

# Runes and Commemoration in Anglo-Saxon England

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*Abstract:* Runic inscriptions are of interest not only as evidence of language and literacy in early medieval England, but also of the cultural functions of the objects on which they appear. In this paper, we present three case studies to examine the ways in which runic writing was used to commemorate the dead in Anglo-Saxon England: a cremation urn from Loveden Hill, Lincolnshire; the wooden coffin of Saint Cuthbert; and a carved memorial stone from Great Urswick, Cumbria. Our study highlights the diversity of rune-inscribed objects in their material and function, from containers for human remains to monuments on public display. In each case we discuss the linguistic problems of the text and the relationship of the inscription to the object and its find context, before turning to a broader examination of the role of inscribed objects in the act of commemoration and the question of the choice of runic over the Roman script.

*Key words:* commemoration, runes, inscriptions/epigraphy, Old English, Anglo-Saxon England, funerary practices

Commemoration is an essential ritual of identity formation and community formation through the creation of social memory. It is a form of interaction with events and people of the past; thus it is a social process and a performative act rather than a historical event or tangible object of the past (cf. Williams 2006: 20; Hallam and Hockey 2001: 1–46). Material objects of various kinds, however, play an important role in commemoration because they help capture and mediate memories.<sup>1</sup> These “things of the past” are intended to objectify the past and extend it into the present in order to facilitate the commemorative process. The present paper will focus on ways of remembering the dead through objects. Commemorating the dead is a ritual (or in fact a series of rituals) that involves a number of different actors, all of whom have a specific connection to the object of commemoration. Individuals associated with the commemorative process include: the person(s) to be commemorated; the patrons who wish to be remembered by their acts of commemoration for reasons of social, religious or political motivation; and, last but not least, the mak-

ers of the artifacts whose craftsmanship (and in the case of inscriptions, language and literacy) is eternalized in the surviving artifacts. Objects of commemoration vary greatly, from containers of the body that provide continued physical presence of the deceased to public memorial monuments that serve as definitions of the past and cater to the needs of those in the present. These objects usually utilize different modes of expression, and their message is expressed as a combination of different markers or characteristics of material objects: object type, image(s), text(s), and even location (immediate physical or larger geographical context).

The focus of the present paper is a subset of commemorative objects that carry inscriptions, specifically inscriptions in runes. Inscriptions give a voice to material objects, and these inscribed objects often bring together texts and images. Because of the combination of different modes of expression, traditionally the subjects of different scholarly disciplines, these artifacts invite (or demand) interdisciplinary collaboration among archaeologists, art historians, epigraphers, linguists, and sometimes literary scholars. Runology has a long history of collaboration between specialists in these and other disciplines, so the present collaborative approach follows an established tradition in the field. As scholars from different disciplines, we approach our objects in very different ways, prioritizing certain aspects while neglecting others. For example, linguists easily overlook the visual layout of the object and the fact that the text is just one element of that artifact, while art historians and archaeologists are often unaware of the intricacies of texts and the limits and uncertainties of inscriptions in determining the date and provenance of objects. In the following, we hope to demonstrate how a dialogue between different scholarly fields can enrich our understanding of commemorative objects that were meant to communicate with texts, images, and their materiality.

We will highlight three vastly different objects from the Anglo-Saxon runic corpus (a funerary urn, a wooden coffin, and a memorial stone monument) that may shed light on the varying functions of inscribed objects at large in the process of commemoration and the diverse role of runic writing specifically in a commemorative context. After a brief introduction to the development of runes and runic writing and the corpus of Anglo-Saxon runic inscriptions, we will discuss each object as a case study. Although all three objects come from the Anglo-Saxon period, they represent different cultural settings, and involve different uses of the runic script on different materials and object types. This heterogeneity reflects that of the Anglo-Saxon runic corpus as a whole (see below): These objects are a sample chosen to show the variety of uses to which runic script was put in Anglo-Saxon England both before and after the conversion of its people to Christianity, and with it, to Roman alphabet literacy. Our objectives are to highlight the unique nature of each artifact both within

the runic corpus and among commemorative objects; to examine how the inscriptions relate to other material markers of the objects; to explore what the inscriptions can reveal about the specific use of these artifacts in a commemorative process; and lastly, to understand why the runic script was chosen (over the Roman script) for these objects of commemoration.

### *Runes: A Brief Introduction*

Runic writing is a type of alphabetic script used in many parts of the Germanic-speaking world from late Antiquity into the Middle Ages (and in some parts of Scandinavia, even into the modern period). The earliest known runic inscriptions are on portable objects in bog deposits dendrochronologically dated to the late second century AD (Stoklund 2006); they use a twenty-four-character alphabet of which we have several complete examples, the oldest on a stone slab used as the cover of a fifth-century grave at Kylver, Sweden (Krause 1966, no. 1). Between 300 and 400 inscriptions written with this system of runes are known from Scandinavia and Continental Europe, with one concentration of finds in southern Scandinavia and Denmark, another in southern Germany (mostly dating from the sixth century), and some more, sparsely-distributed material in eastern and southeastern Europe.<sup>2</sup> The older runes are conventionally thought to have remained in use down to c.700 AD, after which they were replaced by a sixteen-letter system in Scandinavia and other parts of the Viking world (Barnes 2012: 54–65, with references). In England and Frisia, however, the system was elaborated and expanded. There appear to be two phases of modification to the writing system. Between the fifth and seventh centuries, further characters were added and the sound values of others altered; these changes are usually explained as responses to transformations in the sound systems of the Germanic dialects spoken in England and Frisia during this time (see Parsons 1999: 32–39; Waxenberger 2010). Further additions and a standardization of forms—which David Parsons (1999) sees as a deliberate reform instituted by religious communities in the second half of the seventh century—yielded a runic alphabet of twenty-nine or more characters, some of which are only attested in a small number of Northumbrian inscriptions on stone monuments.

The extent of runic literacy (as opposed to familiarity with the Roman alphabet, through contact with the Roman Empire) in pre-Christian Germanic-speaking societies is not clear, but we can be reasonably confident that the surviving material represents only a small proportion of what was actually written. The materiality of inscribed objects plays an important role in this context. The lacunae in the corpus can be partially explained by the durability of material: Inscriptions on metal and stone are much more likely to survive the centuries than those on organic material. Wood and bone are easily available materials for carving, and we

do have some surviving inscriptions on these materials from the earliest periods of runic writing through the late Middle Ages in Scandinavia.<sup>3</sup> It goes without saying, however, that we have no way of knowing how many inscriptions on organic materials are lost to us, but it is likely to be a significant number.

Cultural factors must also be taken into consideration: Metal objects, especially those made of precious metal, are much more likely to be in the possession of members of elites; and elite possessions may be more likely to be deposited in circumstances, such as burial sites, that are preserved over extended periods of time and often attract the attention of archaeologists. These factors can lead us to a possibly false impression that knowledge and use of runic writing were restricted to the wealthier and more powerful members of Germanic societies, and/or to a specialized class of literate “rune-masters.” On the other hand, in a society where there was no practical need to adopt writing for record-keeping or administration, it may well be the case that its early use reflects the desire of elites to imitate Roman practices.<sup>4</sup>

Runic inscriptions seem to have served a wide range of functions throughout their period of use, from the prosaic—many consist simply of personal names, likely those of the makers or owners—to the cryptic, commemorative, magical, and/or religious. At least in the early period, the level of literacy seems to be very variable: A significant number of the earlier inscriptions are unintelligible and may well be meaningless “pseudo-texts,” possibly indicating a culture in which the visual impression of writing, and thus the act of writing itself, were as important as (or even more important than?) the linguistic content.

### *The Anglo-Saxon Runic Corpus*

In the following case studies, we will feature three exceptional, high-profile objects of the runic corpus, distinguished by date, material, and/or length of inscription. It is important, however, to briefly discuss the extent of the surviving material to provide context for these objects. At the time of writing, there is no definitive corpus edition of Anglo-Saxon runic inscriptions, although the preparation of such an edition is underway (Waxenberger and Kazzazi, forthcoming). The following summary is based on existing publications, which give a broad, if incomplete, overview.

It has become conventional to divide the Anglo-Saxon runic corpus chronologically into two parts, with the boundary around 650–700. From the early period, we have around fifteen to twenty inscriptions, all on portable objects and almost all on metal (see Parsons 1999, Looijenga 2003: chap. 8, Waxenberger 2010). Because of the nature of this material, in most cases we cannot be sure whether the objects were inscribed in Britain, and therefore whether or not they represent the language of

Germanic-speaking settlers in Britain. It has generally been assumed that they do (although some items from this period with findspots in Britain are thought, on graphological and/or linguistic grounds, to originate in Frisia).<sup>5</sup> Some are stray finds by metal detectorists, but the majority are from furnished burials in eastern regions of Britain (chiefly Lincolnshire, East Anglia, and Kent). The texts are all very short (three words or less).

From the later period (post-650/700), which we might consider the main period of Anglo-Saxon runic writing, we have a much larger number of objects, including hundreds of coins with runic or mixed-script (Roman and runic) legends. Gaby Waxenberger's corpus (Waxenberger 2010) contains ninety-six items in total.<sup>6</sup> The coins are not included in her corpus; the most detailed account of runic coins in England to date is by Blackburn (1991). As opposed to the short inscriptions of the early period, here we have much more substantial texts, some with a literary character (in poetic form), most notably on the Ruthwell Cross and on the Franks Casket. Many of the inscriptions are from historical Northumbria and from the eastern or southeastern parts of England (notably Kent and East Anglia). It is striking that in Wessex, the center of ecclesiastical and political power (and thus enhanced textual production) in England from the ninth century to the Norman Conquest, runic epigraphy does not seem to have been common.<sup>7</sup>

Leaving aside the coins, the corpus is dominated by stone: There are 38 inscriptions on stone in Waxenberger's corpus, including three entries covering a number of graffiti at religious sites in Italy. Most of the stone monuments in the corpus were produced in Northumbria in the eighth and ninth centuries. This group also includes what are probably the youngest Anglo-Saxon runic inscriptions, those from Whithorn in Dumfries and Galloway, which are dated to the late tenth or early eleventh century (Waxenberger 2010, nos. 93–94). The rest of the surviving inscriptions appear on portable objects made (in order of frequency) of metal (gold, silver, or silver alloy), bone or antler, wood, precious or semi-precious stones, or pottery. The prominence of stone monuments may, again, be an accident of preservation (a brooch or finger-ring is much more easily lost than a stone cross), but it may also reflect the importance of runic script as a display script for commemorative purposes in the ecclesiastical culture of Northumbria.

The object types are too diverse for a numerical breakdown to be very useful—particularly as many of the inscriptions are on unidentified fragments or on objects whose function is not certain—but they include seven finger-rings, three small caskets, and two pairs of tweezers.<sup>8</sup> The texts on the portable objects are mostly short, and many are illegible or uninterpretable. They include names and several religious and/or magical texts.<sup>9</sup>



From this overview, we turn to the first of our case studies, a funerary object from the early period of runic writing in England, a cremation urn from Loveden Hill. The urn represents a rare example of inscribed objects of commemoration in an early Anglo-Saxon funerary context, and presents a challenge both linguistically and archeologically regarding the content of the inscription and the place of origin of the object.

*The Loveden Hill Urn (Waxenberger 2010, no. 77)*

The biconical cremation urn (Figure 1) comes from the large cemetery at Loveden Hill, Hough-on-the-Hill parish, Lincolnshire.<sup>10</sup> Excavations at this site, which was in use throughout the “pagan” period (mid-fifth to late seventh c) (Fennell 1964; Fennell 1974: 285), uncovered 1790 cremation and forty-seven inhumation burials (Meyers and Austin 2014). The urn is decorated with three incised grooves under the neckline. Below the neckline are a row of cross-in-circle stamps, in part above the runic inscription, and another three grooves below the inscription. The line of



Figure 1: Cremation urn from Loveden Hill (British Museum cat. no. 1963, 1001.14). Image © Trustees of the British Museum.

this decoration seems to dip to follow the layout of the text, and the last few runic characters are inserted into a growing gap between the second and third lines. Nonetheless, it is difficult to tell whether the three grooves were made before or after the inscription. Robert Nedoma is of the opinion that the runes must have been added before the decoration and that the “ornaments are arranged in such a way as to avoid the text bar” (Nedoma 2016: 5), but it is also possible that the irregular grooves came first and that the inscription follows the imperfectly horizontal line of the decoration.<sup>11</sup>

The urn stands out in several ways, most obviously by virtue of carrying an inscription. The only other examples are three urns from Spong Hill, Norfolk, which are stamped with the text **alu** (“ale”? “magic”? “protection”?) in so-called “mirror-runes” (branches repeated on both sides of the vertical main stave to create a symmetrical character). All of them were produced with the same stamp, representing a single instance of text creation (for the most recent report and analysis of the Spong Hill cemetery, see Hills and Lucy 2013). The nature of the inscription underlines the significance of the inscribed text as image and a decorative feature of the object, along with the magico-religious content of the word and likely of the act of writing itself.

A number of urns from Loveden Hill and other sites carry stamped or incised marks which have been called “runic” or “rune-like” by J. N. L. Myres (1977: I.358), Kenneth R. Fennell (1964: 361) and—in a surprising departure from his customary skepticism—R. I. Page (1999a: 92–93). When dealing with marks of this sort, it is vital to restrain our imaginations and exercise caution for several reasons. First, runes are very simple linear signs, many of which have shapes which can be found on any number of artifacts produced at different times and places (see, for example, Schwab 1998: 397–98). Where signs that resemble runes (or signs of any other writing system) appear individually or as repeated motifs, rather than in the context of a recognizable piece of text, they may or may not be letters. Therefore, it is prudent to be wary of interpreting as a rune any sign that cannot be said with some confidence to belong to a written text (even an unintelligible one).

For our discussion of runes in a commemorative and funerary context, it is important to note that a rune-like “crazy paving” design on one urn from Loveden Hill (no. 60/201) is used by Fennell (1964: 363) to support the argument for some level of runic literacy in the community which used the cemetery. Further, arrow- and tripod-shaped motifs found on Anglo-Saxon cremation urns have been identified by Myres, Page, and others (see above) as **t**-runes, and interpreted as dedications of the deceased to the care of the god Tiw. Regardless of how seriously we take these claims, the urn from grave 61.A11/261 is unique in bearing a multi-word text incised into the clay. Like many of the other urns in the cemetery, it was apparently in a tilted position when uncovered. In general, Fennell

(1964: 96) regards this orientation as accidental, but in this particular case, he suggests that “the urn was apparently deliberately placed in such a way that [the] inscription should be concealed. Presumably this was to increase the potency of the magic.”<sup>12</sup>

It was evidently not a normal part of funerary practice in early Anglo-Saxon culture to write the name of the deceased (or indeed anything at all) on cremation urns, so we have no clues to what sort of text we might be dealing with here. The inscription itself is difficult to read, and the epigraphic uncertainties have licensed a proliferation of linguistic interpretations. Most commonly cited is the (somewhat problematic) reading by Bengt Odenstedt (1980; 1983): **sīþæbæd** || **þicþ** || **hlaf**. It is uncontroversial that the first sequence reads **sīþæbæd** or **sīþæbld** and that this represents a personal name *Sīþæbæd* or *Sīþæbad* (which is generally thought to be masculine, but could hypothetically be feminine) or *Sīþæbæld* (which would be masculine).<sup>13</sup> Although it might seem natural to the modern reader to interpret this as the name of the deceased, it could belong to the patron/commemorator, the maker/craftsman, or someone else. Odenstedt reads the rest of the text as **þicþ** || **hlaf** = *þicg[el]þ hlāf* “gets bread,” an interpretation which has been widely repeated (for severe criticism see Parsons 1999: 57; also Nedoma 1991–1993: 116–17). This section of the text has also been read **þiuw hlæ(w)** = *þiowu hlæw* “female servant, [her] grave” (Bammesberger 1991: 125–28; cf. Looijenga 2003: 281–82); and **þicw hlæw** = *þic w[ihiþ] hlæw* “consecrates you, grave” (Eichner 1990: 325). Underlying the “grave” interpretations is an assumption that the text must be closely connected with funerary practice and/or commemoration of the dead; but here we are in danger of imposing modern expectations on a text with no parallels and of uncertain reading. While it seems certain that the inscription carried some significance in the commemorative context, we do not know for sure whether or not this is to be treated as a funerary text, and we must be careful of allowing our interpretation of the text to be led by an a priori assumption about the cultural function of the text in relation to the object’s function as a container for remains.

With respect to the epigraphy, the quality of the writing seems to deteriorate from left to right. The first part of the inscription, the name, presents few difficulties to the modern reader, but the characters become harder to identify, and in the final part of the text they are so poorly formed that the reading is extremely uncertain, and any interpretation of this part of the text must accordingly be regarded as speculative (Figure 1). What, if anything, this deterioration signifies is unclear, but it is conceivable that the salience of the name might have led the carver to take greater care in producing it. Another possibility is that the apparent drop in legibility indicates that the carver made the whole inscription without rotating the urn, so that the first part—immediately in front of



the carver—turned out clearer than the later parts, when he or she was working around the side at a more awkward angle.

Not only is the presence of an inscription exceptional, there are some indications in the archaeological literature that this urn may not be of local origin. In the site report, Fennell indicates that most of the urns at Loveden Hill (and most cremation urns in general) were made of local clay; but this one appears not to be (1964: 215, 365). Catherine Hills (1991: 54) claims that, on the contrary, the inscribed urn probably is of local manufacture, but she does not go into detail on the evidence. If the former view is correct, this is curious: if the communities who used the cemetery had access to a local source of clay and included potters capable of making cremation urns, why import an urn (much less unfired clay) from elsewhere? Furthermore, Fennell does not follow up his opinion that the inscribed urn is not local by giving any indication of where it might have been from. If it was brought to the area from somewhere else, does this mean somewhere else in eastern Britain (say, somewhere in Norfolk) or from the Continent? We cannot rule out a Continental origin on either epigraphic or linguistic grounds,<sup>14</sup> nor can we prove an insular provenance. The text contains no diagnostically Anglo-Saxon characters, nor the shared, so-called “Anglo-Frisian” ones.

Despite the uncertainties of the text, its presence and layout on the urn may suggest that, whether the content of the text itself is commemorative or not, it was intended to be seen and be part of a commemorative process more complex than a simple progress from the place of cremation to that of burial. A number of Anglo-Saxon archaeologists (Richards 1992; Hills 1999) have observed that the decoration on cremation urns is predominantly on the upper surface, which might be taken as an indication that they were designed to be viewed from above once they were in the ground. Ruth Nugent and Howard Williams (2012), on the other hand, argue that urn decoration “was unlikely to have ever been experienced from a single vantage point” (2012: 190), but that the objects were intended to be viewed from different angles, turned and handled by their makers and members of the community. The placement of the runic inscription is consistent with this interpretation: running around the side of the vessel, it seems intended to be viewed from the side rather than from above. This would suggest further that the object remained above ground for some time between manufacture and deposit, and that the urn—and therefore the inscription—may have been on display, designed for an audience, for some period of time. Despite the uncertainties of interpretation outlined above, the inscribed urn of Loveden Hill served, as an object of commemoration, as a point of connection between the living and the dead, the visible and the hidden, the speaking and the silent, and possibly the local and the distant. The inscription, a combination of text and image, contributed to

all these aspects of the object, both in the early Anglo-Saxon context and in the modern context of decoding the function of the artifact.

*Saint Cuthbert's Coffin (Waxenberger 2010, no. 78)*

The next case study also focuses on an inscribed container of a body, yet of a different kind: a wooden coffin. As opposed to an urn that may have been used for a domestic purpose prior to its use as a container of ashes in a cremation cemetery, a coffin is an object intimately and exclusively connected to a funerary context and commemoration. It is designed to protect and preserve the body of the deceased, and in the case of the coffin to be discussed here, to guarantee a continued presence of the dead in the community. The coffin in question is that of Saint Cuthbert, one of the most widely known individuals of the Anglo-Saxon period. Saint Cuthbert's coffin is an unusual object not only because, as a wooden artifact, it survived against the odds, but also because its history is exceptionally well documented (see below). It was an object that played a significant part in an ecclesiastical commemorative process for the clear benefit of the monastic community of Cuthbert; an object intended to be preserved and seen both by the community and in the eyes of God. This provides us with a commemorative context in which the unique inscriptions and carved images of the coffin should be interpreted.



Figure 2: The coffin of Saint Cuthbert. © Durham Cathedral Library.

The coffin of Saint Cuthbert (Figure 2) is one of the most famous rune-bearing objects from Anglo-Saxon England. It is a sizable wooden casket (c.174 cm long) that once housed the physical remains of the seventh-century abbot and bishop of Lindisfarne. It is a much travelled object with a well-documented itinerary and biography that will be summarized here briefly in order to illustrate the many functions of this wooden container commonly referred to as a coffin.

Saint Cuthbert died in his cell on Inner Farne near Lindisfarne on March 20, 687. His body was taken to the abbey church of St Peter at Lindisfarne and placed in a stone coffin on the right side of the altar (Rollason 2004: 112). Eleven years later, inspired by miracles, the monks wished to elevate the relics of the holy man, and with Bishop Eadberht's permission, reopened the sarcophagus on March 20, 698. They found the body incorrupt. After proper preparations, Cuthbert's body, together with several objects formerly in his possession, was transferred into a decorated "light casket" of wood (*levis theca* in Bede). The casket was placed on the floor of the church, where it remained for more than a century and a half.

In 875, under the threat of Viking attacks, the Lindisfarne community decided to leave the monastery, taking along with them the precious body of their saint with the associated relics, in the abovementioned wooden casket. Saint Cuthbert and his community wandered in Northumbria for seven years before settling at Chester-le-Street in 883. They remained there for more than a century. In the early 990s, the community temporarily moved to Ripon, and ultimately settled at Durham in 995. There first a small chapel, then a stone church, and finally a cathedral (dedicated in 998) were erected in honor of the saint and to house his earthly remains. In the tenth century, the coffin was likely opened to receive gifts (embroideries) from King Æthelstan (934) and King Edmund (944). It was reopened again in the early eleventh century by sacristan Aelfred Westou, who deposited cathedral relics into the coffin, including the bones of the Venerable Bede (d.735).

The Norman Conquest (1066) and the subsequent Harrying of the North (1069–1070) forced the Durham community to relocate with their relics to Lindisfarne again for three months. Two decades later, in 1093, a new cathedral was founded by the Norman bishops in Durham to honor Saint Cuthbert, and in 1104 his relics were translated to a new shrine (feretory) behind the high altar.<sup>15</sup> The 1104 translation is well documented by an anonymous monk of Durham (after 1122) and by Reginald of Durham (1170). Both texts indicate that the original wooden coffin was incased in two other layers of outer cover (one of which highly decorated), signaling the perception that the coffin itself was part of the assemblage of sacred relics. In the high Middle Ages, Saint Cuthbert's shrine was likely moved during rebuildings in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Cronyn

and Horie 1985: 6) and it received a further cover that could be lifted on special occasions, exposing and concealing the (incased) relics.

During the Dissolution, the multilayered shrine was despoiled and the tomb reopened in 1539. Cuthbert was moved to the vestry, and ultimately reburied in 1542, together with the coffin and numerous other relics of the Cathedral, in the ground (under the site of the former shrine) in a new outer container. It was not until 1827 that the saint's body was brought to daylight again in order to confirm the claim of incorruptibility. But instead of a well preserved body, James Raine, librarian of the Cathedral, found the decayed remains of three coffins together with many bones and relics, some later deposits into the shrine. Saint Cuthbert's remains were reinterred the very same day, but the coffin and the relics were kept for further study and display (Wilson 2004: 113). The tomb was opened again in 1899 to retrieve container fragments and bones for further study. On this occasion, the 698 coffin was first reconstructed by Canon Greenwell (with W. G. Footitt). In 1939 Ernst Kitzinger conducted a scholarly examination of the coffin and proposed a new reconstruction (Kitzinger 1956), which has since been revised. In its current state (on display in Durham Cathedral), the coffin is a reconstruction of some 190 fragments, out of c.7000 wooden pieces recovered from Cuthbert's grave in the nineteenth century.

Saint Cuthbert's coffin is a remarkable artifact in many ways. It is one of very few surviving decorated wooden objects from early medieval England, the only precisely datable runic object (and inscription) based on documentary evidence, and the only Anglo-Saxon reliquary that can be safely associated with an identifiable person (Wilson 2004: 115). The reliquary-coffin is decorated with incised figural carvings and inscriptions in runes and in Roman lettering. The lid shows a full-length standing figure of Christ (Figure 3) surrounded by the four evangelists, represented by their winged symbols: Matthew as a man and Mark as a lion above the shoulders of Christ (Figure 4), and the bull of Luke and the eagle of John below at His feet (Figure 5). On one end of the coffin we find a seated Virgin and Child—the earliest representation of its kind in the medieval West outside of Rome. The other end shows the archangels Michael and Gabriel. One of the two side panels is decorated by a double row of half-length (bust) images of the twelve apostles, while the other side panel shows full-length images of five winged archangels. The inscriptions offer captions, or *tituli*, that help identify the images.

Most of the text on the coffin is in Roman script, with runes used on the lid for the names of three of the evangelists (**m<sup>^</sup>ath\*\*s**, **m<sup>^</sup>arcu(s)**, **\*ohann\*s**) and for a Christogram (**ihs xps**). The Christogram shows a curious interaction of scripts: here the Roman letters IHS XPS, themselves chosen not for their sound values but for their visual similarity to the



Greek ΙΗΣ ΧΡΣ for ΙΗΣΟΥΣ ΧΡΙΣΤΟΣ, have been transliterated into the equivalent runes, again without regard to the Greek sounds.

The inscriptions in Roman lettering, though only partially legible, can be reconstructed quite easily since we know what is supposed to be present. Following a suggestion of Kitzinger (cited by Okasha 1971: 69), it is



Figure 3: Christ on the lid of the coffin of Saint Cuthbert. © Durham Cathedral Library.



likely that the apostles are listed in the same order in which they appear in the mass, and this enables us to fill the lacunae in the surviving text with relative ease (so that the fragment *–[PP]VS–*, for example, can with some confidence be identified as the end of the name *Philippus*). Besides



Figure 4: Symbols of Matthew (left) and Mark (right) on the lid of the coffin of Saint Cuthbert, with their names faintly incised above in runes. © Durham Cathedral Library.

Peter and Paul, however, none of the apostles are depicted with identifiable iconographic attributes.

One fragment, which appears to contain an isolated **m**-rune among Roman letters (-**VmIA**-), helps to remind us that we are dealing with a reconstructed object. In the drawings of J. M. Cronyn and C. V. Horie (1985: 97, figure 1c), the fragment has been placed as part of the archangels side. Elisabeth Okasha had earlier (1971: 68) marked it and the -[**PP**]VS- piece as “unplaced fragments [which] probably originally belonged to texts iv [the archangels] or v [the apostles].” Parsons identifies -**VmIA**- as representing the name of the archangel *Rumiael* (Parsons 1999: 91; cf. Page



Figure 5: Symbols of Luke (left) and John (right) on the lid of the coffin of Saint Cuthbert, with their names faintly incised above in Roman and in runic script respectively. © Durham Cathedral Library.

1995: 319). Another possibility raised by Kitzinger (cited by Okasha 1971: 69) is that it belongs to the name *Bartolomeus* (albeit eccentrically spelled, \*BARTOLVMIAS? cf. VRIA[L]), of which we otherwise have only the beginning. The methodological difficulty here is characteristic of fragmentary objects and reconstructions, as well as of interdisciplinary collaborations: Should our interpretation of the inscription determine the placement of the inscribed piece (archangels vs. apostles side), or should the (hypothetical) location of the small fragment guide us in reading the inscription (as the name of an archangel vs. apostle)? While the overall layout of the casket can safely be identified, some minor details will remain uncertain.

Regarding function, especially in the context of commemoration, the classification of our object calls for some clarification. The wooden casket in question is widely known as “Saint Cuthbert’s coffin” but this is somewhat of a misnomer. The casket had long served the function of a reliquary, for many years a portable reliquary, containing not only the body of Saint Cuthbert but also a selection of his personal objects as contact relics (a pectoral cross, a portable altar, a comb, and the so-called Stonyhurst Gospel of Saint John), later textile offerings by kings (Æthelstan, Edmund), as well as relics of other saints, most notably of the Venerable Bede and allegedly of Saint Oswald. In the course of time, the coffin itself became a relic and was enshrined in further casing of three additional layers.

As for the inscriptions on the coffin, it is important to note that none of them are commemorative inscriptions despite the commemorative function of the casket. They are captions, and as such they relate directly to the individual images and the iconographic program rather than the object at large or its function as the container of the remains of an identified saint. But their presence is highly significant in a commemorative context: the images and texts reference the celestial company of the deceased and thus proclaim his status as a saint, and most importantly, as intercessor for the community. The captions clarify the identity of the members of the heavenly cohort, and prompt the members of the community to read and say the words aloud as an act of commemoration and memory aid for prayers. The images and texts of Saint Cuthbert’s coffin, as an object of commemoration, thus promote interaction between the saint and his community, keeping the saint present as a member of the monastic community, not only through his physical presence (indeed, as noted above, the body had been carried around by the community for over 150 years) but also through continued acts of commemoration, largely in a liturgical context.

It is worth pausing for a moment to consider the significance of the material and structure of the coffin. The body of Cuthbert was initially buried in a stone coffin or sarcophagus, therefore, the decorated wooden



coffin is not the initial container of his remains. The choice of wood, a material much less durable than stone, was likely motivated by a variety of factors. It may have signaled a more immediate and intimate contact with the saint, and provided easier access to (and later greater portability of) the remains. This is confirmed by the (proposed) construction of the coffin that allowed for the easy removal of an outer and an inner lid to periodically view the holy relic, the body of the saint (C. A. Hewett in Cronyn and Horie 1985: 65–67). The choice of a wooden coffin over a sarcophagus, an object type strongly associated with Rome, may have also gestured towards the local roots of the saint, an interpretation further supported by the choice of the runic script on the coffin along with Roman lettering.

It may seem surprising that Cuthbert himself remained unnamed on his coffin, but it was indeed unnecessary since the context identified and authenticated the body inside: the casket with the relics was never out of the possession of the commemorative community, whose identity hinged on the identity and authenticity of the saint. This is in contrast to our next example, the cross shaft of Great Urswick, which, being a memorial for the deceased rather than a container of his body, proudly proclaims all agents of commemoration in a durable medium (stone) through a lengthy commemorative inscription.

*The Great Urswick Stone (Waxenberger 2010, no. 61)*

The inscribed stone cross (or slab) fragment of Great Urswick (Urswick 1, Lancashire North-of-the-Sands; Bailey and Cramp 1988: 148–51, ills. 564–66, 568–69) represents a very different object of commemoration, one that had no direct contact with the remains of the deceased and was meant for display and public access (Figure 6). The monument's lengthy runic inscription identifies various actors in the commemoration process, whose names have survived but whose identities have long been lost to us. The Urswick stone is one of many inscribed commemorative stone monuments of pre-Conquest England, and is thus representative of a well-established practice of commemoration.

Memorial inscriptions are in fact the most common type of inscription on stone monuments from the Anglo-Saxon period. Although wordier than our previous two examples, they record little more than the names of the commemorated and the sponsor(s), and in some cases request prayers for their souls. The majority of these inscriptions are formulaic expressions of varying complexity in the vernacular language (Old English), but there are also examples in Latin (*ora pro X*) (Higgitt 1986: 133; Higgitt 2001: 53; Kopár 2015: 86–94). Among the surviving vernacular memorial inscriptions, there seems to be a slight preference for the runic script: of the twenty monuments,<sup>16</sup> eleven are in runes, eight in Roman



Figure 6: The Great Urswick stone. Photo: Lilla Kopár.



letters, and one monument (Falstone 2, Northumberland; Cramp 1984: 172–73; Okasha 1971, no. 39) is biscriptal, with two virtually identical texts presented side by side in runic and in Roman lettering. The dating of the monuments, based on stylistic, linguistic, and epigraphic evidence, is difficult, but the majority of them are dated to the eighth and ninth centuries. The geographical distribution of the monuments is notable: eighteen of the twenty come from the north of England, with a particular concentration in Western Yorkshire, and only two from the south of England (from Winchester and London, both late examples of somewhat different character, with inscriptions in Anglo-Saxon capitals). This sizeable group of vernacular inscriptions on stone sculpture is indicative of a commemorative epigraphic tradition in the vernacular language that emerged as a new, local development in commemorative practice in the north of England, and flourished in the eighth and ninth centuries (Kopár 2015: 97).

The nature of vernacular memorial inscriptions has been described and discussed, primarily from a linguistic and epigraphic point of view, by Page (1959; 1999a), Parsons (2008), and Waxenberger (2011), and from a more literary angle by Kopár (2015). The following components of formulaic commemorative expressions have been identified: the sponsor formula (*X sette æfter Y* [“X set up (this monument) in memory of Y”]); the so-called *becun* formula, or monument formula, where Old English *becun* “sign, beacon, monument” is combined with a description of the commemorated or the location (“a monument in memory of someone, or set up somewhere”); and a prayer formula (*gebiddaþ þær saule* [“pray for the soul (or for X)”]). In the two most complex examples of vernacular commemorative texts (Great Urswick and Thornhill 2), these formulaic elements are combined to form alliterating long-lines composed in poetic meter, and traces of alliteration and meter can be found on other monuments as well.

The Great Urswick stone carries one of the longest memorial inscriptions in stone, accompanied by figural carvings. The surviving inscription consists of two separate formulaic texts: a complex memorial inscription (a) and a maker formula (b). The now 117 cm tall cross shaft fragment has a strangely curved shape because it was reused in the post-Conquest period as a lintel above a window, and later integrated into the fabric of St Michael’s Church, where it was discovered in 1911 (Figure 6). Luckily, the text panel containing (most of) the memorial inscription is undamaged, but part of the accompanying maker formula that was carved upon the figural scene below the text panel was chiseled away and is now fragmentary. The surviving texts read as follows:

- (a) **+tunwinisetæ | æftertoroz | tredæbeku | næfterhisb | æurnæge-  
bidæsþe | rs || au | læ**

Reconstruction (presented in poetic long-lines):

+ *Tunwini setæ*                      *æfter Torohtredæ*  
*bekun æfter his bæurnæ.*      *Gebidæs þer saulæ.*

[Tunwini set up in memory of Torohtred (this) monument in memory of his child/lord. Pray for his soul.]

(b) **lylþi || sw[o-]**

Reconstruction:

*Lyl þis w[orhtæ].*  
 [Lyl m[ade this].]

These are the most carefully constructed alliterating long-lines in the surviving corpus of vernacular memorial inscriptions. However, the layout of the text was executed with much less care. The memorial inscription is presented in five continuous lines, carved in the large text panel in the middle of the broad face of the slab (side A). Despite the gradually diminishing size of the runic characters, the carver ran out of space: the text in the panel ends in mid-word, and the last word of the prayer formula (“soul”) together with the final character (-r) of the preceding word invades the figural carving below.

The figural carving shows two men with secular dress and hairdo, facing a thin, tall cross between them. The figure on the left is gesturing with his hand towards the other figure on the right. The significance of the scene is unclear, due to the lack of iconographic parallels and the damaged state of the carving. It has been variously interpreted as Christ welcoming the deceased in the otherworld (although the secular representation of both figures speaks against this); a narrative scene from an (unknown) saint’s life; or an event from the life of the commemorated (conversion, benefaction) (Bailey and Cramp 1988: 150; Kopár 2015: 105). The last interpretation seems most likely.<sup>17</sup> The end of the prayer formula (**rsaulæ**) wraps around the cross between the two figures, with two characters each placed in three of the four quadrants of the cross. Although it appears to be a misjudgment of available space for the intended text, it is indeed quite fitting to anchor the word “soul” in the instrument of salvation, the cross. The maker inscription further invades the figural scene: the runic characters are carved across the chests of the figures, but only little more than the name of the “maker,” Lyl, is preserved due to the damaged state of the carving.

The layout of the inscriptions reveals the process of production: the inscriptions were inserted after the figural carving had been completed. The carver of the inscription seems to have perceived the inscription as recorded utterance (text), as opposed to an image (text panel), so recording the full text had higher priority than preserving the integrity of the

layout of the figural design. It is impossible to say whether the text was composed at the same time the monument was commissioned, whether or not the same carver executed both images and inscriptions, and how much impact he (Lyl?) had on the formulation of the text. Tunwine (the commemorator/patron) and Torohtred (the deceased), both with masculine names, were likely relatives, based on common naming practices employing alliteration within the family, and one (or both?) of them may be referenced in the figural carving below the text panel.

The dating of the monument poses some questions for linguists and art historians alike, and exemplifies the need for collaborative research. Both images and texts appear to be somewhat inconsistent in execution and style, thus we need to consider all pieces of the evidence to propose a date. Regarding the inscription, Page (in Bailey and Cramp 1988: 149) noted that the unstressed final vowels in *Tunwini*, *setæ*, *Torohtredæ*, *bæurnæ*, and *saulæ*, and the “unusual fracture diphthong” in *bæurnæ* might be seen as early features, while the imperative ending in *gebidæs* and the *-er* ending of *æfter* are indicative of a later date. As a compromise, Page assigned a broad eighth- or ninth-century date, with the caveat that the peculiarities of the text may be northwestern dialectal features rather than chronological discrepancies. In art historical terms, the carvings fit most comfortably in a (late?) ninth-century context, but we are dealing with a less skilled yet innovative carver here who readily adapted both figural iconography and interlace patterns. The inscription may thus point to a similarly creative adaptation of a memorial formula with archaic linguistic features, which may be indicative of long-standing vernacular commemorative practices rather than contemporary use of language.

As noted above, the Urswick stone differs markedly from our previous two examples of commemorative objects with runic inscriptions. It is a public monument of commemoration with a clear statement about the role of various participants in the commemorative process. It likely commemorates a secular man in a Christian cultural context, thus it illustrates the development of Christian commemorative practices in a wider social context beyond the ecclesiastical and monastic milieu, as well as the lay patronage of stone sculpture, which originated as an ecclesiastical art form in England. The inscription puts great emphasis on identifying the deceased, the patron, as well as the maker of the monument. The latter two obviously had an interest in recording their names publically in association with the person commemorated, for social, political, and/or economic reasons. Therefore, in addition to being a vehicle of commemoration, the monument serves the practical function of a legal statement, a public proclamation of rights, status, and identity defined by the affiliation with the deceased. It is a monument that serves the needs of the present and the future while creating a material reference to the past. In

this process, the inscription is given a central role, which is emphasized by its placement on the monument (in the center of the principal face) and its independence from the iconography, unlike the captions of Saint Cuthbert's coffin. Further, the poetic nature of the memorial formula suggests that the text was likely recited as part of a commemorative ritual at the site,<sup>18</sup> and the prayer formula explicitly calls for continued commemoration and remembrance through prayer.

### *Conclusion*

Although they differ in form, material, and commemorative function, the three inscribed objects discussed above were all already “things of the past” in the Anglo-Saxon period, operating as part of the commemorative process wherein the dead were brought into ongoing interaction with those members of their communities who survived them. Two of them, the urn and the coffin, were designed to contain and preserve the physical remains of the deceased. Despite the different states of the body and the different rituals involved (cremation vs. inhumation; pagan vs. Christian), both objects focused on the mnemonic agency of the body itself (cf. Williams 2004). In contrast, the memorial stone captured the presence of the deceased through the function and decoration of the object, putting more emphasis on the agency of objects in the commemorative process. The inscriptions added mnemonic value to each artifact and engaged the community in an interactive and performative act of commemoration, yet they operated differently on each of the three objects, showcasing the diverse functions of runic inscriptions.

In the case of the Loveden Hill urn, the inscription functions both as text and decoration, and suggests a special significance of the act of writing in the commemorative context. The inscription would likely have continued to be seen and read aloud (?) (at least by some viewers) after the remains were placed in the urn and before it was placed in the ground. As noted above, the inscribed urn is an exception in the early Anglo-Saxon funerary context, and may well represent an example of a new commemorative practice, the details of which remain unknown to us.

Saint Cuthbert's coffin is also an exceptional object in many ways, but with a long and well-documented history of veneration and curation, which provides us with insights into the use of the object in changing circumstances of commemoration. The decoration of the coffin foregrounds the celestial company of the deceased saint and his continued role as intercessor for his monastic community. The inscriptions not only identify the carved images but likely also played a mnemonic role in the ritual of commemoration in a liturgical context. The use of mixed script is a gesture towards the cultural roots of the saint and his community,

combining the local use of runes with the universality of Roman script in the Christian world.

The Urswick stone reflects a different trend in commemorative practices, one in which the sponsor and artist are given a prominent—and public—role in the act of commemoration. The inscriptions play a key role in naming and remembering these individuals, as suggested by the central placement of the text panel on the monument. Further, the poetic form of the commemorative inscription suggests a performative aspect of commemoration in line with the vernacular literary tradition. Despite these differences, the inscriptions on all three objects emphasize the connection between the living and the dead and suggest practices of commemoration throughout the Anglo-Saxon period centering on, and aided by, inscribed objects. These artifacts served as objectified reminders of the past around which social memory could be built.

The use of runes in commemoration continued throughout the Anglo-Saxon period, even after the widespread acceptance of the Roman script in both manuscript and epigraphic context. At least two of our three objects (Saint Cuthbert's coffin and the Urswick stone) were made in a culture equally familiar with both runic and Roman scripts (and to a limited extent with Greek as well), and the choice of one script over the other is difficult to explain. One still encounters the belief, popularized in the writings of amateurs, that runes were perceived in the Anglo-Saxon period as associated with heathenry and magic, and their use was therefore discouraged by the Church (see the critical comments of Page 1995: 315–16); or that they were a lower-class, demotic form of writing. Neither of these ideas is consistent with what we can observe in the inscriptions. In late seventh-century Lindisfarne, both scripts were evidently considered suitable for writing holy names on a casket built to house the relics of a saint; and in the Urswick inscription (as on the Ruthwell Cross, the Franks Casket, and other high-status inscribed objects), runes were considered appropriate for public and pious statements. Just why the carver of Saint Cuthbert's coffin used Roman letters for the name of Luke and runes for the other evangelists; why the Lindisfarne community commemorated a certain Osgyþ using both scripts (cf. Lindisfarne name-stone no. 24, with the same name repeated in runes and Roman letters; Cramp 1984: 202–03); or why the sponsors of the biscriptal Falstone monument (noted above; Cramp 1984: 172–73) felt it necessary to record the same memorial text in two scripts is not clear. But we cannot reasonably ascribe the choice of script to any hierarchical relationship or clearly defined division of function between them. It seems that Northumbrian religious communities, and likely other people in Anglo-Saxon England as well, regarded runes as another mode of writing alongside Roman letters, equally well suited to epigraphic use. Further, it is possible that the runic script had



a special prestige in a commemorative context and an association with social memory and the ancestral past, thus carrying special significance on objects of commemoration, beyond the recording of names and memorial texts. The slight prevalence of runic (vs. Roman) inscriptions on memorial stone monuments overall, among them the longest memorial inscriptions, seems to support this claim, along with the fact that the highly literate community of Saint Cuthbert still felt the need to use the runic script on the coffin of its saint (as well as on a number of memorial name-stones).

The inscribed objects discussed above all express a connection to the past by way of their function as vehicles of commemoration of those who had passed, but at least two of them also seem to reflect an awareness of posterity. In the case of the Loveden Hill urn and the Urswick stone, it is the inscriptions that have guaranteed that the commemorated individuals can still be remembered by name, while the community of Saint Cuthbert relied on social memory (embedded in regulated ecclesiastical practices) for continued commemoration of their deceased patron and intercessor. Further, it is worth noting that our three objects differ not only in date, location, and purpose but also in their material. A more durable material lends the object greater longevity, and it is striking that those participants in the commemorative performance who wished to highlight their own role used not only a very public monument but also the most permanent medium available: stone. In some sense, these “things of the past” were thus also intended as “things of the future,” and our scholarly interest in them confirms that they have succeeded as such, one way or another.

## Notes

1. On the agency of inanimate objects and artifacts from an anthropological perspective, see Gell 1998, and a critical reassessment of his theory by Layton (2003). On commemoration, archeology, and material culture, see, among others, Tarlow (1999: 1–49), Hallam and Hockey (2001, esp. 23–46), and Williams 2006.

2. Runologists at Kiel have compiled an online database of older runic inscriptions with extensive references and contextual information: <http://www.runenprojekt.uni-kiel.de/>.

3. Notably the substantial corpus of runic inscriptions on wooden objects from Bergen (Norway), which consists of almost 700 texts of many different types ranging from business messages to writing exercises, jokes, magical charms, and Latin prayers (Barnes 2012: 106–16).

4. For further discussion on the hypothesis that the adoption of runes in Germanic societies near the Roman frontier may be a response to displays of power by the Romans, see Fischer 2005.

5. Two items formerly thought to be English but now generally accepted as Frisian in origin (in both cases on linguistic grounds) are a gold solidus (probably late sixth century) with the inscription **skanomodu** and an archeologically undated bone fragment found at Southampton with the inscription **catæ** (Waxenberger 2010, nos. 71, 75).

6. Some inscriptions were excluded because, although they are certainly or probably runic, they are illegible and so not useful for the linguistically focused study that Waxenberger was undertaking.

7. Two runic objects were found in Southampton (Waxenberger 2010, nos. 75–76), and one of these—the **catæ** bone mentioned above—is not thought to be English. The only other find in West Saxon territory is a mount or strap end reportedly found near Carisbrooke Castle on the Isle of Wight (Waxenberger 2010, no. 15. See also Page 1999b).

8. Two more tweezers-like objects with runic inscriptions have been found more recently: one—possibly a page holder or page turner—from Baconsthorpe, Norfolk (Hines 2011; Bammesberger 2012; Waxenberger 2012); the other—of uncertain function—from Barkston or Honington, south Lincolnshire (Hines 2015).

9. For example, several of the rings have a linguistically unintelligible text that resembles a known charm against bleeding.

10. National grid ref. SK 908458; cremation grave 61.A11/261; British Museum catalogue no. 1963,1001.14.

11. A three-dimensional model of the whole object was created by Professor Dominic Powlesland, University of York, in 2015: <https://sketchfab.com/models/f2272d1abab64ad2a4a1706b43278181>.

12. The assumption that a runic inscription is in and of itself indicative of magic appears to be inspired by Fennell’s reading of Krause 1937.

13. For a more thorough discussion of the name and an overview of different readings and interpretations, see Nedoma (1991–1993; 2016), who favors the form *Sīþæbad*.

14. The name in **sīþ-** is interesting to the philologist in its apparent attestation of a relatively early sound change, namely assimilation of the nasal consonant in the element \**sīþ-* < PGmc \**sinþa-* or \**senþa-* (compare OE *sīð*, OHG *sind* “journey”) (Orel 2003, s.v. \**senþaz*; Ringe and Taylor 2014: 140–42); but this sound change is not peculiar to English. It is generally regarded as an “Ingvaëonic” or “North Sea Germanic” feature, shared with Old Frisian and Old Saxon. If this change was present in the language of settlers in Britain, it was likely also present in the language of people living on the other side of the North Sea. It should be added that orthographic omission of a nasal before a consonant is a known spelling practice on the Continent and in Scandinavia, in areas where phonological assimilation of the type described above does not take place. Two sixth-century Continental inscriptions contain personal names with the element *-gunþ* (OHG *-gund*) spelled **-gubþ**, for example (Neudingen-Baar wooden stave **blīþgubþ**; Schretzheim bronze capsule **alagubþ**; see Findell 2012, nos. 54, 67).

15. Summary of the history of the coffin based on Cronyn and Horie 1985: 1–10, with further details from Wilson 2004.

16. Monuments with names only (i.e., without any reference to a vernacular memorial formula) are excluded from this count, although those monuments may have had a commemorative function as well (e.g., numerous Northumbrian name stones, see Maddern 2013). For a catalogue and discussion of vernacular memorial inscriptions on stone sculpture, see Kopár 2015: 98–116.

17. The facing broad side of the slab (side C) is decorated with an unusual inhabited vine-scroll with two human figures, a man and a woman, in the middle, accompanied by a pair of birds above and two reptilian beasts below—most likely a representation of the Tree of Life.

18. Further evidence is provided by the placement of small incised crosses within memorial inscriptions. These may have indicated the gesture of the sign of the cross in rituals performed at these monuments. See Kopár 2015: 96.

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