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Photo-Dokumentation des Gandersheimer Runenkästchens

1: Vorderseite
Tineke Loijenga and Theo Vennemann

The Runic Inscription of the Gandersheim Casket

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 #1, known in runic literature as the star-rune. It can be understood as: 1. a rune indicating g. 2. the Christ monogram. 3. the sign of the cross. 4. a symbol for chrisma: 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 widespread 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. 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 collegiate 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 collegiate church, which is kept at the Mairie in 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: aadan þiosne ciismeel gewarhta. This means: „may God help Æad who made this chrismale“. Now chrismale, here rendered as ciismeel, has, according to the Mittelalterlichen 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 linteolum 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 this represented chrism.

Fernand Cabrol describes a chrismale as a flask containing the holy chrism, which should be carried in a chrismarium or a chrisomatory, wrapped in a piece of linen cloth, like relics. 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 chêrêmë. 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).

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“9, such as Page suggested.6 This exemplar assum-
ably 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 𐀩, 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: „Edāl ge mæsse-predatas, mīne gebrūpra, we
seggāp eðow nū þæt we ær ne sædon, forþon-þe we to-dæg

no. 138 (1991/2).
6 Ray I. Page, Art. Gandersheim, Kästchen von, § 2: Runenkundliches, in:
Heinrich Beck et al., eds., Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde 10,
7 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 ambigu-
ous. It can be used instead of „chrismor“ 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.
8 Joseph Bosworth and Thomas N. Toller, An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, Oxford
1898, repr. 1976, 170.

scoelan daelan ûrne ele, on þrêo wilsan gehâlgodne, swâ swâ
us gewissâsæ ðêo bôc: i.e. oleum sanctum, et oleum
chrismatis, et oleum infirmorum, þæt is on ðêliscg, hâlîg ele,
ôper is crisma, and sædca manne ele: (…)“.

Their translation reads as follows: „O ye mass-priests, my bre-
thren, 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 mem-
bers, 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 dispen-
sation, 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 dif-
ferent ways by the bishop, and at different times: the sick-men’s

10 Christopher A. Jones, Ælfric’s Letter to the Monks of Eynsham, Cambridge
oil before communion, the other two thereafter. Chrism represents Christ himself, whereas the holy oil represents the Church.

According to Leclercq, 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. This is accompanied by a series of prayers concerning baptism: „consécration des eaux; abrenuntio des néréphytes; onction baptismale et chrismation; prière sur l'huile des malades; prières pour les défints. Ainsi, cette prière fait partie d'un rituel destiné à la célébration de rites publics et officiels; à la suite des formules de bénéédiction 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“.

IV. The Gandersheim runic legend, transliterated:

<table>
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The forms of the first and 22nd runes are ambiguous; one may read either c or u. This ambiguity is caused by the fact that the sidetwig starts a little below the top of the headstaff, which is not an isolated feature. In 1991, Ray Page transliterated the first rune as u and the 22nd as c, whereas in 1998 he analyzed both runes as either u or c.13

The key to an understanding of the Casket 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 therefore 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 χρίνω „to anoint“. From the same verb the noun χρίμα or more commonly χρίσμα, 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, even of them by itself as well as the four together refer to chrism.

V. Readings and interpretations

V.1 The short sides
We take the star-rune to represent g and we transliterate the inscription as hæfigælae.

In the sequence above we obtain the OE word hæfig. Separating the part æli from the surrounding text of the two short sides, we arrive at the following division: hæfig æli ea.

V.1.1 On hæfig, OE hælig „holy”
With an interpretation of hæfig as hælig „holy”, we see the name, hælig ele, of one of the three unguents cited in Ælfric’s instructions, on how to apply the three sacramental unctions. The spelling (hælig instead of hælig) points to a Northern dialect of Old English; the OED shows it to be Northumbrian.14

V.1.2 On æli, OE ele „oil”
We read the four occurrences of æli as Northern equivalents of what was generally written ele, æle, later æle in Old English, the loanword meaning „oil”, from Lat. oleum. The word has not been recorded in this form before. But æ (or ae) is an occasional spelling to represent the mutation of long and short a. But æ is also a frequent spelling for ò. The fi nail – of *oil, the form in which Lat. oleum, late Lat. olim must be assumed to have been borrowed in order to account for the umlaut of the stressed a, should be preserved in early texts, especially Northumbrian ones. Thus, if our analysis is correct, we have here an archaic Old English occurrence of this loanword from late Latin. It is also the earliest attestiation; up to now the oldest texts preserving the word were, according to the OED, entry ele, the Lindisfarne Gospel (ca. 950, æle) and the Saxon Looedhoms (ca. 1000, ele).

V.1.3 On the rune ea, interpreted as ṣa „water”
What remains to be interpreted is ea. The rune ṣ represents the Old English diphthong ea. The simplest and indeed straightforward interpretation of ea is that it represents OE ṣa “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 Chrisma (see above part III).

113 Gabry Wakenburger did some research into occurrences of hælig and she found cognates in the Durham Rituall (1669). In the Glossary there on page 69 are listed: hælig, hælgi, hælg, hælgi, hælgum, hælga, hælge, hælgena etc.

12 NE oil continues a Middle English reborrowing from Old (Northern) French: cf. OED: s.v. oil


14 Campbell 1959 (note 16), § 259, with number 1.

15 See OED: s.v. ele

16 Vl. a > æ before an / later in the same simple word (cf. also OHG oil, NHG Öl „oil”); later in Old English (and in most German dialects) context-free ae > e.

17 Campbell 1959 (note 16), § 369.

One may wonder why the Old English words for water ēa is used rather than the much more common word waer, the word employed by Ælfric in the instructions cited above. Though waer and running water are the first meanings given in relevant dictionaries, 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 waer: 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-run and the asymmetry of the line without the rune ea, in which case there would be four runes on one side of the star-run, and three runes on the other side. Perhaps the alliteration of ēa with æl made the word even more attractive.

V.2 The long sides
Since the sequence cristnepi is uninterpretable as it stands, we conjecture that the rune-carver omitted one rune in the first word of the long side. We suggest that the omitted letter is s, and read: cri[s]tne pi. This, we think, is the equivalent of Latin baptizō te.

Three runes follow, isi, and then the star-run ċ, 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) sig(no), we might read this first sequence, followed by the star-run symbolising the cross, as cisstne pi 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 similarly named christening, OE cистian. It seems impossible, with the interpretation of æl, and of hæling æl 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 *cistian (actually it should read cristnie or cistigne so we have to assume this verb form to have been remodelled after the first class of weak verbs). We assume that the scribe accidentally omitted one rune, because we now count eleven signs on one side of the star-run and twelve signs (including the two unintelligible signs in the corner) on the other side of the star-run. We think that the number of signs on both sides of the star-run should be twelve, in symmetry to equal the twelve disciples of Christ.

V.2.1 On cri[s]tne pi. I christen thee
We take cri[s]tne pi 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 confirmare te christiane salutis, in nomine Patris et Fili et Spiritus sancti.24 and Angenendt interprets signare, confirmare as Siegelung, Kreuzsieglinierung 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 cirstnian from the way it is glossed and its use illustrated, in, for instance, the Anglo-Saxon dictionary by Bosworth and Toller, under the entry cirstnian: 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 fullan, 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 cirstnian 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, pi, we understand as a representation of OE þēor, i.e. you (accusative singular). The sequence pil may otherwise be interpreted as marking the length of the vowel in OE þēor. 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 for. Since an occurrence of æl is only a short distance away, we only needed to compare the sequence sighiræl to the oils.

24 J. Höfler and K. Rahner, eds., LThK4, 4, s.v. Firmung.
26 Niemeyer 1976 (note 4), 970.
27 Clark Hall/Meritt 1960 (note 22).
named by Ælfric: hālig ele, crisma, séocra manna ele. It is easy to guess that sighðrale is the same as séocra (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 sighðrale.

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 ælī „oil”. On the interpretation séocra ele the preceding word should end in -a. We assume to have here a contraction of both words, to be taken as: sighðra(a)lī. In fact, the ending -a has been dropped, and the spelling æ was preferred, since ælī starts with æ. Besides, the ending -a in séocra is unaccented and may have been pronounced as a Murmelvokal.

Much more complicated is the remainder of the spelling sighðra, if we want to compare it with séocra. 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 #14H7TR6X (Dover) and #14H7N1O (Thornhill III) the star-rune has the value j, or jisheard and jilsuid respectively. In the Old Frisian inscription of Westremen A, however, the value may be either j or g in adujislu and jisuidi, or aduquislu and jisuidi 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 hālig we venture to take the star-rune as indicating g and to read sighðrale.

As for sighðrale being the same as ordinary OE séocra 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 kynigc 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 kynigc is represented by the rune X, 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 rilcnæ, kynigc, ic etc.). Ball suggests that this rune is to be interpreted as an alternative form of X, rather than as something contrasting with it.

Therefore, the use of the star-rune, which is very similar to the initial rune in kynigc, 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 séocra; 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 c; it is fairly frequent in Ru.2 (e.g. folches, stanches)”.30 If the star-rune, indicating g, had not exerted the influence just reconstructed in the representation sighðrale, but an ordinary rune c had been used, then sighðrale would have been siciræ or, with the preceding reconstructive steps, sicraæ ælī, or rather sieræ ælī. 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 blacmgon, the scribe apparently meant to write the well-recorded Old English masculine personal name Blaecmon.31 A second stone, Maughold 2, has only jgmo, probably the same name in another spelling: „blacmgon”.

Let us then turn to the rune i in sighðra. On the evidence of ordinary OE séocra, we expect seoghðra(e), with eo for eo. However, as noted repeatedly, we are dealing with a northern text, and therefore we have to assume Anglian smoothing, in particular the change of eo into ei before a velar consonant.32 Therefore, where Ælfric has séocra, in a northern text we must expect sēocra. If our observation is correct that long ei appeared more similar in quality to short e (namely, if i in ði stands for long e), then our inscription would have to show the rune i in this position. That is what we find. In short, sighðral, already reconstructed as sicraæ ælī, with i for ði, i.e. smoothed [œ], and thus phonetically most probably [sikrê ði], is with a high degree of precision the equivalent of Ælfric’s séocra (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 deviating 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:ki], (male) friends; but amiche [a.mi:ke], (female) friends; funghi [fung:ki], mushrooms; plural of fungo, not fungo [fung:dg].

30 Campbell 1959 (note 16), § 427, n. 1: Ru.2 is Campbell’s abbreviation for Ruthworth Gospel. „Northumbrian gloss to most of Mark, Luke, and John”. c represents the affricate developed from the palatal stop ç.

31 Page 1973 (note 21), 146-147.

32 Campbell 1959 (note 16), § 227.

33 There was also sōc alongside sōc; as a matter of fact, the earliest occurrences cited in the OED (a.v. sick) are sicore mon „sick man” (acc.) and sicco „the sick one”, both in King Aelfred’s Boethius (ca. 880). The genitive plural of this form would, with Anglian smoothing, be sicra.
V.2.3 On imc/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 imc/u, presents a difficulty to our interpretation in that they do not in a normal 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 imn as an abbreviation of Lat. in nomine or its Old English equivalent in namin (or in noman). Bischoff offers several medieval abbreviations for Lat. nomen: no (French), nnm (Spanish, nomin (all others), all overlined. Lindsay 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]tnepis[gno] (c= crucis) (s)ighiraelimnc/u’’
| hastigael ea

B: c-uri[s]tnepis[nn] (c)nomine [s]artii (c= Iesus Christi) (s)ighiraelimnc/u’’ | hastig (c= chrism) aeliea

When we scrutinize the possible ambiguity in the first rune of the long side, we may read crt or urit. When reading uritine p[í] this might be the equivalent of the Latin formula ego te linio, ic pi urit. We then combine the addition of both formulae used during baptism and the subsequent confirmation of a person: crt[s]tnep [í]: baptism te (in nomine sancti Iesu Christi) etc. and uritine p[i]: ego te linio (in nomine sancti Iesu Christi; signo te signum 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 thee” the sign of the cross”. The text continues with the mentioning of the assumed holy ingredients of the Casket: sick men’s oil, holy chrism.

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 aeternam. 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 Jesus Christi, qui te regeneravit ex aqua et Spiritu Sancto, qui te sanctificamus omni potestate et aeternitati tibi in Chrismo, et in domino nostro in vitam aeternam.51

The OE verb wrihtan was used in phrases referring to holy oil and the holy cross. In Cockayne we find a text concerning the curing of „elf disease”. Here the combination of wrihtan, the holy cross, and oleum infirorum 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 words in a cloth; dip it thrice in hallowed font water, have sung over it three times, one Omnibus sanctis, another Contra tribulationem, a third Pro infirmis. Then put a glede in a glede pan, and lay the words on: seek the man with the words 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 mael on aelcum lime).”

On page 349 ff. we find: „If a man hath elf hicket (…). Then work up a drink thus; font water, rue, sage, cassock, 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 ofunction (writ iii crucem mid oleum infirorum), and say: Pax tibi. Then take the writing, describe a cross with it over the drink (nim dæt gewrit, writ crucem mid ofer dæm drance), and sing this over it: Dominus omnipotens, pater domini nostri Iesu Christi, per impositionem huinis scripturae et per gustum huinis expelle diabolum a famulo tuo, here insert the name, and the Credo, and Pater noster. Wet the writing in the drink, and write a cross with it on every limb, and say: Signum crucis Christi conservet te in vitam aeternam. Amen.”

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

52 Bernard Bischoff, Paläographie des römischen Altartums und des abendländischen Mittelalters (= Grundlagen der Germanistik 24), Berlin 1970, 197.
53 Wallace Martin Lindsay, Early Irish Manuscule Scripts, Hildesheim/New York 1971, 33.
54 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 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 uratuna „write runes” in Neudingen, Bavra. This additional complication may suggest that if only one of our two readings was intended, the reading c[ri][s]tnep takes precedence over the reading uritine.
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 imposito et crismatis confirmatio. This is the ritual of confirmation: "the anointing with the holy chrism takes place when the confirmants present themselves with their Parrain and Marraine, whereupon the bishop says: summiat peopolis dextrae manus Christum intincta: N. signo te signo crucis (quod dum dicit, producit pollice signum crucis in frontem illius); deinde prosequitur: et confirmo te Chrismata salutis. In nomine Patris + et Fili + et Spiritus + Sancti. Amen".39 Since only the bishop could perform this second anointment, 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 baptism 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 christmase.

Sick men's oil, sēōca 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 man'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 ("Krankentaufe"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: Y

From analysis of extant runic texts, the yew rune Y may perhaps be taken representing either the sound value of a diphthong: [i:j], or as a semi-vowel [i], or as a simple variant of the rune I, likewise to be pronounced [i] or [j]. As to its form, Looijenga43 suggests it to be a bindrune of / and 9. In the Gandersheim inscription it appears to indicate just an [i] sound, such as can be noticed in other inscriptions: Freilauferheim (Germany) da†ina; Loveden Hill (England) si†ebad; Nebenstedt (Germany) gi†augiz; Dover (England) jis†heard. These inscriptions are dated between the 6th and the 9th/10th centuries.

VIII.2 The double-barred rune h H and the star-rune ★

One of the short sides displays the first 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 χ, Greek for Χριστός and X for Χριστός. In fact, the star-rune might be a ligature as well (although much disputed), made up of runes X (g) and I (i). Already Page44 suggested the star-rune in the inscription to be a "chrismon 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 I, or X plus P. So, actually, we do not have chi and r in "christ" or "chrismon", 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 runic 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 T 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), 2762.
40 Cabrol 1925 (note 37), 2763.
41 Leclercq 1922 (note 11), 1030.
44 Page 1998b/1 (note 7), 424.
letter ēhporc. 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. Page 46 mentions the ēhporc 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 aa and ea represented by two runes, for instance in Mortain: Ḵ, æ and a in aæadan, and on the Franks Casket we have ḱr and a in giugeaus. The rune T appears epigraphically on the Thornhill II stone in eaedred and eateinne, on the Ruthwell Cross in (bih)ea[l]i[gu] and fearran, on the Dover stone in fisheard, and as the final rune, the 26th, in the Thames scramasax ēhporc.

In 1995, Ray Page added a postscript to a reprinted article from 1961, 47 where he suggests that the form of the rune originated as a bindrune of e plus a, ḱr. The runegrapher who invented the rune ea T, 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 bindrune, such as the star-rune and probably also the yew rune. 48

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. 49 Mind that in our inscription the star-rune occurs four times.

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: 23 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 you on 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 anointing of ailing people. Chism represents Christ; holy oil represents the Church of Christ; the confirmation 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. Angenendt 50 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


49 Page 1995 (note 47), 51.

50 Looijenga 1999 (note 43).

51 Rouwhorst 1995 (note 12), 159–160.

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.

Angenendt 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), 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 monastic letter- and wordgames, such as is displayed by the Notae sancti Bonifati, 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. 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. 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, 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.

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 - hælīg for hellig „holy”, æl for ele „oil”, the smoothing of eo in sighir(æ) for sæbjora – prove it to be written in early English (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.
57 Rouwhorst 1995 (note 12), 158.
58 See the texts in Rouwhorst 1995 (note 12), 140–143.
Zusammenfassung: Die Runeninschrift des Gandersheimer Kästchens


Wir deuten die in Kreuzform viermal angebrachte Stemmure aufgrund ihrer eigenen Gestalt (als Christus-Monogramm) und der Form ihrer Anbringung (in Kreuzform) als Hinweis auf Christus, zugleich aber auch als Texturne, nämlich in traditioneller Weise als q bzw. j, wo wir nach dem Usus der alten angelsächsischen Manuskripte q transkribieren.

Eine gewisse mehrfache Beziehbarkeit zeigt sich auch in dem dieses q verwendenden Text selbst. Unsere Hauptsache und -durchsetzung ist die folgende:

Langzeilen: crînþþis þîrælie
Kurzzeilen: hælþ þælia

Die Kurzzeilen bieten den direkten Schlüssel zum Verständnis des Textes. Sie zerteilen sich folgendermaßen in Wörter, freilich nur, wenn wir den Text als Zeugnis des frühen angelsächsischen (nordisch-norddeutschen) Dialekts des alten angelsächsischen auffassen:

hælþ þælia ðæ bzw. hælþ þælia ðæ

Hier bedeutet hælþ þælia, wofür in klassischem Westsächsisch hælþ þælia stünde, „Heiliges Öl“, und ðæ „Wasser“. Beide Substanzen verweisen auf die heiligen Sakramente, insbesondere die Taufe und die Firmung; die weiteren benötigten Substanzen wären Chrysma, worauf hier durch den mehrfachen Christusbezug der Inschrift (insbesondere das Christusmonogramm in der Mitte der Kurzzeilen) bereits verwiesen ist, und Krankenhülle. Der Bezug der Stemmurq-Rune auf die Gesetze wird durch die Symmetrie der Vierzahl der Runen links und rechts der Stemmure als Christusmonogramm unterstrichen; die Vier ist eine Christuszahl, vor allem durch die Evangelisten, in deren Mitte Christus bekanntlich in zahlreichen illuminierten Hand- schriften dargestellt ist.

Die Langzeilen ergänzen wir um ein Zeichen, ð, 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]nne þi i stþ þir[a] æli i nm c

Dabei fassen wir die Runenfolge i stþ einerseits mit ihrer Stemmurq und deren Bezug auf das Kreuz aus vier Stemrunen als in signo crucis, andererseits als Teil von þi (für þæ, mit langem æ) und von stþ þir[a] æli als tighir[a] æli auf. Letzteres steht in nordisch-norddeutscher Dialekt als sic(i)ra æli (mit langem i aus anglofriesischer Ehnung) für „sick man’s oil, Krankenöl“; im klassischen Westsächsisch heißt die Substanz seocra (manche) æle. Das ist die beim Sterbesakrament verwendete Salzsubstan. Am Anfang der Langzeilen sehen wir in cri[s]nne þi (bzw. þii) den Beginn der Sakramentsformel cristne þæ, „christen thee, ich segne (taufe, firme usw.) dich“. Im Schluß der Langzeilen, i nm c, sehen wir vor allem, aber auch nicht ausschließlich eine Abkürzung für in nomine Christi bzw. in noman 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 Krankenhülle) im Namen Christi“ und Kurzzeilen: (alternativ zu verwenden) „Heiliges Öl, (Chrysma), Wasser“

Differenzierungen der Sakramentsformel kommen zustande, wenn man, wie es vorgeschlagen wurde, die erste Rune nicht als c, sondern als ð (für ðæ) liest. Damit erhält man insbesondere den Anfang des mehrsprachigen Verbums wrifan „schreiben“ und somit die Ausstellung einer Übersetzung von lateinisch ego te lineo/linio (olea salutis in Christo lesu) etc.