

## A NOTE ON THE MEANING OF $\bar{o}s$ IN THE *OLD ENGLISH* *RUNE POEM*

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to contribute to a better understanding of the Old English rune-name  $\bar{o}s$  and to question its ‘standard’ or traditionally accepted etymology and/or meaning. Scholars have long maintained that  $\bar{o}s$  in the *Old English Rune Poem* means ‘mouth’ which could have been borrowed from Latin  $\bar{o}s$  as a consequence of a Christian attempt to avoid any pagan connotations.

This article is a result of a larger work assessing the sources of the rune-names and how they have been transmitted in both the Nordic and Anglo-Saxon traditions. I start with a short introduction to runes and rune-names, and then I focus on manuscript sources for  $\bar{o}s$ , especially the rune poems (the Old English, the Old Norwegian, the Old Icelandic and the Old Swedish texts), which are the main sources for the meaning and significance of the rune-names. Finally, after an analysis of the data, I offer alternative solutions for the understanding of this rune-name.

KEY WORDS: rune-names; rune poems; Old English; Old Norse

### RESUMEN

El objetivo de este artículo es contribuir a un mejor entendimiento del nombre de la runa  $\bar{o}s$  en inglés antiguo, además de reflexionar sobre la etimología y el significado que tradicionalmente se le han atribuido. Durante mucho tiempo los runólogos han mante-

nido que *ōs* en el Poema Rúnico Anglosajón significa «boca» y que este significado podría haberse tomado de la palabra latina *ōs* como un intento de la iglesia por evitar cualquier connotación pagana.

Este artículo muestra los resultados preliminares de un proyecto de mayor envergadura que examina las fuentes textuales de los nombres de las runas y cómo estos nombres se han transmitido durante siglos en las tradiciones nórdica y anglosajona. Comienza este artículo con una breve introducción a las runas y a sus nombres, para centrarse más adelante en las fuentes manuscritas de *ōs*, especialmente en los poemas rúnicos (los textos en antiguo inglés, en antiguo nórdico, en antiguo islandés y en antiguo sueco), que son las fuentes textuales más importantes para el estudio del significado de los nombres de las runas. Finalmente, y después de un análisis de los datos recopilados, se ofrecen algunas soluciones alternativas para la interpretación del nombre de la runa *ōs*.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** nombre de las runas; poemas rúnicos; antiguo inglés; antiguo nórdico.

## 1. THE RUNIC ALPHABET AND RUNE-NAMES

The interest in runes began with humanistic scholars in the 1500's and 1600's. But it was not till the end of the 19th c., after comparative Germanic philology had been established, that runology became a scientific discipline due to the interest of scholars such as Bugge and Wimmer. It was at this time when the first reliable corpus editions of runic material started to appear. This development was determined by different factors, among them the improvement of methods of interpretation, and the contact of runology with a number of related disciplines such as archaeology, palaeography, and linguistics.

Runes are the letters of the alphabetic writing system devised and employed by the Germanic peoples at the beginning of our era. The earliest datable inscriptions belong to the late 2nd and 3rd c. and are found in Northern Germanic areas, present-day Norway, Denmark and Sweden. In England most runic inscriptions date from the 7th to the 9th c. Runes died out after the 9th c. in England, but survived longer in Scandinavia, where they continued to be used alongside Latin through the late Middle Ages.

As happened with the letters of the Phoenician and Greek alphabets, each rune had a name and, as in the case of the Phoenician letter names, and as far as the rune-names are understood, they were meaningful words in the language. It seems that the rune-names had a mnemonic function and helped the rune-carvers remember the sound each letter represented.

The names of the older Germanic runes are not recorded. These names have to be reconstructed (cf. Krause, 1966) from later data, mainly rune lists in Continental and Scandinavian manuscripts and the so-called rune poems, but when so doing, some main problems have to be faced. First of all, eight runes of the Common Germanic *futhark* are unrecorded in the shorter sixteen-graph runic alphabet of Scandinavia. Second, due to the sound changes that the language experienced through time, a few sounds were lost and new ones appeared. Accordingly, some rune-names underwent the general phonological

changes in Old Norse and Old English, leaving in some cases *lacunae* which had to be filled in with new runes. Whenever the initial sound of the rune-name was affected by a phonetic change, the value of the rune was also altered. For example, with the loss of initial [j] the name for the j-rune \**jāra* became \**āra* (ON *ár*) and this rune began to represent the sound [a(:)]. For some English runes there is not a counterpart in the Scandinavian *futhorks*, since the Anglo-Saxon *futhorc* exceeds the number of sixteen graphs.

After a thorough analysis of the sources of the rune-names it follows that one could categorise the rune-names according to the certainty with which they have been established. Some rune-names are entirely certain, since their meanings correspond exactly (or almost exactly) in all the sources and traditions, as for example ON *madr*/ OE *mann* 'human being'. Some others are not completely certain, because there is some doubt as to whether the Old Norse or the Old English name has been correctly deduced, or - when comparing them - certain about the Old Norse name but uncertain about the Old English name, or vice versa, or uncertain about both. Another complicating factor is that some names correspond only partially (cf. ON *óss* 'river mouth' ~ OE *ōs* 'mouth'), and others do not correspond at all (cf. ON *þurs* 'giant' ~ OE *þorn* 'thorn').

Different attempts have been carried out to derive a Germanic cosmological system from the rune-names and to explain them as elements of a cultic system. According to Polomé (1991), rune-names fall into different categories: (1) those related to the supernatural world such as \**þurisaz* 'giant'; (2) those which belong to the world of nature like \**īsan* 'ice'; (3) and finally, those representing the world of man, as \**mannaz* 'human being'. The semantic field of these names depicts a society of cattle and crop farmers worried about the weather conditions.

In England, some runes were used to represent their names. These are the so-called *Begriffsrunen* or 'concept runes'. The runes **𐌺**, **𐌾** and **𐌿** were systematically employed taking the place of their names *dæg*, *mann*, *ǣþel* (*ēþel*) respectively. **𐌺** is used instead of its name (*mann*) in the *Lindisfarne Gospels* and the *Ritual of Durham*. It is employed once in the preface to the *Rushworth Gospels* in the word *Farm* **𐌺** (for 'Farman'), which hides a proper name, probably the signature of the scribe. It is also found in *The Vercelli Book* fol. 99<sup>v</sup> (*gefean* **𐌺** *meahte*) and in MS B of the *Poetical Dialogues of Solomon and Saturn* in the word *Salo* **𐌺** (abbreviated form of 'Solomon'). In *Beowulf*, *Waldere* and in Alfred's translation of Orosius' *Historiarum adversum paganos libri VII*, **𐌿** substitutes the word *ēþel*. In *The Ritual of Durham* and *Lindisfarne Gospels*, **𐌺** stands for the rune-name *dæg*. The same rune is recorded in *Ruin* (*Exeter Book* fol. 124<sup>r</sup>). In *Fates of the Apostles* **𐌺** appears instead of *feoh* and in *The Junius Psalter*, Psalm 99 the word *wynn* is replaced by the rune **𐌺**. This latter graph is also employed twice in *Elene* (foll. 128<sup>v</sup> and 131<sup>v</sup>) and once in *Riddle 91* (*Exeter Book* fol. 129<sup>v</sup>).

There are other Old English runic passages where runes stand for their names, which means that the audience had to be familiar with them in order to understand and decipher the texts. These are the *Exeter Book's* runic riddles (numbers 19, 24, 64, and 75 according to Williamson, 1977), where runes are part of the verse form and carry alliteration. Moreover, runes are used to give clues to the solution of the riddles, which leads to the assumption of a learned audience familiar with the runic alphabet. In most cases, editors take the graphs to be read logographically, since they are marked with dots, and with their Anglo-Saxon names.

Runes are seldom used for their names in English inscriptions. Excavations at *Lundenwic*, an Anglo-Saxon settlement north of the Thames, revealed various objects, among them the vertebra of a sheep with two runic inscriptions. The second one reads

‘dric’. Page (1999) takes the **d**-rune in this text to represent the rune-name *dæg*, so that the whole gives a personal name, namely *Dægric*. Another English epigraphical example may be the inscription in the coin legend **wBERHT**, taken as the proper name *Wynberht*.

There are also some instances of ‘concept runes’ in epigraphical inscriptions on the Continent and in Scandinavia. In the inscription **gutaniowihailag** carved on a gold ring found at Pietroassa, Rumania, the o-rune seems to stand for \**ōþal-* (OE *ēþel*) and, therefore, it has been interpreted as: *Gutani o(pal) wi(h) hailag* (‘hereditary treasure of the Goths, holy and sacrosanct’). Also on two Swedish stones from Blekinge (old Danish territory: Gummarp and Stentofte), the **j**- and **f**-runes probably stand for their names (Krause, 1966: 208, 211; Bragg, 1999: 36).

Contrary to what some authors believe, even though rune-names are recorded in a good number of manuscripts, the sources are relatively scarce. The different orthographical variants of each single rune-name are recorded mainly in rune lists and they can be cross-checked and compared in order to reconstruct the Germanic terms using comparative Indo-European and Germanic linguistics. In the case of their significance, however, the earliest available accounts are the rune poems. All these texts of various provenance and date provide invaluable data on the meanings of the rune-names. They also supply an assessment of runic knowledge in different geographical areas, since one of them comes from England, and the other three come from different parts of Scandinavia.

## 2. THE CASE OF THE RUNE-NAME $\bar{O}S$

The etymology of the «standard» (or traditionally accepted) meanings ascribed to the o-rune is Gmc \**ansuz* meaning ‘heathen god’ (PrScan \**ansur*). This rune was preserved in Old Scandinavian to mark pre-nasal [a], resulting in ON *áss* (> *qss*). The name was modified in Old English to *ōs* and the rune was used for the sound [o(:)]. This word is recorded in some Germanic languages as, for example, Old Saxon *ás*, Old High German *ansi-*, *ans-*. The Old English word *ōs* meaning ‘(heathen) god’, does not occur elsewhere in Anglo-Saxon in its simple form, but it is frequently found as the first element in personal names (*Oswald*, *Oswine*, etc.). Let us concentrate on the meaning of the o-rune in the different rune poems.

## 3. THE OLD NORWEGIAN RUNE POEM

The original manuscript of the *Old Norwegian Rune Poem* was lost in the great fire of 1728, which consumed a large part of the city of Copenhagen, including the University Library. Fortunately, the poem had been copied before the original manuscript was destroyed in the fire. The poem survives in three late copies. The earliest version appeared in chapter XIX («De literarum Danicum uso poetico») of Worm’s *Runer seu Danica literatura antiquissima* (first edition in 1636, second edition in 1651). Another copy is found in MS Bartholine D (Donatione Variorum 1, fol.), 31,3 × 20 cm, 426 f. The poem was copied by Árni Magnússon probably ca. 1686-89. The manuscript is now preserved at the University Library, Copenhagen.

The last copy appears in MS papp. fol. 64, 33 × 21 cm, 370 f., from the 2nd half of the 17th c. preserved at the Royal Library, Stockholm. MS 64 fol. was copied by three different hands: Jón Eggertsson, Helgi Ólafsson, and an unknown scribe. The poem is found on page 74 and was copied by Jón Eggertsson.

The meaning of the o-rune differs in the various Scandinavian rune poems. The o-stanza in the *Old Norwegian Rune Poem* reads (Senra Silva, 2003):

JE    †. er leid flestra færda. | en skalper sværda.  
 AM    †. er læid flestra færda. | en skalper er sværda.  
 W    Oys er flestra ferda | En skalpur er | sverda.

(River mouth) is the way of most journeys.  
 A sheath is (the way) of swords.

The semantic content of the first line can be related to a ship sailing along a river and through its mouth (ON *óss*, W *oys*.) In this stanza the meaning of the rune is probably ‘river mouth’, ‘estuary’.

#### 4. THE OLD ICELANDIC RUNE POEM

The text of the *Old Icelandic Rune Poem* is preserved in two early manuscripts: AM 687d 4to and AM 461 12mo. The poem is also recorded in later manuscripts and in printed books from the 17th c. based on the two earliest copies. The manuscript AM 687d 4to (text A) dates from ca. 1500 and is kept in *Stofnum Árna Magnússonar*, Reykjavik. The manuscript AM 461 12mo (text B) is also kept in Reykjavik and dates to ca. 1534-58.

The a-stanza in the *Old Icelandic Rune Poem* goes as follows (Senra Silva, 2003):

A    a er alldingautr ok asg[ar]dz ioff[ur ok v]alhallar visi  
 B    Os er alldengautr og asgarz iufur og ualhallar wiser.

A    a is ancient Gautr and Ásgarðr’s prince and Valhall’s ruler.  
 B    Heathen god/Óðinn is ancient Gautur and Ásgarðr’s prince and Valhall’s ruler.

The three kennings in both versions are Óðinn kennings. The expression *alldingatur* (*aldin-Gautr* = *old-Gautr*) is a common epithet for Óðinn, and *Ásgarðr* is the place where the gods live in the Scandinavian mythology, situated above the *Miðgarðr*, the place designated to human beings. *Jofurr* (*iofur* in the A text and *iufur* in the B text) means ‘prince, leader’, and the periphrasis *Valhallar vísi* (A-version) or *visir* (B-version) ‘Valhall’s ruler’ also appears in an epigraphical post-reformation inscription on a runestone in Stora Lundby, Sweden (Brate and Wessén, 1924-36: 98 f. 3): **ualhallaR.visiR**. This circumlocution was probably taken from Jón Ólafsson’s *Runologia* (1752).

In this poem the rune-name *óss* means specifically ‘Óðinn’ instead of the standard ‘god’. Thus, the *Old Icelandic Rune Poem* departs from the Norwegian text where *óss* designates an estuary.

## 5. THE OLD SWEDISH RUNE POEM

The youngest rune poem, namely the Old Swedish, appears in a letter by the Swedish student Nicolaus Andreae Granius now at the University Library in Leiden. This letter was published in 1908 by Molhuysen. Runologists have not shown much interest in this text, but in 1987 Quak made a modern edition of it. Besides Granius' text, there is another possible source of the poem. The text is edited for the first time in Bureus' copper plate *Runakänslanäs Läräspån*.

The a-stanza in the poem reads (Quak, 1987):

ōs i hvario ā  
 'Óss [is] in every river'.

The rune-name seems to mean 'river-mouth, 'estuary', sharing its meaning with the *Old Norwegian Rune Poem*, distancing itself from the Old Icelandic text. Bureus' text departs somewhat from Granius': *lekr os i vidi(ä)*: («óss ?lies in a wide area?», Senra Silva, 2003.) In any case, it points to a wide extension, probably referring to a river coming into open sea.

In an attempt to find a reason for the change in meaning of the o-rune in the Scandinavian poems, the development of the word from Germanic to Old Norse will be offered. The rune-name in Germanic has been reconstructed as *\*ansuz*. During the Viking Age and as the result (among other changes) of loss of [n] and compensatory lengthening of the preceding nasal vowel [ã], this word became *ásur*. Then u-umlaut was involved in various forms in the paradigm and the word became *ǫsr/ǫss*, but since the sound change did not work homogeneously throughout the paradigm, variation sometimes occurred (*ás-/óss-*). Eventually, after the linguistic and subsequent runological transitions about 1020-1100, this vowel became further rounded and closed to [ō:] (> *óss*) and the runic graph became 𐌺. In time this rune lost its value of [ã(:)]. From the late Viking Age onwards it seems no longer used to represent any kind of a nasal sound, but instead it denotes rounded vowels and occasionally the glide /w/ (Liestøl, 1981: 252). In the rune poems, the spelling *óss* is recorded.

However, there is another Old Norse word *óss* which derives from Gmc *\*ōsa-*, Lat *ōs*, with the meaning 'river mouth'. So in this language there existed two homonym words with different meanings and etymologies at least after the 11th c., one coming from Gmc *\*ansuz* (ON *áss* 'god') and the other from Gmc *\*ōsa-* (ON *óss* 'mouth'). And so 'god' could be written <óss/áss>, whereas 'river mouth' could only be written <óss>. Gradually the form *áss* won out for the meaning 'god', but this could not be used for the rune, since it was the graph for the sound [o(:)]. Hence the Icelandic choice to construe the name as 'river mouth' rather than 'god', which was in the late Middle Ages and in Modern Icelandic spelt *áss*. Here may be the clue to the difference in meaning in both poems. Two hypotheses could apply. On the one hand, the author of the *Old Norwegian Rune Poem* could have changed the meaning of the rune on purpose. He may have decided to take 'mouth', playing with the fact that the two words had become homonyms. He may have also decided to wipe out any heathen meaning of the word due to Christian influence. If this hypothesis were to be correct, it would be strange, though, that the author of the Norwegian poem and not the Icelandic one would avoid any heathen

nuance. Icelanders were used to doing that as it is evident from, for example, the days of the week. On the other hand, the author may not have been conscious of this fact and simply mistook *óss* ('god') for *óss* ('mouth').

## 6. THE OLD ENGLISH RUNE POEM

No medieval copy of the *Old English Rune Poem* survives. The text was on a single leaf bound into Otho B X, whose content consisted mainly of a volume of Old English saints' lives, a few homilies, some confessional and penitential texts and the leaf (fol. 165) containing the rune poem. At the end of the manuscript, a life of St. Margaret was added. That manuscript was badly damaged in the Cotton fire of 1731, and the leaf with the poem was completely destroyed. However, in 1705 George Hickes had printed an edition of the poem in the first section of his *Thesaurus* (1705-1707) (*Linguarum veterum septentrionalium thesaurus grammatico-criticus et archaeologicus*). Hickes (1705-7) made no editorial emendations to the poem itself, as far as one can see, and set out the poem in twenty-nine paragraphs. The *Old English Rune Poem* stands alone in the tradition of rune poems. Eight runes from the Common Germanic *futhark* unrecorded in the younger sixteen-rune *futhark* are employed in this text. The Old English *futhorc* has several new inventions with respect to the twenty-four-rune Continental/Proto-Scandinavian *futhark*.

The *ōs* stanza in the *Old English Rune Poem* reads according to Halsall (1981):

𐌺 ( <i>ōs</i> ) byþ ordfruma	ǣlcra sprǣce,
wisdomes wraþu	and witena frōfur
and eorla gehwām	ēadnys and tōhiht.

The mouth is the source of every utterance,  
the support of wisdom and a comfort to wise men  
and the joy and delight of every noble.

The meaning of the o-rune in the *Old English Rune Poem* is uncertain. Several scholars have maintained that *ōs* as found in this text retains its original Germanic reference to Woden as a source of speech. But many others (among them Dickins, 1915, Kemble 1840, and Halsall, 1981) share the view that *ōs* should be translated as 'mouth'. They suggest that the introduction of Christianity in England had affected its meaning by eliminating any pagan nuance of this word. And so, the author of the Anglo-Saxon runic poem would have replaced the Germanic word *ōs* meaning 'god' by the homonym Latin word *os* meaning 'mouth'.

There is no apparent reason to justify the transfer of meaning between two unrelated languages (i.e. Latin and Old English). I maintain that it would be more reasonable to think that the OE *ōs* was influenced by the Old Norse homonym *óss*, which means 'mouth', although more specifically 'river mouth'. In this sense, the author of the *Old English Rune Poem* would need to have been acquainted with the Old Norwegian runic tradition. This would support a thesis that the Anglo-Saxon poem sometimes is dependent on the Scandinavian tradition of the rune poems. Another possibility could be

that the Germanic word \**osa-* (> ON *óss* ‘mouth’) gave a word in Old English which, like OE *ōs* < \**ansuz*, is not recorded. Some rune-names may include words which have died out and which have been reinterpreted.

## 7. CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this article has been to contribute to a better understanding of the rune-name *ōs*. I have examined the rune poems, which are the most important source of the meaning and significance of the rune-names. The main task has been to contrast the meaning of the o-rune in the different texts. In the *Old Icelandic Rune Poem* the rune-name *óss* differs in meaning with respect to the other Scandinavian poems, since in this text *óss* means ‘the god Óðinn’ and in the Norwegian and Swedish poems it means ‘river mouth’. I have shown that two homonyms coexisted in Old Norse after the 11th c. and proposed that OE *ōs* as found in the *Old English Rune Poem* could have been influenced by ON *óss* meaning ‘river mouth’.

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