The Ruthwell Crucifixion Poem and its Formulae within the Corpus of Old English Runic Metrical Inscriptions

Old English runic inscriptions in metrical form cluster in the north of England. Most of them belong to “a tradition of Northumbrian vernacular memorial-inscriptions” (Parsons 2008: 83) or to a tradition of free-standing sculptured monuments. Early examples (7th and 8th centuries) of this tradition are the name-stones from the monastic centres of Lindisfarne, Monkwearmouth, and Hartlepool.

At about the time of the rise of the name-stone fashion in the northeast, or soon thereafter, the northwest developed another type of runic monument: the monumental cross with a combination of extended text and carved images (Kopár 2021: 151).

Prime examples are the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Crosses (both c. AD 750). Many runic inscriptions on memorial stones (e.g., Falstone, Great Urswick, Overchurch, Thornhill) and obelisks (e.g., Bewcastle) are “formulaic in nature, and their main function is to record the names of the commemorated and the sponsor, and to request prayers for their souls” (Kopár 2015: 86).

While the study of Old English (poetic) formulae has largely been restricted to texts preserved in manuscripts, a small but not insignificant number of epigraphic texts in Old English runes in the vernacular demonstrates the use of poetic formulae outside the manuscript context. The importance of these inscriptions for the Old English poetic corpus has gained more and more attention in recent years (cf. Robinson/Stanley 1991: 28–29; Bredehoft 2009: 49–57). Although some metrical aspects of the texts have been discussed (cf. Naumann 1998: 705–706; Page 1999; Waxenberger 2013; Kopár 2015), little has been said about their employment of Old English alliterative verse and formulae.

This paper makes a comparison of the formulae in Old English metrical runic inscriptions from Northumbria, providing insight into the nature and function of the texts and their contexts. It draws special attention to the main runic inscription on the Ruthwell Cross: Compared to contemporary formulaic inscriptions, this text stands out in many ways (cf. Majewski forthc.). This paper thus tries to situate The Ruthwell Crucifixion Poem within the corpus of Old English runic metrical inscriptions.

Works Cited:


