

SAY WHAT I AM CALLED: A CORPUS OF ANGLO-SAXON  
SELF-REFERENTIAL INSCRIPTIONS

by

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## THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis compiles a working corpus of Anglo-Saxon self-referential inscribed artifacts to examine how the inscriptions and supports utilize self-reference to push the viewer to understand the social and cultural significance of such objects. The inscriptions fall into two broad categories: personal inscriptions reinforce the prestige of the makers, owners, and commissioners associated with them, while impersonal inscriptions authorize philosophical and social discourse through the adoption of literary and oral types (i.e. genres). In addition to an analysis of specific artifacts—ranging from diminutive rings to monumental stone crosses—I provide a quantitative analysis that illustrates the different uses of languages, scripts, and object types. As opposed to literary texts, self-referential inscribed objects create internally complete hermeneutic units that connect the text’s discursive meaning with the function and significance of the thing itself. The inscriptions and their supports structure knowledge about Anglo-Saxon social relationships, liturgical practices, and cultural wisdom.

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*To Elizabeth and Ea Welsie.*

“So comes snow after fire, and even dragons have their ending!”  
-J. R. R. Tolkien

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

“Hrothgar spoke; examined the hilt, old treasure. On it was written the origin of ancient strife, when the flood destroyed, ocean rushed, the race of giants fared terribly. That was an alien people to the eternal Lord. The Ruler gave them final retribution for that through water’s waves. Likewise, on the plate of metal, gold’s shining, through runic letters rightly marked, it recorded and stated for whom that sword was made, it first was best of swords, the serpentine-twisted hilt”<sup>1</sup>

Beowulf, ll. 1687-1698

In the Old English epic *Beowulf*, after the sword Hrunting fails to harm Grendel’s mother, the hero Beowulf stumbles upon the giant’s sword in the mere; he uses the magical weapon to dispatch the hag and to behead Grendel. The hero returns and presents the treasured heirloom to Hrothgar. Though the above passage’s opening suggests that Hrothgar will speak about the hilt, his speech is delayed for eleven lines as the artifact presents its origins through its inscription. Much of the scholarly attention to the giant’s sword hilt refers to the poem’s narrative to identify

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<sup>1</sup> Hroðgar maðelode; hylt sceawode,  
ealde lafe. On ðæm wæs or writen  
fyrngewinnes; syððan flod oflsoh,  
gifen geotende giganta cyn,  
frecne geferdon; þæt wæs fremde þeod  
ecean dryhtne; him þæs endelea  
þurh wæteres wylm waldend sealde.  
Swa wæs on ðæm scennum sciran goldes  
þurh runstafas rihte gemearcod,  
geseted ond gesæd, hwam þæt sweord geworht,  
irena cyst ærest wære,  
wreopenhilt ond wrymfah.

Robert E. Bjork, R. D. Fulk, and John Niles, eds., *Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), 57. All translations are my own, unless otherwise noted.

the inscription's language and the identity of the person who owned it. There is no clear identification in the poem, but Anglo-Saxons would likely have had a solid understanding about how the inscription functioned on the hilt. Although the runes may have merely repeated the name of the sword's owner, the poem's suggestion that the sword was commissioned ("it recorded and stated *for whom the sword was made*") implies that that information exists in the inscription. Thus, the Beowulf poet may have emulated extant inscribed artifacts like the late ninth-century Alfred Jewel (fig. 1), which bears the inscription *ælfred mec heht gewyrcan* ("Alfred ordered me made"). If the poet used such artifacts for inspiration, he had a sizeable body of source material. Many surviving Anglo-Saxon objects bear self-referential inscriptions, or texts that refer to the very objects upon which they are set. Like the literary runes of the giant's sword hilt, Old English self-referential texts invite the reader to ruminate on the meaningful intersections between object and inscription.

The Anglo-Saxons inscribed almost every type of object and monument. Inscriptions appear on their church walls, stone memorials, weapons, coins, stoneware, jewelry, armor, and other artifacts. Even less permanent materials provided the support for inscribed texts, including large tapestries and diminutive runesticks—small bits of wood carved with runic messages.<sup>2</sup> Due to time and the interference of man there are fewer than three hundred inscribed objects identified from the Saxon period in England. Despite their scarcity, Old English inscriptions provide a unique group of texts for literary critics, art historians, and scholars of material culture.

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<sup>2</sup> Although no Old English runesticks appear in archaeological findings, Ericksen convincingly suggests that they influenced poetry. Janet Schrunck Ericksen, "Runesticks and Reading *The Husband's Message*," *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 99:1 (1998): 31-37. The Bayeux Tapestry provides the most well-known embroidered text in the early medieval European tradition, Gale Owen-Crocker, "The Embroidered Word: Text in the Bayeux Tapestry," in *Medieval Clothing and Textiles*, ed. Robin Netherton and Gale Owen-Crocker (Suffolk: Boydell Press, 2006), 35-59. Aside from the inscriptions on the Bayeux Tapestry, a dedicatory embroidery commissioned in honor of Byrhtnoth after the battle of Maldon may also have been inscribed with hortatory text, Mildred Budny, "The Byrhtnoth Tapestry or Embroidery," in *The Battle of Maldon, AD 991*, ed. Donald Scragg (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 263-278.

Like the Alfred Jewel, the examples in this study form a distinct group of artifacts, each of which presents a voice to provide the inanimate an affected agency and identity. Self-referential texts appear on all manner of things, from rings and brooches to sundials and monumental stone crosses.

The fifty-six self-referential inscriptions represent only a small subset of the larger collection of inscribed objects. While there are many other types of inscription—those that repeat names or that solely reference a figure, location, or text—the self-referential inscriptions form a category heretofore unrecognized as distinct by scholars. In this study, I argue that the self-referential nature of these inscribed artifacts structures meaning through a synthesis of the text and the physical object itself. More specifically, the combination of text and object structures culturally significant readings from the audience, constructing the reader's understanding of the object's provenance, function, significance, or, more generally, the role it plays in cultural discourse. In other words, each self-referential inscribed artifact creates a complete hermeneutic unit, a device that structures a viewer's knowledge about itself through its presence and by means of the inscribed text. The Alfred Jewel would be a valuable but indeterminate bauble without its text; an audience understands the prestige and power of the precious gift through its physical presence *and* the presence of the self-referential text that identifies Alfred as both the commissioner and giver of the object. The artifacts in this corpus all share this similar feature: an inscription's self-referentiality acts as the instrument by which the viewer gains a deeper understanding of the object as such, its function, and its relationship to cultural practices and ideas.

Examination of the presented working corpus of Old English self-referential inscriptions demonstrates that these objects and their texts primarily serve one of two purposes: to bolster the

social position of the people associated with the objects, or to structure cultural knowledge through the synthesis of text and artifact and the adoption of Old English oral and literary types—what the modern reader would call genres. Though modern scholarship most often focuses on traditional literary and oral discourse types, this thesis argue that the Anglo-Saxons also relied on self-referential inscribed artifacts to structure and disseminate knowledge about their society and beliefs.

Self-referential, speaking inscriptions from Anglo-Saxon England most often appear in Old English or Latin inscribed in either Roman or runic script. Though the supports and languages vary, the texts nearly always speak in a first person voice and refer back to some aspect of the objects they decorate. The Alfred Jewel exemplifies this type of inscription. Presenting the short text, “Alfred ordered me made,” the jewel does not merely convey information, it *speaks* directly to the reader, and tells its audience something significant about itself—that Alfred commissioned it.<sup>3</sup> Though many of the examples follow similarly formulaic text constructions, self-referential inscriptions may be split into two types: personal or impersonal. Forty-five of the corpus entries are personal inscriptions, those that present texts that name someone related to the artifact, typically an owner, artisan, or patron. Examples from this category nearly always appear in the formula “X made me,” “X owns me,” or “X had me made.” These formulas provide the opportunity to divide personal inscriptions into three subtypes: maker signatures, ownership inscriptions, and commissioner inscriptions. The eleven remaining impersonal examples present texts that parallel literary and oral types, like riddles or Christian poetry, to highlight the artifact’s provenance, its social function, or its relationship to larger cultural ideals and beliefs. Categorizing the objects in this fashion shows that, although vastly

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<sup>3</sup> Entry numbers will be noted in the text with their Self-Referential Corpus Number, or SR-#. See Appendix I table or consult the digital database of Anglo-Saxon self-referential inscriptions at <http://speakingobjects.omeka.net/>.

different in content, examples from the personal and impersonal categories both utilize self-reference to validate philosophical discourses common to Anglo-Saxon culture, whether it be celebrating the prestige of a patron or creating a self-answering riddle. This collection of objects shows that material culture played an important role in reinforcing social hierarchy and the cultural practices within that society. In addition, this combination of text and object creates a single unit that combines the material evidence—the artifact—with the textual explication of that evidence’s significance or function. In other words, this study shows that the Anglo-Saxons utilized self-referential inscribed objects to many of the same hermeneutic ends ascribed to longer literary texts.

To date, no focused collection or study of Anglo-Saxon self-referential, speaking artifacts exists. Much of the current scholarship on Old English inscribed objects focuses on language, script, or object type. Studies such as Elisabeth Okasha’s *Hand-list of Non-Runic Inscriptions* and its three supplements catalogue and detail Latin and Old English inscriptions in non-runic letters, while R. I. Page’s extensive work on English runes typically investigates the form and use of specific runic scripts.<sup>4</sup> Other projects catalogue particular types of inscribed objects—such as rings or swords—and attempt to provide some universal understanding of these object groups as a whole.<sup>5</sup> This study retains the synoptic approach of Page and Okasha, including inscriptions

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<sup>4</sup> Elisabeth Okasha, *Hand-list of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), Okasha, “A Supplement to Hand-list of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 11 (1982): 83-118, Okasha, “A Second Supplement to Hand-list of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 21 (1992): 37-85, Okasha, “A Third Supplement to Hand-list of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions,” *Anglo-Saxon England* 33 (2004): 225-281, R. I. Page, *An Introduction to English Runes* (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Boydell Press, 1999), and Page, *Runes and Runic Inscriptions* (Rochester, New York: Boydell Press, 1995).

<sup>5</sup> There are several studies on inscriptions on certain object types, most notably Okasha’s discussion of inscribed rings, Elisabeth Okasha, “Anglo-Saxon Inscribed Rings,” *Leeds Studies in English* 23 (2003): 29-45. For an examination of medieval sheath inscriptions, see Elisabeth Okasha, “Anglo-Saxon Inscribed Sheaths from Aachen, Dublin, and Trondheim,” *Medieval Archaeology* 36 (1992): 59-66. Higgitt has also investigated the relationship between incised texts and monumental stone crosses, John Higgitt, “Words and Crosses: the Inscribed Stone Cross in Early Medieval Britain.” In *Early Medieval Sculpture in Britain and Ireland*, ed. John Higgitt (Oxford: British Archeological Reports, 1986), 125-152.

from the broad archaeological record in multiple languages and scripts, while narrowing the scope thematically, to self-referentiality across a wide variety of object types.

Thomas Bredehoft uses a similar approach in his study on Old English first-person inscriptions. His list of objects—chosen for their use of the first-person subject—provides many examples in this study; twenty-four of the artifacts from his list reappear as personal inscriptions in my corpus. Drawing on twenty-five texts from Okasha's hand-lists, Bredehoft insightfully notes that the predominance of Old English inscriptions suggests that English literacy may have been more widespread than Latin literacy in Saxon England.<sup>6</sup> However, the scope of this project extends beyond Bredehoft's, which relies solely on Okasha's hand-lists and does not consider other forms of self-referential inscriptions (e.g. third-person or runic texts).

In her recent research, Ursula Lenker investigates what she terms "micro-texts." These texts consist of epigraphic inscriptions, marginal notes, or colophons that present single words, phrases, or incomplete sentences. She notes that most scholars focus on the content of inscriptions, particularly those that challenge a simple interpretation, though few investigate the linguistic efficiency of such micro-texts.<sup>7</sup> As her study involves single-word inscriptions or short phrases, many of the artifacts she considers are similar to the examples discussed in this paper and by other scholars such as Bredehoft. Despite the overlap of objects and material, Lenker's primary focus is not on content of the inscriptions but on the efficacy of micro-texts as tools of communication used in everyday life. This project's goal is to provide an overview and analysis

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<sup>6</sup> Thomas Bredehoft, "First-Person Inscriptions and Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England," *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 9 (1996): 103-110.

<sup>7</sup> Ursula Lenker, "Anglo-Saxon Micro-texts: Language and Communicative Functions" (paper presented at the International Society of Anglo-Saxonists Biennial Conference, Glasgow, August 3-7, 2015). Lenker also discusses the social function of communication linguistics in Ursula Lenker, "The Monasteries of the Benedictine Reform and the 'Winchester School': Model Cases of Social Networks in Anglo-Saxon England," *European Journal of English Studies* 4 (2000): 225-238.



of a thematic group of inscribed objects (i.e. self-referential artifacts), and, as such, there is little connection to Lenker's micro-texts.

My corpus more than doubles the number of first-person texts observed in contemporary scholarship by including otherwise unpublished artifacts, second- and third-person self-referential texts, and purely runic inscriptions.<sup>8</sup> Aside from making more material readily available to scholars of Saxon England, enlarging the corpus demonstrates that the group of first-person inscriptions studied by Bredehoft actually belongs under the umbrella of self-referential speaking objects. Privileging self-reference over grammatical perspective shows that these examples form a unique subgroup of Old English objects that synthesize discursive meaning and material evidence to emphasize the function of the artifact or its connection to social and cultural beliefs and practices.

This paper's corpus draws from several different sources. Approximately half of the artifacts in the corpus come from secondary scholarship pertaining to runes and/or inscribed objects, particularly Okasha's hand-lists of non-runic inscriptions and Page's work on English runes.<sup>9</sup> The remaining examples represent those found in archaeological records and databases, such as the Portable Antiquities Scheme (PAS) and the Historic Environment Records (HERs) for each county in England.<sup>10</sup> Many of the objects from these two sources do not appear in Page

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<sup>8</sup> Since Bredehoft draws mainly from Okasha, his artifacts represent predominantly Roman-letter inscriptions.

<sup>9</sup> In addition to the sources listed above by Okasha and Page, this project draws from George Stephens, *The Old-Northern Runic Monuments of Scandinavia and England* (London: J.R. Smith, 1884).

<sup>10</sup> The artifacts incorporated from these collections come primarily from the digital collections published by the individual county Historic Environment Records and Portable Antiquities Scheme database. The majority of the HER databases can be accessed through an umbrella site: [heritagegateway.org.uk](http://heritagegateway.org.uk). The method for each HER search involved browsing the Anglo-Saxon records in each database (most often listed under "early medieval 410-1066"). The following counties provided fairly extensive HER records of Anglo-Saxon artifacts: Norfolk, Suffolk, Essex, Kent, Sussex, Surrey, Hertfordshire, Cambridgeshire, Northamptonshire, Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Oxfordshire, Berkshire, and Hampshire. Other counties either have no electronic database or a database that does not include any notable compilation of medieval artifacts. These HER databases acknowledge their incomplete status, but they do provide the most comprehensive electronic collections. The search method for the Portable Antiquities Scheme database included targeted inquiries in the early medieval category (c. 410-1066). These

or Okasha simply because they are recent finds; the relevant examples from the Portable Antiquities Scheme—a program designed to catalogue the finds of the general public—were discovered after most of Page’s prolific work on runes. Likewise, the archaeological records hold artifacts bearing fully runic inscriptions that are incompatible with Okasha’s non-runic focus. The resultant compilation provides the most complete view of Old English self-referential inscriptions to date, and is the only study to consider them as a coherent group of artifacts.

The thesis that follows is divided into several sections. It first treats examples from each category, illustrated with key examples. Next a quantitative analysis suggests that Old English remained the dominant language throughout the period, though the script shifted from runic to Roman. It also highlights the relationship and frequency between inscription type and object type. Following the description of categories and quantitative analysis, a comparison of the entries from this corpus indicates that the focus of the self-referentiality varies nearly as much as the object types themselves. The inscriptions range from straightforward statements of self-reference to complex passages that only imply a discursive relationship with the thing itself. This project concludes with a discussion of the significance of the use of self-referential inscribed objects as material to further a discourse that most scholars associate with literature. Many of the examples in the corpus highlight the tendency to create an artifice of identity that positions them as thinking, complicit agents. The resulting self-referential inscriptions, particularly those from the personal category, strengthen the bond between the owner, maker, or commissioner and the object. Examples from the impersonal category, however, most often serve as compressed relatives of traditional Old English literature, such as Christian poetry, riddles, curses, and

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inquiries included searching for artifact descriptions that contained the following terms: runes, runic, rune, inscription, inscribed, incised.

scriptural quotations. These inscriptions are further completed, reinforced, or validated by the reference to their supports.

## CHAPTER II

### PERSONAL INSCRIPTIONS

#### 2.1 *Ownership Inscriptions*

Ownership inscriptions are one type of the three associated with personal inscriptions (i.e. maker signatures, commissioner inscriptions) and comprise approximately one third of the entire group of self-referential inscriptions. Nearly all of the artifacts in this category closely follow a prescribed formula: *X mec ah* (“X owns me”). Scripts vary from runic to Roman, but all of the known examples of owner markings appear exclusively in Old English.<sup>11</sup> Unsurprisingly, ownership inscriptions tend to decorate personal objects, such as knives, rings, brooches, and even strap ends—metal casings to prevent straps from fraying. The prevalence of—and deviations from—the “x owns me” formula, the overwhelming use of Old English, and the number and types of artifacts highlight the importance of ownership and possession among the Anglo-Saxons.

Two characteristic examples of self-referential ownership inscriptions are the well-known Lancashire Ring (fig. 2; SR-38), which combines Anglo-Saxon capitals and runes, and a cast lead strap end from Somerset (fig. 3; SR-52), written entirely in Anglo-Saxon capitals. Both objects follow the typical ownership formula: the ring states *ædred mec ah* (“Ædred owns me”), and the strap end, *wulfstan mec ah a* (“Wulfstan owns me”).<sup>12</sup> These inscriptions—along with other examples from the personal category—deemphasize the agency of the speaking object and promote the significance of the property owner. The artifacts retain their supplied identities, but

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<sup>11</sup> Bredehoft (“First-Person Inscriptions,” 106-07) attributes the prevalence of Old English owner inscriptions to the probability that English-literate Saxons were more likely to own precious objects.

<sup>12</sup> It is the author’s opinion that the extra “a” following the formula is likely an error, or used to fill otherwise empty space.

are relegated to the inactive, objectified role of the possessed. Thus, though the inscription on the Lancashire Ring speaks of its support, its place as the accusative pronoun signifies its relative inconsequentiality in comparison to *Ædred*, the text's active, named subject. And though the script differs, *Wulfstan* enjoys the same prominence on the Somerset strap end. Both objects share a cyclical nature that uses the artifact's constructed identity to consciously confirm the owner's claim of possession. Just as *Wulfstan* could vocally claim ownership of the strap end and the equipment attached to it, the object itself reinforces that relationship by affirming the claimant's authority. Therefore, particularly with the formulaic ownership inscriptions, the object simultaneously restrains its own speaking subjectivity to strengthen the possessive control of the text's human subject.

The few exceptions that depart from the traditional owner formula still suggest that Anglo-Saxon patrons used self-referential inscriptions to reinforce their own authority. A silver nummular brooch from Leicestershire (fig. 4; SR-54) further emphasizes the relationship between owner and object, and provides insight into Saxon women's property rights. The inscription reads *Wulfgýfe me ah ag hire* ("Wulfgýfe owns me, owns [me] for herself"). The short addition to the traditional construction asserts that *Wulfgýfe*'s brooch is under her sole ownership, and that it is not community or shared property (e.g. through marriage). The desire to preserve female property rights becomes even clearer in reference to the Sutton Brooch (fig. 5; SR-39) from Cambridgeshire, which contains a traditional owner inscription and a poetic curse: *Ædwen me ag age hyo drihten/ drihten hine awerie þe me hire æfterie/ buton hyo me selle hire agenes willes* ("Ædwen owns me, may the Lord own her. May the Lord curse him who takes me from her, unless she give me of her own free will"). God's ownership of *Ædwen* parallels her ownership of the brooch, the most passive identity in the inscription as the only identity that does

not actually act, either as possessor or potential thief in the curse. In other words, the brooch can name a chain of ownership and threaten would-be criminals, but remains a physical object that is subject to the whims of the human world. Like the simple, formulaic ownership inscription on the Lancashire Ring, these artifacts articulate the importance of the possessor over the object itself. In the case of the Sutton Brooch, the self-referential “me” of the text not only serves to recognize Ædwen’s ownership, but to set the terms of transfer. Throughout the inscription the identity of the brooch remains in the accusative object position, reaffirming the inferiority of the artifact’s agency and its ability to bolster the human subject’s position as owner/possessor.

## 2.2 *Maker Inscriptions*

Anglo-Saxon maker inscriptions share many features with their ownership counterparts, not least of which is the frequency of a common formulaic construction: *X me fecit* or *X mec worhte* (“X made me”). Also like owner inscriptions, maker inscriptions represent a large portion of self-referential inscribed artifacts, outnumbering owner texts twenty-one to fifteen in the present corpus. Small, portable objects most often bear these inscriptions, though there are also examples of larger stone monuments inscribed by craftsmen. The largest difference from the ownership category is lingual: maker objects appear in Roman and runic Latin or Old English. Though the artifacts in this group have a greater linguistic range than owner signatures, the imposed personality and self-referentiality of the text continue to reinforce the identity of the figure associated with the object—in this case the craftsman.

The types of objects and materials in the personal, maker category vary greatly, but all of the personal maker signatures decorate artifacts and monuments constructed by skilled artisans. Two such examples are the Brussels Cross (fig. 6; SR-34) and a large, stone sundial from Old Byland, North Yorkshire (fig. 7; SR-8). The former—a wood and silver reliquary crucifix now

located in the Cathedral of St. Michael and St. Gudula, Brussels—reads *drahmal me worhte* (“Drahmal made me”), while the latter states *svmarledan huscarl me fecit* “Sumarledan, housecarl, made me”). As with the owner inscriptions, the use of self-reference undermines the agency of the cross by focusing and redirecting attention to the human subject over the inanimate (and accusative) object. By referring to itself, the Brussels Cross ultimately refers back to Drahmal, strengthening his prominence and mastery over the object. The same argument applies to the Old Byland sundial, as well as to more nontraditional maker inscriptions, such as the text on a stone slab at Stratfield Mortimer (fig. 8; SR-44): + VII . KL . Octb/fvit . positvs aegelpardvs . filvs kippingvs in isto loco beatvius sit omo qvi orat pro anima eivs + Toki me scripsit (“+ On the 8th before the Kalends of October, Aegelward son of Kypping was laid in this place. Blessed be the man who prays for his soul. + Toki wrote me”). The traditional maker inscription stands apart from the rest of the text as it is placed outside of the bracket-like engraved crosses. The first part of the text, not a self-referential inscription on its own, becomes the product of Toki, the subject of the maker signature. Though few examples from this corpus appear with other types of inscription, the slab’s self-referentiality still reinforces the artisan’s connection to the product—in this case the script.<sup>13</sup>

### 2.3 Commissioner Inscriptions

The formulaic pattern already seen in owner and maker inscriptions carries through to commissioner inscriptions, although relatively few artifacts from this category exist. The lack of a significant number of artifacts in this category suggests that patrons perhaps used owner markings on their own objects. Commissioners likely used the same formulaic text construction

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<sup>13</sup> The Lancashire Ring’s second inscription, “Eanred engraved me,” provides another example of an engraver as maker. For other self-referential inscriptions that appear with different texts see Brussels (SR-34; SR-47), Kirkdale (SR-7), and Barton St. David (SR-15).

because they sought to reinforce their possession of the object—as owners—or, more likely, to permanently attach their identity to the artifact-as-gift. These texts decorate small, precious things—such as the aforementioned Alfred Jewel—as well as larger stone monuments, such as the repurposed Roman dedication stone at St. Mary-le-Wigford, Lincolnshire (fig. 9; SR-25): *eirtig me let wircean and flos godian criste to lofe and sce marie* (“Eirtig had me built and endowed in honor of Christ and St. Mary”). Like the owner texts, all extant examples of commissioner inscriptions appear to be in Old English, and heighten the connection between the artifact and the patron associated with it. The Mary-le-Wigford monument praises the active founder of the parish church, and the inscribed self-reference only serves to support Eirtig as subject. As an immovable offering to God, the dedication panel highlights that many of the commissioned objects were probably intended as gifts or trades.

The Alfred Jewel almost certainly served as a gift and a reminder to the recipient of the patron’s power and prestige. The speaking object reminds the new owner that King Alfred is responsible for the artifact’s existence and exchange, a connection that would be constantly reinforced no matter how frequently the artifact were to change hands. The idea of this perpetual reminder to the object’s recipient is useful to gift theorists for it shows the irremovable attachment to the giver—an attachment that both reinforces the giver’s prestige and acts as a form of social currency for the new owner. As conceived by Marcel Mauss, the *hau* acts as the immaterial component to a material gift that retains some trace of the original giver; on these objects, the self-referential inscriptions materially exemplify the *hau* as physical manifestations that tie the objects and their trajectories back to the persons responsible for their creation and distribution.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (London: Routledge, 2002), 10. The social function of gifts and donations, particularly transferring from secular givers to ecclesiastical recipients, is



In each case where Anglo-Saxon speaking objects refer simultaneously to themselves and their owners, makers, or commissioners, the artifacts' self-referentiality only bolsters the identity of the person associated with the item itself. This is not to say that the inscriptions are completely passive and inert; as Peter Ramey suggests, these objects possess a limited agency—particularly in their continued ability to influence new readers—that allows them to interact with the human world.<sup>15</sup> The above examples show, however, that agency and interaction preclude owner, maker, and commissioner inscriptions from presenting a truly independent, individual identity. Rather, these inscribed artifacts reinforce the individual identity of the person to whom the object is tied. The self-reference in these speaking objects allows them to participate directly in the relationship between possessor/possessed, maker/product, commissioner/commissioned. As a speaking object the thing names the individual responsible for its being, simultaneously acting as the concrete, physical evidence of the authority and prestige of its owner, maker, or commissioner.

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central to Barbara Rosenwien's study of the land tenure and ownership at Cluny. Barbara Rosenwien, *To Be the Neighbor of Saint Peter: The Social Meaning of Cluny's Property, 909-1049* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1989), 64.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Ramey, "Writing Speaks: Oral Poetics and Writing Technology in the Exeter Book Riddles," *Philological Quarterly* 92 (2013): 348.

### CHAPTER III

#### IMPERSONAL INSCRIPTIONS

Similar to the personal categories, self-referential impersonal inscriptions range from Latin to Old English and Roman to runic, though there are far fewer—only eleven—examples in this category. Impersonal inscriptions present narrative texts that more closely parallel Old English literary and oral genres rather than formulaic statements of their relationships to their human possessors. While the most famous example, the Ruthwell Cross still speaks from a first-person point of view, artifacts like the Franks Casket speak without explicit self-reference, yet nonetheless refer back to their own physical materiality. In other words, an impersonal inscription's content can just as often imply self-referentiality, pushing the viewer to realize the connection between text and object. This suggests that these objects serve a much different purpose than the personal artifacts; their inscriptions do not act to reinforce the authority of the owner or maker, but refer to the objects they decorate to provide an internally complete hermeneutic unit that structures meaning or disseminates knowledge. In this complete unit, the text explicates some aspect of the object—for example its material makeup or its function—while the presence of the object itself reaffirms the validity of the inscription. The impersonal examples noted in this corpus typically appear to reflect traditional literary and oral types of Old English texts, and, though many scholars have noted a connection between literary genres and inscriptions—especially in reference to the Franks Casket and Anglo-Saxon riddles—these objects form a unique discursive group that extends beyond the manuscript page.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Éamonn O'Carragáin suggests that the rood poems from the Ruthwell and Brussels Crosses come from the same tradition as the literary version of the poem, Éamonn O'Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood: Liturgical Images and the Old English Poems of the Dream of the Rood Tradition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 343-349; Leslie Webster interprets the Franks Casket's riddle as a variant of the earlier Latinate enigmata tradition, Leslie Webster, "The Iconographic Program of the Franks Casket," in *Northumbria's Golden Age*, ed. Jane Hawkes and Susan Mills (Stroud: Sutton, 1999), 227-246. Finally, Richard Gameson notes that Anglo-Saxon religious patrons often utilized

The real work of the impersonal inscriptions is to structure and reinforce cultural significance and social ideals through its combination with the physical object. For example, five funerary crosses from Bury St. Edmunds all bear the same text: *crux xpi triumphat crux xpi pellit hostem* (“The cross of Christ triumphs; the cross of Christ repels the enemy”). The text refers to the power of the cross to keep evil at bay, while the material crucifix serves that same apotropaic purpose by its presence. The text works to identify the cultural importance of the thing—its protective power—and the thing itself materializes, validates, and exemplifies the functional significance of the text’s content. An analysis of the text/object relationship shows that the artifacts themselves participate with the inscriptions and provide the concrete evidence that authorizes and validates the claims of the traditional oral and literary discourse types.

### 3.1 Christian Poetry

The mid-eighth century Ruthwell Cross, perhaps the most well-known of all Anglo-Saxon monuments, presents the earliest known example of written Old English poetry (figs. 10-13; SR-48). Most of the panels on the two broad sides represent events from the life of Christ, accompanied by Latin *tituli* to further clarify the scenes and figures. The shaft’s narrow sides contain scrolling vines filled with birds and animals. A runic text circumscribes the vine-scroll panels, relating a version of *The Dream of the Rood*, an Old English poem told from the point of view of the rood that becomes Christ’s cross:

1. [ + *ond*]geredæ *hinæ god almettig . þa he walde on galgu gistiga*
2. *modig f[ore] [allæ] men*
3. *[b]ug[a] [ic ni dorstæ] [. . .]*
4. [. . .]

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scriptural paraphrase on monumental or architectural sources, Richard Gameson, *The Role of Art in the Late Anglo-Saxon Church* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), 70-94.

5. *[ahof] ic riicnæ kyninc .*

6. *heafunæs hlafard hælde ic ni dorstæ*

7. *[b]ismæradu unket men ba æt[g]ad[re] [i]c [wæs] miþ blodi bist[e]mi[d]*

8. *bi[gotten of þæs gumu sida] [. . .]*

9. *[+] krist wæs on rodi .*

10. *hweþræ þer fusæ fearran kwomu*

11. *æþþilæ til anum ic þæt al bi[heald]*

12. *s[aræ] ic w[æs] . mi[þ] so[r]gu[m] gidræ[fi]d h[n]a[g] [ic þam secgum til handa]*

13. *miþ strelum giwundad*

14. *alegdun hiæ hinæ limwærignæ . gistoddu[n] [h]im [æt] [his] [lic]æs [hea]ff[du]m*

15. *[bih]ea[ld]u[n] [h]i[æ] [þ]e[r] [heafunes dryctin].*

(“Almighty God stripped himself, as he willed to mount the gallows, courageous before all men. I dared not bow [. . .] I raised a powerful king, the Lord of heaven, I dared not bend. Men insulted us together; I was drenched with blood, poured from the man’s side [. . .] Christ was on the Cross, but eager ones came there from afar, noble ones came together: I beheld all that. I was terribly afflicted with sorrows. I bowed [to the hands of men], wounded with arrows. They laid him down, limb-spent; they took their stand at the head and feet of his corpse, where they looked upon the lord of heaven [. . .]”)<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The weathered and damaged condition of the cross creates some problems of interpretation. This version comes from Éamonn O’Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, xxv-xxvii. O’Carragáin separates the text into fifteen short passages or lines.

The self-reference in the text is that of a participatory witness: the poem gives the Ruthwell Cross a voice and an identity, allowing the viewer to connect the role of the True Cross in Christ's Passion to the form of the stone cross with its figural representation of that sacrifice. In other words the text interprets the cultural significance of the Ruthwell Cross, as a parallel of the instrument of the Crucifixion. The cross is a sign rich in interpretive meaning that ranges from salvific symbol to apotropaic amulet, as noted in with the examples from Bury St. Edmunds cited above. The audience realizes the Ruthwell Cross's particular symbolism, along with its spiritual function, through the combination of its physicality—in the form of a cross—and its text. The mood of the poem is paralleled in the eleventh-century Brussels Cross (fig. 6; SR-47), an Anglo-Saxon reliquary that contained a shard of the True Cross; it also presents two lines from the rood poem: *Rod is min nama. Geo ic ricne cyning/ bær byfigynde blode bisteded* ("Cross is my name. Once I bore a mighty king, trembling and drenched with blood").<sup>18</sup> Although much more compressed, the lines from the Brussels Cross echo the sentiment of the poem on the Ruthwell Cross, as both belong to a larger body of Anglo-Saxon poetry in *The Dream of the Rood* tradition.

Scholars debate the origins of *The Dream of the Rood*, although bits of it survive in three forms: on the Ruthwell Cross, on the Brussels Cross, and in the tenth-century Vercelli Codex, one of four major manuscripts of Old English poetry. These sources vary greatly in time, material, and provenance, but it is likely that their shared themes come from a common oral or literary tradition.<sup>19</sup> Whether the Ruthwell Cross inscription was the first coherent edition of the

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<sup>18</sup> The Brussels Cross also bears a self-referential maker's inscription, *Drahmal me worhte*.

<sup>19</sup> For a detailed discussion of the history of the poem's authorship and attribution, see O'Carraáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, 45-53.

poem, or whether it was only one version of a multitude of oral narratives, the texts on these two crosses reflect themes from the larger genre of Christian poetry.

The Anglo-Saxons prized a person's ability to invent and disseminate verse adaptations and ruminations on biblical themes. The greatest example of this practice appears in the story of Cædmon, a poor stableman who could not participate in communal singing because he lacked the ability to compose verse.<sup>20</sup> After a miraculous dream, Cædmon receives the gift of song and begins to sing about Creation. His newfound abilities attract attention from the local monastic community, and the once-illiterate layperson spends the rest of his life translating biblical history and narrative into poetry. The tale illustrates the importance of versification among the clergy, as well as the privileged status of religious poetry, a genre that served as the most formal discourse type in Anglo-Saxon England.<sup>21</sup> The runes incised on the Ruthwell Cross follow this tradition, versifying biblical history, as does the compressed inscription on the Brussels Cross. In other words, the crosses act as poets who transmit biblical knowledge through the presentation of their circumscriptive poems.

The self-referential voice of both crucifixes further serves to speak authoritatively—as they echo the instrument of Christ's martyrdom—of the story of the Crucifixion, and actively participate in the poetic transmission of Christian ideals. As a present, speaking object the Brussels Cross anchors the poem as no literary text or human narrator could, provoking the reader to ruminate on the connections between its physical form, its mystical reliquary, and the content of its inscription. Likewise, the Ruthwell Cross reaffirms the historical accuracy of the Passion and pushes the audience to consider the relationship between the constructed identity's

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<sup>20</sup> Judith McClure and Roger Collins, eds., *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 215-218.

<sup>21</sup> Dennis Cronan, "Cædmon's Audience," *Studies in Philology* 109:4 (2012): 348.

validation of the events depicted on the Crucifixion panel and its own form as monumental crucifix.

### 3.2 Scriptural Quotation and Paraphrase

Another subset consists of self-referential objects that bear religious inscriptions that directly quote or paraphrase scriptural sources, though they do not always speak from a first-person voice. Despite the lack of a direct, speaking identity, the texts nevertheless refer back to the artifact itself and invite the reader to ruminate on the relationship between inscription and object. The tenth-century baptismal font from Potterne, Wiltshire is a particularly useful example (fig. 14; SR-16); an extract from Psalm 41 circumscribes the exterior lip of the stone rim: *sicvt cervvs desiderat ad fontes aqvarvm : ita desiderat anima mea ad te deus : amen* (“Just as the hart desires the water springs, so my soul desires you, O God. Amen”). The inscription connects the deer with the psalm’s human speaker, and implies the necessity of baptism. The hart’s physical thirst for water is linked to humanity’s spiritual need for salvation, a need that the font itself services. It falls to the literate reader to connect the implied self-referentiality of the text; though the inscription does not directly relate the significance of baptism, a learned medieval audience would have easily made the connection between the deer’s need for water and the soul’s need to be spiritually cleansed. As opposed to the personal inscriptions—which explicitly refer back to their supports—Potterne’s inscription creates a critical distance that forces the reader to contemplate the cultural and functional significance of the artifact and its text. It is through this act of connection that the circle of self-reference is closed.

A small walrus ivory plaque from Cambridgeshire, depicting the risen Christ, provides another example of a self-referential use of scripture (fig. 15; SR-23). On it, Jesus sits in a mandorla with Mary to his right, and St. Peter to his left. Below, two angels lift the cross, while

eight figures—probably representative of the disciples—watch from the lowest register. Christ raises his hands, which, along with his feet, show the holes from Crucifixion nails. An inscription from the Gospel of Luke appears on the upper half of the mandorla, and directs the viewer’s attention: *O vos omnu[it] mea manus et ped[es]* (“O you all, behold my hands and feet!”) (Luke 24:39). While the voice of the text conflates the writing on the object with the words of Christ, its meaning relies solely on the relationship between word and object, and the viewer’s ability to recognize that relationship. The inscription highlights the identification of Christ and validates his triumph over physical suffering and mortality. In this case, the self-referential inscription identifies and explicates the object’s iconography, as well as draws attention to the pictorial narrative’s most vital features for an audience craving salvation and eternal life: the wounds of Christ. In these cases of biblical quotation or paraphrase, the artifacts employ scripture to highlight the use of monuments like the baptismal font, or to define and clarify iconographies such as that in the walrus ivory plaque. In other words, self-referential impersonal inscriptions can privilege function, identification, and understanding of subject matter.

### 3.3 Riddles

Impersonal self-referential objects can also reflect traditional elements from other, more secular, literary types. The Franks Casket is a prolifically studied example of the connections between object, image, and text (figs. 16-20; SR-22). Likely a product of eighth-century Northumbria, the small whalebone box consists of five carved panels—the four sides and the lid—each circumscribed with a runic inscription.<sup>22</sup> The imagery comes from many different sources: the front panel depicts the Nativity of Christ and the Germanic hero Weland’s escape

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<sup>22</sup> The Franks Casket’s runic inscription is interrupted on the rear panel with the two Roman-character words *hic fugiant*.



from captivity; the left panel portrays the wolf suckling Romulus and Remus; the rear panel recounts events from Titus' sack of Jerusalem; finally, the right panel remains unidentified, but likely depicts a Germanic myth.<sup>23</sup> The runes on the sides and on the back narrate the panels' pictorial narrative, but the text on the front is completely disconnected from the iconography. As mentioned at the outset of the essay, the inscription presents a riddle: *Fisc flodu ahof on fergenberig; / warþ gasric grorn, þær he on greut giswom. / Hronæs ban* ("The wave raised the fish high on the mountain-cliff; the terror-king was sad where he swam on the shingle: whale's bone"). In this case it is the riddle's answer that refers back to the object: the casket is made from whale's bone. Although voice and identity are disconnected from the object—that is, it does not directly speak as a first-person subject—the materiality of the box becomes the focus of the self-referential inscription. The Franks Casket's substance stands as a tactile answer to its literary inscription.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> For a detailed discussion of the iconography of the Franks Casket panels, see Webster, "The Iconographic Program of the Franks Casket," 227-246. Many scholars attempt to unify the otherwise disparate iconography: recently, Richard Abels suggested that each of the box's panels reflects or foreshadows the outcome of good or bad lordship, Richard Abels, "What has Weland to do with Christ? The Franks Casket and the Acculturation of Christianity in Anglo-Saxon England," *Speculum* 84 (2009): 549-581, while Leopold Peeters argues that each panel symbolically reinforces Christian idealism, Leopold Peeters, "The Franks Casket: A Judeo-Christian Interpretation," *Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik* 46 (1996): 17-52. The same amount of attention concerns the identification of the right panel: Wadstein originally proposed that the narrative depicts a myth about Siegfried, Elis Wadstein, *The Clermont Runic Casket* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wicksells, 1900); more recent scholars challenge Wadstein's proposal. David Howlett contends that the panel represents the Scandinavian tale of the death of Balder, David Howlett, *British Books in Biblical Style* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), 230-231, while Leopold Peeters reads the scene as a relation of the madness of King Nebuchadnezzar, Peeters, "The Franks Casket," 29. The theses about the identification and unification of the iconography and themes of the Franks Casket could fill volumes and there is no scholarly consensus on the iconography or theme to date.

<sup>24</sup> Much of the scholarship to date on the thematic unity of the Franks Casket's inscriptions concerns identifying and relating them to the iconographic elements of each panel. Richard Abels argues that each of the panels' inscriptions present further commentary on the outcomes of good or bad lordship, Richard Abels, "What has Weland to do with Christ?" *Speculum* 84 (2009): 549-581. Leslie Webster reads the casket's riddle as derivative of earlier traditions of riddling and enigmas, Leslie Webster, "Program of the Franks Casket," 236, while Carol Neuman de Vegvar connects the inscription to wisdom literature in the tradition of the Anglo-Saxon Maxims, Carol Neuman de Vegvar, "Reading the Franks Casket: Contexts and Audiences," in *Intertexts: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Culture*, ed. Virginia Blanton and Helen Scheck (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 141-160. Most recently, Benjamin Tilghman contends that the box represents an Anglo-Saxon interest in the transmutation of otherwise banal to

Riddles are a recurring motif in Old English literature; pre-Conquest England had a long tradition of riddle-like Anglo-Latin enigmata, while the Exeter Book—one of the four major surviving codices of Old English literature—contains approximately ninety-four riddles in the vernacular.<sup>25</sup> Many of these texts refer to objects very much like the Franks Casket, often small and portable like simple tools or even food items. Riddle 55 from the Exeter book provides a useful comparison to the casket’s inscription: *ic seah in healle, þær hæleð druncon, / on flet beran feower cynna / wrætlic wudutreow* (“I saw in the hall, where heroes were drinking, a wondrous wooden tree of four kinds, carried on the floor”).<sup>26</sup> Like the riddle on the Franks Casket, Exeter Riddle 55 refers to a crafted, portable object—in this case a crucifix. The combination of the casket and its self-referential inscription gives the box’s riddle a level of completeness that the Exeter example lacks. The materiality of the casket serves as the riddle’s material support, its linguistic answer, and as the substantive proof of that answer. In other words, the box serves the specific needs of the genre by acting as the materialized answer to a complex puzzle. In this example, the self-reference of the inscription parallels the correct response, one half of the necessary dual-component structure of the riddle: every riddle must have its response, just as every self-referential inscription must have its object.

### 3.4 Curses and Charms

A less commonly discussed oral/literary tradition that appears within the self-referential corpus is that of the curse, as the example from the aforementioned Sutton Disc Brooch, which

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precious materials as exemplified in early riddle traditions, Benjamin Tilghman, “On the Enigmatic Nature of Things in Anglo-Saxon Art,” *Different Visions: New Perspectives on Medieval Art* 4 (2014): 1-43.

<sup>25</sup> The number of riddles in the Exeter book is debatable as there are no clear distinctions between each entry.

<sup>26</sup> G. P. Krapp and E. V. K. Dobbie, eds., *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*. v. 3 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1931-1942), 190.

curses those who might take the object from Ædwen against her will (fig. 5; SR-39).<sup>27</sup> As Brenda Danet and Bryna Bogoch note, curses most often appear in legal documents, particularly in reference to a hypothetical situation of the non-fulfillment or abrogation of a contract.<sup>28</sup> While they do not consider objects like the Sutton Disc Brooch, its inscription neatly fits into one of their typological categories, the “serious ‘whoever’ curse.” This type of curse, warns or threatens a potential “whoever” that there will be serious consequences for breaking, altering, or ignoring legal codes and documents.<sup>29</sup> A salient comparison comes from the will of Ælfsige, a tenth-century bishop: *gif hit þonne hwa do / God hine fordo ge mid sawle ge mid lichoman ge her ge on þan to feondan/ buton io hit self on oþer wænde* (“If anyone do so [alter this will],/ may God destroy him both soul and body, both here and in the future/ unless I myself change it”)<sup>30</sup> Though focused on different sources and circumstances—the ownership of an object versus the authenticity of a will—both curses conform to a formulaic discourse type. Although it extends from a larger tradition of literary curses, the Sutton Brooch appears to be the only surviving example of an artifact inscribed with a curse, with the possible exception of a set of copper alloy strips from Somerset (SR-2) that read *[e]ahahehine [. . .] tennabbe seme* (“[. . .]he will always possess it [. . .] he who may not own me”). The text of the copper strips is too fragmentary to confidently identify as a curse, although the wording implies that the object belongs to a particular owner and not anyone else.

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<sup>27</sup> *Æduwen me ag age hyo drihten / drihten hine awerie þe me hire æfterie / buton hyo me selle hire agenes willes.* This oral/literary genre more broadly includes charms and magical formulas, see Karen Louise Jolly, *Popular Religion in Late Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 26.

<sup>28</sup> Brenda Danet and Bryna Bogoch, “‘Whoever alters this may god turn his face from him on the Day of Judgment’: Curses in Anglo-Saxon Legal Documents,” *Journal of American Folklore* 105 (1992): 134.

<sup>29</sup> Danet and Bogoch, “Curses in Legal Documents,” 135.

<sup>30</sup> Danet and Bogoch, “Curses in Legal Documents,” 141.

The self-referential aspect of Ædwen's curse operates in a similar manner to the Franks Casket riddle. It utilizes the presence of the object to validate the nature of the inscription; the brooch serves as the material evidence of the text, suggesting that the disregard for codes of ownership will result in divine punishment. After reinforcing Ædwen's position as the owner of the brooch, through the presence of the personal inscription, the object acts as the curser, creating a circularity that goes far beyond the cyclical nature of an ownership formula. The artifact serves as the material object of possession, simultaneously evidencing its owned status and threatening anyone who might disrupt that status. As a speaking, self-referential inscription, the text highlights the brooch's complicity and agency in the relationship between the possessor and the possessed. For the Sutton Brooch, self-referentiality reaffirms the legal status of the owner, but pushes further to give the artifact the power and agency to curse a potential thief (or perhaps a greedy husband).

### *3.5 Maxims and Wisdom Literature*

The final self-referential inscribed example from the impersonal category is the most ambiguous. The text on the Wheatley Hill Ring (fig. 21; SR-24), found in Durham in 1993, simply states *[h]ring ic hattæ* ("I am called ring"). The significance of the inscription seems to be obvious and ambiguous at the same time. Why inscribe an object with its own linguistic signifier? Nearly any Anglo-Saxon would have been able to identify the artifact as a ring. The inscription's blatant redundancy reflects the type of obvious-yet-unclear theme found in the Old English maxims. As a genre maxims are collections of statements that relate cultural or folk wisdom. Like the inscription on the ring, many Anglo-Saxon maxims characteristically present statements so obvious that their purpose is often unclear. For example the collection contemporary scholars refer to as "Maxims II" begins with the statement *cýning sceal rice*

*healdan* (“A king shall hold a kingdom”). The claim echoes the straightforward simplicity of the Wheatley Hill Ring’s inscription, while leaving the reader—particularly the modern reader—questioning the meaning behind the assertion. It is fairly obvious that a king should hold or rule a kingdom, so why is it necessary to say so? Though the root significance of these types of maxims may never be fully understood, the ring’s inscription parallels the maxim in form and content.

An undated ring discovered in Essex, but now lost, presents an inscription that also imparts cultural wisdom and practices—in this case about the nature of injury and recompense. It bears the text *dolgbot* (“wound-compensation”), suggesting that the artifact’s purpose was to repay a wrong perpetrated by the ring’s creator or commissioner. Though the inscription is very short it is clear that the text refers to the practice of compensating others for socially inappropriate conduct or actions; in this case the ring itself is a gift that repays the person who received the *dolg*, probably a physical wound or scar. The inscription acts as a maxim-like text in its ability to reinforce the viewer’s knowledge about the cultural practice of recompense for injury, as well as to imply the importance of adhering to proscribed social codes.

If the purpose of the maxim is to express some kind of cultural wisdom, then the wisdom articulated by the Wheatley Hill Ring is self-definitive. The self-referentiality of the text places the ring as the concurrent speaker and object of the maxim’s statement. As a speaking subject the artifact acts as the most knowledgeable speaker about itself, informing the reader what to call it. The ring falls into a definition of maxims described by James Earl as texts that are not heroic or monastic, but that are rooted in the known world of the poet.<sup>31</sup> As a self-referential object, the Wheatley Hill Ring stands in for that poet and recites information about itself. The object’s materiality becomes its point of subjectivity, and it acts as a speaking subject, relating the

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<sup>31</sup> James Earl, “Maxims I, Part I,” *Neophilologus* 67 (1983): 278.

linguistic identifier applied to it by its owners and makers. In short, the self-referentiality of the maximic ring serves to disseminate cultural knowledge from the constructed identity of a knowing subject.

The subset of impersonal self-referential inscriptions shows that they echo the discourse of different categories of literature (i.e. through different genres). Though the artifacts' texts tend, in general, to be fragmented or truncated—exemplified in monuments like the Ruthwell and Brussels Crosses—their creators relied heavily on the traditional features associated with those genres. Furthermore, the examples show that the self-focused aspect of the inscriptions typically serves to further support the discursive message of the text. Thus the self-referentiality of the Franks Casket serves as the riddle's answer, the text of the Potterne baptismal font connects object function with scriptural practice, and the inscription on the Brussels Cross places the artifact as the authorized speaker of Christian poetry. In each of these cases it is the self-referential nature of the inscription that completes the function of the discourse. Despite the lack of a universally constructed identity—as exists, for example, in the personal inscriptions—these artifacts all utilize self-reference to complete the connection between the object's functional purpose and the inscription's content.

## CHAPTER IV

### QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CORPUS

Examining the entire corpus of self-referential inscriptions reveals that the Anglo-Saxons inscribed a wide range of artifacts with different inscription types in multiple scripts and languages. As stated at the outset, the corpus is purposefully broad in terms of language and material, focusing instead on unifying the examples through the self-referential nature of their inscriptions. As the group's thematic unity starkly contrasts the variety of languages, scripts, and supports, it is useful to provide a quantitative breakdown of the types of artifacts, the category and content of inscriptions, and the prevalence of languages and scripts. This analysis reveals the common characteristics, such as shared languages or scripts within a particular category, as well as more anomalous features, such as the sole appearance of a repair signature on a lead cross from Worcestershire (SR-12). Further, the corpus presents the largest number of self-referential inscribed artifacts and draws the seemingly disparate examples together under one thematic collection.

#### *4.1 Inscription Types*

The majority of Old English self-referential inscriptions identified in the present corpus fall into the personal category. Of the fifty-six inscriptions in this corpus, forty-five of the entries are personal inscriptions, leaving only eleven in the impersonal category. Subdividing the personal group results in approximately fifteen owner inscriptions, twenty-seven maker inscriptions, and three commissioner inscriptions.<sup>32</sup> Nine of the eleven impersonal artifacts explicitly represent different narrative types: two examples of Christian poetry, three scriptural texts, two riddles, one curse, and one maxim. The two remaining artifacts—a set of copper alloy

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<sup>32</sup> Due to damage and incomplete inscriptions, five inscribed objects cannot be firmly identified as maker, commissioner, or owner texts, although they are complete enough to securely read as personal inscriptions.

strips from Somerset (SR-2) and a silver stud from Egginton (fig. 22; SR-11)—are too fragmentary to securely identify; as mentioned above, the Somerset strips’ inscription appears similar to a curse or maxim-like text. The Egginton Stud reads *lædel[u]fie* (“May you love me; may you take me,” or, alternatively, “May you lead me to life”), and could parallel religious texts or Scandinavian love tokens.<sup>33</sup> The comparatively small number of impersonal examples suggests that they were less common in Anglo-Saxon England, though the extant objects show a wide range of textual content. Due primarily their functional differences—one category reaffirming social status, the other validating cultural ideals—the personal inscriptions appear to be much more straightforward in content than the examples in the impersonal category.

Although the earlier discussion of personal inscriptions presents the most common characteristics about that category, the analysis of the whole corpus reveals some noteworthy exceptions. Forty-four of the personal inscriptions explicitly follow the traditional maker, owner, or commissioner formula, placing the human as active subject and the speaking artifact as the accusative object (e.g. *Drahmal me worhte*, “Drahmal made me,” SR-34). The Worcester lead cross is the only personal example to set the object as subject: *sentio ælf.ine art[ifex] fuid* (“I knew Ælfwine who was a craftsman”) (fig. 23; SR-12). It breaks the canonical personal formula, specifically giving the artifact more active subjectivity. Despite the presence of this one non-formulaic inscription, the crucifix still reinforces its maker’s prestige, just as the formulaic examples from the personal corpus openly operated to solidify the power and prestige of the owner, commissioner, or maker. The fact that the cross bears the common OE name Ælfwine suggests that its break from the formulaic artisan signature was not cultural—in other words it is

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<sup>33</sup> Elisabeth Okasha and Richard Langley read the Egginton stud as a parallel to other medieval love tokens, many of which come from Viking lands, Elisabeth Okasha and Richard Langley, “An Inscribed Stud found at Egginton, Derbyshire: an Anglo-Saxon Love Token?” *Derbyshire Archaeological Journal* (1999): 203-205.



not the product of a continental craftsman, although it may represent the only extant surviving example of a larger group. The placement of the crucifix as active, speaking agent reaffirms its power even over its physical creator, although the text simultaneously magnifies Ælfwine's prestige through naming him.

Many of the examples examined thus far appear to be predominantly isolated inscriptions, especially those entries from the personal category. Indeed, nearly all of the examples from this corpus present a single inscription, although it is useful to note that a smaller number of these texts share space on the artifacts with other inscriptions, both self-referential and non-self-referential. Of the forty-five personal inscribed objects four include other personal inscriptions (SR-6, SR-18, SR-38, SR-39). The Lancashire ring (fig. 2) exemplifies the rare double-personal inscription, including both an owner and maker signature: *ædred mec ah eanred mec agrof* ("Ædred owns me. Eanred engraved me"). Much as the single-inscribed examples, objects like Lancashire serve to reinforce the power and prestige of the people associated with its existence—in this case the owner and engraver. In addition to these, seven other personal artifacts bear different types of inscriptions. Most notable among these are the Brussels Cross (SR-34), combining the maker signature with the two self-referential poetic lines from the rood poem and a short, non-self-referential text that names the commissioners. As mentioned in the introduction, the Stratfield Mortimer stone slab (fig. 8; SR-44) follows this trend, combining the maker signature "Toki wrote me" with a longer memorial text. The combination of a personal inscription with a non-self-referential text serves the same function as single-inscription objects. The major difference is that the owner, maker, or commissioner becomes linked with the other discourse types on the artifact. For example, the maker of the Brussels Cross—Drahmal—would be associated with both the artifact he created and the narrative of the rood poem that decorates

it. The presence of multiple texts—even in multiple scripts or languages—also imparted visual and literate distinction upon these objects. Multiple texts would have impressed even an illiterate audience.

In the impersonal category, the Ruthwell Cross, the Brussels Cross, the Franks Casket, and the Sutton Disc Brooch include multiple self-referential texts. Brussels and Sutton include self-referential personal texts—a maker and an owner formula, respectively—though the Ruthwell Cross and the Franks Casket include non-self-referential inscriptions. The other text on the cross, inscribed in Latin, narrates the monument’s sculptural program, which glorifies the life of Christ. Apart from its self-referential riddle, the Franks Casket consists of four other inscribed panels, each presenting text that relates directly to the carved scenes. It is not surprising to find text that describes the pictorial narrative in medieval art, so the unique character of the cross and the box comes from the creators’ desire to give the artifact a speaking identity that directs the audience to focus on the materiality of the object itself and not just the scenes carved into it.

Although there is variation in the content of the inscriptions and their juxtaposition with other text types, the vast majority of entries to adhere to the conventions above. Despite the exception of the Worcester lead cross, personal inscriptions overwhelmingly reinforce the authority of the human associated with them. Similarly the variety and combination of texts on the entries from the impersonal category highlights their ability to reinforce traditional discourses familiar to an Anglo-Saxon audience, such as riddles, poetry, or maxims.

#### *4.2 Languages and Scripts*

All of the texts considered in this study appear in either Latin or Old English.<sup>34</sup> A relatively small number—only about fifteen—exist in Latin, with thirty-eight objects clearly

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<sup>34</sup> The two exceptions to this are the Cleobury Mortimer sundial (SR-10) and the Bridekirk Font (SR-49). Haigh suggests that the sundial’s Old Frisian inscription states “Let the clow (pointer) eye (show you),” though many of

inscribed in Old English. Three of the inscriptions in this corpus are too fragmentary to securely identify the language; in each case a name is followed by damaged text that presents an accusative pronoun and—as one might expect—a conjugated verb (SR-15, SR-42, SR-43). Aside from reinforcing Bredehoft’s claim that vernacular literacy was more widespread than Latin literacy, the prevalence of English inscriptions suggests that self-referential objects originated from the native culture rather than the imported one.<sup>35</sup> The newly identified examples confirm Bredehoft’s observation that ownership and commissioner signatures exist only in Old English; all eighteen objects from the two categories appear in the vernacular. Maker signatures occur in both tongues: twelve maker inscriptions appear in Latin and eleven in Old English, leaving four that are too fragmentary to firmly identify. The bilingual presence in maker signatures suggests that artisans most likely operated in Latin-literate communities, whether in monasteries or among educated craftsmen. These results certainly should not suggest that any majority of Saxon workmen were predominantly Latin-speaking or bilingual, but that the types of inscribed objects that bear self-referential texts likely originated from highly educated workshops.

There are also a small number of objects that incorporate multiple scripts and languages. Eight artifacts present inscriptions that mix Roman and runic script; in most of these cases the inscriptions are predominantly Roman with one or two runic insertions (SR-46, SR-3, SR-5, SR-6, SR-18, SR-19). Each of these cases preserves the Old English language, suggesting that runes were interchangeable with Roman letters in a vernacular context. The two exceptions that include complete words and phrases in multiple scripts are the Franks Casket and the Ruthwell

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his transcriptions have been scrutinized, see D. H. Haigh, “On the Fragments of Crosses Discovered at Leeds in 1838,” *Proceedings of the Geological and Polytechnic Society of the West Riding of Yorkshire* 3 (1856-7), 502-33. Recent scholars contend that the Cleobury Mortimer inscription is now illegible. The Bridekirk Font is inscribed with Scandinavian runes, but the language is a mixture of late Old English and early Middle English: “Richard he made me and had me brought to this joy.”

<sup>35</sup> Bredehoft, “First-Person Inscriptions,” 106.

Cross. These artifacts are also bilingual, using both Latin and Old English. The Casket's rear panel (fig. 20) reads *her fegtaþ titus end giuPeasu hic fugiant heirusalim afitatores* ("Here fight Titus and a Jew. Here flee the inhabitants of Jerusalem"). The first sentence of the panel's inscription appears in runic Old English, while the second sentence is in Roman Latin (with the exception of the final word, which is in Latin but slips back into runic script). Although *tituli* on the whalebone box appear in runes, those on the Ruthwell Cross are cut in Roman script. The presence of multiple scripts is enigmatic, but, at a general level, suggests that the patrons, artisans, and audiences for these objects were educated and literate to the point that they could read different scripts and languages. This is especially true of the Ruthwell Cross as its script concretely signals a shift in language and use. It is also possible that different audiences responded to different scripts and languages, although the complex narratives and puzzles of the Franks Casket as well as the compressed iconography and monastic setting of the Ruthwell Cross suggest that they enjoyed a highly educated viewership.

Impersonal artifacts follow the trends of the whole corpus: three Latin as opposed to eight English inscriptions. These examples tend to present scriptural quotations or paraphrases, as noted on the Potterne font and the Cambridgeshire ivory plaque (SR-16, SR-23). The relatively small number of these Latin impersonal texts reinforces the vernacular presence in the self-referential corpus. The inscriptions parallel the discursive types that appear in Old English literature, carrying also the predominant secular language that permeates much of the literary and oral corpus.

In contrast to the strong vernacular presence, most of the inscriptions appear in Roman letters: only eight purely runic texts survive, leaving forty-eight Roman-letter examples.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Approximately four of the Roman-letter inscriptions contain one or more runic letters.

Whereas Latin was the less common language employed on self-referential artifacts, the Anglo-Saxons seemed to prefer Latinate script, even when using Old English. The typical combination of Roman script and Old English language implies a significant cultural synthesis: English education and literacy privileged the vernacular, but the vehicle of the content was undeniably influenced by Latin. That five of the eight runic objects predate the rest of the corpus confirms a transition from runes to Roman.<sup>37</sup> As education became a more desirable path during the ninth century—particularly under leaders like Alfred the Great (c. 849-899)—the means of learning, especially literacy in the native tongue, most likely involved primarily the Latin alphabet.<sup>38</sup> The intersection of local language and imported script suggests an Anglo-Saxon desire to retain a vernacular identity while simultaneously adopting culturally useful practices from the continent.

#### 4.3 Object Types

Where the linguistic aspect of the corpus follows a pattern—most inscriptions are Old English in Roman letters—the material component of the artifacts is more arbitrary. The corpus contains seventeen personal items: seven rings, four brooches, two caskets, two metal strap ends, a jeweled handle, and one silver stud. Seventeen of the examples appear on larger monuments with five stone crosses or shafts, six sundials, four stone slabs or grave markers, one stone baptismal font, and one dedication stone. Eleven entries are martial in nature, including four leather scabbards, three knives, two swords, and two sword or knife handles. Portable religious objects are another category, represented in the corpus by one reliquary, one bronze censer, one ivory plaque, and three processional or personal crosses. Four inscriptions decorate more

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<sup>37</sup> The Ruthwell Cross, the Franks Casket, Wheatley Hill, Cramond I, and Brandon Bone Fragment were all likely products of the seventh and eighth centuries, while the majority of the corpus comes from the ninth, tenth, and eleventh centuries.

<sup>38</sup> Richard Abels claims that Alfred's promotion of the English language paired with is proliferation of Saxon military tactics, considering both militarism and education forms of defense against foreign bodies, Richard Abels, *Alfred the Great: War, Kingship and Culture in Anglo-Saxon England* (Harlow, UK: Longman, 1998), 147-149.

ambiguous objects: two sets of copper alloy strips, one metal bar, and one whale-bone implement. The last of the fifty-six texts—the inscription on St. Mary’s Church in Breamore (fig. 24; SR-13)—is the only inscription located on the fabric of a building. From the lack of other architectural examples—no doubt due to the scarcity of pre-Conquest churches—the only sound inference to draw from a consideration of the materials alone is that self-referential inscriptions tend to appear on personal, portable objects. This is especially true of the economically valuable personal artifacts, the inscriptions of which likely acted as cultural currency to reinforce social hierarchy, while the sixteen immovable inscribed monuments serve more as public or communal objects: Breamore, the Potterne font, and the five stone crosses are tied to religious communities, just as the sundials, the grave markers, and the dedication stone informed a larger audience. In addition, moveable artifacts were more likely to survive due to the tendency to destroy, replace, or reuse Saxon monumental sculpture in later England; the Ruthwell Cross, for example, was severely damaged by iconoclasts in the mid-Seventeenth century.

The connection between artifact type and inscription type varies, although there are some notable trends. The distribution of personal inscriptions varies widely as they appear on nearly every type of object, from rings to stone crosses. As one may expect, most owner and maker texts appear on small, portable objects such as brooches, rings, and swords. Seven of the eight rings in the corpus, for example, bear personal inscriptions: four owner marks, two maker signatures, and one commissioner inscription. Similarly, all of the brooches in this corpus present owner texts. Beyond metalwork, each memorial slab (or grave marker) is inscribed with a maker signature, as are three of the four stone sundials. Finally all of the scabbards in this collection bear maker texts. Such artifacts were likely marketed to continental buyers, as all of the

scabbards but one were discovered abroad. The rest of the personal examples are distributed in no discernable pattern in relationship to the remaining object types.

Impersonal inscriptions have some notable trends as well: two of the four stone crosses contain impersonal inscriptions, as do two of the four metal crucifixes. Every other example of an impersonal text, poetic or not, stands out as one example among other objects with personal inscriptions. Even the Franks Casket, for example, is the lone self-referential impersonal text to decorate a box, although there is an inscription on the remnants of a box now in Lund (SR-43), the only other similar artifact in the corpus. The Wheatley Hill Ring is the only self-referential ring to not bear an owner, maker, or commissioner marking (SR-24). One tool, the bone handle from Brandon (SR-20), bears a compressed riddle (*wohs weoldum deoran*, “I grew on a beast”), while the other example—from Wallingford (SR-31)—presents an owner text. Finally, each brooch inscription contains an owner marking—The Northumbria Brooch (SR-18) also contains a maker signature—although the Sutton Brooch is the only example to pair an owner text with a poetic curse. The results of the analysis of the corpus show that there may be a correlation between impersonal texts and more publically viewable objects; nine of the fourteen impersonal inscriptions appear on larger monuments or in locations that imply a larger audience. As discussed above, the impersonal texts most often serve to validate the artifact’s place and use in relationship to some discursive ideal (e.g. traditional wisdom via maxims, or the power of the Cross through Christian poetry).

The inscriptions on these artifacts provide the discourse that validates the cultural significance of the supports, while the object simultaneously stands as the actionable or functional component of the discourse’s cultural significance. Thus, the challenge of the Franks Casket’s riddle is reinforced and validated by the physical presence of the whalebone box; a

reader could simultaneously ask and answer the riddle while holding the materialized question and response in his or her hands.

The breakdown of artifact types also provides useful insight into the use of language on particular objects. All four of the grave markers and memorial slabs appear in Latin. This may support the idea of the Roman Church's push to institutionalize the practice of inhumation as opposed to cremation, although the archaeological record of these types of self-referential inscriptions does not provide definitive proof of this. Scabbards are another type of artifact represented only in Latin. Five of the six swords, however, appear to be in Old English, two of which present maker signatures in the vernacular. Certain objects also exist only with Old English inscriptions: rings and brooches appear only in the vernacular. The overwhelming presence of the Anglo-Saxon language on portable wealth suggests that precious objects likely originated to bolster the financial worth and ties of figures in the secular world, while more permanent monuments—like the grave markers—present the salvific language of the medieval Church.

This analysis of the corpus suggests a few general characteristics about Anglo-Saxon self-referential inscribed artifacts:

1. They tended to be personal, portable objects most often inscribed with maker or owner signatures that place the artifact in the passive, accusative role. As only one object (SR-12) breaks this formulaic pattern, these speaking objects most commonly served to name and glorify their most closely associated human subject.
2. They privilege vernacular Old English over Latin, while favoring Roman script over runic. Furthermore, the extant examples imply that runic usage faded with



time, since the purely runic inscriptions are the earliest chronologically. This reinforces the idea that—for the English—learning was not adopting Rome’s principles, but embracing native language and culture.

3. Objects could bear more than one inscription, whether self-referential or not.

The presence of multiple texts, especially the combination of a personal signature with another type, may have added distinction in Saxon eyes. An audience would consider the inclusion of multiple inscriptions on the Ruthwell Cross, for example, as impressive, particularly if the reader were illiterate or monolingual.<sup>39</sup>

4. Each object’s constructed identity relies predominantly on its self-referentiality.

For the personal inscriptions, and a number of the impersonal texts, the voice given to the object—its direct use of the “I” or “me”—reveals this identity.

Objects that only imply a spoken self-reference, such as the Franks Casket, rely on other aspects like materiality to create a sense of identity. The box’s riddle points the reader to its whalebone materiality, creating a sort of origin story or genesis that explains the object’s existence.

These general observations apply to the corpus as a whole, though not every example follows each principle. The characteristic elements of the self-referential corpus could change as scholars identify more self-referential artifacts, but the current body of work supports the observations above. Taken together, the individual analyses and the quantitative analysis further support my two main theses: that personal self-referential inscriptions serve to reinforce the power, prestige,

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<sup>39</sup> John Mitchell, “Literacy Displayed: The Use of Inscriptions at the Monastery of San Vincenzo al Volturno in the Early Ninth Century,” in *The Uses of Literacy in Early Mediaeval Europe*, ed. Rosamond McKitterick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 186-225; Herbert Kessler, “Pictorial Narrative and Church Mission in Sixth-Century Gaul,” *Studies in the History of Art* 16 (1985): 359-370.

and control of the owner, maker, or commissioner, while the impersonal self-referential texts serve the needs of the literary and oral discourses of those owners and makers.

## CHAPTER V

### CONCLUSION

Set against the larger group of Anglo-Saxon inscribed objects, self-referential inscriptions comprise a unique group. The texts convey their information and significance through reference to the artifacts that they adorn. Other types of inscriptions—such as inscribed names or directly referential texts—do not incorporate the presence or identity of the artifact to reinforce their significance. The well-known Seax of Beagnoth, for example, carries the Anglo-Saxon futhorc on one end of the blade, and the name *beagnoð* in runes on the other (fig. 25). The name probably serves to identify someone associated with the weapon (i.e. the owner or maker), while the function of the runic alphabet remains ambiguous.<sup>40</sup> Likewise, the now lost “in deo” ring presents a disconnected Latin text: *In deo beatus deus in aeternum lumine in deo liliosus* (“In God, O God, eternally blessed, pure in the light of God”).<sup>41</sup> The text is an example of a typical religious inscription, although it completely detaches from the artifact itself; there is no reference to the artifact, nor does there appear to be any implied connection between the text and object.<sup>42</sup> As a distinct subgroup, self-referential objects structure meaning differently by presenting their texts in conversation with the function and composition of the things themselves. These examples provoke the audience to consider the synthetic significance of a text and artifact in its relationship to larger cultural and social constructions in Anglo-Saxon England.

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<sup>40</sup> Okasha observes that runic presentations of gibberish or of the Old English futhorc probably served an apotropaic or magical function. Though possible, there is no direct evidence to read the runes as mystical symbols of protection. See Elisabeth Okasha, “Inscribed Rings,” 34.

<sup>41</sup> Okasha, “Inscribed Rings,” 31.

<sup>42</sup> In contradistinction with other inscribed rings and objects that do imply a connection between text and artifact, such as the now lost Essex Ring, which read *dolgbot* (“compensation for a wound”). See Okasha, “Inscribed Rings,” 30-31.

Personal and impersonal self-referential inscribed artifacts are textualized objects that structure Anglo-Saxon cultural and social beliefs and discourses, including the concepts of social hierarchies, religious practices, and the dissemination of cultural wisdom. The owner inscriptions identify both the possessed and the possessor—a relationship strengthened by the complicity implied by the object’s supplied identity—and also highlight the significance of ownership in society. In the personal inscriptions self-referentiality fortifies the importance of the named figure by consciously speaking to reaffirm the personal connection between person and object. Although the content of the impersonal inscriptions significantly varies, the social function of these examples remains similar. Rather than identify and recognize a notable owner, maker, or patron, impersonal artifacts reinforce the cultural significance of the object and its relationship to the supplied discourse. As shown above, the artifacts from this category follow the generic traditions typically attributed to literary and oral culture. The connection between object and inscription buttresses the validity of the particular discursive message through the text’s self-reference. As such, this group of inscribed objects should be considered as powerful discursive texts alongside the more commonly studied literary texts.

Even in a more secular generic mode the impersonal texts validate discursive ideas. Both the Franks Casket and the Brandon bone handle present texts that parallel Old English riddles. The fragment’s inscription (“I grew on a beast”) places the object as a knowing speaker that confirms its own origin. Like the Brussels Cross, the bone object carries on a literary or oral tradition while serving as the physical presence that answers and verifies the riddle. Again removed a step, the inscription on the front panel of the Frank Casket avoids direct self-reference; instead the reader must make the mental connection that the material makeup of the box is physical manifestation of the riddle-text’s answer. Beyond answering the specific riddle,

the combination of textual discourse and physical response materializes the authority of an oral and literary tradition. The casket and handle serve as manifestations of riddles impossible to replicate in an oral or literary discourse simply because the textual component refers to and decorates the actual answer to that riddle. The Franks Casket speaks about itself, creating a distinctly present riddle as opposed to the disembodied—and often unanswered—enigmatic variants in the Old English codices and manuscripts. Limited only by inscribable space, these artifacts exemplify the riddle tradition and highlight the conception and creation of riddles from material culture. Unlike written accounts and oral stories, self-referential inscribed objects name and exist as the thing itself, providing a more complete hermeneutic text than can be offered on a page.

The corpus of Anglo-Saxon self-referential inscriptions sheds light on a previously unnoticed thematic group of artifacts, but also reinforces the place of physical things in the study of literature. The examples from this study carry the cultural connotations of literary and oral discourse in a much more unified and nuanced way than disembodied words on a manuscript page. Self-referential objects extend physically and temporally beyond Saxon England alongside traditional literature; artifacts like the twelfth-century Bridekirk Font (fig. 26), which reads *ricarÐ he me iwrocte and to Ðis merÐe me brocte* (“Richard, he wrought me/ and to this glory brought me”), continue to use a supplied identity to structure an audience’s understanding of the relationship between the crafted thing and its maker. English artists also continue to engrave impersonal inscriptions, like the text around the drip-band of the Gloucester Candlestick (fig. 27): *+lucison[us] virtutis opus doctrina refulgens predicat ut vicio non tenebretur homo* (“This flood of light, this work of virtue, bright with holy doctrine, instructs us so that man shall not be ignorant in vice”). Like the poetic and literary entries from this study, the candlestick’s

inscription presents a text that reinforces the function of the object and informs the audience about the relationship between that function and a higher spiritual significance. A study of such self-referential artifacts in later England—and indeed in other cultures—would provide a more full account of any social group’s philosophical methods of using material and literary culture to create meaning and structure cultural knowledge.

Self-referential inscribed objects also shed light on fictional literary creations, such as the giant’s sword in *Beowulf*. The poem states that the sword bore some narrative device that told of “the origin of ancient strife” and also the destruction of the race of giants in a flood. Scholars argue about the nature, language, and content of the inscription, some even contending that the narrative must be pictorial due to the probability that Hrothgar is illiterate.<sup>43</sup> Though beyond the scope of this project, the evidence of the early self-referential corpus entries suggests that—literate or not—high status figures sought out literary inscriptions on their metalwork goods as opposed to pictorial narratives. The *Beowulf* poet likely intended the fictional giant’s sword hilt to bear a runic or—less likely—roman character inscription, like the other types of inscribed artifacts he may have been familiar with (e.g. Ash Gilton Pommel, SR-26, or the Sittingbourne Knife, SR-6).

Extensive study of the Ruthwell Cross’s connections to the Dream of the Rood tradition exist partly due to sparsity of surviving variants of the poem; the scarcity of traditional literary analogues leads to the necessary acceptance of a monumentally inscribed text. But the necessity of the cross’s usefulness should extend to all self-referential inscriptions. A project on curses that fails to analyze the Sutton Brooch as an analogue to those in written documentation is at a

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<sup>43</sup> Schrader argues that the inscription is literary, but still incomprehensible to Hrothgar, Richard J. Schrader, “The Language on the Giant’s Sword Hilt in ‘Beowulf,’” *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 94:2 (1993): 142. Cramp and Earl believe that the narrative is likely pictorial in nature, Rosemary Cramp, “*Beowulf* and Archaeology,” *Medieval Archaeology* 1 (1957): 66; James W. Earl, “The Necessity of Evil in *Beowulf*,” *South Atlantic Bulletin* 44 (1979): 84.

disadvantage because it provides the physical and discursive example that extends beyond the scope of words restricted to a page. Perhaps more obvious, the Franks Casket must be considered when studying Old English riddles simply because it is the only example of a riddle that allows the reader to solve the puzzle while holding the materialized question and answer. The casket transmits literary and artistic ideals and holds further implications for Anglo-Saxon literacy and narratology. Through this lens self-referential inscribed artifacts provide a truly transdisciplinary and transmedial object of study; similar examples from other cultures and periods will buttress art historical or literary projects, in addition to scholarship focused on literacy, social history, and religious studies.

## APPENDIX A

### ILLUSTRATIONS



*Figure 1, The Alfred Jewel, late ninth century, Gold and Rock Crystal with Cloisonné Enamel, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.  
 Ælfred mec heht gewyrcean  
 "Alfred ordered me made"*



*Figure 2, The Lancashire Ring, ninth century, gold, British Museum, London.  
 Ædred mec ah; Eanred me agrof  
 "Ædred owns me; Eanred engraved me"*



*Figure 3, Strap end from Somerset, tenth or eleventh century, lead, privately owned.  
 Wulfstan mec ah  
 "Wulfstan owns me"*





Figure 4, Nummular Brooch from Leicester, late eleventh century, silver, British Museum, London.  
 Wylfgyfe me ah ag hire  
 "Wulfgivu owns me, owns me for herself"



Figure 5, Sutton Brooch, early eleventh century, silver, British Museum, London.  
 Ædwen me ag; age hyo drihten drihten hine awerie the me hire aefterie buton hyo me selle hire agenes willes  
 "Aedwen owns me, may the Lord own her. May the Lord curse him who takes me from her, unless she give me of her own free will"



Figure 6, Brussels Cross, early eleventh century, gold and wood, Cathedral of St. Michael and St. Gudula, Brussels.

*Drahmal me worhte*  
*"Drahmal made me"*

*rod is min nama geo ic ricne cyning / bær byfigynde blode bisteded*  
*"Cross is my name. Once I bore a mighty king, trembling and drenched with blood"*



Figure 7, Stone Sundial from Old Byland, mid eleventh century, sandstone, Church of All Saints, Old Byland, Yorkshire.

*sumarledan huscarl me fecit*  
*"Sumarledan housecarl made me"*



Figure 8, Inscribed grave stone, eleventh century, sandstone, Church of St. Mary, Stratfield Mortimer, Berkshire.

*Toki me scripsit*  
*"Toki wrote me"*





Figure 9, Dedication Stone, c. 1070-1090, sandstone slab, St. Mary-le-Wigford, Lincolnshire.  
*eirtig me let wircean and fios godian criste to lofe and sce marie*  
 "Eirtig had me built and endowed in honor of Christ and St. Mary"



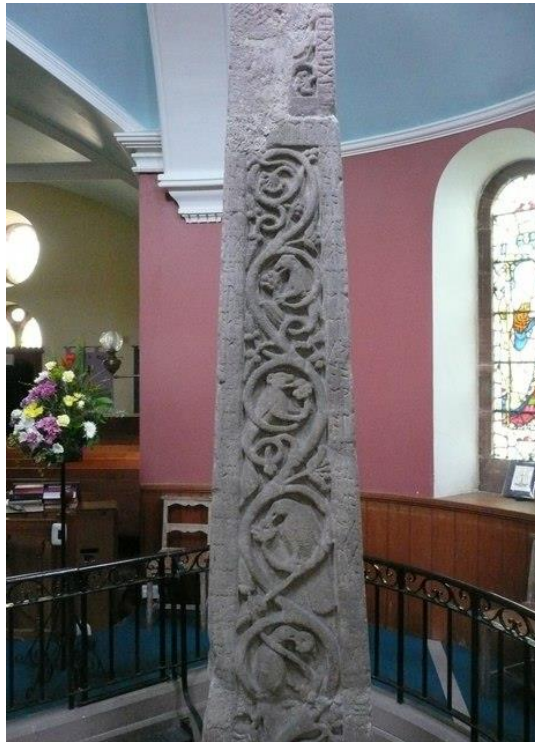
Figure 10, Ruthwell Cross south face, eighth century, sandstone cross, Ruthwell Church, Dumfries, Dumfriesshire.  
 [. . .] *ic riicne kyninc heafunas hlafard* [. . .]  
 "I raised a king, lord in the heavens [. . .]"



Figure 11, Ruthwell Cross North Face.



Figure 12, Ruthwell Cross East Face.



*Figure 13, Ruthwell Cross West Face.*



*Figure 14, Baptismal font, ninth century, sandstone, Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Potterne, Wiltshire.  
sicut cervus desiderat ad fontes aquarum ita desiderat anima mea ad te deus amen  
"Just as the hart desires the water springs, so my soul desires you, O God. Amen."*





Figure 15, Ivory plaque with Christ in Majesty, tenth or eleventh century, walrus ivory, Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Cambridge, Cambridgeshire.  
 o vos omnu[it] mea manus et ped[es]  
 "O, you all, behold my hands and feet"



Figure 16, Franks Casket right panel, early eighth century, whalebone, British Museum, London  
*Her Hos sitip on harmberga/ agl[.] drigip swa hiræ Ertæ gisgraf/ sarden sorga and sefa torna.*  
*"Here hos sits on the sorrow mound. She suffers distress in that Ertæ had decreed for her a wretched den of sorrows and torments of mind."*



Figure 17, Franks Casket left panel.  
*Romwalus and Reumwalus, twægen gibropær, afæddæ hiæ wylif in Romæcæstri, oplæ unneg*  
*"Romulus and Remus, two brothers, the she-wolf fed the in Rome, far from their native land."*



Figure 18, Franks Casket lid.



Figure 19, Franks Casket front panel.

*fisc flodu ahof on fergenberig warð gasric gron ðær he on greut giswom: hronæs ban*  
*"The wave raised the fish high on the mountain-cliff; the terror-king was sad where he swam on the shingle:*  
*whale's bone"*





Figure 20, Franks Casket rear panel.  
*Her fegtaþ titus end giuþeasu; hic fugiant hierusalim afitatoes*  
*"Here fight Titus and a Jew; here flee the inhabitants of Jerusalem."*



Figure 21, Gold Ring from Wheatley Hill, late eighth century, gilded silver, British Museum, London.  
*hring ic hattaē*  
*"I am called ring"*



Figure 22, Silver stud from Egginton, c. 850-950, silver, privately owned.  
laedel[u]fie  
"May you love (me), may you take (me)"



Figure 23, Lead Cross, eleventh or twelfth century, lead, Worcester Archaeological Service.  
sentio ælfwine art[ifex] fuid  
"I knew Ælfwine who was a craftsman"



Figure 24, South porticus, late tenth to early eleventh century, stone, St. Mary's Church, Breamore, Hampshire.  
her swutelað seo gecwydradnes ðe  
"Here the agreement is shown to you"



*Figure 25, Seax of Beagnoth, tenth century, iron with bronze, copper, and silver inlay, British Museum, London.*  
Beagnoð  
"Beagnoth"





Figure 26, Bridekirk font, twelfth century, sandstone, Church of St. Bridget, Bridekirk, Cumbria.  
 ricarþ he me iwrocte and to þis merþe me brocte  
 "Richard he made me and brought me to this glory"



Figure 27, Gloucester Candlestick, twelfth century, gilt bronze, Victoria and Albert Museum, London.  
*abbatis petri gregis et devotio mitis me dedit ecclesie sci petri gloecestre*  
 "The gentle devotion of abbot Peter and his gentle flock gave me to the church of St. Peter at Gloucester"  
*lvcis.onu] virtvtis opvs doctrina refulgens predicat vt vicio non tenebretvr homo*  
 "This flood of light, this work of virtue, bright with holy doctrine instructs us, so that Man shall not be ignorant in vice"

APPENDIX B  
TABLE OF INSCRIBED ARTIFACTS

	Findspot/Object Type	Language/Script	Inscription Type	Inscription Subtype	Text	Source
1	Wiltshire Copper Strips	Latin/Roman	Personal	Maker	thoki me fecit axortant	PAS
2	Somerset Copper Strips	OE/Roman	Impersonal	Charm or Curse?	[e]ahahehine tennabbbe seme	PAS
3	Alnmouth Stone Cross	OE/Mixed	Personal	Maker	m[y]redah meh wo[rhte]	Sculpture Corpus
4	Jarrow Stone Cross	Latin/Roman	Impersonal	Scripture	in hoc singulari signo vita redditur mundo	Sculpture Corpus
5	Edstone Sundial	OE/Mixed	Personal	Maker	loðan me wrohtea	Page, R. I.
6	Sittingbourne Knife 1	OE/Runes	Personal	Owner	s[i]gebereht me ah	Kent HER
7	Sittingbourne Knife 2	OE/Runes	Personal	Maker	Biorthelm me worte	Kent HER
8	Kirkdale Sundial	OE/Roman	Personal	Maker	haward me wrohte 7 brand prs	Page, R. I.
9	Old Byland Sundial	Latin/Roman	Personal	Maker	sumarleðan huscarl me fecit	Sculpture Corpus
10	West Midlands Sword	Latin/Roman	Personal	Maker	benevenutus me fecit	Lincolnshire HER
11	Hertfordshire Sundial	OE/Runes	Impersonal	Maxim	cla aeo iwi	Shropshire HER
12	Egginton Silver Stud	OE/Roman	Impersonal	Love charm?	lædel[u]fie	Okasha 3 <sup>rd</sup> Sup.
13	Worcester Lead Cross	Latin/Roman	Personal	Maker	sentio ælfwine art fuid	Okasha 3 <sup>rd</sup> Sup.
14	Breamore South Porticus	OE/Roman	Impersonal	Scripture	her swutelað se gecwydradnes þe	Sculpture Corpus
15	Canterbury St. Augustine Grave	Latin/Roman	Personal	Maker	[. . .] heriwald me fecit	Sculpture Corpus
16	Barton St. David Stone Bar	Latin?/Roman	Personal	Maker?	gidhild me [fecit]	Sculpture Corpus
17	Potterne Baptismal Font	Latin/Roman	Impersonal	Scripture	sicut ceruus desiderat ad fontes . . .	Sculpture Corpus
18	Putney Sword	?/Roman	Personal	Owner?	osmund [.]e[.] [. . .]	Okasha 2 <sup>nd</sup> Sup.
19	Northumbria Brooch 1	OE/Runes	Personal	Maker	gudrd mec worhte	Stephens, G.
20	Northumbria Brooch 2	OE/Runes	Personal	Owner	ælchfrith mec ah	Stephens, G.

Table of Inscribed Artifacts (continued).

	Findspot/Object Type	Language/Script	Inscription Type	Inscription Subtype	Text	Source
21	Hackness Cross	OE?/ Runes	Personal	Owner	emundr o on æsboa	Stephens, G.
22	Brandone Antler Piece	OE/Runes	Impersonal	Riddle	wohs wildum deoran	Page, R. I.
23	Cramond Brass Ring	OE/Runes	Personal	Maker?	[.]e wo[. . .] el[.]u	Page, R. I.
24	The Franks Casket	Mixed	Impersonal	Riddle	fisc flodu ahof on fergenberig	Okasha Hand-list
25	Cambridgeshire Ivory Plaque	Latin/Roman	Impersonal	Scripture	o vos omnuit mea manus et pedes	Okasha Hand-list
26	Wheatley Hill Gold Ring	OE/Runes	Impersonal	Maxim	hring ic hattæ	Okasha, Rings
27	St. Mary-le-Wigford Stone Plaque	Latin/Roman	Personal	Commissioner	eirtig me het wircean and fios	Page, R. I.
28	Ash Gilton Handle	OE/Runes	Personal	Owner	sigi mci ah	Stephens, G.
29	Bury St. Edmunds Lead Cross	Latin/Roman	Impersonal	Scripture	crux xpi triuphat crux xpi pellit ad hostem	Okasha 3 <sup>rd</sup> Sup.
30	Bodsham Gold Ring	OE/Roman	Personal	Owner	garmund mec ah im	Okasha Hand-list
31	Cuxton Silver Brooch	OE/Roman	Personal	Owner	ælfgivu me ah	Okasha Hand-list
32	Steyning Gold Ring	OE/Roman	Personal	Owner	æscwulf mec ah	Okasha 2 <sup>nd</sup> Sup.
33	Wallingford Whalebone Handle	OE/Roman	Personal	Owner	eadburh mec ah	Okasha, Hand-list
34	Wareham Iron Sword	OE/Roman	Personal	Owner	æþe[. . .] mec ah	Okasha 1 <sup>st</sup> Sup.
35	“eawen” ring	OE/Roman	Personal	Owner	eawen mie ah	Okasha 1 <sup>st</sup> Sup.
36	Brussels Reliquary Cross 1	OE/Roman	Personal	Maker	drahmal me worhte	Okasha Hand-list
37	Brussels Reliquary Cross 2	OE/Roman	Impersonal	Christian Poetry	rod is min nama geo ic ricne cyning	Okasha Hand-list
38	Pershire Bronze Censer Cover	OE/Roman	Personal	Maker	godric me wuorht	Okasha Hand-list
39	The Alfred Jewel	OE/Roman	Personal	Commissioner	ælfred mec heht gewyrcan	Okasha Hand-list
40	“sigerie” ring	OE/Roman	Personal	Commissioner	sigerie heð mea gewircan	Okasha 1 <sup>st</sup> Sup.
41	Lancashire Gold Ring 1	OE/Roman	Personal	Owner	ædred mec ah	Okasha Hand-list
42	Lancashire Gold Ring 2	OE/Roman	Personal	Maker	eanred me agrof	Okasha Hand-list

Table of Inscribed Artifacts (continued).

	Findspot/Object Type	Language/Script	Inscription Type	Inscription Subtype	Text	Source
43	Sutton Brooch 1	OE/Roman	Personal	Owner	ædwen me ag	Okasha Hand-list
44	Sutton Brooch 2	OE/Roman	Impersonal	Curse	age hyo drihten drihten hine awerie	Okasha Hand-list
45	Canterbury Stone Slab	Latin/Roman	Personal	Maker	heriwald me fecit	Okasha 1 <sup>st</sup> Sup.
46	Dublin Leather Scabbard	Latin/Roman	Personal	Maker	eadric me fecit	Okasha 1 <sup>st</sup> Sup.
47	Exeter Bronze Sword Guard	Latin/Roman	Personal	Maker	eofri me fe[. .]	Okasha 2 <sup>nd</sup> Sup.
48	Lund Wooden Box Lid	Latin/Roman	Personal	Maker	leofwin me fe[. .]	Okasha 1 <sup>st</sup> Sup.
49	Stratfield Mortimer Stone Slab	Latin/Roman	Personal	Maker	toki me scripsit	Okasha Hand-list
50	Trondheim Leather Scabbard	Latin/Roman	Personal	Maker	[. .]ic me fec[. .]	Okasha 2 <sup>nd</sup> Sup.
51	Aachen Leather Scabbard	Mixed/Roman	Personal	Maker	byrhtsige me fecið	Okasha 1 <sup>st</sup> Sup.
52	Ruthwell Cross	OE/Runes	Impersonal	Christian Poetry	[. .] ic riicnæ kyninc	Okasha Hand-list
53	Somerset Cast Lead Strap End	OE/Roman	Personal	Owner	wulfstan mec ah a	PAS
54	Surrey Cast Silver Strap End	OE/Roman	Personal	Owner	[. .]a mec ah	PAS
55	West Midlands Silver Brooch	OE/Roman	Personal	Owner	wylfyge me ah ag hire	PAS
56	Essex Ring	OE/Roman?	Impersonal	Maxim	dolgbot	Okasha, Rings



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