The *alysendlecan* rune: Runic abbreviations in their immediate literary context.

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Runic abbreviations in manuscripts constitute something of a curiosity in runic studies, representing what one might call the practical afterlife of the script, transferred from the epigraphical world to the scriptorium. This practice makes use of the logographic component of the script, whereby each character bears a meaningful name, whose initial sound typically corresponds with the phonetic value of the rune. Although the earliest witness to such a naming system is the *Abecedarium Nordmannicum*, usually dated to the mid ninth century (Bischoff 1950: 45; Derolez 1954: 82-3), there is little doubt that this is an early tradition, supported both by cognate names in North Germanic sources (Halsall 1981: 3) and by the suggestion that certain Elder Fuþark inscriptions make use of ideograms, including the proposed deployment of the *oþala* rune on the Pietroassa neck-ring to represent the concept of possession (Düwel 2001: 28). Whilst such *Begriffsrunen* are rather rare, and there are few 'convincing' examples in Old English inscriptions (Page 1999: 79), the manuscript practice exploits an original feature of the script, and is not simply an antiquarian invention.

Only a small number of runic characters are used as abbreviations. The *maðr* rune is found regularly in Icelandic manuscripts, the *fé* rune somewhat less frequently, whilst in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts the runes *mon*, *dæg*, *wynn* and *eþel* are all used on occasion. These are some of the most functional of the rune names, occurring relatively often in written language, unlike the elusive *peorð*, for example, which would be of little or no use as an abbreviation because of its rarity. The practicality of using an abbreviation for a familiar noun such as 'man' is demonstrated clearly in the Old Norse poem *Hávamál*, where the *maðr* rune is used a total of forty-five times, saving a significant amount of space and effort (*Codex Regius*: 5-14).

It seems, however, that Anglo-Saxon scribes never fully exploited the abbreviations at their disposal, and no individual text makes use of all four runes. What is more, a single abbreviation may appear in a manuscript in which the word is used scores of times – a prime example being the single occurrence of the rune *wynn* in the psalms of the *Junius Psalter*, in which joy and rejoicing are, of course, especially prominent themes. Whilst runic abbreviations occur across a fairly large number of texts, including *The Ruin*, *Riddle 91*, *Elene*, *Waldere*, the poetic *Solomon and Saturn*, *Beowulf*, the Old English *Orosius*, the *Junius Psalter*, *Vercelli Homily XVIII*, and in the glosses to both the *Durham Ritual* and the Lindisfarne Gospels, only in the glosses are they used systematically. The runic abbreviations for *dæg* and *mon* used in these particular contexts must be regarded as part of an economising strategy, drawing on every available space-saving device.

As Derolez points out, in all other contexts runic abbreviations are 'exceptional', neither applied consistently nor demanded by constraints of space, appearing unexpectedly in the middle of a text, and subsequently abandoned (1954: 401). It is, according to Bitterli, 'nothing more than a shorthand practice, employed only sporadically by some scribes' (2009: 83-4), which raises the question of why they are deployed at all, in such an erratic fashion, and across such a diverse range of manuscripts. Indeed, the only thing these texts appear to have in common is that they are all written in the vernacular. It is only when we look closely at the literary context in which the runes are found that something of a pattern begins to emerge, their use more often than not seeming to coincide with moments when the idea of unlocking or releasing is raised in the passage in which they are embedded.

Bede's Story of Imma

One does not have to look far to find an association between runes and the concept of unlocking in Old English literature. Indeed, the rarity of contemporary references to the script has led to the particular story we are interested in here being both 'commonly quoted and highly valued' (Page 1964: 21). This is, of course, Bede's story of Imma, which relates the miraculous escape of a chained prisoner of war, making reference to *litteras solutorias* as the superstitious concept the captors use to account for the miraculous unlocking (*Bede's Ecclesiastical History* 4/22: 402).

The idea of 'written charms' transmitted by *fabulae* is perhaps deliberately elusive, and 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 (4/22, 402-4). In effect, Bede substitutes a superstitious interpretation of the loosening bonds being caused by written spells 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 fable may well constitute an 'act of literary suppression' as Seth 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 the 'releasing rune':

> 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 he asked him whether he knew the releasing rune, and had with him the letters written out, such as men tell idle tales of and speak about, so that, for this reason, he could not be bound.'

(*Old English Version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History* 4/22: 328)

Ælfric, writing over a century later, also makes use of the Imma story in a homily on the efficacy of the mass, relating how the prisoner was asked '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). 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).

Ælfric's homily, with its reference to *drycræft* and *runstafum*, not only refers explicitly to runic characters, but also brings the sorcery hinted at in the earlier accounts to the foreground. Elliott suggests that the connection between the script and sorcery may thus have been instinctive for later Anglo-Saxons (1957: 250), but it is important to qualify this slightly by recognising that the association is actually very particular, referring to the specific idea of unbinding, and not to the magic arts in general. It was certainly a concept prevalent enough to be referred to without further explanation in the late tenth century, but may well be conceptual rather than actively superstitious, akin to the instinctive touching of wood when making an optimistic or provocative claim. Such a 'superstitious' individual is not likely to be thinking of the relation between the wood they are touching and the true cross (if this is indeed the root of this superstition), and in a similar manner the association between runes and unlocking could well be deeply ingrained without being actively engaged with. In other words a Christian 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 is used for practical purposes. It this kind of unconscious association that I believe is responsible for the appearance of runic abbreviations in certain literary contexts.

The texts and contexts

The obvious place to begin is with the *Riddle 91* in the Exeter Book, the second of two riddles in the collection with the solution 'key':

> Min heafod is   homere geþuren,
> searopila wund,   sworfen feole.
> oft ic begine   þæt me ongean sticað,
> þonne ic hnitan sceal,   hringum gyrded,
> hearde wið heardum,   hindan þyrel,
> forð ascufan   þæt mines frean
> mod ᛠ freoþað   middelnihtum.

> hwilum ic under bæc   bregde nebbe,
> hyrde þæs hordes,   þonne min hlaford wile
> lafe þicgan   þara þe he of life het
> wælcræfte awrecan   willum sinum.   (*Exeter Book*: 240-1)

'My head is forged by a hammer, wounded by a skilfully made tool, scoured by a file. Often I swallow that which sticks against me, when I thrust the aperture 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, at his will, he ordered to drive out from life with deadly skill.'

This riddle, in common with a number in the collection, puns on the sexual aspects of the object, but the conceit is otherwise relatively straightforward; the personified key is created, girded with rings, and enters a lock to reveal the hoard. The final statement is a little more elusive, and here *lafe* could perhaps be translated as 'legacies', and refer suggestively to the kinswomen of those men the owner has defeated in battle. However, the correct answer, bearing in mind the initial image of forging with hammers and files, must be that this is a *lafe* 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*, referring to the 'heart-joy' that is protected, and unlocked by the key.

The word *wyn* 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 twice in *Riddle 84* (1982: 247). Indeed, the word *wynnstaþol* occurs in the riddle immediately following the key riddle in the collection, playing on the dual meaning of the solution *boc*. None of these are abbreviated. There are also no obvious constraints of space, and the convention of enclosing the runic character between points to distinguish it as an abbreviation rather than a letter to be read phonetically, means that the 'abbreviation' takes up almost as much room as the word written out in full. This is a fairly important consideration, as it negates one of the central reasons for using an abbreviation in the first place! We might well say, with Derolez, that the rune is both superfluous and exceptional, but, I would argue, also used rather pointedly here in a riddle which deals with the process of releasing, and of breaking open a lock. The rune is inspired by, and serves as an additional reference to, the process of unlocking in the poem, perhaps 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. It is itself a species of key, carrying associations that further the solving of the riddle and the metaphorical unlocking of the solution.[1]

It is fairly understandable that a scribe or poet might draw on the loosening associations of the runic script in a riddle so obviously, and literally, concerned with unlocking. Indeed, although not used in any other of the riddles as a straightforward abbreviation, the runic script is employed as a clue in a further six of the riddles, and within this playful medium the reader was primed for the pertinent and ingenious placement of runes. The poem *Elene*, bearing Cynewulf's runic signature, is another text in which one might expect to find runic abbreviations, and it is perhaps surprising that whilst there are numerous instances where the abbreviation for *wynn* could have been used, only two occur.

The first use of the abbreviation is in a prayer by Judas, later known as Judas Cyriacus of Jerusalem, shortly after he has been released from prison, in which in penitential mood he asks the Lord to reveal to him the site of the crucifixion, just as, he says, the bones of Joseph were revealed to Moses from where they were hidden in the ground. His exact entreaty to the 'weroda *wyn*' is 'þæt me þæt goldhord,   gasta scyppend, / geopenie,   þæt yldum wæs / lange behyded', 'that the creator of souls will open that treasure hoard to me, which has long been

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[1] Keys from the period varied to a certain degree, depending on the mechanism of the lock. The majority of hollow stem or casket keys 'common in contexts of the late 8th-11th centuries in Britain and northern Europe' (Ottaway 1992, 669) are, however, remarkably similar in appearence to the traditional key shape, with well defined heads protruding ninety degrees from the handle (Ottaway 1992, Fig. 286). Whether this iconic shape was already established enough for the rune to call them to mind, is somewhat difficult to gauge, but remains a distinct possibility.

hidden from men' (*The Vercelli Book*: 88, 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 'unlocking' context.

The second runic abbreviation occurs some three hundred or so lines later on in the poem, after an interval in which the abbreviation could have been employed on a number of occasions, and was passed over. The context is again a prayer for revealing, this time in the follow-up search for the nails used to crucify Christ. In this case the connection is perhaps even more explicit, Elene asking her apostle to send up his prayer into the 'wuldres *wyn*', the 'joy of heaven', with the specific entreaty 'that he reveal, almighty king, the hoard beneath the earth, that still remains hidden, secret and concealed from people' (ll. 1091-93: 96). In this case the phrase abbreviated 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: 95), and here the rune does not appear.

It seems that in *Elene* the poetic context dealing explicitly with unlocking and revealing triggered a response in the poet or scribe, and brought to mind the abbreviation when the appropriate word was used in relation to this context. If such an unconscious recourse to runes could be inspired by the context of revealing hidden treasure, it might well suggest that runes were more generally associated with unlocking and breaking open than the specific reference to loosening chains in the Old English Bede suggests.

The extent of the frame of reference becomes more apparent when we turn to look at the Old English *Orosius*, in which the rune *eþel* is used once, in a single manuscript, MS BL, Additional 47967, and at a very specific point. The index or title to section 4/5 of the *Orosius* states that in this chapter the Carthaginians hear that 'se mæra Alexander hæfde abrocen Tirum þa burg' (*Old English Orosius*: 4) The term *abrocen* used here is often translated simply as captured, although its primary meaning is 'to break', and the semantic range, including 'vanquish' and 'destroy' (Boswoth and Toller 1898: 3) suggests a rather destructive process. It is certainly more of an emotive term than the common phrase 'he þa burh gewann', and the variations 'geeode Persipolis þa burh' (3/9: 70), and 'begatan Cartaina þa burh' (4/4: 89) also used of Alexander's conquests, and singles out the assault on Tyre as particularly decisive. Indeed, in the summary of Alexander's campaigns we are told that 'Tirus seo mære burg eall toworpenu', 'the great city of Tyre was completely destroyed' (3/9: 70). Of all the Macedonian conquests the assault on Tyre, believed to be impenetrable because of its island position and encircling walls, certainly deserves to be called a breaking of the city. We should perhaps not be overly surprised that a rune should occur in very close proximity to an account of this 'breaking' in the text. The full reference reads as follows:

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

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

There are at least three cases in the Old English *Orosius* where the word *eþel* is employed, and is written out in full (Bately 1980: 381). One has to ask why this single rune occurs where it does, in a case where space was not particularly limited. The answer, again, seems to be that the context of the physical breaking open of the city occasioned the use of a rune.

This episode can be compared to *The Ruin*, another poem in which a single runic abbreviation is employed. Again, the evidence of the unlocking properties of runes may provide a rationale for the inclusion of a rune within this descriptive poem, this time abbreviating the word *mon*. The immediate context for this rune is a passage comparing the previous splendour of the city to its present decay, representing a microcosm for the poem itself:

> Beorht wæron burgræced,   burnsele monige,
> heah horngestreon,   heresweg micel,
> meodheall monig   ᛗ   dreama full –

oþþæt þæt onwende   wyrd seo swiþe.

> 'Bright were the city buildings, the many bathing halls, the wealth of lofty arches, the great martial sound, many a mead-hall full of the joys of *men* – until fate, the mighty one, transformed that.' (*Exeter Book*: 228, ll. 21-24)

Line 24, in particular, represents a turning point from the recollection of the living city to a focus on its present decay, with fate representing the agent of destruction. The poet lingers on the process by which the city crumbles, 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' (228, l. 32). The destruction in *The Ruin* is as comprehensive as Alexander's assault on Tyre, with a similar emphasis on the contrast between its once unassailable character and the breaking of the city, long drawn out but just as decisive. That the rune appears in the midst of this process, and at the very point where fate is said to transform the city from a secure stronghold to a shell, suggests to me that the poet is drawing on the very same impulse that causes a rune to appear where it does in the *Orosius*.

The Ruin follows *The Husband's Message* in the Exeter Book, and it could be argued that it was inspired by the use of a runic cipher in this earlier poem. However, the word *mon* actually occurs three times in *The Husband's Message*, and not once is it abbreviated using the rune, despite the entire momentum of the poem being towards the runic message with which it closes. The abbreviation in *The Ruin* is a deliberate one, intended for a particular effect; to accord with the image of loosening masonry, collapsing roofs and crumbling walls. It also subtly serves to highlight the position of 'man' in this process, as creator, inhabitant and elegist, adding a further layer to the system of signification in the poem.

The runes in *Beowulf* present us with a less clear-cut situation, hinting at a complex of interlocking associations. It is the use of abbreviations in this poem that prompted Derolez to comment on the exceptional use of runic abbreviations, the rune *eþel* used three times out of a possible eleven, not including inflected forms. These occurrences are fairly widely spaced in the manuscript, but are all the work of the first scribe. The last occurrence 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 is made (*Beowulf*: 63). The scribe was clearly primed to remember a runic abbreviation because of the events of the poem and the explicit reference to runic writing. Whilst not connected in any more than a tangential way with revealing or unlocking, it should reinforce the impression that the use of these unusual abbreviations is often triggered by the literary context.

The first use of the *eþel* abbreviation occurs at line 520, and may also have been triggered by a reference to the statement some nineteen lines earlier that Unferth 'onband beadurūne', 'unbound his hostile runes' (19, l. 501). It is interesting, however, that there is a connection with unbinding encapsulated in this very phrase. It is also perhaps worth recognising the lines which immediately follow the runic abbreviation, with its reference to the beautiful fortress 'þær he folc ahte / burh ond beagas', 'where he had his people, stronghold and rings' (20, ll. 522-3). Its relevance only becomes apparent when we compare it to the next rune occurring at line 913. There is no reference to runes at this point in the poem; indeed, the word *eþel* is written out in full both shortly before and shortly after this point (16, l. 410 and 24, l. 616). The only ostensible trigger for this particular rune might be the reference, once again, to guarding the people, hoard and fortress, 'folc gehealdan,   hord ond hleoburh' (l. 912). If this is indeed the trigger, it could either be a matter of the scribe recalling the earlier context in which a rune was used, or be directly related to the concept of hoarding, focusing on containment rather than the releasing or breaking of this containment. We may, of course, be dealing with a case of coincidence, a rather under-credited factor in literary transmission, but if the Beowulf abbreviations do not lend much weight to the idea of a connection between unlocking and the runic script, they at least support the contention that runic abbreviations almost always have a specific and context dependent reason for being.

The text known as *Solomon and Saturn I* is a fitting text with which to close, as it expands the *alysendlecan* association to incorporate the literary frame of reference which was so important in promulgating conceptions of the script. This fragmentary text survives in two manuscripts, MS CCCC 422 containing the larger portion of the poem and the runic Pater Noster, whilst MS CCCC MS 41 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 for this marginal text, there is something of a practical rationale for the use of the rune alongside 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 *omega* sign. By the next reference to Solomon, the scribe has, however, settled on the rune.

Now, the scribe may well have remembered after his first attempt that the rune with the name *mon* could be used instead of the Latinate majuscule, and proceeded from there. However, it is interesting that this second dialogue marker, 'Solo*mon* cwæð', the first in which the rune is used, is immediately proceeded by Saturn asking who of all created things may most easily the holy door of heaven 'ontynan on gatales rīme', 'open in quick succession' (*Poetical Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn*: 82, ll. 36-8), and followed by the famous answer that the palm twigged Pater Noster opens the heavens.

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

Conclusion: Releasing meaning

Throughout this paper I have been arguing for a close association of the runic script in the minds of Anglo-Saxons with the properties of loosening and unlocking. Whilst this may have certain implications for our understanding of contemporary attitudes towards the script, it certainly does not represent a return to the search for Anglo-Saxon paganism, a largely futile and rightly discredited endeavour (Stanley 1975). It is unlikely that this association with unlocking reflects perceptions of the script as *reginkunni*, and it does not support the contention that the 'magic power of the rune was a deep-seated belief' as one editor of *Solomon and Saturn* suggests (Menner 1941: 48). The reference in *Hávamál* to Oðinn's ability to release chains is an interesting analogy, but not, I believe, one that has much bearing on my argument (*Edda*: 41, St. 149). As R. D. 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, a metaphor as useful for Christian revelation as it is for secular riddling. The story of Imma, may, rather ironically, have played a greater role in promulgating this association than the continuation of any popular superstition from the early eighth century when runes were still being widely used.

In the dialogue between the wise Solomon and his pagan interlocutor, Saturn asks how the word of God is to be conceived of in the mind. The response that Solomon gives is telling, not only for the way we read script as a vehicle for revelation in this poem, but also about cultural attitudes to the written word:

> Gylden is se Godes cwide, gimmum astæned,
> hafað silfren leaf; sundor mæg æghwylc
> ðurh gastes gife godspel secgan...
> ...he mæg ða sawle of sinnihte

gefeccan under foldan;   næfre hie se feond to ðæs niðe
feterum gefæstnað,   ðeah he hie mid fiftigum
clusum beclemme,   he ðone cræft briceð,
and ða orðancas   ealle tosliteð.   (84, ll. 63-72)

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

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.

Clearly the idea of loosening was not the only association the runes carried in later Anglo-Saxon England. Amongst the few remaining uses of runic abbreviations that I have not touched upon, there are some that do not fit with the rationale of unlocking, or indeed with any discernable rationale. The *wynn* rune that begins *Psalm 99* of the *Junius Psalter* may well simply represent a pseudo capital, a runic historiation, as it were (*Junius-Psalter*: 132). The rune of *Waldere* is impossible to place properly in context as it appears right before the lacuna in the fragment of the poem that has survived. And finally, there is Vercelli Book *Homily XVIII* dealing with the life of St Martin. Here a single rune for *mon* appears in a passage in which the word occurs three times, in the statement that 'hefonlice blisse 7 gefean *man* meahte a in his mode geseon, 7 on his andwlitan ongitan', 'one might always see in his mood and perceive in his countenance heavenly bliss and joy' (*Vercelli Homilies*: 61, ll. 142-3). There is nothing in the immediate context that suggests to me a rationale for its inclusion, and it would be remarkable indeed if every use of a runic abbreviation across manuscripts of such varying provenance and date were to be the result of a single unified impulse. What I think the connections I have picked out here do show is that the story of releasing runes that the translator of Bede inadvertently canonised is an important component of a complex cultural perception of runes. When reading runes used in other manuscript contexts, particularly the riddles, we should perhaps, therefore, be wary of automatically situating them as agents of concealment, as a means of compounding the riddle or hiding the answer from the uninitiated. Rather than being indicative of 'ambiguity incarnate' (DiNapoli 2005: 161) runes may often represent the keys to unlocking the text, the point at which woven words begin to loosen, rather than the point where the text becomes most obscure.

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