Eþelþryþ Who? The Enigmatic Old English Dry-point Runes in the St Petersburg Insular Gospels

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Abstract
This article offers the first extensive discussion and a new interpretation of the dry-point sequence incised in Old English runes on fol. 213r of St Petersburg, National Library of Russia, MS Lat. F.v.I.8, commonly known as the St Petersburg Insular Gospels. The dry-point runes most likely spell the Old English female name *Eþelþryþ*. However, the central character of the sequence, which is unparalleled in the Old English runic corpus, offers multiple possibilities for interpretation. By placing the dry-point runes into the immediate context of the manuscript page as well as into broader historical and runological perspectives, this article argues that the dry-point inscription employs visual play and functions either as a corrector's signature or as an encrypted commentary on the surrounding Latin Gospel of St John, prompting readers to remember and meditate on the virtues of Saint Æthelthryth, the seventh-century abbess of Ely.

Keywords: Old English *runica manuscripta*, futhorc, dry-point runes, bind-runes, Saint Æthelthryth, Bede, colophon, scribal signature, scribal comment

Introduction

The St Petersburg Insular Gospels (MS Lat. F.v.I.8 in the National Library of Russia, St Petersburg, formerly Leningrad, from the collection of P. P. Dubrovsky) were likely produced in eighth-century Northumbria (Kilpiö and Kahlas-Tarkka 2001, 41–44; Houghton 2010). The manuscript contains the four gospel texts written in Insular half-uncial

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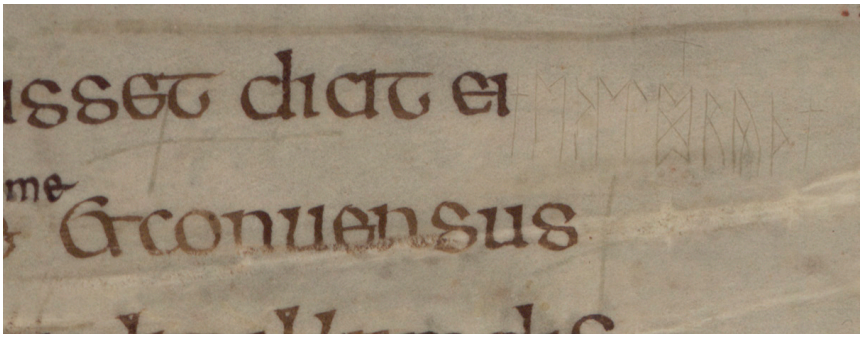

Fig. 1. Detail of the runic dry-point inscription on folio 213r of St Petersburg, National Library of Russia, MS Lat. F.v.I.8. Reproduced with kind permission of the National Library of Russia.

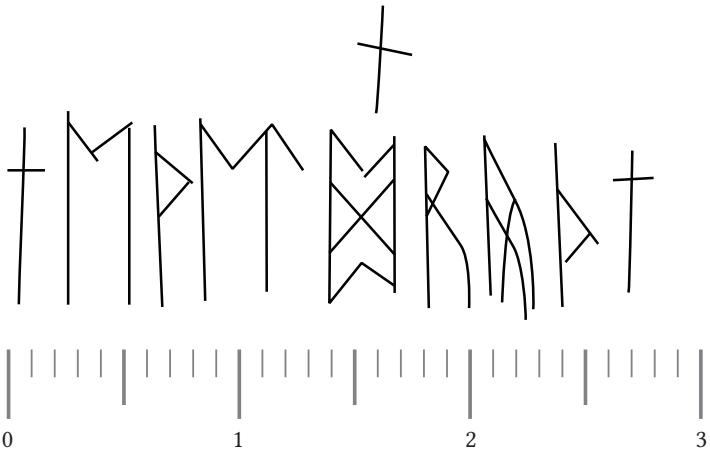

Fig. 2. Drawing by Kerstin Majewski of the runic dry-point on fol. 213r of MS Lat. F.v.I.8, National Library of Russia, St Petersburg (length: c. 28 mm with the crosses to the left and right; height of runes: c. 7–8 mm)

script (Bleskina 2012). The textual form of the gospels has been shown to rely largely on the Old Latin tradition, with some alterations from the Vulgate (Houghton 2010).[1] Although the Latin text contained in the manuscript has been studied from both textual and paleographic perspec-

[1] The manuscript was edited and published on CD-ROM by Natalya Elagina et al. in 2001; this edition and the articles published with it, including one on the runic inscription (Khlevov 2001), are now, unfortunately, difficult for researchers to access amid the shift away from CD-ROM holdings.

tives, an intriguing runic dry-point inscription that appears on fol. 213r has received little attention.

Between two columns of inked Latin text, a sequence of seven Old English runes is scratched in faint dry-point (fig. 1 and fig. 2). The runic dry-point can be transliterated as follows:

				+				
+	**e**	**þ**	**e͡l**	[*eþelþ*]	**r**	**y**	**þ**	+
			+					
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	

The sequence of seven runes[2] begins and ends with the sign of the cross **+**. Above the fourth character, placed in exactly the middle of the sequence, is another cross-sign. Further, a larger cross is underneath character no. 3. Except for the central character,[3] the values of all runes can be determined without difficulty. Five of the runes (nos. 1, 2, 5, 6, 7) are single runic characters; the third rune is a bind-rune (combining **e** + **l**); and, most interestingly, the fourth character is an unparalleled graphic sign. As Khlevov (2001) notes, this character "has no analogies among currently available sources but in this context can be identified as rune **þ** ('thorn') because this is only how the second part of the inscription – *þryþ* – acquires a meaning", producing the common Old English female personal name *Eþelþryþ*.

In this paper, we propose an additional interpretation of the central character, namely as a complex bind-rune of decorative symmetrical design that plays with both form and content. Consequently, the runic dry-point can be interpreted not only as an Old English female name but also as a two-word phrase composed of the name and a modifier: *eþele*

[2] The bind-rune in position 3 is counted as one because it has one stave that is 'shared' by two runes, **e** and **l**; this is signaled in the transliteration with a bow over the two runes. Khlevov (2001) counts them as separate runes (nos. 3 and 4) and thus arrives at a total count of eight characters in the inscription as opposed to our count of seven. See below for further discussion of potential readings of the complex bind-rune. We define a complex bind-rune as a singular visual sign that consists of three or more runes, potentially sharing more than one stave.

[3] In this article, we use the term 'character' to denote a discrete visual sign representing one or more sounds; the word can signify either a single rune or a bind-rune (a combination of two or more runes).

Eþelþryþ 'noble/holy Eþelþryþ'.[4] We thus offer two possible interpretations. Perhaps the most straightforward understanding is that the name is the signature of a female scribe, corrector, or manuscript user called *Eþelþryþ*. Alternatively, the name might (also) refer to the well-known eponymous Anglo-Saxon saint, offering a commentary on the nearby text of the end of the Gospel of John.

Literature review

The runes on fol. 213r of St Petersburg, NLR MS Lat. F.v.I.8, have mostly been passed over in scholarship; they received little attention in the catalogue entries and articles about the manuscript (Dobiaš-Rožděstvenskaja and Bakhtine 1991; Kilpiö and Kahlas-Tarkka 2001; Bleskina 2012). In their catalogue of the 2001 exhibition of early English manuscripts in Helsinki and St Petersburg, editors Kilpiö and Kahlas-Tarkka assign a late eighth-century date to the manuscript and list the "runic inscription scratched with a stylus" (2001, 43) under marginalia, but they do not elaborate any further on the inscription. Dobiaš-Rožděstvenskaja and Bakhtine, the editors of the St Petersburg library catalogue, do not mention the runes at all (1991, 58–61).

The runic dry-point has equally eluded critical attention from runologists. It does not feature in Derolez's landmark edition of English manuscript runes (recorded until 1954, the year of its publication), and the two book-length studies of English *runica manuscripta* since Derolez by Symons (2016) and Birkett (2017) focus (almost) exclusively on runes in the Exeter Book (Exeter Cathedral Library MS 3501) and do not mention those in St Petersburg, NLR MS Lat. F.v.I.8. In his monograph on Old English dry-point glosses, Studer-Joho briefly mentions the runes in MS Lat. F.v.I.8 (2017, 39), but he does not include them in his *Catalogue of Manuscripts Known to Contain Old English Dry-Point Glosses*, because, according to his definition, they "do not qualify as glosses" as they in fact spell out a personal name (p. 38). Page (1999, 198) in his seminal *Introduction to English Runes* dedicates only one sentence to the inscription: he reads it as a combination of two names, *Eþelstan* and *Eþeldryþ*. In his reading, character no. 4 is a bind of **st** and **d**. Birkett (2022, 223), following Page's reading, categorizes the inscription as a "maker's or artificer's name".

[4] See the *Dictionary of Old English*, s.v. *æþele*, adj. 1. In the nominative singular, the Northumbrian adjectival form would be *eþele* (Campbell 1959, § 647) as the adjective inflects like other *ia*/*io*- adjectives in Old English.

The only detailed scholarly treatment of the runes in question can be found in an article accompanying the CD-ROM edition of the manuscript (Elagina et al. 2001). There, Khlevov (2001) presents a description of the runic sequence which, including the cross-signs, measures 28 × 20 mm; the runes alone measure 22 × 7–8 mm. The first four characters "are safely read as *eþel* – a fairly common component of personal names in the Anglo-Saxon world"; runes in positions 5 to 7 "are safely read as *ryþ*". As explained above, Khlevov reads the entire runic sequence as *Eþelþryþ*, "an Old English personal (presumably female) name fairly common at the time [from] when the codex dates". Beyond this observation, the author neither discusses the placement of the sequence in its immediate context on the manuscript page nor attempts to place the name within a broader cultural or literary context.

The inscription and its context

Provenance

The manuscript Lat. F.v.I.8 is currently held at the National Library of Russia in St Petersburg. There is general agreement that it was written in the late eighth century, and the majority of scholars who have studied the manuscript place its production in Northumbria (Kilpiö and Kahlas-Tarkka 2001, 43).[5] From records and from his signature in the manuscript, we know that the manuscript was ultimately donated to the National Library of Russia in 1805 by the diplomat, manuscript collector, and library curator Peter Dubrovsky. How the manuscript came to be on the Continent is unknown, but it is possible that it was for some time at Corbie Abbey: much of the abbey's book collection was moved to St Maur de Fosses in 1638 (Logutova 2001, 97 f.), and the manuscript is known to have been at St Maur at the latest by 1716, when it was moved from there to St Germain des Prés, where Dubrovsky purchased it in 1792 (Dobiaš-Rožděstvenskaja and Bakhtine 1991, 60; Houghton 2010, 115).[6]

[5] There has been some debate about whether the manuscript was produced in the north or south of England. See Kilpiö and Kahlas-Tarkka (2001, 43) for a full discussion of the literature; cf. also Houghton (2010).

[6] Several additional aspects of Corbie's library and of the relationship between Corbie and the British Isles suggest Corbie as a particularly likely prospect. Logutova notes that "the majority of the insular codices of P.P. Dubrovsky come from the library of the abbey of Corbie near Amiens", a monastery founded in the seventh century by Bathild, the Anglo-Saxon wife of Clovis II (2001, 97). Pulliam (2011) notes thematic and iconographic simi-

It is possible, therefore, although not certain, that the manuscript was on the Continent much earlier than the eighteenth century. As Birkett points out, "a large proportion of the surviving runica manuscripta arise from amongst [a Continental] diaspora" of "Anglo-Saxon missionary activity in the eighth and ninth centuries" (2022, 215). Folio 213r may therefore have acquired its dry-point runes in England or on the Continent, and given the evidence of runes used on the Continent in scribal signatures (discussed below), the latter appears more likely.

The dry-point runes

In terms of transcription and transliteration, the dry-point runes pose no major challenge except for character no. 4. The sound values of all the runes can be determined without difficulty. There are, however, some graphematic peculiarities:

First, character no. 3 is a bind-rune. According to MacLeod's typological classification of bind-runes (2002, 17), this represents a bind-rune of the "unambiguous unilateral" type, combining ᛗ **e** and ᛚ **l**. The reason for binding these runes may have been a desire for symmetry in the inscription. If the first three runes, transliterated as **eþe͡l**, count as three characters (the bind-rune counting as one), the number 3 is repeated in the final three runes, transliterated as **ryþ**. The number 3 recurs again in the three cross-signs that frame the inscription and mark its midpoint (character no. 4), as illustrated in figure 2 above. To keep this numerical symmetry, ᛗ **e** and ᛚ **l** had to be combined. Khlevov (2001) has made a similar argument, suggesting that the bind of what he counts as runes 3–4 intentionally brings the total number of characters to seven, with 7 having a "sacral-numeric implication".

larities between the Corbie Psalter manuscript (Amiens, Bibliothèque Municipale MS 18), produced before 800, and the Ruthwell Cross of western Northumbria, also likely of eighth-century date. Ganz notes that Corbie owned several Insular manuscripts, including works of Bede and an eighth-century copy made in southwest England of works by Isidore, Jerome, and Aldhelm's riddles (Leningrad [St Petersburg], Lat. Q.v.I.15) that Parkes (1976) has argued contains the hand of Boniface himself (d. 754), leading Ganz (1990, 41 f.) to conclude that "Corbie [may have] sought insular texts, and texts known to insular authors". Insular visitors, some surely with knowledge of English runes, also periodically came to Corbie; Ganz further notes that "Corbie was an important stopping point for travellers to and from the British Isles, as the lives of the Irish saints confirm". Although this evidence of connections between Corbie Abbey and the British Isles in the eighth century and afterwards is not conclusive, it does make Corbie a plausible location for the manuscript and/or for a person with knowledge of English runes.

Second, character no. 6, ᚿ **y**, has x-shaped twigs between its two mainstaves.[7] It is possible that this shape could represent a cross and emphasize the holiness of the inscribed message, adding a fourth cross-sign to the inscription. However, the twigs are more likely to be explained as an allograph of the Old English **y**-rune.

Third, the form of character no. 4 is unparalleled in the Old English runic corpus, allowing various possibilities for interpretation. The female name *Eþeldryþ* or *Eþelþryþ* is a likely solution, and character no. 4 should then be read as a (highly peculiar and ornamental form of a) single rune. It could either be ᛞ **d** (John Hines, pers. comm., July 3, 2025), giving the name *Eþeldryþ*, or ᚦ **þ**, producing the name *Eþelþryþ* (Khlevov 2001). Further, the character might instead be a mirrored bind-rune of ᛈ **p** and ᚦ **þ** (Gaby Waxenberger, pers. comm., July 14, 2025). Page (1999, 198) suggests that character no. 4 stands for a bind of ᛎ **st** and ᛞ **d**. He proposes reading a combination of two names, *Eþelstan* and *Eþeldryþ* (1999, 198), which, however, seems unlikely: the final two characters *-an* of the first name are hard to identify in the inscription, and the reading sequence is unclear. Lastly, Khlevov (2001) believes that the central bind-rune represents "not just a ligature but rather a pictogram representing the short form of the owner's name as a combination of most of the runes for this name", a "proprietary emblem" that the named person might also have used in other circumstances. The problem with this interpretation, however, is that character no. 4 does not contain all of the runes of the name *Eþelþryþ*.[8]

To judge solely from its form, the individual runic characters that could theoretically have been combined into this peculiar character are the following: ᛗ **e**, ᚦ **þ**, ᛈ **p**, ᛎ **st**, ᚷ **g**, ᛞ **d**, and ᛚ **l**. However, the combination

[7] The most common *y* graph-type in the Old English runic epigraphic corpus is a **u**-rune with a single vertical stroke. See the graph-type analysis of the RuneS project: https://www.runesdb.de/graphtype/148. The form with the cross-shaped twigs is similar to the **y**-rune on the Thames *scramasax* (also known as the Seax of Beagnoth; Page 2006, 218) except that here the mainstaves have a more prominent curve. There is much more graph-type variation in *runica manuscripta*, see Van Renterghem (2018, 59, 82, 94 f., 101, 166, 232, 350–76), although even there the x-shaped twigs are unparalleled.

[8] Another possibility is to read the central bind-rune as the kind of visual-linguistic puzzle known as a rebus: the sequence of **e** + **þ** (concealed in the graphic sign in multiple possible ways), phonetically [eð], spells out the name of the Roman alphabet grapheme *eth* ⟨ð⟩; thus, the runic sequence is meant to be read as *Etheldryth*. Such coded substitution of a bind-rune for Roman *eth* ⟨ð⟩ would constitute a playful form of biscriptality unparalleled in the runic corpus and showing off knowledge of both runic and Roman scripts. Parallels for this spelling come from Okasha (2011), where the second name element *-þryth* is spelled with an initial *eth* ⟨ð⟩ in her list of spelling variants.

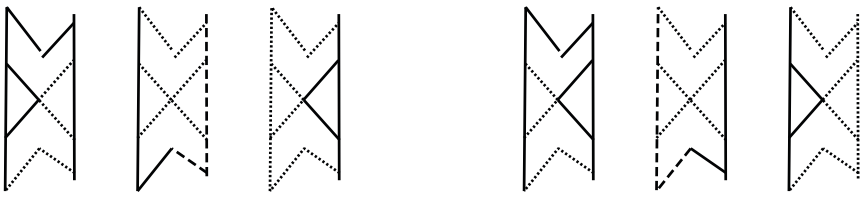

Fig. 3. Possible combinations of spelling *eþelþ-* counterclockwise (left) and clockwise (right)

of these presents no obvious reading. We argue that the bind-rune represents not only a *thorn* but also a repetition of the first name element *eþel-*. In this reading, character no. 4 combines several different types of bind-runes of MacLeod's classification (2002, 17) in a particular order: initially, there is ᛗ **e** + ᚦ **þ**, a unilateral bind; then an upside-down ᛗ **e** + an upside-down ᛚ **ı**, which is a "reversed invisible fully-contained" bind; and lastly, a ᚦ **þ** added to the left-hand stave of ᛗ **e**, which is a "reverse-read unilateral" bind. This complex bind-rune can be read either clockwise, starting from the left stave, or counterclockwise, starting from the right. *Eþelþ-*, together with the subsequent three (individual) runic characters *-ryþ*, spells out the full name: *Eþelþryþ* (see fig. 3).

The entire sequence should then be interpreted as the noun phrase *eþele Eþelþryþ* 'noble/holy Eþelþryþ'. In this case, the reading of the complex bind-rune would start with an **e** (right side up) as the adjectival ending *-e*, followed clockwise by a second **e** (upside down) as the initial vowel of the name. This way, the bind-rune would end with a left-facing **þ**, the initial consonant of the second name-element. The entire dry-point inscription would then read **eþe͡l[eeþelþ]ryþ**.

As Okasha has noted, *Æþel-*[9] was a

> common first name-element in female names [...]. If meaning had been a factor in the choice of a personal name, this might have suggested that the parents were, or would like to have been, of high status. Alternatively, the relatively large number of Æþel- names might reflect the fact that most of the recorded female names under discussion were in fact held by elite women of high social standing (Okasha 2011, 115).

[9] The name-element is ultimately derived from either the adjective *æþele* 'noble' or the feminine/neuter noun *æþelu* 'nobility' (Okasha 2011, 77).

The initial *e-* in the name stands out as a dialectal variant of the more typical spelling, *Æþelþryþ*. Judging from attested Roman alphabet spellings, the first name-element *Eþel-* would be considered a later Kentish or Mercian spelling.[10] However, several ninth-century runic epigraphic examples from the north of England attest to the *Eþel-* spelling in the Anglian dialectal region.[11] Admittedly, character no. 4 could spell the adjective *æþele* with initial *æ-*. The sequence 'noble/holy Eþelþryþ' ultimately lends itself to several spelling possibilities, so that it is impossible to assign a specific dialectal region to it. However, if we were to establish a tentative spelling of the adjective *æþele*, it would most likely mirror the name-element's spelling with initial *e-*: *eþele*.

Lastly, in addition to ᚦ **þ** (spelling the name: **eþe͡l þ ryþ**) or spelling the name with an adjectival premodifier (**eþe͡l[e eþelþ]ryþ**), character no. 4 could also function as an independent cryptogram representing *eþele* (adj.) 'noble/holy'. The different possible reading directions of the cryptogram allow for a multiplication of runic *eþel*(*e*) which could have been intended as a semantic intensifier. It should be noted that bind-runes in the Old English runic corpus usually consist of two adjacent runes that share one mainstave; triple bind-runes are extremely rare,[12] and even more complex bind-runes would be unparalleled. We interpret character no. 4 as a complex visual sign that incorporates multiple bind-runes. This kind of visual play with letter forms is not alien to either Insular or Continental aesthetics, in particular in the context of gospel books with their decorative incipit pages. After all, a bind-rune is a graphic feature with a strong visual and aesthetic component, rather than a conventional linguistic sign, so it functions on multiple levels beyond simply conveying a word or name.

The runic dry-point sequence in its entirety might therefore mean 'noble/holy Eþelþryþ' (in Old English: *eþele Eþelþryþ*), intentionally and playfully stressing the excellent moral quality of the female who is named in the inscription.

[10] Personal communication with Stephen Pelle and Robert Getz from the *Dictionary of Old English*, 13 January 2025.

[11] The spelling with initial *e-* instead of the more common *æ-* is apparently frequently preserved on coins (Campbell 1959, § 203, n. 1), which could point to an epigraphic preference for spellings with initial *e*. This may be supported by the fact that a first name-element *Eþel-* occurs in the runic epigraphic corpus on the ninth-century Thornhill Stone I, spelling the (oblique case of the) masculine personal name *Eþelwini* (Waxenberger 2003, 941); on the same monument, a further example may be the now-incomplete [.]*þelbe* for *Eþelbert* (Page 1973, 144).

[12] The only occurrence of a triple bind-rune is on a copper alloy fragment from Billesley, Stratford-upon-Avon, see Portable Antiquities Scheme WAW-4CA072: https://finds.org.uk/database/artefacts/record/id/405373 (accessed 27 April 2025).

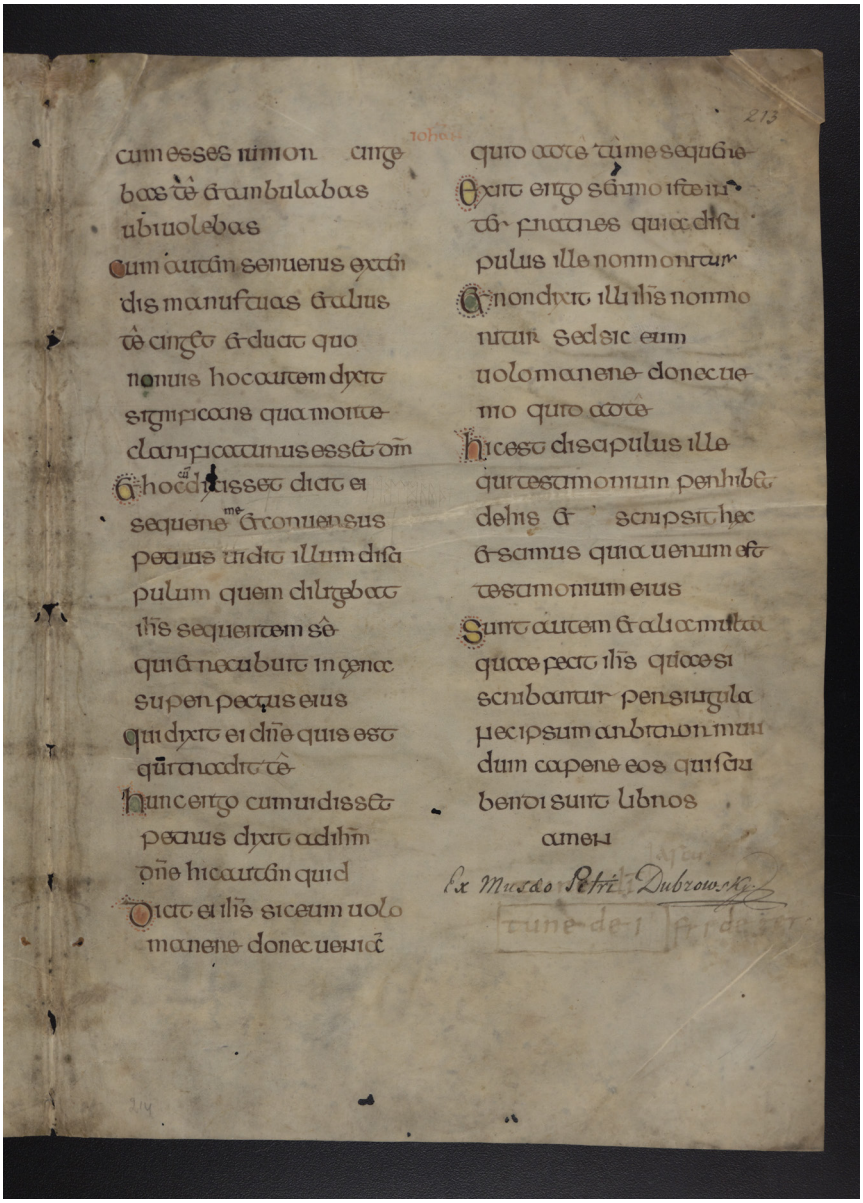

Fig. 4. Folio 213r of the St Petersburg Gospels. St Petersburg, National Library of Russia, MS Lat. F.v.I.8. Reproduced with kind permission of the National Library of Russia.

The text and its immediate visual context

The main inked text on fol. 213r (fig. 4) comprises the conclusion of the Gospel of John, from a few words into 21:18 through to the gospel's end. The Latin text is arranged in two orderly columns and written in Insular half-uncial script as mentioned in the "Introduction" above. The beginning of each verse and/or sentence is marked with a small, decorated initial that is surrounded by ornamental dots and colored red, green or yellow. The top of the page identifies the gospel with the abbreviated name *Iohan* in red ink. Below the shorter, right-hand column of text, following the conclusion of the gospel, is another brief inked text in a later hand: *Ex Museo Petri Dubrowsky*, 'from the collection of Peter Dubrovsky'. This signature also appears on several other folios in the manuscript (see the discussion above regarding the manuscript's provenance). Here, Dubrovsky's signature is written on top of what appears to be a Roman alphabet text in a minuscule script, written in a lighter ink. This under-text is very difficult to make out. Both Dobiaš-Roždestvenskaja and Bakhtine (1991, 60) and Kilpiö and Kahlas-Tarkka (2001, 43) read it as *Ƒascu … ta in Dei*. Below this is another line of minuscule Roman alphabet writing, also in light ink. The first letters of this second, lower line are enclosed in a box and read *tunedei*, perhaps to be understood as the question *tune dei*, 'Are you of God?' Following these boxed letters is another group of letters, probably a name that begins with *Fride-*, perhaps followed by three further letters which Dobiaš-Roždestvenskaja and Bakhtine (1991, 60) and Kilpiö and Kahlas-Tarkka (2001, 43) read as *ger*. If this last word is a name, *Frideger*, it may be the signature of a user of the manuscript. Dobiaš-Roždestvenskaja and Bakhtine (1991) offer no date for these texts in lighter ink; Kilpiö and Kahlas-Tarkka date them to the eleventh century (2001, 43). The high number of secondary (micro)texts added to fol. 213r suggests that this final page of the gospel text is a highly interactive page that inspired many users to assert their presence and mark their interactions (of various kinds) with the manuscript.

The dry-point runes themselves are located near the centre of the folio between lines 10 and 11 of the inked Latin gospel text, in between the two columns but closer to the left-hand one. The runes are scratched next to two lines that contain the end of John 21:19 and the beginning of 21:20: *hoc* [*cum*] *dixisset dicit ei / sequere* [*me*] *conuersus*, "When he had said this, he said to him, 'Follow me.' Turning, …". The words *cum* and *me* are missing from the original text and were added as interlinear corrections above the line.

The runes are accompanied by a total of five dry-point crosses, three very close to the runes and two farther away. Two of the crosses are of approximately the same height as the runic text and are placed at its beginning and end, with a third cross of around the same size placed above the central bind-rune, no. 4 (see fig. 2). A fourth, much larger cross is positioned below bind-rune no. 3 with an extended right arm that forms a line under characters 5, 6, and 7. A fifth dry-point cross with an extended right arm is located in the interlinear space between lines 10 and 11, close to the interlinear addition of the word *me*. Cross-signs at the beginning of runic inscriptions, presumably to signal the start of the text and perhaps to inspire the reader to make the sign of the cross (see e.g. Lenker 2010), are well-known in the epigraphic corpus;[13] and, as Studer-Joho (2017, 37) explains, cross-signs can also function as "marks" in runic dry-points. Crosses above and below an inscription are, however, unusual. The three cross-signs to the left, right, and above the runic sequence seem to form part of the name sequence; they are placed immediately next to the runes as if to frame the inscription and to draw attention to the cryptic bind-rune. The other two much larger and differently designed crosses may have been later additions. The dry-point crosses form part of the complex visual and paleographic landscape of the manuscript page: they ornament the gospel text and give special emphasis to the name. The aesthetics of the inscription, with its symmetrical crosses and balanced number of characters, reflect, in a greatly simplified form, the desire for ornament balanced by organized patterning – particularly patterns of the cross – that is recognizable, for example, in the famous carpet pages of the Lindisfarne Gospels.[14]

Two possible interpretations of the runic dry-point sequence

In the following discussion we demonstrate how the visual layout of the inscription and its relationship to other texts – the gospel text that shares the same manuscript page, comparable inscriptions in other manuscripts, and two works by Bede – point to two potential interpretations of the inscription's meaning and function:

[13] Examples include the Great Urswick stone, the Hackness cross, the Mortain casket, the Lancashire ring, the East Ord cross, and all three rune-inscribed Thornhill stones.

[14] On the early medieval ideal of order and balance in art and the transmission of this aesthetic from antiquity, see Harris (2016, 9 f.).

1. As a personal name with a cryptic element in the form of the central complex character, the inscription could be the signature of a scribe, corrector, or user of the manuscript.
2. Alternatively, the name *Eþelþryþ* may be a reference to the well-known Anglo-Saxon saint Æthelthryth, whose cult flourished for several centuries at monastic centres in England.

A runic dry-point signature

When read as a single personal name, the most straightforward possible function of the runic inscription is that of a signature. Khlevov (2001) offers one version of this argument (see above). We argue more specifically that given the position of the runes on the folio, the signature is likely that of the text's corrector. The two inked lines next to the inscription contain the only scribal corrections to this folio,[15] the last in a series of similar corrections in the same Insular minuscule hand that is found throughout the manuscript. Dobiaš-Roždestvenskaja and Bakhtine date them to the ninth or tenth century (1991, 60), the period of many *runica manuscripta*; this dating makes it likely that the same person wrote both the corrections and the dry-point runes.

As a signature, whether of scribe or corrector, the name in this interpretation functions as a type of colophon, i.e. a brief note at the end of a text or manuscript that identifies a figure associated with the manuscript's production, typically the scribe, and/or requests prayers for that person or gives thanks to God. Colophons in early medieval England served different societal purposes, as Gameson (2002) has shown: they were intended "to immortalise and gain spiritual benefits" for the scribe or "to preserve the hopes, prayers and (if applicable) names of people" (p. 10). They also often functioned as perlocutionary speech acts that prompted the reader to act, for instance, by praying for the person named (p. 32). As discussed above, the crosses surrounding the *Eþelþryþ* dry-point could have signalled readers to pray for her. Gameson also points out that some colophons were designed like codes,[16] employed to visually

[15] These are the words *cum* and *me* as interlinear insertions written in Insular minuscule (not in the half uncial of the main text).

[16] For example, vowels can be replaced by dots or by neighbouring consonants (on bfk or cgl and dotted codes, see Nievergelt 2009, 13–15). Gameson (2002, 26) names the following examples: CCC 236; TCC B. 3. 25; Copenhagen, KB, GKS 2023 (4°); BL, Cotton Titus D xxcii;

and conceptually distinguish the colophon from the rest of the text.[17] We argue it is especially the enigmatic and playful quality of the runic dry-point that connects it to the form and function of colophons.[18]

Several surviving runic signatures in the corpus of Insular and early medieval Continental manuscripts offer parallels to the visual and linguistic complexity and playfulness of our inscription (cf. esp. Birkett 2023). One such example is the cover of Kassel, Universitätsbibliothek, 2° Ms. theol. 65, containing a scratched single name repeated three times: **iosewʒ** / **i iosi ⟨?⟩** / **iosewʒ**, which Derolez (1954, 414) reads as the name *Iosepi*, following Lehmann (1918, 16). The scratching, rather than inking, of the name three times in runes resembles the dry-point and the repetitive pattern in the *Eþelþryþ* sequence, in which, as argued above, *eþel*, repeated two or more times, is embedded in a visually and conceptually complex bind-rune.

Another example, St Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 127, contains on fol. 379, at the end of the comment by St Jerome on the Gospel of Matthew, the inked runic sequence **ræd**ᚷᛝ**u**.[19] The runes, twice as large as the Roman script letters, are placed exactly in the middle of the page and framed by two dots marking the beginning and the end of the sequence. The runes are clearly Old English.[20] Derolez (1954, 411 f.) reads them as the name *Ratgar*, a scribal signature, speculating that the scribe intentionally made his name hard to read by using two different runes for the sound [r] and two different runes for the sound [ɑ]. Similar coded runes are also found in other Continental manuscripts,[21] paralleling the *Eþelþryþ* inscription in encoding certain characters and challenging the reader to work out which name is truly intended.

Finally, Bibliothèque municipale de Valenciennes, Ms. 59 (52), fol. 181v, features the runic name **ɑgambertus**.[22] The runes are incorporated into a visually and linguistically complex code which includes Greek letters

BL, Cotton Vitellius E xviii; Reims, BM, 9. One of his examples, Valenciennes, BM, 59, is "a particularly complex, encrypted colophon" (p. 26, n. 108).

[17] Striking examples of visual colophons are the decorated incipits of Vatican Library, Reg. lat.12, fol. 21r, and London, British Library, Arundel 155, fol. 133r (Gameson 2002, 26 f.).

[18] See Derolez (1954) for English and Nievergelt (2009) for Old High German dry-point glosses in runes.

[19] https://e-codices.unifr.ch/en/csg/0127/379 (accessed 27 April 2025).

[20] The third rune is the small **d**-allograph; the fourth and fifth runes represent two different **g**-runes from the Old English rune-row, *giefu* and *gar*.

[21] Derolez (1954, 411–412) mentions as examples St Gall, MS 270; Leyden MS Voss. Lat. 12 δ; and Vienna MS 1761.

[22] https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8452674f/f364.item (accessed 27 April 2025).

and is preceded by a Roman-letter box monogram, i.e. a combination of the individual letters of a name into one single symbol (Derolez 1954, 406–8; Nievergelt 2009, 15; Garipzanov 2018, 260). This design bears some resemblance to the five-cross scheme that accompanies the *Eþelþryþ* sequence as well as to the visual play of its complex bind-rune.

Aside from these scribal signatures, there is also the well-known example of Cynewulf's authorial runic signature, integrated into the epilogues of four Old English poems: *Juliana* and *Elene* in the Exeter Book (Exeter Cathedral Library MS 3501) and *Christ II* and *Fates of the Apostles* in the Vercelli Book (Vercelli, Biblioteca Capitolare CXVII). Several scholars (esp. Niles 2006, chap. 8; Symons 2016; Birkett 2024) have highlighted the complex ways in which we should read the runes that spell the name *Cyn*(*e*)*wulf* in these four poems. All four runic signatures are unique and must be decoded differently by the reader in each poem. The individual runes, when taken in isolation, spell the letters contained in the name *Cyn*(*e*)*wulf*. Integrated into the alliterative lines of verse, however, each of the runes also stands for the name of the runic character or for a noun that begins with the same sound as the rune. The use of runes to set up a double-layered enigma – each representing both sound and word or concept – that the reader must solve in order to understand the intended name parallels the enigma of the *Eþelþryþ* inscription with its cryptic central bind-rune that encodes both the sound [θ] and a repetition of the first name theme as a premodifying adjective.

To sum up, all the aforementioned examples of runic names in manuscripts command the reader's attention and require the reader to pause and puzzle over their interpretation; in this way they invite *ruminatio*, a common practice among monastic readers (cf. Leclercq 1982, 15 f.). In the inscription in the St Petersburg Insular Gospels, the crosses centre the reader's attention and concentration on Eþelþryþ's name and therefore on her person. Further, the runic signatures discussed above also function as a way to show off the author's or scribe's intellect in commanding a script different from the Roman one. The *Eþelþryþ* runes, too, could be read as a demonstration of the scribe's knowledge and cleverness. From another perspective, the use of runes to sign a recognizably Old English name to a Latin text written in Roman script could be read as a cultural claim. If Eþelþryþ had lived on the Continent, she might have chosen to write her name in Old English runes in order to establish a connection to

her native country and culture.[23] If she was writing in England, the use of runes might have represented a localizing claim on the Latin gospel, an attempt at anglicizing the Christian text and message.

There are reasons, however, to doubt that this runic sequence is a scribal signature. In Gameson's corpus of early medieval English colophons, which comprises about 40 examples,[24] only Bodleian MS 451 (Nunnaminster, 12th cent.) contains a colophon by a female scribe,[25] which suggests that the percentage of female scribes who recorded their names was extremely low. This would make *Eþelþryþ* an extremely rare example in the corpus of scribal signatures. At the same time, Studer-Joho in his catalogue of dry-point glosses in Roman and runic script lists only four examples of signatures, including the *Eþelþryþ* inscription (2017, 38 f.), suggesting that most surviving English dry-point inscriptions are in fact glosses rather than signatures.

A runic commentary

Certain visual and material aspects of the runic *Eþelþryþ* sequence suggest that it may be better understood not as a signature but rather as a gloss or commentary on the text it accompanies. As noted above, dry-point is an uncommon medium for scribal signatures. It makes practical sense for most scribes to sign their names in ink for the sake of greater visibility; the *Eþelþryþ* inscription, scratched in dry-point, is less immediately visible to the reader. The eye does not instantly catch the runic sequence scratched on the manuscript page; it only appears under the right light conditions, adding a revelatory quality to its discovery. There are several reasons why a scribe might choose dry-point over ink. Dry-point could be indicative of spontaneity, meaning that a user could inscribe the inscription with a sharp instrument on the spot; or it could signal a hierarchy of texts (main text vs. commentary); or an effort "to preserve the neatness of the costly MSS" (Studer-Joho 2017, 30). The runes are scratched in very close proximity to the inked gospel text but they are not what Symons calls "textual runes", runes that are "incorporated into the main body" of the

[23] The Old English noun *eðel* (m./n.) means 'homeland'. It is also the name of the Old English œ-rune ᛟ which is sometimes used to abbreviate the word (e.g., in the *Beowulf* manuscript). In the present inscription, however, we read *eðel* as an adjective.

[24] Gameson's corpus of c. 40 manuscripts containing colophons (2002, 11) represents about 5% of the total number of manuscripts produced before the early twelfth century.

[25] The Latin colophon on fol. 119v reads "Salua et incolomis maneat per secula scriptrix" (Gameson 2002, 17).

text or that form "a necessary element of the composition in which they occur" (Symons 2016, 27), like the Cynewulfian signatures or the runes that appear in the Exeter Book riddles. Standing apart from the main text, the inscription appears more like a commentary.

The dry-point sequence bears a striking resemblance to a lesser-known corpus of early medieval runic glosses from the Continent: runic dry-point glosses from the late eighth or early ninth century which use Old English runes to record Old High German text. Nievergelt (2009, 71) emphasizes that, in general, dry-point glosses in runes are extremely rare in Old High German manuscripts. St Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek 11 is the only instance where runic dry-point inscriptions function as glosses on the main Latin biblical text.[26] By contrast, St Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek 185 and 225 represent a more unusual type of runic glossing, with the glosses referring to an entire paragraph instead of a single word or phrase (Nievergelt 2009, 61–65, 57 f.).

One aspect of the Old High German dry-point corpus that makes it a particularly good parallel to the *Eþelþryþ* inscription is the frequent use of bind-runes. Nievergelt (2009, 49) believes the bind-runes are not phonetically motivated but rather an economical form of writing. An example of bind-rune usage is the gloss to St Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek 185: in the lower margin of page 113, above the Latin text attributed to Prospero Aquitano, *Liber de promissionibus et praedicationibus dei*, II, 39, chap. 21, Old English runes spell **uuinegcarat** (Nievergelt 2009, 60). Nievergelt (pp. 61–63) interprets this runic sequence as either an unattested personal name or a textual gloss in the form of an Old High German compound noun. Runes 3–6 (**i**, **n**, **e**, **g**) form a quadruple bind-rune; the middle rune is the star-rune ᚼ (no. 12 in the futhorc), a visual representation of a cross-sign. Another example of Continental dry-point bind-runes is found in St Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek 188: p. 77 bears a marginal runic gloss at the

[26] Four runic glosses in dry-point are found in St Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek 11, presumably all by the same scribe (Nievergelt 2009, 46). All four glosses can be dated to the late eighth or early ninth century (Nievergelt 2009, 51). The Old English runes on p. 55, line 3, transliterate as **þuuuisurunga**, probably for OHG *d(u)wisurunga*, *dwisarunga* 'anger', glossing Lat. *animositatem* in Hebrews 11:27 (Nievergelt 2009, 34–38). The Old English runes on p. 144, line 16, are written as an interlinear gloss above the Latin word *allegoriam* in Galatians 4:22–24 (Nievergelt 2009, 38–40). They spell **keruni** for OHG *keruni* 'secret' (Nievergelt 2009, 40). Page 249, line 16 (Nievergelt 2009, 40 f.), contains an interlinear gloss above Latin at *testinauit* in Jesus Sirah 17,20. The runes transliterate as **entikesitot** for OHG *enti kesitot* 'and (he) appointed' (Nievergelt 2009, 41). Finally, on p. 532, line 12, a runic interlinear gloss is found above Latin *prodigia* in Acts 7:36 (Nievergelt 2009: 41–43). Runic **rabouhhan** probably stands for OHG (*for?*)*rabouhhan* 'sign of wonder' (Nievergelt 2009, 43).

bottom of the page, before the beginning of the homily of Maximus Taurinensis 114 (Nievergelt 2009, 66). The Old English runes transliterate as **ecæw**; they probably spell out Old High German or Old English and refer to the entire homiletic passage (Nievergelt 2009, 68). In summary, it is striking to find several early medieval Continental examples of Old English runes scratched in dry-point that gloss not only single Latin words but refer to entire paragraphs of Biblical texts, just as the *Eþelþryþ* inscription may do (as argued below). Furthermore, bind-runes seem to be rather common in these Continental dry-point glosses.

A very different example of a gloss-like runic dry-point is found later, in the tenth-century Exeter Book. This manuscript contains various instances in which runes written in ink "playfully misdirect and challenge the reader, representing several different forms of sophisticated wordplay" (Birkett 2023, 224; see also Symons 2016). For example, the runes integrated into the alliterative verses of Riddle 24 form an anagram: in order to arrive at the riddle's solution, the runes must be re-arranged (Birkett 2023, 226). A so-far overlooked runic dry-point sequence has recently been discussed by Birkett: **bunrþ** scratched into the margin of Riddle 64 (fol. 125r). Although the runes defy interpretation,[27] Birkett (2023, 223) stresses the possibility that "the perpetrator of the dry-point may have been fully conversant in the script, and attempting an ingenious wordplay of their own, perhaps using a cipher or means of morphological concealment similar to those used in the riddles". Here as well, it is not the runes written in ink but those scratched onto the parchment that playfully and cryptically encode a message, much like the *Eþelþryþ* inscription.

Identifying Eþelþryþ

The pertinent question is: who was the woman referenced on fol. 213r of the St Petersburg Insular Gospels? As Okasha (2011, 111 f.) notes, the Old English female name *Eþelþryþ*/*Æþelþryþ*

> occur[s] in many unconnected sources of different dates, from Bede to the ninth-century Anglo-Saxon Chronicle dealing with post-Bedan material, to DB [Domesday Book]. We can suggest that such names [as *Eþelþryþ*] appear to have remained popular over several centuries of the Anglo-Saxon period.

[27] Page suggested in a private conversation to Williamson that the dry-point might be an abbreviation of *beo unreþe* 'be merciful', which Williamson understood as a reader's exasperated response to "the absurd difficulty of the runic riddle" (1977, 327, n. 62).

Eþelþryþ is attested in many orthographic variants (Okasha 2011, 23 f., 62, 64 f.). A spelling with initial *e* may indicate Anglian provenance, as recorded, for example, in the ninth-century Durham *Liber vitae* (Insley 2015, 444, 446) and in the Old English epigraphic runic corpus. However, the spelling with initial *e* is more common in West Mercian and Kentish sources after the eleventh century (see footnote 9). If the inscription represents a signature, then, *Eþelþryþ* could refer to a number of historical women.[28]

If the name functions as a commentary or gloss rather than a signature, then one likely candidate is St Æthelthryth (also known as St Etheldreda or St Audrey) of Ely (c. 636–679), a Northumbrian queen and abbess who became a well-known and much beloved saint from the time of her death in the late seventh century into the later Middle Ages. According to Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis anglorum*, from which all later sources on Æthelthryth are ultimately derived (Blanton 2007, 4), Æthelthryth was a royal woman of East Anglia, the daughter of King Anna. She had two marriages, the second to King Ecgfrith of Northumbria, whom she left after twelve years (assisted by Wilfrid of York, c. 633–709/710) to become a nun at Coldingham, and eventually abbess at Ely, where she oversaw construction of the new monastery and ruled for seven years. When her body was later found to be incorrupt with a neck wound posthumously healed, a cult immediately formed around her and her relics at Ely: Bede

[28] *Eþelþryþ* is attested in various Northumbrian sources, see Okasha (2011) and *Prosopography of Anglo-Saxon England* (*PASE*). In the Durham *Liber vitae*, *Eðilðryth* is written three times (fol. 16v (36) (38) (47)), and *Edildryð* (fol. 17r (28)) and *Ætheldrihtha* (fol. 46r (27)) once (London, British Library, MS Cotton Domitian A vii; 9th cent., probably Lindisfarne). In Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* (II, 14; IV, 19) we find OE *Æðelfrið* (possibly a spelling error) and Lat. *Aedilthryd* as well as OE *Æðeldryð* and Lat. *Aedilthrydam* (acc.), referring to the daughter of King Edwin II of Northumbria, d. after 627 (*PASE* s.v. Æthelthryth 1). In Aelfric's *Life of Saints*, St Æthelthryth is referred to in three chapters (XX, l. 2: *Æðeldryþðe*, OE (dat.); XX, l. 8: *Æðeldryð*; XXXII, l. 262: *Æþeldryð*). In the Latin *Liber Eliensis* (Trinity College, Cambridge MS O.2.1; 12th cent.) the Latin name *Ætheldretha* is recorded at least twice (I, 2; I, 3); according to *PASE* (s.v. Æthelthryth 2), it also refers to the seventh-century saint (d. 679), the abbess of Ely. Non-Northumbrian sources record other historical persons with the same name, for example, Æþeldryð, a seventh-century abbess (*PASE* s.v. Æthelthryth 3) in the *Cartularium Saxonicum* 91; Æðelðryð, the eighth-century queen of King Æthelstan I of the South Saxons (*PASE* s.v. Æthelthryth 4) in the *Cartularium Saxonicum* 132; Ælfric's *Vita Æthelwoldi* (2, 17, 22) contains the name of a tenth-century abbess of Nunnaminster (*PASE* s.v. Æthelthryth 7); other historical records refer to an eighth-century Anglo-Saxon queen (Alcuin, *Epistle* 259; *English Historical Documents c. 500–1042*, ed. Whitelock; cf. *PASE* s.v. Æthelthryth 5), to the ninth-century wife of a man called *Æthelwulf* (*PASE* s.v. Æthelthryth 6), and to a tenth-century nun at Winchester (*PASE* s.v. Æthelthryth 8).

reports that the linens and coffin in which she was originally buried drove out devils and cured blindness (*Ecclesiastical History*, iv.19, 390–97). Her cult spread throughout Northumbria, East Anglia, and even to centres in the south, including Glastonbury, Winchester and Canterbury (Blanton 2007, 21). In particular, she was an important figure for the tenth-century reform movement in England, as evidenced by Ælfric including her in his *Lives of Saints*. Blanton argues that Æthelthryth was "the perfect symbol of chaste monasticism" for the tenth-century reformers, as she offered a model for giving up an elite lifestyle, a renunciation that the reformers hoped to promote among contemporary elites (p. 13). Æthelthryth remained a popular saint in England under the Normans and indeed up until the time of the Reformation (pp. 6 f.).

On first examination, there seems to be little in this woman's life and legend that would connect her to the conclusion of the Gospel of John. However, Bede's homily on the ending of the gospel and his characterization of Æthelthryth in his *Historia ecclesiastica* suggest that readers of John's Gospel might have recognized a thematic link between John and Æthelthryth in the two figures' shared commitment to virginity. Consequently, the inscription of Eþelþryþ's name on Lat. F.v.I.8, fol. 213r, could be interpreted as an "active appropriation" of her example to offer "inspiration to a particular audience on a specific theme" (Palmer 2018, 30), here answering the call of devotion through virginity.

In his homily on the conclusion of the Gospel of John (Homily 1.9, on John 21:19–24, for the feast of St John the Evangelist), Bede focuses not on the narrative in the text but instead on its author, John, whom he understands to be both the author of the gospel and the apostle of the same name. In the homily, Bede is complimentary about John's writing but reserves his greatest praise for John's virginity: Bede claims that John was special to Jesus because he remained a virgin all his life,[29] and further, that Jesus entrusted his mother Mary to John's care *ut virginem virgo servaret* (*Homeliarum*, 62, l. 66), "so that virgin might watch over virgin" (*Homilies*, 87). In the homily's conclusion, Bede in fact ties John's rhetorical accomplishments to his virginity: *Et hoc virgini privilegium recte*

[29] *Diligebat autem eum Jesus non exceptis caeteris singulariter solum, sed prae caeteris quos diligebat familiarius unum, quem specialis praerogativa castitatis ampliori dilectione fecerat dignum* (*Homeliarum*, 61, l. 55–58), "Jesus did not love him alone in a singular way to the exclusion of the others, but he loved [John] beyond those whom he loved, in a more intimate way as one whom the special prerogative of chastity had made worthy of fuller love" (*Homilies*, 87).

servabatur, ut ad scrutanda verbi incorruptibilis sacramenta incorrupto ipse non solum corde, sed et corpore proderet (*Homeliarum*, 66 f., l. 247–49), "And this privilege [of recording Christ's life] was properly kept for a virgin, so that he might put forth for consideration the mysteries of the incorruptible Word, having not only an incorrupt heart, but an incorrupt body" (*Homilies*, 94). Coming from a writer who cared greatly about the craft of writing itself, as Bede demonstrates in the *Historia ecclesiastica* and elsewhere, this is significant praise both for John and for the concept of virginity.

Bede's version of the life of Æthelthryth in book IV, chapters 19 and 20 of his *Historia ecclesiastica* similarly positions her commitment to virginity as her most praiseworthy accomplishment. After giving an account of the events of her life (as outlined above), Bede inserts into his text an original poem which he composed *in laudem ac praeconium eiusdem reginae ac sponsae Christi*, "in honour of this queen and bride of Christ" (*Ecclesiastical History*, iv.20, 396 f.), that is, in honour of Æthelthryth. Given this dedication, the poem is often referred to as Bede's "Hymn for Æthelthryth", but is in fact a hymn more generally in praise of virginity itself, of which Æthelthryth is a recent example: Bede identifies his poem's main subject as virginity when he introduces it as a *hymnum uirginitatis*, "hymn on the subject of virginity" (*Ecclesiastical History*, iv.20, 396 f.). In the poem, Bede presents Æthelthryth as a contemporary, Anglo-Saxon version of the great female virgin saints of the Roman world, Agatha, Eulalia, Thecla, Euphemia, Agnes, and Cecily, all of whom Bede describes as brave in the face of their various tortures. Æthelthryth's life and death, while less dramatic than those of the women to whom Bede compares her, are presented as equally praiseworthy because of her equally-preserved virginity, maintained even through two marriages. As further evidence of her enduring purity, both metaphysical and physical, Bede devotes several lines to her incorrupt body and the healing powers of her relics (*Ecclesiastical History*, iv.20, 398 f.). In short, Bede characterises Æthelthryth as foremost among virgin saints because she succeeds at and offers a model for enacting the virtue of chastity within Bede's own time and place (Blanton 2007, 12 f.). There is a clear similarity in the way Bede paints Æthelthryth as an exemplary virgin Christian woman/abbess and the way he paints John as an exemplary virgin Christian man/writer: Bede holds up both figures as models of chastity that an Anglo-Saxon monk or nun might aspire to imitate. Any monastic reader of the eighth century and onwards, informed by Bede's writings and cognizant of Æthelthryth's

cult, was most likely aware of her renowned virginity and could perceive an implied connection or parallel to John.[30]

Conclusion

This article has argued that the central character in the sequence of seven dry-point runes on fol. 213r in the St Petersburg Insular Gospels should be understood as a complex bind-rune that allows us to read the inscription as both the name *Eþelþryþ* and the phrase *eþele Eþelþryþ* 'noble/holy Eþelþryþ'. The article explored the possibilities of this Old English female name being either a scribal signature or a commentary on the nearby gospel text. As the name appears on the folio near the final two of a series of corrections to the main text, the most straightforward interpretation of the inscription is as a scribal signature, more particularly that of an emender. Yet in the larger context in which it appears on the folio, preceded by the adjective 'noble/holy', the female name is perhaps a reference to Saint Æthelthryth of Ely. *Eþele Eþelþryþ* might be understood not only as an invocation of the saint but also as an exemplum for those reading the Gospel of John in this particular manuscript, recalling the importance of the early English saint as a figure of the Christian virtue of virginity, a form of devotion emphasized by Bede.

It has been argued in a different context that manuscript runes "undoubtedly require us to engage in a more participatory reading practice" (Birkett 2023, 234). The vernacular script triggers in the reader "an involved unpicking of meaning where the playful teases us towards enlightenment" (p. 235). The playful aspect of the runic *Eþelþryþ* sequence is rather obvious: the symmetrical layout of the seven runes, focusing attention

[30] Bede's writings, especially his *Ecclesiastical History*, were well-known both in England and on the Continent as evidenced by the wide circulation of manuscripts on the Continent (Westgard 2010). Beyond the thematic connection in Bede's writings between the two figures, there is a tantalizing suggestion of a calendrical link between Æthelthryth and the end of the Gospel of John. Notes on fol. 170r of the Burchard Gospels (Universität Würzburg M.p.th.f.68), a sixth-century Italian manuscript with lectionary notes added in seventh or eighth-century Northumbria (Lenker 1997, 394–96), suggest that the end of this gospel was read on the feast of Saints Peter and Paul on June 29 – just six days after the feast of St Æthelthryth on June 23. It is tempting, then, to imagine a scenario such as the following: a reader using the end of the Gospel of John in the St Petersburg Insular Gospels to prepare for the feast of Saints Peter and Paul might reflect on Bede's homily on that very text commemorating John's virginity and recall that Æthelthryth was similarly celebrated for virginity only six days earlier, and thus be prompted to scratch Æthelthryth's name beside the gospel text.

on the centre, cannot be coincidental. The complex character that forms the centre of the runic dry-point invites us to participate in a particular intellectual play: *eþel* can be deciphered in multiple ways, as a simple noun and name element (*eþel-* as in *Eþel-þryþ*) and as a homonymous adjective (*eþele Eþel-þryþ*). The *Eþelþryþ* runes play not only with form but also with sound: the bind-rune resists immediate vocalisation. While the runes preceding and following the bind-rune are clear (**eþe͡l** and **ryþ**), the onlooker must pause and reflect, contemplating the decipherment and the meaning of the fourth and central character which subsumes various runic signs in one complex bind-rune.

Further, the interplay between the runic and Roman scripts on a single folio shows some resemblance to other runic uses in manuscripts such as the Exeter Book riddles and the *Cyn*(*e*)*wulf* signatures. Playfulness and the employment of bind-runes are also characteristic of Continental dry-point runes. Given the possibility that the manuscript was held at a Continental library during the Middle Ages and the fact that many *runica manuscripta* were produced on the Continent (Birkett 2022, 215), it is likely that the Old English runes were in fact added to the manuscript on the Continent.

Finally, the runes must be interpreted in the context of the entire folio as one voice within a chorus of voices. The main text of the gospel forms the foundation, layered upon which are interlinear corrections, the colophonic text(s) at the end of the gospel, Dubrovsky's ownership claim, and the runes themselves. This diversity of texts, scripts, and scribal presence demonstrates different forms of interaction with and on the manuscript page. As this article has demonstrated, a full appreciation of the significance of any runic inscription requires consideration of not only its runological features but also of its visual, material, and cultural context.

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