A Material History of Medieval and Early Modern Ciphers
Cryptography and the History of Literacy

Edited by Katherine Ellison and Susan Kim

The series provides a forum for studies that consider the material forms of texts as part of an investigation into the culture of early modern England. The editors invite proposals of a multi- or interdisciplinary nature, and particularly welcome proposals that combine archival research with an attention to theoretical models that might illuminate the reading, writing, and making of texts, as well as projects that take innovative approaches to the study of material texts, both in terms of the kinds of primary materials under investigation, and in terms of methodologies. What are the questions that have yet to be asked about writing in its various possible embodied forms? Are there varieties of materiality that are critically neglected? How does form mediate and negotiate content? In what ways do the physical features of texts inform how they are read, interpreted, and situated?

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Images, Texts, Ciphers, and the Franks Casket

Susan Kim and Asa Simon Mittman

Medieval cryptography, as surveyed in David Kahn's enormously influential and invaluable study, *The Codebreakers*, flickers in an era of "cryptologic darkness" in which occasional surviving signatures or enciphered glosses nod to the complexity of earlier beginnings and later developments "like a single candle guttering in a great medieval hall."\(^1\) While a few extremely complex encrypted texts survive, especially from the later Middle Ages—texts like the famous Voynich manuscript, for example—these encryptions are in fact not representative of the bulk of ciphered texts that have survived from the Middle Ages, and certainly not from the early Middle Ages. As Kahn and others have noted, the encrypted texts that have survived from the European Middle Ages do tend to be, as ciphers, simple: vocalic substitution ciphers, for example, or the dot or number ciphers described by both Isidore and Rabanus Maurus. For all that the basic mechanism of these substitution ciphers is simple, even "simple in the extreme,"\(^2\) however, a surprising number of these texts do not resolve cleanly into plaintext. In this essay we consider two of these problematic ciphers and their contexts: the cipher on the right hand panel of the Franks Casket, and the interpolated cipher in Exeter Book Riddle #36. We do so taking as our point of departure a scribal note addressing the use of the substitution cipher written in the margins of one eleventh-century manuscript, the so-called Vitellius Psalter (Cotton Vitellius E.xviii): "Hit is lyte craeft; ac þe haw man maeg dwelian manega men mid legðer gear ge ware ge urwar" ("It is a trivial skill; nevertheless, one can deceive many with it, both those who are aware, and those who are not.")\(^3\) We acknowledge that these ciphers, as ciphers, are "lytel craeft" but consider as well that for all their apparent triviality, they are not simply games; as the Vitellius commentator observes, they can be effective against even—or perhaps particularly—the "ware," who might be inclined to dismiss them.

Riddle 36 appears in the context of the late-tenth-century collection of Old English poems, the Exeter Book. The riddles in this collection are highly literary enigmatic texts that range from the explicitly very serious (with "book" or "bible" as their proposed solutions) to the astonishingly crude (with "key" or "onion" as their proposed solutions, but with "penis" or "erection" as their much more obvious answers). They are grouped with "wisdom literature," texts like the "Maxims," sets of gnomic verse, or Alcuin's educational dialogues, texts used to both preserve and transmit cultural "wisdom" and to train students in interpretation and in patterns of thought. They are about how we know things and what we call the things we know. Many of the riddles in fact end with the command, "Say my name" or "Say what I am called." In very simplified form, for example, in Alcuin's *Disputatio ad Pippini*, "Quid est littera" and its answer "Custos historiae" ("What is the letter: the keeper of history") fits into this tradition.\(^4\) In the case of the more elaborate riddles, these patterns of thought include classification and also require the ability to recognize multiple simultaneous, though often quite contradictory meanings, one of which can be spoken aloud, and one of which, whatever its legitimacy, must be passed over in silence.

In the foreword to the 1993 revised edition of his translation, Kevin Crossley-Holland explains that from the 96 or so riddles in the collection, he has selected as many as possible—"all those that are not either very badly damaged or impossibly obscure."\(^5\) Riddle 36, which does not appear in his edition, is not "very badly damaged." However, unlike many of the riddles with which it is bound, Riddle 36 remains without a clear "solution."\(^6\)

The text, as it appears in the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records edition, follows:

Ic white geseah on wege feran,
seio was worælice wundrum gegierwed.  
Hæfte feowere feet under wombe  
ond ehtuwe  
mön h. w. M. wiif . m . x. l. k fw f hors. qxks  
ufon on hyrace;  
Hæfte tu ðíþru ond twel tw eagan  
ond siex heafdu. Saga hwæt hie wäre.  
For flodwegas; ne was þæt na fugol ana,  
ae þæt was æghwylces anra gelincès  
horses ond mannès, hundes, ond fugles,  
ond eac wifes wilte. Pu wast, gif Pu const,  
to gesocganne, Þæt we sod witan,  
hu þære wilte wise goncę  
I saw a creature travelling on the way.  
It was splendidly, wondrously equipped.  
It had four feet under the belly and eight  
mam hump/woman mxlkfps horse qxks  
above on its back  
It had two wings and twelve eyes  
and six heads. Say what it was.
It travelled the floodpaths, nor was it a bird.
But there was the likeness of each of these:
a horse, a man, a dog, a bird,
and also the beauty of a woman. You know, if you know how
to say, what we know is true,
how things go for that creature.
(Translation ours.)

Through a seemingly straightforward substitution for each vowel of the consonant that follows it in the Roman alphabet, the encriphered line, "man h p/w m p/woman m x k f p/w f horse q x x s," can be read as "man homo woman mulier horse equus," very clearly an alternation between the Latin words for man, woman, and horse (homo, mulier, equus), and the Old English words for man, woman, and horse (menn, wif, hors). Already, then, the line suggests literate play across languages, moving between the two literary languages of Anglo-Saxon England, making a display of literacy in both languages and then exaggerating that literacy by the alphabetic manipulation of a vocalic substitution cipher.

In order to make the line come out so clearly as a substitution cipher, we have to slide around several inconsistencies. Krapp and Dobbie contend:

It is evident that the scribe... probably through inexperience with this form of writing, has jumbled his text considerably. In _h.w. M._ the w is miswritten for p, and second p has been omitted after M; in _m.x.k.w. w._ the w is miswritten for r; and the f before hors has been written in the wrong place and should follow hors.3

To make sense of the first claim, that in _h.w. M._ the w is miswritten for p, and second p has been omitted after M, one needs to know that the Old English alphabet includes a few letters that are not part of the Roman alphabet, among them the letter wyne, which looks like a slightly pointier "p" and is used where Present-Day English transcriptions use the letter "w." According to Krapp and Dobbie, if the substitution cipher were to work "correctly," we should have HPMPWIIIF. However, what appears is HWMWIIIF.

As Fred Robinson's work with syntactic glosses has made quite compellingly clear, following the expected sequence of the Latin alphabet, the Anglo-Saxon alphabet included, with some variation, a number of additional letters, the sequence wyne, thorn, asb, eth, and even sometimes the notan and ampersand.9 One way of approaching the cipher in Riddle #36, then, might be to consider that since no other "o" occurs in what is the likely plaintext (homo, mulier, equus), it is possible that this is a cipher which does not work by the expected alphabetic sequencing, and in which wyne, not "p," replaces "o." If so, then, we might have "homo" in its entirety (h wyne m wyne). Working strongly against such a proposal, however, is the problem that the wyne-substituting for o of homo must then also serve as the wyne that is the first letter of wif ("woman"). This problem underscores a central weakness of the vocal substitution cipher as a cipher. As Fletcher Pratt puts it, the vocal substitution already "violate[s] one of the cardinal principles of cryptography by making it difficult to tell a letter of the clear from an enciphered letter."

The cipher's "violation" of "cardinal principles of cryptography" is thus brilliantly underscored at this juncture by two other violations of boundary: the Latin "homo" is monstrously joined to the English "wif" as the boundaries of both word and language are transgressed in this moment of alphabetic promiscuity.11 The second wyne, that is, must belong at once to the Roman alphabet (as the cipher for the "o" of homo) and to the Anglo-Saxon alphabet (as the first letter of the Old English word wif). It joins a Latin word and an English one. It also conjoins words that represent fundamental categories of difference: man and woman.

This really could, of course, be just a mistake. But mistakes usually make sense: they work within the categories by which we know things. This moment of alphabetic promiscuity is also very like the "mistake" in the last words of the encriphered line. As Krapp and Dobbie note, "the f before hors has been written in the wrong place and should follow hors." If we do not simply "correct" or change the line, and if we take f for e and x for u, we have a sequence which places the Old English word hors inside the enciphered Latin equus.

In addition to the fact that the cipher works to create these moments of boundary confusion and violation, even in its hyper-literate-bilingual textuality, it also arrest the process of reading. Since, as noted above, many of the riddles in the Exeter Book end with some form of the demand, "Say what I am called," they require their readers to identify the speaking object that narrates the poem. Riddle #36, in contrast, draws out the problem of both posing and articulating a solution to the riddle. As Craig Williamson writes, "The cryptic line has only made solving the riddle more difficult."12 But in addition, its final line, "Pu wast, gifu pu consti to gescanegne, Pea we sodan witana..." ("you know, if you know how to say, what we know is true...") makes clear the difference between knowing something and knowing how to speak it, and it emphasizes again that the encriphered line, by taking out the vowels of the Latin, renders the words unspeakable. Especially given that Anglo-Saxon readers likely read aloud, even when they were alone, the moment of pause which the cipher creates, however briefly, before resolution into articulate language(s) thus also provides the opportunity for its readers to stop reading while continuing to look at the letterforms on the page, thus both to denaturalize and make visible the processes of reading and to separate the forms on the page from the spoken language it represents.
Such intellectual play with language is not restricted to pages proper. The eighth-century whalebone chest we now call the Franks Casket similarly pushes us to consider the relationships across representational systems—across languages and alphabets, between images and texts, and between the ways we make meaning from each, and it does so most powerfully through its use of secret writing. The Franks Casket has engravings on all four sides as well as its lid (Figure 2.1). The four sides all also have inscriptions running around their edges as well as sometimes within the space of the images. The lid contains an inscription within the space of the image, and it is missing some framing panels that might also have contained inscriptions like those on the sides. The casket’s images depict, wildly, episodes from Germanic mythological history (like the story of Weland the Smith), Christian narratives (the adoration of the Magi), and Roman mythology and history (the suckling of Romulus and Remus, the conquest of Jerusalem). The inscriptions not always but sometimes have what appears to be a direct relationship to the images. On the rear panel, for example, the inscription “Hic fugiant hierusalem” (“Here they flee Jerusalem”) surrounds a scene that seems to involve fleeing figures. The various inscriptions are in Roman letters in different scripts, in Old English runes—forward, backward, and upside down—and in Latin, in Old English, and, on the right side, in some kind of substitution cipher (Figure 2.2). This is a remarkable diversity of writing strategies on an object that is less than nine inches in its longest dimension, and it attests to the strong drive in the literate, learned culture of Anglo-Saxon England to explore the possibilities of written language by taking it apart and reconfiguring it in novel ways.

As R. I. Page notes, attempts at solution of the cipher are “too many, diverse, and improbable ... to discuss here.” But, and without entering into the debate too fully, we note that it is likely a vocalic substitution cipher of some kind involving variant or cryptic rune-like forms. Part of the difficulty in rendering the cipher has to do with the problem of how we understand the relationship between the texts and images. The texts on the back and left panels seem to be providing identification or explanation for the images they frame: “Romulus and Remus, two brothers,” and “Here the inhabitants flee Jerusalem.” It is difficult to reconstruct from the images on the right panel, however, the likely parameters of a text that might identify this rather baffling sequence involving a bird-horse-snake-man hybrid, a warrior, a horse, and three hooded figures.

The fact of the existence of the cipher alone charges the way we approach the rest of the casket’s images and texts. Thomas Klein has noted that the text of the back panel, “Hic fugiant hierusalem” (“Here they flee Jerusalem”), not only includes both Old English and Latin, but it also moves between runic letters and, like many Anglo-Saxon manuscripts, both Roman and insular scripts, with the difference between the writing systems clearly emphasized. As Klein observes, the letters of the Latin text are smaller than most of the runes. Also, in contrast to the runes, which are “firmly attached to the bases of their text boxes,” the Latin letters “float in the relatively narrow rectangular space dedicated to them.” The alternation between the Roman majuscule and rounded...
insular miniscule forms marks them as clearly different from each other and from the runic letters of the other texts.

The carving techniques used to render these framing texts, as well as the texts within the image on the right panel, are the same as those used to produce the casket's images. Both are produced with medium relief carving, slightly undercut at the edges to produce a floating effect. The sameness of material and technique creates a visual correspondence between text and image, and it therefore invites the viewer to enact a sort of transdisciplinary maneuver of reading images and viewing texts. This strategy, which we find in many Anglo-Saxon and insular works such as the elaborate incipit pages in insular Gospel books (Figure 2.3),

![Image of Irish Evangelary from St. Gall, Ireland, c. 750. Switzerland, St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 51, p. 79 (www.e-codices.unifr.ch). Reproduced under Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License.](image)

emphasizes and exaggerates the visuality of the text. The text of the opening of the Book of Mark in the St. Gall Gospels, for example, fuses together the first three letters of “initial,” turning them into a lively, pattern-filled form that not only invites a slow and close inspection but also so exaggerates the congruence of letter and image that it by necessity stops the reading process.

These first three letters are barely legible as letters, and we can only read them at all by predicting what the text should say. They might just as well be an “H,” or perhaps an “O.” They could read “Ibi” or “Idi” as easily as “Ini.” Further, we cannot count the curious, interlacing beasts (eleven) nor follow the intricate lines of the knotwork panels while still reading the linear sequence of letters and words of the page in a meaningful way. Indeed, the nature of the forms used here even defies the reading of the letterforms as two-dimensional marks on a flat page: “even though ornament, and particularly interlace, is generally thought of as a linear art, it has the effect of imparting to the resolutely two-dimensional manuscript page a sense of mass and texture.”

The presentation of the texts of the casket similarly defies straightforward reading practices predicated on more common writing practices that facilitate the turn, in textuality, away from the materiality of the text. The casket’s use of multiple languages (Old English, Latin), scripts (runic, Roman), carving techniques (one panel is incised while the rest are carved in relief), and orientations (upright, inverted, boustrophedonic, reversed) continually interfere with the reader’s habits—particularly the “ware” reader’s habits—of disregarding the way the text has been physically written as what might constitute textual meaning.

In Klein’s argument, the marked and seemingly intentional differences between the script forms used on the casket index “the moment of encounter between several systems of writing, and the carver’s conscious strategies for dealing with that encounter,” in a demonstration of fluency and confidence in all of them. Another way of reading Klein’s thoughtful observations, however, might be to suggest that this display of textuality might also function, like other exaggerations, and like the “secret writing” of the cipher on the right panel, like the ornate, deconstructed letterforms of insular manuscripts, to make visible, and to challenge, the processes of representation it requires. That is, this demonstration of textual confidence requires participation in its systems for writing and reading (we need to know how those systems work, and we need to be part of the overlapping textual communities they reflect and create). At the same time, by making those same systems visible, this remarkable display of confidence also makes it possible to imagine reading and viewing differently.

Marijane Osborne, for example, taking into consideration the context of the right panel cipher (See Figure 2.2), draws our attention to the dots
in the lower inscription on the front panel and suggests their function as part of another cipher system, a common system involving the substitution of arrangements of dots for letters dating back to the Romans and described for the early medieval context in Rabanus Maurus's ninth-century *De inventione lingvarum*. For Osborne, the likelihood that the dots in the casket inscription are functioning as ciphers is increased by their proximity to an odd figure in the image space, that thing that looks like a goose. In fact, she argues that the inclusion of the dots-as-cipher might change the word "gastric," usually translated as "powerful one" or "angry one" to a word that means something like "he who has power over geese/souls."18

To make that association, to suggest that the text is in interaction with the image, is not such an unusual claim—we make that argument all the time in the study of illuminated manuscripts. But on the Franks Casket, something perhaps more complex is going on with respect to the relationship of text and image. In a number of places, inscriptions occur within the space of the images. These can be quite useful, like the identification of the Magi on the front panel, or the naming of Aegili on the top. In a number of other places, however, there are runic inscriptions within the space of the images that are not so clearly marked off in a caption space, as on the front panel: in fact, in a few of these places, the inscriptions are very difficult to read even as text. On the rear panel, for example, the words "risci," "bita," and "wudu" are all but lost in the "wudu," the representations of wood, around them.

Once one is looking for text not only in the frames around the images, but in the images themselves, one can become accustomed to resolving these lines and curves into letters, and then into words. Tilghman argues that a central theme of the casket's complex text-image program is "the transformation of objects and the fashioning of matter into new things."19 The writing processes wrought in the casket and the reading practices elicited by it suggest further forms of transformation and fashioning. The fact that many of the casket's letterforms and imageforms are structurally and stylistically indistinguishable invites us to approach the images *differently*, apprehending sequences, patterns, and repetitions as potential text to be deciphered for a textual meaning. Again, that brings us to the effects of the appearance of ciphers within texts and images. Many of the ciphers available in the early Middle Ages, in fact, are not letters or letterforms, or even sequences of dots, but forms that closely resemble images. These ciphers involved images of fish bones, trees, slips, and men with forked beards or pigs with lice. They work as ciphers by dividing each image into two sections, and then by marking one of the two by a section of the alphabet, and the other by a place within that section of the alphabet.20 The hahal runes provide a very simple example of such ciphers: tree-like forms with a vertical and "twigs" on either side marking the section of the runic alphabet and the place in the sequence within that section of the alphabet. Certainly, such runes survive in England, for example on the Hackness stone [eighth or ninth century].21

If, with cipher systems like the hahal runes or the dot ciphers in mind, however, we return to the Franks Casket and consider not only the obvious ciphers but also the many dots and squiggles—what have been called "meaningless curves used primarily as space fillers"22—we must consider that we may no longer separate the "image space" from the textual borders. We can consider the pattern of dots on the lid, the arrangement of arrows and their irregular fletching, and the sequences of tree trunks with sets of two or three roots on either side of the vertical, just as initial forays into this kind of examination. To be absolutely clear, we are not arguing that these dots and tree-like structures *actually are* (necessarily) an elaborate code or cipher. We are certainly tempted, and certainly interested in how such temptation works, but we are not proposing here an elaborate decryption of this puzzling object. We instead suggest that the integration of letters, letterforms, and the substitutions for letters—the integration of text, and particularly of *secret* writing, into the images of this object—is a powerful seduction to engage particular and particularly exaggerated *modes of reading*, and thus also an opportunity to see, and thus to re-consider, how we read images and texts, and how we do or do not attempt to "resolve" them into meaning.

In "Millions and Millions of Distinct Orders," Katherine Ellison argues that cryptographers in the seventeenth century exploited a "moment of encounter between several systems of writing," similar to the one Klein locates on our casket.23 Ellison writes

> that cryptographers ... were not only conscious of the perceived competition between print and script but also capitalized upon that tension... Secret writing forced readers to acknowledge their habits with texts, to see pages differently, to reprioritize what should be noticed, and to realize the blind spots created by contemporary conventions.24

In her reading of John Wilkins's *Mercury*, or, *The Secret and Swift Messenger*, Ellison considers, for example, Wilkins's "biform code" employing two different handwriting styles, but also codes manipulating "visual cues in spaces the reader would not be looking at while reading,"25 for example the arrangement of dots which might blend into letterforms and images: "[e]ach point, if camouflaged as part of a letter or image, as stray ink between the lines, or even as reader marginalia, can blend into the spaces readers may overlook as they focus on the words"
and images themselves. Secret writing, that is, makes visible not only how, but also where we find textual meaning. By displacing meaningful symbols from the textual space proper into "spaces the reader would not be looking at while reading," that is, secret writing at once exaggerates and de-conventionalizes the process of reading: readers of secret writing move from the sequences of forms to the more conventional textual sequences they point to, and from there to meaning necessarily elsewhere. At the same time, readers of secret writing must also begin elsewhere, outside the spaces and forms proper to the text, and outside the now visible conventions of reading text. What does it mean to begin and end outside the ways we know and represent? What does it mean to make ourselves see the ways we know and represent, and to see the limitations of the categories of difference we maintain in order to do so? To comprehend such things about the ways we sustain our understanding of human intelligence?

A number of scholars have identified the text on the front of the Franks Casket as a riddle, like the literary riddles of the Exeter Book. As a riddle, it was part of "a cacophony of things constantly chattering about themselves, not only through riddles, but also in the form of inscriptions on actual objects" to which "Anglo-Saxons were subject." Especially given Klein's argument for the casket's display of textual confidence, considering the text on the front panel as a riddle is particularly provocative: unlike the literary riddles, like Riddle 26 (the "book" riddle), the riddle here turns not away from the materiality of the text, but rather, and insistently, back toward it, as the riddle's "solution." In the "book" riddle, the riddle takes the material, the animal, the "mec" deprived of life, as its starting point ("Mec feonda sum feore besynpede [a certain enemy came, deprived me of life], from which it develops, from object to subject, into the "Ic" which speaks, which can demand that the reader/listener name it as the book ("Frige hwæt ic hatte ["Say what I am called"]). In marked contrast, the casket riddle names not its transformation but what is perhaps its own material, brenæsban, as the "solution" to the riddle.

In this way, these two types of puzzle—the cipher and the riddle—both tilt in the same direction. They both stop us from reading as we would usually read and instead draw our attention to the mechanisms, the technologies through which we read. The cipher reveals the letters, those keepers of history, for what they are: abstract shapes with no organic or causal connection to the sounds they represent in words with no organic or causal connection to the meanings they represent. By replacing one letter with another, or replacing a known letter with a new and unknown one, the carver at once exaggerates and disrupts their function as letters. The Exeter Riddle, with its strange deconstruction and interlacing of words, and its enciphered letters serving as ligatures binding languages together, reminds us that this exaggeration and disruption is not unique to the Franks Casket. However, the riddle carved into the bone of the front panel further estranges us from our inculcated and naturalized reading processes. It highlights its own material in a way that is familiar to historians of early medieval art (though perhaps less so to historians of language). Herbert Kessler stresses:

Overt materiality is a distinguishing characteristic of medieval art. In most works, the substances used to fashion figures and ornament are apparent in ways that, say, the oil paint on a fifteenth-century Flemish panel or the marble of a Neo-classical sculpture are not. The materials do not vanish from sight through the mimicking of the perception of other things; to the contrary, their very physicality asserts the essential artifact of the image or object. Such typically medieval media as mosaic, stained glass, and enamel all demonstrate this point.

So, of course, does whalebone. The casket's riddle stops our eyes from seeing only letters—enciphered or clear—and instead causes us to refocus our vision on the material out of which they were carved, on the bone, and on the delicate techniques used to bite and hew and chip it away until the glossy runic twigs stood out from the lightly textured background.

Focusing on the material of this inscription, however, also calls out a particular challenge not only to the processes of reading, but also to the understanding of the genesis of the letter itself. Many discussions of runic forms suggest that these forms were explicitly designed to be incised into hard surfaces like wood and bone, hence their exclusive use of straight lines. Erik Moltoke, for example, observes that in general "letter shapes of an alphabet are determined by the material in which they are written or cut" and that runic forms with their vertical and diagonal lines were designed to be carved in wood," the grain of which would make curved and horizontal lines difficult to read and to carve. Michael Barnes has noted very clearly the circularity of this commonplace, however: it works on the argument that "the vertical, diagonal and angular lines" of many early inscriptions reflect the necessity of carving at an angle to the grain of wood and the greater ease of doing so without curves (the shapes show that wood was the material), but also that "since wood was the primary material, the first runes must have had a shape suited to working in that medium," that is, vertical, diagonal, and angular (because wood was the material, the runes took these shapes). As Barnes continues, the commonplace must also be considered with the provisos that wood is perishable, and most of the earliest inscriptions we have now are not on wood but on metal, and that a number of medieval inscriptions that are on wood survive with not angular but "beautifully rounded runes." On the front of the Franks
Casket, just below the enframing inscription, is a secondary inscription on a small rectangular panel. Here, the runes are incised, as is far more typical than the relief carving of the other inscriptions on the casket. As the riddle is carved in relief, with a frame around it to emphasize its inversion, so the incised inscription is presented on a raised panel. The word of the relief inscription just above the incised panel, the word carved in this raised relief, is “ahof,” that is, “raised,” ensuring that the reader not miss the word-and-form play. If the material gives shape to the letter in its originary state, nonetheless, the letter can be, as it is here, shaped in absolute defiance of what is most congenial to the material: the exaggeration here is like the exaggeration of secret writing. The casket riddle makes visible the “blind spots created by contemporary conventions”—in fact, perhaps the blind spot of textuality: the turn away from the materiality of the sign. As the Vitellius annotator claims, “it is a trivial skill,” but we hope not so easily dismissed for all that. In the early medieval contexts in which these “simple in the extreme” ciphers appear, do explorations of and challenges to the ways we still do read, view, and know.

The Franks Casket, as the larger context for all this enigmatic writing and image making, is an object we can only identify in very rudimentary terms. Barnes has argued that for runic inscriptions in particular:

> it cannot be emphasized too strongly that runic inscriptions are much more than texts. The type of object bearing the inscription will often hold a clue to the interpretation of the message; size, shape and material can all influence layout; runes may owe their particular appearance, and words their spelling, to the condition of the surface into which the inscription is carved, and so on. 32

But, as Benjamin Tilghman observes:

> we cannot even say for certain what many of our most famous [Anglo-Saxon] objects are; or were intended to be. The Franks Casket, for example, has been identified as a treasure chest or a book shrine, and was used in the later Middle Ages as a reliquary, but all we can say with any certainty is that it is a box that likely originally had a latch. 33

We do not know, that is, what the Franks Casket was designed to do, or what it did, in its context of production and early reception, beyond that it was “a box that likely originally had a latch,” that it was used to hold and carry something in its secret interior. We propose here that one way the Franks Casket works through its cipher and its many gestures toward secret writing, however, is through externalizing that interior, making its secrecy visible and public. The runic letters across the bottom of the front panel are backward and run right to left. While this reversal is in itself not terribly unusual, in this context, it presents the haunting possibility that we might read it, as we are accustomed to reading, if only we could do so from the inside of the box, somehow on the other side of representation, reading through the bone.

Notes
2 Kahn, Codebreakers, 89.
6 However, most editions conclude that probable solutions include “Man, Woman, and Horse” and “Ship.” For example, Frederick Tupper, Jr., ed., The Riddles of the Exeter Book: 154–157; Craig Williams, ed., The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 248–252; and George Philip Krapp and Elliot Van Kirk Dobbie, eds., The Exeter Book (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), 341.
7 Krapp and Dobbie, Exeter Book, 198.
8 Ibid., 341.
10 Fletcher Pratt, Secret and Urgent: The Story of Codes and Ciphers (Garden City, NY: Blue Ribbon Books, 1942), 44.
12 Williamson, Old English Riddles, 249.
13 Raymond I. Page, An Introduction to English Runes, 2nd ed. (Woodbridge: The Boydell Press, 1999), 178. For example, proposed by Marijane Osborne: “Here the hos sets upon the taster of harm.\Affliction prevails, so that to her the earth-isle is a grave, a sore den of sorrows and of torments to the mind.” Marijane Osborne, “The Grammar of the Inscription on the Franks Casket, Right Side,” Neuphilologische Mitteilungen, 73, no. 3 (1972): 663–671. Earlier, Osborne proposed: “Here a group are situated on a hill of grief: \Egil is active, so that to them this earth-isl...
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