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Rune Poem

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A rune poem is a verse exposition of the common names given to the individual characters of the runic alphabet, and examples of varying complexity survive from Anglo-Saxon England, thirteenth-century Norway, and late medieval Iceland.

The original tenth-century witness to the Old English *Rune Poem* was destroyed in the fire at the Cotton Library in 1731. We know that the poem was originally recorded on a single leaf (fols. 165a–b) in London, British Library, MS Cotton Otho B X, a manuscript described as "A Saxon book of divers saints lives and the Alphabett of the Old Danish letter" in the Cotton Catalogue of 1621. It is likely that the Elizabethan antiquarian John Joscelyn, also mentioned in the catalogue entry, was responsible for attaching the *Rune Poem* to this collection. Fortunately, the poem had already been copied by Humphrey Wanley before it was lost, and published in George Hickes's *Thesaurus* of 1705. The extent to which these early editors altered the layout and content of the poem has been a source of some debate, but it is likely that the rune names themselves were added as an aid to the reader sometime after the copying of the poem (Van Kirk Dobbie 1942; Halsall 1981). As the most recent editor concludes, there is little linguistic or stylistic evidence to support a date of composition much before the latter half of the tenth century (Halsall 1981).

The OE *Rune Poem* consists of 29 stanzas of between two and five lines, which describe in more or less enigmatic fashion the conventional names of the Anglo-Saxon runes. The poet deviates from the typical order of the *futhorc* in several places, including placing the rune *ear* ("earth" or "grave") at the end of the sequence, seemingly to conclude the poem on a meditative note. Whilst it has been suggested that the rune poem tradition as a whole developed "as an elementary guide to the *futhorc*, presumably designed to help the memory" (Page 1999, 63), in the case of the Old English poem the individual stanzas are far too developed to serve a purely mnemonic function (Shippey 1976). Whilst some stanzas are primarily descriptive – the rune named *ēoh* (yew) "is a tree rough on the outside" (st. 13) – others introduce a didactic element, or like stanza 9, play on the transformation of the object:

> ᚻ [Hægl] byþ hwītust corna; hwyrft hit of heofones lyfte,
>
> wealcaþ hit windes scūra; weorþeþ hit tō wætere syððan.
>
> [Hail] is the whitest of grains; it whirls from heaven's heights, flurries of wind blow it around; afterwards it turns to water.

The runic alphabet may well have provided the poet with a convenient list of proper nouns around which to compose a series of poetic excursions, bringing to bear received knowledge from a variety of sources of Anglo-Saxon learning. However, the *Rune Poem* has also been seen to encode a specifically Germanic set of values. Proponents of this view suggest that the Old English and Scandinavian poems all derive from a common Germanic ancestor – a so-called *ur*-poem – which encoded a system of belief as well as a list of names. In fact, the earliest witness to the tradition of versification is the ninth-century *Abecedarium Nordmannicum*, a piece of mnemonic doggerel that tells us

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nothing about the characterization of the rune names (Derolez 1954).

It is true, however, that the OE *Rune Poem* shares certain features with its later Scandinavian counterparts not accounted for simply by the similar names of many of the runes. For example, hail is also described as "the coldest of grains" in the Norwegian and Icelandic traditions, whilst "riding" is conceived of in terms of the contrasting experience of the horse and rider in all three versions. However, it is unclear whether these connections are the result of the three traditions deriving from a common archetype, or whether they result from a common stock of gnomic wisdom (see Clunies Ross 1990). What is apparent from comparison with the Scandinavian traditions is that certain Anglo-Saxon rune names have been more fully aligned with a Christian worldview. For example, the third rune is named as *þurs* (ogre) in the Scandinavian tradition, whilst in the OE *Rune Poem* it is named as *þorn* (thorn): an object that retains the violent associations of what was probably the original referent, whilst divesting it of pre-Christian connotations.

There are several additional runes in the Anglo-Saxon *futhorc* not present in the 16 rune younger *futhąrk*, and there is still some uncertainty surrounding their supplied names. The rune named *peorð* is described as a game, but the exact referent of this *hapax* is unclear. Debate continues as to the referent of the rune named *ior* – as a river-creature which takes its food on land, it may refer to an amphibian. Even when the rune name is not disputed, wordplay and shifting perspective are key features of the treatment of the runes (Hall 1977) and the most accomplished of the stanzas echo the Exeter Book riddles in their enigmatic play: the *āc* (or oak) feeds pigs (through its acorns) before traveling on the ocean (as a boat). This is a poet who manages to realign the multiple subjects of the runic alphabet with a Christian sense of the world in which all life points to the Creator, and which leads us from a celebration of wealth and aristocratic pursuits to the inevitability of the grave in which "blooms fade, joys depart, men fail."

SEE ALSO: Anglo-Saxon Riddles; Runes; Wisdom Literature

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