

Graphemics reveals identity: The runic inscription on the Ruthwell Cross

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Abstract: The Ruthwell Cross is made from sandstone and is 5.28 m high. Its main inscription, the *Crucifixion Poem*, is in runes (some of which, however can no longer be read). This inscription is one of the most prominent inscriptions in the Old English Runes Corpus and is outstanding in several ways: The poem is written in the early Northumbrian (Nhb.) dialect, the attestation of which is scant in Old English manuscripts. Not only does the inscription show special graphemic use of certain runes, it also exhibits completely new runes for the velar allophones of the Gmc. voiceless plosive */k/ and the voiced velar fricative */x/. Some of these new runes can also be found in other runic inscriptions in the west of Northumbria, but, in general, not in the east of Northumbria. The runic data implies that there were, in fact, two Northumbrian sub-dialects. The main goal of the Ruthwell carver or designer seems to have been to express in writing as phonetically precisely as possible the form of speech used in this area. This having been said, the inscription provides us with a unique marker of identity of Ruthwell and its sphere of influence, as well as with an insight into an east-west division of the Northumbrian dialect area.

1. Introduction

Runes are Germanic characters. In Great Britain, runic writing began in Pre-Old English (Pre-OE), basically the *adventus Saxonum*, in ca. AD 425, and lasted until the 11th century (approximately the end of the Old English period). Named after the first six characters, the Common Germanic, or *Older futhorc* of 24 characters was the basis for the Old English *futhorc*. The Old English Runes Corpus (OERC) is extremely small in comparison to the Old English (OE) text corpus in the Latin script. With all the new finds of the last few years, it currently comprises 115 inscriptions.

Nevertheless, the runic inscriptions come from a period and from parts of England where there is a lack of early manuscript texts. The majority of the inscriptions was written in the 8th and 9th centuries. As for the findspots, most texts come from Northumbria followed by Mercia. Runic texts are extremely valuable because they grant us an insight into early OE in general and into dialects in particular that are otherwise hardly attested in the non-runic manuscript tradition in that period.



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Map 1: The find spots of the inscriptions in the Old English Runes Corpus (OERC)

The following map presents the Nhb. inscriptions with Ruthwell.



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Map 2: The find spots of the inscriptions in the Northumbrian Runes Corpus

2. The Ruthwell Cross and its Uniqueness within the OERC

2.1 *The Object and its Location*

The Ruthwell Cross (RC) is made from sandstone and is 5.28 m high. The main inscription in runes, is the *Crucifixion Poem* (cf. Majewski 2022; Bammesberger 2023), which is inscribed on two sides of the monument. On “art historical and archaeological grounds”, the Ruthwell Cross has been dated to “probably second quarter of the eighth century” (Hines 2023:76); while, from a linguistic point of view, it has been dated to ca. AD 750 (Waxenberger 2006:296).

2.2 *The Inscription*

The first two parts of the *Crucifixion Poem* are presented here to show the runes \mathfrak{X} , \mathfrak{X} , \mathfrak{h} , \mathfrak{h} and \mathfrak{X} in their phonological environments.¹

¹ The following conventions are used in this article: runes are transliterated in lower-case and **bold** letters; uncertain runes are given in italics. Bind-runes are marked by an arc \frown . Phonemes are put between slashes // and allophones are given in square brackets []. Graphemes are denoted by angled brackets <>. In the narrow

RC: north-east side

ǀXeredæ hinæ Xod almeᵛttiX · þa he walde on XalXu XistiXa modiX f[...] [...] men[
]geredæ hinæ God almehttig þa he walde on galgu gistīga mōdigf[...] +[allæ] men[
‘God almighty stripped himself when he chose to mount the gallows courageous [...] +[all] men’

RC: south-east side (inscription with reconstructed rune +[m]):

ǀ ih riīhnæ Xyniᵛh · heafunæs hlāfard hælða ih ni dorstæ [..]smæræ[.]u uᵛ Xet men ba
ætXad[.] ih [...] +[m]iþ b[.]odæ bistemi[.] bi

ǀic riīcnæ (rīcnæ) kyniᵛc, heafunæs hlāfard. Hælða ic ni dorstæ.

[Bi]smæræ[d]u uᵛket men bā ætgad[re]. Ic [wæs] +[m]iþ b[l]ōdæ bistēmi[d] bi[.

‘I [...] the mighty King, the Lord of Heaven. I did not dare to bend.

They mocked the two of us both together. I [was] moist with blood (...)’

[Waxenberger forthc.: OE Edition no. 69]

This inscription is outstanding in various ways:

1. It is the longest inscription in the OERC but some of the runes cannot be identified.²
2. It is written in the early Nhb. dialect (Waxenberger forthc.:chapter 6) and more importantly
3. it shows special graphemic use of the *yew* rune, ᵛ ǀ, to represent the voiceless palatal [ç] and velar [x] fricatives.
4. The use of rune no. 28 *ea* ǀ for the short and long diphthongs *ea*, *ēa*. In Northumbria this rune is also used for *eo*, *ēo*.
5. The inscription also exhibits new runes for the velar allophones of the voiceless plosive Gmc. */k/ (rune *calc* ǀ; rune no. 31 X) and the voiced velar fricative */ɣ/ (rune *gār* X). In other inscriptions, however, these allophones were still denoted by runes no. 6 *cēn* k c and no. 7 *g(i)efu* X.
6. Two of these new runes (X [ɣ]; ǀ [k]) were also used in other inscriptions in the west of Nhb.
7. All of this may allow for the conclusion that there was a leading runic centre in the west of Nhb.

3. The Graphemic Level in Detail

Now I would like to turn to the graphemic level and would like to start with the allophones voiceless velar and palatal fricatives and their representations.

3.1 Denoting the Allophones [x] and [ç] and the Special Graphemic Use of the Yew-Rune ᵛ

In the following, the various possibilities of representing the voiceless velar [x] and palatal [ç] fricatives in the clusters [xt] and [çt] are presented and discussed.

transcription [k̄] is used for the (more) palatalized *k*. The brackets] and [mark the break-off of an inscription on the right-hand or on the left-hand side.

2 “Over 320 runes either remain or are recorded” [Bammesberger 2023:24].

Generally, the grapheme <H> <h> (also combined with <k> <c>) is used to depict the voiceless fricatives ([x]; [ç]) not only in the runic tradition but also in the non-runic manuscript tradition [SB 1965:§ 4.7]. The same is true for the rune <g> and its counterpart in the Latin script although the use of it is less common [SB 1965:§ 221 note 1].

The combination <H>(<k>)+<↑>, <h>(<c>)+<t>, was used in two inscriptions found in the west of Nhb., the Thornhill Stone III and the Kirkheaton Stone, but it is also found outside the west of Northumbria, such as in London and Monte Sant' Angelo, Italy, as well as in inscriptions whose provenance is possibly Mercian (Mortain Casket). <g>+<t> was possibly applied in east Nhb. as the Auzon/Franks Casket shows.

the rune <h>			the rune <g>
1. [xt] = <Ht> <ht>	2. [çt] = <Ht> <ht>	3. [çt] = <Hk↑> <hct>	4. [çt] = <X↑> <gt>
Findspot in Northumbria		East Nhb. provenance	
Kirkheaton Stone 8th–9th cent. (non-Anglian) woroh̄tæ 'made'	Thornhill Stone III ca. 750–9th cent. (Anglian) berht̄suipe <i>Berhtswiþe</i>		Franks Casket (east Northumbrian) early 8th cent. fegtap 'fight' ³
Findspot and/or provenance outside of Northumbria			
Mortain Casket ca. 750–9th cent. (possibly Mercian) gewarah̄tæ 'made'	London National Portrait Gallery Bone ?8th/9th cent. (linguistically indecisive) tatberht <i>Tatberht</i>	Monte Sant' Angelo Inscription D late 7th–middle of the 9th cent. (linguistically indecisive) hereber̄hct <i>Hereber̄eht</i> (= <i>Herebreht</i>)	

Table 1: the use of <ht>, <hct> and <gt> for the representation of the clusters [xt] and [çt] (and also h for [x] and [ç])

To sum up, the distribution of <H>(<k>)+<↑>, <h>(<c>)+<t>, seems the more widespread approach to render the clusters [çt] and [xt] and this is in congruence with the manuscript tradition.

Regarding the geography of the findspots in the west of Northumbria, **ht** is used on the Thornhill Stone III and on the Kirkheaton Stone. The latter is not Nhb. in provenance because the personal name **eo**h 'horse, stallion' in the inscription shows breaking instead of Angl. smoothing (**eh*); therefore the use of **ht** in the west of Northumbria can be regarded as being limited to the Thornhill Stone III.

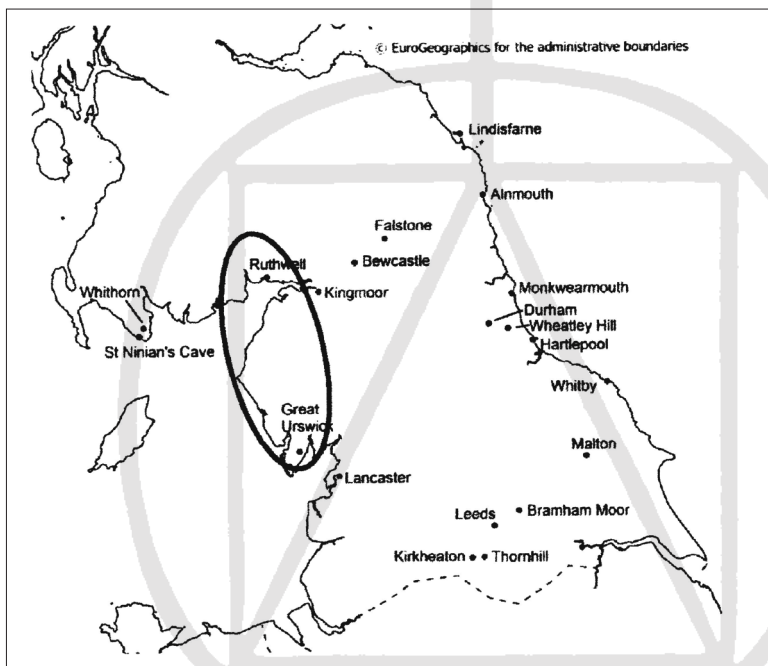
However, the representation of the fricative clusters [çt]; [xt] is outstanding on the RC and on the somewhat later Great Urswick Stone because both inscriptions use the rune *yew* <J>+<t>.

3 Rune <X> <g> is also used for [ç] on the Franks Casket: **unneg** 'unnear'.

6. [çt] = <ſtt̥> <ſtt̥>
RC NE ca. AD 750 (Northumbrian) alme ſttig ‘almighty’
Great Urswick Stone ca. 750–9th cent. (Anglian) toro ſtredæ <i>Torhtredæ</i> (PN)

Table 2: The use of <ſtt̥> to represent the clusters voiceless velar and palatal fricatives + /t/ ([çt]; [xt])

Although the original sound value of the *yew*-rune is by no means clear, it could definitely denote /i(:)/ in OE as can be inferred from the personal name *ſ**l**heard (*Ġisheard*; masc. PN) on the Dover Stone 9th–10th(–11th) cent. As /i(:)/ in OE could also be expressed by the rune *i* |, the *yew*-rune ſ must have become obsolete at some point, as I have suggested elsewhere.⁴ It thus could arguably have been ‘re-cycled’ and used for the voiceless palatal [ç] and velar [x] fricatives on the RC and the Great Urswick Stone.



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Map 3: The use of the <ſtt̥> in the inscriptions on the Ruthwell Cross and the Great Urswick Stone

4 For more details see Waxenberger (forthc.: *Phonology* chapter 6.2.2) and Waxenberger (2017).

3.1.1 Summary

In general, the cluster [çt] and [xt] are represented by the runes <H>+<T>, <h>+<t>, in runic inscriptions. While the FC uses <X>+<T>, <g>+<t>, whose equivalent in the Latin script is also found in the non-runic manuscript tradition, the RC carver/designer left the beaten track choosing a path undiscovered until then: the *yew*-rune <J>+<T>. This new path was also taken by the Great Urswick carver/designer,⁵ who probably cut the runes between AD 750 and the 9th cent.

3.2 Rune no. 28 \widehat{ea} ʃ

This rune was generally applied to denote the short and long diphthongs *ea*, *ēa* but in Northumbria it was also used for *eo*, *ēo*. The same is true in the non-runic manuscript tradition for the late Northumbrian texts, the *Lindisfarne Gospels* and *Durham Ritual*, and also for the Merc. *Vespasian Psalter*.

The rune \widehat{ea} ʃ is an obscure bind-rune, appearing as one character but was created from a bind-rune proper: bind-runes proper share one main stave. In the case of rune \widehat{ea} ʃ there are two possibilities, either binding the runes <f>+<f>, <æ>+<a>, or <M>+<f>, <e>+<a>.⁶

Table 3 reveals that the rune \widehat{ea} ʃ (no. 28) occurs only in five inscriptions (RC; Thornhill Stone II, London Thames *scramasax*, Dover Stone, Gandersheim Casket).⁷ The earliest attestation of these inscriptions is on the RC (ca. AD 750). While the RC and the Thornhill Stone II are Nhb., the *scramasax* was found in London, the Dover Stone in Kent and the uninterpreted Gandersheim Casket came to light in Germany but its language is clearly OE, possibly Mercian.

5 I use the label ‘carver/designer’, because we cannot be certain about the number of people involved in making and carving an object; neither can we be certain about their roles in designing and carving the inscription: Did, for example, the carver/craftsman have a say in the choice of the characters or was it completely the prerogative of the designer (or layouter) of the inscription? Additionally, to what extent was the patron involved in the process of carving?

6 In the case of <M>+<f>, <e>+<a>, the two runes would have been bound to <Mf> and the left main stave of the rune *e* and the lower side-twig of rune *a* would have been deleted so that the result would be a symmetrical character: \widehat{ea} ʃ. However, a development of <f>+<f>, at a(n earlier) stage <æa>, may also be possible: in this case <f>+<f> > <1>+<f> would have been bound to <f> and the lower side-twigs removed. For reasons of symmetry the ascender of the upper side-twig of the rune *a* ʃ was added to rune *æ* ʃ [Waxenberger 2017:215].

7 The biscriptal (Latin script and runes) Falstone Stone is excluded here because only the Latin text can be seen; the runes are not legible: *e*[...] *EOMAE* (dat.sg. of *ēam* ‘maternal uncle’ < **ēa-am* < **ēa*[x]*am* [Campbell 1959:§235.2; Hogg 1992:§5.131]; *ēa* + [x] + vowel > Nhb. <EO> for <ea>; see also Waxenberger (*Phonology* forthc.: no. 26).

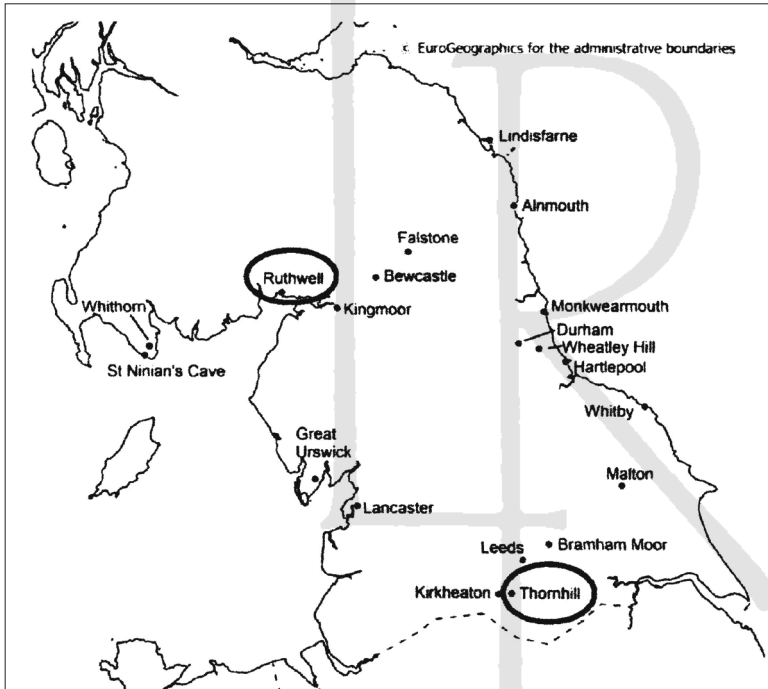
Findspot	ea ƿ (no. 28) for <i>eo</i> , <i>ēo</i> , <i>ēa</i>	Phonological development
Nhb.	RC (ca. AD 750) 1a. RC NW: <i>*[bih]ea*[l]du*[n]</i> = WS <i>behēoldon</i> 1b. RC SW: fearran (= WS <i>feorran</i>) 1c. RC SE: heafunæs (= WS <i>heofon</i> ‘heaven’) 2. Thornhill Stone II: (ca. AD 750–9th cent.) eadred (<i>Ēadrē/ed</i> masc. PN) eatene (? <i>Ēadpegn</i> masc. PN)	1a. OE <i>ēo</i> (< Gmc. <i>*eu</i>); Nhb. < ea > for <i>ēo</i> 1b. Nhb. <ea> for <i>eo</i> by breaking of Gmc. <i>*e</i> + <i>r</i> + Co 1c. Nhb. <ea> for <i>eo</i> due to back mutation 2. OE <i>ēa</i> < Gmc. <i>*au</i>
London	London Thames <i>scramasax</i> : non-Anglian (8th–9th–10th cent.) beagnop (<i>Bēagnōp</i> ; masc. PN)	OE <i>ēa</i> < Gmc. <i>*au</i>
Kent	Dover Stone: non-Anglian (9th–10th(–11th) cent.) *slheard (<i>Ġislheard</i> ; masc. PN)	Breaking of Pre-OE <i>*æ</i> + <i>r</i> + Co
Germany	Gandersheim Casket: possibly Mercian (ca. AD 800) ælfælica (2x)	

Table 3: The diphthongs *ea/ēa* (and *eo/ēo*) represented by the rune ƿ **ea** (no. 28) in the OERC

The unprovenanced inscriptions, the Mortain Casket and the Rome Graffiti, either use two runes (<**æa**> <ƿƿ>) or a bindrune proper (<**e+a**> <ƿƿ>) as can be seen in Table 4 and Map 4 below.

Findspot	< æa > <ƿƿ> for <i>ēa</i>	< e+a > <ƿƿ> for <i>ēa</i>
France	Mortain Casket: (ca. 750–9th cent.) æadan <i>Ēada</i>	
Italy		1. Rome Cimitero di Commodilla Graffito (AD 689–801) eadbald <i>Ēadbald</i> 2. Rome Catacombs ad duas Lauros (ca. AD 650–the end of the 8th/ beginning of the 9th cent.) eadbald <i>Ēadbald</i>

Table 4: The diphthongs *ea/ēa* (and *eo/ēo*) and their realizations by <**æa**> <ƿƿ> and <**e+a**> <ƿƿ> in the OERC



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Map 4: Distribution of the rune \widehat{ea} (no. 28) in Northumbria

3.2.1 Summary and Conclusion for the rune \widehat{ea} 𐌶

Regarding the evidence provided by the temporal occurrence of the rune \widehat{ea} compared to that of the bind-rune proper and the rune's position in the OE *fuþorc* row (= no. 28), the rune \widehat{ea} 𐌶 seems a comparatively late creation.⁸ The data (see also Waxenberger *Phonology* forthcoming: chapter 4) reveals the application of the rune \widehat{ea} (no. 28) on the RC for the diphthongs *ea/ēa* and *eo/ēo* of whichever origin.⁹ Also found in Northumbria, the probably somewhat later inscription on the Thornhill Stone II uses this rune for long $\bar{e}a$ < Gmc. **au* ($\widehat{ca}dred$ *Ēadrēled* masc. PN; $\widehat{ca}te$ 𐌶 *nne* ?masc. PN). The rune \widehat{ea} is also used for the non-Nhb. inscription on the London Thames *scramasax* ($\widehat{be}agnob$ *Bēagnōþ*; $\bar{e}a$ < Gmc. **au*) and the late Dover Stone (*𐌶 *slheard* *Ġisheard*; *ea* by breaking of Pre-OE æ+r+Co).

Judging from the attempts to date the inscriptions, the RC seems the earliest attestation of rune \widehat{ea} . The unprovenanced and linguistically indecisive Rome Graffiti in the Cimitero di Commodilla (AD 689-801) and the Catacombs ad duas Lauros (ca. AD 650 – the end of the 8th/beginning of the 9th cent.) were cut between ca. AD 650–800. Both show bind-runes proper <𐌶> to render $\widehat{e}adbald$. If the Rome Graffiti were carved before ca. AD 750, which means before the inscription on the RC, the bind-rune proper < $\widehat{e}+<a>$ > <𐌶> could be seen

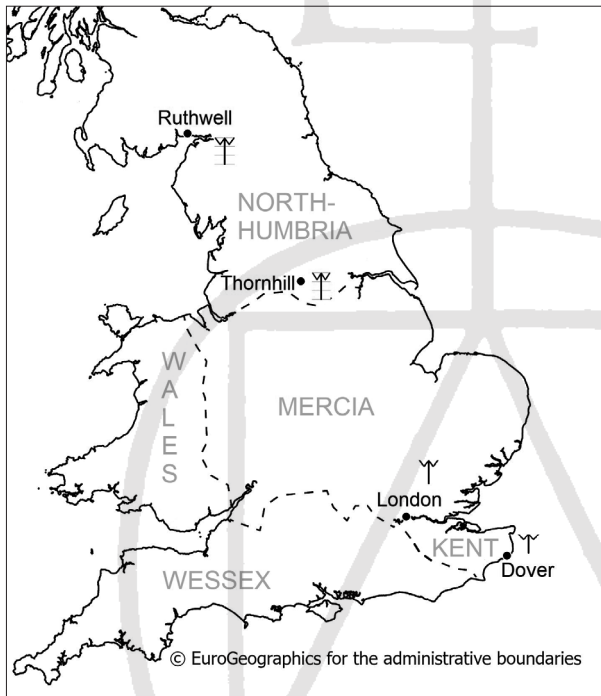
8 See particularly Parsons (1999) and Page (1961/1995) on the discussion whether or not the rune \widehat{ea} 𐌶 may have belonged to the original *fuþorc* row.

9 The RC carver/designer uses the rune \widehat{ea} for long $\bar{e}o$ ([...] \widehat{ea} [.du] [...] [*bih*] \widehat{ea} [*l*] *du* [*n*] = WS *behēoldon*); for short *eo* by back-mutation ($\widehat{he}afunæs$) and by breaking of **e+r+Co* ($\widehat{fe}arran$).

as an indication that the rune \widehat{ea} 𐌶 (no. 28) had not been created yet. On the premise that the Rome Graffiti are later than the RC text, we may see this as an indication that the designer(s)/carver(s) of the Rome inscriptions did not yet know the new rune.

As the non-Nhb. inscriptions (London Thames *scramasax*; Dover Stone) are somewhat later than the Nhb. texts, it therefore seems legitimate to assume Nhb. origin for the rune no. 28. This applies especially since this rune was used for the diphthongs *ea/ēa* and also for *eo/ēo* which is an Anglian feature. Rune no. 28 must have then made its way to the south, as the Dover Stone and the London Thames *scramasax* indicate (see below map 5).¹⁰

I should like to point out that rune no. 28 \widehat{ea} was only used for the diphthong *ea/ēa* and for the Nhb. depiction of *eo/ēo*. It was neither used for the variants or early forms of the diphthongs *ea/ēa* such as <*æu*> (Great Urswick Stone) and <*æa*> (Mortain Casket) nor for the succession <ea> in the loan word **giuþea**¹¹ (gen.pl. of *Iudeas* ‘the Jews’) on the east Nhb. Franks Casket and also not for the early diphthong <eu> for *ēo* (**greut** = *grēot* ‘grit, sand’) on this object.



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Map 5: Distribution of the attested forms of the rune \widehat{ea}

10 At the beginning of OE proper, the Germanic *fuþark* was enlarged by the new runes nos. 24–27 (rune α 𐌶, α 𐌷, α 𐌸, α 𐌹) and by rune no. 4 the new α 𐌶 (<Pre-OE / α :/). Runes no. 29–31 have been seen as Nhb. innovations. However, this leaves rune no. 28 as caught between the blocks of innovation. As this rune is first attested on the RC, I assume that it may have been created directly by the RC designer/carver. This assumption is corroborated by the new creations for the velar voiced fricative α 𐌶 [ɣ] and for the velar plosives [k] 𐌶 and [k] 𐌷 in the same inscription. An additional motivation for creating the bind-rune \widehat{ea} 𐌶 may have been the necessity to save space as four runes at the most could be placed next to each other in the same line on the RC.

11 The sequence is **giuþeasu** = **giuþea su** for **giuþea su**[*mæ*]: see Waxenberger (2023a:257).