FROM MANUSCRIPT TO MANUSCRIPT:
TWO OLD ENGLISH RUNIC RIDDLES

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Riddling is a universal phenomenon with a noble and ancient lineage. The Vedas, the Koran, the Old Testament, classical Greek literature, all abound in examples of riddles and there is none better known than that of the Sphinx concerning the three ages of man. What is striking about some of these riddles is their similarity of theme throughout the world, where they appear at different times but are treated differently. This would suggest either a spontaneous origin based on similar observation or similar processes or else a common origin with dissemination through oral or written transmission.

Riddles are found to exist on two levels: popular and learned, often passing from one group to the other. The Old English riddles illustrate both types and tendencies. While no positive distinction can be made between the two, in general the longer and more poetic ones, as also those containing *runes*, may safely be called learned; whereas, the shorter and usually metrically inferior ones, especially those dealing with simple domestic themes and the 'obscene' riddles, must be regarded as popular. The transition from the popular to the learned or literary form is best exemplified by Riddle 84 in the Exeter Book[1].

As with similes and metaphors, riddles purport to represent something as something else. The significance of the resemblance, whether explicit or implicit, is assumed to be more or less easily recognised. Additionally, however, in the riddle, there is introduced

an element of calculated deception; the resemblance is submerged in deliberate ambiguity or obscurity. Clues that are given are seldom obvious and the ambiguity tends to take one of two forms. In one, no deception is intended beyond what would amount to a test of the hearer's mental agility in deducing the answer. In the other, the riddler sets out to trick the hearer maliciously, by forcing an ambiguity beyond the limits of fair play; or else, he posseses a special knowledge which his auditor cannot be expected to have. The one is an exercise of intelligence; the other a trial of wits, in which the riddler hopes to exhibit his superiority. The answers to the riddles are sometimes concealed in words, or in signs as in the *runes*. When the riddle is versified, the ambiguity is heightened by the increment of poetical language. Or, as happens sometimes, the language is strained to satisfy metrical needs with the same result.

In planning the production of *Sixty Riddles from the Exeter Book*[2], I was motivated by the desire to present as accurate a text of the originals as possible in a 'rendering' into Modern English and at the same time to invite the reader whose knowledge of Old English was practically minimal, if not nonexistent, to partake of the pleasure to be derived from the intellectual exercise of their solution by suggesting the same in the design of the initial letter with which their Modern English version began. Much of the credit in interpreting my needs correctly accrues to the artist. While the text he was required to illustrate was modern, its substance, in reality, was of the past. He was expected to exercise his imagination sufficiently enough to re-create this past but at the same time neither to perplex nor to help the reader unnecessarily in any way. The 'rendering' itself had had to take into account the fact that, although Modern English has developed historically out of Old English, the changes in accidence, syntax and lexis that have taken place over the last nine hundred years would make it subtanstially different from its progenitor. To appreciate just what is involved in the process of 'rendering' an Old English poetic text into a suitable Modern English equivalent - especially where there is the added complication of *runes*, disputed editorial readings, or mis-readings, blunders in copying by the scribe of the manuscript, and sometimes the poor condition of the manuscript itself - it would do no harm to delineate the procedure I have followed.

The texts in facsimile were examined and compared with the published versions of my predecessors before setting them up as the basis for my own edition. Any emendations to the original, either suggested to me by the readings of previous editors or by my own interpretation of the text, are incorporated in my version or else mentioned in my introduction to the riddles. In the case of the two riddles that form the basis of this article, I present each one as it occurs in the manuscript, through its successive stages of transformation (with editorial comments and emendations) via a prose 'rendering' and so to its final form in verse. The solutions to each of the two riddles is given at the end of this article.

But, some preliminary remarks to begin with. First, none of the extant Old English verse is written in the form in which it is to be found in modern editions: it is written in long continuous lines and the breaks between poems are often indicated by breaks in the manuscript. Second, none of the titles of the poems are original either: they are the invention of modern editors (and some are still disputed). Third, the rhythm of Old English verse is neither syllabic (like most later English verse), nor merely quantitative (like the Latin hexameter), nor based solely on stress (like a good deal of twentieth-century verse). Old English poems depend on a restricted range of verbal patterns, fixed overall but permitting a certain range of variation at each point. Eduard Sievers interpreted this system according to five 'types' thus:

In each line:

(i) the basic unit consists of two half-lines joined by alliteration, the first generally heavier than the second.

(ii) in each half-line there are two stressed points. Two or three of the stresses in each complete line should alliterate with each other, preferably the first and/or second, and the third. The fourth stress does not carry alliteration.

In each half-line:

(iii) Stresses must fall on one of these three possibilities: (a) a syllable with a long vowel; (b) a syllable ending in a consonant cluster; (c) *two* syllables conforming to neither of the former types.

(iv) remembering the above rule, each half-line must consist of one of the following five 'types', as expresses by the symbols $'$ (full stress), $\backslash$ (minor stress), x (no stress):

A $\quad'$ x $'$ x

B $\quad$ x $'$ x $'$

C $\quad$ x $''$ x

D $\quad''^\backslash$ x or $''$ x $^\backslash$

E $\quad'^\backslash$ x $'$ or $'$ x $^\backslash$ $'$

(v) each x, representing a point of no stress, may include any reasonable number of syllables, usually one to three.

There are a certain number of sub-rules of minor importance. Types A, D and E may be preceded by one or more unstressed syllables (anacrusis); where two strong stresses follow each other, in the C and D types, the second may be short, in defiance of rule (iii) (licence); an extra weak syllable may be inserted after the first stress in the D type. With few exceptions, these rules fit every half-line of Old English verse in existence. They are so firmly based that variation from them is usually a sign that the copyist has made some obvious mistake.

So, its two basic principles of metre are those stress or emphasis in the construction of the patterns of its half-line, which is the metrical unit, and secondly of alliteration, or the rhyming of initial sounds internally, as the method of uniting the two half-lines in the ears of their hearers. It is now clear, as John C Pope has very fully demonstrated, that 'Sievers' classifications of five 'types' of half-line is inadequate because it ignores the musical side of the verse, and confuses grammatical and metrical quantity, thus encouraging a purely artificial and less natural method of reciting. But most students

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of Old English nurtured on 'Sievers' five 'types' find it difficult to classify half-lines except as he did.

And now a word about *runes*. These are letters of the characteristic alphabet which recorded early North, East and West Germanic texts. In the Anglo-Saxon context, *runes* belong to that branch of script developed commonly for their inscriptions on coins, memorial stones, crosses, etc, and minimally for their writings.

Altogether thirty-one distinct *runic* characters, some with major variant forms, appear in the inscriptions. Modern scholars, following their Anglo-Saxon predecessors, list them in a particular order called the *futhorc* after the value of the first six letters. This order derives from that of the primitive Germanic runic alphabet (the *futhark*) but its ultimate origin is unknown.

The only epigraphical *futhorc* we possess is that of the Thames scramasax a one-edged sword recovered from the Thames near Battersea in the nineteenth century.

From Anglo-Saxon and early Norman times survive a number of manuscript records of *runes*, the letters arranged sometimes in *futhorc*, sometimes in ABC order. Their scribes drew the runic characters, with more or less care and accuracy, and usually added the Roman value above or below the *rune* and sometimes also the *rune* name.

Each Anglo-Saxon *rune* had a name which was also an Old English common or proper noun. Usually the name began with one of the range of sounds that the name represented, as *feoh*, 'money' or 'f', *hægel*, 'hail' for 'h', and *dæg*, 'day' for 'd'. When, as sometimes happened, no suitable Old English word had the right opening, the system was satisfied with a *rune*-name containing the appropriate sound, as *Ing*, the name of a god or hero, for ' ϴ '.

The Anglo-Saxon *Runic Poem*, once in Cott Ms Otho B.x, formed the most detailed study of the *rune*-names to survive to modern times. The poem consists of twenty-nine stanzas of alliterative verse from two to five lines long. Each begins with a *rune* and its name which the rest of the stanza expounds, so that the whole comprises an elementary

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guide to the *futhorc*, presumably designed to help the memory. The Anglo-Saxon *Runic Poem* is not unique, however, for there are Norwegian and Icelandic parallels, suggesting that there was a common mnemonic verse-type.

Runic writing did not lend itself readily to the practical uses which we associate with most forms of alphabetic writing; it never developed into a cursive script, but remained epigraphic to the end.

The methods of inscribing *runes* (whose script was angular) varied with the material. The frequent use of the Old English verb *wrítan*, Old Norse *ríta*, Old High German *rízzan*, suggests that originally *runes* were 'carved' or 'scratched' onto wood, metal or stone; by more elaborate means of 'writing' followed, such as carving into wood, chiselling into stone, or stamping in the case of coins or bracteates.

As with most early alphabetic scripts *runic* writing normally recognizes no division between words. Inscriptions could be read from right to left, or from left to right, or *boustrephedon*, that is in the manner in which a field is ploughed. Sometimes an inscription of two or more lines is to be read from the bottom upwards. Occasionally, however, various devices, such as one or several dots, were employed to distinguish words or what might be termed 'sense-units'.

A further point that requires mention is the use of ligatures, sometimes called 'bind-*runes*', that is time- or space-saving contractions of two (rarely three) *runes* into one symbol. The most common device is the use of one vertical stroke shared by two *runes*.
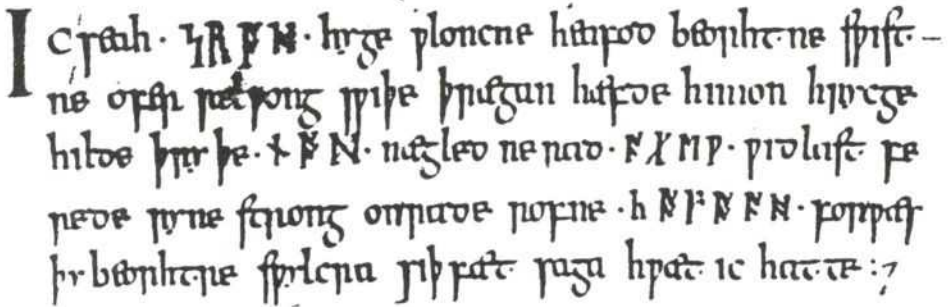
Double sounds, especially consonants, are not generally indicated as such in the older Germanic *runic* inscriptions, although there are some exceptions. This rule applies not only medially in words, but also when one word ends and the next word begins with the same sound.

Of a similar *genre* is the use of *runes* in the Old English poetic riddles and the signed poems of Cynewulf. In the *runic* riddles the solution was inserted into the verse with the aid of *runes* or *rune*-names, sometimes spelling backwards to enhance the puzzle. In

Cynewulf's verse the poet's name was spelt in *runes* which in three of the poems were fitted singly into the text so that their names formed part of the narrative; in the fourth poem, *Juliana*, the *runes* occur in three groups. The poet's purpose, as he expressly states, was to request prayer by name to aid his soul to attain salvation. The only example of continuous writing in *runes* is that of the Ruthwell Cross which corresponds to certain lines of the Old English poem known as *The Dream of the Rood.*

Riddle 19³

Facsimile⁴

This riddle transcribed reads:

Icseah . �hå ᚱ ᛈ ᛁ . hyge wloncne heafod beorhtne swist

ne ofer sælwong swi e rægan hæfde himon hrycge

hilde þryþe. ᛉ ᛈ ᛁ. nægled ne rad. ᚠ ᚷ ᛗ ᚹ . widlast fe

rede ryne strong onrade rofne . ᚲ ᛈ ᚠ ᛈ ᚠ ᛁ. forwæs

y beorhtre swylcra si fæt Saga hwæt ic hatte:

It is obvious immediately that the text needs editorial emendation of some sort. To begin with, there is no separation between the words *Ic* and *seah*; *him* and *on*; *on* and *rade*; and *for* and *wæs** ; The word *swist* is meaningless and should read *swift*, the scribe accidentally repeating the initial 'long s' by a simple extension of the upward stroke of 'f' into a loop. The metre is faulty in the first line of the text and a word, or an expression containing a word capable of taking a stress,

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for the sake of the alliteration, might profitably be supplied. Three out
of the four groups of *runes* make complete sense. Read backwards
they are *hors, mon, ha(o)foc*. The fourth is corrupt and has caused
considerable confusion as to its interpretation. In this case the editor
has to decide whether the *rad* that precedes the *rune* group (but is not
itself written as a *runic* letter) actually belongs to it but was
accidentally spelt out in full as the name of that *rune*, or whether
carelessness on the part of the scribe, as could possibly be the case in
the spelling of the group *hafoc* (containing the extraneous 'o'
unrecorded elsewhere as a dialectal form) is to be considered evident
here. Finally, the pronoun *ic* at the end of the riddle is obviously wrong
since the riddle begins with the formula 'I saw'. Accordingly, *ic* here
must be emended. The 3 singular neuter pronoun, *hit*, would make the
best sense, in the circumstances.

The earliest editors made the following observations. They
completed line 1 in various ways. Grein read *Ic seah (somod)*, the
somod referring to the *runes* and not to the characters of the riddle,
and so did Assmann and Tupper. Wyatt read *Ic seah (swoncorne)*, in
order to supply an adjective agreeing with the adjectives in lines 2-3
(when re-arranged as verse). Trautmann read *Ic (on siþe) seah*. Kock,
Anglia 43, 310 ff., suggested *Ic seah (sigan)*. Grein's *somod*
undoubtedly has its advantages, but has no parallel in the other *rune*
riddles. Trautmann's conjecture *on siþe* is supported by the similar
phrase *on swaþe*, Rid. 75.1, and perhaps we might even read *on swa
e* here. In line 1b Trautmann supplied *ond* after the second *rune*, and
similarly in line 5ª, the name of the R-*rune*, as standing for that *rune*
and to be read with the *runes* in line 6ª. Then, reading the *runes*
backward, we would have *wegar*, which Tupper thought was for
wiggar, 'lance'. Cosijn, *Beitr.*, 23, 129, took *rad*, ᚱ , and X as forming
the word *gar*, reading ᛗ and ᚹ as *wynneh,* that is the horse which
widlast ferede. Holthausen, *Anglia* 35, 169, pointed out that for
alliteration, the ᚹ should come at the beginning of the group; and in
Anglia 44, 347, he read *nægledne* ᚱᛁᚹ,X,I ,ᚠI *widlast ferede*, to
improve the alliteration, but he accepted *wiggar* as the meaning of his
jumble of *runes*. Hicketier, *Anglia* 10, 593 ff., proposed *rand* for *rad*,

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line 5b, and also ᛈᛖᛗᛈ (= eow) for ᛟᚷᛗᛈ . Trautmann, p.81, taking *rad X* as standing for *gar*, read *Nægledne gar*/ W, E *ond* ᚹ / *widlast ferede*. Wyatt read *nægled ne rad*, 5b, "the rider rode not in armour", but made no attempt to interpret the *runes* in 6ª. Mackie treated the *runes* in the simplest way possible, reading them as WEGA (gen.pl. dependent on *widlast?*) and beginning a new sentence with 6ª; he translates, "travelling far upon the ways, swift in his progress, he carried a strong hawk".

The responsibility of an editor, it will be seen, is to produce a sensible version of the original. In experimental form, after all of the above points have been taken into consideration, the text might read:

Ic [on si e] seah. ᛋᚱᛖᚻ. hygewloncne heafodbeorhtne //

swiſtne ofer sælwong swi ᚦe ᚦrægan //hæfde him on hrycge hildeᚦryᚦe//. ᚷᛖᛗ . nægledne rad//. ᚠᚷᛗᛈ . widlast ferede // rynestrong on rade rofne . ᛚ ᛖ //ᛖᛖᛋᚻ . for

wæs ᚦy beorhtre // swylcra siᚦfæt saga hwæt *hit* hatte:

The next stage is   the recasting of the original to read like verse, with the half-lines divided by a visually recognizable *caesura*, and punctuating it according to our understanding of these terms today:

Ic [on si e] seah. ᛋᚱᛖ.

ᚻ hygewloncne, heafodbeorhtne,

swiſtne ofer sælwong   swi e   rægan.
Hæfde him on hrycge   hilde ry e

. ᚷᛖᛗ. Nægledne rad

. ᚠᚷᛗᛈ. Widlast ferede

rynestrong on rade   rofne . ᛚᛖ

ᚠ ᛖ ᚠ ᚻ . For wæs ᚦy beorhtre,

swylcra siᚦfæt.   Saga hwæt *hit* hatte:

A tentative translation of this would be:

    I saw [on course] SRO

    H proud-hearted bright-headed   (HORS = horse)

    very swiftly over the fertile plain proceed.

    It had on its back battle-strength

    NOM. The nailed-one rode   (MON = man)

    AGEW. The wide track bore   (WEGA/WIGA = warrior)

    strong for the course riding CO

    FOAH. It was the nobler for   (HAOFOC = hawk)

    such an expedition. Say what it is called.

And the final translation (with the illustrated capital):

saw [on course] a steed,

high-spirited, a splendid head,

very swift across the pleasant plain proceed.

Battle-might upon its back it bore,

a man. The riveted-one rode,

the warrior. Wide-wandering conveyed,

strong for the run, riding, a stout

hawk. The happier was it for

such a venture. Say what it is called.

Riddle 42[3]

Facsimile[4]

[Manuscript facsimile text]

This riddle transcribed reads:

> Ic seah wyhte wrætlice twa undearnunga ute plegan
> hamed laces hwit loc anfeng wlanc under wædum gif
> þæs weorces speop fyllo iconflette mæg þurh
> runstafas rincum secgan þã þe   bec witan bega æt
> somne naman þara wihta þær sceal nyd wesan twe
> ga o þer 7se torhta æsc ananlinan acas twegen
> hægelas swa some hwylc wæs hord gates cægan cræf
> te þa clam me onleac þeþa rædellan wid ryne menn
> hyge fæste heold heortan bewrigene orþonc bendum
> nu is undyrne werum ætwine huþa wihte mid us
> hean mode twa hatne sindon.

Probably the first thing to notice is that there are no closing marks
at the end of this riddle and the next one begins immediately after it
in the same line in the manuscript. Again, as with the previous riddle

there is no separation between certain words and division of others (though this is always syllabic). Of the first type are the following: *ic* and *on* and *flette*; the Tironian nota 7 and the demonstrative *se; an* and *an* and *linan*; *e* and *a*; and *hu* and *a*. Of the second type are: *hæmed* and *laces*; *hwit* and *loc*; *æt* and *somme*; *twe* and *ga*; *hord* and *gates; cræf* and *te; clam* and *me; ryme* and *menn; hyge* and *fæste; or onc* and *bendum*; and *hean* and *mode*. The tilde in *a* and the Tironian nota are scribal contractions and both need to be expanded. The word *speop* is obviously a mistake for *speow*, the 'p' repeated because of its striking similarity to *runic* 'wynn'. Finally, the *runes* themselves are spelt out in full as the solution to the riddle depends upon the auditor's ability to convert each of these to their epigraphical forms and re-arrange them.

The most important editorial observations are these. In line 1, Holthausen, *Anglia Beibl.*, 46, 9, would read *Ic wyhte seah* instead of the MS *Ic seah wyhte*. In line 2, Sievers, *Beitr.*, 10, 520, suggested *plegian*, for metrical reasons, instead of the MS *plegan*; and so too Trautmann. In line 11, the latter would supply *ond* before *hæglas*. *Hwylc*, in the same line, has caused difficulties of interpretation. Grein, *Spr.*, 2, 121, took it doubtfully as a relative, 'ei qui' or 'si quis'. So also Wyatt, who thinks *Hwylc* is *Swylc*. Williamson treats it as a scribal mistake for *swa ic* (earlier *sue ic*) and accordingly emends the following *wæs* to *æs* on the grounds that this is the only reading that makes sense of the preterite tense *onleac* at 12b. Tupper, p. 173, more plausibly takes *Hwylc* as a simple interrogative; and Macki's translation follows his. The syntax is certainly obscure here, and any of the proposed interpretations may be defended. According to Krapp-Dobbie, the word probably has reference not to 'which letter', but to 'which riddler', that is, 'who solved the riddle?'. Finally, Trautmann reads *heorran* for *heortan*, as a variation of *clamme*, 12.

Taking into account all these points, a re-constructed text might read:

Ic seah wyhte wrætlice twa undearnunga ute plegan // hæmedlaces hwitloc anfeng wlanc under wædum gif // þæs weorces speow fæmne fyllo ic on flette mæg þurh // runstafas

rincum secgan þam þe bec witan bega ætsomne // naman þara wihta ær sceal nyd wesan twega // oþer ond se torhta æsc án an linan acas twegen // hægelas swa some hwylc wæs hordgates cægan cræfte //þa clamme onleac þe þa rædellan wit rynemenn // hygefæste heold heortan bewrigene or þ oncbendum // nu is undyrne werum ætwine huþa wihte mid us // heanmode twa hatne sindon.

If this were now re-cast to read like verse, with the half-lines divided by a visually recognizable *caesura*, and punctuated, we would have the following:

Ic seah wyhte   wrætlice twa

undearnunga   ute plegan

hæmedlaces;   hwitloc anfeng,

wlanc under wædum,   gif þæs weorces speow,

fæmne fyllo.   Ic on flette mæg

þ urh runstafas   rincum secgan

þ am þe bec witan   bega ætsomne

naman þara wihta. þær sceal *Nyd* wesan

twega oþer θ *ond* se torhta *Æsc*

an an linan,   *Acas* twegen,

Hægelas swa some.   Hwylc wæs hordgates

cægan cræfte   þa clamme onleac

þe þa rædellan   wit rynemenn

hygefæste heold,   heortan bewrigene

or þ oncbendum.   Nu is undyrne

werum æt wine   hu þa wihte mid us

heanmode twa   hatne sindon.

A tentative translation of this would be:

I saw two wondrous wights

openly indulge outside

in sexual intercourse; the white-locked (one) received

proudly, beneath her weeds, if it succeeded, from that work,

a woman's fulness. I can upon the floor,

through rune-staves, tell warriors,

those who understand books, both together   A

of the names of those wights. There *Need* shall be   N   N

in each of the two and the splendid *Ash*   &

alone on the line, *Oaks* two,   A

Hails likewise. Which of that hoard's gates' was   H   H

the key (whose) craft unlocked the chains

which the riddle from rune-men

held wisely concealed in the heart

with skilfully contrived bonds? Now is revealed

to men at (their) wine how those wights among us,

the mean-minded two, are called.

wo curious creatures saw I

outside openly indulge

in sexual love; the white-locked took

beneath her weeds, if that work prospered, proud,

a virgin's fill. I can, upon the floor,

with runic letters, warriors tell,

men who understand books, both

those creatures' names. There shall *Need* be

in each of two, and the excellent *Ash*,

one on the line, *Oaks* two,

Hails likewise. Which key's skill was it

unlocked the chains of that hoard's gates

which the riddle from rune-men

wisely held, hid in the heart

with cunningly-contrived bonds? Now is revealed

to warriors at their wine how those wights among us,

the mean-minded pair, are called.

NOTES

This article forms part of a Doctoral Thesis, "Anglo-Saxon Verse Runes", to be presented by the author to the University of Barcelona in September 1990.

1 The Exeter Book, chief of the four codices of Anglo-Saxon poetry, has belonged to the Chapter Library of the Cathedral since 1072. It is listed in the catalogue of donations made to the Cathedral as *i mycel boc gehwilcum þingum on leoðwisan geworht* by the Leofric who in 1046 became Bishop of Devonshire and Cornwall. Written on vellum in a fine liturgical hand, the manuscript contains no drawings except a set of about sixty large initial letters. At some time the manuscript suffered considerable damage - the front has been used as a writing-board, and more appropriately as a beer-mat; an uncertain number of leaves at the beginning have been lost; and the last fourteen have been burnt through with a brand. The manuscript is outstanding for the variety and range of its verse. Two of Cynewulf's signed poems are here, the *Ascension* and *Juliana*, in addition to the *Advent Lyrics*, two poems on *Judgement Day*, the group of elegies that include *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, part of an Anglo-Saxon *Bestiary* or *Physiologus* describing the *Panther* and the *Whale*, the *Rhyming Poem*, the *Phoenix*, one of the finest religious poems written in Anglo-Saxon, and, of course, the *Riddles*.

2 Two riddles from this selection were published by *Orbis*, vols. 46/47, 1982, pp. 12-13. The artists are my son, Gavin Rodrigues, and a friend, Dave Thomson.

3 For the texts of the Riddles and corresponding notes, see GP Krapp and EVK Dobbie, *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, III, 1936.

4 The facsimiles are reproduced from photographs taken by the Cambridge University Library from *The Exeter Book of Old English Poetry* (London, 1933), edited by RW Chambers, Max Forster and Robin Flower.

5 The solutions to the riddles are as follows: Rid. 19 - warrior on horseback with hawk; Rid. 42 - Cock (AS *hana*) and Hen (AS *hæn*).