

## The Old English Rune Poem – Semantics, Structure, and Symmetry

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With the manuscript version destroyed in a fire at the Cotton Library in 1731, the Old English *Rune Poem* is known only from the printed version of George Hickes' *Linguarum Veterum Septentrionalium Thesaurus*, published in 1705.

Printed on page 135 of the *Thesaurus* the poem's stanzas run one beneath the other, with the appropriate rune (plus one or more variants in some few cases) to the left of each, glossed by its old English name, which effectively commences each stanza. According to Hickes, the rune names were added later in the life of the manuscript version of the poem, glossing the runes themselves, though, as he gives no further information on the subject, we do not know exactly when this occurred. In this regard, Maureen Halsall remarks, "Any sensitive reader, observing the riddling nature of the poem, must feel considerable doubt that either the rune names or the sound values formed a part of the text when the Old English *Rune Poem* was first composed and recorded."<sup>1</sup> Dating from probably the late ninth or early tenth century, the dialect of the poem is overwhelmingly late West Saxon, though it contains some few non-West Saxon forms, such as the rune name, *wen*, a probably Kentish<sup>2</sup> form of the West Saxon, *wynna*, the latter of which is the form found in its final stanza. Other slight irregularities occur in the poem. Thus, while *man* is given as the name for the 'm' rune, *manna* is used in the first ('F') and the third ('Ð') stanzas. However, we are able to turn a sideways glance to the Old Norwegian and Old Icelandic rune poems, in order to clarify some of the Old English runes, the alphabets represented by the three poems being, ultimately, traceable to the common or old Germanic Fupark of twenty four runes.

Elmer H. Antonsen has asserted that the peculiar

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<sup>1</sup>Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem: A Critical Edition*, p. 25.

<sup>2</sup>Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem: A Critical Edition*, p. 28.

arrangement of the twenty-four runes of the Germanic Futhork betrays a "...mnemonic device that is no longer retrievable, but which may have left some slight echo in the runic poems preserved in medieval manuscripts."<sup>3</sup> The later runic alphabets do, of course, follow the basic pattern of the earlier Germanic Futhork though considerably modified by the late eighth century, decreasing in the number of runes in Scandinavia whilst increasing in number in the runic alphabets of England. (In the latter case the 'A' was replaced by 'O', and the 'K' by 'C', and thus is referred to as 'Futhorc'.) Carved on the short sword, or *scramasax*, found in the river Thames in 1857, and dating probably from the late ninth century, is a Futhorc of twenty-eight runes, the last four having the phonetic values of 'a', 'æ', 'y', and 'ea', while in the ninth century Vienna codex the latter two runes are reversed<sup>4</sup>. (Notably, the continental Futhork was also sometimes written out with the last two runes in reverse position, e.g., the sixth century (?) Futhork from Grumpan<sup>5</sup>) The Old English *Rune Poem* lists twenty-nine runes, and, here also, we find the last two runes reversed, the newer rune, *ior*, thus the penultimate rune, the final position taken by *ear*, as in the Thames *scramasax*. It is possible that the author of the Old English *Rune Poem* placed *ear*, meaning 'grave' in the context of the poem (most usually *ear* signified 'ocean'), in the final position to conclude the poem with a suitable finality of theme, though the order of the runes does not otherwise betray a sequential narrative, following stanza by stanza. The peculiar usage of the term, may not betray a matter of composition, however, as one of mnemonics.

While the first two runes of the old Germanic Futhork are *fehu* and *uruz*, meaning 'cattle' and 'aurochs' (bison) respectively, which, as livestock, bear some connection, its other runes are not so conveniently located to propose a linear narrative running throughout it, and if we are to consider the presence of a mnemonic device then we are bound to ask whether, for example, the separation of *rai ðo* and *ehwaz* ('riding' and 'horse' respectively) by fourteen runes – and for which we might form a connection here – was a part of its design? The Old English,

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<sup>3</sup>Elmer H. Antonsen, *Runes and Germanic Linguistics*, published in *Trends in Linguistics - Studies and Monographs* 140.

<sup>4</sup>Regarding the *scramasax* and the codex, the runes betwixt 'e' and 'æ' are also ordered differently.

<sup>5</sup>See Elliott, *Runes*, pp. 15-16 & p. 18.

Norwegian, and Old Icelandic *Rune Poems* all arguably exhibit some hint of a mnemonic structure (i.e., an importance for the structure in the representation of those ideas put forth in the vocabulary of the poem), though this appears to be most developed in the Old English. (We cannot assume, however, that the semantic structures of the rune poems (i.e., of its stanzas) are universally shared, rather than locally developed.) Terms, and even whole phrases, that connect stanzas semantically, are frequently separated by several stanzas, e.g., the *hægl*, *eolhx secg*, and *lagu*, stanzas of the Old English *Rune Poem*, all of which reference water. Most strikingly, related ideas or themes often appear in stanzas that are located structurally opposite, or symmetrically, thus the first and last, second and penultimate stanzas, etc. Three examples present themselves in the sixteen stanzas of the Norwegian *Rune Poem*:

- (2)<sup>6</sup> *illu jarne*, ‘bad iron’ / (15) *gull*, ‘gold’  
 (3), (*purs*) *vældr kvenna kvillu*, giant is the cause of women’s sickness / (14), (*maþr*) *er moldar auki*, ‘man is earth’s increase’.  
 (5), *Reginn slo svæþet bæzta*, ‘Reginn forged the best sword’ / (12), *opt værþr smiþr at blasa*, ‘often the smith is busy blowing’ (with bellows).<sup>7</sup>

In the first example, iron, or “bad iron” is referenced in one stanza, and another metal, i.e. ‘gold’, in its opposite, while in the last example, metallurgy, rather than metal, is apparent in the vocabulary of both stanzas. In the fifth stanza we thus read that ‘Reginn forged’, or acted as a blacksmith, while in the second we hear of the work of a smith. The second example bears the least resemblance in its pairing of stanzas, simply juxtaposing ‘woman’ and ‘man’ and their conditions.

In the Old English *Rune Poem*, I would advance, the first and last seven stanzas are related, again symmetrically, i.e., first with last, etc., though, as with the example of the Old Norwegian, the details given are often of a contrary nature. Thus, to give the example in which this is perhaps most readily presented, the second and penultimate stanzas of the Old English *Rune Poem*, *ur* and *iar*, ‘aurochs’ and ‘beaver (?)’, describe mammals of a distinctly different nature, abode, etc. A precedent for examining stanzas which posit ideas contrary to each other,

<sup>6</sup>The position of the stanzas are in brackets, e.g., (2) = second position.

<sup>7</sup>Pollington has reproduced the Norwegian and Old Icelandic *Rune Poems* alongside his translations, in *Rudiments of Runelore*, pp. 52-55.

exists in the rune poem itself, arguably, where the juxtaposition of opposites is occasionally to be found within single stanzas – e.g., the *rad* stanza – which we shall consider later on. It is possible to see connections between structurally opposite stanzas deeper into the poem than the seven at either end, e.g., *hail* (9) (ending, *towætere syððan*, ‘turns to water’) and *lagu* (21) (*lagu* ‘ocean’/‘water’), though, if there is present a relationship between opposite stanzas here, they depend only upon a single term or phrase, and are as such undeveloped by comparison. It is not possible to say why such a relationship should be largely confined to the first and last seven stanzas, though it shall be worth noting that, as such, it covers all of the runes additional to the Germanic, and that the last definite pairing is thus *gyfu*, ‘gift’, and *epel*, ‘homeland’, the latter rune being, generally, the final rune of the Germanic.<sup>8</sup> It is possible, then, that the author either had a freer hand because of the introduction of newer runes, or that he turned to the structure of the poem in order to establish a more definite set of associations for the newer, and perhaps still somewhat connotatively ambiguous, runes. The intention of this paper is, then, to examine the relationships of opposite stanzas, or a symmetry of the Old English *Rune Poem*, which I have proposed, as regards the first and last seven stanzas. I refer throughout to the Old English text as printed by Hickes as well as the translations of Bruce Dickins, Maureen Halsall, J. M. Kemble, and Stephen Pollington. The names of the rune pairs are given throughout this paper – at the beginning of our examination of the named rune pairs – and the placement of any stanza in the rune poem is indicated, also throughout, by a bracketed number (e.g., *feoh* (1)). Immediately below is the text of the Old English *Rune Poem* accompanied by my translation which, given the nature of this paper, must remain an approximation, serving only as an introduction to greater examination of the text in question.

1.  
*(feoh) byþ frofur fira gehwylcum*  
*seal ðeah manna gehwylc miclun hyt dælan*  
*gif he wile for Drihtne domes hleotan*

2. (*ur*) *byþ anmod and oferhymed*

1.  
 (wealth) is a consolation to everyone,  
 although every man shall distribute much  
 if he will, before the Lord renown be  
 dealt in his lot.

2.

<sup>8</sup>There is one, relatively abstract, indication of a symmetry to the structure of the Old English *Rune Poem*: the pictographic shape of the Germanic ‘a’ rune, which originally stood in the position taken by the later Old English ‘o’ rune, is found opposite this latter rune in the poem.

*felafræcne deor feohteþ mid hornum  
mære morstapa þæt is modig wuht*

3.  
*(Ðorn) byþ ðearle scearp ðegna gehwylcum  
anfengs yfyl ungemetun reþe  
manna gehwylcum ðe him mid resteð*

4.  
*(os) byþ ordfruma ælcra spræce  
wisdomes wraþu and witenas frofur  
and eorla gehwam eadnys and tohiht*

5.  
*(rad) byþ on recyde rinca gehwylcum  
sefte and swiþwæt ðam ðe sitteþ onufan  
meare mægenheardum ofer milþapas*

6.  
*(cen) byþ cwicera gehwam cup on fyre  
blac and beorhtlic byrneþ oftust  
ðær hi æþelingas inne restap*

7.  
*(gyfu) gumena byþ gleng and herenys  
wraþu and wryþscype and wæcna gehwam  
ar and ætwist ðe byþ oþra leas*

8.  
*(wyn) ne bruceþ ðe can weana lyt  
sares and sorge and him sylfa hæfþ  
blæd and blysse and eac byrga geniht*

9.  
*(haegl) byþ hwitust corna hwyrft hit of heofones  
lyfte  
wealcaþ hit windes scura weorþeþ hit to wætere  
syððan*

10.  
*(nyd) byþ nearu on breostan weorþeþ he ðeah  
oft niþa bearbum  
to helpe and to hæle gehwæpre gif he his hlystap  
æror*

11.  
*(is) byþ oferceald ungementum slidor  
glisnaþ glæshluttur gimum gelicust  
flor forste geworuhht fæger ansyne*

(aurochs) is proud and horned above,  
a very dangerous animal, it fights with horns  
a splendid moor stepper: that is a headstrong  
creature.

3.  
(thorn) is exceedingly sharp to every thane,  
ill to seize, immeasurably dreadful  
to everyone whom with it rests.

4.  
(God) is the Origin of all speech,  
wisdom's prop, and a help to councilors,  
and to every warrior inner-peace and  
refuge.

5.  
(debating/riding) is in the hall to every  
warrior  
gentle, but very bold when he sits high on  
a very strong mare over miles of path.

6.  
(pine torch) is to every living thing known by  
its fire,  
shining and bright it burns often  
where the noblemen inside rest.

7.  
(gift) to men is honor and praise,  
support and worth, and to every fugitive  
possessions and sustenance when bereft of  
anything.

8.  
(hope) he need not that have little want,  
soreness and sorrow, and has himself  
prosperity and happiness, and also  
sufficient security.

9.  
(hail) is the whitest of seeds, turned out of  
heavens air,  
tossed by the wind, and turned to water  
then.

10.  
(need) is narrowing on the breast for the  
children of men, strife becomes nevertheless  
often a help, and anyone is healed if he  
listen beforehand.

11.  
(ice) is overly cold, extremely slippery,  
a glistening glass, jewel-like floor wrought  
with frost, a beautiful surface.

12.

*(ger) byþ gumena hiht ðon God letetþ  
halig heofones cyning hrusan syllan  
beorhte bleða beornum and ðearfum*

13.

*(eoh) byþ utan unsmeþe treow  
heard hrusan fæst hyrde fyres  
wyrtrumun underweþeþd wynan on eþle*

14.

*(Peorð) byþ symble þlega and hlehter  
wlancum ðar wigan sittatþ  
on beorsele bliþe ætsomne*

15.

*(eolhx) secg eard hæfþ oftust on fenne  
wexet on wature wundaþ grimme  
blode brenet beorna gehwylcne  
ðe him ænigne onfeng geded*

16.

*(sigel) semannum symble biþ on hihte  
ðonne hi hine feriatþ ofer fisces bep  
oþ hi brimhengest bringetþ to lande*

17.

*(tir) biþ tacna sum healdetþ trywa wel  
wiþ æþelingas a biþ on færylde  
ofer nihta genitþu næfre swiceþ*

18.

*(beorc) byþ bleða leas bereþ efne swa ðeah  
tanasa butan tudder biþ on telgum wlitig  
heah on helme hrysted þægere  
geloden leafum lyfte getenge*

19.

*(eh) byþ for eorlum æþeling wyn  
hors hofum wlanc ðær him hæleþas ymb  
welege on wicgum wrixlatþ spræce  
and biþ unstylum æfre frofur*

20.

*(man) byþ on myrgþe his magan leof  
sceal þeah anra gehwylc oðrum swican  
for ðam drihten wyle dome sine  
þæt earne flæsc eorþan betecan*

21.

*(lagu) byþ leodum langsum gepuht  
gif hi sculun nepun on nacan tealtum  
and hi sæyþa swyþe bregatþ  
and se brimhengest bridles ne gymetþ*

22.

*(Ing) wæs ærest mid East-Denum  
gesewen secgun oþ he siððan est  
ofer wæg gewat wæn æfter ran  
ðus heardingas ðone hæle nemdun*

12.

(year) is man's gladness since God lets,  
holy heavens king, the earth deliver  
her bright blood to the rich man and the  
poor man.

13.

(yew) is on the outside a rough tree,  
harsh, fast in the earth, the hurdle of fire;  
supported with roots, a joy in the native  
land.

14.

(chess?) is always play and laughter  
where boastful warriors sit  
in the beer hall cheerful together.

15.

(elk sedge) dwells often in the fen,  
waxing in water, it wounds grimly;  
inflames the blood of every noble  
that tries to grab it.

16.

(sun) to seamen is ever a hope,  
as they ferry hence over the fishes' bath  
until the ocean-stallion is brought to land.

17.

(Tir) is a token, it holds confidence well  
with nobles; always forward in attack  
over nights gloom, never betraying.

18.

(birch) is bereft of fruit although it ever bears  
twigs without offspring, radiant in its boughs  
although in its crown are fair shoots  
laden with leaves near to the clouds.

19.

(steed) before nobles is the joy of warriors,  
the horse proud with hoofs; when the  
warriors rich in horses exchange speech,  
to the uneasy it is ever a consolation.

20.

(man) in his mirth is beloved by his kindred,  
though shall everyone far depart,  
for by his decree the Lord determines  
that the pitiful flesh is given to the earth.

21.

(sea) to people seems lasting  
if they are bound to venture on a tilting vessel  
and the ocean waves violently alarms them  
and the ocean stallion heeds not its  
bridle.

22.

(Ing) was first among the East Danes  
seen by men, until he afterward again  
departed across the waves, the wagon after  
him ran, thus hardened men named the  
hero.

23.  
(*eþel*) *byþ oferleof æghwylcum men*  
*gif he mot ðær rihtes and gerysena on*  
*brucan on blode bleedum oftast*
24.  
(*dæg*) *byþ Dritnes sond deore mannum*  
*mære metodes leoht myrgþ and tohiht*  
*eadgum and earmum eallum brice*
25.  
(*ac*) *byþ on eorþan elda bearmum*  
*flæsces fodor fereþ gelome*  
*ofer ganotes bæþ garsecg sandaþ*  
*hwæþer ac hæbbe æþele treowe*
26.  
(*æsc*) *biþ oferheah eldum dyre*  
*stip on stapule stede rihte hyll*  
*ðeah him feohtan on firas monige*
27.  
(*yr*) *byþ æþelinga and eorla gehwæs*  
*wyn and wyrþmynd byþ on wigge fæger*  
*fæstlic on færeldre fyrdgeatewa sum*
28.  
(*io/iar*) *byþ ea fixa and ðeah a bruceþ*  
*fodres onfoldan hafað fægerne eard*  
*wætre beworþen ðær he wynnum leofað*
29.  
(*ear*) *byþ egle eorla gehwylcum*  
*ðonn fæstlice flæsc onginneþ*  
*hraw colian hrusan ceosan*  
*blac to gebeddān bleða gedreosaþ*  
*wynna gewitaþ wera geswicaþ*

*Feoh* (1) / *ear* (29):

While Kemble's translation of the first part of the Old English *Rune Poem*, *Feoh byþ frofur*, 'Money is a consolation', proves the most problematic of those that concern us here – as he does not inform us, by his translation, what money be a consolation for – it is perhaps the most accurate introduction to the poem as a whole, and the most literal translation. *Frofur* (West Saxon *frofor*), we should note, has been translated by Dickins and Pollington alike as 'comfort', while Halsall renders it, 'benefit', though it might also be translated as 'compensation', 'refuge', etc.

The final rune of the poem, *ear*, is generally regarded in the context of the stanza as meaning, 'grave' (Dickins, Pollington, Elliott), though connected to the earth (Halsall). Elliott,

23.  
(homeland) is highly beloved by every man  
if right and proper he may  
have prosperity in his blood (-lineage?).
24.  
(day) is the Lords messenger, dear to men,  
splendid light of God, mirth and refuge,  
to the fortunate and the miserable,  
profitable to all.
25.  
(oak) on the earth is, to the sons of men,  
fodder for the flesh; it fares often  
over the gannets' bath, the ocean finds  
whether the oak keeps its noble oath.
26.  
(ash/ash-spear) overhead is dear to men,  
firm in its station, hilt of steadfast right,  
though it fight against many men.
27.  
(saddle) is for noblemen and every prince  
joy and worth, on the horse a beautiful object,  
steadfast on the journey, wargear to some  
extent.
28.  
(beaver) is a river creature yet he always  
brings  
his food to the land, [his is] a pleasant  
dwelling  
near the water, where he lives in joy.
29.  
(earth) is grievous to every nobleman,  
when constantly the flesh it attacks,  
the corpse cools, the earth accepts  
by its dark bed, fruits fall,  
joys disappear, promises are broken.

however, proposes that the rune meant, “earth, soil, gravel,”<sup>9</sup> as well as “ocean, sea, wave”<sup>10</sup> the latter of which, he suggests has become transposed onto the preceding “meaningless” rune, *iar*,<sup>11</sup> which describes a kind of ‘river fish’ (*eafīxa*) and its abode. Kemble translates *ear*, in regard to the Old English *Rune Poem*, as ‘war’, though this seems incongruent to its etymology, already mentioned, and, moreover, this interpretation is not substantiated by the stanza, and, therefore cannot be accepted as such.

The final phrase of the poem, *wera geswicap*, ‘covenants broken’ may bear some relation to the societal bonds that are implied in the *feoh* stanza, where we are told that every man must distribute his wealth, if he wishes to be renowned by the Lord (*Drihtne*). Nevertheless, as with other comparisons of opposite stanzas, we find that the poem advances not only a similar or related theme in each, but opposing specifics of the theme. Thus, *wera*, ‘covenant’, ‘promise’, etc., with the implication of a legalistic binding, in the final stanza, as opposed to *dælan*, ‘share’, ‘distribute’, and *miclun*, ‘a great deed’, ‘greatly’, etc., a voluntary act, in the first stanza. However, while the act of charity is again the subject of the seventh stanza (*gyfu*), it is given a purely societal context, whereas, the *feoh* stanza gives it a religious context. Thus, *gif he wile for drihtne domes hleotan*, literally, ‘if he will, before the Lord, renown be dealt in his lot’, though *hleotan* has tended to be translated rather more prosaically, e.g., “gain” (Dickins).

The *ear* stanza shares the theme of the death of the individual person, and, more specifically the committing of the corpse to the earth or grave, with the *man* (20) stanza. Yet, as with *feoh* and *gyfu* (7), the context of the *man* stanza also implies the societal bond. Thus, *man byþ on myrgþe his magan leof*, ‘man in his mirth is dear to his kin’. Notable, in this regard, the *man* stanza expresses that the end of the life of the person is caused by the ‘judgment’ or ‘decree’ (*dome*) of the Lord (*drihten*), and both of these terms, as we have seen, are found in the *feoh* stanza. It is possible, then, that the *feoh* stanza expresses the comfort or consolation (*frofur*) of life, in regard to his money or wealth, and the societal bond created by its distribution, in the acknowledgement of his mortality, expressed by the final stanza, *ear* (and implied by the

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<sup>9</sup>Elliott, *Runes*, p. 54.

<sup>10</sup>Elliott, *Runes*, p. 53.

<sup>11</sup>Elliott, *Runes*, p. 54.



phrase, ‘before the Lord’, in the *feoh* stanza). Most specifically we have the broken (human/societal) covenants of *ear*, as opposed to the covenant or decree (*domes*) of the Lord (*Dritne*) of the *feoh* stanza. In the Old English poem, *Elene*, authored by the ninth century Christian poet, Cynewulf, we find the transitory nature of earthly possessions again expressed, and directly compared to what we might call the ‘heavenly’ or ‘eternal’, alluded to in the term *lyfte*, ‘sky’, ‘heaven’ - *ƿ æghwam bið læne under lyfte landes fratwe gewitaþ under wolcnum*, ‘ƿ [wealth] for everyone is transitory beneath the heavens, earth’s trappings dissolve beneath the clouds’.

*Ur* (2)/ *iar* (28)

The second rune described by the Old English *Rune Poem*, is *ur*, from the Germanic, *uruz*, meaning ‘aurochs’, a type of wild ox found on the European continent, but which had become extinct in Britain by the time in which the English rune poem must have been developed. In contrast, the Old Norwegian *Rune Poem* gives this rune the name ‘slag’ (i.e., a waste product of smelting iron), while the Old Icelandic *Rune Poem* gives this rune the meaning of ‘drizzle’. Halsall remarks that, “It stands as clear testimony to the conservatism of Germanic tradition in Britain that, although the aurochs survived only in the forests of the continent and was therefore unknown to English hunters, the fearsome brute retained its linkage with the second rune, as well as the major elements of its reputation...”<sup>12</sup> Arguably of greater importance, however, is the introduction of another animal into the Old English *Rune Poem*, opposite the *ur* stanza, that is, *io* or *iar* (the rune is glossed both *io* and *iar* in Hickeys’ *Thesaurus*). Following the rune in the printed version of the poem is *byþ ea fixa*, (‘is of the river-fish’) though this is generally amended to *byþ eafix*, ‘is a river-fish’. Both Halsall and Kemble interpret *iar* as ‘eel’, though ‘beaver’ has become, perhaps, the accepted name in recent years, and is adopted by Pollington. As the *ur* and *iar* stanzas are each concerned with a type of mammal, comparison is a relatively simple task. It is notable, however, that the two mammals in question are portrayed very differently, if not as qualitatively opposite one another. The aurochs is *anmod*, ‘fierce’, *modig*, ‘headstrong’, ‘proud’, ‘courageous’, ‘moody’, etc., whereas the beaver lives in joy (*thaer he wynnnum leofath*). Moreover, the aurochs is portrayed in the Old English *Rune*

<sup>12</sup>Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem: A Critical Edition*, p. 105.

*Poem* as lacking an abode, as roaming, i.e., a ‘moor-stepper’ (*morstapa*), in contrast to the beaver, which ‘has a fair dwelling’ (*hafath fægerne eard*).

*Thorn* (3) *yr* (27):

It is interesting to note that while the ‘U’ (2) rune had retained the original Germanic meaning in the Old English *Rune Poem*, but not in the Old Icelandic or Old Norwegian, here the opposite is true, where the latter two retain the original meaning of ‘giant’, and the Old English adopts the meaning of ‘thorn’. The first line of the poem reads *ðorn byþ ðearle scearp*, ‘thorn is exceedingly sharp’. The stanza continues, *ðegna gehwylcum anfengys yfel ungementum rethe*. Dickins translates *ðegna* as ‘knight’ and Halsall and Pollington as ‘warrior’, while Kemble renders it simply ‘man’, though it might be translated as ‘thane’ or even ‘servant’; thus the above can be rendered, ‘to every thane, ill to seize, immeasurably dreadful’. It is the last line of the stanza, *manna gehwylcum the him mid resteth*, (‘for any person that with it rests’) that connects us to its opposite stanza. *Resteth*, ‘rests’, is translated as ‘sit’ by Dickins, and as ‘lays’ by Pollington. Halsall connects this rune to the briar patch, though she does not state why we should regard it as such, and taken at face value the stanza is unsatisfactory. In order to understand this rune, and particularly the term, *rested*, that it employs, we must, I suggest, turn to its opposite, *yr*.

Elliot suggests that *yr*, an uncommon noun in Old English, may have been adopted from the Scandinavian,<sup>13</sup> while, similarly, Pollington points to the use of a Norse rune of the same name, based, he suggests, on the Germanic *algiz* rune. *Yr*, as it appears in a continental context, signifies either the yew wood, or a bow made of yew. Thus, the Norwegian *Rune Poem* ends with the rune *yr*, where it signifies the yew tree used as firewood, while the Old Icelandic *Rune Poem* also ends with *yr*, though signifying a bent bow, and ‘Yew bow’ is also the most widely accepted interpretation of the rune as it appears in the Old English *Rune Poem*. Kemble’s translation of the *yr* stanza is:

Bow is of nobles  
And of every man  
Joy and dignity,  
It is fair on the horse,

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<sup>13</sup>Elliot, *Runes*, p. 35.

Firm in the expedition,  
Part of warlike arms.

Although the term, *fyrðgeatewa*, ‘war-gear’ appears in the last sentence of the stanza, it is compromised by the term, *sum*, which may mean ‘certain’, or more likely, I would suggest, ‘to some extent’ (thus, ‘war-gear to some extent’). Dickins makes no note of the warrior aspect of *fyrðgeatewa*, translating it simply, “equipment.” The Old English text shows quite clearly that the nature of this object is not so much as a practical weapon but rather as something ornamental or decorative, a status symbol of the nobleman and man of royal blood. Thus it is *wyn*, ‘joy’, and *wyrþmynd* (*weorþ-mynd*), ‘worth’, ‘honor’, ‘mark of distinction’ (‘dignity’ (Kemble), ‘adornment’ (Pollington)). *Yr* is thus rather an object of beauty and rank, yet its beauty is intimated, specifically, as dependent upon its being placed upon the horse, thus, *on wicge fæger*, ‘fair on the horse’. Grienberger thus interprets *yr* as ‘saddle’<sup>14</sup> (from the saddle-bow made of yew). This interpretation may be strengthened by the peculiar wording of the opposite stanza, *þorn*. Particularly, we shall recall that the last few words of the *þorn* stanza are *him mid resteth*, ‘with it rests’ or ‘sits’ (Dickins). It is possible that the two stanzas in question here, represent the hardship and roughness (symbolized by *þorn*) of the thane, servant, or warrior, compared to the comfort of the noble’s life (represented by *yr*). Dickins translations of the two stanzas are:

(The thorn) is exceedingly sharp, an evil thing for any knight to touch, uncommonly severe to all who sit among them.

( ? ) is a source of joy and honour to every prince and knight; it looks well on a horse and is a reliable equipment for a journey.

*Os* (4) / *æsc* (26):

The ‘A’ rune (i.e., its shape) was moved to its opposite position in the O.E., where it acquired the sound value of æ, and the name of *æsc*, typically taken to mean ‘ash-tree’. Regarding the *æsc* stanza, Halsall says simply, “the description of the ash-tree... [is] completely naturalistic,” though she notes the

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<sup>14</sup>Grienberger, *Runengedicht*, p. 218 and p. 219. Quoted by Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem- a Critical Edition*, p. 157.

“heroic terminology” of the stanza; thus, *ðeah him feohtan on firas monige*, which she, as most historians, translate as “although many men attack it.” Halsall suggests that this refers either to the use of ash-wood in the production of weapons, especially spears, or to the difficulty of felling the ash-tree.<sup>15</sup> Notably, Theodor von Grienberger, who believed the stanza to represent the spear, translated the final line as rather, “ist tüchtig, taugt, manche Männer zu bekämpfen,” ‘is good for fighting against many men’<sup>16</sup>. Notably, preceding the above - *ðeah him feohtan on firas monige* - is *stede rihte hylt*, which Halsall translates as, “it holds its ground as it should.”<sup>17</sup> Kemble and Pollington’s translations are similar, the former rendering it, “well it holdeth its place,” and the latter, “holds its place properly.” *Stede* may indeed be translated ‘place’, or ‘steadfast’, ‘holds’, etc.; *rihte*, of course, means ‘right’, ‘properly’, ‘fair’, ‘just’, or, as in Kemble’s rendering, “well”. *Hylt*, however, may be otherwise translated as the ‘hilt’ of a weapon, usually a sword, giving us, ‘hilt of steadfast right’. The atmosphere of conflict is more evident in Dickins’, “... it offers stubborn resistance.”

There is less ambiguity in the *os* stanza, and consequently a certain uniformity of translation prevails, though the meaning of the name of the rune name has been debated to some extent. Dickins declines to translate it, while Halsall and Kemble both render it ‘mouth’. Pollington renders it ‘god’, though he is also aware of its literal meaning of ‘mouth’. He says, that “The O.E.<sup>18</sup> poem has replaced... [the rune, *ansuz*, of the Common Germanic Futhark] with the homonym ‘os’ (mouth) though there is a strong possibility that there is a punning reference to Woden [continued from the European], the god most closely associated with eloquence and prophecy.”<sup>19</sup> The beginning of the stanza, *Os byþ odfruma ælcere spræce* is translated only slightly differently by scholars, the only dissimilarity being the translation of *spræce*, rendered ‘speech’ by Kemble, and ‘utterance’ by Halsall. Both Dickins and Pollington translate this as ‘language’. Translations of the last half of the stanza, *und witen a frofur and eorla gehwam eadnys and tohyht*, differ little from

<sup>15</sup>Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem: A Critical Edition*, p. 79.

<sup>16</sup>Quoted by Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem: A Critical Edition*, p. 79.

<sup>17</sup>Halsall relates *hylt* to *healdan*. See Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem: A Critical Edition*, p. 169.

<sup>18</sup>Old English.

<sup>19</sup>Pollington, *Rudiments of Runelore*, p. 18.

Halsall's, "and a comfort to wise men and the joy and delight of every noble," with the exception of Kemble, who does not infer the nobility of the persons signified, as indicated by *eorla*, translating this term as, simply, 'man'. Dickins thus translates the *os* stanza:

( ? ) is the source of all language, a pillar of wisdom  
and a comfort to wise men, a blessing and a joy to  
every knight.

A semantic relationship might be asserted for *stabule* ('Æ' stanza) and *wraþu* ('O' stanza), the former meaning, 'foundation', 'stability', 'security', 'support', etc., and the latter, 'help', 'support', or, more accurately in the context of the stanza, I would suggest, 'prop'. By extension, we might propose such a relationship between the two lines of the 'Æ' and 'O' stanzas. To reference Kemble, we have in the 'O' rune, "the support of wisdom," and for the 'Æ' rune, "stiff in its station." Dickins' translation of the Old English *Rune Poem* gives, arguably, a more definite connection between the two lines in question here. Thus, he translates *wisdomes wraþu* as 'a pillar of wisdom,' and *stith stathule* as a "sturdy trunk," both of which refer to a physical shaft conjoined to an intellectual or emotional quality. We are left then with two possible interpretations of *æsc*, one in which the stanza is considered as an ash-tree, and another in which it is considered primarily as an ash-spear. It will be worth giving Halsall's translation of the stanza in full at this point:

The ash is extremely tall, precious to mankind,  
strong in its base; it holds its ground as it should,  
although many men attack it.

*Rad* (5) / *ac* (25):

There is a certain accordance of details, among the Old Icelandic, Old Norwegian, and Old English rune poems, in relation to the 'R' rune. All three poems refer to journeying by horse, and, moreover, to the difficulty of such a journey, though the continental works limit this to the struggle of the horse, whereas the Old English emphasizes the travails of the rider himself. In Hickeys' *Thesaurus* the rune is glossed with the term, *rad*, generally agreed to mean, 'riding', though Dickins does not translate it, and Kemble translates it as "saddle." Elliott links the use of the 'R' rune to the belief that the soul undertook a

journal after death, noting the Sutton Hoo ship burial, as illustrative of this belief, though he adds, "In the three runic poems the word 'riding' is interpreted quite literally."<sup>20</sup>

If we turn to the opposite stanza, that is, *ac*, 'oak', we also find indication of a journey. Thus, *fereþ gelome ofer ganotes bæþ*, 'fares often over the gannet's bath'. Here, notably, the author employs the use of a kenning (*ganotes bæþ*, i.e., 'ocean', 'sea') similar to that found in the 'S' (16) stanza, and with identical meaning: *feriaþ ofer fisces bep*, 'fare over the fish's bath'.

If we are correct in our assertion that the Old English *Rune Poem* is symmetrical, in so far as the poetic explication of the first and last seven runes – with opposite stanzas related in meaning – the *ac* stanza reinforces the generally accepted translation of *rad* as 'riding', both of these being concerned with travel. Yet, while there is no compelling reason to question 'riding' as its primary meaning, the *rad* stanza is nuanced, beginning thus, *rad byþ on recyde rinca gehwylcum sefte*, 'riding is in the building to every warrior soft'. The term, *recyde* ('building') may be rendered more specifically as 'hall', 'palace', or, as Kemble translates it, "house". His translation of *rad* as "saddle" is an attempt to reconcile the different contexts of the poem, through which the meaning of the rune is explicated, though he appears to use this noun in the more general sense of 'seat'. Kemble's interpretation is:

Saddle is in the house  
to every man  
soft and very bold,  
for him that sitteth upon  
the very strong horse,  
over the mile paths.

Here *rad* may have had the same double-meaning in Old English as 'riding' does in contemporary English slang, I would suggest, i.e., 'riding a horse', etc., and 'sexual intercourse'. Notably, the final word of the *ac* stanza, *treowe*, appears to make use of its double-meaning of 'tree' or 'wood' (*treow*), on the one hand, and 'pledge', 'oath', 'promise', 'agreement', etc., on the other. If such is the case with the *rad* stanza then *rad byþ on recyde*, 'riding in the house', could then be a euphemism for sexual intercourse between, probably, man and wife, hence it is

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<sup>20</sup>Elliott, *Runes*, p. 57.

described as *sefte*, ‘soft’, and perhaps, ‘effeminate’, whilst riding, in its literal sense, remains a difficult task, especially if, as in the case of this stanza, the rider is far from home. (It is interesting to note that, like the *rad* stanza, the *ac* stanza presents two very different types of environment, i.e., the earth (*eorþan*) and the ocean.)

However, *rad* also has the meaning of ‘reckoning’, ‘reason’, ‘wisdom’, etc., or, perhaps, ‘debating’. It is of some possible significance that, as noted, the *ac* stanza also refers to a formal verbal pledge, specifically in relation to the journey described. Thus, the latter part of the *ac* stanza is, *garsecg fandap hwæþer ac hæbbe æpele treowe*, ‘ocean finds whether the oak keeps its renowned pledge’, ‘oath’, ‘faith’, etc. Again, the rune poem seems to corroborate ‘debating’, etc., as a secondary or tertiary meaning of *rad*, for, notably, in the *eh* (19), ‘horse’, stanza we read, *welege on wicgum wrixlap spræce*, ‘rich in horses exchange (or barter) speech’.

#### *Cen* (6)/ *dæg* (24)

Following on from *rad*, the *cen* (‘pine-torch’) stanza makes use of the imagery of a group of persons ‘inside’ (*inne*) a dwelling, though it does not tell us which type of dwelling specifically, or for what purpose they have come together. We have already observed that the *rad* stanza speaks of ‘riding in the home’, and it shall be worth noting that somewhat similar to the *cen* stanza in this regard is the *peorth* (14) stanza, which speaks of ‘warriors sitting in the beerhall’ (*ðar wigan sittap on beorsele*). In the Old English poem *Elene* the ‘C’ rune is again used to signify the torch, though here it appears in the context of the mead-hall. Thus *Elene* reads, ‘**ƿ** *drusende þeah he on medohealle...*, ‘**ƿ** [torch] sluggish[;] though in the mead hall...’<sup>21</sup>

Halsall notes the relative scarcity of Old English word, *cen*, observing also, what she refers to as “the pressure for the near homonym *cæn*, ‘keen’, ‘brave’ for the rune name proper, particularly as *cæn* is listed as a variant from in one rune list on folio 3v of St John’s College, Oxford, ms 17.”<sup>22</sup> It is noteworthy then that *cen*, ‘torch’, is placed opposite to *dæg*, to which it bears

<sup>21</sup>Pollington sees a break after *drusende* (which he translates as ‘failing’) Pollington translates *drusende þeah he on medohealle mādmas þege æplede gold*, ‘C (torch) failing, though in meadhall he might receive treasures, apple-red gold’. See *Rudiments of Runelore*, p. 58.

<sup>22</sup>Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem – A Critical Edition*, p. 114.

marked similarities. The first line of the *cen* stanza reads, *cen byþ cwicera gehwam*, ‘torch is known to all’, and comparable, then, to latter part of the *dæg* stanza, *myrgþ and tohiht eadgum and earmum, eallum-brice*, ‘mirth and hope to rich and poor, profitable to all’. There can be no doubt that the *dæg* stanza is concerned, like *cen*, with the motif of light; thus it states that day is *mære metodes leoht*, ‘the glorious light of God (Creator)’, contrasting with the *cen* stanza’s wording, *fyre blac ond beorhtlic*, ‘fire pale and bright’.

On closer inspection, however, the language of the *cen* stanza sharply contrasts that of *dæg*. Of the former Elliott remarks that it might be “... linked with the sun-cult, gradually coming to symbolize the security and comfort of the torch-lit hall, as the [Old English] *Runic Poem* suggests.”<sup>23</sup> It is surely noteworthy then, that the *dæg* stanza may indicate some vague memory of a solar cult, though given over to a Christian verbiage; hence the phrase, *mære metodes leoht* (‘splendid light of God’), already mentioned. The *cen* stanza, however, formulates no overt citation of such a cult, nor, without the help of its opposite stanza, can we find a religious context for the pine-torch (though it is not impossible that it, again, betrays some memory of a cultic fire, or perhaps even a cremation pyre). The context of the lit pine-torch appears, however, to be that of a meeting of nobles, who, the stanza seems to suggest, it rightfully belongs to, perhaps, we may deduce, as a symbol of nobility or the remnant of a cultic object. The pine-torch is, as we have noted, ‘known to all’, yet, if we look at the final line of *cen*, we see specifically that, ‘it often burns where noblemen rest inside’ (*byrneþ oftust ðær hi æþelingas inne restap*), and distinguished then from the light of *dæg*, which is, as stated, ‘profitable to all’ (*eallum brice*).

*Gyfu* (7) / *epel* (23):

Similar to the first stanza of the Old English *Rune Poem*, *feoh*, the seventh stanza, *gyfu*, ‘gift’ extols the virtue of charity, though the latter speaks of the benefit to the recipient rather than the giver. Nevertheless, there is perhaps a more significant relationship between the *gyfu* stanza and its opposite, *epel*, ‘homeland’ or ‘family land’ (Halsall). The latter part of *epel* stanza reads, *on brucan on blode bleadum oftast*, which Kemble (who amends *on brucan* to *onbrucan*, and *bleadum* to *blædum*) renders, ‘may enjoy in his blood ofttest [often] with increase’. It is possible that blood (i.e., lineage) is connected to the notion

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<sup>23</sup>Elliott, *Runes*, p. 57.



of the homeland, family, etc., though most scholars (e.g., Dickins, Halsall, Pollington) amend *blode*, ‘blood’, to *bolde*, ‘house’, ‘dwelling’, etc., with Dickins also interpreting *epel* as ‘estate’. (In this regard we might note the use of term, *bruceþ*, ‘bring’, ‘enjoy’, in the *iar* (28) stanza where the beaver (?) is described as enjoying (*bruceþ*) his food, preceding, *hafap færerne eard*, ‘has a fair dwelling place’.) Pollington thus renders *brucan on bolde bleadum oftast* as “enjoy wealth in his dwelling generally.”

However, while both the *gyfu* and *epel* stanzas concern livelihood, the former is concerned with the exile (*wræcna*), possibly from his homeland, while the latter is concerned with one who is able to enjoy wealth specifically in his home or homeland. *Gyfu* is a ‘support’ (*wrathu*) for the exile who, according to the last words of the stanza, ‘has nothing other’ (*ðe byþ opra leas*).

As a final remark, we might note the last phrase of the *eoh* (13), ‘yew’, stanza: *wynan on epel*, ‘a joy in the homeland’; the last word, we shall note, is the name of the rune already discussed. The preceding phrase of this stanza, *wyrtrumun underwrepyd*, ‘with roots underpinned’ might then be removed from the context of the yew tree, represented by the name of the rune itself, and regarded as a metaphor for the familiar roots (*blode*) of the homeland. A description of the yew tree would not seem to necessitate a reference to ‘homeland’, and other stanzas appear to employ many inessential details (e.g., the journey by water of the oak (*ac*), the resting on sitting on thorns (*ðorn*), man attacking the tree it holds dear (*æsc*), etc.). It would seem likely then that such details are not mistakes<sup>24</sup> of copying, etc., but, in many cases at least, significant clues to the meaning of the structure of the Old English *Rune Poem*, and, moreover, strong indication that we cannot consider stanzas in isolation, but, rather, that we must in fact consider the whole poem in relation to each stanza.

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<sup>24</sup>Kemble considered the poem to contain many “gross blunders;” see Kemble, *Anglo-Saxon Runes*, p. 35.

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