

The Anglo-Saxon Name for the s-Rune: *Sigel*, a Precious Jewel

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Abstract

The Anglo-Saxon rune-name *sigel* has been interpreted as meaning ‘sun’. In some contexts Old English *sigel* does refer to the sun, in others it means ‘clasp’, ‘brooch’, or ‘jewel’. All these meanings, however, are difficult to reconcile with the maritime imagery of the Anglo-Saxon *Rune Poem*’s *sigel* stanza. I suggest that the poet has exploited Christian metaphor based on an interpretation of the Hebrew letter-name *zaith* as *zayith* ‘olive’, and that the imagery of the *sigel* stanza refers to the olive branch brought to Noah on his Ark, as well as the oil of chrismation, which was also referred to as the Seal of the Holy Spirit (Latin *sigillum*). The Nordic *Rune Poems* would appear to have taken their cue from their Anglo-Saxon counterpart and associated the seal with Emperor Constantine’s vision of the Cross in the sun’s halo and the decree that this sign be emblazoned on his army’s shields.

Keywords: *sigel*, seal, sun, s-rune, Anglo-Saxon, rune-name

This article is part of a wider study in which I challenge commonly held views that the apparently everyday, meaningful names given to runic characters—such as Old English *hægl* ‘hail’, *lagu* ‘water’, *man* ‘man’, or *dæg* ‘day’—had a purely indigenous, northern European origin, coeval, or virtually coeval, with the creation of the runic script itself and independent of the traditions of the Mediterranean alphabets.

An excellent survey of the literature on rune-names is given by Nedoma (2003). Suffice it to mention here the principal proponents of the various theories over the last decades. For instance, the traditional, non-alphabetic ordering of the runes in the futhark prompted Arntz (1944) to propose that

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both the futhark scheme itself and its names had their origin in magic. Seebold (1993) has also suggested a magic-mantic origin, based on the pairing of names. Von der Leyen (1931, 1957) and Jungandreas (1935, 1974) had earlier put forward the idea of name-pairs. Complete cult systems were presented by Schneider (1956), by Agrell (1928), who linked the system to the cult of Mithras, and by Marstrander (1928), who suggested a scheme of deities. Less integrated was the categorisation presented by Krause (1948; 1970, 30), who divided the names into seven groups: gods and demons (the runes **a þ t m ŋ**), animals (**u z e**), plants (**i þ b l**), astronomical and weather phenomena (**h i j s d**), negative powers (**k n**), cult concepts (**r g**), non-cult concepts (**f o**), plus one uncertain (**w**). Elliott (1989, 71–76) and Polomé (1991) reduced Krause's categories to three: the world of gods, the world of nature, and the world of man. Nedoma himself reserves judgment on whether the invention of the names was coeval with the creation of the futhark, and is sceptical of investing the names with religious or magical qualities.

In contrast to these views, I am hoping to demonstrate that rune-names show evidence of having been inspired by the Irish process of coining names for characters of the ogam script based on the traditional names of letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Initially, the characters of both ogam and runic scripts probably had purely phonetic names, like the letters of the Latin alphabet, rather than the meaningful names that eventually came to be assigned to them. From the fifth century onwards, however, the advent of Christian missions—first in Ireland and subsequently in England—brought users of ogam and runes into contact with Latin transcripts and interpretations of the names of Hebrew letters which were cited, in particular, in connexion with the Psalms. As a result, names were created for ogam and runic characters in imitation of the Hebrew alphabet. Prime movers in this process were probably scholars in Ireland seeking to give respectability to ogam as a native Irish script on a par with the three sacred alphabets, Hebrew, Greek and Latin, but especially with Hebrew. The process was pursued further in northern England in relation to runes, probably under the influence of Irish missionaries, who were largely responsible for Christianising that part of the country after the Anglian immigrations. From England the runic nomenclature was exported to Scandinavia, where some of the names were cloaked in pagan guise in keeping with the syncretism encountered in the process of Christianisation in Scandinavia.

This proposal for the tradition of naming of alphabet letters being passed on to the naming of ogam characters and runes removes the discussion from the realm of cult and magic and places it firmly in Irish and English

scriptoria, some time after the creation of the scripts. It also reverses the direction of transmission of rune-names, which are commonly assumed to have been coined in northern Europe, probably Scandinavia, and imported into England along with the runic script. I would suggest, however, that the names, having been coined in northern England in the seventh to eighth centuries, were exported to the European continent in the wake of Christian missionary activity. Derolez (1954) documents numerous Continental manuscripts, dating from the late eighth century onwards, in which rune-names from apparently English sources are listed. These manuscripts provide the first record of rune-names but they do not give any indication of the names' meanings, some of which, such as *man* 'man', are unambiguous, but some of which, such as Old English *sigel*, are obscure.

Fortunately, there is a series of poems in Old English and the Nordic languages in which the meanings are clarified to some extent, but even here the meaning of a name like *sigel* remains unclear. It has been assumed that the forms of the rune-names as described in the Nordic poems are older than the forms in the Old English poem and that in some cases the Old English name is a Christian substitution for the Nordic name. An example of this possible Christianisation that is often cited is the Nordic name *purs* 'demon' or 'giant', beside the Old English form *þorn* 'thorn'. However, on the basis of my thesis that the names were in origin English coinages in a Christian context, which were subsequently taken to, say, Scandinavia by Christian missionaries, a name like *sigel* would be the older form beside its Nordic equivalent *sól* 'sun'. But what is the relationship between *sigel* and *sól*, and what does *sigel* mean? Similar questions can be asked of the relationships between all the Old English and Nordic rune-names. I concentrate here on *sigel* and *sól* because in this instance the hypothesis of a Christian origin leads to a possible solution to the long-debated meaning of Old English *sigel*.

The stanzas describing the s-rune in the *Rune Poems*

The Nordic name for the s-rune, *sól*, and its interpretation in the Norwegian and Icelandic *Rune Poems* are quite straightforward. *Sól* means 'sun' and that is precisely the meaning that fits the sense of the stanzas in the poems. The Norwegian stanza reads:¹

¹ There are negligible differences between the versions of this stanza in the manuscripts; see Page 2003b, 556 f. The translation of *helgr dómr* as "holy decree" (Page's translation, cf. also Bauer 2003, 152: "dem heiligen Urteil") is debatable and is discussed in more detail below.

s. [sól] *er landa liome | luti ek helgum dome*
 “Sól is the light of the world; I bow to the holy decree”

while the Icelandic stanza, in Page’s redaction (1998, 29), reads:

s [sól] *er skýja skjöldr ok skínandi røðull*
 [ok ísa aldrtręgi] [also: *hverfandi hvel*]

“Sól is the clouds’ shield and a shining halo
 [and ice’s despair] [also: turning wheel]”.

The equivalent stanza in the Anglo-Saxon *Rune Poem*, on the other hand, cannot so readily be explained as relating to the sun. The name appearing beside the stanza in the margin of the only surviving copy of the poem by Hickes (1705, 1.1: 135), taken from the now lost British Library, Cotton Otho B. x, fol. 165v, is *sigel*:

s (<i>sigel</i>) <i>semannum</i>	<i>symble biþ on hihte</i>
<i>ðonne hi hine feriaþ</i>	<i>ofer físces beþ</i>
<i>oþ hi brimhengest</i>	<i>bringeþ to lande.</i>

“*Sigel* is ever a joy to seafarers
 as they take it over the fish’s bath
 until the sea-steed brings them to land.”

Elsewhere, in manuscript sources containing Anglo-Saxon futhorcs or lists of rune-names in alphabetical sequence (runic alphabets), the name of the *s*-rune varies considerably. Of the forms from manuscripts with rune-names recorded by Derolez (1954), there were eight records of *sigil* (including one in place of an erased *sygil*, discussed below), four records of *sigi*, three of *sigel*, and one each of *sigo*, *sig* and *síl*, but almost as many forms with a *-u-* in the first syllable: six records of *sugil*, five of *suhil*, three of *siugil*, and one of *suigil*; there was only one record of *sol*. The form *sigi* is consistently found in those futhorcs associated with the *isruna* tract, while the forms with *-u-* in the first syllable are all found in runic alphabets attached to the tract known as *De inventione linguarum* (or *litterarum*). But in all the *De inventione* alphabets, the names of many of the other runes differ from the names in the Anglo-Saxon *Rune Poem*, the provenance of all the manuscripts except one being either Germany or France. The exception is the only manuscript in the group of English provenance—London, British Library, Cotton Titus D. viii (*saec.* xv), fol. 7r–v—which is the only one to preserve the form *sigil*.

Despite these differences in name-forms, runologists have gone through

considerable philological contortions in attempts to reconcile the various forms with the known senses of Old English *sigel* and the enigmatic sense of the Anglo-Saxon rune-stanza, beside the unenigmatic Scandinavian *sól*, on the presumption that *sigel*, *sól* and the *De inventione* forms are to be equated. I would suggest, however, that a narrow concentration on philology does a disservice to the inventiveness of those who coined the rune-names and who created the *Rune Poems*, which are sometimes unfairly dismissed as mnemonic doggerel. The name of the s-rune is a good example with which to demonstrate my discomfort with the way rune-names in general have been regarded. To do this, I consider in turn: the known senses of *sigel*, some of the attempts to fit these senses to the stanza, and some attempts via etymology to fit the form of the name *sigel* to the *De inventione* forms and the Nordic *sól*. All this is well-known territory, but we have to cross it in order to establish common ground for a new approach.

Known senses of Old English *sigel*

Still the most useful summary of the senses of *sigel* is probably Tolkien's analysis of the first element of the place-name *Sigelwara land* (Tolkien 1932, 1934). He came to the conclusion that, in one of its senses, *sigel* (earlier *sigil*) ultimately derived from Latin *sigillum*, which referred to the small figures on the precious stones used as seals. According to him, many of the glosses and texts pointed to the Old English word being used of a brooch or round ornamental jewel or collection of jewels in the form of a necklace (Tolkien 1934, 101 f.). The glosses he cited included: *bullā*, *sibba* (corrupt?), *gemma* and *fibula* (*fibula* also being glossed as *hringæ*, *hringæ*, *hringe*), found in the Épinal/Erfurt, Corpus, Harley 3376 and Cleopatra A. iii glossaries, dating from the eighth to twelfth centuries. The texts, from the tenth to eleventh centuries, were: *Beowulf* (four records), Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* (two records of *sigel* as a translation of *monile*), the Old English *Martyrology* (one record), and Wulfstan's homilies (one record).

Tolkien was undecided, however, as to whether this word was the same as the *sigel* that occurs in the sense of 'sun' in the first element in words for 'Ethiopians' (*sigelhearwan*) and 'heliotrope' (*sigelhwearfa*) and was used of the 'sun' in various poems. He noted twenty-nine instances of *sigel-* or *sigil-* as the first element in words for 'Ethiopia(n)' in the ninth to eleventh centuries, and thirty-five instances of *sil-*, *syl-* or *siel-* with the same function in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In the case of 'heliotrope', he cited sixteen instances of *sigel-* from the eleventh century. His examples of *sigel* as an independent word for 'sun' in poetry included: *Beowulf*, l. 1666a (tenth

century), *Menologium*, l. 89a (eleventh century), and *Doomsday*, l. 117a (eleventh century). However, he suggested that unfamiliarity with the word led to other forms such as *sægl* or *segl* (*Andreas*, ll. 50b, 89b and 1456b; eleventh century?),² and even an alternative word *swegl* ‘bright sky’ (*The Phoenix* and *Wonders of Creation*), being substituted for *sigel* in the sense of ‘sun’. As to gender — whether it signified a jewel or the sun — *sigel* was probably a neuter or strong feminine noun, not masculine. In the runic inscription on the disc brooch from Harford Farm in Norfolk (seventh century), **sigilæ** is clearly a feminine noun: **luda : gibaetæ sigilæ**, “Luda repaired the brooch”.

Sigel and the meaning of the Anglo-Saxon stanza

Interpretation of *sigel* in the context of the Anglo-Saxon rune-stanza faces two problems: Firstly, how does a meaning such as ‘jewel’, ‘brooch’ or ‘sun’ fit the maritime imagery? And secondly, if *sigel* is a neuter or feminine noun, what does masculine *hine* refer to?

In the past, three well-known solutions have been offered. Dickens (1915, 17), for instance, circumvented the issue of *hine*’s referent and re-interpreted the word as *heonan* ‘hence, away’, taking the verb *feriaþ* as an intransitive use of *ferian*:

S. (the sun) is ever a joy to seafarers (or, in the hopes of seafarers)
when they journey away over the fishes’ bath
until the courser of the deep bears them to land.

Von Grienberger (1921, 212) kept to *hine* as a pronoun and suggested that it referred in anticipation to the *brimhengest* in the next line. Page (2003a, 71f.) followed this suggestion and simply reversed the two words in his translation.

The sun is a continual joy to seamen,
when they take a sea-steed over the fish’s bath
until it brings them to land.

Both of these solutions are rather awkward and neither explains why the sun (or a jewel) is a particular joy to seafarers (or ever in their hopes), other than being a sign of fair weather or perhaps an aid to navigation, rather like *tacn* in the *tīr* stanza that follows the *sigel* stanza.

² Some editors have emended *sægl* and *segl*, on the assumption “that in an earlier MS of *Andreas* the word was expressed in all three places by the rune, which was afterwards wrongly expanded by a copyist” (Brooks 1961, 64).

A third solution, which has sought to resolve all these problems, has been to see the copyist's *sigel* as overriding the poet's intended name, namely *segl* 'sail', so that the translation should read:

A sail is constantly a joy to seamen
when they carry it over the fish's bath,
until the sea-stallion brings them to land.

This idea flies in the face of all other recorded forms of the rune-name, but Nicholson (1982), who was one of those advocating this interpretation,³ pointed out that rune-names could be interpreted differently in different contexts. He cites Cynewulf's interpretation of the *u*-rune as *ūre* 'our', rather than *ūr* 'aurochs', and possibly *cēne* 'bold', instead of *cēn* 'torch'. Perhaps, he suggested, the rune-poet took an incidental interpretation of the *s*-rune as *segl*, whereas Hickes, the seventeenth-century editor of the poem, re-inserted the form *sigel* as being more in line with other manuscript forms of the name. In his view, the poet may not have been conversant with the meaning of an unfamiliar *sigel*; he could even have been influenced by the alternative spelling *segl* found in *Andreas* (see above). A further example of an incidental use of the *s*-rune to refer to a sail could possibly be found in *The Husband's Message* (*Exeter Book*, tenth century), where the combination of the single runes **s** and **r** would read more satisfactorily in the context as representing *segl-rad* 'sail path', i.e. the sea, rather than *sigel-rad* 'sun's road', i.e. heaven:

Gecyre ic ætsomne • ʒ • ʀ • geador
• ʚ • ʀ • ond • ʀ • aþe benean
þæt he þa wære.

"I put ʒ and ʀ together,
ʚ, ʀ and ʀ to declare with an oath
that he was there."

The *segl* solution is ingenious, but it relies heavily on just one of many different solutions that have been offered for the runes in the *The Husband's Message*.

³ Others who have suggested the substitution of *segl* with the sense 'sail' include: Kemble (1840, 342 and 345), Tolkien (1934, 98 f.), Jungandreas (1936, 229) and Hacıkyan (1973, 54). Tolkien and Hacıkyan both refer to the gloss "*sigel id est velum*" that appears in the rune list in London, British Library, Cotton Domitian A. ix, but Nicholson (1982, 314 n. 6) dismisses this as "of no real value since it is in a sixteenth-century hand".

The etymological approach

The Anglo-Saxon rune-names *ōs*, *ūr*, *þorn* and *cēn* are all interpreted differently from their Scandinavian counterparts in the rune poems. So there is no inherent reason why Old English *sigel* should tally with the sense of Scandinavian *sól* ‘sun’. But, with most runologists having been brought up on Indo-European philology, it is hardly surprising that there have been repeated attempts to establish etymological explanations for the concordances and discordances between different forms of rune-names. The name of the *s*-rune has not escaped attention. Arguments relating to *sigel*, *sól* and *sugil* by, for example, Seebold and Lehmann can be summarised as follows:

(a) Seebold (1982, 184 f.): Sanskrit *sūrya*- ‘sun, sun-god’ < **suwljo-*; Gmc. **suwlja-* > Proto-Old English **sugulja-* > **sugyli* > **sygil* > Old English (OE) *sigil*. [Cf. p. 183: Old High German *jugund*, Old Saxon *juguð*, OE *iuguð*. Gmc. **juwnti-* > West Gmc. **jugunþi-* (syllabic *-n-*); Gothic *junda* (dat. sg.) < **junt-ō-* (asyllabic *-n-*).] OE **sygil* > *sigil* under influence of *sigil* ‘jewel’. Gothic *sugil*: “wahrscheinlich ... eine ungeschickte Gotisierung des altenglischen Wortes”.

(b) Lehmann (1986, 328): *sugil* ‘sun’, “name of *s*-rune in Sal [abbreviated here to “Vienna 795”]; OE *sygil*, *sigel*, *segl*, *sægl* (in Andreas); O[ld] I[rish] *sól* f. PIE [Proto-Indo-European] *sāwel-* ← *saH-we/ol-* ‘sun’ ... PIE zero grade *swel-*, in S[anskrit] *súvar*, Av[estan] *hvarə* ‘sun, light, heavens’ ... Gmc forms with *-g-* from PIE *s_cHwel-*, as in OE *iugup* ‘youth’ ... Cf also *saui*, with which J Schmidt 1883 [*Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung* 26, 9] had proposed a relationship. OE *swegle* n ‘heaven, sun’, O[ld] S[axon] *swigli* ← **swegila-* ‘shining’ may be secondary Gmc forms, rather than ablaut variants, as by Wood 1901 [*Modern Language Notes* 16, 306].”

This type of etymological discussion has centred on the question whether Old English *sigel* for ‘brooch, jewel, necklace’ is distinct in origin from the word *sigel* for ‘sun’. The argument in favour of distinct words draws support from forms with *-u-* in the first syllable in the later lists of rune-names in alphabetical sequence as well as the letter-name *sugil* in the well-known manuscript listing supposedly Gothic letter-names, namely Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, 795 (provenance St. Amand; 798/9), 20v (abbreviated here to “Vienna 795”). A futhorc in Vienna 795 contains the form *sigil* corrected from *sygil* which, as Seebold has suggested (see above), may indicate an original form *sugil*, with *-u-* mutated to *-y-*, followed by unrounding to *-i-* before *-g(i)-*: *sugil* > **sygil* > *sigil* > *sigel*. This process, which could have been influenced by similarity with the *sigel*-jewel word, is perfectly possible in theory, but the

essential link between *sugil* and *sigil*, namely **sygil*, is not attested other than as the remains of an erasure, probably a mistake, in Vienna 795.

Rather than resort to etymology, however, I would suggest that there is a much simpler possibility, namely that *sigel* as a bright, shining gem could have been used metaphorically of the sun in the same way that *gimm* (< Latin *gemma*) and *hring* are used in poems like *The Phoenix*: *heofones gim* ‘gem of heaven’ (l. 183) and *is ymb þone sweoran swylce sunnan hring beage beorhtast* ‘about his neck, like the sun’s halo, is the brightest of rings’ (ll. 305 f.).

An alternative approach

My own solution is not based on literal interpretation or on etymology, but on metaphor and allegory which, to my mind, befits a poetic environment. My ideas may be difficult to accept, since they rely on two unorthodox premises.

The first premise is the proposition I put forward in *Indogermanische Forschungen* (Griffiths 1999), namely that both the sequence of runes in the futhark and the sequence of characters in the Irish ogam scheme are closer to the order of letters in a Greek form of the alphabet rather than that of the classical Latin alphabet. According to this hypothesis, the s-rune is equivalent to the *zeta* of the Greek alphabet, which in turn is equivalent to the *zaith* or *zain* of the Hebrew alphabet.

The second premise is that outlined above in the introduction: (1) both rune-names and Irish ogam-names were creations in response to the Hebrew and Greek letter-names introduced into Ireland and England by Christian missionaries, especially in connexion with the psalters, and (2) the Anglo-Saxon rune-names, often with Christian allusions, were adopted in Scandinavia, with pagan modifications—not the other way round, i.e. Germanic names were not introduced into England, with Christian modifications. I have touched on these ideas in an earlier article (Griffiths 2006), and will be working them out in detail in a coming Ph.D. thesis. Here, I concentrate on evidence drawn from my analysis of the Anglo-Saxon *sigel* stanza. First, however, I need to make a brief detour away from runes before I return to that stanza.

In a Christian context there were three main traditions which grew up around the names of the Hebrew letters encountered in the psalters, two attributable to Jerome (*Epistula XXX*, 5,⁴ and *Liber interpretationes hebraicorum*

⁴ Jerome’s interpretations in his *Epistula XXX* were largely based on the Greek interpretations of Eusebius of Caesarea, *Praeparatio evangelica* X, 5.

nominum) and one to Ambrose (*Expositio in psalmum David CXVIII*). The particular interpretations of relevance in the present context are those given by Jerome for *zaith* or *zain* in his *Liber interpretationes: zaith fornicatio uel oliua siue haec*. What Jerome has done is to take intelligible Hebrew words that he thought approximated the letter-names *zain*, *zaith* and *zeh*, namely: *zanah* (זנה) = *fornicatio*, *zayith* (זית) = *oliva*, *zeh* (זה) = *haec*. In an apparently deviant list copied in the Vespasian Psalter at the beginning of the eighth century in Canterbury (London, British Library, Cotton Vespasian A. i, *saec.* viii ^{2/4}), we find the letter-name spelled *zae* and glossed as *elementum mundi*, which a closely related French psalter (Vatican City, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Codex Reginensis lat. 11; provenance N.E. France; *saec.* viii^{ex}) reproduces as *alimentum mundi* (see Griffiths 2007). By now, it will be clear that the mental agility of a medieval exegete or poet is needed to appreciate the connexion between Jerome's glosses and *alimentum mundi*. Fortunately, in a commentary on Cassiodorus's explanation of Psalm 118, Bede has provided a solution by associating the letter *zaith* with the Latin *sustinere* 'sustain (by food, money or other means)' in connexion with the oil of chrismation as a symbol of spiritual nourishment from the Holy Spirit (Bede, *De titulis psalmorum*, see Salmon 1959, 175).⁵

I now return to the Anglo-Saxon *Rune Poem* and what a Christian might make of the *sigel* stanza—I say Christian, because I would suggest that the poem was written by a Christian for Christians. When the imagery of the stanza is considered in terms of an archetypical biblical narrative—seafarers delighted to see something precious in the sky, which is a constant joy to them until they reach dry land—this, surely, recalls Noah with his family in the Ark, overjoyed to see the dove with the olive branch as a sign of receding flood-waters and the promise of a new life.

To early Christians, the Ark, with Noah and his family, was a prefiguration of the Church and its congregation, with Noah as Christ. Numerous Christian authors made the link between the Ark, the Church and Christ, or the Ark and the Cross carrying Christ (for example, Tertullian, *De idolatria*

⁵ The text reconstructed by Salmon from various manuscripts is different from that in Migne's *Patrologia Latina* (PL, 93: col. 1062D). The relevant passage in Salmon reads: *Chorus sanctorum, spem promissionum Domini sensibus nostris commendans, asserit fideles aduersa mundi sustinere quibus aeterna vita promittitur; quae olivae nomine exprimitur, quia et hic sanctorum facies exhilarator in oleo et illic Spiritus Sancti aeterna visione pinguescit*. ("The chorus of the holy, entrusting to our thoughts the hope of God's promises, declares that the faithful to whom eternal life is promised will be sustained in face of the world, which is what is expressed in the name of the 'olive', since the face of the holy is on the one hand refreshed in oil, and on the other shines forth with the eternal vision of the Holy Spirit.")

XXIV; Augustine, *Sermo* LXIII, 1; Jerome, *Dialogus contra luciferianos* XXII; Ambrose, *Sermo* XLVII, 2). As a consequence of these associations, Noah's salvation from the flood was considered a prefiguration of the rite of baptism, as described in 1 Peter 3:20 f., and followed in numerous exegeses (for example, Tertullian, *De baptismo* VIII; Cyrille of Jerusalem, *Catachesis* XVII: *De Spiritu Sancto* II; Didymus of Alexandria, *De Trinitate*; John Chrysostom, *De Lazaro concio* VI). The dove with the olive branch is interpreted as the Holy Spirit, and the oil from the olive was the holy oil of chrismation and confirmation into the Church, as expressed in the liturgy of both eastern and western churches, although the precise significance and position of chrismation in the liturgy was not the same everywhere. (On the evolution of the rite of baptism in the early Church and the relation between water-baptism, unction and the laying-on of hands, see Lampe 1951 and the references given there.) The anointing with oil came to represent the gift of the Seal of the Holy Spirit. But the oil was also a symbol of Christ Himself, the Messiah, the anointed one, whom the congregation carried (in their hearts) to the Promised Land: *hi hine ferialþ ofer fisces beþ | oþ hi brimhengest bringeþ to lande*, "they take it over the fish's bath | until the sea-steed brings them to land". Seen in this light, the *fisces beþ* takes on a second meaning: not only metaphorically 'the sea', but also the *piscina* 'fish pond', where Christians (*pisciculi* 'little fishes') bathed at baptism. On early Christian sarcophagi there are some pertinent illustrations of a ship and the dove as a guide or protector (see Garrucci 1879, plate 486). Even the reference to 'joy' in the stanza can be regarded as being a reflection of the New Testament references to 'joy' in connexion with baptism (e.g. the eunuch's going on his way with rejoicing, χαίρων, in Acts 8:39; see Lampe 1951, 64 f.).

I would argue therefore that what is a constant joy to the seamen in the Anglo-Saxon rune-stanza is the gift of the Seal of the Holy Spirit at baptism. The imagery of a marine voyage, moreover, could well have been suggested not only by the association of baptism with Noah's Ark, but also by the Latin term for the laying-on of hands, *imponere*, which was an important part of the baptism rite. Another specific meaning of *imponere* was 'to embark, to put on board ship' (Lewis and Short, s.v. *imponere*). However, there are several other metaphorical descriptions of salvation by baptism in a marine setting which might be of relevance here. For example, the poet of the Old English *Exodus* likened the pillar of cloud accompanying the Israelites to a mast with a sailyard (Lucas 1994, 68 and 89–93). The allusion is to the Cross and to the Ship of the Church, propelled by the sail of the Holy Spirit, bringing the exiles to salvation.

The Exodus, like Noah's Ark, was seen as a prefiguration of salvation through baptism. The same theme is found in Hippolytus of Rome, who linked a ship's shining sail to the Holy Spirit who sealed the faithful with his sign. Lactantius, moreover, used marine imagery to contrast the way pagan philosophers and Christians navigate through life, the pagans losing their way, while the Christians have a heavenly light, brighter than the sun, to navigate by (Hippolytus of Rome, *De Antichristo* LIX, see Achelis 1897, 91; Lactantius, *De divinis institutionibus* VI, 8). All these references to a guiding glow, whether sun, sail or seal, are in effect intimately connected with the description of baptism as an illumination or enlightenment by the grace of God, as expressed in the Greek φωτισμός, Latin *illuminatio* (Tidner 1963, 100).

It would seem that the poet in the Anglo-Saxon *Rune Poem* was deliberately playing with words as metaphors — as, for example, in the *secg* and *āc* stanzas, where *secg* is taken to refer to both 'sedge' and 'sword', and *āc* to 'oak' and '(oak-timbered) ship'. In the *sigel* stanza, he associated the word for seal with the use of *sigel* as a metaphor for the illuminating, jewel-like sun, and at the same time may possibly have intended to allude to a ship's glowing sail. In view of the phrase *hi hine feriaþ*, however, I am inclined to lay greater emphasis on the seal than the sail, since the sign of the seal can be carried, whereas a sail is more a means of actively carrying a ship forward.

Unfortunately, there are problems with a purely 'seal' interpretation. The literature on the concept of a 'seal' in a Christian context is considerable, and mostly relates to the metaphorical use of the Greek σφραγίς, for which the Latin *signaculum* is the most frequent translation. Throughout the Vulgate translation of the Bible, for example, the word used for 'seal' in the spiritual sense is not *sigillum* (which would be the precursor of *sigel*) but *signum* or *signaculum*. The word used for 'sealing' or 'signing' is *signare*. *Sigillum* is certainly used in the material sense of a seal on a book, particularly in the Apocalypse, but the word is not transferred to the Seal of the Holy Spirit. Jerome's Vulgate translation, however, is not our only source for the use of cognates of *sigillum* in a metaphorical sense. In the Gothic Bible, σφραγίς in a metaphorical sense is translated as *sigljo*, and according to Lewis and Short (s.v. *sigillo*), a Latin-Greek glossary equates the Greek verb σφραγιζω with Latin *sigillo*. Moreover, in the Irish Würzburg manuscript of the Pauline epistles, at Ephesians 1:13, a marginal gloss on the past participle *signati* gives an Irish form of Latin *sigillati*, namely *siglithi*. This gloss is *a prima manu* (in the primary hand) and dated fairly reliably to A.D. c. 700 (cited in Stokes and Strachan 1901, 632, cf. xxiii f.):

13. *signati^a estis Spiritu promissionis sancto⁵*

(Glosses: 4. [in marg.] *siglith²⁰* [^a a prima manu] 5. .i. *atácomarde fuirib* [i.e. a sign is upon you] .i. spiritus sanctus)

The Old English word for ‘seal’, however, is *insegel*, later *inseil*, with an *in-* prefix, the origin of which is obscure, but which is also found in Old Frisian, Old High German and Old Norse. On the other hand, as Jane Roberts has recently pointed out (2006a), the Old English *insegel* is found as an equivalent of Latin *sigillum* in a spiritual sense in a text such as Felix’s *Vita Guthlac* (compare the Latin in Colgrave’s edition 1956, 74–77 and 82–83 with the Old English in Gosser’s edition 1909, 104 f. and 110).

Thus, although a case can be made for the use of Latin *sigillum* and *sigillo*, and even of Irish *siglithi*, to refer to the Seal of the Holy Spirit, there is no evidence of Old English *sigel* being used in this way — unless, that is, the rune-poet has intended to use the word to mean not ‘seal’, but ‘jewel’, in a metaphorical sense. Some confirmation of this possibility again comes from Old Irish, where an expression for the sacrament of baptism is *sét baitsi* ‘jewel of baptism’ (O Neill 1907, 98 §10):

*Sét baitsi ocus comnae aithne, écnaire nosgeba,
coibsin cáich dodabera bad fir docht dondacela.*

“The jewel of baptism and communion, commandment and intercession, he should receive it; the confession of everyone who gives it, let it be right closely that he conceal it.”

Finally, before turning to the Nordic ‘sun’, I must mention two examples of alphabets where the letters derived from Semitic *zaith*, namely Greek *zeta* and Latin *Z*, appear to have been linked to the concept of a precious jewel. In first example — to be found in two related English manuscripts, one in Exeter, Cathedral Library 3507, fol. 65r (*saec.* x) and the other in London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. xii, fol. 45v — the letter *zeta* in a Greek alphabet is glossed *pretiositas*. The second example occurs in the *Yellow Book of Lecan*’s version of the Irish *Auraicept na nÉces*, “The Scholars’ Primer”. Here the Latin alphabet is reproduced with glosses as given elsewhere by Virgilius Maro Grammaticus. Being the Latin alphabet, Virgilius ended his own version at the letter *X*, since *Y* and *Z* were considered to be Greek additions. However, the scribe of the *Yellow Book of Lecan* has added these last two letters and glossed the letter *Z* as *presiositas* (Calder 1917, ll. 4211–23; see also Herren 1979, 65 n. 6).

Scandinavian *sól*

But where does this interpretation of Old English *sigel* leave the Nordic ‘sun’? The Icelandic rune-stanza appears to comprise apparently regular kennings for the sun or purely descriptive phrases. The Norwegian stanza, however, is not purely descriptive. The reference to “the light of the world” together with the idea of bowing to something holy brings the text into the realm of religion. There is nothing specifically Christian in the wording (unless *helgr dómr* is understood as ‘holy relics’, see footnote 6), but Bauer (2003, 152f.) makes the point that the linking of God (or Christ) with the sun was widespread in Christian poetry. It is also perhaps significant that the Norwegian *hagall* stanza contains a specific reference to Christ (Page 2003b, 555):

h. [*hagall*] *er kalldazster korna | Krister skop hæimen forna*
“Hagall is the coldest of grains, Christ created the old world”.

So it may not be too far-fetched to see the *sól* stanza’s reference to “the light of the world” as alluding to the Christian light of the world as much as it does to the sun, while “bowing to something holy”, or preferably “bowing to that which is holy”,⁶ indicates acceptance of Christianity.⁷

The association of Christ with the sun was established most notably in the well-known anecdotes relating to the emperor Constantine’s vision on the eve of battle. Accounts of this episode vary. Lactantius, writing fairly soon after the event, said that Constantine saw the *chi rho* monogram in a

⁶ I translate the phrase *helgum dome* as “to that which is holy” because the translation “to the holy decree” is debatable. Old Norse *dómr* meant generally the same as Old English *dōm* ‘decree, judgment’, but Old English developed compounds with the second element *-dōm* with an abstract sense, such as *cristendōm* ‘Christendom’, some of which were borrowed into Old Norse as collocations, such as *kristinn dómr* ‘the Christian faith’, in which *dómr* no longer referred to a decree or judgment. Old English *hāligdōm* ‘holiness, sanctity; holy things, relics, sacrament; holy place, sanctuary’ was borrowed as a collocation, *helgr dómr*, which has been taken to refer to ‘holy relics’. This evolution in meaning, however, does not diminish the essential meaning of *luti ek helgum dome* as “I bow to (i.e. venerate) that which is holy”, whether “that” be a decree, material object, place, or more generally something imbued with holy significance.

⁷ Liestøl (1948) maintained that in some stanzas of the Norwegian poem the second part probably relates to a description of the graphic form of the rune dealt with in the stanza, and specifically suggested that the “bowing” referred to in the *sól* stanza may have been intended to describe the bent (“genuflecting”) form of the *s*-rune, *ᚱ*, known in Old Icelandic as *knésól* ‘knee-sun’ (cf. Neuner 2006, 238). In his development of Liestøl’s approach, Neuner conceded, however, that the form of the rune attached to the Norwegian *sól* stanza in the manuscripts is that of the short-twigg variety, *ᛚ*, not the long-branch *ᚱ* (2006, 243). But even if the stanza does refer to the form *ᚱ*, that does not explain the reference to holiness.

dream before the battle against Maxentius at the Milvian Bridge near Rome in A.D. 312 and was told to put the sign (*cæleste signum dei*, “celestial sign of God”) on the shields of his army (*Christum in scutis notat*, “mark Christ on the shields”; Lactantius, *De mortibus persecutorum* XLIV, 5). Eusebius of Caesarea, writing more than twenty years later, reported that the emperor had told him he had seen the sign of the Cross outlined in a halo of light about the setting sun and had heard a voice saying “In this sign you will be victorious” (Eusebius, *De vita beatissimi imperatoris Constantini*, bk. 1, 28). The following night, Christ appeared to Constantine in a dream and commanded him to use the sign in battle as an emblem of divine protection. Whatever the details may have been, the story fitted very nicely with the established image of a Roman emperor as the rising or invincible sun, which Constantine had inherited and had perpetuated on a series of coins under the title *solī invicto comiti*, “to the unconquered sun, minister (of the Lord)”, in commemoration of an earlier vision he is said to have had in A.D. 310 in which “his own Apollo” appeared with Victory to offer him wreaths of laurel. The essential point of these anecdotes is that they interweave the image of the sun, victory in battle, and the sign of Christ—whether as a cross or the *chi rho* monogram—and that the insignia of Christ was emblazoned on the shields of the Roman armies. Constantine accepted, i.e. bowed to that which is holy (the holy decree?), while even the Icelandic “clouds’ shield and a shining halo” might be seen as reflecting this anecdote.

The source of “Gothic” *sugil*

None of the above arguments provides an explanation for the form of the letter-name *sugil* in the alphabet in Vienna 795, or the other forms of the name with medial *-u-* in the *De inventione* alphabets. In my opinion, Tolkien was probably on the right track when he tentatively suggested a connexion with “Italian *suggello* (old northern Italian *suello*)”. This word is described in dictionaries as a popular variant of *sigillo* ‘seal’:

1. Cortelazzo and Zolli (1988): *suggello*, *littera senese*: *sugiello* (1283), var. *populare* (di *sigillo*), *suggellare*, *fermare con suggello*; ‘*bollar con ferro i malfattori*’ (1676), Lorenzo Lippi (=Perlone Zipoli).

(“*suggello*, Sienese letter: *sugiello* (1283), popular variant (of *sigillo* [i.e. ‘seal’]), *suggellare*, to close with a *suggello*: “*bollar* [stamp] the criminals with iron” (1676), Lorenzo Lippi (i.e. Perlone Zipoli).”)

2. Pianigiani (1988): suggello sta per sigillo, scambiata la prima sillaba per il prefisso *sub*: subgellum. Forma varia di sigillo, ma usato preferibilmente nel significato metaforico di Conferma, Testimonianza, Componimento, Segretezza.

(“*suggello* stands for *sigillo*, the first syllable change for the prefix *sub*: *subgellum*. Variant form of *sigillo*, but preferentially used in the metaphorical sense of ‘confirmation’, ‘testimony’, ‘(legal) settlement’, ‘secrecy’.”)

Particularly notable, however, is the 1676 quote added by Cortelazzo and Zolli: *bollar con ferro i malfattori*, “stamp the criminals with iron”. The verb *bollare* is defined by Zingarelli as follows:

Zingarelli (1966): *bollare*: Segnare col bollo, suggello. Segnare con marchio d’ignominia. Danneggiare con atto disonesto.

(“*bollare*: Mark with stamp, seal. Mark with brand of ignominy. Damage with dishonest act.”)

The concepts of branding a criminal and of metaphorically branding someone as ignominious are closely related, which indicates to me that two Latin words may have been conflated here: *sigillatus* ‘adorned with little images’, from *sigillare*, and *sugillata* ‘black-and-blue (spots)’, i.e. bruises, from *sugillare* ‘to beat black-and-blue; to jeer, to taunt, to insult’.⁸ To stamp something with the mark of an identifying seal is physically not far removed from stamping something with the mark of an identifying brand, even if there is a clear difference of intent. The Greek σφραγίς has a similar variety of connotations, and in fact a sect like the Carpocratians cauterised their disciples behind the lobe of the right ear with a cattle-brand like the σφραγίς (Lampe 1951, 126 f.). The tattooing of soldiers, slaves and guild-members will also have led to metaphorical comparisons with the “signed” soldiers and servants of Christ (Lampe 1951, 7–13).⁹

⁸ In a note, Tolkien (1934, 105 n. 2) remarks that Roumanian *sugel* ‘whitlow’ is cited in “Meyer-Lübke *Rom. Etym. Wörterb.* (3 Auflage), no. 7904”, as being derived from *sigillum*. I would have thought, however, that something like a whitlow was more akin to a mark on the skin such as a bruise and hence to *sugillo* rather than *sigillum*.

⁹ In the light of this possible connexion between identifying Christians with a seal on a par with soldiers and slaves, it is interesting that Bede, in his comment on the Hebrew letter *zaith*, uses the verb *asserere* or *adserere* ‘to declare’ (see footnote 5 above), since this verb had two specific usages, one in the phrase *aliquem manu in libertatem adserere*, meaning ‘to declare one (a slave) to be free by laying hands on him’, the other in the phrase *aliquem in servitutem adserere*, meaning ‘to declare one to be a slave by laying the hand upon him’.

I would suggest therefore that the original distinction between the marking processes described by Latin *sigillare* and *sugellare* became blurred and that the “Gothic” letter-name *sugil* reflects a form derived from *sugillata*, whereas the Anglo-Saxon rune-name *sigel* reflects a form derived from *sigillum*, while modern Italian has come to make little distinction between *sigillo* and *suggello*.

Conclusion

I conclude that the Anglo-Saxon rune-name *sigel* was chosen to refer to the precious jewel of baptism and chrismation with the oil of the *oliva* of Jerome’s interpretation of *zaith*, and that it contained within it an allusion to a specialised use of Latin *sigillum* for the Seal of the Holy Spirit. At the same time, an allusion to the “glowing sail” of the Holy Spirit as described by Hippolytus and in the Old English *Exodus* need not be completely ruled out. The use of *sigel* in the sense of ‘sun’ was probably metaphorical, as with the use of *gimm* (< Latin *gemma*) and *hring* in poems like *The Phoenix*. The Norwegian *Rune Poem* subsequently took over the basic Christian concept of a “guiding light” and transformed it into the “light of the world” and the something holy to which Constantine and his followers bowed in humility—*luti ek helgum dome*, “I bow to that which is holy (the holy decree?)”—while even the Icelandic text—*ś [sól] er skýja skjöldur ok skínandi røðull*, “*sól* is the clouds’ shield and a shining halo”—might be seen as reflecting the anecdote of the sign in the sky being transferred to Constantine’s shields.

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