

Unlocking Runes? Reading Anglo-Saxon Runic Abbreviations in Their Immediate Literary Context

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Abstract

Runic abbreviations appear sporadically in a number of Old English manuscripts, including three of the four major poetic codices. A convincing rationale for the apparently erratic deployment of these unusual abbreviations has yet to be proposed.

In this article I identify the immediate literary context as an important factor influencing the distribution of Anglo-Saxon runic abbreviations, noting in particular that the runic brevigraphs often appear in passages which deal with unlocking. To illuminate this association, I turn to Bede's story of the prisoner Imma, whose chains become unlocked each time he is bound. His credulous captors believe this miracle to be the work of *litteras solutorias*, or 'releasing letters', the Old English translation of Bede's work referring explicitly to the *alysendlic*, or 'unlocking', rune. This episode may help to explain why runes appear in a riddle about a lock and key, in the context of Elene's prayer to open a hoard, and in a passage in which Saturn asks how he may unlock the doors of heaven. If such an association indeed exists, it has implications for our understanding of the perception of the runic script in late Anglo-Saxon England, and it also suggests that the rationale for the use of runes in the Exeter Book riddles may be connected with revealing rather than concealing information.

Keywords: Runic abbreviations, logographs, *runica manuscripta*, Old English poetry, scribal practice, riddles, Bede

Introduction

Runic abbreviations in manuscripts constitute something of a curiosity in runic studies. They are not quite the preserve of the antiquarian,

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as they appear to represent a practical application of the traditional “rune names”, but neither can this limited use be described as a continuation of an earlier epigraphical tradition. They belong to what one might term the functional afterlife of the script, and represent an intriguing footnote to the study of the *runica manuscripta* of Anglo-Saxon England.

The practical basis for the use of runes as abbreviations stems from the logographic character of the script, whereby each character bears a meaningful designation whose initial sound typically corresponds with the phonetic value of the rune. Although the earliest witness to such a naming system is the *Abecedarium Nordmannicum*, usually dated to the mid-ninth century (Bischoff 1950, 45; Derolez 1954, 82 f.), cognate names in North Germanic sources suggest that it represents a common Germanic tradition (Halsall 1981, 3), and that the use of runes as abbreviations in manuscripts exploits an early feature of the script.

The suggestion that runes are used as logographs in certain older futhark inscriptions is, however, more contentious. Possible candidates include the proposed deployment of the **ōþala* rune on the Pietroassa neck-ring to represent the concept of possession (Düwel 2008, 28) and the use of the rune **jāra* or ‘harvest/bountiful year’ on the Stentoften runestone in the phrase *Hapuwulfz gaf j[ār]*, ‘Hapuwulfz gave a bountiful year’ (DR 357). There are certainly few “convincing” examples in the Anglo-Saxon corpus of runic inscriptions (Page 1999, 79). Brown, Okasha, Page and Pickard plausibly suggest a logographic use of the *dæg* rune in the personal name *Dægric* on an inscribed vertebra discovered during excavations on the National Portrait Gallery in London and dated to the eighth or ninth century (2001, 206), but this appears to be an isolated case within the corpus of Anglo-Saxon runic inscriptions.¹ Indeed, the concept of a discrete category of *Begriffsrunen* (‘ideographs’) probably owes much to the dubious nationalist scholarship of the early twentieth century,² and we should certainly be wary of falling back on a logographic interpretation whenever an inscription resists a straightforward reading. However, the occasional use of runic logographs in early inscriptions, as well as the employment of runic abbreviations in medieval Icelandic manuscripts, suggests that Anglo-Saxon scribes were not so much breaking new ground

¹ A rune is, however, used in a similar manner as the second element in the signature of a tenth-century glossator named *Farman*, who inserts a short scribal note at the bottom of fol. 50v of the Rushworth Gospels (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Auct. D.2.19, from the late eighth or early ninth century). See Page 1999, 221.

² On the possible influence of “*Germanentum*-consciousness” on the logographic interpretation of the Stentoften inscription, see Mees 2011, 283.

by using runes in this way as shrewdly exploiting a widely recognised feature of the script.

Derolez carried out a preliminary study of these logographs, grouping them under the heading of “Runes written for their names” (1954, 390 f.). Runes are used in place of their names in several well-known poetic contexts, including in riddles 19, 24 and 64 where a sequence of runes must be expanded to their names to complete the poetic line but also spell out a solution to the riddle; in an enigmatic sequence at the close of *The Husband’s Message*; and in Cynewulf’s signature passages in the poems *Christ II* and *Juliana* from the Exeter Book and *Elene* and *Fates of the Apostles* from the Vercelli Book. In these signature passages, the poet cleverly exploits the logographic potential of the runes in order to embed his name within the verse line and to engage the reader in a process of textual disclosure (see Birkett 2014). In the case of the riddles, there is no doubt that the runic sequences also constitute meaningful elements of the poem, and that they serve as clues to be pondered and deciphered.³ However, in addition to such creative uses of runic logographs, Derolez also drew attention to the use of runes as occasional or stand-alone abbreviations in Old English manuscripts, an apparently offhand scribal use that one commentator has compared to a modern writer’s use of the ampersand (DiNapoli 2005, 145). To illustrate the editorial distinction between these uses of runes within the same text, we can look at the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records edition of the Vercelli Book (Krapp 1932), in which the two *wyn(n)* abbreviations that appear within the body of the poem are expanded in the same way as any other *nota* (lines 788 and 1089), whilst the significant runes that appear in Cynewulf’s signature passage are deemed worthy of inclusion in the text. In other words, there is a distinction made between abbreviations deemed to be serving as *notae*, which are merely noted in passing (if noted at all), and runes used for their names in “meaningful” sequences. The logographs under consideration in this article are of the former category: stand-alone runic abbreviations that have passed unremarked as little more than a scribal shorthand.

Only a small number of runic characters are used as stand-alone abbreviations in Old English manuscripts, namely the runes *man(n)*/*(mon)* ‘man’, *dæg* ‘day’, *eþel* ‘homeland’ and *wyn(n)* ‘joy’. These four nouns occur relatively frequently in the Old English corpus, unlike the elusive *peorð*, for example, a *hapax* which appears only in the Old English *Rune*

³ For a comprehensive treatment of the riddle solutions (including the runic riddles), see the extensive notes and commentary in Williamson 1977, 125 f.

Poem and which would be of little use as an abbreviation because of its obscurity, though as Page points out, “why certain others never appear is a mystery” (1999, 221). In medieval Scandinavia the *maðr* ‘man’ rune is employed fairly regularly in manuscripts of varying provenances and dates – including poetic, legal and religious texts – whilst the *fé* ‘wealth’ rune found a more limited use. The benefits of using an abbreviation for a familiar noun such as ‘man’ is demonstrated clearly in the Old Norse poem *Hávamál*, copied in the late-thirteenth century (Codex Regius, GKS 2365 4to, fols 5–14), where the *maðr* rune is employed a total of forty-five times, saving a significant amount of space and effort.

Looking at a text such as *Hávamál*, there appears to be a clear practical basis for using a rune to abbreviate a common word, which makes it all the more surprising that in Anglo-Saxon contexts the rune names are not exploited systematically. Indeed, their deployment could be described as singularly erratic: a solitary abbreviation often appears in a manuscript in which the word is used scores of times, a prime example being the single occurrence of the runic abbreviation *man(n)/(mon)* in the Exeter Book, in *The Ruin*.⁴ Whilst stand-alone runic abbreviations occur across a fairly wide range of texts, namely *The Ruin*, *Riddle 91*, *Elene*, *Waldere*, *Solomon and Saturn I*, *Beowulf*, the Old English *Orosius*, the *Junius Psalter*, *Vercelli Homily XVIII*, in a scribal note to the Rushworth Gospels, and in Aldred’s glosses to both the *Durham Ritual* and the Lindisfarne Gospels, only in the glosses are they used in anything approaching a systematic manner. This latter context of the glosses is unique in that the runes *dæg* and *man(n)/(mon)* “occur very frequently” throughout the Old English text (Derolez 1954, 402) and this rare example of “systemetic use on a small scale” (ibid.) will not be considered in any detail in this article due to the very different nature of these glossed texts. It should be noted, however, that the restricted area available for writing and the desirability of keeping the gloss concurrent with the Latin text provides a clear practical basis for the use of abbreviations in this particular context (see Eaton 1986, 24f.). Indeed, the runes are used alongside an array of non-runic abbreviations unparalleled elsewhere (see Ross 1943, 309–21, for a full list), and here the

⁴ According to the *Old English Concordance*, the word *man(n)/(mon)*, even simply in its uninflected and uncompounded form, occurs seventy-two times in the Exeter Book, including twenty-six times in a single poem (*Maxims I*). The *m*-rune which appears in *Riddle 19* is part of the sequence **nam** (a retrograde rendering of *man*) and the runes are not pointed as logographs; however, in true riddling fashion, a complete poetic line would also require voicing of the names of the three runes.

runes should be regarded as one element within the glossator's overall strategy for manipulating the available space.

It may be that this attempt by one idiosyncratic glossator to systematize the use of runic abbreviations has had an undue impact on our understanding of the runic logographs used by other Anglo-Saxon copyists, reinforcing the impression that all runic abbreviations have a similarly utilitarian function and that they represent "an efficient, flexible auxillary tool" (Eaton 1986, 26) arising from a regularised scribal practice. In fact, as Derolez points out, in all other manuscript contexts in which stand-alone abbreviations occur, the use of the rune is not routine, but "exceptional" (1954, 401). The abbreviations are neither applied consistently nor demanded by constraints of space, appearing unexpectedly in the middle of a text, and subsequently abandoned, leading Bitterli to conclude that the use of these abbreviations represents "nothing more than a shorthand practice, employed only sporadically by some scribes" (2009, 83 f.). This raises several questions: firstly, why an essentially redundant shorthand such as this survived at all, and secondly, why runic abbreviations were used in such an erratic fashion across a diverse range of manuscripts. The practice does not seem to be associated with a particular centre of manuscript production, and the various manuscript witnesses range in date from the Lauderdale *Orosius*, probably copied between c. 892 and c. 925 (British Library Catalogue), to the marginal *Solomon and Saturn I* in Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS 41, dated to the mid-eleventh century (Anlezark 2009, 5). The manuscripts display a similar variety in their content. The vast majority of the texts in which runic abbreviations occur are poetic (with the exception of the Old English *Orosius* and the glosses mentioned previously), but these poetic texts vary greatly in genre and subject matter, from Cynewulf's rendition of the Latin *Inventio crucis* narrative to the heroic epic *Beowulf*. It is only when we look more closely at the immediate literary context in which the runes are found that something of a pattern begins to emerge within this apparently chaotic distribution, suggesting that several of these offhand abbreviations may constitute meaningful elements of the text in which they appear, and that scribes may have been responding to literary impulses when they turned to this obscure shorthand practice. Furthermore, the use of runic abbreviations often seems to coincide with a particular literary impulse: moments when the idea of unlocking or releasing is raised in the passage in which they are embedded.

Bede's story of Imma

For the critic attempting to reconstruct attitudes towards the runic script in Anglo-Saxon England there are only a very limited number of literary accounts that might be considered, and by far the most influential of these is the story of Imma from Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*. Indeed, it is in part the paucity of literary engagements with runes that has led to this story from Bede's canonical work being both "commonly quoted and highly valued" (Page 1964, 21). In this section of the *Historia*, Bede relates the story of a young Northumbrian named Imma who is captured after a battle with a Mercian army, but who cannot be imprisoned because his shackles miraculously come unlocked each day. This account is of interest to us as it makes passing reference to *litteras solutorias* as the superstitious concept the captor uses to account for the miraculous unlocking and Imma's escape from his chains (*Historia*, bk 4, ch. 22; 1969, 402).

The idea of *litteras solutorias* or 'releasing letters' transmitted by *fabulae* is quickly dismissed by Bede as nonsense, the story going on to inform the reader of the true cause of the miracle of the unlocking chains: the regular masses held by the captive's brother. In effect, Bede substitutes a superstition about efficacious letters with the central Christian rite of the recitation of the mass, replacing an older cultural hermeneutics and teaching us how to read the miraculous from a Christian perspective. It is not even clear whether Bede is referring to runes in this episode, or to a generic superstition about the act of writing and the power of words, and his reluctance to elaborate on the idle fables he refers to may well constitute an "act of literary suppression" as Lerer suggests (1991, 39). The Old English translation, however, seeks to make some sense of this allusion to *litteras solutorias* through the concept of written characters, and more specifically, the idea of the 'releasing rune' (*Old English Bede*, bk 4, ch. 23; 1890–98, 1.2: 328):

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.

'And [the captor] asked him whether he knew the releasing rune, and had with him the written letters, about which men tell idle tales and speak, so that, for this reason, he could not be bound.'⁵

⁵Translations throughout are the author's, unless indicated otherwise.

Both Page (1964) and Fell (1994) have made us aware that the Old English term *run* does not automatically (or even regularly) refer to the script. However, in this case, the fact the author refers to “written characters” in the same sentence strongly suggests that *run* is being used in the sense of “runic character”. Ælfric, writing over a century later, also makes use of the Imma exemplum in a homily on the efficacy of the mass, and here the association with the script is unequivocal. The homily refers to the captor asking Imma *hwæðer he ðurh drycræft oððe ðurh runstafum his bendas tobræce*, ‘whether he broke apart his bonds by means of sorcery or runic letters’ (*Ælfric’s Catholic Homilies*, 204). Interestingly, Ælfric appears to have worked directly from the Latin to produce his version of events, and does not seem to have been influenced by the Old English translation (Godden 2000, 538). It represents, in other words, an independent association between *litteras solutorias* and runes.

Ælfric’s homily, with its reference to *drycræft* and *runstafas*, brings the operative magic hinted at in the earlier accounts to the foreground. However, this need not necessarily represent an instinctive association of runes with magical practices in general, as Elliott suggests (1957, 250), but rather indicate a particular conceptual association between runes and unlocking. What is clear is that the association of runes with loosening, releasing and unbinding, whether actively superstitious or merely an abstract notion, was current enough to be referred to without any further explanation in the late tenth century. Even if the unlocking association was not as popular and widespread as Ælfric’s casual allusion suggests, it is no exaggeration to claim that the story of Imma and the unlocking letters 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, including those who had no practical knowledge of runes as a working epigraphical script. Indeed, Bede’s *Historia* was “one of the most popular history books in any language” (Colgrave and Mynors 1969, 17), and the unusual story of Imma represents one of the more memorable episodes in a work whose influence on Anglo-Saxon literary culture is hard to overstate.

The association between runes and physical unlocking (or indeed, liberation and spiritual release—senses covered by the semantic range of the verb *alysan* in the *Dictionary of Old English*) may therefore have been automatic rather than actively superstitious. In other words, a tenth-century ecclesiastic could easily relate runes to the idea of unlocking without being guilty of expressing a pagan world-view, and whilst being fully aware that the script had a history of use for both everyday commu-

nication and Christian devotion. It is this kind of reflexive association that I suggest may be responsible for the appearance of runic abbreviations in the following contexts relating directly or indirectly to the idea of unlocking.

The abbreviations in context

Understanding the use of runes in any literary context requires close attention to the internal dynamics of the text in question, as well as a degree of reasoned conjecture about the role that the script plays within this particular literary framework. In the following analysis I present each context in turn, starting with those poems which most clearly demonstrate a concrete link between unlocking conceits and the placement of runic abbreviations, and moving towards texts which expand this frame of reference to encapsulate ideas of breaking open hoards and a metaphorical opening of the gates of heaven. The stand-alone abbreviations for which no rationale is evident are also considered in the conclusion, aiming for complete coverage of the Anglo-Saxon corpus of runic abbreviations.

Exeter Book, Riddle 91

The obvious place to begin is with *Riddle 91* in the Exeter Book (Exeter Cathedral Library, MS 3501, mid-tenth century), the second of two riddles in the collection with the solution ‘key’.

*Min heafod is homere gepuren,
searopila wund, sworfen feole.
oft ic begine þæt me ongean sticað,
þonne ic hnitā sceal, hringum gyrded,
hearde wið heardum, hindan þyrel,
forð ascufan þæt mines frean
mod. † . freopað middelnihum.
hwilum ic under bæc bregde nebbe,
hyrde þæs hordes, þonne min hlaford wile
lafe picgan þara þe he of life het
wælcraefte awrecan willum sinum.*

‘My head is forged by a hammer, wounded by a skillfully made tool, scoured by a file. Often I swallow up that which sticks against me, when I must thrust the hole in the rear, girded by rings, hard against the hard, expel that which protects my lord’s heart’s 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, by his will, he ordered to drive out from life with deadly craft.⁶

This riddle, in common with a number in the collection, puns on the sexual aspects of an object traditionally hung from the belt, but the conceit is otherwise relatively straightforward: the personified key is forged, girded with rings, and enters a lock to reveal the hoard. The final statement is a little more elusive, and in the context of sexual conquest *lafe þicgan* (l. 10) could perhaps be translated as ‘take hold of legacies’, and refer suggestively to the kinswomen of those men the owner has defeated in battle. However, the most appropriate answer, bearing in mind the initial image of forging with hammers and files, must be that these are remains unlocked with a mechanical key, representing trophies, or the spoils of war that the key-holder keeps locked away. The rune occurs in the compound *mod-wyn(n)*, referring to the ‘heart-joy’ that is protected, and unlocked by the key.

The word *wyn(n)* is a relatively common one—Takuji Oda lists two occurrences of the word standing alone in the riddles, and at least six compounds or inflected forms, including two in *Riddle 84* (1982, 247). To put the use of this abbreviation in a wider context, the word *wyn(n)* and its derivations appear written out a total of 105 times in the Exeter Book (*Old English Concordance*). Indeed, the word *wynn-stapol* occurs in *Riddle 92*, immediately following the key riddle in the collection and playing on the dual meaning of the solution *boc*, and here it is not abbreviated. The mystery is only compounded by the fact that there are no obvious constraints of space on the manuscript page (see fig. 1)—indeed, the word *þæt*, one of the few words consistently abbreviated throughout the manuscript, is written out in full in the same line as the runic abbreviation. What is more, the scribal convention of enclosing the runic character between points means that the “abbreviation” takes up almost as much room as the word written out in full.⁷ This is an important consideration, as it negates one of the foremost reasons for employing an abbreviation in the first place.

We might well say, with Derolez, that the rune is both superfluous

⁶ Expanded runic abbreviations are highlighted by use of italics, both here and in all translations throughout this article.

⁷ As Krapp and Dobbie point out, in the Exeter Book this pointing usually serves to distinguish a rune used logographically from a runic letter to be read phonetically in a sequence (1936, xxiii).

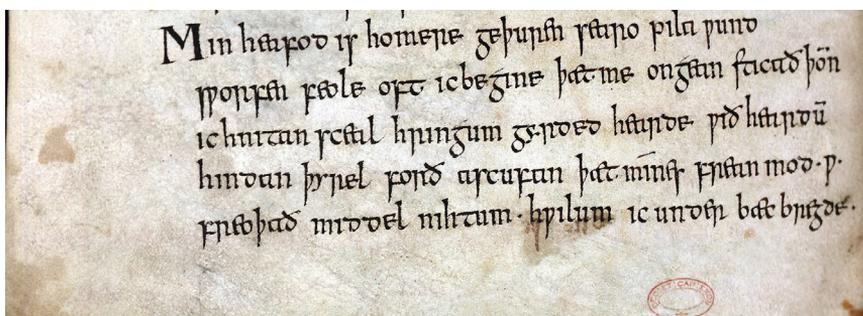


Fig. 1. Exeter Cathedral Library, MS 3501, fol. 129v. Image reproduced with kind permission of Exeter Cathedral Library.

and exceptional, and there has been no suggestion that it constitutes a meaningful element of the poem despite the precedent for employing runic sequences as clues in several other riddles. Williamson, though noting the contraction and its misreading by an early editor (and repeating the erroneous information that a Roman *w* is used as an abbreviation in *Elene*), treats it as an unremarkable paleographical feature rather than a meaningful component of the riddle (1977, 390). However, I would argue that it is not by any means an indiscriminate or offhand use of the abbreviation. The rune is deployed in a very pointed manner in this particular literary context, in a riddle which deals with the process of breaking open a lock to reveal the lord's *mod-wyn(n)*. The runic abbreviation is inspired by, and serves as an additional reference to, the physical and revelatory mechanics of the poem, drawing on the same cultural construction of the runic script as the translator of Bede's story of Imma. I might tentatively suggest that the very shape may have appealed to the scribe as well, reflecting in visual form the object which is being riddled upon.⁸ It is itself a species of key, carrying associations that further the solving of the riddle and the metaphorical unlocking of the solution. In fact, it has a lot more in common with the other *wyn(n)* runes that appear in Cynewulf's signatures to *Christ II* and *Juliana*, in the

⁸ Though keys from late Anglo-Saxon England exhibit a variety of shapes and sizes, the majority of hollow stem or casket keys are remarkably similar to the iconic mortice key shape that we recognize today. Keys of this variety are carried by St Peter in the tenth-century *Benedictional of St Æthelwold* (British Library, Additional MS 49598), in plates depicting the Pentecost and the Dormition of the Virgin Mary (fols 67v and 102v). See also the discussion (and illustration) of key types from the period in Ottaway 1992, 669 and fig. 286.

runic passage of *The Husband's Message*, and in riddles 19 and 64, where the logograph is part of a sequence that needs to be interpreted in order to “solve” the poem.

The poem Elene

It is fairly understandable that a scribe or poet might consciously draw on the *alysendlic* associations of the runic script in a riddle so obviously, and literally, concerned with mechanical and metaphorical unlocking. Indeed, although this is the only stand-alone runic abbreviation that appears within the riddles of the Exeter Book, the runic script is employed in a further six of the riddles, usually appearing as a sequence of letters that spell out the solution to the poem or to which the reader is directed as a clue to correct interpretation. Within this intellectually playful medium the reader was primed for the pertinent and ingenious placement of runes, and would perhaps even expect the *wyn(n)* rune to act as a conceptual aid to the solving of *Riddle 91*. The poem *Elene* from the Vercelli Book (Vercelli, Cathedral Library, MS CXVII, end of the tenth century) is another text in which the use of runic abbreviations is rendered somewhat unremarkable by the more elaborate use of runes elsewhere in the manuscript, including the famous runic signature with which this poem closes — a signature that also exploits the logographic possibilities of runes.⁹ As the scribe seems to be “a mechanical recorder of the texts before him” (Szarmach 1979, 187), it may well be that his exemplar for *Elene* contained the runic abbreviations, and that he copied them in, not thinking to replicate this practice elsewhere. The use of exemplars of different provenances by the scribe of the Vercelli Book 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*. However, the use of the abbreviation is by no means consistent even within the poem *Elene* — of the numerous opportunities for employing the abbreviations for *man(n)/(mon)*, *dæg*, and *wyn(n)* (*epel* does not occur in the text), only the rune *wyn(n)* is used, and on only two occasions (on fols 128v and 131v). In both these cases the immediate literary context dealing with unlocking may have been a determining factor in their deployment.

⁹ On the link between the unlocking conceit and Cynewulf's revelatory signature passages, see Birkett (2014). Though they are used in place of their names, I do not class these sequences of runes as stand-alone abbreviations, and they have never been dismissed as a scribal shorthand.

The first use of the abbreviation *wyn(n)* in this poem occurs in a prayer by Judas, later known as Judas Cyriacus of Jerusalem, shortly after he has been released from prison. 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. His exact entreaty to the *weroda wyn(n)*, the ‘people’s joy’ (l. 788), is *þæt me þæt gold-hord, 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’ (*Elene*, ll. 790–92). Here, as in the *Riddle 91*, we have an explicit connection with opening and revealing. That the rune should appear at this very point, and not before, certainly suggests a connection with the immediate literary context of a plea to reveal what is hidden, and with the unlocking association recorded in the Old English *Bede*.

The second runic abbreviation occurs some three hundred or so lines later on in the poem, after an interval in which the abbreviation *wyn(n)* could have been employed on three different 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 with revealing is perhaps even more explicit, *Elene* asking her apostle to send up his unlocking prayer into the *wuldres wyn(n)*, the ‘joy of glory’, with the specific entreaty *þæt þe gecyðe cyning ælmitig / hord under hrusan, þæt gehyded gen, / duguðum dyrne, deogol, bideð*, ‘that you reveal, Almighty King, the hoard beneath the earth, that still remains hidden, secret and concealed from people’ (ll. 1091–93). In this case the phrase containing the abbreviation is a common one, and interestingly enough, it also occurs some forty lines earlier in the poem, in the context of the decision of Judas Cyriacus to become a Christian (l. 1039), and here the word is written out in full.

Whether it is the scribe or the poet himself who was responsible for these abbreviations is hard to determine. We might, however, expect a poet engaged in sophisticated runic play in the authorial colophon to *Elene* and who structured the poem by means of “multiple revelations” (J. Campbell 1972) to be more than capable of leaving signposts in his verse in order to engage the intellectual faculties of the reader. These runic abbreviations may even serve to move the reader towards thinking about the value of runes as logographs, and as symbols associated with revealing, in anticipation of the runic signature passage which ends the poem and contains its message of salvation (Birkett 2014, 775 f.). What is more, the appearance of the abbreviation in this context of opening hoards and revealing hidden treasure might imply that runes were associated more

broadly with unlocking and breaking open than the specific reference to loosening chains in the Old English *Bede* suggests, perhaps coming to encompass both physical and intellectual processes of revelation.

The Old English Orosius

The extent of the physical frame of reference becomes more apparent when we turn to look at the Old English translation of Paulus Orosius's *Historiarum Adversum Paganos Libri VII*, an early-fifth-century universal history written to demonstrate the calamities that had afflicted the pre-Christian world. The rune *epel* appears once, at a very specific point in the earliest of the two manuscript witnesses, the Lauderdale or Tollemache *Orosius* (British Library, Additional MS 47967), dated to the early tenth century.

The index or title to book 4, chapter 5, of the Old English *Orosius* records the devastating news that *se mæra Alexander hæfde abrocen Tirum þa burg*, 'Alexander the Great had broken into the city of Tyre'. The past participle of the verb *abrecan* used here is often translated simply as 'captured', although its semantic range, including 'to break into', 'take by force' and 'destroy', suggests a more active process of breaching the city's walls (*Dictionary of Old English*). It is certainly a more emotive term than the common phrase *he þa burh gewann*, and the variations *geeode Persipolis þa burh* (bk 3, ch. 9; 1980, 70), and *begatan Cartaina þa burh* (bk 4, ch. 4; 1980, 89) also used of Alexander's sieges, and singles out the assault on Tyre as particularly decisive. Indeed, in the summary of Alexander's campaigns we are told that the great city of Tyre was *eall toworpenu*, or 'completely destroyed' (bk 3, ch. 9; 1980, 70).

Of all the Macedonian conquests, the assault on Tyre — believed to be impenetrable because of its island position and encircling walls — is noteworthy for the way in which Alexander's armies assault the fortress via a causeway, and eventually breach the defenses to gain possession of the city's riches. In light of the unlocking associations outlined previously, we should perhaps not be overly surprised that a rune should occur in very close proximity to an account of this 'breaking open' of the unassailable fortress. The full reference reads as follows (*Old English Orosius*, bk 4, ch. 5; 1980, 90):

Æfter þæm hierdon Cartainenses þæt se mæra Alexandra hæfde abrocen Tirum þa burg, seo wæs on ærdagum heora ieldrena Ƕ, 7 ondredon þæt he eac to him cumin wolde.

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

There are at least three cases in the Old English *Orosius* where the word *epel* is employed, and is written out in full (Bately 1980, 381). One has to ask why this single rune occurs where it does, in the middle of a line in which space was not limited, and in a context in which an obscure abbreviation was hardly warranted (particularly when the commonly abbreviated word *þæt* is written out in full in the same line). The answer, again, seems to be that the context of the physical breaking open of the city occasioned the recourse to a rune. We should remember that both the scribe and the original translator of the Tollemache *Orosius* would have been fully acquainted with the story of Imma and the *alysendlic* rune. Indeed, as Alistair Campbell points out in his introduction to the facsimile of the Tollemache *Orosius* (1953, 13), both this translation and the *Parker Chronicle* associated with the same scribe actually constitute “supplements to Bede’s *Historia*”, the *Orosius* translation setting Bede’s work “in a background of universal history”. What is more, an uninterpretable (and orthographically implausible) runic sequence, written in a hand “of about 1000” (ibid.), appears on an unnumbered leaf of the Lauderdale manuscript directly preceding the *Orosius*. This impenetrable sequence, which is copied beside several symbols of the evangelists and a decorative panel, only reinforces the impression that this was a scribal milieu in which runes were valued rather more for their symbolism than their practical applications as letters.

The poem The Ruin

The use of a runic abbreviation in the episode from the *Orosius* has an analogue in *The Ruin*, another poem from the Exeter Book in which a single runic abbreviation is employed in a line in which the frequently abbreviated word *þæt* is written out in full (see fig. 2).

Again, the association between runes and processes of unlocking and revealing may provide a rationale for the inclusion of a rune within this enigmatic poem. Though the abbreviation resembles a *d*-rune (ᚳ), here it is almost certainly a poor approximation of the *m*-rune (ᚱ) abbreviating the word *man(n)/(mon)* in the compound *mannndream*, or ‘human joy’ (Derolez 1954, 397). This is a compound which is attested elsewhere (for example in *Beowulf*, l. 1264, describing Cain’s flight from ‘human joy’), and

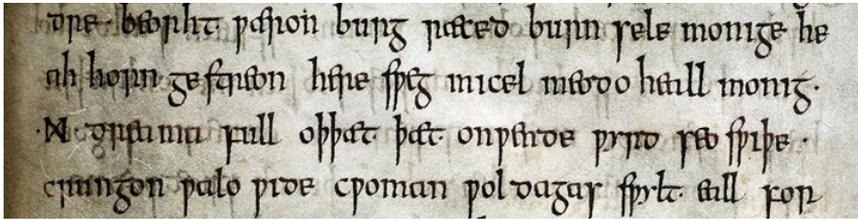


Fig. 2. Exeter Cathedral Library, MS 3501, fol. 124r. Image reproduced with kind permission of Exeter Cathedral Library.

which continues the alliteration across the half-line. The immediate literary context for this rune is a passage comparing the previous splendour of the city to its present decay, representing a microcosm for the dynamics of the poem as a whole (*The Ruin*, ll. 21–24):

*Beorht wæron burgræced, burnsele monige,
heah horngestreon, heresweg micel,
meodheall monig .M. dreama full—
oppæt þæt onwende wyrd seo swife.*

‘Bright were the city buildings, the many bathing halls, the wealth of lofty arches, the great martial sound, many a mead-hall full of *human* joys—until fate, the mighty one, transformed that.’

The quoted passage functions as one of the central moments of transformation in the poem, moving us abruptly from recollection of a *beorht burg*, or ‘bright city’, to a citadel in ruins. The poet lingers on the process by which the once-majestic city collapses, 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*, ‘broken into piles’ (l. 32) and the roof gapes open to the elements. The destruction in *The Ruin* is as comprehensive as Alexander’s assault on Tyre, with a similar emphasis on the contrast between the city’s once proud, rich and unassailable position, and its current ruined state. My contention that the rune is deployed with the idea of breaking and unbinding in mind is supported by the repeated emphasis throughout the short poem on the contrast between enclosure and exposure. The wall foundations are described as being ingeniously bound together into circles with wires (ll. 19f.) and as the work of master-builders and giants, whilst amongst the damaged lines of the poem we can make out the phrases *orþonc ærsceaft*, ‘ingenious ancient craft’ (l. 16), and *lamrindum beag*, ‘ringed with a rind

of loam' (l. 17). When the city bath becomes the focus of the poem, the poet tells us that *weall eall befeng / beorhtan bosme*, 'the wall entirely surrounded it, within its bright breast' (ll. 39f.). In contrast with these images of security and enclosure, we have a parallel register of gaping space and *westen stapolas*, 'deserted foundations' (l. 27), whilst the barred-gate specifically lies *berofen*, or 'destroyed' (l. 4), and the bound walls are *wyrde gebræcon* 'broken by fate' (l. 1).

That the rune appears in the midst of this process of elemental unbinding and unbarring, and at the very point where fate is said to transform the city from a secure stronghold to a ruin, suggests to me that the poet is drawing on the very same impulse that causes a runic abbreviation to appear where it does in the Old English *Orosius*—namely, a developed conceptual association between runes and the process of unlocking. Indeed, as *The Ruin* is positioned between two sequences of riddles in the Exeter Book and is not singled out as being generically distinct from these enigmatic poems, we should perhaps understand this rune as analogous to a riddle clue. Here it points us not in the direction of a concrete solution to the poem, but towards a network of associations between runes and different processes of revelation, disclosure and the breaking open of cunning devices. In other words, the *man(n)/(mon)* rune draws the reader's attention to the centrality of the motif of mutability repeated throughout the poem, and subtly serves to highlight the position of 'man' within this process of unraveling bonds: as creator and demolisher, artificer and riddle-solver. Furthermore, by implicating the written word in the series of material extrications taking place within the poem, the rune brings together the conceptual fields of material craft and poetic artifice made explicit in a poem such as *Riddle 91*, where the link between the physical breaking open of a lock and the solving of the intricate riddle becomes the central conceit.

It should be noted that *The Ruin* follows *The Husband's Message* in the Exeter Book, and it could be argued that the abbreviation was simply inspired by the use of a runic cipher in this earlier poem. However, the word *man(n)/(mon)* actually occurs three times in *The Husband's Message*, and not once is recourse made to the runic brevigraph, despite the entire momentum of the poem being towards the runic message with which it closes. Indeed, even in its uninflected form, the word *man(n)/(mon)* occurs some seventy-two times in the Exeter Book (cf. footnote 4 above), and there are numerous compounds such as *moncynn* and *mondryhten* which often appear in close succession (*Old English Concordance*). Only in *The Ruin* is the word represented by a rune. The abbreviation is a deliberate

one, intended for a particular poetic effect: to emphasise the image of loosening masonry, collapsing roofs and the crumbling of ingeniously bound walls.

The epic Beowulf

Of all the texts under discussion, the rationale for the use of the rune *epel* in the *Beowulf* manuscript (Cotton Vitellius A. xv, c. 1000) has proved the most intriguing to critics. Derolez was content to note that the use of the rune three times out of a possible eleven in the poem *Beowulf* made it “exceptional” (1954, 401). Senra Silva made headway in using the runes to speculate on the transmission of the poem, and suggested a compelling reason for the use of the particular rune *epel* in a text “where the continental homeland is most deeply depicted”, but she again concludes (1998, 242–44) that there is “no clear explanation” for the “very non-systematic way” in which the runes are employed within the poem itself. Fleming perhaps came closest in terms of a compelling rationale, looking in detail at the habits of the two scribes of *Beowulf* and arguing that each rune is deliberately positioned as “an heirloom which itself is part of the same past that is celebrated in the poem” (2004, 179). There is thus some precedent for viewing these abbreviations as consciously deployed and poetically engaged, consistent with the evocation of a Germanic inheritance in the poem. Even if the idea of unlocking is not the primary stimulus for using these abbreviations, in each individual case it is evident that there is support in the immediate literary context for the use of the rune, bolstering the contention that these runic abbreviations are rarely employed in an offhand manner.

The three brevigraphs in question are fairly widely spaced in the poem, but they are all the work of the first scribe. This is an interesting observation in itself, as it suggests that the use of runes was not a standard practice, even within discrete scribal communities. The last occurrence of the runic abbreviation at line 1702 is easiest to rationalise, as it occurs in the 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 was first made. The scribe was clearly primed to remember a runic abbreviation because of the events related in the poem and the explicit reference to a runic inscription within the text. A case could perhaps be made for the rune here as a revelatory motif connected with Hrothgar’s unlocking of his word-hoard following perusal of the hilt, particularly as it is contemplation of the runic message that inspires his

lengthy sermon. Whether or not the abbreviation is connected here with revelation, its proximity to the runic episode in the poem should reinforce the impression that the use of these unusual abbreviations is, more often than not, triggered by the literary context.

The first use of the *epel* abbreviation occurs at line 520, and may also have been inspired by the statement some nineteen lines earlier that Unferth *onband beadurune*, ‘unbound his hostile runes’ (l. 501), in order to confront the hero. It is interesting that there is a connection with unbinding encapsulated in this very phrase, and leads one to wonder if this poetic expression is itself a further reflex of a common association between runes and unlocking. It is also perhaps worth recognising the lines which immediately follow the runic abbreviation, with its reference to the beautiful fortress *pær he folc ahte / burh ond beagas*, ‘where he [Brecca] had his people, stronghold and rings’ (ll. 522 f.). Its relevance only becomes apparent when we compare it to the next abbreviation occurring at line 913. There is no reference to runes or writing at this point in the poem; indeed, the word *epel* is written out in full both shortly before and shortly after this point (ll. 410 and 616). The only ostensible trigger for this particular rune might be the reference, once again, to Heremod’s failure to guard the people, hoard and stronghold, *folc gehealdan, / hord ond hleoburh* (ll. 912 f.).

If this is indeed the trigger, it could simply be a matter of the scribe recalling the earlier context in which a rune was used, rather than it being directly related to the repeated notion of hoarding and guarding a stronghold. We may also, of course, be dealing with a case of coincidence, a rather under-credited factor in literary transmission. However, the phrases are so similar in both construction and content, and runic abbreviations so rare, that the idea of accidental concurrence seems unlikely. It may be, as Fleming suggests, that these references to the hoard and stronghold both refer to legends older than the poem itself (2004, 182 f.), or that reference to the material wealth (the *beagas* and *hord*) of these ancient peoples instinctively brought to mind runes. What is clear is that in the absence of the usual spatial restrictions that might serve to explain the recourse to an archaic abbreviation, close attention to the literary context often supplies an alternative rationale for their “non-systematic” deployment.

The poem Solomon and Saturn I

The poem known as *Solomon and Saturn I* is a fitting text with which to close this paper, as it expands the *alysendlic* association to incorporate the

biblical frame of reference which was so important in promulgating ideas about the efficacy of the written word. This fragmentary text survives in two manuscripts, Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS 422 (mid-tenth century) containing the larger portion of the poem and the runic Pater Noster, whilst Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, MS 41 (mid-tenth century) 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 in this latter text, but a runic abbreviation is employed in the rendering of Solomon's name.

Because of the obvious constraints of space on this marginal text, there is a practical rationale for the use of the rune alongside several other abbreviations. However, the use of the rune is not entirely consistent even here. The first of the abbreviations of Solomon's name does not, in fact, use a rune, but an insular letter 'm', 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 *man(n)/(mon)* rune,¹⁰ although still supplying an abbreviation mark to assist the reader in viewing it as a brevisgraph rather than a letter.

It may be that after his clumsy first attempt, the scribe recalled that the *m*-rune could be used instead of his makeshift abbreviation. However, it is interesting that this second dialogue marker, *Solo*𐌺 *cwæð*, 'Solomon spoke' (l. 38), the first in which the rune is used, is immediately preceded by a question from Saturn, asking what of all created things may most easily open *ða haligan duru heofna rices* 'the holy door of the kingdom of heaven' (l. 36), and followed by the famous answer that the palm-twigged Pater Noster opens up heaven.

If there is indeed, as I have been suggesting, a strong association of the script with the property of unlocking, breaking open and revealing, what better prompt to remember the runic abbreviation than this particular question and response, identifying a written incantation as the key to unlocking heaven? It is small wonder that the second longer portion of the poem we possess chooses to represent these 'unlocking' letters of the Pater Noster as runes.

¹⁰ Here, clearly used for *mon*, where *mon* is an alternative spelling for *man(n)*. In certain contexts, such as the Exeter Book poems, both forms are present, and the abbreviation could thus represent either spelling.

Conclusion: Releasing meaning

Throughout this paper I have been arguing for a close association of the runic script with the properties of releasing and unlocking in Anglo-Saxon literary culture, an association that was prevalent enough to influence the use of runic abbreviations in manuscripts and to explain, at least partly, their extremely sporadic deployment. Clearly the idea of unlocking was not the only association the runes carried in late Anglo-Saxon literary culture. Their use in the revelatory signature passages of Cynewulf's poems, as symbols of literary inheritance in the runic hilt episode in *Beowulf*, and as ornamental letters in *Solomon and Saturn I* represent a range of Anglo-Saxon literary responses to the script. Indeed, there are several uses of runic abbreviations that do not appear to fit with the idea of the releasing rune, or indeed with any discernible rationale. The *wyn(n)* rune that begins *Psalm 99* of the *Junius Psalter* (Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 27, beginning of the tenth century) may well simply represent a runic historiatio, drawing attention to the opening of the text. The runic abbreviation of the *Waldere* fragment (NKS 167 b 4to, beginning of the tenth century) is impossible to place in context as it appears right before the lacuna in the short section of the poem that has survived, though the fact that the rune seems to be written over a letter suggests that the scribe may have introduced a rune into the text as he copied (see Fleming 2004, 180). And finally, there is Vercelli Book *Homily XVIII* dealing with the biography of St Martin. Here a single rune for *man(n)/(mon)* appears in a passage praising the saint (fol. 99v), in which the word occurs three times. There is nothing in the immediate context that suggests to me a reason for its inclusion at this particular point.

These exceptions do not, however, detract from the wider argument that context plays an important role in determining when and where runic abbreviations are used, that they often serve as meaningful elements of the text, and that the association between runes and unlocking was a developed one in Anglo-Saxon England. Indeed, it would be remarkable if every use of a runic abbreviation across manuscripts of such varying provenance and date were the result of a single unified impulse. The fact that we can identify any consistency in the deployment of runic abbreviations across such a range of literary contexts is itself suggestive of a prevalent cultural narrative about the script in late Anglo-Saxon England, one that was perhaps promulgated by the story of releasing runes which the translator of Bede inadvertently canonised.

Whilst the premise that runic abbreviations are semiologically active

may have certain implications for our understanding of contemporary attitudes towards the script, it certainly should not encourage speculation about the perceived magical qualities of runes, a largely futile and rightly discredited endeavor. It is unlikely that this association with unlocking reflects older perceptions of the script as Old Norse *reginkunnar* ‘derived from the gods’, and it does not support the contention that the “magic power of the rune was a deep-seated belief” as one editor of the *Solomon and Saturn* poems suggests (Menner 1941, 48). The reference in *Hávamál* (st. 149) to Óðinn’s ability to release chains (along with using runes to raise the dead) is clearly an interesting analogy, but not, I believe, one that has much bearing on the Anglo-Saxon context. 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” (1986, 26). As the context in *Solomon and Saturn* suggests, the unlocking property may well have developed as a literary association, pertaining as much to the idea of revealing meaning as to releasing chains. Indeed, *Riddle 42* of the Exeter Book explicitly calls on *rynemenn*, ‘rune-skilled men’ (l. 13) with book learning to reveal the solution through a runic clue, and *þæs hordgates / cægan cræfte þa clamme onleac* ‘unlock the hoard-gate’s fetters with key craft’ (ll. 11–12), demonstrating that this image of runic unlocking had become an established (and rather elaborate) intellectual conceit. The story of Imma, though repudiated by Bede, will almost certainly have played a greater role in promulgating this association than the continuation of any putative superstition from the early eighth century when runes still had a currency as an epigraphical script in Anglo-Saxon England.

Despite Bede’s attempt to consign the *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. Indeed, as the runes passed out of common use and became increasingly the preserve of antiquarians, the concept of meaning unlocked through knowledge of these obscure characters would only have become more pronounced. If the idea of unlocking runes was as pervasive as I am suggesting, it should perhaps lead us to reassess the rationale for using runes in more celebrated contexts. When reading the runic riddles of the Exeter Book, we should be wary of automatically situating them as a means of compounding the riddle or concealing the answer from

the uninitiated. Rather than being indicative of “ambiguity incarnate” as DiNapoli suggests (2005, 161), runes may conversely represent the keys to unlocking the passage: the point at which the woven words begin to loosen, rather than the point where the text becomes most obscure.

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