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Title	'Cynewulf' in The Encyclopedia of British Medieval Literature
Authors	Birkett, Thomas
Publication date	2017-08-01
Original Citation	Birkett, T. (2017) 'Cynewulf', in Echard, S. and Rouse, R. (eds.) The Encyclopedia of British Medieval Literature, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell. isbn: 978-1-118-39698-8
Type of publication	Book chapter
Link to publisher's version	http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/book/10.1002/9781118396957
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Download date	2026-11-07 01:10:54
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/5090

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Cynewulf

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Unlike other named poets of vernacular verse such as the Venerable Bede, we know about Cynewulf only through the internal evidence of the four Old English poems that bear his name. Two of these – *Christ II* (*The Ascension*) and *Juliana* – are preserved in the Exeter Book miscellany, whilst *The Fates of the Apostles* and *Elene* are found amongst the devotional poems and prose homilies of the Vercelli Book. Each of these four poems includes a colophon in which the poet draws out the spiritual message of the preceding text and embeds the name Cyn(e)wulf in the poetic line using Anglo-Saxon runes. In two of the colophons the name is spelled as Cynwulf (without medial -e-), though there is no reason to believe that these common spelling variants point to different poet-personas.

Establishing the date and provenance of the poems has been a preoccupation of Cynewulf scholarship since the discovery of the signatures. The writing of the Vercelli and Exeter Books provides a secure *terminus ante quem* in the late tenth century. Unsurprisingly, the poems are all copied in the dominant late West Saxon dialect, but there are several features indicative of Anglian origins, including several half rhymes that are resolved into full rhymes when the typical Anglian smoothing of vowels is applied. This would suggest that the poems were originally composed in Mercia or Northumbria, the balance of dialect evidence seeming to favor a Mercian provenance (Fulk 1996). Sisam (1953) suggests that the form of the name may itself provide some clarity on dating: evidence from genealogies and coin legends indicates that the name would have been represented as Cyniwulf before the mid-eighth century in Mercia. In two more recent surveys of the evidence, Fulk (1996) confirms most of Sisam's observations (though proposing a somewhat later *terminus post quem*), whilst Conner (1996) suggests a date even closer to the tenth-century copying of the manuscripts, based in part on the identification of a source for *Fates*. Much ink has been spilled trying to link the individual behind the runic signature conceit with one or other historical figure, though biographical studies are now increasingly rare. Although the intimate appeal that is made to the poet's own penitential state in several of the colophons is striking, it is also a conventional pious trope, telling us nothing concrete about the persona behind the common name Cynewulf.

All four signature conceits make use of the runic script, and exploit the fact that runes had both a phonetic value (as ordinary alphabetic characters) and also a conventional proper name. By transposing the individual letters of the name C-y-n-e-w-u-l-f into runic logograms that stood for these conventional names, the Cynewulf poet was able to weave the name into the verse, whilst ensuring that the sequence stood out on the manuscript page. To a certain extent, the conventional names directed the content of the colophons. For example, the final letter in the name is *feoh*, meaning "wealth," and thus the poet was obliged to incorporate this word into at least three of the four colophons. The challenge of including the u-rune (named *ur*, or "aurochs," in the *Rune Poem*) appears to have been too much of an ask even for this inventive poet, and it is generally accepted that the personal pronoun *ure* is intended instead in

The Encyclopedia of Medieval Literature in Britain, Edited by Siân Echard and Robert Rouse.
© 2017 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. Published 2017 by John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.
DOI: 10.1002/9781118396957.wbemlb372

three of the four colophons. Working within these restrictions, the poet created a unique riddle on each occasion, linked by a focus on Judgment Day, but also responding artfully to the themes of the preceding poems (Warwick Frese 1975). Whilst the signature passages themselves are inventive in their conceit of using runes to embed a personal name within Old English verse, the ideas and motifs contained in these colophons are "quite familiar from other Old English poems" (Shippey 1972, 157).

The embedded runic conceit has been remarkably effective in transmitting the name along with the poems, and maintaining the order of the signature passage. However, it has been suggested that the Cynewulf poet was not motivated by modern conceptions of authorial copyright, but rather by a desire to be accounted for his works of devotion and to inspire the same spiritual revelation in others, an appeal for the reader's prayers that Sisam reminds us is conventional in Latin letters (1953). It is also worth remembering that the message of the colophons – essentially that all earthly presence is ephemeral – stands in direct contrast to the idea of proprietorial authorship (Stodnick 1997). Indeed, the colophons may deliberately serve to lead the reader away from surface display and toward engaged contemplation (Birkett 2014). In this understanding of the poems, the concept of a "signature" is something of a misnomer – it is a device intended to inculcate revelation rather than to elevate the author. As Calder points out, our lack of knowledge about the personality of this poet "facilitates critical examination of the poems he wrote" (1981, 17).

THE POEMS

Rather than dealing with the Old Testament themes represented in the poems of the Junius manuscript (the so-called "Cædmonian" group), the Cynewulf poet takes as his subject matter a range of popular extra-biblical homiletic and hagiographical narratives linked to the church calendar (Sisam 1953), dealing with the Ascension of Christ, the Martyrdom of the Apostles, the Passion of St. Juliana, and the *inventio crucis* legend. With the exception of *Christ II*, all the poems are martyrological in character: dealing with sanctified individuals engaged in the Christian mission and contending with pagan antagonists. It is noteworthy that two of the four works deal with female protagonists – St. Juliana in the typical virgin martyr pose, protecting her purity in the face of outlandishly violent coercion, and Elene as a powerful leader of men and the agent of the discovery of the true cross. The range of subjects chosen is perhaps indicative of the Cynewulf poet's concern for eschatological inclusivity, with each of the colophons making a universal appeal to all humankind to earnestly contemplate the end of days.

Christ II is the second of the three sequential Christ poems copied in the Exeter Book, and though there are merits in reading the poems as a triptych, the second poem is distinct in aspects of its style, and is the only one now attributed to Cynewulf (see Fulk 1996). It is also notably different in subject matter to the three other signed poems, taking as its primary source Gregory the Great's twenty-ninth homily on the Gospels. The Cynewulf poet's rendition of the Ascension narrative is influenced by the narrative structure of the source, and also by Gregory's discursive exegetical technique, in which diverse events from sacred history are connected at an allegorical level (Shippey 1972). The first half of the poem follows its source in interweaving allusions to scriptural history and apocrypha in its description of the Ascension, whilst the latter half is dedicated to a meditation on the eschatological

significance of this pivotal event, the role of the church in continuing Christ's ministry and the model that Christ's "leaps" provide for the individual seeking salvation. The poet is skillful in adapting his style to the narrative and homiletic sections of the poem (Calder 1981); however, the colophon is the Cynewulf poet's most significant addition to his source, serving as an autobiographical space in which the poet's persona is used to engage directly with the reader. We are told how Cynewulf anguishes over his former transgressions – though with no insight into what these might be – and that he expects a harsh judgment: demonstrating, in other words, the proper penitential attitude (Rice 1977). The act of solving the runic riddle models the call at the opening of the poem "to seek for spiritual mysteries with the skill of the mind" (ll. 440–41), whilst also teaching us to read away from the physical manifestation of the runic name and toward the spiritual message the runes reveal: soon "the ᚹ [joy] of earth's riches will be gone." (ll. 804–5). In short, the Cynewulf poet balances an emotional evangelism with a carefully fashioned rhetoric designed to implicate his vernacular audience in their own journey of salvation.

Juliana has often been derided as an uninspired verse rendition of an uninspiring Latin saint's life. The poet certainly doesn't entertain spiritual mysteries in the same way as in *Christ II* and *Elene*, preferring the straightforward polemic of martyrdom and its heavenly reward. The poet is not recalcitrant about adapting the source to serve the polemic, however, and the "distilled version of epic style" chosen for this poem (Calder 1981, 155) may well be apposite for the straightforward hagiographical narrative. If seen as rather heavy-handed by many modern commentators, the poem achieves what it sets out to do: demonstrating how a reward is appointed to each person "bi gewyrhtum" (according to [their] deeds) (l. 728) and how the martyr can both inspire and directly intercede for the individual. The colophon puts this model of saintly intercession into practice, addressing the audience in the first person with an appeal to pray for Cynewulf's soul, apparently imperiled by the evil deeds of the author. However, the fact that the author projects himself to address the reader from beyond the grave makes it clear that this is a rhetorical construction. It is generally accepted that the grouped runes **cyn** and **ewu** here stand for the collective nouns *cyn* (race [of men]) and *ewu* (ewes/sheep?), whilst the final **lf** perhaps represents *leof* (beloved) with medial vowels added (Birkett 2014). Sisam offers the alternative suggestion that each group may stand for the full name "Cynewulf" (1953). In fact, in true riddlic style, these clusters may stand for both the individual and the collective in a sophisticated play on the message of a universal fate to which *monna gehwam* (each individual) is bound, or represent visually the anxiety of the poet at the soul's impending dislocation from the body (Bjork 2013). The fact that the runes work in a different way to the other signature riddles has led some critics to suggest that it may represent the first of the Cynewulf poems (see Elliott 1953), and others the product of the poet's declining years (see Woolf 1955).

The last poem to be identified with Cynewulf was *The Fates of the Apostles*, which follows *Andreas* in the Vercelli Book. Attempts have been made to determine the relationship between *Andreas* and *Fates*, including the idea that Cynewulf deliberately co-opted a poem already in existence by attaching his shorter composition (see Puskar 2011). *Fates* constitutes a catalogue of the 12 apostles with a brief description of the persecution and death of each, and there is still some debate about the exact source used: it may be based on a full account of the apostles (Cross 1979), possibly Usuard's recension

of the martyrology (Conner 1996), or have been pieced together by the author. Often dismissed as a simple verse list, in recent decades the poem has found greater favor with critics, who have pointed out the widespread popularity of the catalogue and shone light on the poet's rhetorical virtuosity (see Calder 1981; Anderson 1983). As with *Juliana*, the Cynewulf poet is co-opting a conventional poetic model and technique of exposition to reach the same salutary conclusion: just as the apostles distained "idele æht-welan" (idle wealth, l. 84), so the colophon calls on us to recognize the transitory nature of the world. In this colophon the poet explicitly frames the riddle, telling the reader that the wise-one might discover "hwa tas fitte fegde" (who composed this song, l. 98) and ending the passage with a recapitulation and a call to pray for his soul. We may be dealing here with the first of the colophons, and a poet not entirely confident that his conceit would be understood. However, the message of distain for worldly ornamentation encoded by the runic riddle suggests that the poet is playfully undermining his own signature conceit. The breaking up of the name mirrors an earthly dislocation; *feoh* (or wealth) stands at the end (both figuratively, and as the last letter of the name); and the reader is encouraged to recognize that memorializing verse (whether of apostle or poet) has its primary value in its application to the individual's spiritual condition.

Elene is often regarded as the Cynewulf poet's most accomplished work, both in terms of its intellectual ambition, and its success in adapting the narrative using the conventions of Old English poetry. The poet's source closely resembles the Latin *Acta Cyriaci*, and the narrative concerns St. Helena's journey to Jerusalem to discover the true cross. Helena, the mother of Emperor Constantine, is recast in the poem as a martial queen, and the poet merges an imperial setting with such typical Old English tropes as seafaring imagery and the beasts of battle motif, to create a distinctly Anglo-Saxon rendition of the *Inventio crucis* narrative. It has been noted that the poem is structured around "multiple revelations" (Campbell 1972): of the cross and nails through the agency of Elene and Judas Cyriacus, but also of spiritual truths, personal revelation in contemplation of the true cross, and intellectual enlightenment, including the solving of runic riddle. The poet displays his virtuosity in an autobiographical sequence in which he describes the revelation provided to him through poetic craft – doing so using an elaborate series of rhyming half-lines. The information that he labored in his art during the confines of night, and that he is writing in old age was pounced upon by early critics, but it has been noted that the old age persona is a conventional conceit (see Woolf 1955), and also that the colophon echoes the language used to describe the conversion of Constantine and Judas earlier in the poem (Warwick Frese 1975). As well as acting as the culmination of the Cynewulf poet's evangelizing message, the colophon is deeply integrated into the series of disclosures made throughout the poem, using the signature as a model for meditative reading. Earthly presence is a confine which only spiritual understanding can unlock, and whilst the Cynewulf poet guides the reader through a succession of physical and spiritual paradigms for revelation, it is the individual's responsibility to contemplate the cross and uncover the anagogical meaning of the *inventio* narrative.

STYLE AND LEGACY

The question of Cynewulf's unique style has often been considered hand in hand with an attempt to define (and expand) the canon of Cynewulfian poetry. Much in the poet's style is typical to most surviving Old English poetry, though there are some features that

have been singled out as more or less distinctive. These range from the formal, such as a tendency toward complex sentences with multiple subordinate clauses (see Shippey 1972), to the influence of Latin models on lexis, syntax, and aesthetics (Sisam 1953) and his skill in interpreting the intellectual virtues of these sources within the expressive conventions of Old English verse. In terms of the thematic unity of the four poems, Anderson recognizes "penitentialism, sapientialism, and compunction" as guiding preoccupations, along with a sustained interest in the "continuing apostolic mission" (1983, 179), whilst Calder draws attention to the poet's stylistic self-consciousness and "devotion to the perfecting of the surface" (Calder 1981, 166). Few unsigned poems are now attributed to Cynewulf, though *Guthlac B* is sometimes included in the canon due to stylistic similarities (see Bjork 2013), a case made stronger by the fact that the ending (and a potential colophon) is missing from this poem.

If there is little that can (or should) be said about the individual who appended the name Cynewulf to these four poems, it is clear that the poet was extremely well versed in the literary cultures of his day, both Latin and vernacular, and that he was earnest in his evangelizing ministry, attempting to move the reader toward engaged contemplation of Christian themes through exacting attention to the construction of his verse. The most ingenious features of the four poems are the riddlic colophons that encode the name Cynewulf – and they have ensured a continued interest in this modest canon of an otherwise unknown individual. This is perhaps itself a measure of the success of a poet whose aim was not so much to be remembered for his artistic genius, as to ensure each reader paused to contemplate a message of salvation that he believed was applicable "æghwam … under lyfte" (to every person under the sky).

SEE ALSO: Anglo-Saxon Riddles; *Christ I, II, & III*; *Elene*; Exeter Book; Runes; Vercelli Book

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