Discussion:
A difficult runic inscription
from King's Somborne, Hampshire

1. On the interpretation of a challenging inscription from King's Somborne, Hampshire[1]

JOHN HINES AND ELISABETH OKASHA

Abstract

An Anglo-Saxon silver strap-end, found in 2019, is a common artefact-type but, unusually, this one also contains an inscribed runic text utilising the relatively common Old English maker formula 'N made this.' However one graph, obscured by deterioration on the surface of the metal, as well as by idiosyncrasies in the orthography, poses intriguing challenges to interpretation. We discuss various possibilities and alternative suggestions, and report on a technologically-aided attempt to uncover a crucial rune that is obscured by corrosion.

Keywords

There are perspectives from which the inscribed silver strap-end found at King's Somborne, just 2 km south of Stockbridge in Hampshire (Figs. 1–2) might be seen

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[1] This article is part of the following multi-authored discussion on the King's Somborne strap-end:
  1. John Hines & Elisabeth Okasha, "On the interpretation of a challenging inscription from King's Somborne, Hampshire."
  2. Gaby Waxenberger, Editor's note summarizing Alfred Bammesberger (2022), "Old English *gǽsil* in the runic inscription from King's Somborne," *Notes & Queries* 69, no. 3, 176-77.
  3. Gaby Waxenberger, "In response to Hines & Okasha, 'On the interpretation of a challenging inscription from King's Somborne, Hampshire.'"
  4. John Hines, "Afterword."

as a rather run-of-the-mill and unstartling find. Strap-ends (ornamental belt-terminals) of the 8th to 10th centuries AD are particularly numerous metal-detector finds: as of mid-October 2023, the number of records produced by a search on "Anglo-Saxon strap-end" in the Portable Antiquities Scheme database (The Portable Antiquities Scheme Website) is approaching 2,000. The inscription, presented and discussed below, represents the standard maker formula '*N* made this.' In terms of runography and onomastics, however, this specimen poses tantalizing challenges which are discussed in this joint article in the form of alternative suggestions concerning how we might decipher an otherwise unidentifiable and therefore almost certainly bungled or garbled personal name in the subject position, and the grammatical and lexical status of the object noun phrase referring to the artefact that the inscription is on. Archaeologically—and especially as an inscribed object—this new find adds to an emerging set of items that provide a new field of evidence for the understanding of runic literacy in southern England in the Middle Anglo-Saxon Period.
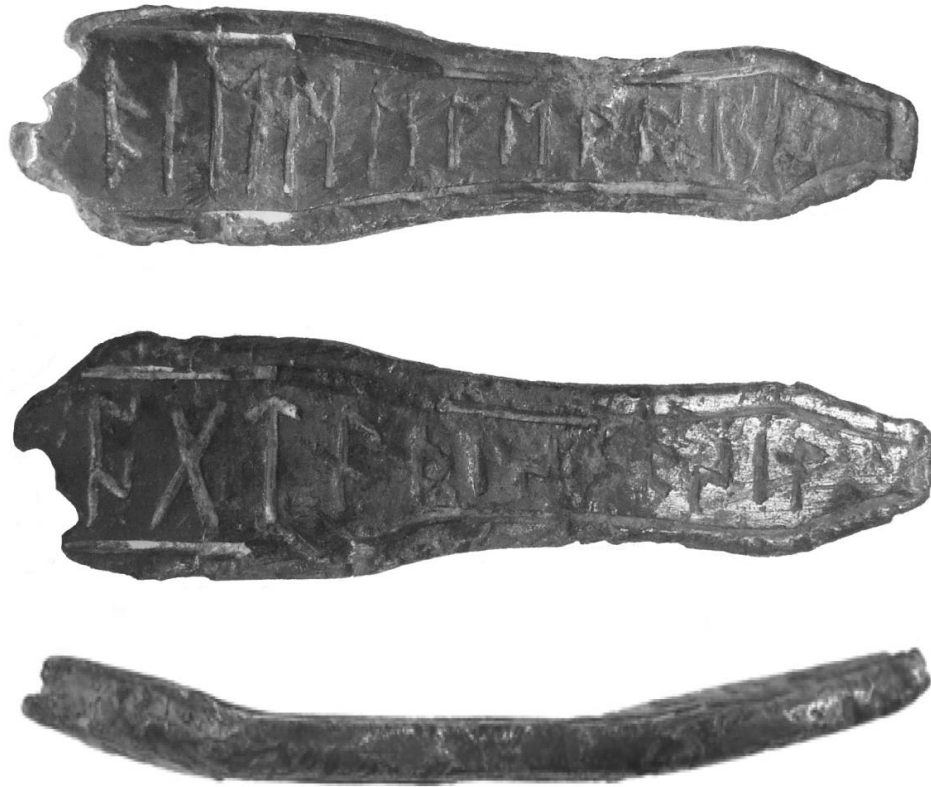
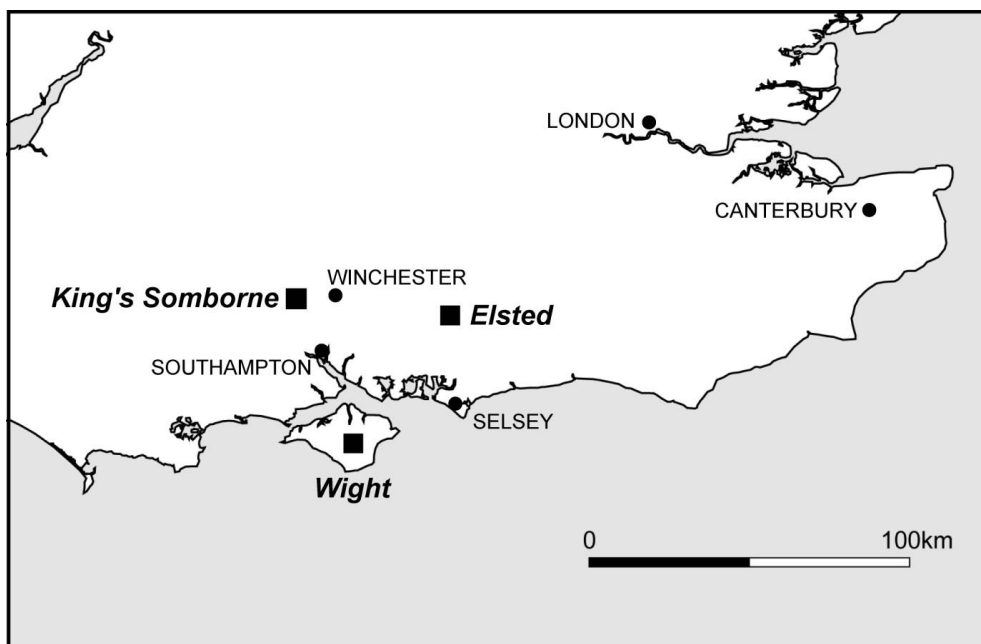Fig. 1   The King's Somborne strap-end. Photographed by John Hines.

Fig. 2   The find location with other sites referred to in the text and major sites of the Middle Anglo-Saxon Period. Drawn by John Hines.

1. A description of the find and discussion of the inscription

JOHN HINES

1.1 The artefact

The strap-end (Fig. 1) measures 41.2 x 10.5 mm and weighs 4.58 g. Preliminary alloy-composition analysis at Cardiff University indicates that the silver content of the item is in the range of 87.5–89% Ag, consistent with the fact to the eye it appears to be an artefact with a high silver content. There are also remains of niello, a black inlay produced primarily from silver, copper, and sulphur, in the incised framing lines on the face of the object. When found in January 2019 the object was correctly reported and delivered to the Finds Liaison Officer for Surrey and Hampshire, who logged it under the Portable Antiquities Scheme database number SUR-4A9C55. Its precious metal content means that it also falls under the provisions of the Treasure Act of 1996, where it has Treasure Case reference 2019T10. The present author was then invited to comment on the inscription, which identified a key question (explained more fully below) that detailed instrumental analysis might be hoped to resolve. It proved possible, as a result, to transfer the item temporarily from the British Museum to the care of the Department of Archaeology and Conservation at Cardiff University for such study in October 2019. After that work was successfully completed in January 2020, however, the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and its many restrictions meant that the strap-end had to remain securely stored in Cardiff until late August 2021. Under the provisions of the Treasure Act, the strap-end has now been acquired by Hampshire Cultural Trust. It is currently on display in Winchester.

While, as noted, strap-ends are very familiar Middle to Late Anglo-Saxon archaeological finds, and the runic inscription on this item immediately locates the object in that cultural and chronological milieu, in several important respects the King's Somborne strap-end is really quite unusual and even unique. The shape of the item, with the concave sides for much of its length and a blunt, wedge-shaped terminal, can only be paralleled in the most general terms by a very few specimens of his rare Classes F and G in the extensive illustrated corpus of strap-ends collected in a PhD thesis by Gabor Thomas in 2000 (Thomas 2000, figs. 3.0, 3.31 and 3.32).

It is also untypical for the object to carry no cast relief, incised, or punched ornamentation other than the runic lettering and the framing lines around those. There is a larger number of comparable plain strap-ends in Thomas's corpus than counterparts in respect of shape, but the only strap-ends that are typically plain are the extremely slender specimens of Class C, where the elegant shape itself is the artistic form of the metal belt-fitting. Meanwhile silver was only regularly used for Thomas's numerous Class A strap-ends, characteristically convex not concave in outline; the great majority of all other known specimens are made from copper alloys (Thomas 2000, 154–60).

What, however, can still be considered typical of the wide population of Middle to Late Anglo-Saxon strap-ends including the King's Somborne specimen are the size and proportions of the object, and the way in which it was made to be attached to some strap. The length:width ratio of c. 4:1 is more characteristic of Thomas's Class B (strap-ends with parallel-sided shafts and zoomorphic terminals) than of Class A (convex in shape and with zoomorphic terminals, and an average length:width ratio of 3:1). It was typical for the strap-ends to be attached by means of a grooved or split terminal at the broader end (opposite to the zoomorphic terminals referred to in the definitions just quoted) through which small rivets fastened the metal mount to the leather, hide, or textile strap. The attachment end of the King's Somborne strap-end is far from complete, and the remains of the rivet holes visible there clearly show that it was repaired at least once after breaking here. In its surviving form it is no longer usable, and this could, of course, explain how it came to be lost, only to be retrieved by a hobby metal-detectorist some thirteen-hundred years later. Deliberate or accidental decommissioning, however, is a feature which it shares with the two other rune-inscribed strap-ends known to date, from Elsted in West Sussex and an unknown site on the Isle of Wight (see Fig. 2; Hines 2019). The former carries what can be identified as a female name ending in -flæd, although the first element of that dithematic name can neither be read nor identified conjecturally, while the text on the Isle of Wight strap-end is much more obscure. In both of those cases, however, it looks as if the items were deliberately rendered non-functional through the removal of the attachment end, which may have been done to prepare the object for curation. It is entirely plausible that the King's Somborne strap-end had been kept in the same way.

From the second half of the 7th century onwards, silver was circulating increasingly widely and regularly in southern and eastern England in the form of coinage. The coins themselves ultimately had the value of the precious metal they contained, measurable in terms of fineness and weight, rather than being cash tokens as in the modern world. We can therefore explore the contemporary value, or even 'cost,' of the King's Somborne strap-end by reference to this material. The current coinage in the area in question consisted of the relatively small and thick *sceattas* (sg. *sceat,* although often 'sceatta' in recent and current literature) down to the 760s, when this coinage was widely superseded by 'pennies' which were broader and thinner in form and also reformed to conform to a higher weight standard. It is illuminating to examine the 4.58 g of the (not quite complete) strap-end (c. 4.05 g of pure silver) in terms of how many contemporary silver coins that would correspond to.

4.58 g divided by:	
3	1.527 g
4	1.145 g
5	0.916 g

One thing that is striking here is that these figures do not correlate persuasively with the standard weights of pennies: in the range mostly of c. 1.15–1.20 g in a 'light' phase from the 760s to the mid-790s or of 1.30–1.40 g in the subsequent 'heavier' phase (Naismith 2012, 168–80). The lower figures (divided by factors of 4 and 5 respectively) do, however, correspond rather tantalizingly with weight-ranges typical of *sceattas* of the Secondary Period (now dated c. AD 710 onwards: Gannon 2013, 112–36), the heavier ones of the 'early Secondary Period' (1.00–1.20 g), the lighter of the 'mid-' and 'late Secondary Periods' (c. 720 onwards: 0.90–1.00 g and 0.80–1.00 g respectively). The West Saxon shilling was counted as 5 *sceattas* or pence. It is, of course, utterly conjectural, although not absurdly unrealistic, to imagine that a craftsman took a group of silver coins corresponding to a defined value of this amount to melt down and cast to make the strap-end; he would also have known that it was about the correct amount for his purposes in terms of the size of object he intended to manufacture. If there is any validity in that comparison,

it would direct us to a date no later than the third quarter of the 8th century for the relevant coins to have been current (although naturally, obsolete coinage might be particularly suitable for such recycling). We must note, concurrently, that the high silver content of the strap-end is much more closely in line with that of the Primary and Intermediate series of *sceattas* (of the late 7th and early 8th century) than the Secondary types (Northover 1994), or of the earlier pennies from the 760s to c. AD 840 (Naismith 2012, 161–3). There is consequently no simple correspondence between the quantity and quality of metal in this strap-end and the forms of coinage circulating from the late 7th century to the early 9th. Nevertheless the comparison is still meaningful. Although we have little clear evidence for the exchange value of a shilling around this time in ordinary transactions, one clause in King Ine of Wessex's law-code (§55) that sets the value of a ewe with a new-born lamb at one shilling does add to relevant understanding of the object.

1.2 The inscription

There are rows of runes on both faces of the strap-end, most of which are clearly legible. The direction of the by-staves show that the runes run left-to-right from the attachment end to the narrower terminal of the strap-end. This involves some diminuendo in the height of the runes from start to finish. There initially appear to be 11 distinct graphs on what we shall label side A, which appears to be the start of the inscription, and 12 on side B. Just two runes are seriously obscured by corrosion of the object. These stand back-to-back on the two sides A and B.

An initial reading suggested after microscopic visual examination of the object is as follows:

Side A:	**æ i e *r* e l e *w* o r o**
	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12
Side B:	**o g t æ þ i s – æ s i l**

Italicized letters in the transliteration represent proposed rather than clear readings. The dash at side B position 8 (B.8) marks the place of one fully obscured rune.

To the naked eye, rune A:4, transliterated *r* above, appears to be an **m** rune. Under the microscope, however, it can be seen that there is no full length crossing

stave ascending from mid-left-hand upright stave to the top of its right-hand counterpart as there should be, while the descending stave from top left to lower right is cut through an S-shaped curve and continues as the lower part of the right-hand vertical stave in formally exactly the same manner as A.10 **r**. An upper continuation of the right-hand vertical stave has been deliberately cut in to take this stave to full height. What appears to be the right-hand section of the ascending crossing stave is in fact much less firmly cut than the definite segments of the rune, and so might not be part of the inscription at all. Identification as **r** therefore initially appeared more valid than **m**, even though that makes it difficult to explain the upwards continuation of the right-hand vertical stave. A bind-rune $\widehat{\textbf{ri}}$ is conceivable, but there are no other bind-runes in the inscription, and this is a very awkward combination to have inscribed in such a way.

The top of rune A:8 is hidden by corrosion products. What is visible clearly shows a single upright main stave with a right-angled pocket to the right. This could be either **þ** (as B:5) or **w** (as A:8). The difference between the two would be determined by whether or not the top of the pocket and the top of the main stave meet at the same point (**w**) or the main stave continues to rise beyond that junction. If A:8 is the same height as A:7 and A:9 then **w** appears likely here; there is, however, space within the frame line for the main stave to rise sufficiently to form a clear **þ**. The reading *w* is proposed here also because that would allow us to identify a familiar word in the text.

Rune A:11, **o**, is considerably abraded, incomplete and faint. Nonetheless, under the microscope the central part of an **o** rune formed in the same way as rune B:1 is quite satisfactorily to be seen.

The only problematic graph on Side B is B:8, which is all but totally obscured by corrosion. Under the microscope, what appears to be the very top and bottom of one or more staves can be seen.

Curious forms are the **s** runes at B:7 and B:10, which are reversed (back-to-front) from the usual way in which this rune is presented.

A plausible reading of the sequence thus proposed from A:8 to B:7, **woro/ogtæþis**, (where / marks the line break) is as normalized Old English *worhte þis*: 'made this.' The presence of the consonant **g** where **h** might be expected is not at all problematic, using a rune that can represent a voiced velar fricative for what

should have been an unvoiced velar fricative. The introduction of a so-called svarabhakti or parasite vowel **o** in the consonant cluster *rh* is genuinely common. The proposed reading here postulates that the parasite vowel was repeated at the start of side B from the end of side A, either to mark the continuation of the text or as an accidental dittography.

If the middle two words of the inscription mean 'made this' then we would expect a subject (in the nominative case) to precede **woro/ogtæ** and an object in the accusative case to follow it. As first transliterated, in the subject position we have the sequence **æierele**. *þis* is the accusative singular of the neuter form of the demonstrative article 'this' in Old English. If the invisible rune at B:8 is **n**, then **þisnæ** could be a precise spelling of standard Old English *þisne*, the masculine accusative singular of that article. **sil** is a possible spelling of a contracted form of the neuter noun that would normally be *sigel*, meaning a piece of jewellery and thus appropriate to a silver strap-end; however it is then a challenge to determine or even conjecture what might have preceded that root as a two-letter prefix ending in -*æ*. Although *sigel* has a feminine side-form *sigle*, there is no recorded instance of this noun having passed into a masculine declension (cf. Hines 2020, 82–5, for more on the complex history of this lexeme as a Latin loanword in the Germanic languages). The only known Old English noun to end in the sequence -*æsil*, later -*æsel*, is the word for 'hazel,' a masculine noun.

We would expect the opening of the inscription to have either a personal name, or possibly some form of title or other clear identifier of the maker of the artefact and its inscription. **æierele**, or indeed a conceivable **æiemele**, are not immediately identifiable with known names or nouns. Old English has no diphthongal sequence *æi*, and perhaps especially if the **g** rune is used for what should have been *h* in *worohtæ*, the most likely interpretation is that this sequence represents what would normally be *æg*, with a palatalized *g* that had become the semi-vowel [j]. *Agir* is in fact a recorded Germanic name-element, and probably represented in Old English by the one *Egera* who appears in the list of witnesses to a charter of King Ceadwalla of Wessex of the late 7th century (Förstemann 1900, cols. 41–2; Redin 1919, 95; S 233: this charter text is generally considered to be a 12th-century compilation of authentic earlier material). The final sequence **ele**, however, could only regularly

be explained as a diminutive in -*el* from -*il*, while the final -*e* rather than -*a* would suggest a feminine variant.

Fig. 3   How runic **h** might be written to appear as **æi**: a diagram. Drawn by the author.

That is one line of analysis which might yield a genuine name form here, but it is very contrived. An alternative, which may also seem extraordinary but cannot be overlooked, is provided by the fact that we have one securely attested although etymologically inexplicable and certainly not common Old English masculine name ending in -*emele*, *Hemele* (Redin 1919, 149; PASE, sn. HEMELE; cf. OHG *Hemilo*: Förstemann 1900, col. 744). An opening with initial vowels **æi** could not be reconciled with that, but the actual graphic forms of those runes side-by-side are practically identical with the double-barred **h** of the Old English *fuþorc*— albeit with the second vertical main stave to the right separated from the crossing by-staves (Fig. 3). It is abnormal to have an **æ** rune with the two by-staves around the middle of an upright main stave as appears to be the case at A:1 as initially read. At position B:4 we clearly have a 'correctly' formed **æ** with the upper by-stave joined to the top of the main stave (B:9 **æ** appears to be the same in form, but that is not entirely clear). It is possible, then, to conjecture that the inscription on the King's Somborne strap-end (or even just the spelling of this name) had been cut following an exemplar by someone with an imperfect understanding of the runic alphabet who produced two (near-)standard runes in the place of one. That is undoubtedly imaginative, but limited competency of such a kind may be evident in some of the other problems and peculiarities of the inscription. At what we shall still refer to as position A:4, this also implies that the suggested *r* was intended to be **m** after all, and the adaptations visible were undertaken to make the rune look like that to the naked eye. For these reasons, I propose that Hemele is the masculine personal name of the subject of the verb *worohtæ* in this inscription.

   To read the end of the inscription in full and so to establish what the object noun phrase to *worohtæ* is, we needed to find some way of removing or looking through the corrosion — hoping that the decay has not passed right through the

body of the strap-end and removed all the detail. As noted above, the demonstrative article in the accusative case could be either *þis* (neuter) or *þisnæ* (masculine), and from what can be seen from the surface the latter is possible, although the final **sil** can be considered more likely to represent a Latin loanword of neuter grammatical gender.

Professional cleaning of the object could have been an option to remove the corrosion and reveal the surface; however it is an intrusive process which removes material and might do so without achieving the desired result. The internal condition of the object, namely how deeply the corrosion lies, could be assessed non-intrusively by X-radiography, and indeed it could be hoped that that process might itself reveal the original graph through the corrosion and so yield the information desired to complete the reading. Fortunately, special permission was obtained for this analysis to be carried out in the Department of Archaeology and Conservation at Cardiff University.

The analytical studies were carried out to the highest curatorial standards by Madeline McLeod, an MSc Conservation student, under the supervision of Phil Parkes, Reader in Conservation, and in consultation with myself. It was discovered, happily, that the body of the strap-end is largely sound; nevertheless disentangling the obscured areas of the runic inscription was still far from easy. Ultimately, however, both Madeline McLeod and myself were fully satisfied that it can be determined that the obscured graph is **g** (see Fig. 4), and so the final word is a neuter noun *gæsil* — a noun that has not previously been recorded in Old English. In fact, once this reading has been made, it is indeed possible to construe the tiny fragments of the rune visible around and partly through the corrosion as the remains of a **g** rune.
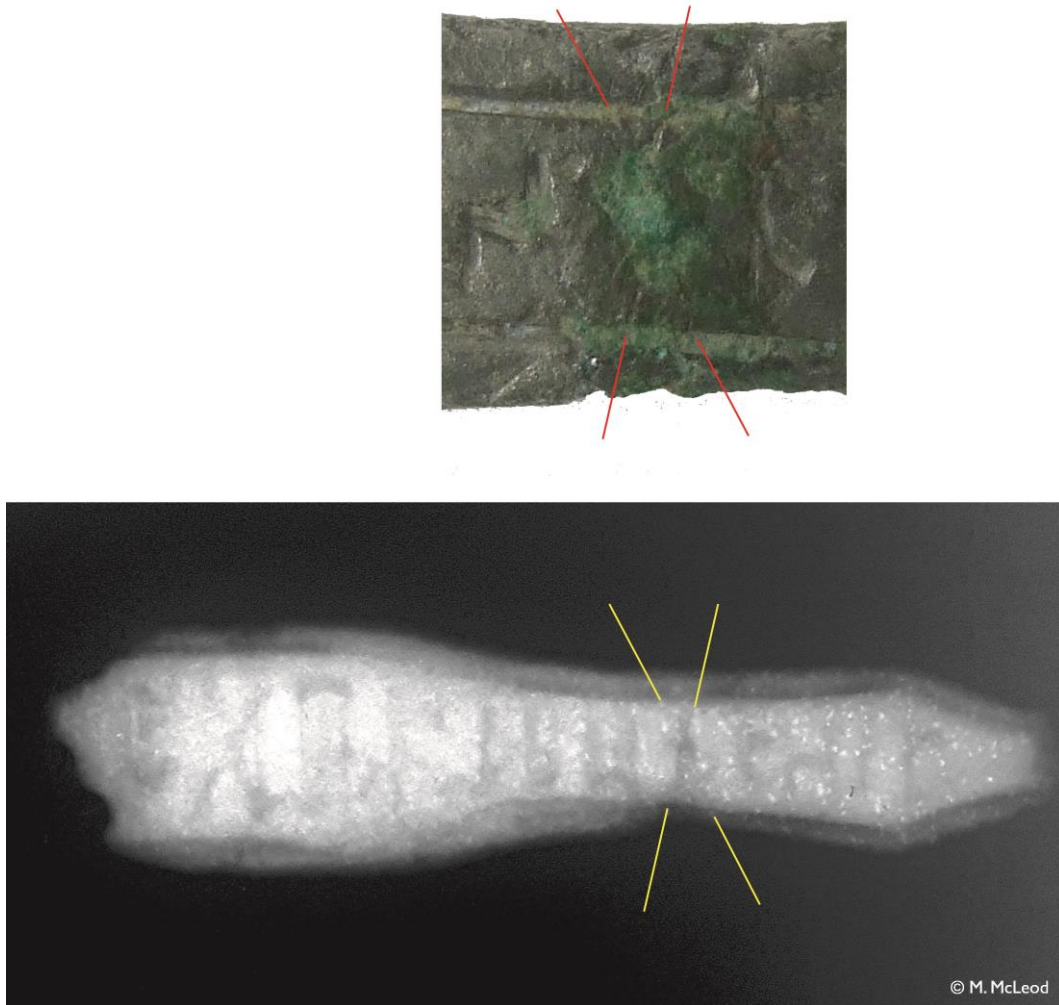
Fig. 4   Macro-photograph of the area of corrosion where **g** is read and x-ray image of this side, with arrows to draw the eye to the proposed crossing staves of the **g** rune. Photograph (a) by the author (b) by Madeline McLeod.

The reading *gæsil* can be accounted for as a neuter noun formed from the root *sigillum* borrowed from Vulgar Latin as *sil* with the perfective prefix that is *ge-* in Standard Old English. This is a common prefix for Old English nouns; it can be semantically very light, but its use does imply that this object so named is not just an item of jewellery but one that somehow finishes or completes an object: which indeed is what a belt-terminal or strap-end does. A close parallel may be the noun *gebæte*, *gebætel* for a bridle-bit.

A revised transliteration of the text may therefore be:

Side A:	**h**	**e**	**m**	**e**	**l**	**e**	**w**	**o**	**r**	**o**
	1/2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11

Side B:	**o**	**g**	**t**	**æ**	**þ**	**i**	**s**	**g**	**æ**	**s**	**i**	**l**
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12

I interpret this text as what should read *Hemele worohtæ þis gæsil*, or, edited into normalized Old English, *Hemele worhte þis gesil*: 'Hemele made this strap-end.' (A variant of the verb showing metathesis of the *or* sequence is *wrohte.*) This short and otherwise mundane text thus apparently adds a new term to the Old English lexicon. Contextually, the exceptional nature of the object and the fact that it carries only this inscription where the overwhelming majority of contemporary strap-ends in this cultural zone typically have decoration on one face, and a very few are inscribed on the back, imply that this unusual product was made as some sort of badge or display of Hemele's craftsmanship. In fact it appears to have been a display of his limited literate competency at the same time. But that does not diminish the implications in respect of the relatively common use of runic literacy in southern England.

1.3 Dating the inscription

The idiosyncratic character of the King's Somborne strap-end means that we are in no position to date it at all precisely on the typological grounds that may be available for archaeological artefacts. It is in fact difficult to determine relatively narrow dates for 8th- or 9th-century strap-ends unless they are retrieved from separately datable contexts, or carry particularly distinctive decoration. The Elsted (West Sussex) strap-end is datable on such grounds to the 9th century by reference to the foliate ornament on its face (Hines 2019, 291). Our best dating evidence in the present case therefore seems to be by linguistic criteria, in which case the one significant feature should be the preservation of unstressed /æ/ in *worohtæ* and *gæsil*. This is usually taken to be characteristic of 8th-century spelling of Old English south of the Northumbrian dialect area, with raising to /e/ or even levelling

to /ə/ characteristic of the 9th century and later (Waxenberger 2006). It is important to note too, that this suggests a possibly earlier date for the King's Somborne strap-end and its inscription than for the Elsted strap-end, and indeed for that from the Isle of Wight, the closest parallels to which also appear to be of the 9th and even 10th centuries rather than earlier (Hines 2019, 297; Thomas 2000, 205).

2. Response to John Hines's argument

ELISABETH OKASHA

Important note: I have not examined the object myself but have only worked from photographic images, including copies of the x-ray images, all kindly supplied by John Hines, and from the images publicly available on PAS.

None of this response should be in any way interpreted as adverse criticism of John Hines's interesting paper, but merely as a way of moving forward the discussion and of suggesting further lines of enquiry.

I start with the initial reading suggested by Hines: **æ i e r e l e *w* o r o o g t æ þ i s . æ s i l**, that is, with word-spacing added, *æierele woroogtæ þis[n]æ sil*. Although, as noted above, I was kindly supplied with photographic copies of the x-ray images, I remain unconvinced by the suggested restoration of an original **g** rune beneath the corrosion, preferring the reading **n**.

Thus, in normalised Old English spelling, I suggest that the text reads: *æierele wrohte þisne sil*. As Hines notes, the spellings of *wrohte* with a *g* for *h* and a parasite vowel in the consonant group *rh* are not infrequent in runic texts. Moreover, the spelling of final *-æ* for *-e* can be readily paralleled in many words occurring in runic inscriptions, as can the doubling of vowels; compare, for example, the runic text on the Mortain casket which reads *good helpe æadan þiiosne ciismeel gewarahtæ*: 'God help Æadan [who] made this *ciismeel*' (Page 1999, 162–3). Hines makes the interesting suggestion that the doubled **o** in the middle of *woroogtæ* may, however, have been inserted to show the continuation of the text on to the second side of the strap-end.

This text, then, is an example of a standard Old English maker formula, appearing on several inscribed objects, but not, as far as I know, on any other strap-end. There is, for example, the text on the Brussels cross reading *drahmal me worhte*, and that on the Kirkheaton runic stone reading *eoh worohtæ* (Okasha 1994, 76). The first word in both these examples, and in many others, is a personal name, usually taken to be that of the artisan. Thus the interpretation suggested by Hines that the first word on the King's Somborne strap-end is a personal name is almost certainly correct.

He takes this personal name as a form of *hemele*, a recorded Old High German name. However common this name may be in Old High German texts, it is certainly not well-recorded from Anglo-Saxon England. Indeed, as far as I can find, it occurs only once, in the ninth-century genealogies in Cotton MS Vespasian B 6 (Sweet, 1885, 168, line 39). It does not seem to occur in other manuscript texts, nor in other inscriptions, nor in *Domesday Book*, nor on coins (von Feilitzen 1937, Smart 1992, Sweet 1885).

Thus I read the name as *æierele* and suggest that it is Old English, a form of **Æþelmæl* or *Æþelmær*. The spelling of the first element is little problem: for instance, in *Domesday Book*, the first name-element *æþel-* occurs with a variety of spellings, *ai-*, *ei-*, *aiel-*, etc. (von Feilitzen 1937, 182).

The second element *-rele* is more problematic. I suggest that it is an error for *-mele* or *-mere*. As a first name-element *mæl-*, of originally Irish origin, is quite well recorded, including with the spelling *mel-* (Smart 1992, 87; von Feilitzen 1937, 323), but it is not recorded as a second name-element. Similarly, the common Old English noun *mæl* 'mark, time' occurs readily as the second element of compound nouns (*fotmælum*, *edmæle*, etc.), but not as a second element of personal names.

However there is a well-recorded personal name *Æþelmær*. The most obvious solution seems to me to read the personal name on the strap-end as a garbled spelling of this fairly common name. This name occurs with a variety of spellings, for example *æimær*, *aimar*, although admittedly it is rare with a final vowel except in oblique cases (von Feilitzen 1937, 184–5; Smart 1992, 33–4).

The text continues *þis[n]æ sil* As noted above, I cannot confirm from the images I have seen that the bracketed letter is actually a **g** rune, and a reading with

an **n** rune makes perfect sense: *þis[n]æ* is then a form of the demonstrative *þis* 'this' in the masculine accusative singular form *þisnæ* for *þisne*.

The final word is, in my opinion, not a 'new' Old English word but a form of either of the well-recorded Old English words *sigil*, *sigl* 'buckle, gem' or *sigle* 'collar.' Semantically speaking, the former seems more probable, and the spelling *sil* for *sigl* is recorded. In either case the noun *sigl* 'buckle' would here be used for 'strap-end': I am unaware of a separate specific word for 'strap-end' in Old English, although there may have been one, and *sigl* 'buckle' seems entirely appropriate.

The only problem with this interpretation is that both these words (*sigil*, *sigl* 'buckle, gem' and *sigle* 'collar') are grammatically neuter in Old English: in the accusative singular either should, strictly speaking, be preceded by *þis*, the neuter form of the demonstrative, not by the grammatically masculine *þisne.* However an inscription in runes on a strap-end is not necessarily to be expected to use perfect literary Old English, as indeed is obvious from the discussion of the rest of the text, both by Hines and myself above. I therefore read the (normalised) text as the following:

> *Æþelmær wrohte þisne sigl*
> 'Æþelmær made this strap-end'

One or two other points made by Hines are worth discussing. For example, he says, "Contextually, the exceptional nature of the object and the fact that it carries only this inscription where the overwhelming majority of contemporary strap-ends in this cultural zone typically have decoration on one face, and a very few are inscribed on the back, imply that this unusual product was made as some sort of badge or display of Hemele's craftsmanship." The PAS database lists almost 2,000 Anglo-Saxon strap-ends, of which three, including the object under discussion, contain runic texts, two contain non-runic texts, and one is doubtfully inscribed at all. It is therefore hard to be sure how to interpret "exceptional nature" in this context. Moreover, I am unaware of any Anglo-Saxon inscribed object used as a badge, although some may well be silently advertising the artisan's craftsmanship. A further point about artisans in general is that they were probably unlikely to be literate; they thus would have been copying an exemplar without necessarily

understanding its meaning or even knowing that its text contained their own given name.

A final comment is on the secondary works consulted: Hines does not mention two important sources of personal names used in Anglo-Saxon England, those in *Domesday Book* and those of moneyers on coins. Two useful books in these fields, respectively those by von Feilitzen and Smart, are given below. Although, as Hines notes, Gabor Thomas never published his PhD thesis on strap-ends, a very full account of them is contained in at least two of Thomas' published works: Thomas 2001 and Thomas 2004 (see below).

References

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Discussion:
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2. Editor's note[1]

GABY WAXENBERGER

Alfred Bammesberger's comment on John Hines's analysis and interpretation has meanwhile been published (Bammesberger 2022). Therefore, only a short summary of Bammesberger's argument will be given here in order for the reader to be able to follow the further discussion.

Hines (Hines & Okasha 2023) offers the following transliteration:

Side A:	**h**	**e**	***m***	**e**	**l**	**e**	***w***	**o**	**r**	**o**	
	1/2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	

Side B:	**o**	**g**	**t**	**æ**	**þ**	**i**	**s**	**g**	**æ**	**s**	**i**	**l**
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12

This may be read as *Hemele worogtæ þis gæsil.*

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[1] This article is part of the following multi-authored discussion on the King's Somborne strap-end:
  1. John Hines & Elisabeth Okasha, "On the interpretation of a challenging inscription from King's Somborne, Hampshire."
  2. Gaby Waxenberger, Editor's note summarizing Alfred Bammesberger (2022), "Old English *gǣsil* in the runic inscription from King's Somborne," *Notes & Queries* 69, no. 3, 176-77.
  3. Gaby Waxenberger, "In response to Hines & Okasha, 'On the interpretation of a challenging inscription from King's Somborne, Hampshire.'"
  4. John Hines, "Afterword."

For the reading *gæsil,* Bammesberger offers the following explanation:

On the assumption that the vowel *æ* in **gæsil** is long (= *gǣsil*), we can surmise that in a starting-point (Pre-Old English) **gaisil* > **gāsil* the vowel *ā* underwent *i*-umlaut, yielding *ǣ*. For a starting-point Gmc. **gaisil-* conceivable cognates are available: OHG *geisila/geisla* 'whip' and ON *geisl* 'staff, stick.' The suffixal morpheme *-il-* in **gās-il-* > *gǣsil* can be recognized in a number of further lexical items, e.g., OE *cēcil* 'little cake.' If Gmc. **gaisa-* referred to a weapon, then **gaisila-* may have represented a diminutive. From an etymological viewpoint, the form *gǣsil* may be compared with OHG (feminine) *geisla/geisila* 'whip.' It is probable that neuter *gǣsil*, meaning 'strap,' represents a noun so far unattested in the Old English lexicon.

References

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3. In response to Hines & Okasha, "On the interpretation of a challenging inscription from King's Somborne, Hampshire"[1]

GABY WAXENBERGER

I would like to offer some (graphemic) comments on John Hines's and Elisabeth Okasha's interpretations of the runic inscription on the strap-end found at King's Somborne, Hampshire (Hines & Okasha 2023).

1. Comments on John Hines's transliteration, interpretation, and translation of the runic inscription

1.1 Rune A:1

From a graphemic point of view, this sign could be the rune ᚫ *æsċ*, as there are at least two cases in the Old English Runes Corpus (OERC) where the side-twigs of this rune do not start exactly at the top. These two inscriptions are on the Gandersheim Casket and the Mortain Casket.

1.2 Rune A:1/2

If runes A:1/2 are an **h**, the personal name *Hemele* is attested in OE, thus this interpretation is also possible.

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  1. John Hines & Elisabeth Okasha, "On the interpretation of a challenging inscription from King's Somborne, Hampshire."
  2. Gaby Waxenberger, Editor's note summarizing Alfred Bammesberger (2022), "Old English *gæsil* in the runic inscription from King's Somborne," *Notes & Queries* 69, no. 3, 176-77.
  3. Gaby Waxenberger, "In response to Hines & Okasha, 'On the interpretation of a challenging inscription from King's Somborne, Hampshire.'"
  4. John Hines, "Afterword."

1.2 Rune B:2

The rune <**g**> instead of <**h**> for [ç] is found on the Left Panel of the Franks Casket (**unneg** 'far') and also in the non-runic manuscript tradition (see Waxenberger 2021).

1.3 Runes B:7 and B:10

The two sinistrograde **s**-runes, ᛀ, are optically not in line with the dextrograde inscription, but this is not unique: the **s**-runes on the Great Urswick Stone show dextrograde and sinistrograde forms in the same text: **setæ** ᚻ**etæ**; **his hi**ᛀ.

1.4 Rune B:8

A short part of the lower left stave can be seen in Hines's photos of the strap-end (Hines & Okasha 2023, Fig. 1): so the rune **g** is absolutely convincing and would fit into the space.

1.5 Summary

Judging from Hines's photos (Hines & Okasha 2023, Fig. 1), his transliteration of the text is possible, although A:1/2, **h**, is uncertain and should be marked as such: *h*. As B:2 is not obvious to the naked eye, but partially reconstructed, the forthcoming *Edition of the Old English Runic Inscriptions* will represent it as [+][**g**]. Thus the inscription in the edition will appear as follows:

Side A: *h* e *m* e l e *w* o r o

Side B: **o g t æ þ i s** [+]**[g] æ s** *i l*

2. Comment on Elisabeth Okasha's transliteration, interpretation, and translation

Elisabeth Okasha comments on the word *sigil*: "[…] and the spelling *sil* for *sigl* is recorded" (Hines & Okasha 2023).

A spelling <sil> is possible. -**æ**(-) as a root and final vowel suggests a fairly early date (8th or possibly early 9th cent.; see also Hines in Hines & Okasha 2023) for the inscription: this means that the sound change -*ig*- > *ī* must then have already been carried through at this time. According to Campbell (1959, §266), there was already a tendency in early OE for this sound change, and according to Luick (1921, §252), it came into existence at an early time in WS and probably also in Kent. Hogg (1992, §7.70) considers this sound change as common in early and late WS, "but in other dialects occurrences are infrequent."

3. Conclusion

John Hines's and Elisabeth Okasha's discussion shows the individual steps and analyses they have taken to arrive at their individual interpretations and translations. Although the results are not fundamentally different (see below), they clearly demonstrate the challenges a researcher has to face. It starts with graphemics inasmuch as the identification of runes and their interpretations is concerned (cf. Hines in Hines & Okasha 2023). One of the pivotal points is the identification of A:1 and A:2 or A:1/2: is it one or two runes, that is **h** or **æi**. In both cases, the runes are somewhat different from the regular runes in the Old English Runes Corpus. If ᚨ **æ** is assumed, the side-twigs do not start at the top, and in the case of **h**, the bars do not touch the right stave. From a graphemic point of view, both interpretations, **h** and **æi**, are justified.

Additionally, etymology and semantics play an important role for the sequence B:8 – B:12. Is the Old English word for 'strap-end' *gæsil* or is it *sil*? Moreover, are these interpretations compatible with the sound changes, i.e., the assumption of a vocalized *g* in *sīl* (cf. Okasha in Hines & Okasha 2023)? Do the names follow the principles of Germanic (compound) names? However, both interpretations reveal the same text-type, namely the formula 'X made Y.'

As both analyses and interpretations have their pros and cons, both interpretations will be included in the forthcoming *Edition of the Old English Runic Inscriptions* as follows:

John Hines's interpretation:

Hemele worohtæ þis gæsil
'Hemele made this strap-end'

Elisabeth Okasha's interpretation:

Æþelmær wrohte þisne sigl
'Æþelmær made this strap-end'

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4. Afterword[1]

JOHN HINES

As the first contributor to this discussion, whose suggestions have been reflected upon with care and authority by my colleagues here, I am grateful for the opportunity to offer my own short *Afterword*—not in the spirit (I hope) of having the final say, but rather as my further reflections. One thing we can all agree upon in respect of this find is that the craftsman who made the strap-end and apparently inscribed it (although of course he/she might have had it inscribed by someone else) with a standard '*N* made this object' formula did not, runographically, make a perfect job of the latter. We are not, as a result, sure what his or her name was. That we also cannot be sure what word he or she employed to denote the item is due both to deterioration in the condition of the metal and the fact that the noun used is either lexically or grammatically a *hapax legomenon*.

Gaby Waxenberger shows that there is extensive, relevant, variance in runic orthography and phonemic representation in Old English inscriptions, so that at best one may argue that a particular graphic form, like that at the start of line A, is unusual or even abnormal, yet it remains difficult categorically to identify an inscribed rune as 'this or that, and not-this and not-that.' There are indeed several possibilities for the name of the signatory. One might appeal to an adaptation of

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3. Gaby Waxenberger, "In response to Hines & Okasha, 'On the interpretation of a challenging inscription from King's Somborne, Hampshire.'"
4. John Hines, "Afterword."

Occam's Razor, and ask which suggested solution involves the least conjectural emendation. But even if one could weight alternative conjectures appropriately, there can be no guarantee that such a principle will lead to the correct answer. Occam's Razor is designed to identify the 'best' solution to a philosophical problem, not to read inscriptions.

I welcome Alfred Bammesberger's (see Bammesberger 2022) alternative proposal of *gǣsil* in the sense of 'a small pointed object,' which accepts the cautious if confident reading **g** in the obscured area of line B: I had not been aware of the OHG cognate *gaisila*. The -*s*- root variant of the lexeme familiar as OE *gār*, OHG *gēr*, ON *geirr*, 'spear,' is widely although not copiously attested: in the Celtic languages as the root of what appears as a loanword in Latin, *gaesum*, and with regular loss of -*s*- plus a relational prefix *g^wo*- in Welsh *gwawy*, both of which are also words for 'spear.'[2] In Germanic it appears too in the Gothic and Vandal kings' names recorded as *Radagaisus* and *Gaisericus*, and in ON *geisl*, 'staff,' and its more figurative derivative *geisli*, 'beam, ray'; a Langobardic *gīsil* is argued to have the sense 'arrow' (*Edictum Rothari* §224; Kaufmann 1968, 147–8, sn. GĪS-; cf. Nedoma 2004, 304–6, sn. GISALI). One question which remains is whether we can explain in any regular way why this noun should have become neuter in OE when it is feminine in OHG and masculine in ON—although Latin *gaesum*, tantalizingly, is neuter. I stress that I do not in any way see that question as a conclusive counter-argument to the proposition. A term that means 'little point' will obviously fit this object very well. I would, if anything, be happy to rest for now on the position that both *gǣsil* and *gǣsīl* offer thoroughly plausible solutions.

References

Bammesberger, Alfred. 2022. "Old English *gǣsil* in the Runic Inscription from King's Somborne," *Notes and Queries* n.s. 69, no.3, 176–177.

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[2] Celtic philology does not require this word to have been borrowed from Germanic rather than inherited direct as an Indo-European lexeme. The lexeme is also attested in early Irish, Cornish, and Breton.

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