in this poem and with Kålund’s (1884–91) support for Worm’s interpretation (note also the definition of *úr* as ‘sparks’ in *Íslensk orðabók* 2002). If this is right, both *eldu* (spelt “ellu” by Worm) and *illu* could be correct readings: sparks come from the impurities in heated iron (*illu* implying ‘impurities’, *eldu* ‘heated’). The translation would be either ‘sparks come from the impurities of iron’ or ‘sparks come from heated iron’.

The Icelandic Rune Poem

The text of the *Icelandic Rune Poem* is preserved in two early manuscripts: AM 687d 4to and AM 461 12mo. The poem is also recorded in later

manuscripts and in printed books from the seventeenth century, but these texts are based on the two earliest copies. A new edition with full details of the known textual history was published by Page in 1998.

The *Icelandic Rune Poem* consists of sixteen stanzas of a common pattern, each having as subject a rune of the sixteen-character *fuþark*. In contrast to the Old Norwegian poem, the stanzas are composed of three periphrases or kennings alluding to the rune-name (*þríðeilur*). The *u*-stanza reads:

- A **u** er skygja gratur ok skæra þuer[rir ok] hirdis hatr Vmbre Visi
 B Vr er skya gratr og skarar þorir og hirdis hatr
- A ‘**u** [úr] is crying of the clouds, destroyer/diminisher of mown hay and shepherd’s hate.
 B úr is crying of the clouds, diminisher? of mown hay and shepherd’s hate.’

The three kennings in this stanza describe rain. One does so neutrally (‘crying of the clouds’), whereas the other two emphasise the negative consequences of too much rain or of rain falling on crops at the wrong time. The Latin gloss on the rune-name in text A is *ymber* ‘rain’.

The Swedish Rune Poem

There are two sources for the *Swedish Rune Poem*. The text was edited for the first time in Bureus’s copper-plate print *Runakänslanäs Lärä-span*. This is known as *Runtavlan*. The other source is Granius’s text, edited most recently by Quak (1987; cf. also Bauer 2003, 209–33).

Bureus’s text seems to include the rune-name as part of the periphrasis: **ur i uästan uäþr**. It is interesting to note that in this version *ur* and *uäþr* are given as two separate words rather than a compound. The sentence may be understood as ‘rain in the west wind; westerly weather’.

The *u*-verse in Granius’s text reads *urväder värst*. He renders the name of the rune as ‘storm, bad weather’. The verse might then translate as ‘stormy/bad weather (is) the worst’. But the text may be corrupt – not least in view of the fact that Bureus has *úr* as a separate word – and should perhaps be corrected to: *ur väder värst* ‘rain (is) the worst weather’. However this may be, both versions seem to interpret *úr* as bad weather.

Other manuscript and epigraphical material

Having dealt with the major sources, I now move to a summary presentation of other material relevant to the name of the *u*-rune. These, mainly younger,

sources may be able to cast light on the earlier material. In general they are late and consist mostly of manuscript material. Much information may be obtained from them on the use of the names but little on their actual meaning. The only exception is an inscription from the old church in Bø, Telemark: a single stanza consisting of eight half-lines, linked two-and-two by alliteration. All these lines, except for the first and last, are circumlocutions. Once each rune-name has been decoded, they spell out the female name **kuprun** (*Guðrún*), someone the poet is probably in love with. He may be suffering from unrequited love, and that is why he cannot fall asleep.

This text identifies the name of the *u*-rune by means of two circumlocutions in the manner of the rune poems: *fjón svinkanda* ‘workers’ hate’ and *heys víti* ‘hay’s destruction’, i.e. ‘rain’ (cf. Louis-Jensen 1994, 36; my translation).

Svæfn bannar mér,	‘[It/She] prevents me from sleeping;	
sótt er barna,	[it/she] is children’s sickness	(= <i>kaun k</i>)
fjón svinkanda,	workers’ hate	(= <i>úr u</i>)
fjalls íbúi,	mountain’s inhabitant	(= <i>þurs þ</i>)
hests ærfaði,	horse’s work	(= <i>reið r</i>)
auk heys víti,	and hay’s destruction	(= <i>úr u</i>)
þræls vansæla,	thrall’s unhappiness	(= <i>nauð n</i>)
þat skulu ráða.	[people] will have to work it out.’	

Although the inscription is Norwegian, it does not lend support to the notion that there was a specifically Norwegian name ‘slag’ for the *u*-rune. Rather it shows that in Norway just as in Iceland the name was understood as ‘light rain’.

Late records of the rune-names have to be sought exclusively in Scandinavia, since runic tradition lasted much longer in the North than elsewhere. Works based on what is obviously genuine runic tradition were written in the 1600s and 1700s or even later.

In an attempt to reconstruct the text of the *Icelandic Rune Poem*, Page (1998, 24) sifted through data from these later works and noted that by the eighteenth century a fund of runic lore had developed around the kennings of which this poem consists. The doubt he expresses about the value of such late material for our understanding of the poem and its history is fully justified. However, it seems clear that the meanings of the rune-names to be found in these documents do not as a rule diverge from those of earlier sources. What their authors may have done is make innovative combinations in order to obtain a larger number of periphrases that could be used in poetry. That may be why we sometimes find uncommon or unexpected circumlocutions in this material.

The tradition of the *rímur* poets

In the fourteenth century a new form of narrative poetry came into being in Iceland: it was known as *ríma* ‘rhyme’, pl. *rímur*. Most of the *rímur* belonging to the late Middle Ages are anonymous. However, after 1500 the poet frequently identifies himself in his work, although he does not always give his name in ordinary form, but may conceal it in a cryptic rendering, which the reader has to convert into letters (Craigie 1952, 289). This practice goes under the modern Icelandic heading *fólgin nöfn* ‘concealed names’. It is found in some earlier *rímur*, but becomes more frequent in later centuries. The importance of *fólgin nöfn* for the present study lies in the fact that on some occasions (mainly after 1600) the poet indicates his name to the reader with the help of rune-names, though usually replacing them with synonyms, kennings or even homonyms (Craigie 1952, 289). I will give two examples by way of illustration.

The first comes from a poet called Árni Böðvarsson á Ökrum (1713–77; see Páll Eggert Ólason 1915, 123 f.; my literal translation — note that some of the rune-name synonyms seem incoherent).

<i>Fióls blóma fegurð sé</i> A <i>fýsir þangað riða.</i> R <i>Sumir mæðast sorginne</i> N <i>svellið springur víða.</i> I	<i>Eikin blómguð aldin regn</i> B A U <i>Óðins burinn hreldur</i> D <i>úði sumar marsins megn</i> U A R <i>mæðir Hlýrnis eldur.</i> S
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Uppheims funi álpta grund **S O**
ærin harmur þjóða. **N**
Marga girnir stytta stund
starfi meður ljóða.

‘I see the beauty of violets and long to ride thither. Some are troubled by the sorrow, the ice bursts in many places.	The blooming oak, fruits, rain, Óðinn’s harmed son, drizzle, summer, the horse’s strength troubles the fire of heaven.
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Heaven’s flame, the ground of swans,
 substantial grief of peoples.
 Many like to spend time
 working with poetry.’

Rune-name synonyms or circumlocutions have been employed to code the poet’s name, Árni Baudvarsson: *úr* is replaced by two synonyms, *regn* ‘rain’ in the first pair of lines of the second stanza, and *úði* ‘drizzle’ in the second.

Guðmundur Erlendsson á Felli (†1670) concealed his name in *Æsopus-rímur* (Páll Eggert Ólason 1915, 126 f.; my translation).

<i>Sturlað kaunið steypiregn</i> G U	<i>Aðhnígandi úr sem reið</i> U R
<i>stunginn Týr og maður</i> D M	<i>eg þess nafnið játa</i>
<i>élkers-baun og eymdin megn</i> U N	<i>Golnis sandinn geðs af leið</i>
<i>ásinn þrábenjaður.</i> D	<i>er greiddi um ræðu máta.</i>

‘The disturbed ulcer, pouring rain,	The coming drizzle as riding/ carriage,
dotted Týr (or: stabbed god/Týr) and man,	I admit his/its name
heaven’s bean and the great misery,	Óðinn’s sand from the mind
severely wounded god.	that untangled the speech.’

In this text both plain rune-names (*maður*, *úr*, *reið*) and poetic synonyms are used. In the first line *steypiregn* ‘pouring rain’ is a synonym for *úr* ‘drizzle’. *Élkers-baun* is an *úr* kenning. *Él-ker* (*él*- ‘snow-shower’, *-ker* ‘tub, container’) is a ‘snow-shower’s tub’, and thus refers to *himinn* ‘heaven, the sky’. A bean of or from heaven is rain. *Stunginn Týr* could be either a plain rune-name (‘dotted Týr/**t**’, i.e. **d**) or a circumlocution in which the god’s name is used as a generic.

Runologia

Runologia (AM 413 fol., previously Royal Library, Copenhagen Addit. 8 fol.) is without doubt the most important eighteenth-century manuscript containing material on rune-names. Its author is Jón Ólafsson of Grunnavík (1705–79). The work was written in 1732, but the original has not survived. AM 413 fol., the only preserved copy, dates from 1752. *Runologia* is an immense storehouse of rune-name periphrases. Part 3, chapter 1, for example, entitled *De parafrasi runica, um dylgiurnar* (fols. 130–35), contains lists of thematically repetitive rune-name circumlocutions (with the runes arranged in ABC order). A few illustrative examples are:

Úr er skýja grátr. Skaði þerris og hirðis hatr ... hláka hrið. Himinn-svite ... undir-rót svella.
 ‘Úr is clouds’ tears. Damage to dryness and shepherd’s hate ... thaw’s storm.
 Heaven’s sweat ... cause of swells (waves).’

The periphrases *skýja grátr* and *hirðis hatr* also appear in the *Icelandic Rune Poem*. However, where the Old Icelandic text has *skæra þverris* ‘destroyer of mown hay’, we here find *skaði þerris* ‘damage to dryness’. This could be

a general statement to be interpreted as ‘wetness’, but it could equally well refer more specifically to the drying of hay. That would mean that the same idea is being expressed by two words that alliterate with the ones used in the poem.

In spite of the fact that Jón seems elsewhere to conflate the Norwegian and Old Icelandic rune-name traditions, he does not do so in the case of *úr*. In his presentation the name signifies ‘rain’. The meaning ‘slag’ he nowhere records.

Manuductio compendiosa ad runographiam scandicam antiqvam

The Swedish scholar Olaus Verelius wrote his *Manuductio compendiosa ad runographiam Scandicam antiqvam* in 1675. It comprises runic material similar to that found in Jón Ólafsson’s and Worm’s works. Chapter seven (pp. 24–34) has the typical descriptions of the rune-names of the sixteenth-character *fupark*, presenting first the rune itself, then the name identified by means of *prídeilur*, although sometimes they are reduced to *tvídeilur*. Certain of these periphrases are identical or similar to the ones found in the *Swedish Rune Poem*. The poem itself is embedded in a text together with other material. Its context is clearly calendrical, since Verelius also provides the names of the three extra golden numbers: *aurlaugr*, *twimadur*, and *belgþor*, though without explanatory periphrases. He most probably took this material from Bureus. In relation to the *u*-rune he writes:

Λ Secunda est Runa, & Ur nominator h. est, *nivosa & horrida procella*; cujus symbolum: *Ur er vesta veder*: i.e. *pessima aeris tempestas est procella illa horrida*.

‘Λ is the second rune, and is called *ur*, i.e., *terrible snow storm*; whose symbol [is]: *Ur is the worst weather*: i.e., *a terrible storm is the worst tempest*.’

The description of *úr* as *nivosa & horrida procella* is not taken from the rune poems; ‘rain’ has here been transformed into ‘worst weather, a storm’, presumably on the basis of the periphrasis *vesta veder*, which is most probably a variant of Bureus’s *uästan uäþr* ‘westerly weather’.

Conclusion

All these additional sources confirm the Icelandic ‘light rain’ definition of *úr*, and thereby support the hypothesis that the definition given in the *Norwegian Rune Poem* is metaphorical. The inscription from the old church

in Bø shows that the Icelandic definition was used in Norway as well, and Jón Ólafsson's *Runologia* implies that the Norwegian sense 'slag' was unknown in Iceland.

Summing-up

The aim of this article has been to shed light on the names of the *u*-rune, and more specifically on the meaning and interpretation of *úr* in the *Norwegian Rune Poem*. On the basis of the investigation, the following conclusions seem warranted. First, the 'aurochs', of the *Old English Rune Poem*, may well have been the original name of the rune, but this name and/or animal was little known and *úrr* 'aurochs' could thus have been replaced by a homonym in Scandinavian tradition. Second, Old Norse *úr* 'light rain' appears to be the standard name in the Scandinavian poems, except perhaps the Norwegian. Third, the meaning usually assigned to the name in the *Norwegian Rune Poem* could indicate the substitution of yet another homonym, *úr* 'slag' (cf. the possible etymological correspondences in Low German and Dutch). Nonetheless, since no traces of the meaning 'slag' are found in any of the later sources, not even the medieval Norwegian inscription from Bø, the metaphorical interpretation of *úr* as referring to rainlike sparks, suggested by Worm and supported by Kålund, may well be correct.

In an etymological discussion of Norwegian *aur*, Bjorvand (2006, 102) independently arrives at the conclusion that Old Norse *úr* for 'slag (of melted iron)' is most probably a secondary metaphorical use of the word to denote a 'rain' of glowing iron sparks.

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