# Speech Acts and Inscriptions: The Syntax of the Right Side of the Auzon Franks Casket

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The Auzon Franks Casket contains a variety of inscriptions in both Latin and Old English, unusual for their length in a text this early. A. S. Napier's 1901 analysis of the phonology and morphology of the Old English portion came to the conclusion that it reflects a Northumbrian variety of the language no later than the early eighth century, about the time of *Cædmon's Hymn*. Subsequent scholarship has confirmed this location and date, or at least has produced nothing to throw either out of possibility.

However, nearly everything else about the significance and structure of the inscription, from word division to parts of speech, remains under investigation. Almost forty years ago R. I. Page accurately described the bibliography of interpretations of this runic inscription as "formidable' (1973: 175), and no single breakthrough has reduced the plethora of interpretations arising from this text's many points of obscurity and outright grammatical ambiguity. Toon, while venturing a date in the late seventh century (675) for the language, which would make it the earliest known writing in any variety of English, wrote of dialectical differences that "silence is the best response to the total absence of information about, say, Early East Anglian" (1992: 428). But not to act is itself an action, and in the case of the Auzon Franks Casket there are possibilities that bear consideration and perhaps ultimate rejection.

Though runologists like all historians work to free their texts from the anachronisms of later vernacular writing, later texts may influence first impressions and consequent assumptions about the syntax of a runic text, particularly when the parallel seems obvious. This influence is most mischievous when it is unconscious. Comparison with later texts can however test the degree of applicability when the comparison takes into account not only the apparent parallels, but the full syntactic repertoire that provides the context for that choice. Partial parallels highlight the similarities and the differences between the more copiously documented later stage of the language and the runic tradition.

For example, consider the much-vexed topic of element order, and what it indicates about whether early Germanic languages were verb-second, a topic intensively debated thirty years ago at the First International Symposium on Runes and Runic Inscriptions (Antonsen 1981: 50-61, with summary of discussion). Much depends on where the lines are drawn, for languages and states of the language. Bruce Mitchell (1984: § 3929) observes that clause-initial *her* in prose for the early tenth century (the E version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle) introduces verb–subject order, but in some instances, even when the subject is long and might be expected to follow the verb, the initial adverb is immediately followed by the subject rather than the verb. What Campbell (1964: 192) had called "a general tendency" to initial adverb-verb order, Mitchell, with the Toronto *Dictionary of Old English* microfiche concordance at his disposal, adverbially downgraded to "obviously no more than a tendency."

But this tendency is stronger in verse than prose, and stronger early, to the extent that written records exist, than later. In verse, adverbial *her*, while it is usually in the first halfline of a clause, is only occasionally clause-initial; when it is, it is also immediately followed by the finite verb, particularly the copula, e.g. in *Beowulf* 361a and 1228a, where it appears in the present tense in direct discourse. This verb-seconding when *her* is clause-initial is violated only in verse that by other criteria is late, such as *Christ and Satan*. Instances of clause-initial *her* followed by subject–verb order are often clearly marked as scribal. For example, in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle poem on the tenth-century battle at *Brunanburh* the entry-initial *her* is extrametrical. Also, the Chronicle entry-initial *her* is always followed by the past tense of chronicle narrative. *Her* appears with subject–verb order in the eleventh-century glosses to Prudentius, where the Latin has verb-final without an adverb (*Luxuria in cena sedit* glossed *Her seo galnys sit on hyre gebeorscipe*), the Benedictine Rule, and in an eleventh century scribble in Salisbury 173, *her ic let*. Okasha's hand-list of non-runic inscriptions in Old English shows an instance of clause-initial *her* followed by the subject (1971: 58) and two with verb–subject order after initial *her* (1971: 15, 138).

Differences in syntax between prose and verse, while not absolute, structure the order of

elements in the clause, particularly syntactically independent monosyllabic words bearing only light stress, such as pronouns and deictic adverbs. If not in their usual place, defined in verse as in the area between the first word and the first syllable with alliterative stress, these small words are adjacent to preceding stressed words and in Old English, rather than becoming enclitic, consequently are themselves stressed (e.g. *her* in *Beowulf* 376a, 397b, 1061b). Anglo-Saxonists are familiar with the metrical research following Hans Kuhn's 1933 article, and Alice Harris and Lyle Campbell summarize an era of Indo-European diachronic syntactic research from Jacob Wackernagel and Karl Horst Schmidt on how the change in early Latin *ab vos sacro*, *sub vos placo* to Classical *obsecro vos*, *supplico vos* illustrates the tendency of elements that are reanalyzed as a verbal category to occur adjacent to the verb; and particularly of adverbs reanalyzed as preverbs "that could express location or perfective aspect" (1995: 222-3).

The verb's conjugational marking for agreement with the number of its subject is significant for these early inscriptions in that it is frequently problematic (e.g. Page 1973: 180, on the difficulty of the number marking on the subject and the verb on the back panel). The inflectional marking on the verb of tense and mood may also have a bearing on the position of the verb in the clause, at least in texts that have ambiguities of word-division and clause-division.

There are other differences that are not linguistic of themselves but which may be diagnostic of intention and so of the grammar. Placement within the rectangular border of text on each of the panels differentiates the back panel, with the adverb *her*, from the right panel, which arguably begins with a more substantial word, an imperative verb. The back panel's *her* appears in a prose text, introduces a verb in the present tense, and runs bottom to top. The front panel, in the part parallel to this, has the isolated noun phrase meaning "whale bone," implying though not providing a present tense.

By contrast, the right hand panel with the cryptic *hVr* has this word in the upper left-hand corner. The right side inscription is in verse and is in the present tense. The front panel has beginning in its upper left-hand corner the syntactic riddle of *fisc flodu ahof*, ambiguous by case and disambiguated if at all only by sense, because both the endingless masculine *fisc* and the *u*-declension masculine *flodu* are inflectionally nominative or accusative. Page (1973:176-7), argues for subject–object–verb, in that *flodu* is accusative singular or plural unless very early.

The left side, like the front, starts in the upper left. It differs in having the verb in the past tense and being in prose, but like the right side it has syntactic subject–object ambiguity in the Old English noun phrase *twegen gebroþr*. It compounds this ambiguity with the riddle of conjoined Latin-derived proper names with an inflectional ending *-us*. Page (1972: 178) seems to assume the Old English noun phrase *twegen gebroþr* is nominative. It could be an unsupported nominative (like the front panel's "whale bone"). The *twegen gebroþr* could also be accusative, beginning a syntactically independent gloss on the preceding noun phrase though left dislocation, a fronted object matched by a copy pronoun. In each instance, the upper left-hand corner provides a beginning that is something of a permanent miscue, with several instances of grammatical ambiguity unresolvable by element order. Are these deliberate puzzles or the unavoidable consequence of the archaic and terse expression suitable for carving?

This ambiguity is complicated by the possibility of multiple entry points into a text that follows the perimeter instead of always beginning in the upper left and concluding below. Manuscript practice may preserve a relic of the possible original significance of the use of full forms for the coordinating conjunction, a word of such high frequency that it quickly achieved regular abbreviation in the manuscript tradition. In each of the two Auzon Franks inscriptions argued to begin with *her*, the subsequent coordinating conjunction is written out in full, rather than the Tyronian note that would become usual in the manuscript tradition, once as *and*; once, as in the Northumbrian *Cædmon's Hymn*, as *end*. Whether these differences reflect dialect (Smith 1978: 27-28 section IV (3)(a)) or a momentary failure of translating the pattern text from one language into another Page (1973: 179), in the later manuscript tradition the full forms mark conjoined pairs that are clause-final (Blockley 2001: 85); a not too significant correlation of graphic form and syntactic function as such conjoints strongly tend to be clause-late.

If the *hVr* on the right side of the casket is not – by the usual element order of clause-initial

adverb-finite verb in verse clauses, by the place it has in the perimeter of the rectangle, the same as the adverb on the back panel, then why might it be the verb "hear"? The right panel's *hVr*, like the adverb *her* on the back, is followed by present tense verbs, beginning with *sitaþ*. Still, the clause-initial adverb in this position in verse is spectacularly misplaced with respect to its verb, with parallels only from the tenth and eleventh century. The influence of Latin, if there is any, would also support verb-second here. In Latin, the classical preference for verb-final had yielded to verb-second by the fourth century CE (Ostler 2007: 119). More generally, recent linguistic work on code-switching has noticed the effect of bilingualism on element order and complementation, though it has not as yet elucidating diagnostics that can resolve verb placement in the Franks Casket inscription (MacSwan 2009: 332-4; Myers-Scotton and Jake 2009: 351-4).

The imperative mood is naturally rare in written texts, outside recipes, legal codes and narratives with direct discourse, but there is no reason to believe that runic inscriptions on objects were restricted to the declarative mood. While there is no exact parallel for the construction proposed for the Auzon Franks inscription in the runic record, there are several partial matches. Alfred Bammesberger has found an imperative in the approximately contemporary inscription of the Derby Bone Plate, which he divides as *god geca þaræ Hadda þi þis wrat* (Bammesberger 1991). Though Page (1999: 163) has found this solution "perhaps too ingenious," the word-division that gives declarative *gecaþ*, the previous consensus reading, is no less difficult to match to a verb elsewhere in attested Old English. The Derby Bone Plate's clause medial imperative suggests familiar use of this mood, as in Indo-European languages imperatives tend first to be limited to clause-initial position.

A possible objection to taking *hVr* as the imperative of the verb *heran* is that the usual prefix *ge-* (which would have been *gi-* in Northumbrian; Campbell 1959: § 369) does not appear. But is the prefix necessary with this finite verb? Both the etymology of *hear* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* and Campbell's paradigm (1959: § 748) treat the verb as not essentially prefixed. The presence and absence of the prefix in early verse may be an index of the pressures both of classical alliterative verse and of inscriptional compression. The prefix appears in the verse inscription on the front panel in the past tense *geswom*, where it is metrically essential to the clause-delayed verb. The prefix appears later on the right side itself in *gisgraf*. Here it is not metrically essential, but may help clarify the word boundary between the verb and the apparent proper name *Ertae* that precede it The status of *ge-* with verb forms other than participles (Campbell 1959: § 731 (h)) has not received the attention given to the nominal prefix, other than Lindemann 1970, who produces evidence from the manuscript tradition that indicates the prefix is not necessarily perfectivizing. *Beowulf* has numerous instances of unprefixed past tense *hyran*.

The lack of the prefix is not simply a nod to the less bounded "non-past" of the imperative and indicative present moods, as the plural imperative of a verb of speaking, *gibid[d]æþ*, beginning the Lancaster cross fragment has the prefix (Elliott 1959: 86-7). Though this text fits well in time with that of the Auzon Franks inscription, there may be significant linguistic differences between the western coast and the eastern part of Northumbrian, the probable origin of the casket, as in the phonological values and the forms of the runes (Waxenberger forthcoming).

Another difficulty for interpreting the *hVr* as this verb is syntactic. In later Old English texts the rection of *(ge)hyran*, while allowing clausal complements, is overwhelmingly noun objects. The usual later *ge-* prefix with this verb, in that the prefix can nominalize participles, may have some bearing on that preference in grammatical government. Yet, even though in the history of syntax the complements of noun objects tend to precede clausal objects, the clausal object had been achieved with the unprefixed verb in early poetic Old English, albeit with an infinitive and an expressed complementizer, in *Beowulf* 273b.

There is one noun inflection that is definitive for the syntax of the right side. *Hos* at least grammatically has to be only the subject of the lower verb, as one would need an inflectional *hose* if this were the object of an imperative *her*. Therefore, the reading argued for here replaces only an adverb with an imperative: "Listen, Hos sits on the harm-mound." The action of listening urged upon the reader is not to attend to a person, but to a claim about a present or future occurrence.

Finally, the adequacy of the futhorc and the cryptic runes made from it to the vocalism of Northumbrian has some bearing on the type of words used in the inscription. The hardest rune

to decrypt is the first to appear in the inscription if an expected clause-initial word is not what it seems.

Would the long *e* in adverb *her* "here" have a cryptic form different from the vowel in a verb meaning "to hear"? The ambiguity of the vocalism of the cryptic vowel in *hVr* is non-decisive for the adverb or the imperative verb. It remains to be determined whether this ambiguity is a flaw in the code devised for this inscription or instead another deliberate riddle. The cryptic rune in this word is generally taken as representing *e*, while a similar cryptic rune elsewhere in the panel is taken as *æ*. These two values have been troublesome. C. J. E. Ball reversed Napier's vocalisms of the cryptic runes for *e* and *æ* and Page (1973: 181-2) comments that the results are about the same.

The West Saxon form of the verb *hieran* "to hear" shows a long *ie* as the southern *i*-umlaut of primitive (500-600) Germanic long *ea*. While there is an English futhorc rune (Dickins rune 28) for the diagraph <ea>, named *ear* in later rune lists, this rune does not appear anywhere in the Auzon inscription, and certainly a sixth-century vocalism would be an exceptional archaism in even a seventh-century inscription. Campbell (1959: § 200 (7)) observes that in early non-West Saxon English texts the *i*-umlaut of Germanic *ea* can be written as <æ>.

The cryptic rune that does appear in *hVr* for what Napier took as signifying the mid front vowel <e> is explained by Derolez in 1981 (following C. J. E. Ball 1974: 512) as having a basis in the futhorc runes for *g* (*gyfu*) but more particularly that for *c* (*cen*); in Derolez's words, "the carver of the Auzon casket, or his patron, resorted to a subtler device: each vowel-rune was replaced by that with which its name ended" (1981: 23).

Derolez (and Page 1973: 63-7) note that the usual substitution codes in medieval writing rely on the relative ease of replacing the high-frequency characters of the vowels with a marker that acknowledges the place of the vowel in the Roman alphabet, whether by dots that indicate whether the missing vowel is the first, second, third, fourth, or fifth in the Roman order (the so-called *notae Sancti Bonifatii*), or by using, instead of a vowel, the consonant that follows that vowel in the Roman alphabet. These five consonants happen to be mostly well-defined stop consonants; it may be significant that *e* would have to be symbolized with a fricative (*f*) in this code. Though this code relies on the order in the Roman alphabet, it would not be difficult to translate that into the order of the futhorc; that is, until one gets to the low vowels *ac* and *æsc*, followed by nothing but vowels.

Of course, substituting for vowel runes the coda of the word that names a vowel rune is also problematic, as we cannot be sure that these names did not change radically in the hundred or more years before the poem from Cotton Otho B x and the other *runica manuscripta* that name the runes. Of the five, the graph devised for the runic representation of the mid front vowel, if that is what it is, is the most difficult (Derolez 1981: 22), as the Auzon cryptic rune cannot stand for the *y* in *gyfu*. If it is the e in cen, then the length of the vowel in the adverb *her* is not represented, as one might expect because Old English inscriptions in general do not distinguish between long and short vowels.

Auzon does have a cryptic vowel rune for the *æ* that one would expect in a Northumbrian spelling of the imperative verb "hear" and it is the one that Derolez (1981: 22) describes as taking its form from the word *æsc*, and for which he therefore believes an archaic, symmetrical version of Dickens rune 6 appears. However, the diacritical consonant ends the spelling—but, it might be noted, not the sound—of the word *æsc*, This contrast between spelling and sound may lie behind not only the possible confusion of *e* with *æ*, but also Elliott's observation about the lack of the *cen* rune where one would expect it instead of the second *g* rune in *gisgraf*, the Dickens rune 6 cen having been commandeered, in its asymmetrical usual form, for a cryptic rendering of the vowel (Elliott 1959: 106 ).

If the relationship between the consonantal forms of the cryptic runes and their vocalic value rests in the idea that runes had names, and those names had nuclei such that each vowel-rune could be unproblematically replaced by that rune with which the vowel-rune's name ended, and if the words were pronounced, not spelled to do so, such a motivation does provide a reason for the context of this inscription,; in particular, to push the interpretation of the cryptic rune in *hVr* towards the value *æ*, for the verb "hear", and not *e*, for the adverb "here". The code as used has an appropriate link, a solved riddle, with an initial imperative verb of audition—listen to what you read and you will hear the cryptic runes center themselves on the sound of the name of those tortured runes.

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