

Old English Rune Poem (OERP)

(Icelandic and Norse ones to be added)

I do not present an exact facsimile but an approximation as follows.

In the left column, the drawing of the rune is like the one of the original. The associated Latin letter is found to the left of the rune (as in the original). The name of the rune, above the drawing, is at the same place as in the original, but it is written with modern characters. For instance, rune Wen is written in the original a bit like 'pen' because 'w' was written at the time similarly to 'p'. Classically, the 'f' and the 's' are also quite different, and I put modern characters for them as well.

In Maureen Halsal's edition, the accents on the letters have been added, and this is already an interpretation of the original. On the contrary, I give here the text as it appears in the original, except a point on the letter 'y' (as in the drawing of rune Nyd, below), that I omitted.




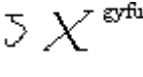
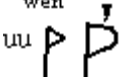
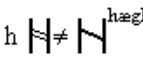
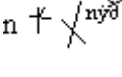

The translation is as near as possible to the original, sometimes, it is «not very meaningful», as some would say, but I prefer keep the ambiguities ... that might mean something to you.

Another translation very near to the original is due to Eric Wodening, and available at <http://members.tripod.com/wednesbury/first.html>.

See much more information on the runes at:

<http://www.teaser.fr/~lfontaine/nmh/>

^{feoh} ƿ ƿ	byþ frofur. fira gehwylcum. sceal ðeah manna gehpylc. miclun hyt dælan. gif he wile. for ðrhtne domes hleotan :·	Wealth (<i>or cattle, or movable property</i>) is for all a benefit, though each should share a lot if he wants to cast by lots (<i>or obtain</i>) a destiny (a "doom") in front of the master ¹ .
^{ur} u ʀ	byþ anmod. y ofer hyrned. fela frecne. deor feohteþ. mid horns . mære mor stapa. ƿ (þæt) is modig wuht :·	Aurochs (<i>or bison</i>) is resolute, mightily horned. A very bold (<i>or dangerous</i>) fighting beast with horns. A stalker of the moors, this is a mighty being.
^{ðorn} ð ƿ	byþ ðearle scearp. ðegna gehwylcum. anfen-gys yfyl. ungemetum reþe. manna gehwylcun. ðe him mid restedð :·	Thorn (also a kenning for "Giant") ² is severely sharp to the liegemen, catching (it brings) evil, excessively reckless to the human who rests with it.

o 	byþ ordfruma. ælcra spræce. wisdomes wraþu. and witenas frofur. and eorla gehwam. eadnys and to hiht :	God (<i>or mouth</i>) ³ is fount of each discourse, support of wisdom and help (<i>or compensation</i>) for the wise one, rest and refuge to each nobleman.
R 	byþ onrecyde. rinca gehwyrcum. sefte and swiþhwæt. ðam ðe sitteþ onufan. meare mægen	Riding (<i>or travel</i>) in the hall, for each warrior, (makes them) soft, and something mighty strong who sits on a strong horse for a path of miles (= mil paþas).
c 	heardum. ofer mil paþas : byþ cwicera gehwam cuþ on fyre. blac and beorhtlic byrneþ oftust. ðær hi	Torch (<i>or pine, torch of pinewood</i>) is obviously fire for each living being, shining, glittering, most often it burns where the princes rest.
S 	æþelingas inne restaþ : gumena byþ gleng and herenys. wraþu y wyrþscype y wræcna gehwam ar and ætwist ðe byþ oþra leas :	Gift (<i>or generosity, favor, sacrifice</i>) is, for the heroes, ornament and dignity and impels their grace, but a support for these with no other (= lonely ones).
wen 	ne bruceþ ðe can weana lyt sares and sorge and him sylfa hæfþ blæd and blysse and eac byrga	Joy (<i>or hope, probability</i>) never ends for the one who knows little of woes, sores and sorrows. He gets success and bliss and enough (protection in a fortress ⁴).
h 	byþ whitust corna. hwyrft hit of heofones lyfte. wealcaþ hit windes scura. weorþeþ hit to wætere	Hail (<i>or hailstorm</i>) is the whitest grain, it whirls down from the sky's heights, tossed in the wind shower, becomes water thereafter.
n 	syððan : byþ nearu on breostan weorþeþ hi ðea oft niþa bearnum to helpe and to hæle gehwære gif hi his hlystaþ æror :	Necessity (<i>or duty, hardship, trouble- or also possibly: desire, longing</i>) is distress on the chest and often strife of the servant. It becomes help and healing for the children if they listen soon enough.
I 	byþ ofer cealdunge metum slidor glisnaþ glæshluttur gimmum gelicust flor forste geworuht fæger ansyne :	Ice is mightily cold and gliding. It shines like clear glass, as the jewels, a ground worked upon by cold, beautiful to look at.

§ & ϕ^{ger}

byþ gumena hiht ðon god
læteþ halig heofones
cyning hrusan syllan
beohrte beornum and
ðærfum :

The year (*or "good year"*, hence the classical translation: harvest) is a joy for the men when the god, holy king of the skies, ("obviously", here, the God Freyr, also called King Freyr, and God of fertility) makes earth supply brightly the noble and the poor.

eo S Z^{eoh}

byþ utan unsmeþe treow.
heard hrusan fæst hyrde
fyres. wyrtrumum under
wreþyd wynan on eþle :

Yew is a tree, rough from the outside, hard and fast in earth, a shepherd of the fire, his roots under the pillar, a joy on the native land.

p H^{peorð}

byþ symble plega. and
hlehter wlancum ðar
wigan sittap on beor sele
bliþe æt somne :

Chessboard⁵ (*the dictionary gives this meaning with a ?*) is feast day, games and casting by lots, for the proud (*or the splendid*) fighters sitting in the bier hall, happy together.

X T^{eolhx}

secgeard hæfþ oftust on
fenne. wexeð on wature.
wundap grimme. blode
breneð beorna gehwylcne
ðe him ænigne onfeng
gededeð :

The elk of the sedge⁶ (eolh = elk) often dwells in fens, grows in water, grimly wounds and burns with boils the blood of the hero who seizes it.

r Y^{sigel}

se mannum symble biþ on
hihte ðonn hi hine feriap
ofer fises beþ oþ hibrim
hengest bringeþ to lande :

Sun (*sigel = sun; sige = victory*) is feast day and hope for those who depart on the fishes' bath until the wave-steed brings them to land.

τ ↑^{tyr}

biþ tacna sum healdeð
trywa wel. wiþ æþelingas
a biþ on færylde. ofer
nihta genipu. næfre swiceþ
:

Tir is one of the signs; it keeps well its promise (*also possible: it controls well the tree - a not so absurd meaning in view of Yggdrasil*) with the noble, and it is there during the travel above the dark of the night, never deceives.

b B^{beorc}


byþ bleða leas. bereþ efne
swa ðeah tanas butan
tudder. biþ on telgum
wlitig. heah on helme
hrysted fægere. geloden
leafum lyfte getenge :

Birch has no shoots, it carries its rods without fruits; radiant high twigs, high its crown with leafs fairly laden, reaches the sky.

e M^{eh}


byþ for eorlum æþelinga
wyn. hors hofum wlanc.
ðær him hæleþas ymb.
welege on wicgum
wrixlap spræce. Y biþ
unstyllum æfre frofur :


Steed (*or war steed*) is for the princes and the noble's joy; the warhorse arrogant in the hall⁷, where the wealthy heroes exchange talk. And it is ever refuge to the unstill ones.

dw_s
m 

byþ on myrgþe his magan
leof. sceal þeah anra
gehwylc oðrum swican.
for ðam drythen wyle

Human is mirth to the beloved kin; he shall though
each one deceive, when the lord will doom this
miserable flesh to be entrusted to earth.


dome sine  (þæt) earme
flæsc eorþan betæcan :

L 

byþ leodum langsum
geþuht gif hi sculum
neþun on nacan tealtum.
Y hi sæ yþa swyþe bregapþ.
and se brim hengest

Water (*or sea, ocean*) seems lasting to the
liegemen if they venture out in a tossing bark
(ship), so frightening are the waves of the sea, and
the surf-steed no longer takes care of the bridle.


bridles ne gym(eð) :

m_g 

wæs ærest mid east
denum. gesewen secgun.
oþ he siððan est. ofer wæg
gewat wæn æfter ran. ðus
heardingas ðone hæle

Ing was first among the East Danes, so was he
looked at, until towards East he went on the wave
after his wagon, thus these proud men named this
hero.


nemdun :

oe 

byþ ofer leof. æghwylcum
men. gif he mot ðær.
rihtes and gerysena on
brucan on bolde bleadum

Native country (*or ancestral home*) is loved by
each human, if there the moot⁸ holds, and that he
enjoys justly and often the convenience of his
sweet home.

oftast :

m 

byþ drihtnes sond. deore
mannum. mære metodes
leoht. myrgþ and tohit
eadgum and earmum.

Day is sent by the Lord, mankind beloved,
glorious light of the creator, joy and hope for the
rich and the poor, useful to all.


eallum brice :

a 

byþ on eorþan. elda
bearnum. flæsces fodor
fereþ gelome ofer ganotes
bæþ garsecg fandapþ.
hwæþer ac hæbbe æþele

Oak is on the ground, for the sons of man, food
for the flesh; often it travels on the gannet's bath.
The ocean checks if the oak keeps nobly its faith.

treowe :

ue 

biþ ofer heah. eldum dyre.
stiþ on stapule. stide rihte
hylt. ðeah him feohtan on
firas monige :

Ash (*or spear*) rises high, loved by the folk, strong
in its support, it justly keeps its place in spite of
many human attacks.

y

byþ æþelinga and eorla
gehwaes. wyn and
wyrþmynd. byþ on wicge
fæger. fæstlic on færelde.

Bow (? , *could also be gold ? , horn ?*) is joy and
memory of princes and nobles; beautiful on a
steed, firm in travel, some military gear.

lō

fyrð geatewa sum:·
byþ ea fixa. ðeah abrucep.
fodres onfoldan. hafap
fægerne eard. wætre
beworpen. ðær he

Eel (?) is a kind of river fish; it nevertheless finds
its food on the ground; it has a beautiful dwelling
covered with water, where it lives in joy.

ear^{tir}

wynnum leofap :·
byþ egle eorla gehwylcun.
ðonn fæstlice flæsc
onginneþ. hracolian
hrusan ceosan blac to
gebeddan bleða
gedreosaþ. wynna gewitaþ
wera geswicaþ :·

Earth (*or corn ear, or ocean*) is loathsome to each
nobleman, when flesh firmly tries to choose the
ground, fallen fruits as bedmates, joy vanishes,
man turns traitor.

cweorð
q ih

stan
r z
gar
y

Hos characteres ad alia
festinans
studioso lectori interpretenda relinquo

The last line provides three more runes: *cweorð*, *stan* and *gar* known by other Futhorcs.
stan means stone, but the meaning of *cweorð* and *gar* is not sure.
The Latin sentence states that the understanding of these signs and other similar is left to
the studios readers. The runes in the middle make the formula 'olhwnfhg' which must be
a still unsolved enigma.

Notes.

1. The conventional translation: «if he wants to obtain glory in front of the Lord» is certainly possible, but too Christian for such a poem - Christianized - but still full of paganism. I prefer: «if he wants to cast lots of fate in front of the Lord», by reference to the *Völuspa* where the first human shapes have no destiny, while three Gods will give them life and fate.
2. Icelandic and Norse runic poems refer to the *Thurs*, the name of the giants when they represent the brutish natural forces. The Eddic poem called **In praise to Thor** (*Þórsdrápa*), explained and commented here, speaks of *Þorns niðjum* (children of the thorn), *svíra Þorns* (thorn's neck), *í þornrann* (toward thorn's home) where obviously thorn refers to a living being, a Thurs from the context of the poem.
3. Icelandic runic poems speaks of *áss* (one of the Aesir, the Nordic Gods). Old Norse poem speaks of *óss* (river mouth). The translation by mouth or God (where God would be here Wóden, the first among the Aesir) is still under debate among scholars. It is obviously more 'logical' to say that the mouth is source of discourse, but it should be remembered that Wóden, called *Óðinn* ("Odin") in the Nordic tongues, is also «the Gods' shouter» and the owner of the mead of poetry that allows poetic speech. For

instance, Gautrek's saga shows the hero Starkad told by Óðinn: « I give to him the gift of poetry, he will speak his poems in the same way he speaks naturally».

4. We feel some kind of wordplay here: Old English *burg* (nominative, accusative and genitive plural, *burga*) means fortress, and *byrga* (nominative singular) means security. Nominative is forbidden by the sentence structure. Logical *byrga* is thus not possible but "enough of a fortress" is not very meaningful either. Both meanings may be mixed up here.

5. In fact, chess did not become popular before the twelfth century, thus the poem does not speak of chess, as we know it. Archeology suggests that the games played by the Anglo-Saxons were quite similar to those played by the Vikings, known as *tafl*, with several variants as *halatafl*, *kvatrutafl*, *hnefatafl*. This last one was known in Welsh under the name of *tawl-bwrdd*.

For more details, look at: <http://www.regia.org/games.htm>

6. In already cited, *Þórsdrápa*, a giant, widely called a monster throughout the poem, is also called by the kenning *parent of the elk sedge*, so that the *sedge deer* (*sefgrímnis*) seems to point at a wild monster. The elk of the sedge could then be a mythical monster, akin to the giants. All this evokes Grendel, the wild monster described in the poem Beowulf.

7. The original gives *hofum* that can be read as such, dative plural of *hof*, «hall, court», or as *hōf*, «hoof». For instance, the poem Beowulf says: *gif ... to hofum Geata gebinged*, i.e., «if he would go the court of the Geats», where *hof* even means *the king's court*.

I chose the meaning of court, hall, as opposed to traditional translations (hoof) because there is there more talk than under to hoof of a horse, and meeting a horse is not impossible in a still primitive court.

8. I found it obvious to translate *mot* by moot, thinking of the Icelandic *thing*. The poem recalls that “sweet is the country where *thing* takes place,” as opposed to most places where tyranny reigns.