THE OLD ENGLISH RUNIC INSCRIPTION OF
THE WHITBY COMB AND MODERN TECHNOLOGY

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1. The object

The Whitby Comb is kept in the Whitby Literary and Philosophical Society's Museum (Record No: WHITM:ARC1020).

According to Stephens (1884: 118) the comb was found "in the kitchen-midden belonging to the old monastic family (house) at Whitby". As the object comes from a "rubbish dump near the ruins of Whitby abbey" according to Page (1973: 168; 1999: 165), it is "traditionally associated with the Anglo-Saxon monastery of Streoneshalh, founded in 657 and destroyed in the second half of the ninth century." It is an untraced find and the finder is unknown [Whitby Literary and Philosophical Society's Museum].

The comb is broken and therefore the initial two runes and the last runes are missing, according to Looijenga (2003: 289). The average height of the runes is between ca. 1.1-1.3 cm.

2. The Date of the Whitby Comb

The attempts to date the comb are vague: Stephens (1884: 118) has "?Date about A.D. 600-650" but marks the date as uncertain. Page (1973: 168) sees the date of the comb in the context of its findspot (657 – second half of the ninth cent.: see above section 1) and Page (1973: 168; 1999: 165) observes that the language fits "this date range". Mitchell (1994: WhiC1) dates it to the 8th or 9th century and Flowers (1999: 44) assigns it to the 7th century. After analysing the unstressed vowels in the Old English Runes Corpus (Waxenberger 2006; forthcoming) and after comparing the rune-forms of the comb to the Auzon/Franks Casket (Waxenberger forthcoming), I have arrived

1 My sincerest thanks go to Mr. Mark T. Edwards, BA (Hon. Keeper of Whitby Museum) whose help and support made it possible to examine the comb again.
at the conclusion that the inscription belongs to the end of the 7th/beginning of the 8th century.

3. The Inscription of the Whitby Comb

The inscription consists of slim runes and the cuts are relatively faint. It runs from left to right. The surviving text has 28 runes, three of which are unambiguous bind-runes. Additionally, the first two characters are assumed to be bind-runes as well. The side twigs of the second rune Æ of the bind-rune ÆÆ (nos. 1+2) cannot be seen, but can be reconstructed with certainty because the second element of the phrase (mæus) has an unambiguous bind-rune mæ (nos. 5+6). Therefore it is legitimate to assume a bind-rune for runes nos. 1 and 2 especially since there is no main-stave between Æ and U. Despite the fact that the top part of rune no. 3 is missing, the two staves clearly indicate that it is the rune U. Although occurring in darker areas around the rivets, the runes G (no. 9), D (no. 19), and Y (no. 28) can clearly be recognized. The inscription has four bind-runes: ÆÆ (nos. 1+2), mæ (5+6), ÆA (19+20) and HEL (21+22+23). The text breaks off after the rune Y.

The core problem of the inscription is rune no. 20. It was seen as the rune O for a long time, which, in turn, would have had an impact on the attempt to date the inscription (see below). The progress of technology, however, has made it possible to decipher rune no. 20.

3.1 The transliterations and readings of the Whitby text in the literature

Page (1973: 168; 1999: 164) reads what is left as

ÆÆUS mæus god aluwaludo helipæ cy

'My God: may God Almighty help Cy-

The rune no. 20 of the sequence aluwalud was generally regarded as the rune O (Page 1973: 168; 1984: 42; 1999: 164, Bammesberger 1991: 134, Düwel 2001: 74; 2008: 74, Mitchell 1994: Wh.Co.2). However, Page (1966: 12) points out the formal difficulty presented by rune no. 20 and discusses both possibilities O and A but arrives at the conclusion

2 The symbol | is used when the text breaks off.
3 See, however, Bammesberger 2010 where the rune A vs. O is discussed.