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Old English Manuscript Runes

Selected Case Studies in Scribal and Literary Context

utzverlag

Sprach- und Literaturwissenschaften

Band 55

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Zugl.: Diss., München, Univ., 2017

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Nationalbibliothek: Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über http://dnb.d-nb.de abrufbar.

ISBN 978-3-8316-4750-7 (gebundenes Buch)
ISBN 978-3-8316-7839-6 (E-Book)

Printed in EU
utzverlag GmbH, München
089-277791-00 · www.utzverlag.de

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1. Introduction

1.1. The Old English *fuþorc*

This book has been created under the consideration of the state of research up to 2017 and does not incorporate later developments in the field.

The first extensive language change in England began with the Roman conquest under Emperor Claudius in 43 AD (Rogers 2014, 40ff) and the subsequent diglossia with Latin, as the superstrate, dominating "the 'low' language (Ll) spoken by most of the population" (Tristram 2007, 196). These changes had profound influences on Celtic (Tristram 2007, 196f). In this time characterised by political and linguistic change, the first Germanic people started arriving in Britain. Most of them were mercenaries brought to Britain for protection. It was Emperor Probus who first brought Burgundians and Vandals to the Isles (cf. http://faculty.history.wisc.edu[1]). When the Roman Empire began to crumble, military resources were stretched thinly as many parts of the empire required protection. Most of them did so more than Britain. Vikings, "sea-raiders from Europe" (Middleton 2001, 7), and Scandinavia exploited this lack of security and raided Britain. Some of these invaders "brought their families and settled in Britain" (Middleton 2001, 7). After ca. 449 AD according to Bede (Miller 1999, 25), Germanic groups started arriving in larger numbers. The foremost being the Angles and the Saxons from what is known today as Germany (Stenton 2001, 14), and the Jutes, who are believed to have their origin in modern day Scandinavia, most likely Jutland (Britannica, Jute people).

According to Bede, these were "the three strongest races of Germany" (Miller 1999, 25) at that time. As their numbers increased, so did their influence. By the seventh century, England was reigned by a heptarchy comprising Northumbria, Essex, Sussex, Wessex, Kent, East Anglia, and Mercia. It was not until the ninth century that Wessex, under Ælfred the Great, united all the seven to combat the growing Viking threat.

With the Germanic invaders, a new writing system came from the continent – runes. "Runes are an alphabetical system of writing, and for the most part they are used to record language" (Barnes 2010, 7). The word *rune* developed from the OE word *rūn*, 'mystery', 'secret', or 'whisper' (Kemble, Griffiths 2012, 8; Looijenga 2003, 8).

In Scandinavia, runes were used from circa 200 AD until the fifteenth or sixteenth centuries (Düwel 2008, 2). "In Great Britain runic writing began in Pre-OE in ca. 400 A.D." (Waxenberger 2017, 209). The runes were in use roughly until roughly

[1] Source: http://faculty.history.wisc.edu/sommerville/123/123%205%20Anglo%20Saxons%20I.htm

the 11th century (Waxenberger 2017, 209). The Germanic people used a rune row of 24 runes; today we call it the Older *fuþark*, named after the first six letters of the row (cf. Figure 4).

ᚠ ᚢ ᚦ ᚨ ᚱ ᚲ ᚷ ᚹ ᚺ ᚾ ᛁ ᛃ ᛈ ᛇ ᛉ ᛊ ᛏ ᛒ ᛖ ᛗ ᛚ ᛜ ᛞ ᛟ

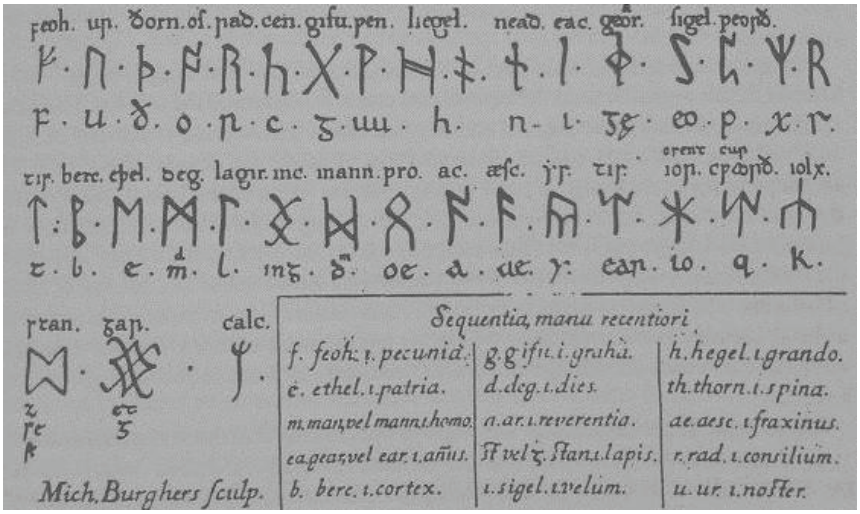
f u þ a r k g w h n i j p ï z s t b e m l ŋ d o

(Figure 1 – Older *fuþark*, Looijenga 2020, 821)

In the same fashion, the OE rune row is called *fuþorc*. The OE *fuþorc* changed two characters (rune 4, *ōs* ᚩ **o**, and rune 24, *œþil* ᛟ **œ**) and, until its demise, gradually extended its parent system of 24 runes – first to 27 in ca. 650 AD and subsequently to 31 runes in ca. 750 AD in the north-west of Nhb. (Waxenberger 2017, 242f.). The only complete *fuþorc* in the epigraphic corpus is found on the Thames scramasax (Findell 2014, 37), the dating of which ranges from as early as 400 AD to as late as the 10th century AD (Waxenberger forthc.). It displays a *fuþorc* with 28 runes (cf. Figure 2).

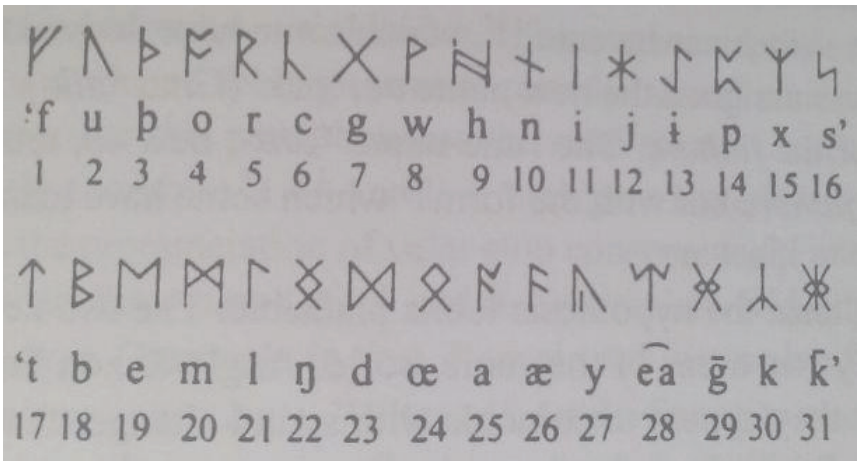
(Figure 2 – The London Thames *scramasax*)

However, in contrast to the epigraphic tradition, the manuscript tradition has more runes, showing up to 35 runes (depending on the period of the evolution of the language) (cf. Figure 3). The *Cotton MS Domitian A ix* (Ker 1957, no. 151), being the last known row to have been written down (around 1100), presents the highest rune count (cf. Figure 3).



(Figure 3 – *Cotton MS Domitian A ix* runes, Page 1973, 199)

Out of those 35, two hardly qualify as a part of the OE rune row – *cweorð* ᛥ **q** and *stan* ᛝ **st** – because they have not been recorded anywhere else and are thus unique to the *Cotton MS Domitian A ix*. While there are two runes resembling *stan* ᛝ **st** on the Westeremden yew stick from Frisia, they are considered as mirror runes of ᚴ **p** and ᛒ **b** and are usually read equally as *p* and *b* respectively (cf. Looijenga 1997, 184f; Munske & Arhammer 2001, 529). Page (2006, 45) identifies 31 runes in the OERC, including a variant of *calc* (Figure 4, rune 31), which "appears on one side of the [ann. Ruthwell]". However, the context of its use appears more complicated (cf. Waxenberger 2021).



(Figure 4 – 31 rune *fuþorc* row according to R. I. Page (2006, 39))

However, it is important to keep in mind that the OE inscriptions that runologists know and work with today most probably account for only a small percentage of

the total number of inscriptions that had been created in England (Page 2006, 271f). The OE epigraphical corpus encompasses approximately 115-120 items (Waxenberger 2023). The OE runes were in use roughly from the fifth to the eleventh century. Assuming the period of usage to be approximately 600 years, the numbers add up to almost 16 inscriptions per 100 years, that is, one inscription every six years. This is a significantly low number considering the apparent value of the runic script in England, judging by its use on prestigious objects such as the Ruthwell Cross or St. Cuthbert's coffin.

1.2. The Old English manuscripts

The potential reasons for this neglect are manifold, but at the centre, there lies the problematic situation of the OE manuscript corpus. The actual manuscript tradition started in England in 597, with the arrival of missionaries sent out by Pope Gregory to educate and convert the people (Symons 2016, 1), and the OE tradition is considered to have ended in the eleventh century (Crystal 2014, 489f). However, despite spanning a little more than 600 years, the OE manuscript corpus is relatively small with a just over 400 extant manuscripts. A large number of manuscripts were lost to Viking raids – such as the sacking of Lindisfarne in 793 (Swanton 2000, 57) – and later to the dissolution of the English monasteries by King Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell between 1536 and 1541 (Bernard 2011, 390ff). The remaining manuscripts were later collected and archived by antiquarians and scholars or disseminated to other countries, e.g., Denmark, Italy (http://www2.le.ac.uk/).

A further loss of manuscript material took place in 1731, when the Cottonian Library in the Ashburnham House caught fire, destroying or badly damaging several manuscripts housed there either directly or through the subsequent water damage from the efforts to extinguish the blaze. The *Nowell Codex* (British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius A XV), which contains *Beowulf*, and which will also be subject of this work was also heavily damaged in the Cottonian fire (Bauer 2003, 12).

Within this significantly depleted corpus, runes are an even rarer occurrence than their epigraphic counterparts, being restricted to nine manuscripts.

There are various reasons why runes being a rarity within the manuscript tradition is an expected phenomenon.

1. Runes predate the emergence of the OE manuscripts by a significant margin.
   Runes were a part of the heritage brought to England by the Continental settlers, signifying that they date back to the *Adventus Saxonum*. Epigraphic material in England dates as far back as the fifth century, whereas the OE

manuscripts started emerging around the 6th/7th century (cf. Gneuss & Lapidge 2014, 97, 172, 422).

2. Latin was the language of choice in the ecclesiastic context Under Æthelbert, Christianity was introduced to England, and with it, came the Latin alphabet. Latin was the language of religion and the official language of the church. Literacy varied widely from clergy down to peasant, with only select groups being considered *literatus* (Orme 1996, 35ff.); therefore, writing and copying of was the responsibility of monasteries and thus the resultant works were most likely to be in Latin.
3. Runes were later supplanted by the OE Latin alphabet. With Latin being the preferred language of choice for religion and education, Irish missionaries spread an insular variant of the Latin alphabet across Britain. The OE alphabet had 24 letters that were mostly taken from Latin, but it also incorporated unique OE letters, such as *thorn* þ and *wynn* ƿ, which were adopted from the OE rune row, the *fuþorc*.

Further, even within their respective manuscripts, the runes appear infrequently. In Latin-script manuscripts, they typically occur in glosses, cryptographic notations, marginalia, or personal names, likely serving diverse functions. Even in the manuscript with the highest number of runes, the Durham Collectar, they appear only 53 times across 89 folios (176 pages) – which results in an average of approximately one rune every three pages. Starting with the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, the other manuscripts follow that number by increasingly considerable margins. Another problem emerges from the function of the runes in manuscripts. OE added two runes to its Latin grapheme pool to render two sounds that did not have an appropriate representation in the Latin writing-system: ᚦ for [ð]/[θ] and ᚹ for [w]. Aside from these adopted runes, the majority of the OE manuscript runes are *Begriffsrunen* - logographs, which replace the words they represent, that is their names.

In his article "Unlocking Runes? Reading AngloSaxon Runic Abbreviations in Their Immediate Literary Context", Thomas Birkett (2014, 110) postulates that:

> "Indeed, it would be remarkable if every use of a runic abbreviation across manuscripts of such varying provenance and date were the result of a single unified impulse"

An actual overarching analysis into this impulse and potential correlations, connecting elements, and motifs of the OE manuscript runes is so far lacking. This book aims to provide such an analysis for these runic abbreviations.

Since we are dealing with manuscripts, a note must be made on the sigla, the scribal abbreviations. Several of these can be found in both the Old English as well as the Latin portions of the texts examined.

One of the most common forms of scribal abbreviations were the Tironian notes, a 1st century BCE system of shorthand encompassing thousands of signs credited to Cicero's scribe, Tiro, which partially survived and was adopted into pre-medieval and medieval writing systems (Capelli 1982, 1ff.). In the OE manuscripts, the most common shorthand variants found are the Tironian note <7> for <and>/<ond>, and an altered version of the thorn character, <þ>, for <þæt>/<þaet>. Shortening these particular words appears a very logical, pragmatic decision, because of their very high occurrence rate and thus the saving of time and resources.

As a disclaimer it must be stated that the translations of the OE texts provided throughout are, unless stated otherwise, my own.

1.3. Methodology and manuscripts used

As explained in the introduction, this book will focus solely on finding commonalities among the ordinary logographic runes found in OE manuscripts. To be considered ordinary for the scope of this discussion, these runes should not fulfil any apparent further purpose in the text they are used in beyond replacing the word that they represent, e.g., be used as part of a riddle or as a way of signing one's own text. While the OE runes seldom occur in the OE manuscript tradition, there is a clear, observable difference in their quality.

Included manuscripts:

1. Cambridge: Corpus Christi College, MS 041 – *Old English Bede*
2. Copenhagen: Danish Royal Library, NKS 167 b, 4º – *Waldere* fragments
3. Durham: Durham Cathedral Library, MS A IV 19 – *The Durham Ritual*
4. London: British Library, Add MS 47967 – *Orosius, Historia adversus paganos ('The Old English Orosius' or 'The Tollemache Orosius')*
5. London: British Library, Cotton MS Nero D IV – *The Lindisfarne Gospels*
6. London: British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius A XV – *The Nowell Codex*
7. Vercelli: Biblioteca Capitolare, MS CXVII – *The Vercelli Book*

All of these manuscripts feature a seamless integration of the OE runes as logographs into the running text in order to replace a word or a part of a compound. Further, none of the runes in these manuscripts appear to have a specific ulterior motive behind their usage, e.g., being used as a signature or as a part of a built-in riddle.

Excluded manuscripts:

1. Cambridge: Corpus Christi College, MS 422 – *The Red Book of Darley* (specifically *Solomon and Saturn*)

2. Exeter: Exeter Cathedral Library, MS 3501 – *The Exeter Book*
3. The four Cynewulfian poems: *Christ II, Elene, Juliana*, *Fate of the Apostles*

The entire Exeter Book and the four Cynewulfian poems have been excluded from this study based on the apparent motivation behind their runes, whereas the *MS CCCC 422 Solomon and Saturn* has to be excluded not for the motivation behind its runes, but rather for their character and doubtful authenticity (Symons 2016, 150). In Solomon's explanation of the power in each letter of the *Pater Noster*, the runes accompany a capital Latin letter at the beginning of each phrase. This means that the runes do not appear in a logographic but in a graphemic function (Anlezark 2009, 28; Derolez 1954, 420), which renders them irrelevant to the present study.

On the other hand, each of the four Cynewulfian poems features the runes ᛦᛞᚾᚹᚢᛚᚠ **cynwulf** or ᛦᛞᚾᛖᚹᚢᛚᚠ **cynewulf**, in their logographic function, spread across the texts (occurring towards the end of the four poems), which is generally accepted as the poet's method of signing his work (Elliott 2013, 281f), although additional, more layered and lyrical intentions behind these runes have been suggested (Niles 2006, 285ff, Birkett 2014, 771ff). The *Exeter Book*'s runes are found mainly in its riddles and elegies, the poem *The Ruin* and Cynewulf's runic signature in the two poems *Christ II* and *Juliana.*

The reason why the *Vercelli Book*, a collection of various prose and poetic texts, is included but the *Exeter Book* is not, despite also being a collection of OE poetry, lies in the connection of its texts. With regard to structure and focus, the *Vercelli Book* appears to have been "put together from a number of different exemplars with no apparent overall design in mind" (Treharne 2000, 89). Its runes can be found in the Cynewulfian poems *Elene* and *Fates of the Apostles* and an individual homily, *Homily XVIII*. As the Cynewulfian runes have a clear motivation whereas the ones in *Homily XVIII* apparently do not, there appears to be no connection in these two sets of OE runes. The *Exeter Book*, on the other hand, reflects a much clearer focus in its texts, featuring a large collection of riddles and elegies. Its runes appear to be equally connected. Besides the poems *Christ II* and *Juliana*, the majority of the runes is found in the riddles and two elegies, *The Husband's Message*, and *The Ruin* (with a single rune). Disregarding Cynewulf's runes, almost all the runes found in the *Exeter Book* share the aspect of riddles and may be read not only as graphemes but also as logographs. The riddles and *The Husband's Message* utilise these runes as a cryptic way of conveying meaning (Symons 2016, 35f), rather than simply using them to replace words. While *The Ruin* might be an exception to this, due to extensive damage to the manuscript it offers only one rune to be analysed and very little context. Therefore, a clear distinction between the use of the rune in *The Ruin* and the cryptic, as well as the other non-Cynewulfian runic texts cannot be reliably ascertained. Furthermore, it

cannot be simply assumed that this elegy alone features a significantly different use of the runes, which would fit the scope of the present discussion.

Thus, having defined the relevant manuscripts, the method for such an analysis was, necessarily, very straightforward:

In the first step, the manuscripts were classified into groups according to the runes used in them. This is to ensure parity. From there, each manuscript was analysed individually. First, each manuscript was searched meticulously for its runes and the runes and their contexts recorded. Then these contextual circumstances were examined to ascertain whether a connection or common motivation between the contexts of the same rune can be found. The accompanying vocabulary and semantics were particularly important, as they are the most influential factors for furthering the understanding of a word in context.

If such a connection or connecting motivation was found, the analysis was moved up one stage, to examine whether the connections between the runes of the individual manuscripts resemble each other for the different manuscripts containing the same rune.

2. The rune ᛟ œ (*œ̄þil*)

The ᛟ œ rune is among the oldest of the OE runes which had evolved from the original Germanic import. ᛟ **œ**, the 24th rune in the rune row, kept its place as but changed its value from **o** ***oþil*** to **œ** *œ̄þil* by *i*-umlaut. The change was part of the first extension upon the Common Germanic *fuþark* of the Adventus Saxonum, necessitated by complex linguistic changes

The earliest example of the ᛟ **œ** rune in the OE epigraphic corpus that is probably OE, is found on the Watchfield Mount, a case fitting dated around 500-550 (Waxenberger forthc., 82). It is to be noted that on both inscriptions, the ᛟ **œ** rune still denotes /o/, as the *i*-umlaut was not phonemicized until ca. 650 (Waxenberger forthcoming, 542). The latest instance of the ᛟ **œ** rune in the epigraphic corpus is inscribed on the Falstone memorial stone, which can be dated to the late eighth or early ninth century.

There are three manuscripts containing ᛟ **œ** as *Begriffsrune* in the OE manuscript corpus:

1. British Library, Cotton MS Vitellius A XV – *The Nowell Codex*
2. British Library, Add MS 47967 – *Orosius, Historia adversus paganos* (*'The Old English Orosius' or 'The Tollemache Orosius'*)
3. Danish Royal Library Copenhagen, NKS 167 b, 4º – *Waldere* fragments

The oldest of the three is the *Old English Orosius* manuscript, which has been determined to date from around 870 to 930 (Bately 1980, Lxxiii–lxxx). The fragments of the *Waldere* manuscript and the *Beowulf* manuscript can both be dated to the late tenth to the early eleventh century (Klaeber 2009, xxvii).

From these datings, we can see that there is indeed only a negligible gap between the last epigraphic evidence of the ᛟ **œ** rune and the first manuscript the ᛟ **œ** rune appears in. Thus, there is no issue that its meaning may not have been understood any more among the literate community.

The sporadic occurrence of the rune is an interesting factor. A total of five instances of the ᛟ **œ** rune in the entire OE manuscript corpus may be an indicator of two significantly different things:

1. The use of the ᛟ **œ** rune was very personal and, thus, exclusive to few scribes only.
2. There existed a special set-up, contextual circumstances, that would allow the ᛟ **œ** rune to be used especially for meaning conveyance.

Option 1 is not provable by itself, since the majority of scribes encountered in looking at the runes remain unknown. This is especially true of the manuscripts containing the ᛟ **œ** rune. *Waldere* has been almost entirely lost, with the exception of four leaves, and it cannot be attributed to a known scribe. *Beowulf* was written down by two different scribes, both of whom are unknown, and is possibly a copy of previously existing source material. Finally, the *Old English Orosius* is the work of an unknown scribe.

While all of these manuscripts were written by unknown scribes, the *Waldere* fragments and *Beowulf* cannot be attached to a scriptorium either. The *Waldere* fragments were found in the collection of the Danish Royal Library in Copenhagen, and they cannot be assigned to a specific scribe or scriptorium. *Beowulf,* surviving only as a copy made by two different scribes (Boyle 1997, 29ff.) in the Nowell Codex, reflects a mixture of different dialects, ranging from Mercian to Northumbrian, Early West Saxon, Kentish, and Late West Saxon (Kiernan 1996, 69ff.).

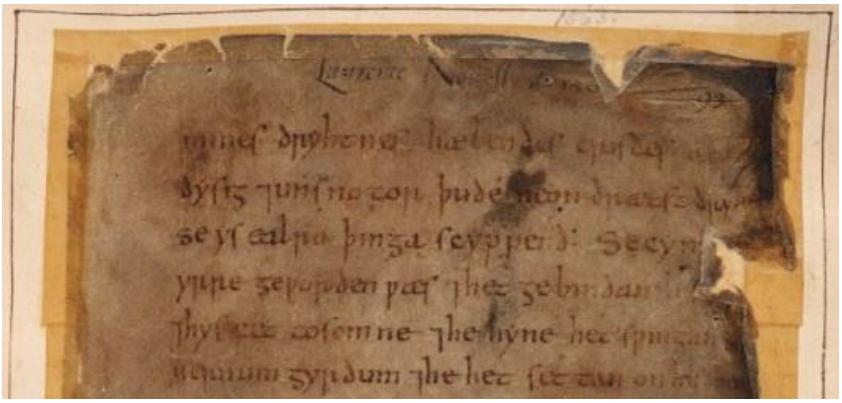
With the scribe and the scriptorium being out of the question as the basis and evidence for option 1, it seems more prudent, by method of elimination, to continue with option 2.

The premise of option 2 is the assumption that there are the same prerequisites being fulfilled in every case where the rune is used, whether it is on a physical or a semantic level. In order to analyse these, it is necessary to work through each of the three manuscripts separately to dissect the circumstances of each rune and attempt to identify parallels.

2.1. The manuscript Cotton Vitellius A xv

MS London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A xv is a composite codex containing two separate OE codices (Ker 1957, nos. 215 and 216; Gneuss & Lapidge 2014, no. 399): the *Southwick Codex* and the *Nowell Codex*. The *Southwick Codex* constitutes the first part of the MS Cotton Vitellius A xv. It includes the only complete surviving version of the OE translation of *St. Augustine of Hippo's Soliloquies* traditionally ascribed Alfred[2], the *Gospel of Nicodemus,* the *Prose Debate of Solomon and Saturn*[3]*,* and a fragment of the *Homily on St. Quentin*[4].

The second of the two unrelated codices that comprise the MS Cotton Vitellius A xv (Klaeber 2009, xxv), is the Nowell Codex. The Nowell Codex is the older of the two and includes arguably more prestigious material, especially *Beowulf*. It was named after Laurence Nowell, the first known owner, who wrote his name and the date, 1563, on the first leaf (Figure 8; Klaeber 2009, xxvi). Nowell was an English antiquarian, who compiled the *Vocabularium Saxonicum*, the first OE dictionary. In 1563, he inherited the manuscripts that make up the Nowell Codex.



(Figure 5 – "Laurence Nowell 1563" on first leaf of the Nowell Codex, Cotton MS Vitellius A XV ff 94r)

The *Nowell Codex* comprises the five following items (http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=cotton_ms_vitellius_a_xv):

[2] See now Sauer 2019
[3] See, e.g., Sauer 2007
[4] http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=cotton_ms_vitellius_a_xv