

THE COMPLETE  
OLD ENGLISH  
POEMS



*Translated by*  
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*With an introduction by* TOM SHIPPEY

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## THE RUNE POEM

**T**his poem has led a charmed if precarious life. Its original home, Cotton MS B10, was largely destroyed by fire. The poem had been copied early in the eighteenth century by Henry Wanley for the *Thesaurus* of George Hickes, and the poem in modern editions is based on this transcription, which in several places is suspect (Page, 63). Shippey notes that the poem's purpose is "to provide a list of rune-names in a memorable and recitable form," but admits that "the length and complexity of its definitions seems too much for perfect mnemonic efficiency" (19). The poem is a kind of alphabet poem for the Anglo-Saxon runic *futhorc*, similar to other such poems in Icelandic and Norwegian. The OE word *run* has a variety of meanings, including "runic character, secret, counsel, mystery, advice, whispering, letter, writing." Halsall explains the central theme of the poem as follows: "The author of *The Rune Poem* recognized in the *futhorc* an opportunity to compose a poem about the temporal world in which he lived and its relationship to the eternal world in which he hoped and believed" (56). The runes in this translation are represented by bold capital letters followed by their OE names in italics; for the runes themselves in their original shapes, see Halsell or Shippey. The meanings of most of the OE names for the runes are well understood, but some are not. *Peorð* has been read as "chess pawn, dice-box, throat, apple-tree, dance, penis, pipe or flute, and nothing" (Halsall, 128; Shippey, 135; Niles, 2006, 26 ff.), and I have tried to capture some of this ambiguity in the translation. The *B*-rune is normally read as *Beorc*, "beech," but as Niles points out, the description does not fit that tree, and he argues for another *B*-word, *Boc*, which means both "beech" and "book," though this involves a complex and enigmatic shift of meanings in the verse (2006,

268 ff.). The meaning of the war-weapon *Yr* is also debated; I've included both "Bow" and "Battle-ax" as the most likely meanings. The ambiguity of some runes begins to approach that of the Exeter Book riddles. Since the meaning of the rune *Ior* is so much debated, and guesses include "eel, newt, beaver, serpent, and ocean" (see Halsell, 159, and Niles, 271 ff., who also suggests the possibility of *Ig*, "island"), I have left this verse as a miniature riddle. The last rune, *Ear*, is generally taken to mean "earth, grave," though the evidence for this name is much debated (see Niles, 274 ff., who argues for *Ea*, "alas!"). For more on the relation between riddles and *The Rune Poem*, see Sorrell and also Niles, 251 ff.

## The Rune Poem

**F** is for *Feoh*, a wealth of goods  
 In cash or cattle, a comfort to each man  
 Who should give it generously, not gather it in,  
 If he wants God's glory on Judgment Day.

**U** is for *Ur*, aurochs or wild ox, 5  
 Fierce and fearless with savage horns,  
 Moorland-stepper, wild-wanderer,  
 A bold attacker, a headlong harrower.

**Þ** is for *Þorn*, a sliver of sharpness, 10  
 A piercing of pain, a threat of thistle.  
 Don't lay a hand on nature's needle  
 Or lie down to sleep in a lap of thorns.

**O** is for *Os*, mouth and speech-maker, 15  
 Song-shaper, word-weaver,  
 Keeper of wisdom, comfort to man,  
 Hope and happiness to everyone on earth.

**R** is for *Rad*, riding the hard road. 20  
 In the meadhall everyone is an easy rider—  
 It's all talk and beer. It takes a brave man  
 To ride a powerful horse on mile-stoned paths.

**C** is for *Cen*, a torch of flame,  
 A blaze of brightness, a branch of fire.

This creature lights up the hall of heros  
Where princes rest in its welcome warmth.

**G** is for *Gyfu*, generosity and gift-giving, 25  
Which bring a man honor, glory, and grace.  
Praise comes to a man who gives to the poor  
A chance for hope from a helping hand.

**W** is for *Wynn*, the joy a man knows 30  
From wonder and wealth, not sorrow and woe—  
He stores up for himself an abundance of bliss,  
Prosperity and pleasure in the city stronghold.

**H** is for *Hægl*, hail from the storm-skies, 35  
The hardest of grains, the whitest of seeds.  
It descends in the air and strikes in the wind—  
In the end a riddle: the water-stone.

**N** is for *Nyd*, the need that binds 40  
The human heart, a heavy burden—  
But sometimes it heals the harried soul  
If a man makes out its meaning in time.

**I** is for *Is*, ice clear as glass,  
The slippery cold that escapes the clutch,  
The morning gem that melts at noon,  
The floor of frost, the glittering ground.

**J** is for *Ger*, the year's time of planting, 45  
The hope of harvest, when God's glory  
Arrives in the earth, the goodness of grain,  
The fulness of fruit for rich and poor.

**EO** is for *Eob*, the unsmooth yew, 50  
Wrinkled and rough, rooted and firm,  
Hard and hale, a wind-break by the house,  
A feast for the fire, a joy for the home.

**P** is for *Peorð*—play and laughter,  
Dice or chess pawn or power in the pants.

It brings pleasure to proud men  
Who make their moves in the meadhall. 55

**X** is for *Eolhx-secg*, a rush or reed  
Which grows in the fen with sharp strength  
To wound men. It brings burning blood  
To any foolish hand that would hold it. 60

**S** is for *Sigel*, the sun that sustains us,  
The hope of travelers from dawn to dusk.  
The seafarer follows the sun's road  
On a sea-stallion in his lookout for land.

**T** is for *Tir*, a star-sign, a token, 65  
Something for princes to trust in the sky—  
A clear constellation above the night-clouds.  
Keeping faith for its followers, it never fails.

**B** is for *Beorc*, birch, (beech or poplar),  
A fruitless tree which sends out suckers 70  
And shoots, becoming a canopy of branches,  
A bright crown of leaves under the curve of heaven.

**E** is for *Eb*, a hoof-proud horse  
Prancing on the road, a prince's joy.  
Rich riders mix words as they amble along; 75  
The restless at heart find comfort in a horse.

**M** is for *Mann*, mirth-maker, word-weaver,  
Dear to his loved ones, kith and kin,  
But death can break any human bond  
When God calls the bone-house back to the ground. 80

**L** is for *Lagu* where the seafarer sails—  
The ocean looks endless to the long-wave-rider.  
The unsteady sea-horse chafes at his bridle  
And suddenly the sailor is a friend of fear.

**NG** is for *Ing*, first king of the East-Danes, 85  
A legendary hero everyone has heard about.

He ruled well till he rode across the waves  
 With a wagon that walked on water behind him.

**ĀE** is for *Āepel*, the family homeland,  
 The precious ground, the place of fathers 90  
 And grandfathers before them, where a man  
 Can enjoy peace and prosperity in his own house.

**D** is for *Dæg*, the day dear to men,  
 The gift of God, the dawn and daylight  
 Lent by the Lord, the radiance of the sun, 95  
 Bringing hope and happiness to rich and poor.

**A** is for *Ac*, the oak tree rising from earth,  
 A precious sustainer as it feeds mast to pigs,  
 Who are food for our flesh. As a wave-walker  
 It rides the sea-road, testing itself on water. 100

**Æ** is for *Æsc*, a tall tree, a terrible weapon,  
 Prized by men. It holds its ground  
 In a battle-hand or walking the wave,  
 Resisting attack or attacking resisters.

**Y** is for *Yr*, some dangerous war-weapon, 105  
 Battle-ax or bow, slayer or shooter,  
 Bringer of blood. It rides hand and horse,  
 Flies straight to the enemy's head or heart.

**IO** is for *Ior*, the riddle of a river-fish  
 That kills its food fiercely and drags 110  
 Its dinner up on the land. It lives happily  
 In a home surrounded by water. Say what it is!

**EA** is for *Ear*, earth-grave, ground-home,  
 A horror to man when flesh falters,  
 Corpse cools, the bone-house breaks down, 115  
 Death comes calling, no time for counsel,  
 The richness of life turns to rot—man is mulched.