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Das Gandersheimer Runenkästchen

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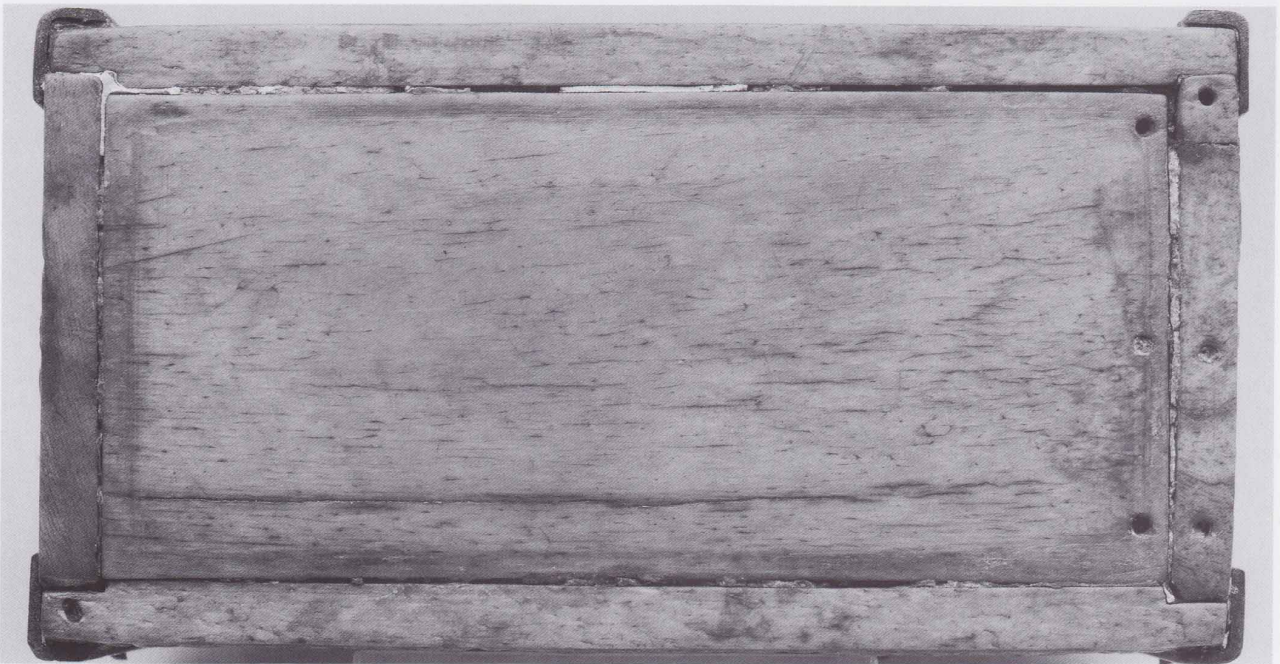
Photo-Dokumentation des Gandersheimer Runenkästchens



1: Vorderseite



5: Bodenrahmung mit Runeninschrift



6: Boden

The Runic Inscription of the Gandersheim Casket²

I. Introduction

At the symposium at Braunschweig it was established that the Casket's ornamentation is Christian (see other papers in this volume), therefore Casket and runic text may be interpreted against a Christian background. This conviction provided support for our idea that the runic text on the bottom frame might refer to the Casket's function, or rather, to its – now lost – contents.

The ornamentations are doubled, and also the runic text on the bottom frame is doubled; we find twice the same runic sequence on the long sides, and another sequence is repeated on the short sides. In our view, the scribe did so in order to render at least two different layers in the text, and to present at least two different meanings.

There are no word dividers in the inscription, so the text is not separated into words. Therefore one can interpret the textual sequence differently. On all four sides of the frame, one rune is invariably in the middle: the \star , known in runic literature as the star-rune. It can be understood as: 1. a rune indicating **g**,³ 2. the Christ monogram, 3. the sign of the cross, 4. a symbol for chrism: a holy unction made of oil and balsam. In this paper we will investigate the possible meanings of this sign in the inscription.

The dating of the Casket, late 8th/early 9th century, would place it in a wide-spread tradition of portable, so-called house-shaped or tomb-shaped caskets. Such a casket could be used as a reliquary, or a container for the host, or for holy oil: a *chrismale*.⁴ We compared the Gandersheim Casket with the

casket of Mortain, because it is approximately of the same date and origin, 8/9th century and from Anglo-Saxon England, and because both have a runic inscription.

The Mortain casket was discovered in the treasury of the collegial church at Mortain. The Gandersheim Casket came to the Braunschweig Museum in 1815. The history of both caskets before those dates is unknown, although the casket of Mortain may be mentioned in an account of 1741 in the annual of the collegial church, which is kept at the Mairie at Mortain. Here it is stated that „Le 25 avril, fête de saint Marc, on se rend à l'église Notre-Dame du Rocher: le sous-diacre, revêtu de l'aube, porte devant soi le livre des Evangiles, et, suivant l'usage, la petite châsse dorée“.

The inscription reads: **good helpe: æadan þiiosne ciismeel gewarahtæ**. This means: „may God help Æada who made this chrismale“. Now *chrismale*, here rendered as **ciismeel**, has, according to the *Mittelaltinisches Wörterbuch*, entry *chrismalis*, four meanings: 1. a *vas chrismatis*, a container for preparing or keeping chrism; 2. a *receptaculum eucharistiae*, a container of the consecrated host; 3. a *lindeolum candidum vel vestis candida baptismatis*, a piece of cloth used after baptism; 4. a *pallium altaris*, a cloth used for covering the altar. We assume that the first meaning was meant, and that **ciis** represented *chris*-.

Fernand Cabrol⁵ describes a *chrismale* as a flask containing the holy chrism, which should be carried in a *chrismarium* or a *chrismatory*, wrapped in a piece of linnen cloth, like reliques. He quotes several Latin texts on Irish saints, and it appears that the Irish monks carried a *chrismale* with them on their journeys. A box, containing the bottles with holy oil, or the eucharist, was hung from a chain around the neck under their clothes. The Mortain casket has attachments for a chain, whereas the Gandersheim Casket has none. It may have been carried in a sack, a *perula*, such as monks used to carry their books. The size of the Casket is small enough to allow it to be transported.

The Gandersheim Casket may have come from the Gandersheim Stift (hence its name), but this is uncertain. Much more problematic than its provenance is the fact that the bottom frame with the runes is a later addition. It might have been made in the early 19th century, before the Casket came into the possession of the Museum. The present frame with runes would then be a copy, and in that case any reading and interpretation would be hypothetical. However, we do not think the inscription a fake. For a fake, the runes are too well executed and the Old English text is too sophisticated. In the (early) 19th century, runic knowledge was quite sparse and certainly not up

¹ The first author, a runologist, was asked to discuss the runic legend at the symposium „Das sog. Runenkästchen aus Gandersheim“ 24–26 March 1999. Only a short time before the start of this symposium, it became clear to her that the part of the legend that can be read as **hælig æli** in all likelihood means „holy oil“, thus referring to the possible contents of the Casket, as a container of flasks with sacred unguents, i.e. holy oil. References to the object itself are not at all uncommon in runic texts, we have texts such as „comb“ on a comb and „footstool“ on a footstool. „Holy oil“ became the key to the further interpretation of the text. During the conference, the first and second author, a linguist, discussed the runological and linguistic problems and possibilities over a meal. They decided to tackle the problems together and to publish their results together. The discussions were continued by e-mail. The first author explored the runological and contextual backgrounds, whereas the second author focused on the linguistic problems.

² We wish to express our gratitude to the following persons for their advice on several specialist aspects of our paper: Arnold Angenendt, Klaus Düwel, Victor H. Eibern, Tette Hofstra, Ray Page, Gaby Waxenberger.

³ In this paper we use the transliteration **g** for the star-rune, although a transliteration **j** often occurs. This confusion is caused by the supposed pronunciation of initial *g*- in Old English and Old Frisian words. We will not go into this matter here any further.

⁴ Jan Frederik Niermeyer, *Mediae Latinitatis Lexicon Minus*, Leiden 1976, 177, lists the entry *chrismale* as a neuter noun, meaning „ampoule contenant le

chrême“. Cf. the inscription on the casket of Mortain: **ciismeel**, which has been interpreted as *chrismale*; see also Ray I. Page et al., *Art. Reliquary or Container for the host*, in: Leslie Webster and Janet Backhouse, eds., *The Making of England. Anglo-Saxon Art and Culture AD 600–900*, Exhibition Catalogue The British Museum London 1991, no. 137 (1991/1).

⁵ Fernand Cabrol, *Art. Chrismale*, in: *DACL* 3, 1913, 1478–1481.

to the quality of this inscription. Besides, in those days one would not find anybody with knowledge of Anglo-Saxon runes and 8th-century Old English and its dialects.

II. The frame with the runes

We agree with Ray Page that whoever made the inscription was a skilled craftsman. The inscription „is one produced by someone with a knowledge of runes or with a good exemplar before him“, such as Page suggested.⁶ This exemplar assumably was the original inscription. The frame with the runes is loose, i.e. it is not attached to the Casket. No holes have been drilled into it. On one side of the bottom plate are holes, which do not seem to have a particular function. The runes on the present frame give the impression of having been made with the help of a template.

III. Holy oil, sick-men's oil, and chrism

In this paper we will investigate the question of whether the Gandersheim Casket could have had the function of a container of holy oil, chrism, and sick-men's oil. We believe that the runic inscription on the base frame refers to these substances. This assumption was caused by a lead presented by Page.⁷ In his discussion of the runes he especially comments upon the central and symmetrical place of one of the runes, the so-called star-rune *, in the inscription. This rune, he wrote, might be „a chrism or form of the sacred monogram“. This turned out to be a fruitful observation, since it led to a sudden insight in both the inscription's and the object's function.⁸ The word „chrism“ triggered the first author to look up the entry *crisma* in the Anglo-Saxon Dictionary of Bosworth and Toller.⁹ They list under the entry *crisma*: „chrism, (...) n. an unction, (...) the chrism, unction or holy oil, used for anointing by the Roman Catholic church after baptism; *oleum chrismatis*.“ The crucial question became now: Could it be that the Casket were a container of holy oil, and that its inscription indeed said so?

Therefore we think it useful to start by giving the text Bosworth and Toller referred to, namely the so-called second Old English letter by Ælfric to bishop Wulfstan, headed *Quando Dividis Chrisma*: „Eála ge mæsse-preostas, mine gebrôpra, we secgaþ eow nu þæt we ær ne sædon, forþon-þe we to-dæg

sceolan dælan urne ele, on þreo wisan gehalgodne, swā swā us gewissaþ seó bōc; i.e. *oleum sanctum, et oleum chrismatis, et oleum infirmorum*, þæt is on Englisc, hālig ele, ôþer is crisma, and seóccra manna ele: (...)“.

Their translation reads as follows: „O ye mass-priests, my brethren, we will now say to you what we have not before said, because to-day we are to divide our oil, hallowed in three ways, as the book points out to us; i.e. *oleum sanctum, et oleum chrismatis, et oleum infirmorum*, that is, in English, holy oil, the second is chrism, and sick men's oil: and ye ought to have three flasks ready for the three oils; for we dare not put them together in one oil vessel, because each of them is hallowed apart for a particular service. With holy oil, ye shall mark heathen children on the breast, and between the shoulders, in the middle, with the sign of the cross, before ye baptize in the font water; and when it comes from the water, ye shall make the sign of the cross on the head with the holy chrism. In the holy font, before ye baptize them, ye shall pour chrism in the figure of the cross of Christ; and no one may be sprinkled with the font water, after the chrism is poured in.“

Another recorded letter by Ælfric to the monks of Eynsham elaborates on the holy chrism and on the different ways the holy oils should be consecrated:¹⁰ „On Maundy Thursday chrism is to be blessed by the bishop, because on that day the Lord passed down to his disciples the sacraments of the church. In the sacristy three small vessels should be filled with oil, and the bishop should mix balsam into the one that appears worthier of reverence than the others. It is stipulated that the first vessel, which is for the remedy of sick and afflicted members, should be blessed before communion, because this vessel signifies the ancient fathers, who possessed the great gift of healing powers. Then, when one ampoule has been blessed, the bishop alone shall communicate and, after receiving the sacrifice, bless the two remaining ampoules, because Christ alone offered his body to God the Father and drank the cup of his Passion, and afterwards the sacraments of his chrism and oil were established. Two vessels, moreover, should be blessed after the bishop's communion, one of which – in which the balsam was mixed – we understand to represent Christ, in whom mercy and truth have met each other; in the second is signified the body of Christ that exists under the new dispensation, that is, the church under the grace of Christ. Two of the vessels are consecrated in silence, that is, the first and the third; but the middle one, in which balsam was mixed, should be blessed aloud, because it is Christ we are proclaiming, as Paul says: We preach not ourselves, but Jesus Christ.“

Apparently there is a significant difference between the three oils. One difference between the chrism and the other two oils is the fact that chrism contains balsam. Basically, the oils differ because they have been consecrated and blessed in three different ways by the bishop, and at different times: the sick-men's

⁶ Ray I. Page, Art. Casket. The Inscription, in: Webster/Backhouse 1991 (note 4), no. 138 (1991/2).

⁷ Ray I. Page, Art. Gandersheim, Kästchen von, § 2: Runenkundliches, in: Heinrich Beck et al., eds., *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 10, Berlin/New York 1998 (1998/1), 424.

⁸ Later, when Page and Looijenga discussed the legend at length in Cambridge on 3 September 1999, it turned out that in English the word „chrism“ is ambiguous. It can be used instead of „chrism“, meaning the Christmonogram, and in this sense it was meant by Page. This fruitful lead in fact fathered a case of serendipity: a surprising outcome that was not intended or foreseen.

⁹ Joseph Bosworth and Thomas N. Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, Oxford 1898, repr. 1976, 170.

¹⁰ Christopher A. Jones, *Ælfric's Letter to the Monks of Eynsham*, Cambridge 1998, 129–130.

According to Leclercq,¹¹ baptism by applying holy oil and chrism is preceded by an exorcism, benedictions and other ceremonies. Oil and water are blessed by the bishop in the name of Christ, in an official liturgical ritual.¹² This is accompanied by a series of prayers concerning baptism: „consécration des eaux; abrenuntio des néophytes; onction baptismale et chrismation; prière sur l'huile des malades; prières pour les défunts. Ainsi, cette prière fait partie d'un rituel destiné à la célébration de rites publics et officiels; à la suite des formules de bénédiction à réciter sur l'huile et sur le chrême des baptêmes, une formule à réciter sur l'huile des malades: c'est bien un rituel liturgique“.

$\frac{C}{U}$ ritnepiisi* hīræliinm $\frac{C}{U}$ ** | hæli* æliea
1 5 10 15 20 25 30 33

The key to an understanding of the Gasket and its inscription is the cross formed by the four star-runes. By its very shape, the star-rune individually represents the Christ monogram and thus symbolizes Christ: and jointly, by their formal arrangement, the four star-runes in the inscription symbolize the cross and thereby Christ again. Now Christ (Lat. *Christus*, Greek *Χριστός*) is the Messiah (in Hebrew), i.e. the anointed one: *χριστός*. „The anointed“ is the (nominalized) perfect passive participle of *χρίω* „to anoint“. From the same verb the noun *χρίμα* or, more commonly, *χρῖσμα*, later *χρίσμα* „chrism“, Old-English *crisma* is derived, which the Oxford English Dictionary under the entry *chrism* defines as follows: 1. oil mingled with balm, consecrated for use as an unguent in the administration of certain sacraments in the Eastern and Western Churches; 2. a sacramental anointing; unction; 3. the ceremony of Confirmation, esp. as practised in the Eastern Church. Therefore the star-runes, everyone of them by itself as well as the four together refer to chrism.

¹³ Page 1991/2 (note 6); Page 1998/1 (note 7), 424.

What remains to be interpreted is **ea**. The rune ᚷ represents the Old English diphthong *ea*.²¹ The simplest and indeed straightforward interpretation of *ea* is that it represents OE *ēa* „water“. Water is one of the substances needed in sacramental rituals, notably in baptism, together with two unguents, holy oil and chrism (*oleum sanctum*, *oleum chrismatis*). Note also the reference to water in Ælfric's instructions in his Epistle *Quando dividis Crisma* (see above part III).

²¹ Cf. Ralph W. V. Elliott, *Runes. An Introduction*, Manchester 1989, 44; Ray I. Page, *An Introduction to English Runes*, London 1973, 45.

One may wonder why the Old English words for water *ēa* is used rather than the much more common word *wæter*, the word employed by Ælfric in the instructions cited above. Though „water“ and „running water“ are the first meanings given in relevant dictionaries,²² the word is much more commonly used with the meaning „stream, river“. Perhaps the rarity of the word in the intended meaning (a meaning which is, however, fully determined by the context, which does in no way support reference to a stream) made it attractive to the designer of the inscription by lifting it to a higher style.

But there is a better reason for writing *ea* rather than *wæter*: there was only room for a single rune. This room was not merely available but had to be filled, given the required symmetry around the star-rune and the asymmetry of the line without the rune *ea*, in which case there would be four runes on one side of the star-rune, and three runes on the other side. Perhaps the alliteration of *ēa* with *æli* made the word even more attractive

V.2 The long sides

Since the sequence **critneþi** is uninterpretable as it stands, we conjecture that the runecarver omitted one rune in the first word of the long side. We suggest that the omitted letter is *s*, and read: **cri[s]tne þi**. This, we think, is the equivalent of Latin *baptizo te*.

Three runes follow, **isi**, and then the star-rune *✱*, which we take to symbolise the name of Christ, and also the cross, and chrism, which is one of the two holy oils used in baptism (see above part III). If the preceding runes **isi** may be abbreviations for *i(n) si(gno)*, we might read this first sequence, followed by the star-rune symbolising the cross, as *cristne þi in signo crucis*, „I christen thee in the sign of the cross“. We are aware that we obtain thus a mixture of Old English and Latin.

The anointing with three substances, holy oil, chrism and water, took place in rituals summarily named christening, OE *cristnian*. It seems impossible, with the interpretation of *æli*, and of *hælig æli* in particular, not to see the beginning of the long sides, **cri[s]tne** in our reading, as an imperfect rendering of the base of this verb, with one rune, *s*, omitted. The omission of runes is a phenomenon that occasionally happens in runic writing. The form *cristne* we understand as the 1st person singular indicative of **cristnan* (actually it should read *cristnie* or *cristnige* so we have to assume this verb form to have been remodeled after the first class of weak verbs).²³ We assume that the scribe accidentally omitted one rune, because we now count eleven signs on one side of the star-rune and twelve signs (including the two unintelligible signs in the corner) on the other side of the star-rune. We think that the number of signs on both sides of the star-rune should be twelve, in symmetry to equal the twelve disciples of Christ.

²² John R. Clark Hall and Herbert D. Meritt, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, Cambridge 1960⁴, s.v. *ēa*; Bosworth/Toller 1889 (note 9), s.v. *eá*

²³ We thank Gaby Waxenberger for tracing the occurrences of *cristnian* and its inflections in the Dictionary of Old English.

V.2.1 On **cri[s]tne þi** „I christen thee“

We take **cri[s]tne þi** to be the Old English translation of the beginning *signo te* of the Latin formula used in the ritual of confirmation: *signo te signo crucis et confirmo te chrismate salutis, in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti*,²⁴ and Angenendt interprets *signare, confirmare* as „Siegelung, Kreuzsignierung auf der Stirn“. ²⁵ In medieval Latin *signare* has a slightly more general meaning than is suggested by the confirmation formula. It means „to make the sign of the cross over a person or a thing“. ²⁶

More specific meanings only arise from the use in specific rituals. Applied to a child or a heathen, *signare* could mean „to baptize“ or „to confirm“; applied to an object or a substance, it would mean „to make holy, suitable for use in Christian ritual“. This effect of a general meaning taking on a specific meaning when used in a particular way is also evident for the Old English verb *cristnian* from the way it is glossed and its use illustrated, in, for instance, the Anglo-Saxon dictionary by Bosworth and Toller, under the entry *cristnian*: „to christianize, catechize; catechizare“. In medieval Latin, *catechizare* means „to instruct in Christianity, a Christian character, on the people“, and in combination with OE (*folc*) *fullian* „to baptize people“, a reasonable interpretation, viz. meaning-in-use, could be „to instruct the people in Christianity, in matters Christian“, namely as a preparation for their subsequent baptism.

Also the first meaning given for OE *cristnian* in the Anglo-Saxon dictionary by Clark Hall and Meritt²⁷ is not the literal meaning but one of the meanings-in-use: „to anoint with chrism (as a catechumen), christen, baptize“. It may already be evident from the above sections that this particular meaning-in-use is of special significance in our interpretation of the inscription and the entire Casket.

The runes that follow, **þi**, we understand as a representation of OE *þē* „thee“, i.e. you (accusative singular). The sequence **þii** may otherwise be interpreted as marking the length of the vowel in OE *þē*. A reading *i(n) sig(no crucis)* „in the sign of the cross“ would also be available without the *i* for *in*, as the *signo crucis* of the confirmation formula cited above shows. In any event, such possibilities, which cannot have escaped a contemporary learned contemplator of the inscription, add to it an interesting double entendre.

V.2.2 On **sighiræli**

What follows in the text is more difficult. Without Ælfric's instructions, cited above, perhaps the solution would never have been found. With them, we knew what to look out for. Since an occurrence of *æli* is only a short distance away, we only needed to compare the sequence **sighiræli** to the oils

²⁴ J. Höfner and Karl Rahner, eds., *LThK*² 4, s.v. *Firmung*.

²⁵ Arnold Angenendt, *Bonifatius und das Sacramentum initiationis*, in: *Römische Quartalschrift* 72, 1977, 133–183, at 144: *signare, confirmare* „Siegelung, Kreuzsignierung auf der Stirn“.

²⁶ Niermeyer 1976 (note 4), 970.

²⁷ Clark Hall/Meritt 1960 (note 22).

named by Ælfric: *hālig ele, crisma, sēocra manna ele*. It is easy to guess that **sighīræli** is the same as *sēocra (manna) ele*, i.e. „sick men's oil“, with „men“ omitted, thus „oil of the sick“. Note that we read the sequence **si** twice, in *signo* and in *sighīræli*.

Though easy to guess, the explanation is not without difficulties. Let us start at the end. The last three runes, as already said, we take to be *æli* „oil“. On the interpretation *sēocra ele* the preceding word should end in *-a*. We assume to have here a contraction of both words, to be taken as: **sighīræ(æ)li**. In fact, the ending *-a* has been dropped, and the spelling *æ* was preferred, since *æli* starts with *æ*. Besides, the ending *-a* in *sēocra* is unaccented and may have been pronounced as a *Murmelvokal*.

Much more complicated is the remainder of the spelling **sighīræ**, if we want to compare it with *sēocra*. The first problem is the exact value of the star-rune. It is usually transliterated **j**, although it might as well indicate **g**. In the inscriptions *JH1N7R (Dover) and *I1H1I1 (Thornhill III) the star-rune has the value *j*, or **jisheard** and **jilsuip** respectively. In the Old Frisian inscription of Westeremden A, however, the value may be either **j** or **g** in **adujislu** and **jisuhidu**, or **adugislu** and **gisuhidu** respectively, because palatalisation of *g* before front vowels also happened in Old Frisian.

The runic legend of Gandersheim was influenced by the Anglo-Saxon runic tradition (because of the occurrence of the rune representing **ea**). The star-rune as indicating the Christ monogram may have had a strong impact on the inscription as a whole and on the transliteration of the rune as **g** in particular. Therefore, and because of the reading **hælig** we venture to take the star-rune as indicating **g** and to read **sighīræli**.

As for *sighīræli* being the same as ordinary OE *sēocra ele*, one difficulty is the employment of **gh** where we expect the rune for **c**. But this difficulty is not unsurmountable. We have to remember that by the ornamental symbolic ground plan of the inscription, the star-rune had to occur in this word. The phonetic values of the star-rune and of the rune **c**, though not normally identical, were at least related by their place of articulation. We may compare the problem to other inscriptions, such as **kyningc** in the Ruthwell cross inscription. In this inscription we find a variety of spellings indicating palatal back consonants, either voiced or voiceless, „in a remarkably careful way“. ²⁸ The initial sound of **kyningc** is represented by the rune **✱**, which represents a voiceless back consonant. Ball also observes that „**c** and **g** (in the Ruthwell Cross inscription) are used for the voiceless palatal stop (...) and the (voiced) palatal semi-vowel (cf. NE yet), respectively“ (for instance in **riicnæ**, **kyningc**, **ic** etc.). Ball suggests that this rune is to be interpreted as an alternative form of **ʁ**, rather than as something contrasting with it.

Therefore, the use of the star-rune, which is very similar to the initial rune in **kyningc**, for a *k*-sound in the Gandersheim inscription was apparently not entirely out of the question.

The rune **h** may have been added to the rune **g** to underline the fact that a somewhat unusual spelling²⁹ was being used for the word *sēocra*; the addition of *h* to a velar or palatal consonant would, although rare, likewise not be unheard of: „Occasional use of *ch* seems to be without phonetic significance, as it is found for both *c* and *ċ*; it is fairly frequent in *Ru.2* (e.g. *folches*, *stenc̃hes*)“.³⁰ If the star-rune, indicating **g**, had not exerted the influence just reconstructed in the representation **sighīræli**, but an ordinary rune **c** had been used, then *sighīræli* would have been *sicīræli* or, with the preceding reconstructive steps, *sicræ æli*, or rather *sicra æli*. Since there are other indications of a northern origin of our inscription, we may take this **gh** as a runic counterpart of the „fairly frequent“ Northumbrian *ch*.

There are at least two other instances of a scribe having difficulties in representing confusing palatal sounds. In the Anglo-Saxon inscription of the Maughold stone on the Isle of Man, with runes reading **blagcmon**, the scribe apparently meant to write the well-recorded Old English masculine personal name *Blæcmon*.³¹ A second stone, Maughold 2, has only **lgmo**, probably the same name in another spelling: „blagcmon“.

Let us then turn to the rune **i** in **sighīræ**. On the evidence of ordinary OE *sēocra*, we expect *seoghīræli*, with *eo* for *ēo*. However, as noted repeatedly, we are dealing with a northern text, and therefore we have to assume Anglian smoothing, in particular the change of *ēo* into *ē* before a velar consonant.³² Therefore, where Ælfric has *sēocra*, in a northern text we must expect *sēcra*. If our observation is correct that long *ē* appeared more similar in quality to short *e* (namely, if **i** in **pi** stands for long *ē*), then our inscription would have to show the rune **i** in this position. That is what we find. In short, **sighīræli**, already reconstructed as *sicræ æli*, with **i** for **[ē]**, i.e. smoothed **[ēo]**, and thus phonetically most probably **[sēkire ?li]**, is with a high degree of precision the equivalent of Ælfric's *sēocra (manna) ele*.³³

²⁹ It so happens that the phonetic value of the rune **h**, as voiceless aspiration, suits this letter well to the indication of a voiceless reading of the preceding rune. But it must be doubted that such phonetic considerations guided the runographer devising the text. One will remember that in Italian orthography an *h* is added to *c* and *g* before palatal vowels (*i*, *e*) to give them a hard (velar) reading: *amici* [a.'mi:.tʃi] „(male) friends“ but *amiche* [a.'mi:.ke] „(female) friends“; *funghi* [ˈfuŋ.ɡi] „mushrooms“, plural of *fungo*, not *fungi* [ˈfuŋ.dʒi].

³⁰ Campbell 1959 (note 16), § 427, n. 1. *Ru.2* is Campbell's abbreviation for Rushworth Gospels: „Northumbrian gloss to most of Mark, Luke, and John“. *ċ* represents the affricate developed from the palatal stop *c*.

³¹ Page 1973 (note 21), 146–147.

³² Campbell 1959 (note 16), § 227.

³³ There was also *sīoc* alongside *sēoc*; as a matter of fact, the earliest occurrences cited in the OED (s.v. *sick*) are *sicne mon* „sick man“ (acc.) and *sioca* „the sick one“, both in King Aelfred's *Boethius* (ca. 888). The genitive plural of this form would, with Anglian smoothing, be *sīcra*.

²⁸ Sir Christopher Ball, Inconsistencies in the Main Runic Inscriptions on the Ruthwell Cross, in: Alfred Bammesberger, ed., Old English Runes and their Continental Backgrounds, Heidelberg 1991, 17–123, at 117.

V.2.3 On **inmc/u**

The 21st and 22nd runes can be transliterated either as **m c** or as **m u**. The 22nd rune has the same shape as the initial rune of the long side. Both sequences **m c** or **m u** are difficult to explain. In the corner are two signs, no runes, but perhaps tachygraphic signs or tyronian notes, or abbreviation signs known from manuscripts. They may well be completely wrecked or rests of abraded runes.

The sequence **inmc/u**, presents a difficulty to our interpretation in that they do not in a natural fashion contribute to the Old English text. The idea that they, together with the signs on the corner of the frame, begin some sort of an abbreviation has been held before. In view of the confirmation formula *Signo te signo crucis et confirmo te chrismate salutis, in nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti* one might want to see **inm** as an abbreviation of Lat. *in nomine* or its Old English equivalent *in naman* (or *in noman*). Bischoff³⁴ offers several medieval abbreviations for Lat. *nomen*: *no* (French), *nmn* (Spanish), *nom* (all others), all overlined. Lindsay³⁵ lists only one occurrence of *nm* for *nomen*, in an 8th-century manuscript from Bobbio.

VI. We arrive at the following transcriptions and interpretations:

A: **c|uri[s]tneþiisi[gn]o|* (= crucis) (sig)hīræliinmc/u** | hælīgæliea**

or

B: **c|uri[s]tneþii[n]([nomine])s[ancti]* (= Iesu Christi) (sig)hīræliinmc/u** | hælīg (* = chrism) æliea**

When we scrutinize the possible ambiguity in the first rune of the long side, we may read **crit** or **urit**. When reading **uritne þi** this might be the equivalent of the Latin formula *ego te linio, ic þi urite*. We then obtain the combination of both formulae used during baptism and the subsequent confirmation of a person: **cri[s]tne þi: baptizo te (in nomine sancti Iesu Christi)** etc. and **uritne þi: ego te linio (in nomine sancti Iesu Christi; signo te signo crucis)** etc.

We think that the scribe may have wanted to express two different meanings. „I baptize thee in the name of Jesus Christ“; and „I write on thee³⁶ the sign of the cross“. The text continues with the mentioning of the assumed holy ingredients of the Casket: sick men's oil, holy oil, chrism.

³⁴ Bernhard Bischoff, *Paläographie des römischen Altertums und des abendländischen Mittelalters* (= Grundlagen der Germanistik 24), Berlin 1979, 197.

³⁵ Wallace Martin Lindsay, *Early Irish Manuscript Scripts*, Hildesheim/New York 1971, 33.

³⁶ There is a problem, though, in the writing of **urit** if this should be taken as a synonym for *writ*. In the Anglo-Saxon runic tradition, the runographer would have used the rune **w þ** for rendering the initial sound, not **u**. Using the rune **u** may point to Latin influence. In Latin, there existed no letter *w*, instead *u* was used. This is also found in Continental runic inscriptions, for instance in **uraitruna** „write runes“ in Neudingen Baar. This additional complication may suggest that if only one of our two readings was intended, the reading **cri[s]tne** takes precedence over the reading **uritne**.

We interpret the text as follows: „I baptize you in the sign of the cross / in the holy name of Christ. I write (on) you the sign of the cross (with) chrism. Sick (men's) oil (in the name of Christ). Holy oil, chrism, water.

VII. Backgrounds

The formula that accompanied the anointing with holy oil, also called „huile des catéchumènes“, was *ego te linio oleo salutis in Christo Jesu Domino nostro, ut habeas vitam æternam. Amen*. The priest „writes“ the sign of the cross on the person's chest and between the shoulders. The anointing with chrism is performed by „writing“ the sign of the cross on the forehead, and by saying the following formula: *Deus omnipotens, Pater Domini nostri Jesu Christi, qui te regeneravit ex aqua et Spiritu Sancto, quique dedit tibi remissionem omnium peccatorum ipse te liniat Chrismate salutis in eodem Christo Jesu Domino nostro in vitam æternam*.³⁷

The OE verb *writan* was used in phrases referring to holy oil and the holy cross. In Cockayne³⁸ we find a text concerning the curing of „elf disease“. Here the combination of *writan*, the holy cross, and *oleum infirmorum* is found.

„Against elf disease: take bishopwort, fennel, lupin, the lower part of enchanters nightshade, and moss or lichen from the hallowed sign of Christ, and incense, of each a hand full; bind all the worts in a cloth, dip it thrice in hallowed font water, have sung over it three masses, one *Omnibus sanctis*, another *Contra tribulationem*, a third *Pro infirmis*. Then put gledes in a glede pan, and lay the worts on: reek the man with the worts before nine in the morning, and at night, and sing a litany, and the credo, and the Pater noster, and write Christs mark on each of his limbs (*writ him cristes mæl on ælcum lime*).“

On page 349 ff. we find: „If a man hath elf hicket (...). Then work up a drink thus; font water, rue, sage, cassuck, dragons, the netherward part of the smooth waybread, feverfew, a head of dill, three cloves of garlic, fennel, wormwood, lovage, lupin, of all equal quantities; write a cross three times with the oil of unction (*writ iii crucem mid oleum infirmorum*), and say: *Pax tibi*. Then take the writing, describe a cross with it over the drink (*nim ðæt gewrit, writ crucem mid ofer ðam drence*), and sing this over it: *Dominus omnipotens, pater domini nostri Iesu Christi, per impositionem huius scripturae et per gustum huius expelle diabolum a famulo tuo*, here insert the name, and the Credo, and Paternoster. Wet the writing in the drink, and write a cross with it on every limb, and say: *Signum crucis Christi conservet te in vitam æternam. Amen*“.

The Roman Catholic church applied a double anointing in baptismal rites, or *sacramentum initiationis*: one by the priest with

³⁷ Fernand Cabrol, *Art. Huile*, in: *DACL* 6, 1925, 2779–2791, at 2779.

³⁸ Thomas O. Cockayne, *Leechdoms, Wortcunning and Starcraft of Early England* 2, London 1865, 345–351.

oleum sanctificatum, that is holy oil, followed directly or at a later date by a second anointment, which could only be performed by the bishop, who touched the believer on the forehead with holy chrism („writing the sign of the cross“, see above): *manus impositio et crismatis confirmatio*. This is the ritual of confirmation: „the unction with the holy chrism takes place when the confirmants present themselves with their parrain and marraine, whereupon the bishop says: *summitate pollicis dextrae manus Chrismate intincta: N. signo te signo crucis (quod dum dicit, producit pollice signum crucis in frontem illius); deinde prosequitur: et confirmo te Chrismate salutis. In nomine Patris + et Filii + et Spiritus + Sancti. Amen*“.³⁹ Since only the bishop could perform this second ointment, called confirmation, and since he was not always present on all occasions, the second anointing could take place much later, or not at all. In order to perform this duty, the bishop had to travel through the whole of his diocese, and, in order to keep up with the baptizing of newborn children and new converts, he had to do this on a regular basis. On these journeys he had to carry the flask with chrism with him, in all likelihood in a container, perhaps a little box, called *chrismale*.

Sick men's oil, *sēocra manna ele*, is the extreme unction, originally meant to treat those who suffer from illness, in order to make them well again. This oil is applied in the name of the Lord; it is a *redemptio mortuorum*, a salvation of the dead.

The application of sick men's oil was performed by making the sign of the cross on the sick person's eyes, ears, nostrils, mouth, hands, feet and loins. The formula accompanying the rite of the extreme unction is: *per istam sacram unctionem ego te linio*, „through this holy oil I write on you“.⁴⁰ The anointment was applied „in the name of Christ“.⁴¹ The priest also uses the formula *baptizo te in nomine patris et filii et spiritus sancti* when baptizing the sick („*Krankentauf*“⁴²).

The term „extreme unction“ is met with for the first time in a text from Reims in the early 7th century. At the end of the 8th century texts concerning the application of extreme unction and baptismal rites appear, such as in the Irish ritual of Dimna in the 9th century, and the Irish missal of Stowe from the 9th or 10th century.

VIII. Some additional remarks concerning certain runes

VIII.1 The yew rune: ƿ

From analysis of extant runic texts, the yew rune ƿ may perhaps be taken representing either the sound value of a diphthong: [ij], or as a semi-vowel [j], or as a simple variant of the rune i, likewise to be pronounced [i] or [i̥]. As to its form,

Looijenga⁴³ suggests it to be a bindrune of l and ʝ. In the Gandersheim inscription it appears to indicate just an [i] sound, such as can be noticed in other inscriptions: Freilaubersheim (Germany) **daʔina**; Loveden Hill (England) **sīþebæd**; Nebensstedt (Germany) **gliaugiz**; Dover (England) **jīslheard**. These inscriptions are dated between the 6th and the 9th/10th centuries.

VIII.2 The double-barred rune h ᚷ and the star-rune *

One of the short sides displays the first rune **h** as damaged or abraded, since one of its headstaves is missing. The second short side displays the rune **h** a bit cramped because of its occurrence at the very edge of the frame. No doubts have arisen concerning its identity. This double-barred variety as well as the star-rune occurred in England, in Frisia and in Germany from the 6th century onwards.

If the star-rune * is regarded as a Christ monogram (*chi-rho*), it seems to be composed of the letters I, Greek for Ἰησοῦς and X for Χριστός. In fact, the star-rune might be a ligature as well (although much disputed), made up of runic X (**g**) and l (**i**). Already Page⁴⁴ suggested the star-rune in the inscription to be „a chrism or form of the sacred monogram“ for Christ (a simplified *chi-rho* without the *rho*). Christograms like these occur as early as the Roman catacombs, for instance in the Callisto catacomb. See Leclercq⁴⁵ on the two ways of indicating the Christ monogram: by using the Greek letters X plus l, or X plus P. So, actually, we do not have *chi* and *r* in „christ“ or „chrism“, but just *chi*. We mentioned earlier that in **ciis-meel** on the Mortain box we seem to lack a rune **r**, but when comparing it to the star-rune or Christogram (actually presenting a bindrune of **g** and **i** = **gi**) in Gandersheim, a similar background may be assumed.

VIII.3 The rune ea

The final rune on the short sides is the rune **ea**, only known from the Anglo-Saxon rune row. Considering its presence at the end of the line and perhaps at the end of the whole inscription, it may point to a symbolic function, such as „the end“ or „eternity“. A comparable symbolism occurs in the four interpretations of the star-rune.

The rune ƿ is, as far as is known, strictly Anglo-Saxon, since it occurs epigraphically only in England and in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts.⁴⁶ It is supposed to be a rather late development, the last of the four additional runes that go to make up the 28-

³⁹ Cabrol 1925 (note 37), 2782.

⁴⁰ Cabrol 1925 (note 37), 2783.

⁴¹ Leclercq 1922 (note 11), 1030.

⁴² See Arnold Angenendt, *Geschichte der Religiosität im Mittelalter*, Darmstadt 1997, 465–466.

⁴³ Tineke Looijenga, The yew rune in the Pforzen Inscription, in: Alfred Bammesberger, ed., *Pforzen und Bergakker. Neue Untersuchungen zu Runeninschriften* (= *Historische Sprachforschung/Historical Linguistics, Ergänzungsheft 41*), Göttingen 1999, 80–87, with references.

⁴⁴ Page 1998/1 (note 7), 424.

⁴⁵ Henri Leclercq, *Art. Chrisme*, in: *DACL* 3, 1913, 1481–1534, at 1485 ff.

⁴⁶ René Derolez, *Runica Manuscripta Revisited*, in: Bammesberger 1991 (note 28), 85–106 (repr. from 1954); Elmar Seebold, *Die Stellung der englischen Runen im Rahmen der Überlieferung des älteren Futhark*, in: Bammesberger 1991 (note 28), 439–569.

letter *fuporc*. Also in manuscripts containing Anglo-Saxon rune alphabets of the 28-letter type, the rune is found as the last letter, sometimes given the value *z*, obviously because **z** is the last letter in the Latin alphabet.⁴⁷ Page⁴⁸ mentions the *fuporc* of the so-called Salzburg-Alcuin manuscript (Vienna), dated to the middle of the 8th century, which contains the rune **ea**. Epigraphically the rune occurs as early as the 8th century (Ruthwell, Thornhill II, Thames *scramasax*).

We sometimes find the sequence **æa** and **ea** represented by two runes, for instance in Mortain: **ƿƿ**, **æ** and **a** in **æadan**, and on the Franks Casket we have **ƿƿ** and **a** in **giupeasu**. The rune **ȝ** appears epigraphically on the Thornhill II stone in **eadred** and **eateinne**, on the Ruthwell Cross in **(bih)ea(l)[d]u** and **fearran**, on the Dover stone in **jīslheard**, and as the final rune, the 28th, in the Thames *scramasax fuporc*.

In 1995, Ray Page added a postscript to a reprinted article from 1961;⁴⁹ there he suggests that the form of the rune originated as a bindrune of **e** plus **a**, **ƿƿ**. The runographer who invented the rune **ea** **ȝ**, simply dropped the first stem of **e** and the lower arm of **a**. This must be the solution, especially since there is more evidence for runes originating from bind-runes, such as the star-rune and probably also the yew rune.⁵⁰

IX. Star-rune and number mysticism

Perhaps we should point to the possible presence of sacred numbers in this inscription. Numbers such as four (four evangelists, four Church Fathers) and twelve (twelve apostles) are so obviously present in this inscription that one cannot neglect them. Both clusters of runes or signs, twelve (including the omitted **s**) and four, can be found on either side of the star-rune, on the long and the short sides.

It was clear to the copyist that the star-rune should be in the middle of the frame's four sides. This rune is so obviously at the centre and has been placed so geometrically in the inscription that one cannot escape the impression that it should be regarded as the central symbol of the text, and at the same time it can be interpreted in different ways, i.e. it has several meanings. We find in the *Sacramentarium Gelasianum Vetus* that it is required to make the sign of the cross over the font water. In texts of around 800, we see that this should be done four times.⁵¹ Mind that in our inscription the star-rune occurs four times.

⁴⁷ See for instance Ray I. Page, *The Old English Rune ear*, in: Ray I. Page, *Runes and Runic Inscriptions. A Collection of Articles*, Woodbridge 1995 (first published 1961), 71–86, at 74; Ute Schwab, *Die Sternrune im Wessobrunner Gebet* (= *Amsterdamer Publikationen zur Sprache und Literatur*), Amsterdam 1973, 33, 35, 46, fig. 8, 9, 14, presenting an *De inventione litterarum* type and an *isruna* type; see also Seebold 1991 (note 46), 531ff.

⁴⁸ Page 1995 (note 47), 71–72.

⁴⁹ Page 1995 (note 47), 51.

⁵⁰ Looijenga 1999 (note 43).

⁵¹ Rouwhorst 1995 (note 12), 159–160.

When counting either from left to right or from right to left, the Christ monogram, i.e. the star-rune, should be on the thirteenth place. Among his twelve disciples, Christ is depicted as the thirteenth person. The short sides display the star-rune in the middle as well, with four runes on each side, symbolizing the number of the four evangelists or the four Fathers of the Church. Our inscription counts 24 runes/signs on a long side, and 9 runes on a short side, which makes 33 runes, perhaps pointing to Christ's lifetime. When not counting the star-rune, but including the one missing rune, we count on one long side: 24 runes/signs, and on both short sides 16 runes, which adds up to 40. This may point to the 40 days before Easter, the *quadragesima*. During this period one prepares oneself for baptism, which takes place on Good Friday.

X. Conclusions

We conclude that the Gandersheim Casket was a container of holy oil. We arrive at this conclusion through analysis of the runic text, which we interpret as follows: „I baptize you in the holy name of Christ / in the sign of the cross. I write (on) you the sign of the cross (with) chrism. I write on you the sign of the cross (with) sick (men's) oil. (I baptize you with) holy oil, chrism and water. (I confirm you with) chrism and I write on you the sign of the cross“.

An important feature of our reading of the inscription is the double interpretation of the four star-runes which are arranged in the middle of each side to form a cross. We read them both as symbols and as ordinary runes. We understand the arrangement as „making the sign of Christ's cross“ with the symbol of Christ the Anointed. The very fact that the rune was used in an ornamental symbolic way may have exerted a certain force on the structure of the text and the assignment of a phonetic value to each star-rune occurrence.

The contents of the box, which we consider to have been flasks with holy oil and chrism, were used for baptizing and for the ointment of ailing people. Chrism represents Christ; holy oil represents the Church. Hence our conviction that the house-shaped Gandersheim Casket was used as a container for oil and chrism.

The bishop consecrates the holy chrism, the oil of catechism and the sick men's oil every year at Maundy Thursday. Angenendt⁵² mentions that outside Rome the practice of confirmation was first witnessed in Anglo-Saxon England. The venerable Bede attached great value to the confirmation; the bishops should confirm even in the tiniest and remotest villages. Boniface, as a missionary bishop, introduced in the eighth century the confirmation to the Continent as well. The fact that we find this Northumbrian or Mercian box on the Continent, and that it seems to have been preserved in a monastery, Gandersheim, may be seen against the background of the introduction of the

⁵² Angenendt 1997 (note 42), 472.

confirmation ritual and the pouring of chrism into the font water. The date of the box and the introduction of the new ritual of consecrating font water with chrism coincide: late 8th/early 9th century.

Angenendt⁵³ mentions that Boniface founded his first dioceses east of the Rhine, and in doing so he reduced the dimensions of the existing dioceses. This would enable the bishop to complete his confirmation duties during his visitation rounds. Angenendt also observes that Boniface and Willibrord both consecrated auxiliary bishops (Chorbischöfe) to meet with the growing demand for confirmations.

The Gandersheim Casket may have been part of the professional equipment of a bishop. In the second half of the 9th century the confirmation practice decreased in frequency and even came to a halt. The Casket is dated to the late 8th/early 9th century, so it could have served its function for a while, and after the confirmation practice ended, it may have found its way into a monastery such as Gandersheim.

We may assume that the inscription has its origin in a learned Christian context. Such an origin is not at all strange for an Anglo-Saxon runic inscription; one may compare the inscription on St Cuthbert's Coffin (dated to 698),⁵⁴ and on the Franks' Casket (8th century), displaying both Latin and vernacular texts in runes.

We place the Gandersheim Casket and its inscription in an ecclesiastical context of the time around 800. The learned impression reminds of monastical letter- and wordgames, such as is displayed by the *Notae sancti Bonifatii*, riddles, and the changing of characters, as in the runic inscription of the Franks Casket.

The dating of the Casket fits well into a context such as described above. The addition of chrism to the font water is met with for the first time in literary sources from the late 8th and early 9th centuries.⁵⁵ Angenendt (in a letter dated 2. August

1999) mentions that the Carolingian liturgical reform requests the priests to come to the cathedral on Maundy Thursday to collect the holy oil. After 800 a specific rule says that at least one priest of the deaconry should come to fetch it.⁵⁶ It stands to reason that the sacred oil was poured into an ampoule and subsequently was kept and transported in a casket.

If one wonders why the text referring to chrism etc. was written on the Gandersheim Casket, this introduction of the new ritual may have been the cause. And that the text was written with runes may find an explanation in the fact that the mixing of font water with chrism spread quickly among Frankish and Germanic Christians, according to Rouwhorst,⁵⁷ and was introduced in Rome only rather late (ca. 1000). As is evident from the prayer accompanying the ritual, the purpose of mixing the font water with chrism was to increase the water's (and in that way the baptism's) holiness and power.⁵⁸

The localization of the Northern English provenance of the Casket suggested by its iconography (see elsewhere in this volume) is fully supported by the linguistic analysis: Several features of the text – *hælig* for *hālig* „holy“, *æli* for *ele* „oil“, the smoothing of *eo* in *sighir(ae)* for *sēocra* – prove it to be written in early Anglian (Northumbrian). This is in harmony with the well-known missionary efforts of Northern England in the 8th and 9th centuries, supporting an interpretation of the Casket as belonging to a missionary bishop working on the heathen front of the recently conquered Saxon Parts of the Franconian Kingdom and Empire, the „Sachsenmission“.

Abbreviations:

DACL	Fernand Cabrol and Henry Leclercq, eds., Dictionnaire d'Archéologie Chrétienne et de Liturgie
DOE	Dictionary of Old English
LThK	Lexikon für Theologie und Kirche
NHG	New High German
OED	Oxford English Dictionary
OHG	Old High German

⁵³ Angenendt 1997 (note 42), 472.

⁵⁴ See Ray I. Page, Roman and Runic on St Cuthbert's Coffin, in: Page 1995 (note 47), 315–326.

⁵⁵ Rouwhorst 1995 (note 12), 157.

⁵⁶ Cf. Angenendt 1977 (note 25), 141.

⁵⁷ Rouwhorst 1995 (note 12), 158.

⁵⁸ See the texts in Rouwhorst 1995 (note 12), 140–143.

Zusammenfassung: Die Runeninschrift des Gandersheimer Kästchens

Die Runeninschrift auf den Bodenleisten des Runenkästchens von Gandersheim ist trotz klarer Lesbarkeit der einzelnen Runen, erheblichen Umfangs und zweimaliger Ausfertigung bisher ohne plausible Interpretation geblieben. Sie wird in diesem Beitrag neu gelesen und interpretiert. Dabei ergeben sich eindeutige Bezüge zur ursprünglichen Funktion des Kästchens.

Wir deuten die in Kreuzform viermal angebrachte Sternrunen aufgrund ihrer eigenen Gestalt (als Christus-Monogramm) und der Form ihrer Anbringung (in Kreuzform) als Hinweis auf Christus, zugleich aber auch als Textrunen, nämlich in traditioneller Weise als **g** bzw. **j**, wofür wir nach dem Usus der altenglischen Manuskripte **g** transkribieren.

Eine gewisse mehrfache Beziehbarkeit zeigt sich auch in dem dieses **g** verwendenden Text selbst. Unsere Hauptlesung und -deutung ist die folgende:

Langzeilen: **critneþi i si* hīr[æ] æli i nm c**

Kurzzeilen: **hæli*æliea**

Die Kurzzeilen bieten den direkten Schlüssel zum Verständnis des Textes. Sie zerlegen sich folgendermaßen in Wörter, freilich nur, wenn wir den Text als Zeugnis des frühen englischen (nordhumbrischen) Dialekts des Altenglischen auffassen:

hæli* æli ea bzw. **hælig æli ea**

Hier bedeutet *hælig æli*, wofür in klassischem Westsächsisch *halig ele* stünde, „Heiliges Öl“, und *ea* „Wasser“. Beide Substanzen verweisen auf die heiligen Sakramente, insbesondere die Taufe und die Firmung; die weiteren benötigten Substanzen wären Chrisma, worauf hier durch den mehrfachen Christusbezug der Inschrift (insbesondere das Christusmonogramm in der Mitte der Kurzzeilen) bereits verwiesen ist, und Krankenöl. Der Bezug der Stern- bzw. **g**-Rune auf den Gesalbten wird durch die Symmetrie der Vierzahl der Runen links und rechts der Sternrunen als Christusmonogramm unterstrichen; die Vier ist eine Christuszahl, vor allem durch die Evangelisten, in deren Mitte Christus bekanntlich in zahlreichen illuminierten Handschriften dargestellt ist.

Die Langzeilen ergänzen wir um ein Zeichen, **s**, und zwar nach dem Sinn, aber auch aufgrund numerologischer Überlegungen, indem sich nur so die Christuszahl Zwölf (zwölf Apostel) als Zahl der Zeichen links und rechts des Christusmonogramms erzielen läßt. Wir zerlegen den Text folgendermaßen:

cri[s]tne þi i si* hīr[æ] æli i nm c

Dabei fassen wir die Runenfolge **i si*** einerseits mit ihrer Sternrunen und deren Bezug auf das Kreuz aus vier Sternrunen als *in signo crucis*, andererseits als Teil von **þi** (für *þē* mit langem *e*) und von **si* hīr[æ] æli** als *sighīr[æ] æli* auf. Letzteres steht in nordhumbrischem Dialekt als *sic(i)ra æli* (mit langem *i* aus anglicher Ebnung) für „sick men's oil, Krankenöl“; im klassischen Westsächsisch heißt die Substanz *sēocra* (*manna*) *ele*. Das ist die beim Sterbesakrament verwendete Salbsubstanz. Am Anfang der Langzeilen sehen wir in **cri[s]tne þi** (bzw. **þii**) den Beginn der Sakramentsformel *cristnie þe* „I christen thee, ich segne (taufe, firme usw.) dich“. Im Schluß der Langzeilen, **i nm c**, sehen wir vor allem, aber nicht ausschließlich eine Abkürzung für *in nomine Christi* bzw. *in naman Cristes*. Insgesamt deuten sich die Langzeilen in dieser Auffassung folgendermaßen, wobei die Kurzzeilen die alternativen Substanzen anzeigen:

Langzeilen: „Ich segne/taufe/firme (usw.) dich im Zeichen des Kreuzes (unter Verwendung von Krankenöl) im Namen Christi“ und

Kurzzeilen: (alternativ zu verwenden) „Heiliges Öl, (Chrisma), Wasser“

Differenzierungen der Sakramentsformel kommen zustande, wenn man, wie es vorgeschlagen wurde, die erste Rune nicht als **c**, sondern als **u** (für *w*) liest. Damit erhält man insbesondere den Anfang des altenglischen Verbums *writan* „schreiben“ und somit die Andeutung einer Übersetzung von lateinisch *ego te lineo/linio* (*oleo salutis in Christo Iesu*) etc.

Was die Herkunft des Runenkästchens angeht, so weisen unsere Lesungen und Deutungen der Inschrift wie ja auch die Ikonographie auf Nordengland; insbesondere die hier erstmals bezeugte Schreibung **æli** für *ele* „Öl“ weist auf ein hohes Alter des Textes. Zudem erhalten wir aber erstmals einen direkten Hinweis auf die Funktion des Kästchens: Es handelt sich um ein tragbares Behältnis für die geweihten Substanzen zur Verabreichung der Sakramente. Die wahrscheinlichste Gesamtinterpretation ist die, daß das Kästchen einem Bischof im Gebiet der Sachsenmission des gerade – im späten 8. und frühen 9. Jahrhundert – nach Osten erweiterten Fränkischen Reichs auf den Reisen in seiner Diözese als tragbares Behältnis für die geweihten Salbsubstanzen zur Spendung der Sakramente diente. Diese Interpretation stimmt zu den wohl bekannten missionarischen Anstrengungen Nordenglands im 8. und 9. Jahrhundert.