

Three Notes on Runes

Peorð, Eolh, and Eoh

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The Elder Futhark is of direct interest to Celticists because Celtic literacy is central to several serious theories of runic origin. The runes are first securely attested as a Germanic script, and the earliest clear runic finds belong to northern Germany and Scandinavia. But the alphabetic world from which runes may have emerged was not only Roman. It also included several Celtic or Celtic-adjacent writing traditions south of the Germanic North. Lepontic and later Cisalpine Gaulish were written in the Lugano alphabet in northern Italy. Gaulish was written in Greek letters in southern and central Gaul, especially from the later second century BC onward. Celtic communities also used or encountered Celtiberian, Gallo-Latin, Venetic, Raetic, Camunic, and other North Italic scripts across the Alpine and transalpine contact zone ^{1, 2, 3, 4}. This is why the North Italic thesis has repeatedly attracted runologists. Mees summarizes the older position clearly: Marstrander and Hammarström preferred North Italic derivation because those scripts are often closer to runes in letter-shape and direction of writing than classical Latin is; he also notes that Holger Pedersen and Marstrander already allowed Celtic tribes to act as transmitters ⁵. Mees himself goes further. If early or proto-runic writing predates the Roman Rhine-Danube frontier, then “the most likely model” is one of the scripts used by Celtic peoples in the last centuries BC ⁵. Zeidler offers a still more explicitly Celtic intermediary model: eastern La Tène vessel marks, coin marks, and short inscriptions may reveal a Celtic script, probably derived from Camunic or Venetic, which shows “remarkable similarity” to the futhark and may have transmitted an ultimately Etruscan alphabet northward ⁶. Fairfax gives a different but equally Celtic-mediated route, deriving runes from the Greek alphabet as used by Gauls around the middle of the first century BC ⁷. Stifter’s survey of early Celtic epigraphy is important here because it asks exactly where Celtic and early Germanic literacy could have interacted, and which unusual Celtic letter-forms may bear on the origin of runic writing ⁸. Crawford’s recent public synthesis follows the same general direction: he treats Alpine script traditions, especially Cisalpine Celtic/Lepontic material, as a very probable proximal source for many early runic features, while also allowing that the futhark may be eclectic rather than copied from one source ⁹. The realistic position is therefore this: the Elder Futhark is Germanic in its earliest secure use,

but several of the best origin theories place Celtic-literate groups, Alpine scripts, and Celtic-controlled routes of transmission near the center of its formation, with Celtic writers, in some models, first using the very alphabetic forms from which the futhark was later adapted.

The names of several runes are a separate problem. The shapes and sound-values of the runes may be studied through inscriptions and alphabet history. The names are known mostly from later manuscript traditions, especially the Old English Rune Poem, Gothic letter-name material, and the Scandinavian rune poems ^{10, 11}. Three names are especially problematic: ƿ Peorð, ʏ Eolh-secg, and ʒ Eoh. This paper does not claim to solve them. It proposes small improvements to the best existing hypotheses. The improvements are logical and semantic. They try to explain why the Old English rune-poem stanzas say what they say. They also try to keep phonology, manuscript evidence, and ordinary meaning close together.

ƿ = Peorð/*perþō:

The Old English Rune Poem says that Peorð is always “plega and hlehter,” play and laughter, where warriors sit together in the beer-hall ¹⁰. The usual problem is that Peorð is not otherwise a clear Old English noun. Gothic has the letter-name pertra, but that does not give a meaning by itself ¹¹. Griffiths’s best proposal connects Peorð with Old Irish bert. The Irish word has several senses. It can mean burden, clothing, covering, deed, exploit, trick, action, and also a move or play in a game. The phrase bert chluichi means a move in a game, and derivatives such as bertrach or bertlach can refer to a gaming-board ¹². The old issue is phonological. Irish bert begins with written b, while Peorð begins with p. Eska’s laryngeal-realism model can help resolve this issue. Under that model, the Celtic contrast was not simply voiced b versus voiceless p. The active feature was [spread glottis], so written Old Irish b may reflect a lenis voiceless stop, closer phonetically to [p] than the spelling suggests ¹³. This makes a perceived or borrowed form like pert phonologically natural. The semantic side then becomes very strong. Peorð need not mean “clothing.” It may have meant something in the area of play, game, move, trick, prank, or gambit. This directly explains plega as a near gloss. It also explains hlehter as the natural social result of play, trick, or prank. The beer-hall setting is then not decorative. It is the context in which such a word belongs. The missing evidence is still real. There is no independent Old English noun peorð meaning “play” or “trick.” But among the available hypotheses, Griffiths’s Irish bert theory, strengthened by Eska’s phonology and narrowed semantically to “play/trick/gambit,” gives the Old English stanza the cleanest sense.

Y = Eolh-secg/*algiz:

The later Norse name Ýr shows that yew-names could be transferred within the rune tradition, but the Old English evidence has priority here because it preserves Eoh and Eolh-secg as separate rune-names with separate stanzas, while the Younger Futhark preserves a reduced system in which the old Eoh rune no longer stands apart ¹⁰. The Old English Rune Poem says that eolh-secg lives most often in the fen, grows in water, wounds cruelly, and stains with blood anyone who grasps it ¹⁰. This does not sound like an elk as an animal. It sounds like a sharp marsh plant. The compound has usually been read as “elk-sedge” or “elk’s sedge.” The second element, secg, is helpful because Old English secg can mean a sedge-like plant, and it also overlaps with the semantic field of sword or blade ¹⁴. The first element, eolh, has often been connected with Proto-Germanic *algiz “elk.” The problem has been semantic. Why name a rune after an elk if the poem is about a fen plant? The answer may be that “elk” was never meant as a simple animal label here. It may have been part of a plant-name. The plant could be “elk-sedge” in two related senses. First, the shape of a sword-lily, iris, gladdon, or sedge-like blade plant can resemble the Y shape. Its lower leaves may form a fan. Its upper flowering form may branch or angle upward. This visual pattern can also suggest antlers. Second, a possessive name such as “elk’s sedge” is easier to understand if the plant was associated with elk-like animals in wetland habitat. This need not mean that elk specifically ate the exact plant meant by the poem. It is enough that European elk/moose are wetland browsers and that aquatic vegetation belongs to their feeding ecology ¹⁵. Modern *Gladiolus* is also called sword-lily and has sword-shaped leaves in upright fans, although the Old English plant need not have been the modern florist’s *gladiolus* ¹⁶. This strengthens the *algiz hypothesis, but in a narrower form. The best claim is not “Y means protection,” and not even simply “Y means elk.” The best claim is that the rune-name may have been preserved through an elk-sedge or antler-sedge plant-name: a sharp wetland blade-plant whose shape made the elk element visually intelligible, and whose habitat made ecological association with elk-like wetland browsers plausible. This explains the poem’s fen, water, wound, and blood. It also gives the rune-shape a role. The hypothesis remains modest because the independent plant-name evidence is not complete. But semantically it is stronger than the abstract “protection” theory, and stronger than treating *algiz as a bare animal-name.

Ƕ = Eoh/*īwaz:

The Old English Rune Poem identifies Eoh as the yew. It is rough outside, hard, firm in the earth, a keeper of fire, supported by roots, and a joy on the estate ¹⁰. The meaning “yew” is therefore much stronger than the meaning of Peorð. The problem is the phonetic value of the rune and the later forms of the name. Later manuscript forms such as Cweorð and the Gothic letter-name quertra, attached to a similar sign whose branches are slightly bent, have sometimes invited /kw/ explanations, but Cweorð belongs to the late Anglo-Saxon manuscript tradition, and the interpretable early uses of Ƕ still point more naturally to i/j and later ç/h values. For the oldest and least-specific Proto-Germanic reconstruction, *īwaz is the better heading. It represents the wider Germanic yew-word and matches the broader Indo-European and Celtic comparison better than a form already containing h. The Old English forms ēoh and īh, together with West Germanic h- and g-forms such as Old High German īha and īga beside īwa, still need explanation ¹⁷. They do not require the oldest Proto-Germanic rune-name itself to have contained h. Rather, as Mees notes, these forms may reflect later strengthening or velarization from an earlier *īw-, so that a Proto-West-Germanic form like *īhwaz remains relevant even if the pan-Germanic heading is *īwaz ¹⁷. Several scholars have proposed lost vowel values for Ƕ, including Antonsen’s [æ:] and Connolly’s [i(:)]. These proposals explain why the rune may once have had a separate place beside Ƿ Isaz, but the direct epigraphic evidence for those exact values is weak ¹⁷. The more convincing cluster is the high-front and palatal-glide cluster. Looijenga argues that the yew rune may have developed as a bind-rune of Ƿ i and ʰ j, with a value such as [ji(:)] or [i(:)j] ¹⁸. Grønvik’s [ç] proposal can be seen as belonging near the same phonetic path, not as a wholly separate solution. A sequence or transition like i/j can naturally move toward palatal friction in pronunciation. Mees’s comparison with later yogh also belongs here, since yogh could mark a palatal semivowel as well as voiced or voiceless fricatives ¹⁷. This lets the main proposals work together without forcing *īhwaz into the Proto-Germanic heading. The rune may have begun in a high-front or i/j zone. Its oldest name may be reconstructed as *īwaz, while later h- and g-forms of the yew word supplied a natural bridge to h, [ç], and x-like values in some branches. Thus the name does not merely identify the tree. It also helps explain why the rune could drift between ī, j, h, and palatal or velar fricative values without needing a lost [æ:] or [i] phoneme.

These three notes have the same method. They do not replace attestation with certainty. They use the attested poems and the best existing hypotheses more tightly. Peorð is best understood through play, trick, and game-action, with Old Irish bert providing the Celtic comparison and Eska’s laryngeal realism making the phonological match cleaner. Eolh-secg is best understood through elk-sedge as a sharp antler-like wetland blade-plant, visually comparable to the rune and ecologically associated with elk-like wetland browsers. Eoh is best understood through

*īwaz, a yew-name whose later West Germanic h- and g-forms help explain both the high-front and palatal-fricative sides of the rune. In each case, the improvement is small. But small improvements matter, because these names are not isolated labels. They are where rune-names, sound-values, plant names, Celtic contact, and manuscript learning meet.

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