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# EXETER BOOK *RIDDLES* 48 AND 59: TRAUTMANN'S "INSCRIBED RING"

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ABSTRACT

Moritz Trautmann, in his 1915 edition of the Exeter Book *Riddles*, proposed the solution: "Inscribed Ring" to both *Riddles* 48 and 59; but his arguments have been largely ignored by subsequent editors and commentators, most of whom prefer the older solution: "Chalice" (alternatively "Pyx" or "Paten" for *Riddle* 48) suggested by Franz Dietrich in an influential article published in 1865. I argue here that Trautmann's commentary has been partly misread and his case undervalued, and that "Chalice", or similar Eucharistical objects, were suggested to Dietrich by his own emendation of the metrically deficient verse 11a (*dryhtdolg*) in *Riddle* 59 – an emendation that produced a spurious reference to the wounds Christ suffered at the crucifixion. Archaeological evidence in the shape of inscribed precious-metal rings of Anglo-Saxon manufacture supports Trautmann's solution to both *Riddles*, which are consequently to be regarded as examples of the same riddling conception of writing as "silent speech" as is shown by the poets of several other *Riddles* (42 "Cock and Hen", 47 "Bookmoth", and 60 "Reed Pen") in the Exeter Book collection. The idea of an "Inscribed Ring" is, however, indicated too explicitly in both *Riddles* 48 and 59 to be accepted as the actual solution to either. Comparison with *Riddle* 47 "Bookmoth", *Riddle* 48's neighbour in the manuscript, suggests that the true solution of all three of these *Riddles* is the underlying concept of "the written word".

Keywords: *Riddles*; Anglo-Saxon; Old English poetry; Exeter Book; inscriptions.

The aims of this article are to offer a new solution: "The Written Word" for *Riddles* 48 and 59 in the Exeter Book collection of Old English riddles; to point to the weaknesses of the various possible solutions ("Chalice", "Pyx", "Paten") suggested by Franz Dietrich in 1865 and accepted by most modern writers on these two poems; to draw attention to the generally neglected case made by Moritz Trautmann in 1915 for the solution: "Inscribed Ring"; to cite

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archaeological evidence, unnoticed by Trautmann, which supports his case; and to emphasize the formal relationship between *Riddle* 48 and its immediate predecessor in the manuscript, *Riddle* 47, usually solved as "Bookworm" (or "Bookmoth"). I argue that this relationship provides a way of justifying my replacement of Trautmann's "Inscribed Ring" with my new solution: "The Written Word".

The texts of *Riddles* 48 and 59, followed by my own translations, are given below:

Riddle 48[2]
Ic gefrægn for hæleþum hring endean,[3]
torhtne butan tungan, tila þeah he hlude
stefne ne cirmde, strongum wordum.
Sinc for secgum swigende cwæð:
'Gehæle mec, helpend gæsta.'
Ryne ongietan readan goldes
guman galdorcwide, gleawe beþencan
hyra hælo to gode, swa se hring gecwæð.

("I heard of a ring bearing a message (?) before men, splendid without a tongue, rightly even though it did not cry loudly with voice, with strong words. Silently the treasure said before men: 'Heal me, helper of souls.' May men understand the mysterious utterance, the magic saying of the red gold, prudently entrust their health to God, as the ring said.")

Riddle 59
Ic seah in healle hring gyldenne
men sceawian, modum gleawe,
ferþþum frode. Friþospede bæd
god nergende gæste sinum
se þe wende wriþan; word æfter cwæð
hring on hyrede, hælend nemde
tillfremmendra. Him torhte in gemynd
his dryhtnes naman dumba brohte
ond in eagna gesihð, gif þæs æþelan
goldes tacen ongietan cuþe
dryhtdolg, don swa þæs beages
benne cwædon. Ne mæg þære bene
æniges monnes ungefullodre

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2 The texts of *Riddles* 48 and 59 are here reproduced from *The Exeter Book*, edited by George Philip Krapp & Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie (1936: 205–206 and 209–210), though I retain the MS reading *dryhtdolg* in *Riddle* 59.11a, on which see further below.

3 MS *hringende an*. The form *endean* (for *endian*) might be a contraction of *ærendian*, "to bring tidings"; see Krapp & Dobbie (note; 1936: 347), who also point out that the context leads us to expect an infinitive of a verb denoting verbal utterance here. My translation reflects their argument. On the problem of *endean*, see further Muir (1994: II, 610).

godes ealdorburg gæst gesecan,
rodera ceastre. Ræde, se þe wille,
hu ðæs wrætlican wunda cwæden
hringes to hæleþum, þa he in healle wæs
wylted ond wended wloncra folmum.

("I saw in the hall men, prudent of spirit, wise of heart, examining a golden ring. He who turned the band round prayed to God the saviour for peaceful prosperity for his soul. The ring spoke words then in the company, named the saviour of righteous men. Into his mind and into his eyes' sight the dumb thing brought clearly his lord's name, if he knew how to interpret the marks of the excellent gold, (its) noble wounds, (and) do as the ring's wounds said. No man's soul whose prayer remains unfulfilled may seek the royal fortress of God, the city of the heavens. Let him who so wishes explain how the wounds of the wondrous ring spoke to men when it was turned and passed round in hall by the hands of these proud men".)

In 1865 Franz Dietrich (1865: 235) argued that the solutions to both these riddles were ritual vessels used in the Latin mass ("Abendmahlsgeräthe"), and nearly all later editors and commentators agree with him. For *Riddle* 48, Dietrich suggested either "Pyx" (the container for the consecrated host) or "Paten" (the dish from which the host is served to communicants) as possible alternatives to "Chalice". Tupper (1910: 179), Niles (2006: 143) and Cavell (2017: 129–138) prefer "Paten", Wyatt (1912: 105), Baum (1963: 18), Brooks (2016: 141–158) and Williams (2017: 482–502) "Chalice",[4] and Mackie (1934: 241), Williamson (1977: 287) and Muir (1994: II, 622) regard all three solutions as possibilities. For *Riddle* 59, Dietrich's solution, "Chalice", is accepted by all these later editors and critics who express an opinion on the matter (Tupper 1910: 197; Wyatt 1912: 108; Mackie 1934: II, 241; Baum 1963: 19; Williamson 1977: 313; Muir 1994: II, 623; Niles 2006: 143; Cavell 2017: 129; Brooks 2016: 143).

The first dissenter was Moritz Trautmann, whose 1915 edition of the *Riddles* challenged all of Dietrich's suggestions.[5] In his view, the word *hring* in *Riddle* 48.1 and 8 rules out both "Chalice" and "Pyx"[6] and he repeats the same objection to "Chalice" for *Riddle* 59, where the object in question is called *wriþa* in line 5,

4 Williams (2017: 487) argues that *Riddle* 48 and its predecessor in the manuscript, *Riddle* 47 ("Bookworm") are two parts of the same poem which dramatises "the fraught process of cultivating divine wisdom". On the relationship between the two poems, see further below.

5 See *Die altenglischen Rätsel (Die Rätsel des Exeterbuchs)*, edited by Moritz Trautmann (1915).

6 "Dies kann aber, wegen *hring* 1, weder ein Kelch noch eine Kapsel sein" (Trautmann 1915: 108). Trautmann's solution: "Inscribed Ring" for both riddles is supported by Okasha's "Old English 'hring' in Riddles 48 and 59" (1993), who gives a thorough account of the relevant archaeological evidence.

*beag* in 11, and *hring* in 1, 6 and 17, all words meaning "ring".[7] Trautmann's objection applies equally to *ciborium*, one of the most recently suggested solutions, which is a round, lidded, bunlike container for the eucharistic wafers to be distributed to communicants.[8] On *Riddle* 48 Trautmann (1915: 108) concludes: "Mir scheint ein Ring mit einer Inschrift gemeint"; and thinking, like Wyatt before him, that *Riddle* 59 has the same solution, he regards both poems as making reference to a ritual, unrecorded elsewhere and peculiar to the Anglo-Saxon church, in which the faithful passed round an inscribed ring and repeated the prayer inscribed on it:

> Ich möchte aus den beiden Rätseln auf eine gottesdienstliche Handlung der altenglischen Kirche schließen, bei welcher die Gläubigen der Reihe nach die Inschrift eines Ringes betrachteten und lasen, bezw. nachsagten, eine Inschrift des Sinnes 'Erlöse mich, Christus, Heiland der Gläubigen'.
>
> (Trautmann 1915: 118)[9]

Of later editors, only Pinsker & Ziegler, in their 1985 edition,[10] confront Trautmann's criticisms of Dietrich's arguments and the former's suggestion of a gold inscribed ring as the solution to both riddles; but they repeat the earlier charge levelled against Trautmann by Krapp & Dobbie (1936: 351, headnote to *Riddle* 59) and Williamson (1977: 313) that he offers no alternative suggestions to replace Dietrich's.[11] This accusation seems to have arisen from a misreading of Trautmann, who nowhere suggests that the solution to either riddle is an item of "Abendmahlsgeräthe", as Dietrich had suggested: he mentions only "ein kirchliches Gerät" ("a piece of ecclesiastical equipment").[12] Failure to appreciate the distinction may account for the fact that Pinsker & Ziegler (1985: 263) do not reject Dietrich's "Chalice" completely: their solution for both riddles is "Inscription ring on a chalice",[13] a composite solution that meets Trautmann's objections only half-way.

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7 "Ein Kelch kann m. E. nicht *hring*, *wriþa* und *beag* genannt warden" (Trautmann 1915: 118).

8 See Breeze (2021: 137–150). All three of Breeze's examples of actual *ciboria* are of twelfth-century manufacture.

9 "I would solve both riddles in terms of a religious ceremonial act of the Old English church, during which believers one after the other looked at and read, or repeated after somebody, an inscription on a ring, an inscription with the sense: 'Redeem me, Christ, Saviour of believers'".

10 See Pinsker & Ziegler (1985: 263–265, 281–283).

11 Pinsker & Ziegler (1985: 281).

12 "Daß es sich um ein kirchliches Gerät handelt, kann nicht bezweifelt warden" (Trautmann 1915: 108).

13 "Wir meinen nicht, daß mit dem 'Ring' ein rundes Gefäß bezeichne wird, sondern ein 'goldener Inschriftring', der auf einem, aus einem weniger edelen Metall gefertigten, Abendmahlkelch aufgebracht ist" (Pinsker & Ziegler 1985: 263).

For all their influence on later scholars, Dietrich's solutions have little, if anything, to recommend them. I share Trautmann's doubt about whether a drinking-vessel, receptacle or container could sensibly be called a "ring". A riddle might, of course, project an abstract image of the solution to test the reader's powers of deduction, but none of these artefacts really resembles a ring, and there is no suggestion in either poem that the solution is any kind of receptacle. If "Chalice", "Pyx", "Paten" or "Ciborium" were the solution to either riddle, one would expect at least an allusion to the object's contents. As we have seen, Trautmann invented a church ritual peculiar to the Anglo-Saxon church to account for both poems, though both evoke rather the secular hall familiar from heroic poetry such as *Beowulf*: it is apparently in some secular assembly (*Riddle* 48.1 *hæleþum*, 4 *secgum*, 6 *hyrede*, 7 *guman*; *Riddle* 59.2 *men*, 17 *hæleþum*, 18 *wloncra*), "in hall" (*Riddle* 59.1, 17 *in healle*) rather than in church that the "ring" is passed round and examined.[14] Dietrich was certainly unjustified in conflating the object's "wounds", mentioned twice in *Riddle* 59 (12 *benne*, 16 *wunda*) – metaphorical references to the ring's inscribed letters, as Trautmann (1915: 118) realized – with Christ's wounds that "speak" (in blood) to communicants.[15] It was clearly Dietrich's emendation of the metrically faulty a-verse *dryhtdolg* in line 11 of *Riddle* 59 that steered him in the direction of "Chalice" as the solution: he created the hint of a container for Christ's blood by reforming the entire line as a reference to the wounding of Christ: *þone dysige dryht dolgdon furðum*, "den einst eine thörichte schaar verwundete" / "whom the foolish rabble once wounded" (Dietrich 1865: 235, n2). Dietrich's restructured version of line 11 is rejected by all later editors; but in spite of the fact that neither poem in its unemended manuscript form makes any reference to the wounding of Christ, to the wounds themselves, or to his blood, the notion that *Riddle* 59, at least, refers explicitly to Christ's wounds persists: Tupper (1910: 43), Krapp & Dobbie (1936: 210), and Williamson (1977: 102) all read *ond dryhtnes dolg*, "and the Lord's wounds", for 11a,[16] even though there are

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14 It has been argued that such standard heroic settings in some of the *Riddles* may be riddling disguises of an ecclesiastical setting; see Eric G. Stanley, "Heroic Aspects of the Exeter Book Riddles" (1995: 209–210).

15 Dietrich (1865: 235), footnote 2: "als kelch ist der goldene reif (60, 1. v riða 5) bezeichnet ... theils durch das geheimnisvolle aber den einsichtigen (v. 2. 9. 10) verständliche sprechen seiner wunden (v. 12. 17) d. h. des für die menschen vergossnen blutes des heilandes, welches er darstellt, und nach den früh im mittelalter gehenden geschichten von wunderbarer verwandlung, im weine enhält" ("The golden ring is identified as a chalice ... partly by the mysterious though comprehensible speaking of its wounds, in other words of the blood of the Saviour shed for mankind, which it [sc. the chalice] represents and contains in the form of wine, according to the stories deriving from the early middle ages of its miraculous transubstantiation"). See also Cavell (2017: 134) who suggests that the object's wounds "may … simply refer to the process of manufacturing and decorating a metal object".

16 See also Cavell (2017: 133) and Brooks (2016: 142).

difficulties in squaring this expression with the meaning of the rest of the sentence in which it is embedded. Trautmann (1915: 35), on the other hand, followed by Pinsker & Ziegler (1985: 98), expanded 11a as *dryhtmaðmes dolg*, "the splendid treasure's wounds" (referring to the letters cut into the metal of the ring),[17] a preferable arrangement because it not only solves the metrical problem but also avoids introducing any extraneous ideas into the text.

Trautmann, in common with most of the subsequent commentators and editors I have mentioned, does not refer to the existence of strong archaeological support for his reading of these two *Riddles*. Several gold and silver rings with inscriptions in Latin or Old English survive from the period.[18] The content of the inscriptions is varied and sometimes uncertain. Most of them consist of or include a personal name,[19] though neither of our two *Riddles* suggests that a personal name forms part of the inscription on the ring they describe. Instead, it is in both cases the inscription's explicitly Christian content that engages the attention of its contemporary readers. *Riddle* 48 cites, in line 5, a prayer, *Gehæle mec, helpend gæsta*, "Heal me, helper of souls", that is to be understood either as the actual text on the ring or the essence of it. Pinsker & Ziegler (1985: 263) identify Psalm 11.2

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17 The compound *dryhtmaðum* is attested only in *Beowulf* 2843.

18 The inscriptions are edited by Elisabeth Okasha in *Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions* (1971). The list of them below follows Okasha's numbering: 13 Bodsham (Kent), gold, Old English, probably ninth century; 14 Bossington (Hants.), gold, Latin, ninth-tenth century; 33 Driffield (ER Yorks.), gold, Latin, perhaps ninth century; 36 Essex, silver, Old English, date uncertain, now lost; 66 Manchester (listed under "Lancashire" by Okasha; see Page (1999: 31, 162), gold, Old English (mixed roman and runic letters), probably ninth century; 70 Laverstock (Wilts.), gold, Old English, A.D. 828–58; 86 Llysfaen (Caernarvonshire, Wales), gold, Old English, ninth century; 103 Rome I, gold, Old English, possibly ninth century; 107 Sherburn (WR Yorks.), gold, Old English personal name, Latin title, A.D. 853–88; 115 Swindon (Wilts.), gold, Old English personal name, probably late ninth to tenth century; 155, the "Eawen" ring, provenance unknown, gold, Old English, probably ninth to tenth century; 156, the "Sigerie" ring, silver, Old English, date uncertain; and 157 the "Đancas" ring, silver, Old English, script and date uncertain, now lost. To these may be added the recently-discovered runic Wheatley Hill (Durham) ring, silver-gilt, Old English, perhaps from the second half of the eighth century, on which see Page (1999: 169).

19 Examples are the Llysfaen gold ring's *Alhstan*, presented without any elaboration, and Rome I's *Avfret* (or possibly *Alfret*). The names in such inscriptions are probably of the ring's owner in most cases; and three inscriptions explicitly identify the named person as the ring's owner, an example being the Lancashire (Manchester) gold ring with *Ædred mec ah*, "Ædred owns me". The other two instances are Bodsham, *-armund* (probably to be restored as *Garmund*) *mec ah*, "Garmund owns me", and the "Eawen" ring, *Eawen mie ah*, "Eawen owns me". Two inscriptions identify royal personages: Laverstock, *Ethelvvulf Rx* (for *Rex*), "King Ethelvvulf", and Sherburn, *Eaðelsvið Regna* (for *Regina*), "Queen Eaðelsvið". The "Sigerie" ring records (though some of the forms are irregular) the name of the person who commissioned the making of the ring, *Sigerie heð* (for *het*) *mea* (for *me*) *gevvircan*, "Sigerie ordered me to be made"; and the Manchester gold ring adds to the owner formula already cited the name of the engraver in *Eanred mec agrof*, "Eanred engraved me".

*Salvum me fac, Domine* as the source of this part of the text. Other biblical allusions sometimes appear among the inscriptions on our corpus of Anglo-Saxon precious-metal rings. The Sherburn gold ring, which seems to have belonged to Queen Eaðelsvið of Mercia, includes before the queen's name two capitals, *A* and *Đ*, with abbreviation marks over both letters and plausibly interpreted by Okasha (1971: 113) as the initials of *Agnus Dei*, in reference to the carved representation of the lamb on the ring, and deriving from John 1.29 *Ecce agnus Dei, qui tollit peccatum mundi*.[20] The Driffield gold ring spells out the first part of the same verse, *Ecce Agnvs Dei;*[21] and the Swindon gold ring is inscribed *Bvredrvð*, an otherwise unknown form of what is presumably a personal name, followed by symbols representing the *alpha* and *omega* of Revelations 1.8 and 22.13 *Ego sum alpha et omega*. None of these three rings carry explicitly formulated prayers of the kind exemplified by *Riddle* 48's quotation from the Psalms; but all three identify the deity, the feature that is indicated in *Riddle* 59.6–8 as the essential point of the inscription for those who read it.[22] The biblical quotations on these three rings and on the rings described by the two *Riddles* seem to combine several functions for the wearers: they are declarations of faith, prayers, meditations on the nature of God, and probably apotropaic charms as well.[23]

*Riddles* 48 and 59 are the only ones in the Exeter Book collection to focus on epigraphic inscriptions, though they do not seem out of place in the collection: the way both of them relish the paradox of writing as silent speech and revel in the esoteric nature of written communication finds clear echoes in other Exeter Book *Riddles*. *Riddle* 42, "Cock and Hen", is one example; but a better one is probably *Riddle* 60, "Reed pen", lines 7b–10a of which read:

> Lyt ic wende
> þæt ic ær oþþe sið æfre sceolde
> ofer meodubence muðleas sprecan,
> wordum wrixlan.[24]

("Little did I expect that I ever, sooner or later, should speak mouthless across the mead-bench, mix words".)

Readers will realize, however, that there is a problem of interpretation that my discussion has so far circumvented, and that is the question of the form of *Riddles* 48

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20 See also the photograph of the ring in her plates.

21 *Dei* is in a contracted form in the inscription.

22 *Riddle* 59.6 *hælend nemde*, "named the saviour", 7–9 *in gemynd his dryhtnes naman ... brohte ond in eagna gesihð*, "... brought ... to mind and into the eyes' sight his lord's name".

23 I am grateful to Dr Anna Gannon, Fellow of St. Edmund's College Cambridge, and to Dr Robin Orton for their suggestions about the intended function of these inscriptions.

24 Text from Krapp & Dobbie (1936: 225).

and 59. Most of the Exeter Book *Riddles* require the solver to identify some nominal concept in the text as veiling the identity of the solution which it in some respects resembles. The similarity should not be too obvious, but it should be discoverable. All modern attempts to solve *Riddles* 48 and 59 except Trautmann's and Okasha's assume that the "ring", variously denoted in both poems, represents this nominal concept; that it is the solution in disguise, as the form of most of the other *Riddles* in the collection would lead us to expect, and that some form of vessel is the solution. I have argued that none of these 'vessel' solutions is at all satisfactory; but Trautmann's conclusion that the "ring" is itself the solution is equally unsatisfactory, because if he is right, the solution is in no way disguised;[25] there is no riddle for the reader to solve. If we reject the many 'vessel' solutions, the only escape from this latter difficulty that I can see is to accept that *Riddles* 48 and 59 were not designed as riddles of the usual kind. Instead of the conventional riddling procedure, according to which poets set up a series of similarities between a presenting image and the riddle's solution, the former chosen to suggest the latter, we have a focus on ambiguities and paradoxes that result when language, essentially and originally oral and aural, develops an allotropic variation, is diverted into a new channel, acquires a written, silent, visible form, and is displayed on a material medium. Thus in *Riddle* 48, the ring speaks eloquently but silently, and in *Riddle* 59 the "wounds" (metaphorically, letters) inscribed in the metal ring communicate linguistically (16 *wunda cwæden*) with those who can see and read them. And so the nearest thing to a solution to these poems, regarded as riddles, is "The Written Word". Both poems show that in the time they were composed, for some Anglo-Saxons at least, the unfamiliar implications of literacy were objects of great fascination. How can language communicate without being heard? How can sound be transposed into a visible form?

There is support for this interpretation in the context of *Riddle* 48 in the manuscript. It is surely no coincidence that *Riddle* 47 "Bookmoth" (or "Bookworm"), 48's immediate predecessor, works in the same way. Instead of challenging the reader to find a solution, it too names what the modern title assumes is its solution, and contemplates the peculiarities in the relationship between speech and writing. The poem begins: *Moððe word fræt*, "the moth ate words"; the larva internalised (3 *forswealg*, "swallowed") the parchment containing the text, though no meaning is conveyed: the insect is no wiser for its meal. *Riddles* 48 and 59 might well have been inspired by *Riddle* 47, and it is of course possible that all three poems share the same author.[26]

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25 As Breeze (2021: 146) puts it, "it would be a poor riddler who gave away his answer so ineptly".

26 For a more detailed discussion of *Riddles* 47 and 60, see my *Writing in a Speaking World. The Pragmatics of Literacy in Anglo-Saxon Inscriptions and Old English Poetry* (Orton 2014: 165–172). See also Bitterli's *Say What I Am Called* (2009: 191–193), for an exploration of *Riddle* 47's implications.

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