Segn of the times: a new solution for Exeter Riddle 55

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ABSTRACT

This article proposes 'military standard' or 'banner', OE *segn*, as the solution to the problematic Exeter Book Riddle 55 (*Ic seah in healle*…). The solution addresses each of the clues offered by the riddle-poet, using an object with attested sociocultural significance to the early English people. In so doing, it attempts to resolve several longstanding critical questions surrounding the riddle, and highlights some of the sociocultural insights to be gained from this riddle-solution pair.

Despite their ludic nature, riddles have long been recognized by scholars as a valuable source of insight into the cultures that generate them. In certain contexts, the presentation and solution of riddles can serve important social functions, including initiation, commemoration or the transmission of collective social wisdom or belief.[1] However, an important distinction between riddles and other means of sociocultural communication is their two-part structure: the inseparable pairing of question, posed by the riddler, and answer, supplied by the audience.[2] The cultural insights to be gained from riddles are therefore predicated on knowledge of both elements. For the riddle to be meaningful, one must know, with reasonable confidence, both the question *and* its intended solution.[3]

For these reasons, the approximately ninety-five Old English poems known as the Exeter Book Riddles (Exeter, Cathedral Library, 3501) have proven both valuable and notoriously problematic as a source of insight into the early English

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[1] See M. Cavell, *Weaving Words and Binding Bodies: the Poetics of Human Experience in Old English Literature* (Toronto, 2016), p. 28; A. Davis, '*Agon* and *Gnomon*: Forms and Functions of the Anglo-Saxon Riddles,' *De Gustibus: Essays for Alain Renoir*, ed. J. M. Foley (New York, 1992), pp. 110–50, esp. 120–1 and 128; D. Ben-Amos, 'Solutions to Riddles', *Jnl of Amer. Folklore* 89 (1976), 249–54. See also J. Neville, 'The *Exeter Book Riddles*' Precarious Insights into Wooden Artifacts', *Trees and Timber in the Anglo-Saxon World*, ed. M. D. J. Bintley and M. G. Shapland (Oxford, 2013), pp. 122–43. For sociocultural functions in performance, see R. D. Abrahams, 'The Literary Study of the Riddle', *Texas Stud. in Lang. and Lit.* 14 (1972), 177–97.

[2] Abrahams, 'Literary Study', p. 182.

[3] Ben-Amos, 'Solutions to Riddles', p. 253. See Davis's observation that 'once the answers have become as traditional as the questions, they become discourses for the confirmation of truths held in common' ('*Agon* and *Gnomon*', p. 124).

culture that produced them.[4] On one hand, the wide-ranging riddles have been treasured by scholars as a 'catalogue of ephemeral objects', a representation of cultural artifacts and practices otherwise unattested in the surviving Old English corpus.[5] Although some of the riddles are based on Latin precedents, 'the majority are likely true folk products', reflecting the contemporary values and experiences of their creators.[6] As such, they offer tantalizing views into the everyday cultures of early medieval Britain and, particularly, that society's collective understanding of certain material objects they encountered on a regular basis.[7]

On the other hand, as Jennifer Neville has emphasized, the Exeter Book Riddles are a problematic source of sociocultural insight because none of them actually includes a recorded solution.[8] Thus, we must solve each riddle as accurately as possible before we can fully access the information it preserves. This endeavour is complicated, first, by our distance from the original source, and second, by the nature of the riddles themselves, which are intentionally designed to obscure, rather than emphasize, their proper solution.[9]

[4] For the complete Exeter Book Riddles, see ASPR, vol. III (1936). See also B. J. Muir, *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry: an Edition of Exeter Dean and Chapter MS 3501*, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (Exeter, 2000); and C. Williamson, *The Old English Riddles of the 'Exeter Book'* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1977); F. Tupper, *The Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Boston, 1910); A. J. Wyatt, *Old English Riddles* (Boston, 1912); F. H. Whitman, *Old English Riddles*, Canadian Federation for the Humanities Monograph 3 (Ottawa, 1982); P. F. Baum, *Anglo-Saxon Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Durham, NC, 1963); and C. Williamson, *A Feast of Creatures: Anglo-Saxon Riddle Songs* (Philadelphia, 1982).

[5] Bintley and Shapland, introduction to *Trees and Timber*, pp. 1–18. See also Neville, '*Exeter Book Riddles*' Precarious Insights', p. 122.

[6] G. A. Morgan, 'Dualism and Mirror Imagery in Anglo-Saxon Riddles', *Jnl of the Fantastic in the Arts* 5 (1992), 74–85, at 76. For Anglo-Saxon collective wisdom in the Exeter Riddles, see R. Boryslawski, 'The Elements of Anglo-Saxon Wisdom Poetry in the *Exeter Book* Riddles', *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia* 38 (2002), 35–49. For the Latin-inherited riddles as a source of Anglo-Saxon cultural insight as well, cf. E. von Erhardt-Siebold, *Die lateinischen Rätsel der Angelsachsen* (Heidelberg, 1925), pp. 1–3.

[7] As Marijane Osborn observes, 'the majority of these brief poems depend on a knowledge of objects and creatures familiar to the Anglo-Saxons for their answer'. M. Osborn, '"Skep" (*beinenkorb, *beoleap*) as a Culture-Specific Solution to *Exeter Book* Riddle 17', *ANQ* 18 (2005), 8–18, at 8.

[8] Neville, '*Exeter Book Riddles*' Precarious Insights', pp. 122–5.

[9] As Davis puts it, 'There is an explicit confrontational element, or *agon*, in the surface conventions of the riddle, and certainly in the act of riddling, involving as it does at least two parties, one of whom has something the other wants (the answer) and is making trouble about giving it up' ('*Agon* and *Gnomon*', p. 128). For obfuscation and misdirection as characteristics of the Anglo-Saxon riddles, see S. A. Mitchell, 'Ambiguity and Germanic Imagery in OE Riddle 1: "Army"', *SN* 54 (1982), 39–52, esp. 39; M. Salvador-Bello, *Isidorean Perceptions of Order: the Exeter Book Riddles and Medieval Latin Enigmata*, Med. European Stud. 17 (Morgantown, WV, 2015), 17; and W. Tigges, 'Signs and Solutions: a Semiotic Approach to the Exeter Book Riddles', *This Noble Craft…: Proceedings of the Xth Research Symposium of the Dutch and Belgian University Teachers of Old and Middle*

The majority of the Exeter Book Riddles have been solved to the satisfaction of the scholarly community. However, there remain several riddles in the Exeter Book for which no comprehensive solution has yet been firmly identified. It is important to continue trying to solve them, since fixing the solutions will unlock the full range of cultural insights to be gained from these texts.

Foremost among these problematic specimens is Riddle K-D 55, which has been called 'a stumper', and 'one of the most challenging riddles to be found in the Exeter Book'.[10] Although a number of answers have been proposed, there has not yet been a consensus identification of the object this riddle describes. The text reads:

> Ic seah in healle, þær hæleð druncon,
> on flet beran feower cynna,
> wrætlic wudutreow ond wunden gold,
> sinc searobunden, ond seolfres dæl
> [5] ond rode tacn, þæs us to roderum up
> hlædre rærde, ær he helwara
> burg abræce. Ic þæs beames mæg
> eaþe for eorlum æþelu secgan;
> þær wæs hlin ond acc ond se hearda iw
> [10] ond se fealwa holen; frean sindon ealle
> nyt ætgædre, naman habbað anne,
> wulfheafedtreo, þæt oft wæpen abæd
> his mondryhtne, maðm in healle,
> goldhilted sweord. Nu me þisses gieddes
> [15] ondsware ywe, se hine on mede
> wordum secgan hu se wudu hatte.[11]

Previously proposed solutions have included a shield or scabbard; a liturgical cross and/or gallows; a drinking bowl and barrel; a harp; a reliquary; and a tetraktys.[12]

English and Historical Linguistics, Utrech, 19–20 January, 1989, ed. E. Kooper, Costerus ns 80 (Amsterdam, 1991), 59–82, esp. 79.

[10] Williamson, *Feast of Creatures*, p. 196; and K. Taylor, 'Mazers, Mead, and the Wolf's-Head Tree: a Reconsideration of Old English "Riddle 55"', *JEGP* 94 (1995), 497–512, esp. 512. Numbering based on ASPR III, 208. Alternatively identified as Riddle 53 by Williamson, *Old English Riddles*; and as Riddle 13 by Baum, *Anglo-Saxon Riddles*. For more on the difficulty of this particular riddle, see also Williamson, *Old English Riddles*, p. 300; J. D. Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems and the Play of the Texts*, Stud. in the Early Middle Ages 13 (Turnhout, 2006), 61–2; and P. J. Murphy, *Unriddling the Exeter Riddles* (University Park, PA, 2011), p. 61.

[11] As found in ASPR III, 208. For my proposed translation, see below, p. 69.

[12] Shield/scabbard: F. Dietrich and S. A. Brooke, cited in Tupper, *Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 188; and Wyatt, *Old English Riddles*, p. 106. Scabbard: 'richly decorated (lines 3, 4), and divided into quarters by a cross' (*ibid.*); also cited in Williamson, *Old English Riddles*, p. 301. Cross: Tupper,

Among the most widely supported solutions are also a range of answers having to do with the storage of weapons, including a sword box, a rack or a hanger.[13]

However, as John D. Niles explains, in addition to being aesthetically satisfying, a reasonable solution to any riddle must succeed in three key areas: lexical accuracy, textual comprehensiveness and historical plausibility.[14] Thus, the 'correct' solution for Exeter Book Riddle 55 must be based on the most likely interpretation of each word in the text; it must comprehensively address every detail in the riddle; and, it must correspond 'to some reality known to have been within the grasp of the Anglo-Saxon riddler'.[15]

Based on these criteria, and as earlier scholarship has demonstrated, each of the previously proposed solutions to this riddle is problematic in at least one major respect.[16] For example, 'cross' is linguistically problematic as a primary solution, as it necessitates the translation of *abæd* (12b) as 'ward off', rather than 'force, compel, demand' or 'receive' (from *abiddan*). As Williamson explains, such a reading 'is certainly stretching both the meaning of *abæd* and the natural syntax of the line', but without such a modification, it is unclear how the Cross 'receives' or 'demands' a sword for its liege lord.[17] For practical reasons, 'scabbard' and 'shield' are problematic with regard to the object's composition from four types of wood (9–10a).[18]

Riddles of the Exeter Book, p. 189; and H. Pinsker and W. Ziegler, *Die altenglischen Rätsel des Exeterbuchs: Text mit deutscher Übersetzung und Kommentar* (Heidelberg, 1985), pp. 275–6. Murphy insists that 'whether Riddle 55's solution is scabbard, sword box, or weapon rack, then, surely the metaphorical focus is on the cross' (*Unriddling*, p. 63). See also D. Bitterli, *Say What I Am Called: the Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book and the Anglo-Latin Riddle Tradition* (Toronto, 2009), p. 129. Gallows (or sword-rack): F. Liebermann, cited in Williamson, *Old English Riddles*, pp. 301–2; Tupper, *Riddles of the Exeter Book*, pp. 188–9; and Murphy, *Unriddling*, p. 67. Drinking bowl and barrel: Taylor, 'Mazers, Mead, and the Wolf's-Head Tree'. Harp: M. Trautmann, cited in Tupper, *Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 188; and Williamson, *Old English Riddles*, p. 301. Reliquary (*scrin*): Neville, '*Exeter Book Riddles'* Precarious Insights', p. 125. Tetraktys: G. K. Jember, *The Old English Riddles: a New Translation* (Denver, CO, 1976), appendix, n.p.

[13] See, for example, Williamson, *Old English Riddles*, pp. 301–2; Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, pp. 61–9 and 75–81; and Murphy, *Unriddling*, pp. 62–3.

[14] Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, p. 30.

[15] A. N. Doane, 'Three Old English Riddles: Reconsiderations of Numbers 4, 49, and 73', *MP* 84 (1987), 244–57. See also Whitman, *Old English Riddles*, p. 15.

[16] For an overview of the primary objection(s) to each solution offered to date, see especially Williamson, *Feast of Creatures*, pp. 196–7; Taylor, 'Mazers, Mead, and the Wolf's-Head Tree', pp. 497–8; and Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, pp. 61–2 and 68–73.

[17] Williamson, *Old English Riddles*, p. 303; see also Muir, *Exeter Anthology* II, 651–2; and *ASPR* III, 350. Cf. Salvador-Bello, *Isidorean Perceptions of Order*, p. 371, for sword as dedicatory offering to a church (i.e. to the Cross). Pinsker-Ziegler suggest instead that the Cross (their chosen solution) 'served' its lord Christ 'as a weapon' (*Die altenglischen Rätsel des Exeterbuchs*, p. 275).

[18] As Williamson observes, 'a composition of four woods would be neither stable nor strong' (*A Feast of Creatures*, p. 196) and, elsewhere, 'the structural weakness of such an hybrid should be

Each of the other proposed solutions proves similarly unstable with regard to certain clues: for example, a gallows is no more likely to receive swords (12b) than a cross is, nor is the gallows likely to be composed of four kinds of wood or associated with gold or silver (3b–4), or be carried into the mead hall during a feast (1–2b). Nor would either a harp or a cross necessarily be associated with the four specific types of wood the riddle names.[19] On the other hand, while Keith Taylor's solution 'mead bowl and barrel' accounts for the specific woods on the riddle-poet's list, the connection between these objects and the sign of the Cross (5) is less clear.[20] The associations between the Cross, gallows and the sword box or rack are similarly uncertain.[21]

Finally, the widely accepted weapons-storage solutions (box, rack and hanger) are problematic on a historical level. Even the main proponents of these solutions note that there is little evidence that such objects would have been familiar to the riddle's original audience. As Williamson indicates, for example, 'there is no evidence in Old English literature or Anglo-Saxon archaeology for the existence of an early English sword rack. There is no Old English word for sword rack and there are no manuscript illustrations of sword racks in any early English manuscripts that I have seen.'[22] Similarly, of his own proposed **wæpen-hengen* (or **wæpen-treow* or *fyrd-wæn*), a rack or wagon for the storage and transportation of armaments, Niles concedes that the terms are 'unattested in the extant records of Old English', either literary, archaeological or artistic.[23] This lack of attestation makes it less likely that any of these items would have been familiar enough to early medieval audiences to work as a riddle solution in this culture.

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obvious' (*The Old English Riddles*, p. 301). Similar objections could also be raised regarding the gallows.

[19] Both objects were made of wood. In fact, patristic tradition held that the Cross was made of four types of wood – but not of the four types listed in the riddle (see also Murphy, *Unriddling*, pp. 63–4). For example, in Pseudo-Bede, *Collectanea*, no. 372, the woods listed are cypress, cedar, pine and boxwood (in *Collectanea Pseudo-Bede*, ed. M. Bayless and M. Lapidge, Scriptores Latini Hiberniae 14 (Dublin, 1998), 179). See also Williamson, *Old English Riddles*, pp. 303 and 301.

[20] Cf. Niles's assertion that 'the solution is likely to win few adherents because of the obvious difference between a bowl or barrel and the gallows' (*Old English Enigmatic Poems*, p. 69).

[21] As Williamson himself admits, 'The connection between such an ornamental swordchest and the rood or gallows of lines *7b–12a* is obscure at best' (*Old English Riddles*, p. 302). See also Williamson, *Feast of Creatures*, p. 197; and Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, p. 69.

[22] Williamson, *Old English Riddles*, p. 302; also, 'there was no Anglo-Saxon sword rack, as far as we know' (Williamson, *Feast of Creatures*, pp. 196–7).

[23] Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, p. 75; see also pp. 73 (literature or archaeology) and 78 (artistic depiction). Nor is there mention of sword boxes, although, per Williamson, 'swords must have been kept somewhere at some times when they were not in use' (Williamson, *Old English Riddles*, p. 302).

Moreover, despite practical assumptions that such apparatus must have existed, several passages from *Beowulf* specifically depict weapons set aside in other ways.[24] In this text, Geatish shields are laid or stacked on the floor, spears leaned against the wall; helmets are rested and byrnies draped along mead-hall benches, 'as was their custom' (*wæs þeaw hyra*, 1246).[25] Even Beowulf's high-value corselet and heirloom sword are handed over to a companion for safe-guarding, rather than relegated to rack, box or hanger.[26] Again, such evidence challenges the idea that weapon-storage objects would have been familiar to the original audience. Thus, according to the criteria for a successful riddle solution outlined above, neither of these popular proposals, nor the other previously offered solutions, can be fully confirmed as 'correct'. Moreover, since the riddle is as yet unsolved, the cultural insights to be gained from it remain only incompletely accessible.

For these reasons, I propose a new approach to Riddle 55 of the Exeter Book, identifying the riddle-object in question as a military banner or standard (OE *segn* or *cumbol*). Although relatively understudied by scholars, such military standards are well attested in Anglo-Saxon literary and historical records, and surviving depictions of such objects, visual as well as written, closely resemble the riddle-object in appearance, nature and use.[27] The answer 'banner', 'standard' or *segn* (a) meets the qualifications for an accurate solution, including that of the object's familiarity and significance to the original audience; (b) reasonably satisfies each of the clues offered in the riddle (both overt and implied); (c) comprehensively resolves a number of the more complicated points raised by earlier readings of this riddle; and (d) uncovers a level of sociocultural significance previously unrecognized in this text.

At the expense of the poetry, but with emphasis on the outline of this new solution, I translate Riddle K-D 55 as follows:

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[24] See, for example, Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, p. 78; and Williamson, *Old English Riddles*, p. 302. Moreover, as Williamson points out, 'One might suppose that swords would be set aside in the pleasure of good company, but a number of Anglo-Saxon laws make it clear that men wore their swords even while drinking at table' (*ibid.*).

[25] *Beowulf*, in *Klaeber's Beowulf and The Fight at Finnsburgh*, ed. R. D. Fulk, R. E. Bjork and J. D. Niles, 4th ed. (Toronto, 2008), lines 325–6 and 1243b–1250a. All subsequent citations of *Beowulf* refer to this edition, unless otherwise stated.

[26] *Beowulf* 671–4.

[27] For other Old English terms used for the same type of object, and an overview of the scholarship, see M. W. Hennequin, 'Anglo-Saxon Banners and *Beowulf*', *Medieval Clothing and Textiles*, vol. 16, ed. M. L. Wright, R. Netherton and G. R. Owen-Crocker (Woodbridge, 2020), pp. 1–29. My thanks to Professor Hennequin for providing me with an early draft of this article.

I saw, carried out onto the floor in the hall where men drank, four kinds [of a thing]:

    (1)   a wondrous wood-tree,[28] and
    (2)   twisted gold, cunningly bound treasure,[29] and
    (3)   a portion of silver, and
    (4)   the sign/token of the Cross (of him who raised a ladder up to the heavens for us,[30] before he destroyed the city of the hell-dwellers).

I am readily able to sing before noblemen of that beam's inherent virtues. There was:

    (A)   maple,[31] and
    (B)   oak, and
    (C)   brave yew, and
    (D)   dusky holly.

All together, they are useful/dutiful/profitable for the lord.

    They have one name – wolf's-head tree – that often *abæd*[32] weapons – treasure in the hall, gold-hilted sword – for the liege-lord.

    Now answer me this riddle, who presumes to say in words what this wood is called.

This schematic rendering foregrounds the key aspects of the riddler's question as well as highlighting several textual features that have proven problematic in previous readings. It also draws attention to the carefully crafted structure of the riddle, which divides the information provided by the poet into three main sections: first, a description of the riddle-object's physical context and appearance (1–7a); second, a description of its intrinsic nature and/or composition (7b–10a); and third, an elaboration on its sociocultural function, role or use (10b–14a).

CONTEXT AND APPEARANCE (LINES 1–7A)

First, the riddle introduces the mystery object in context, as it is *in healle, þær hæleð druncon, / on flet beran* (1b–2a).[33] These introductory lines suggest that the object in question is portable, and that it probably belongs in a mead hall, in the company of warriors, since that is where the riddling voice claims to have seen it. Further consideration of this particular phrasing within the larger Old English poetic corpus also suggests that the object is likely to be a culturally significant one, closely associated with heroic violence, dominance, prestige and power.

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[28] See Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, p. 68.
[29] See Tupper, *Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 190.
[30] Or else 'of Him who raised us up to the heavens by that ladder' (Williamson, *Old English Riddles*, p. 303).
[31] Niles calls this translation of *hlin* (i.e. *hlyn*) 'an educated guess' (*Old English Enigmatic Poems*, p. 66).
[32] A crux; see above, n. 17, and below, pp. 88–90.
[33] 'carried out onto the floor, in the hall where men drank'.

First, as Megan Cavell observes, 'the term *flet* is consistent with the heroic imagery of the hall', and 'occurs frequently in heroic contexts'.[34] As such, this choice of words would likely have laid a foundation for the heroic resonances of the object and its environment in the minds of the original audience. In *Beowulf*, moreover, the phrase *on flet boren … þær guman druncon*, a close variant of the K-D 55 wording, refers to the presentation of an extraordinary war trophy: the slain *Grendles heafod* (1639b, 'Grendel's head') dragged into Heorot and laid before the Danish king, Hrothgar, his queen and his court.[35] Beowulf himself characterizes this prodigious head as *tires to tacne* (1654, 'a token of victory, glory or honour'), a simultaneous confirmation of his heroic triumph over this monstrous enemy and of his exceptional service to the king.

Another informative verbal parallel to the opening lines of Riddle K-D 55 appears at the end of Riddle K-D 56, the poem in the Exeter Book collection immediately following the one under consideration here.[36] In this example, the poet reiterates the formula *þær hæleð druncon, … on flet beran* (11b–12a), but adds, first, that the item carried is a *laf* (10b) – a term whose meanings range from 'vestige' to 'heirloom' to 'survivor' – and, second, that it is presented *minum hlaforde* (11a, 'to my lord').[37] Although the solution of Riddle 56 also remains subject to some debate, scholars agree that the diction is heroic, and that the overall effect is that of a high-value war prize or trophy (metaphorical or otherwise) being presented to a liege lord or king, as a token of victory following a violent struggle.[38] Thus, based on the poetic precedents of the Old English corpus, Riddle 55's opening lines present the object not only as portable and belonging in a mead hall among feasting warriors, but also as associated, like a battle standard, with heroic themes of violence, victory and a warrior's loyal service to a lord.[39]

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[34] Cavell, *Weaving Words*, p. 45.

[35] '…Hroðgar gretan.
Þa wæs be feaxe   on flet boren
Grendles heafod,   þær guman druncon,
egeslic for eorlum,   þære idese mid' (*Beowulf* 1646b–1649).

[36] The complete final lines of Riddle 56 read: *Ic lafe geseah / minum hlaforde, þær hæleð druncon, / þara flana geweorc, on flet beran* (10b–12, *ASPR* III, 208). Niles suggests that 'the compiler of this part of the Exeter Book seems to have conceived of these two riddles as a pair' (*Old English Enigmatic Poems*, p. 81). See also Salvador-Bello, *Isidorean Perceptions of Order*, pp. 374–5; and Cavell, *Weaving Words*, pp. 44–5.

[37] In relation to Riddle 55, see Cavell, *Weaving Words*, pp. 44–5. For *laf*, see also P. Portnoy, '*Laf*-Craft in Five Old English Riddles (K-D 5, 20, 56, 71, 91)', *Neophilologus* 97 (2013), 555–79.

[38] Cavell, *Weaving Words*, pp. 45–6.

[39] *Ibid.* pp. 26–7.

The poet builds on these initial impressions of the portable, heroic symbol of dominance, prestige and service in battle with a detailed physical description of the riddle-object as *feower cynna* (2b): that is, either 'one thing with four aspects', or 'four separate things'.[40] The four elements in question are listed (that is, *wrætlic wudutreow* (3a); *wunden gold* (3b); *seolfres dæl* (4b); and *rode tacn* (5a)), with each separate item being marked off by the conjunction *ond*.

The solution proposed here for Riddle K-D 55 – *segn*, or 'battle standard' – fits with each aspect of the poet's description of the riddle-object's physical appearance. Early medieval military banners, modelled on Roman prototypes (*vexilla*), were all comprised of the same basic elements: a long staff or pole, usually wood; rich metallic ornaments; and a cloth pendant or banner suspended, near the top, from a shorter cross-bar attached at right angles to the main pole.[41] Each of these elements corresponds with an item from the poet's list.

First, the description *wrætlic wudutreow* (3a, 'wondrous wood-tree') accords well with the tall shaft of the standard, which was typically made of wood and measured up to half again the height of its bearer.[42] Not only in size but also in shape, the impressive wooden pole could not have seemed all that far removed from its origin as a 'tree of the woods'.[43]

Wunden gold (3b) is also a recognizable feature of medieval battle standards, which are frequently described as golden and closely associated with other valuable treasures in Old English literature. For example, in *Beowulf*, Scyld Scefing's followers adorn his funereal treasure ship with a lofty *segen gy(l)denne, / heah ofer heafod* (47b–48a).[44] Similarly, a *segen gyldenne* (1021a, 'golden banner') is first among the four dynastic treasures with which Hrothgar rewards Beowulf for his defeat of Grendel. Finally, Wiglaf recovers a luminous *segn eall gylden* (2767b, 'a banner all golden') from the slain dragon's hoard. The riddle's elaboration on the mystery object's 'twisted gold' as *sinc searobunden* (4a, 'cunningly bound treasure') further

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[40] 'a thing of four kinds' (Whitman, *Old English Riddles*, p. 203); or 'four kinds of thing' (Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, p. 64). Cf. Taylor's assertion that the riddle describes four separate objects but is concerned only with the identity of the wooden one ('Mazers, Mead, and the Wolf's-Head Tree', p. 500).

[41] See M. Deanesly, 'Roman Traditionalist Influence among the Anglo-Saxons', *EHR* 58 (1943), 129–46, esp. 131 and 138; also M. Rostovtzeff, 'Vexillum and Victory', *Jnl of Roman Stud.* 32 (1942), 92–106, esp. 93; and V. Maxfield, 'Military Standards, Roman', *The Encyclopedia of Ancient History*, ed. R. S. Bagnall, K. Brodersen, C. B. Champion, A. Erskine and S. R. Huebner (Hoboken, NJ, 2013), p. 4504.

[42] See R. L. S. Bruce-Mitford, 'The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial: Recent Theories and Some Comments on General Interpretation', *Proc. of the Suffolk Inst. of Archaeol. and Nat. Hist.* 23 (1950), 1–78, esp. 17.

[43] *Beam* (7b) reinforces the impression that the wooden (part of the) object is 'a large one' (Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, p. 65).

[44] 'a golden ensign high overhead'.

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reflects an artisanal value also emphasized in these *Beowulf* banners: Hrothgar's ancestral banner is *hroden* (1022a, 'adorned'); and the dragon's, *hondwundra mæst, / gelocen leoðocræftum* (2768b–2769a), is so intricate an artifact that it seems to have been made by magic.[45]

Lavish adornments, like those on the riddle-object and in the literary examples, also characterize several battle standards mentioned in historical sources. For example, in their records of the Battle of Hastings, both William of Malmesbury and William of Poitiers describe the personal standard of King Harold Godwinson as a 'Fighting Man' richly embroidered in gold and gems.[46] The Roman *vexilla* that likely inspired such Anglo-Saxon standards also featured luxurious textiles, as 'in later times (perhaps after the middle of the third century AD) *vexilla* were purple … with much gold interwoven'.[47]

The riddle's context in the Exeter Book also supports the identification of the *wunden* (3b, 'braided or plaited') gold as high-value textile. As noted above, the next

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[45] 'Greatest of hand-wonders, woven by arts of song [by magic]'. See *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary based on the Manuscript Collections of the late Joseph Bosworth*, ed. T. N. Toller (Oxford, 1898), with T. N. Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary based on the Manuscript Collections of Joseph Bosworth: Supplement* (Oxford, 1921) and A. Campbell, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary based on the Manuscript Collections of Joseph Bosworth: Enlarged Addenda and Corrigenda to the Supplement by T. Northcote Toller* (Oxford, 1972), cited hereafter as Bosworth-Toller, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, *s.v.* 'ge-lucan'. See also the description of Satan's 'excessively golden' banner in his rebellion against God, in the *Prose Dialogue of Solomon and Saturn* (cited in Hennequin, 'Anglo-Saxon Banners', p. 7); and B. Raw, 'Royal Power and Royal Symbols in *Beowulf*', *The Age of Sutton Hoo: the Seventh Century in North-Western Europe*, ed. M. O. H. Carver (Woodbridge, 1992), pp. 166–74, esp. 172.

[46] This banner was taken as spoils of war by William I, after Harold's defeat at the Battle of Hastings (see below n. 94). William of Malmesbury: 'That same standard […] bore the figure of a warrior, richly embroidered with gold and gems'. William of Malmesbury, *Gesta regum* [hereafter WM, *GR*] iii. 241, in William of Malmesbury: *Gesta Regum Anglorum / 'The History of the English Kings'* I, ed. and trans. R. A. B. Mynors with R. M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom (Oxford, 1998), 454. See also William of Poitiers ii. 31: 'vexillum Heraldi, hominis armati imaginem intextam habens ex auro purissimo' ('Harold's banner, in which the image of an armed warrior was woven in pure gold'), in *Gesta Guillelmi ducis Normannorum et regis Anglorum*, ed. and trans. R. H. C. Davis and M. Chibnall (Oxford, 1998), pp.152–3, quoted in R. M. Thomson with M. Winterbottom, *William of Malmesbury: Gesta Regum Anglorum / 'The History of the English Kings'* II: *General Introduction and Commentary* (Oxford, 1999), p. 233; and R. W. Jones, *Bloodied Banners: Martial Display on the Medieval Battlefield*, Warfare in History (Woodbridge, 2010), pp. 33–4.

[47] Rostovtzeff, 'Vexillum and Victory', p. 95. For the Anglo-Saxons as much as for the Romans, conspicuous display of luxury textiles was a sign of wealth and, especially, political power. See S. Marzinzik, 'Expressions of Power: Luxury Textiles from Early Medieval Northern Europe', *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings* (2008), https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsa conf/113, pp. 1–10, esp. 3 and 7–10. On the in-weaving and embroidery of gold, see also G. R. Owen-Crocker, *Dress in Anglo-Saxon England*, 2nd ed. (Woodbridge, 2004), pp. 285–6. With reference to battle standards, see M. Clegg Hyer and G. R. Owen-Crocker, 'Woven Works: Making and Using Textiles', *The Material Culture of Daily Living in the Anglo-Saxon World*, ed. M. Clegg Hyer and G. R. Owen-Crocker (Exeter, 2011), pp. 157–84, esp. 178.

riddle (K-D 56) in the Exeter Book describes a wounded, struggling creature whose vestiges are – in an exact echo of Riddle 55 – *þær hæleð druncon* […] *on flet beran* (K-D 56, 10–12b), and presented to the lord like a trophy. This riddle is usually solved as 'warp-weighted loom' or 'loom and web', where the object borne out onto the hall floor, like the object in K-D 55, is the valuable cloth that the loom has produced in the stylized heroic encounter.[48]

As well as such ornate, heroically associated textiles, *wunden gold* (3b) and *sinc searobunden* (4a) could also refer to adornments on the shaft of the *segn*. Among the Romans, the pole of the military *signum* was often gilded and studded with gems.[49] As Margaret Deanesly explains, 'the *signum* of the legion […], a wooden lance with similar sharp metal tip, for sticking in the ground', could also be '*silver-plated* and enriched with a series of discs, fillets, and metal ornaments'.[50] Thus, Anglo-Saxon emulation of Roman military prototypes could likewise account for the riddle-object's *seolfres dæl* (4b, 'portion of silver').

The fourth item on the poet's list of *cynna* – the *rode tacn* (5a, 'sign of the Cross') – takes priority in many readings of this riddle, and Frederick Tupper's proposed solution, 'cross', is one of the most popular solutions to K-D 55. However, as Niles has suggested, the very thing that makes that solution so tempting also makes it unlikely, since naming the actual solution in the riddle 'would be too much of a give-away'.[51]

From a practical standpoint, a battle standard fits with this clue as well as it does the other three criteria, while avoiding the idea that the poet has explicitly stated

[48] See especially E. von Erhardt-Siebold, 'The Old English Loom Riddles', *Philologica: Malone Anniversary Studies*, ed. T. A. Kirby and H. B. Woolf (Baltimore, 1949), pp. 9–17; and Cavell, *Weaving Words*, pp. 27–46 and 56. For associations in Riddle 56 between weaving and heroic violence, see M. Cavell, 'Looming Danger and Dangerous Looms: Violence and Weaving in Exeter Book *Riddle 56*', *Leeds Stud. in Eng.* ns 42 (2011), 29–42, esp. 30 and 42. Niles likewise notes the shared phrasing between Riddles K-D 55 and 56; accordingly, he places them both in the '"wooden object" group that consists of Riddles 52–56' (*Old English Enigmatic Poems*, pp. 81 and 83). See also Salvador-Bello, *Isidorean Perceptions of Order*, pp. 374–5. However, since it is the *laf*, the textile, that is carried in Riddle 56, and not the loom, I suggest that the cloth, not (just) the wood, connects the two texts.

[49] See, for example, Jonathan Coulston's claim that 'The gem-encrusted staff described by Amminanus on Constantinus II's standard reflected the decoration current on other classes of 4th century military equipment'. J. C. N. Coulston, 'The Draco Standard', *Jnl of Roman Military Equipment Stud.* 2 (1991), 101–14, at 109. The staffs were also 'gilded' (*ibid.* p. 101).

[50] Deanesly, 'Roman Traditionalist Influence', p. 137, emphasis added. See also Bruce-Mitford, 'Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial', pp. 17–18.

[51] Thus, he contends, 'Whatever object is alluded to by the phrase *rōde tācn* (5a), it ought to look or function *like* a cross without actually being one' (Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, p. 69). Compare S. A. Mitchell: 'By its very nature, then, a riddle is unlikely to be satisfactorily solved if the suggested answer is the object most obviously described in the riddle' ('Ambiguity and Germanic Imagery', p. 39).

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the answer, *rode*, in his text. As noted above, the cloth banner on the traditional standard was suspended high on the shaft by a shorter cross-piece that would serve as a *rode tacn*.

Even though some legionary *signa* did not have the cloth component, 'all Roman standards have horizontal projections of some kind', which would produce the cruciform shape required of the riddle-object.[52] In Christian contexts, moreover, the Cross was also a popular battle-standard motif, being inwoven or embroidered onto the cloth banner, affixed on top of the shaft, or both, as in several manuscript illustrations.[53] The pervasiveness of these motifs thus suggests a number of ways in which a battle standard could have 'betokened' the rood, just as the riddle-poet specifies.

Perhaps the most famous of battle standards, and the one which corresponds most directly to many of the criteria outlined so far, is the *labarum* of the Roman emperor Constantine: the military ensign inspired by his vision of the Cross and subsequent conversion to Christianity (Fig. 1). According to the *Vita Constantinus* of Eusebius, who claims to have seen the object first-hand, the emperor's *labarum* was a

tall pole plated with gold [which] had a transverse bar forming the shape of a cross … From the transverse bar, which was bisected by the pole, hung suspended a cloth, an imperial tapestry covered with a pattern of precious stones fastened together, which glittered with shafts of light, and interwoven with much gold, producing an impression of indescribable beauty on those who saw it.[54]

Although Eusabius's testimony was written centuries before the Exeter Book was compiled, Cynewulf's *Elene* bridges the temporal gap between this imperial Roman prototype and the Anglo-Saxon context of the Exeter Riddles; *Elene* also describes in detail the emperor's miraculous vision and the standard it inspires;

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[52] Bruce-Mitford, 'Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial', pp. 14 and 17. The resemblance is especially clear according to Tupper's interpretation of *rode tacn*: 'It bears the form of the Cross (in the older broader meaning for which only a vertical pole with a cross-piece is necessary)' (*Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 189).

[53] See the Tiberius Psalter, London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius C. vi, 8v. Heslop describes the Tiberius Psalter as a 'relentlessly Anglo-Saxon book' which depicts 'a banner bearing the device of a cross formy between four pellets. The same form of the cross is repeated at the top of the staff from which the flag flies'. T. A. Heslop, 'A Dated "Late Anglo-Saxon" Illuminated Psalter', *AntJ* 72 (1992), 171–4, at 172. As Heslop further observes, 'there is little doubt that the Normans fought at Hastings under a banner of this design' (*ibid.*). See also Jones, *Bloodied Banners*, p. 34.

[54] Eusebius, *Life of Constantine*, trans. and ed. A. Cameron and S. G. Hall (Oxford, 1999), book 1, p. 81, lines 29–31. For more on the shape and design of the *labarum*, see *ibid.* pp. 207–11; Rostovtzeff, 'Vexillum and Victory', esp. pp. 95 and 104; and D. E. Martin-Clarke, 'Significant Objects at Sutton Hoo' *The Early Cultures of North-West Europe: H. M. Chadwick Memorial Studies*, ed. C. Fox and B. Dickins (Cambridge, 1950), pp. 107–19, at 116.

Fig. 1: Labarum of Constantine, I AE Follis Reverse, type RIC VII Constantinople 19, 307–37 CE. © Classical Numismatic Group, Inc.

and, like the mystery object of Riddle 55, the object of Constantine's vision is both *tacen* and *treo*, and richly decorated with gold and gems.[55]

As some readers have suggested, it is possible that these textual commonalities, bolstered by parallels to the gold-and-gem-encrusted Cross of *The Dream of the Rood* and the adornment of the True Cross in *Elene*, further support the solution 'cross'.[56] However, as Eusebius's description of the *labarum* illustrates, and *Elene* reflects, the *rode … tacen* Constantine adopts after the vision is not a lavishly adorned cross, but rather a cruciform *segn* (124), a battle standard whose shape and embellishments are designed to evoke the Cross that inspired it.[57] Thus, solving Riddle 55 as 'standard' reflects even more comprehensively than 'cross' the

[55] Cynewulf, *Elene*, ASPR, vol. II (1932), lines 85 and 89; *golde geglenged, gimmas lixtan* (90); see also 107, 128, 165 and 103–4. See also Tupper, *Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 190.

[56] See Cynewulf, *Elene*, trans. C. W. Kennedy (Ontario, 2000), p. 20, lines 1022–7. See also Bitterli, *Say What I Am Called*, pp. 129 and 166; and Salvador-Bello, *Isidorean Perceptions of Order*, pp. 369–70.

[57] This *halige treo* (128) is also a *þuf* (123) – another Old English term for ensign or battle standard, about which see more below, p. 81. For the likely influence of Eusebius's *Vita Constantini* on *Elene* and *The Dream of the Rood*, especially with regard to the *labarum*, see Martin-Clarke, 'Significant Objects', pp. 115–16.

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distinctive parallels between the riddle-object and Constantine's hybrid martial-religious ensign, emphasizing the cruciform imagery as well as accounting for the heroic elements the riddle-poet also includes in his description.

The poet further elaborates on his *rode tacn* with an allusion to the Harrowing of Hell (5b–7a), the days between the Crucifixion and the Resurrection during which Christ laid siege to Hell and freed the virtuous pagans. First, this digression highlights the *rode tacn* enough to make it a good 'decoy possibility': a strategically misleading push towards an alternative solution common to the riddle genre.[58] At the same time, however, this allusion also underlines the heroic aspects of the riddle-object, pointing beyond the Cross itself to something more complex and specifically militaristic.

The poet's evocation of *Christus Victor*, who *helwara / burg abræce* (6b–7a, 'destroyed the city of the Hell-dwellers'), encourages the audience to associate the object with Christ in his martial persona. The characterization would likely have reminded the audience of contemporary visual and liturgical representations of the Harrowing of Hell, in which the image of Christ carrying a cruciform battle standard was a ubiquitous motif.[59] The digression also reflects the Anglo-Saxon tendency to represent Christ as the ideal warrior-king, and prioritizes interpretation of the *rode tacn* in a combination of martial and ecclesiastical, rather than exclusively religious, contexts.[60]

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[58] Mitchell, 'Ambiguity and Germanic Imagery', p. 39. Taylor calls this digression 'an elaborate textual diversion' ('Mazers, Mead, and the Wolf's-Head Tree', p. 500). On 'a variety of decoy possibilities' as an inherent aspect of the riddle genre, see J. Wilcox, 'New Solutions to Old English Riddles: Riddles 17 and 53', *PQ* 69 (1990), 393–408, at 403. See also M. Salvador Bello, 'Direct and Indirect Clues: Exeter Riddle no. 74 Reconsidered', *NM* 99 (1998), 17–29, esp. 17; P. Sorrell, 'Oaks, Ships, Riddles, and the Old English Rune Poem', *ASE* 19 (1990), 103–16, esp. 107; and G. K. Jember, 'Literal and Metaphorical: Clues to Reading the Old English Riddles', *Stud. in Eng. Lit.* (Tokyo) 65 (1988), 47–56, esp. 47. As noted above, 'cross' is a persistently attractive solution to this riddle. See, for example, E. G. Stanley, 'Heroic Aspects of the Exeter Book Riddles', *Prosody and Poetics in the Early Middle Ages: Essays in honour of C. B. Hieatt*, ed. M. J. Toswell (Toronto, 1995), pp. 197–218, esp. 209–10; and also Baum, who suggests that 'the solutions hesitate between Scabbard and Cross; probably both are intended' (*Anglo-Saxon Riddles*, p. 17).

[59] See 'The Harrowing of Hell,' in the Tiberius Psalter, London, British Library, Tiberius C. vi, 14r (Winchester, s. xi med.) (Figs. 2 and 3). Gneuss-Lapidge, *ASMss* 378. As W. H. Hulme observes, 'Artists … were at a very early date caught by the magnetism of the scene which represents the victorious Christ with the banner of the Cross in one hand treading the shattered gates of hell and Satan underfoot' (*The Middle-English Harrowing of Hell and Gospel of Nicodemus*, EETS es 100 (London, 1907), p. lxv). See also K. Tamburr, *The Harrowing of Hell in Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2009), p. 11. For medieval parallels between *Christus Victor* and Emperor Constantine, including use of the *vexillum*, see *ibid.* pp. 30–1, 39 and 132.

[60] See, for example, W. A. Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship in Anglo-Saxon England* (Los Angeles, 1970), pp. 46–8; and C. J. Wolf, 'Christ as Hero in "The Dream of the Rood"', *NM* 72 (1970), 202–10. For this in the Harrowing of Hell, see Tamburr, *Harrowing of Hell*, pp. 13–14, 28 and 34–7.

Fig. 2: Harrowing of Hell © British Library Board. Cotton MS Tiberius C. vi, f. 14r.

Fig. 3: Detail of banner from Fig. 2 © British Library Board. Cotton MS Tiberius C. vi, f. 14r.

Venantius Fortunatus's famous hymn 'Vexilla Regis proderunt' (569 CE) further illustrates the symbolic equation of banner and Cross in Christian discourse at this time. The hymn calls the Cross 'the standard [*vexillum*] of the King' (line 1), as well as 'wood' (*ligno*, line 12) and 'tree' (*arbor*, line 13). Moreover, like the object in the riddle, this particular royal military banner is also closely related to Christ's conquest of Hell (*Praedamque tulit tartare*, line 20).[61] The resemblances between the *vexillum* in the hymn and the riddle-object, including their close associations with Christ's military persona and his victorious campaign against Hell, suggest again that 'banner' (*segn* or its synonyms) would have been a culturally accessible answer to Riddle 55 – informed, enriched and complicated, but not exclusively defined, by its symbolic associations with the liturgy.[62]

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[61] 'and bore the spoils of Hell'.
[62] Similarly, *healle, þær hæleð druncon* (1) can also refer to the taking of Communion in other contexts. See, e.g., Pinsker and Zeigler, *Die altenglischen Rätsel des Exeterbuchs*, p. 276. Deepest thanks to my anonymous reader for pointing out these connections.

From an academic perspective, this proposed solution also resolves the lingering question of whether *feower cynna* (2b) indicates 'four kinds of thing' or 'a thing of four kinds'.[63] If the four objects in the list in fact refer to the various components of a battle standard, then the poet's evocative visual description of the riddle-object encompasses both possibilities, since one could perceive a *segn*, or standard, as four distinct components – wood, gold/cloth, silver, cross-piece – unified into a single, ornate whole.

NATURE AND COMPOSITION (LINES 7B–10A)

After this physical description of the riddle-object, the poet describes its intrinsic nature and composition. His introductory claim, *Ic þæs beames mæg / eaþe for eorlum æþelu secgan* (7b–8),[64] establishes an important lens through which to interpret the subsequent clues.[65] First, by emphasizing the ease with which an audience of noblemen would appreciate the *æþelu* (8b, 'inherent qualities' or 'intrinsic nobility' or 'lineage') of the *beam* (7b) – the poet reiterates his earlier placement of the riddle-object in a heroic context, and reinforces the relationship between the object and the men drinking in the mead hall where it appears. More specifically, he encourages the audience to interpret the ensuing list of trees – *hlin*, *acc*, *iw* and *holen* (9–10a) – as *eorlum* most likely would: in a secular, aristocratic, martial register.[66]

Framed in this way, Riddle 55's second list begins with its most difficult item. *Hlin* as a tree name is otherwise unattested in Old English, and opinion is divided as to its meaning. The *Dictionary of Old English* glosses it as 'linden' or 'lime tree', but the editors note that *hlin* has also, 'less plausibly', been identified as cognate with Icelandic/ON *hlyn*, 'maple', as in Bosworth-Toller.[67] In fact, considered from the perspective of the noblemen in the poet's ideal audience, either interpretation reinforces the authoritative and martial connotations of the riddle-object.

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[63] See Taylor, 'Mazers, Mead, and the Wolf's-Head Tree', pp. 500 and 502.

[64] 'I am readily able to sing before noblemen of that beam's inherent virtue'.

[65] Cf. Niles, who sees this simply as a polite form of address to a generic audience (*Old English Enigmatic Poems*, p. 65); compare also Doane, 'Three Old English Riddles', p. 244.

[66] For example, the emphasis on the earls as the text's ideal audience directs away from the possibility that, as some scholars have suggested, the fourfold list of trees is an allusion to patristic traditions describing the Cross as composed of four types of wood. See n. 19 above; Tupper, *Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 190; and Salvador-Bello, *Isidorean Perceptions of Order*, p. 369.

[67] Equivalent to ME *lyn*, or OE *lind*. See the website of the Toronto *Dictionary of Old English*, *s.v.* 'hlin'. Cf. Bosworth-Toller, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, *s.v.* 'hlyn'. For toponymic evidence supporting the likelihood of *hlyn* as linden, see D. Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England: Literature, Lore and Landscape* (Woodbridge, 2010), pp. 215 and 257.

First, linden wood is well-known as the main material for Anglo-Saxon shields.[68] *Linde* serves as a substantive kenning for *scild* ('shield') in Old English poetry, and reference to this type of tree would easily have conjured images of battle *under linde* in the mind of the aristocratic warrior.[69] Any thought of battle would likely also have brought to mind the lord's *segn*, which in poetry even becomes synonymous with the men who rally and fight beneath it.[70]

Alternatively, identifying *hlyn* as maple, speaks – like the gold and silver in the poet's initial description – to the artisanal excellence and high-value materiality of the riddle-object. Maple is a 'fine-grained or even-textured wood […] probably reserved for specialist items', including 'cups in the royal burial of Sutton Hoo', mead or ale flasks, and musical instruments such as the harp.[71] Maple, like linden, was also sometimes used for shields.[72] In each case, the attested uses of maple associate it not just with high-level craftsmanship, but also with the social experiences – hall joys, mead sharing, music and battle – that bound the *comitatus* and their lord together. Thus, the inclusion of *hlyn* among a banner's compositional 'virtues' makes sense from practical, artistic and socioculturally symbolic standpoints.[73]

Likewise, *acc* (9a, 'oak'), would have had heroic connotations among the company of the mead hall, the noble male audience to whom the poet imagines he might 'most easily' convey the riddle-object's inherent qualities. For example, in the Old English *Rune Poem*, the oak is characterized in terms reminiscent of a faithful retainer, who 'keeps faith [*treow*] nobly'.[74] The pun on *treow* ('faith') and *treow* ('tree') underlines the oak's symbolic associations with a warrior's dedicated

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[68] On the Sutton Hoo shield as 'a lime species', see M. G. Comey, 'The Wooden Drinking Vessels in the Sutton Hoo Assemblage: Materials, Morphology, and Usage', *Trees and Timber*, ed. Bintley and Shapland, pp. 107–21, esp. 109.

[69] For the significance of lime-tree/linden in an Anglo-Saxon context, see Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 214–17. For *linde* as 'shield', see, for example, *Beowulf* 2365 and 2610; and *The Battle of Maldon* 96 and 244. See also Bosworth-Toller, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, s.v.* 'lind'.

[70] See, for example, *Beowulf: siðþan he under segne sinc ealgode / wælreaf werede* (1204–1205a); *þa wæs æht boden / Sweona leodum, segn Higelace[s]* (2957b–2958).

[71] The artisanal value of maple-wood is offered in support of the solutions 'mazer' (see Taylor, 'Mazers, Mead, and the Wolf's-Head Tree', p. 505) and 'harp' (see Williamson, *Old English Riddles*, p. 301).

[72] See C. P. Biggam, 'The True Staff of Life: the Multiple Roles of Plants', *Material Culture of Daily Living*, ed. Clegg Hyer and Owen-Crocker, pp. 23–48, esp. 44.

[73] Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 158; see also pp. 255–8. In performance, *hlin* – whatever wood the poet intended – was also likely to recall *hlyn*, 'sound, noise, clamour, din', especially with reference to the noise of battle. See Bosworth-Toller, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, s.v.* 'hlyn'.

[74] M. Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem: a Critical Edition*, McMaster Old English Stud. and Texts 2 (Toronto, 1981), 93, line 90, and p. 153. For discussion of the oak in early medieval English culture more generally, see Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 193–200.

service to a lord – a characterization further reinforced by the tree's reputation as formidable and steadfast; its poetic synonymy with the ships made of its wood; and its common use, like linden/lime and maple, as material for shields.[75] From a more practical standpoint, the size, strength and durability of an oak *beam* would also have made it a good candidate for the shaft of a heavily adorned *segn*.[76] Thus, like the *linde*, the *acc* has symbolic as well as practical connections with the war banner and its associated values in an Anglo-Saxon heroic context.

The next tree on the list, *iw* (9b, 'yew'), first appears in the Old English *Rune Poem* as valuable firewood – a source of the warmth and comfort in the hall.[77] It was also used to make weapons, such as bows; and, like maple, was material for drinking cups and other aesthetically significant artifacts.[78] Indeed, both woods were routinely included among more high-value objects, in the feast hall and in lavish burials like the one at Sutton Hoo, even though the early English 'had ready access to precious metal and exotic imports'.[79] This suggests that they may have been valued by aristocratic warriors for symbolic reasons as well as practical ones.

On a more symbolic level, yew was associated with 'death and regeneration', as well as 'immortality and protection against evil'.[80] Moreover, the *hearda* (9b, 'hearty') yew is steadfast, 'hard and firm in the earth', like the oak tree and the ideal warrior.[81] Most importantly for Riddle 55, archaeologists have also suggested that yew may have been one type of foliage used to adorn the type of standard called a *t(h)uuf*, mentioned in several poetic and historical sources including Cynewulf's *Elene* and Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*.[82] Thus, this element of the riddle-object's *æþelu* (8b, 'lineage' or 'inherent qualities') could have reminded the listening *eorlum* of

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[75] For a discussion of riddilic elements in the *Rune Poem*, see Sorrell, 'Oaks, Ships, Riddles', esp. p. 116, for the *treow/treow* pun. For oak, as well as lime, in Anglo-Saxon shields, see Bintley and Shapland, introduction to *Trees and Timber*, p. 5, n. 27, citing J. Watson, 'Wood Usage in Anglo-Saxon Shields', *ASSAH* 7 (1994), 35–48.

[76] In Cynewulf's *Elene*, *beam* (91), along with *treo(w)* (89), is used to designate the vision upon which Constantine models his *labarum*.

[77] Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem*, p. 89, lines 35–7, and p. 127. See also Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 210; and S. Pollington, *The Mead Hall: the Feasting Tradition in Anglo-Saxon England* (Hockwold cum Wilton, Norfolk, 2003), p. 79.

[78] Biggam, 'True Staff of Life', p. 44. Pollington, *Mead Hall*, p. 131. The staves of the large tub in the Sutton Hoo burial are yew, which 'seems to have been selected purely for its appearance' (Comey, 'Wooden Drinking Vessels', pp. 115 and 119).

[79] *Ibid.* p. 119.

[80] Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 207.

[81] Halsall, *The Old English Rune Poem*, p. 89, lines 35–7.

[82] Bruce-Mitford, 'Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial', p. 18. In Cynewulf's *Elene*, Constantine's *labarum* is also called *þuf* (123). Likewise, Bede offers the Latin *tufam* and Old Engish *thuuf* as synonyms for King Edwin's *vexillum*, the royal banner that accompanied him everywhere (*Historia ecclesiastica* [hereafter *HE*] ii. 16, in *Bede's History of the English People*, ed. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969)). See also Bosworth-Toller, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, *s.v.* 'þuf'.

their most fundamental values – feast and hall joys on one hand, and, on the other, the absolute loyalty and deadly service to their liege lord. It could even have suggested actual vegetal adornment on that lord's banner or *segn*, among the intrinsic parts of which the poet includes this *hearda iw*.[83]

Finally, *holen* (10a, 'holly') likewise has practical and symbolic connections to the world of the aristocratic warrior. A 'dense, hard and heavy' wood, holly 'burns very hot and was used by smiths and weapon makers' as fuel for the forge. That the same wood was also 'used to make spear shafts', would further reinforce its association with the tools and practice of warfare, as well as making it – like the oak – a good material for the main shaft of a standard, or its cross-piece. In addition, holly 'has been used historically for carving and inlay work', so it could also have been incorporated into artistic embellishments of an ornate artifact like a standard.[84] Each tree on the list could thus have conjured facets of heroic warfare in the minds of the noble warriors in a lord's mead hall – the riddle-poet's stated ideal audience – as well as providing practical components for the well-adorned battle standard the poem describes.[85]

SOCIOCULTURAL FUNCTION (LINES 10B–14A)

Finally, the last section of the riddle addresses the sociocultural role and/or uses of the object in question, and again a battle standard answers the criteria offered. First, the poet indicates that, *ætgædre* (11a, 'together'), these component woods *frean sindon ealle / nyt* (10b–11a).[86] Most readings of Riddle 55 have emphasized the *nyt* ('useful, advantageous, dutiful, profitable') part of this description, but the solution offered here also emphasizes the object's specific usefulness to a *frean* ('master' or 'lord').[87] For example, any weapon-storage apparatus would have been useful to all warriors equally, as would the drinking bowl; the gallows arguably more useful to the community than the lord alone; and the Cross, though indispensable to Christ's salvific mission, perhaps less directly identifiable as advantageous or profitable to a war leader in his hall.[88]

On the other hand, a standard, *segn* or *cymbol*, is both practically and symbolically useful to the early English lord specifically. First, on the battlefield, 'standards

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83 See Pollington, *Mead Hall*, pp. 116–18.
84 Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 214. For the combination of oak, lime and holly in prehistoric joinery in Britain, see *ibid.* p. 157.
85 Oak, holly and yew are all represented as warriors in the early Welsh poem *Câd Goddeu*, 'The Battle of the Trees'; the same trio also appear among the seven chieftain trees, sacred, high-status trees in early medieval Irish law. In medieval Ireland, at least, three of the four trees the riddle names are directly associated with war and aristocracy (Hooke, *Trees in Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 90 and 45).
86 'are advantageous to the lord or master'.
87 For the range of translations, see Bosworth-Toller, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary, s.v.* 'nyt'.
88 See above, n. 17.

served as a focus, rallying point, and transmitter of orders', both an emblem and a tool of the commander's authority over his men.[89] Again, the symbolic import-ance of the banner in this regard is reflected several times in *Beowulf*, where a lord's fighting forces are identified in one instance as *under segn*, and elsewhere simply as *segn*.[90] The emblematic centrality of the banner is likewise underlined in Beowulf's recollection of the way he avenged King Hygelac's death: he targets and slaughters a figure he identifies not as the king's killer, but as the standard bearer of the enemy who slew him.[91] Elsewhere, early English writing on the emperor Constantine emphasized the belief that 'the *labarum* will bring luck in battle', which would be another way the banner would prove useful to a lord in times of war.[92]

In addition, an enemy leader's banner could prove just as advantageous to a warlord or king as his own, offering both a clear target during a battle, and a valuable trophy afterwards. For example, as Wace records, Harold's ornate 'Fighting Man' banner served as a focal point for Duke William's attack at the Battle of Hastings, as 'he made every possible attempt to reach the standard with all the forces he had brought with him'.[93] After William's targeted onslaught proved successful, moreover, '[t]hat same standard, after his victory, was sent by William to the pope'.[94] Even when they were not as lavish as Harold's 'Fighting Man' (or the object of Riddle K-D 55), the adversary's captured banner was an important token of victory for the winning side, the material value of the object itself being enhanced by the symbolic appropriation of the fallen leader's authority and his defeated people's collective prestige.[95]

Elsewhere, historical evidence suggests that the banner was equally useful to the early English king off the battlefield, as an emblem of his royal authority. Indeed, the lord's banner may have been the primary indication of his royal status.[96] As Chaney has suggested, 'the standard or banner' was 'more important than the

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[89] Maxfield, 'Military Standards', p. 4504. See also Jones: 'The banner then not only served to mark the position of the commander on the field, but also telegraphed his orders and intentions, and served as a rallying-point for his men. Given this role it will be clear that the loss of a commander *or of his banner* could be catastrophic for an army' (*Bloodied Banners*, p. 37, emphasis added).

[90] See above, n. 70.

[91] See Martin-Clarke, 'Significant Objects', p. 115, citing *Beowulf* 2505 and 1204; see also Hennequin, 'Anglo-Saxon Banners', pp. 15–17. Cf. Jones, *Bloodied Banners*, p. 42.

[92] Martin-Clarke, 'Significant Objects', p. 116.

[93] Wace, *Roman de Rou*, trans. G. S. Burgess (St Helier, 2002) pp. 284–5, quoted in Jones, *Bloodied Banners*, p. 42.

[94] WM, *GR* iii. 241 (ed. Mynors *et al.*, p. 454).

[95] Similarly, among the Romans standards 'were the symbolic embodiment of the unit, and their loss constituted a very considerable disgrace. Their retrieval was seen as a symbol of successful retribution and restored prestige' (Maxfield, 'Military Standards', p. 4505). For banners as tokens and spoils of victory in the Middle Ages, see also Jones, *Bloodied Banners*, p. 43.

[96] For the banner as royal regalia, see G. R. Owen-Crocker, '"Seldom … does the deadly spear rest for long": Weapons and Armour', *Material Culture of Daily Living*, ed. Clegg Hyer and

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crown as a sign of Anglo-Saxon kingship', and, as a number of scholars have observed, the Venerable Bede records in detail the Northumbrian king Edwin's reliance on his royal banner to convey his power, dignity and authority.[97] In these respects, a standard is more useful to a lord than to anyone else, in ways that the noble warriors in the Anglo-Saxon mead hall would readily have recognized.[98]

Then, in what is perhaps the single most difficult clue in Riddle 55, the poet suggests that this aristocratically useful, composite wooden object 'has one name' (11b), *wulfheafedtreo* (12a, literally 'wolf's-head tree'). Established readings of this hapax see it as a kenning for 'gallows', since, 'to "bear the wolf's head" is to be an outlaw, while "a tree for outlaws" is a gallows'.[99] In fact, in a number of cases – as with *rode tacn* – this detail has been taken as the answer itself: either 'gallows' or 'cross', where 'cross and gallows are interchangeable terms for the instrument and symbol of Christ's crucifixion'.[100]

If we assume instead, as others have, that the wooden object is not literally a gallows but 'must resemble a gallows whether in looks or in function', then a Roman-inspired military standard fits here as well.[101] The cross-piece and pendant banner easily mirror the elevated rectangular profile of the Anglo-Saxon gallows, which are depicted in manuscript illustration as two uprights and a cross-beam.[102]

However, although the 'gallows' reading of the *wulfheafedtreo* compound is reasonable – and fits with the proposed solution *segn* – it may be worth revisiting the assumption that this is the only way to read this unusual term. For example, such a reading is problematic on a practical level since (as others have objected of scabbard or shield) a gallows comprised of four types of wood would be complicated and, most likely, structurally unsound.[103] Moreover, while traditional

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Owen-Crocker, pp. 201–30, esp. 229. See also Martin-Clarke, 'Significant Objects', pp. 114–15; and Chaney, *The Cult of Kingship*, pp. 128 and 146.

[97] *Ibid.* p. 140; Bede, *HE* ii. 16 and n. 82 above.

[98] For example, Bruce-Mitford identifies the standard as 'a symbol of royal office peculiar to the Anglo-Saxon background' ('Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial', p. 13).

[99] Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, p. 65. See also Williamson, *Old English Riddles*, pp. 303–4; Tupper, *Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 191; and Wyatt, *Old English Riddles*, p. 106.

[100] J. M. Foley, quoted in Salvador-Bello, *Isidorean Perceptions of Order*, p. 372. For arguments against 'gallows' as the actual solution, see Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, p. 65.

[101] *Ibid.* p. 65; see also p. 71.

[102] See 'Old English Hexateuch', London, British Library, Cotton Claudius B. iv, 59r (s. xi/xii), Gneuss-Lapidge, *ASMss* 315; and 'Miscellany on the life of St. Edmund', New York, The Morgan Library, M. 736, 19v (Bury St Edmunds, s. xii¹). For archaeological evidence of two-post gallows at Anglo-Saxon sites, see A. Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 158 and 133. See also Cavell, *Weaving Words*, p 41.

[103] See above, n. 18. In his solution, Taylor addresses this difficulty with a reconsideration of *treow* – which he identifies not as 'tree', but more metaphorically as 'source' – to suggest that the kenning should instead be taken as a 'metaphor denoting something that perpetuates the creation of outlaws' (i.e. alcohol) (Taylor, 'Mazers, Mead, and the Wolf's-Head Tree', p. 508).

readings of the wolf's-head tree as 'gallows' assume both that 'wolf's-head' means 'outlaw' *and* that the tree in question is for hanging, neither of these are fully verified by the riddle.[104] In fact, as Taylor and Williamson observe, 'no critic who has translated the term in this manner has been able to explain in a reasonable fashion the relationship between the gallows and the proposed subject of the riddle' – which suggests that the interpretation may need some reconsideration.[105]

There are several different ways to read this tripartite *naman* from the perspective of the riddle-poet's ideal audience of noblemen in the mead hall. In each case – as with the list of trees – the multiple valences of each term in *wulf-heafed-treo* (and their combinations) can all be logically associated with the battle standard and its place in Anglo-Saxon society.[106]

For example, the first element, *wulf*, has clear significance in a martial context, as the wolf was often used as a symbol for the ferocity of early medieval warriors.[107] In *Beowulf*, both the Geatish warrior Wulf, brother of Eofor, and the eponymous hero's own name demonstrate the close association between wolves and formidable, accomplished fighters.[108] Elsewhere, the historian Plutarch describes early Germanic warriors as fighting in zoomorphic array, 'splendid equipment with helmets resembling the open jaws of terrible beasts of prey and strange animal faces'.[109] The famous 'beasts of battle' motif, which pairs wolves with ravens and eagles as emblems of war, makes it likely that the wolf would have been well represented among these animal-headed warriors.[110]

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[104] For example, even with traditional interpretation of 'wolf's-head' as 'outlaw', I suggest that the kenning 'tree for a wolf's-head' more directly recalls the Old English *heafod-stocc* than the gallows. As Andrew Reynolds has shown, this 'stock or post on which the head of a criminal was fixed after beheading' was a familiar enough part of the Anglo-Saxon world to appear in charter bounds as a landmark. See Bosworth-Toller, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, *s.v.* 'heafod-stocc'. See also Reynolds, *Anglo-Saxon Deviant Burial Customs*, pp. 31, 119, 169, 223–4, 243 and 273–4. The quasi-legalistic allusion to a head on a stake also has heroic resonances: in *Beowulf*, Grendel's *heafod* is mounted on *waelstenge*, a spear, or, more literally, a 'pole or stake of the slain' (*Beowulf* 1638–9). See Bosworth-Toller, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, *s.v.* 'wæl-steng', 'wæl' and 'steng'. This is the same grisly trophy that Beowulf presents before Hrothgar, queen and court, in the evocative verbal echo of Riddle K-D 55's *þær hæleð druncon, on flet beran*, noted above.

[105] Taylor, 'Mazers, Mead, and the Wolf's-Head Tree', pp. 507–8, citing Williamson.

[106] As Salvador Bello explains, even the most difficult and deliberately misleading clues in a riddle can be understood, retroactively, to support the correct solution. ('Direct and Indirect Clues', pp. 17 and 20.)

[107] D. Wyatt, *Slaves and Warriors in Medieval Britain and Ireland, 800–1200* (Leiden, 2009), p. 73.

[108] *Beowulf* 2961–98. See Wyatt, *Slaves and Warriors*, pp. 101 and 75; cf. Jones, *Bloodied Banners*, p. 107.

[109] Quoted in A. T. Hatto, 'Snake-swords and Boar-helms in *Beowulf*', *ES* 38 (1957), 145–60, at 159–60.

[110] See F. P. Magoun, 'The Theme of the Beasts of Battle in Anglo-Saxon Poetry', *NM* 56 (1955), 81–90. For discussion of warriors (*wælwulfas*) as cognate with the wolf as beast of battle in *The Battle of Maldon*, see P. Cavill, *Maxims in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge, 1999), p. 122.

There may even have been judicial precedent for the association of warrior and wolf's-head. In one early English law code, at least, the distinction between thief and warrior is mainly a matter of numbers: 'We use the term thieves if the number of men does not exceed seven, band of marauders for a number between seven and thirty-five. Anything beyond this is a war band.'[111] Depending on the number of his company, then, a warrior could (also) have been an outlaw, or 'wolf's head', especially to his enemies. Thus, 'wolf' and 'wolf's head' could easily have carried martial significances as well as legalistic ones for the riddle's mead-hall audience.

Alternatively, if *treo(w)*, like *beam*, can be interpreted as a synonym for a banner on its pole (as it is in *Elene*), then the 'wolf-head tree' could easily refer to a battle standard featuring a wolf's-head motif.[112] Although no known example of a wolf standard survives from the Anglo-Saxon period, there is a range of historical evidence supporting the probability that such a thing existed. First, there are records of several types of animal appearing on (or serving as) military banners among the early English and their contemporaries. For example, Henry of Huntingdon's *Historia Anglorum* records a golden dragon as the royal standard of the West-Saxon war leader Ethellium at the Battle of Burford (AD 752), and of King Edmund at the Battle of Assadun (AD 1016).[113] Bulls' heads adorn the (presumed) royal standard discovered at Sutton Hoo; and Vikings during the same period were known to carry banners featuring the raven, a beast of battle like the wolf.[114]

Furthermore, archaeologists have demonstrated that early medieval English banners were most likely modelled after those *labara* and *vexilla* represented on coins that circulated in Britain.[115] Among these Roman precedents, 'animal

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111 See 'the late seventh-century *Law of Ine*', King of Wessex, quoted in Wyatt, *Slaves and Warriors*, p. 104.

112 See above, n. 55 and n. 76; *Elene* 89 and 128. Lupine zoomorphic symbolism appears on multiple artifacts in the Sutton Hoo burial, with a number of the wolves worked in gold. See C. Hicks, *Animals in Early Medieval Art* (Edinburgh, 1993), p. 69.

113 H. G. Bohn, *The Chronicle of Henry of Huntingdon: Comprising the History of England, from the Invasion of Juluis Cæsar to the Accession of Henry II* (London, 1853), pp. 130 and 192.

114 One such raven banner was enshrined by a Christianized follower of Cnut in the Northumbrian Church of St Mary in York. See Chaney, *Cult of Kingship*, pp. 41 and 132–4. For the Sutton Hoo standard, see Martin-Clarke, 'Significant Objects', pp. 112–13. See also R. L. S. Bruce-Mitford, *The Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial: a Handbook* (London, 1972), p. 21. For this item as 'honoured object' and likely royal symbol, see Bruce-Mitford, 'Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial', pp. 18–19, 4 and 7; and Chaney, *Cult of Kingship*, pp. 53 and 142. In an interesting echo of the current discussion, Bruce-Mitford dismisses the possibility, raised by other scholars, that the Sutton Hoo object might have been 'a portable weapon-rack' ('Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial', p. 12).

115 For Anglo-Saxon modelling after Roman prototypes, especially depictions of standards found on Roman coins circulating in Britain, see Bruce-Mitford, 'Sutton Hoo Ship-Burial', pp. 14 and 17–18; and especially Deanesly, 'Roman Traditionalist Influence', pp. 129–46. See also Maxfield, 'Military Standards', p. 4503; and Rostovtzeff, 'Vexillum and Victory', p. 97.

totems' were also commonplace, and Roman historian Pliny lists '*wolf*, minotaur, horse, and boar', along with the famous praetorian eagle, as the most popular of these.[116] The British section of the *Notitia Dignitatum* (*c.* 395–430), an illustrated catalogue of all official Roman insignia of the late empire, likewise depicts a number of wolf motifs, including 'what appear to be wolf-headed flagpole finials'.[117] With this device in particular, lingering Roman influences could readily have translated into a 'wolf's-head tree' banner among early English nobility.

Yet another possible Roman precedent for the 'wolf's-head tree' as a military banner is the *draco*, or dragon, standard. Originating with barbarian tribes of the Danube but widely adopted for use among Roman imperial forces, the *draco* standard 'flew from the top of a staff and had a wolf or snake's head with a free-flowing, sinuous body' made of cloth.[118] The T-shape created by the inter-section of the creature's head and the staff meets the *rode tacn* criterion of the riddle, while the intricate gold and silver metalwork commonly found on the heads correlates to the riddle-object's *wunden gold* and *seolfres dæl*.[119] As the description above suggests, moreover, these standards were often hybrid creatures, with the body of a dragon but the head, specifically, of a wolf.[120]

Historical and visual records confirm that these wolf-headed, serpentine banners would have been familiar to the early English. First, as Deanesly indicates, the Roman *draco* was 'the distinctive banner of the Britons'.[121] Moreover, the Welsh used these banners tactically as well as ceremonially, which further fulfills the requirement that the riddle-object be 'useful to the lord' (10b–11a).[122] The same device also appears twice on the Bayeux Tapestry, where 'each standard

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[116] Maxfield, 'Military Standards', p. 4503, citing Pliny's *Historia naturalis* x. 16. Emphasis added. See also Rostovtzeff, 'Vexillum and Victory', p. 97. Deanesly notes that these totemic animals were likewise represented on the coins from which the early English likely drew their inspiration ('Roman Traditionalist Influence', p. 138).

[117] G. Freibergs, '*Yin* and *Yang* as Insignia of the Armigeri: Chinese Cosmological Symbols on Late Roman Shields', *The Medieval West Meets the Rest of the World*, ed. N. van Deusen, Musicological Stud. 62/2 (Ottawa, 1995), 1–35, at 14, and esp. 1–2. For illustrations and contextual commentary on the *Notitia*, see L. Ueda-Sarson, 'Late Roman Shield Patterns: Comes Britanniae', http://lukeuedasarson.com/ComesBritanniarum.html.

[118] See Coulston, 'The Draco Standard', pp. 101 and 105.

[119] *Ibid.* p. 102, for Roman examples, including at least twenty depicted on Trajan's Column alone. Historical records also attest to lavishly decorated dragon banners, which fit even more closely with the description of the riddle-object's *sinc searobunden*. As Coulston describes, 'The entry of Constantius II into Rome saw the emperor surrounded by purple-embroidered *dracones* attached to gilded and gem-studded staffs' (*ibid.* p. 101). Deanesly, 'Roman Traditionalist Influence', p. 138, similarly notes the 'silver-bound jaws' of other examples. For the simplistic T-shape cross, see Tupper, *Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 189.

[120] See Freibergs, '*Yin* and *Yang*', pp. 15–16; and Coulston, 'The Draco Standard', p. 102.

[121] Deanesly, 'Roman Traditionalist Influence', p. 136.

[122] *Ibid.* p. 138.

… exhibits *a wolf-head*, fore-legs, and wings'.[123] In each case, as with the Roman precedents, the *draco* banners attested in early medieval English contexts fit neatly with the components and characteristics of the object described in Riddle 55.

The idea that *wulfheafedtreo* could refer to an early medieval English battle standard seems even more likely when one considers the analogy of this term to an equally striking hapax in Beowulf: *eaforheafodsegn* (2152a). The word refers to the banner that Beowulf receives from Hrothgar and turns over to his king, Hygelac. Emphasizing the rarity of any triple-compound construction in Old English, Mackie has explicitly suggested that 'eaforheafodsegn, "boar's-head ensign", is clearly formed upon a model, that of wulfheafodtreo, "wolf's head tree"', in Riddle 55.[124] Although he still translates the latter term as 'gallows', the commonalities – especially the attested poetic interchangeability of *treo* and *segn* – strongly suggest that these two unusual compounds refer to the same type of object.

Additionally, in *Elene*, Constantine prepares for battle under an *eofor-cumbol* (79, 'boar standard') before replacing it with his newly inspired cruciform *labarum*.[125] In this context, at least, the boar standard and the *labarum* (which is also called *treo*) are analogous. Thus, the only real difference between these contemporary Old English descriptions of battle standards and the riddle-object called 'wolf's-head tree' seems to be the substitution of one animal (the boar) for another (the wolf), which is just as closely associated with the power and prestige of heroic warriors and kings.

The fact that *wulfheafedtreo* (12a), the poet's challenging name for his composite riddle-object, fits in so many ways with the proposed solution 'banner' or *segn* again recommends this as a viable answer for Riddle K-D 55. Specifically, the interpretations offered above relieve the longstanding critical difficulties with this term and its place in the rest of the riddle, most of which stem from the established reading of the poet's hapax as 'gallows'.[126] The multiple poetic and historical intersections between 'banner' (*segn*) and the poet's challenging clues underscore both the deftness of the riddler and the comprehensive cultural resonances of the object he describes.

The final clue offered by the poet is that this useful, oddly named object 'often *abæd* weapons – treasure in the hall, gold-hilted sword – for the liege-lord'

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[123] Coulston, 'The Draco Standard', p. 112, n. 47, emphasis added.

[124] W. S. Mackie, 'Notes upon the Text and the Interpretation of "Beowulf"', *MLR* 34 (1939), 515–24, at 524.

[125] Chaney, *Cult of Kingship*, pp. 123–4, 126 and 143. See also Martin-Clarke, 'Significant Objects', p. 115; and R. J. Cramp, '*Beowulf* and Archaeology', *MA* 1 (1957), 57–77, esp. 60, n. 13.

[126] As Tigges has suggested of the Exeter Book Riddles, 'The difference between nonsense anomalies and those featuring in riddles is that in the latter the anomalies ideally stop being so as soon as we realize what the answer is supposed to be' ('Signs and Solutions', p. 68).

(12b–14a). As noted above, the meaning of *abæd* has been another point of contention in previous interpretations of the riddle. This problematic verb has been identified as a form of *abiddan*, and thus translated 'to ask, pray, pray to, pray for, obtain by asking or praying'; or of *abædeþ*, and thus 'to force, wring, compel, demand, require (where something is due)'. Other proffered translations include 'to offer', 'to receive' and, most controversially, 'to ward off'.[127]

In other proposed solutions, each of these interpretations works mainly in isolation. For example, the Cross could be said to ward off weapons, offering God's protection to the lord; or else, more abstractly, to receive weapons or treasure offered as gifts to the church. But it is less clear how a cross would 'ask for' or 'offer' weapons, treasure or sword for or to a lord – especially in his mead hall, where the poet situates the riddle-object.[128] A harp could be said 'to ask for' or even 'require' the *scop*'s payment from an obliging lord, but it, too, seems unlikely to offer him weapons.

The drinking bowl and barrel might accompany the lord's distribution of treasure at a feast, but they would neither offer nor receive such treasure directly, nor require nor obtain weapons. The gallows would be unlikely to have any direct involvement with weapons or treasure, especially in relation to the liege lord or his *comitatus* in the hall.[129] The solutions in the 'weapons-storage' group – including chest, scabbard or rack – are understood to receive the weapons stored within it, and, arguably, also to offer them back up for use.[130] However, such an interpretation minimizes the active implications of this verb: the sense that the riddle-object is itself somehow conveying the demand or compulsion on its lord's behalf. By their nature, the scabbard, sword box or weapons rack could receive and 'offer' only passively.[131]

On the other hand, a military standard encompasses most, if not all, of the possible meanings of *abæd*, including even the most controversial. First, as emblem of the lord's authority and, by extension, the *mondryhtne* (13a, 'lord') himself, a

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[127] See Bosworth-Toller, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, *s.v.* 'abiddan' and 'abædeþ'. See also n. 17 above; and *ASPR* III, 350. For the additional possibility 'to offer', see Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, p. 66–7; for 'to receive', see Williamson, *Old English Riddles*, p. 304. For an overview of the controversy, see Muir, *Exeter Anthology* II, 651–2.

[128] See Tupper, *Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 189; Williamson, *Old English Riddles*, p. 303; and Salvador-Bello, *Isidorean Perceptions of Order*, p. 371.

[129] Compare Stanley, 'Heroic Aspects', p. 210.

[130] See Baum, *Anglo-Saxon Riddles*, p. 17; Murphy, *Unriddling*, p. 62; and Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, p. 67, n. 24.

[131] See Tupper, *Riddles of the Exeter Book*, p. 189; Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, pp. 61–2 and 69. Also uncertain is the relationship between these solutions and *rode tacn* (and/or *wulfheafedtreo* as 'gallows'); as Williamson notes: 'somehow (either by an unknown wordplay or because of some unknown similarity of function or design) the box is being compared to a gallows or rood in the riddle' (*Old English Riddles*, p. 303).

standard could be said 'to demand' (or, less generously, 'to force' or 'to compel') – and 'to obtain by asking' – the loyal service of each elite warrior and *goldhilted sweord* (14a, 'gold-hilted sword') in the lord's fighting force. Moreover, on the battlefield, the *segn* would simultaneously boost the morale and coordinate the efforts of these sworn warriors, thus working to 'ward off' the weapons of the enemy.[132]

After the battle, the banner, again standing metonymically for the lord himself, would traditionally 'require as due', and 'receive', any *maðm in healle* (13b, 'treasure in the hall') collected by his victorious retainers. In return, the banner-lord would also be expected to redistribute these materials among his *comitatus*, 'to offer' weapons and treasure to the receiving warriors, in exchange for their past – and future – efforts on his behalf.[133] Thus, the poet's use of the multivalent *abæd* deftly encompasses all aspects of the reciprocal relationship between the *mondryhtne* and his men, just as early English people would have recognized the riddle-object, the *segn*, as both emblematic of the lord's power and synonymous with the elite warriors he commanded.[134]

CONCLUSION

Finally, the poet challenges the listener to answer the riddle, to name the *wudu* (16b, 'wood'), his song describes. This formulaic closing subtly reminds the audience of the object's previous identification as *treo* and *beam* – both of which are synonyms for the *labarum*, Constantine's famous battle standard, and deftly evoke the *segn*'s height, composition and basic shape.

In all three main aspects – appearance, composition and use – a battle standard satisfies the poet's description of the mystery object in Riddle K-D 55. It is portable and belongs in a mead hall among noble men. It is adorned with gold and silver and closely associated with animal symbolism; and it is useful to a lord in all the specific ways the riddle suggests. Solving the riddle as *segn* or 'banner' accounts for the high-value materiality of the object and its cruciform shape as well as its associations with weapons – each of which has been prioritized independently in various previous readings of the text. It also accounts, within the poet's own specified context, for the list of trees that defines the object's intrinsic qualities; and it allows for internally consistent interpretations of *abæd* and *wolfsheafodtreo*, both of which have presented significant difficulties in previously proposed solutions.

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[132] Compare Cavell's reading of *Elene*, in which Constantine's 'battle-success is also linked to the use of God's symbol on his standard. Thus, the victory-standard here acts as a metonymy for victory', a 'visual representation of the outcome of conflict' (*Weaving Words*, p. 27).

[133] See, for example, H. E. Davidson, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England: its Archaeology and Literature* (1962; Woodbridge, 1998), pp. 75–6 and 212–13; and Portnoy, '*Laf*-Craft', p. 559.

[134] As noted above, *segn* is used in *Beowulf* to refer to the warriors under the banner-lord's command (1204–1205a and 2959b–2960).

Segn ('banner' or 'battle standard') also answers all of the scholarly criteria for a viable riddle solution, including comprehensiveness, lexical accuracy and contextual plausibility. It reasonably incorporates all the information provided by the poet; satisfies all the clues (both overt and implied); and addresses a number of the issues, linguistic and historical, raised by earlier interpretations of the text. It does so, moreover, with a riddle-object that is well attested in surviving early medieval English sources, both written and visual, and is thus demonstrably familiar to the riddle's original audience.

Solving the riddle in this way unlocks for modern readers both the cultural complexities of the riddler's 'enigmatic definition' in K-D 55, and the socio-historical resonances of the object he defines.[135] Recognizing the riddle-object as a *segn* illuminates the riddle's insights into the relationship between a lord and his warriors; the interlacing of secular and religious imagery in mead hall as well as monastery; and the enduring investment of early English identity, royal authority and collective power and prestige in high-value, high-status objects like the lord's banner, *segn* or *cumbol*. For all of these reasons, I propose that this should be the new 'standard' solution for the long-perplexing Exeter Book Riddle 55.[136]

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[135] M. Nelson, 'The Rhetoric of the Exeter Book Riddles', *Speculum* 49 (1974), 421–40, at 424.

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