

## ON THE MEANING OF *STRĒLUM* IN THE RUNIC *CRUCIFIXION POEM* ON THE RUTHWELL CROSS

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**Abstract:** *The 14 verses of the Crucifixion Poem, inscribed with Old English runes (futhorc) on the eighth-century Ruthwell Cross, to some extent match with verses of the poem The Dream of the Rood in the Vercelli Book (second half of the tenth century). This paper discusses the relationship of the two texts with the example of the phrase miþ strĒlum ġiwundad ('wounded with arrows') and reconsiders the meaning of Old English strǣl ('arrow'). Three of the runic poem's formulae indicate that 'arrows' are the weapons with which the Cross, not Christ, is wounded at the crucifixion.*

**Keywords:** *formula, Northumbria, Old English, runes, Ruthwell Cross, strǣl/strĒlum*

### 1. Introduction: The Ruthwell Cross and the *Ruthwell Crucifixion Poem*

The Ruthwell Cross (RC), named after its location in Ruthwell Parish Church in Dumfries and Galloway, Scotland, has been dated to *c.* AD 750. It is without doubt one of the most important Anglo-Saxon high crosses that have come down to us. After the English Reformation, the monument was declared idolatrous: in 1642, it was broken into several pieces by Presbyterian iconoclasts. In the 19th century, the RC was reconstructed and re-erected, moved into the church and lowered into a pit in the apse, where it still stands today.

The RC is 5.2 metres high. Its four sides are adorned with relief sculptures and inscriptions: The broader faces (north and south) show 14 biblical scenes of different size, which are framed by Latin inscriptions in Roman capitals (short runic inscriptions are found on the upper stone). A large, inhabited vine-scroll decorates the narrower faces (east and west); along the horizontal and the right and left borders of the vine-scrolls runs the main runic inscription: it is a poem in Old English alliterative verse, in which Christ's Cross speaks and gives its own account of the crucifixion.

The complex iconographic program of the RC has been studied by art historians and scholars from other disciplines. The sculptures and inscriptions form a thematic unity and follow a theological programme. For example, Ó Carragáin (2011:68) has shown that the RC "was designed by an experienced liturgist, for a community which evidently performed some variety of the Roman liturgy".

The *Ruthwell Crucifixion Poem* and the inhabited vine-scroll are masterfully integrated into the overall artistic programme. The runic inscription is the longest epigraphic text written in the Old English *futhorc* – the writing system that was brought to England by the Germanic peoples and was subsequently used by the

Anglo-Saxons. The poem is an original rendering of the crucifixion narrative. The only immediate textual parallel are lines 39–42, 44b–49, 56b–59, and 62b–64 of *The Dream of the Rood* (abbreviated *The Dream*; quotations are from Swanton’s 2000 edition, translations are my own).

In 1844, John Mitchell Kemble discovered that passages of *The Dream of the Rood* in the Vercelli Book - a manuscript from the mid-tenth century, preserved as Codex CXVII of the cathedral library at Vercelli, in northern Italy - matched closely, in wording and metre, the Ruthwell inscription. Ever since, scholars have relied on the relationship of the two poems. *The Ruthwell Crucifixion Poem* - perhaps due to its fragmentary state - has often been considered the minor version of the two. However, a detailed comparison with *The Dream* makes it clear that the epigraphic text differs in many respects from the manuscript version (cf. Majewski forthc.).

A reading of *The Ruthwell Crucifixion Poem* and a Modern English translation are given below (translations are my own). One difficulty of dealing with the runic text is that, due to the damage of the stone, part of the runic inscription is lost (for a new reconstruction, see Majewski forthc.: Chapter 7). In the reading below, letters *in recte* indicate that the rune in question can no longer be read with certainty; reconstructions are given in square brackets [ ]; three dots [...] indicate that more than two runes are missing.

1	[#on]gēredæ hinæ god almehttig *	þā hē walde on galgu gisfīga
	‘[#] God Almighty stripped himself	when he chose to mount the gallows,’
2	mōdig[... ] men	
	‘courageous [...] men.’	
3	[... ]	
4	[... ] ic rīcnæ kyniŋc *	
	‘I [...] the Mighty King,’	
5	heafunæs hlāfard	hælda ic ni dorstæ
	‘the Lord of Heaven.	I did not dare to bend.’
6	[bi]smæræ[d]u uŋket men bā ætgad[re]	ic [...] miþ b[l]ōdæ bistēmi[d]
	‘They mocked the two of us both together. I [...] made moist with blood,’	
7	bi[... ]	
	‘[... ]’	
8	[#]kris[t] wæs on rōdi	
	‘[#] Christ was on the Cross.’	
9	hweþræ þēr fūsæ	fearran kwōmu
	‘However, readily	from afar there came’
10	æþpilæ til ānum	ic þæt al bi[hēald]
	‘noble persons to the one.	I beheld it all.’
11	sā[ræ] ic w[æ]s mi[þ] so[r]gu[m] gidræ□[fi]d	h[n]āg [... ]
	‘Sorely was I afflicted with sorrows.	I inclined [... ]’
12	[m]iþ s[t]rē[l]um giwundad	
	‘wounded with arrows.’	
13	ālēgdun hīæ hinæ limwæriŋnæ	gīstōddu[n] him [æt his līc]æs



The formula also features in *Christ III* (l. 1085b–1087a; *ASPR* 3). In contexts other than the crucifixion, it is attested in *Andreas* (l. 487 *hū ðū wægflotan wære bestēmdon* ‘how you keep the wave-floaters [i.e. ships] wet’; l. 1238 *swāte bestēmed* ‘bedewed with blood’; l. 1471 *þurh dolgsleġe drēore bestēmed* ‘through a wounding blow bedewed with blood’; *ASPR* 2), *Beowulf* (l. 486 *eal benċpelu blōde bestȳmed* ‘all the bench-planks bedewed with blood’; *ASPR* 4), and *Exodus* (l. 449 *wæron beorhhliðu blōde bestēmed* ‘mountain-heights were bedewed with blood’; *APSR* 1). Moreover, the inscription on the Brussels Cross (11th century; Cathedral of St Michael and St Gudula, Brussels) shares some verses with the runic text on the RC - among others, the phrase *blōde bestēmed* (Majewski forthc.:Ch. 2.3.2).

A variation of the Ruthwell formula in l. 6b is found in *The Dream* l. 22b *mid wætan bestēmed* (‘bedewed with moisture’): in l. 18–22 (my emphasis), the dreamer has a vision and sees the Cross bleed from its right side. The physical pain normally associated with Christ is transferred to the Cross.

*Hwæðre ic þurh þæt gold  
earmra ærgewin,  
swætan on þā swīðran healfe.  
Forht ic wæs for þære fæggran gesyhðe.  
wendan wædum ond blēom;*

‘However, through that gold  
the former struggle of wretched ones,  
**to bleed from its right side.**  
I was afraid of that beautiful vision.  
change its clothing and colours;

*ongytan meahte  
þæt hit ærest ongan  
Eall ic wæs mid s[ol]rgum gedrēfed.  
Geseah ic þæt fūse bēacen  
hwīlum hit wæs mid wætan bestēmed,*

I could perceive,  
when it [(the cross)] first began  
I was entirely **afflicted with sorrows.**  
I saw that shifting gallows  
now it was **bedewed with moisture**’.

In l. 20b it is the dreamer who is *mid s[ol]rgum gedrēfed* ‘afflicted with sorrows’, but in RC l. 11a and in *The Dream* l. 59a the same formulaic expression describes the Cross’s pain (see below). In a different context, the formula is also attested in *Judith* (l. 88a; *ASPR* 4); the combination *mid sorgum* + verb is found in *Genesis* (l. 481 *mid swāte and mid sorgum siððan libban* ‘to live thereafter with sweat and with sorrows’); *ASPR* 1) and *Solomon and Saturn* (l. 367 *mid sorgum gewīteð* ‘tormented with sorrows’); *ASPR* 6), cf. the *DOE Web Corpus*, s.v. *mid sorgum*.

The third formula, RC l. 12 *\*[m]iþ s[t]rē[ll]um ġiwundad*, is paralleled only by *The Dream* l. 62b. In l. 59–63, the narrative voice alternates between the first person (personal pronoun OE *ic* ‘I’), the Cross, and the third person description of what happens to Christ (third-person plural verb forms, ‘they’). In the quotation below, the passages that refer to the Cross are highlighted; the poetic formulae that also feature on the RC (l. 11a, 12) are underlined.

*Sāre ic wæs mid [sorgum] gedrēfed,  
ēaðmōd elne mycle.  
āhōfon hine of ðām heftan wīte.  
standan stēame bedrifenne;  
Ālēdon hīe ðær limwērigne,*

*hnāg ic hwæðre þām secgum tō handa,  
Genāmon hīe þær ælmihtigne God,  
Forlēton mē þā hilderincas  
eall ic wæs mid strælum forwundod.  
gestōdon him æt his lices hēafdum;*

<p>‘Sorely I was <u>afflicted with sorrows</u>,  <b>humble, with great eagerness.</b>  they lifted him from the heavy torment.  <b>standing, drenched with moist;</b>  There they laid the limb-weary one down,</p>	<p><b>nevertheless, I inclined to the hands  of the men,</b>  There they took the Almighty God,  <b>The warriors left me there</b>  <b>I was entirely <u>wounded with arrows.</u></b>  they placed themselves at His body’s  head;’</p>
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These three formulae of the Ruthwell poem are also attested in *The Dream*. In both poems they describe the Cross’s agony at the crucifixion: it is made moist by the blood that flows out of Christ’s wounds (RC l. 6b), it experiences mental distress (RC l. 11a) and physical pain (RC l. 12). The formulae highlight the Cross’s experience—it suffers the pain which we would usually attribute to Jesus.

### 3. A reconsideration of RC l. 12 ‘Wounded with Arrows’

Although RC l. 12 and *The Dream* l. 62b employ the same poetic formula, many scholars (e.g., Howlett 1976: 58; Ó Carragáin 1987: 26–27) have read RC l. 12 as a participial attribute to l. 13a:

<p>RC l. 12–13a <i>[m]iþ s[t]rē[l]um ġiwundad</i>  ‘wounded with arrows,  down’</p>	<p><i>ālēgdun hīæ hinæ limwæriġnæ</i>  they laid the limb-weary one  down’</p>
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In contrast to *The Dream*, it is Christ and not the Cross that is wounded by ‘arrows’, which are often interpreted as “a metaphor for the five wounds in Christ’s body” (Ó Carragáin 2010: 243). Christ is called *limwæriġnæ* (‘the limb-weary one’) (l. 13a) when he is taken down from the Cross. Ó Carragáin (1987: 27) holds that the composer of *The Dream* adapted RC l. 12 to make a “shift in devotional emphasis [...] towards the power of the Cross”.

Bammesberger (forthc.) doubts this reading for grammatical reasons: “**ġiwundad** would be expected to agree in case and number with **limwæriġnæ**, the form ought to be accusative singular” and end in *-næ*. He therefore re-considers the arrangement of the runic text and believes that RC l. 12 *\*[m]iþ s[t]rē[l]um ġiwundad* could originally have been in line with verse 8 and refer to Christ. The re-arranged lines account for the fact that “[i]n St John’s gospel [19:34], the piercing of Christ’s side takes place directly after Christ had given up his spirit” (Ó Carragáin 2005: 81).

<p>*RC l. 8+<i>krist wæs on rōdi (stemni)</i>  ‘+ Christ was on the Cross/stem,</p>	<p><i>miþ strēlum ġiwundad</i> (= RC l. 12)  wounded with a lance/spear’</p>
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Grammatically, the dative or “instrumental [plural] *strēlum* is likely to be a dual in form, meaning ‘by means of the spear’; a corresponding dual form in *-um* is available in *\*[hēa]f[du]m*” (RC l. 13b), which can be translated as a singular, ‘at the head (of Christ’s body)’ (Bammesberger forthc.). Bammesberger (2001: 289) explains that, in Old English, “one major source for the use of *-um* as a marker of the instrumental singular lies in the dual”. The *-um* ending in *strēlum* could indicate that its meaning derived from an ‘elliptical dual’: ‘with two things’, i.e.

‘with two arrows’ (Bammesberger 2001: 289). This would later have acquired a meaning in the singular, ‘by means of the arrow/spear/lance’.

I agree that the meaning of *strēlum* may be that of an instrumental singular, but I object to a re-arrangement of the verses. I believe that *strēlum* are the weapons that hurt the Cross, and not Christ, and question the scholarly consensus that RC l. 12 refers to Christ.

An objection to the common reading of verse 12 was brought forward earlier by Bundi (1979: 54) and MacKinnell (2004: 109). Yet, it seems as if most scholars had overlooked that grammatically, syntactically, and metrically, RC l. 12 refers to l. 11a. In other words, l. 12 is a poetic variation of l. 11a, in which the Cross describes its mental and physical pain (Majewski forthc.: Chapters 6.5.2.17 and 6.6.3.1).

RC l. 11	sā[ræ] ic w[æ]s mi[þ] so[r]gu[m] gidræ[fi]d	h[n]āg [...
RC l. 12	[m]iþ s[t]rē[l]um giwundad	
	‘Sorely was I afflicted with sorrows, ‘wounded with arrows.’	I inclined [...],’

This reading also avoids the discussion of the somewhat unusual employment of Anglian *strēlum* (RC l. 12) ‘arrows, shafts, darts’ (cf. Bosworth’s *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, s.v. *stræ̅l*) instead of Old English (OE) *spere* ‘spear’ or *næglum* ‘nails’ (cf. *DOE Web Corpus*, s.v. *nægl*, *spere*) to denote the weapon(s) with which Christ is wounded in the biblical crucifixion narrative. In John 19:34 (*The New Oxford Annotated Bible* 2018: 1950), a soldier pierces Christ’s side with a spear or lance to confirm that he is dead.

#### 4. Arrows and the Archer on the Ruthwell Cross

As can be inferred from Table 1, most scholars in the 19th century translate *strēlum* as ‘shafts’. Only Stephens (1867–1868: 431–432) argues that

Christ did not die of Crucifixion or by being pierced in His side with a spear. He was *shot to death*. All sorts of missiles were hurled at him, wounding, dinting and bruising and *jagging the wood of the Cross*, and at last one fatal STREAL - doubtless the Mistletoe - struck Him and He died!

While this interpretation arouses scepticism, Stephens is the first to doubt that OE *stræ̅l* refers to the spear that wounds Christ. *Shaft* and *streale* belong to the semantic field ‘arrow’ (cf. *OED Online*, s.v. *shaft*, n.2 and *streale*, n.).

Source	Translation
Kemble (1840: 356; 1844:37)	‘wounded with shafts’
Haigh (1857: 170 - 171)	‘with shafts wounded’
Stuart (1867: 549)	‘wounded with shafts’
Stephens (1867–1868: 431–432)	‘with streals all wounded’

Cook (1905: 33, n. 62)	‘wounded with nails’
Bütow (1935: 48)	‘mit Pfeilen verwundet’
Howlett (1976: 58; 2008: 256)	‘wounded with arrows’
Page (1973:151; 1999:147148)	‘wounded with arrows’
Ball (1991: 113)	‘wounded with arrows’
Swanton (2000: 125, n. 62)	‘wounded with arrows, darts’
Bammesberger (forthc.)	‘wounded with a lance/spear’

Table 4. Translations of *miþ strēlum ġiwundad* (RC l. 12)

In the note to *The Dream* l. 62, Cook (1905: 33) points out a parallel to *Christ and Satan* (ASPR 1): l. 508–509a *þā mē on bēame beornas sticedon / gārūm on galgum* ‘when men stuck me on the cross, / with spears on the gallows’. Here, the word for ‘spear’ is OE *gār* ‘weapon with a pointed head’ (DOE A–I online, s.v. *gar*). But he argues that on the RC and in *The Dream*, “the nails must be meant, and this is most likely”. The same is suggested by Bütow (1935: 75, n. 62). The nails hurt both the Cross and Christ. However, the piercing with the nails occurs much earlier: in l. 46–47a, it is again the Cross that describes its wounds caused by the nails. OE *strǣl* must therefore denote a different kind of weapon, as it refers to the Cross only.

Anglian *strēlum* (‘arrows’) as the weapons that wound the wood of the Cross do not appear as original, if we consider that there is a direct reference to shooting an arrow on the RC’s upper stone.

The figure of the *Archer* on the RC has been interpreted in different ways. Raw’s (1967: 393) suggestion that it stands for the preacher, shooting the words of scripture into the hearts of the congregation has generally been accepted in Ruthwell scholarship. Ó Carragáin (2009: 186) favours this interpretation, arguing that Christ is the ‘chosen arrow’ hidden in God’s quiver (cf. Isaiah 49: 1–7; *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* 2018: 1045–1046). The same metaphor of the ‘chosen arrow’ is used “in the *Introit* for Mass on the feast of the Nativity of St John the Baptist” (Ó Carragáin 2010: 246). Based on this and on other liturgical implications, Ó Carragáin demonstrates that the *Archer* connects with the entire upper stone, including the *Visitation*: “in Elizabeth’s womb one of God’s chosen arrows, John the Baptist, leaps to recognise the other, Christ, in Mary’s womb” (Ó Carragáin 2010: 246). On the opposite side of the RC, the ‘hidden arrows’ (in their mothers’ wombs) are ‘revealed’ in the sculptures of *St John the Baptist* and *Christ in Glory*.

The Ruthwell sculptor, by representing the Archer’s ‘chosen arrow’ with such vivid detail, encouraged the audience to see the Visitation panel not as a static icon, but as one of an important sequence of historical events leading to the midsummer Nativity of John the Baptist, God’s ‘chosen arrow’, and to Christ’s own midwinter Nativity. (Ó Carragáin 2009: 192)

On the RC, sculptures and texts are intricately connected, so we may assume that *strēlum* ('arrows') was employed deliberately in the runic poem. On a literal level, it could mean that the Cross dies the death of a martyr, shot at by *strēlum* ('arrows') like St. Sebastian, to be later resurrected like Christ. The religious community at Ruthwell was probably familiar with St Sebastian through Bede's *Martyrologium* (cf. Brown, Biggs 2018: 287). On a more symbolical level and in connection with the sculptures on the broader faces of the RC, the *Archer's* arrow could also stand for the "[t]he arrows from the bow [that] pierce the bodies of Christ and the cross, bringing about the death that leads to resurrection" (Karkov 2019: 119).

The Ruthwell archer may then be the origin of this particular representation of the crucifixion in Anglo-Saxon England. It is the archer's arrows that let flow the streams of blood and water that give voice to the cross and give birth to the community of believers depicted on the shaft of the cross, as well as the community of believers who had the cross made. (Karkov 2019: 116)

This symbolical reading is strengthened by the etymology of OE *strǣl*: the noun developed into Present-Day English (PDE) *streale* ('arrow'), now an obsolete form (*OED Online*: s.v. *streale*, n.; see also Stephens 1867–1868 in Table 1). OE *strǣl* is of Germanic origin and has a cognate in Modern German (G.): *Strahl*. Kluge, Seebold (2011: 889) write that the meaning of G. *Strahl* (MHG *stræl*, PDE *comb*) might go back to the same West Germanic root as *Strahl*, namely \**strǣlō* ('arrow') (fem; cf. Middle High German (MHG) *strāle*; OE *strǣl*): in the plural, *Strähl* meant the long teeth of a comb, which could be compared to the sharp point at the front of an arrow (the Indo-European root of *comb*, OE *camb*, *comb*, is \**gómbho-* ('tooth'); Kluge/Seebold 2011: 467, s.v. *Kamm*, m.). This semantic affinity of the Germanic nouns meaning 'arrow' and 'tooth' could indicate that *strēlum* on the RC does not necessarily mean 'arrows', but 'sharp-pointed weapons' in general, which harmed the Cross - be it nails, arrows, a spear or a lance. The symbolical meaning of Anglian *strēlum* could be a synthesis of all weapons that harm the cross; metaphorically, the 'arrows' would then wound Christ as well.

## 5. Conclusion

The RC's runic poem narrates the crucifixion from the perspective of the personified Cross, highlighting its role in this central Christian event. Three poetic formulae express the Cross's physical and mental distress. This paper has shown that RC l. 12, \*[m]iþ s[t]rē[l]um ġiwundad ('wounded with arrows') - usually attributed to the figure of Christ - is a poetic variation of the preceding verse and refers to the Cross's wounds. This reading is based on grammatical, syntactical, and metrical grounds. Symbolically, the Cross and Christ (due to their special unity) are wounded with the same *strēlum* ('arrow(s)'), which is a unique feature of the epigraphic poem, just like *prosopopoeia* (i.e. the speaking Cross). It has furthermore been shown that the runic poem connects with the symbolic meaning of the *Archer* and the overall sculptural programme of the RC.



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