

[return to updates](#)

THE BRITISH MUSEUM SWORD



by Miles Mathis

First published June 30, 2020

One of my readers sent me [a link to this today](#), thinking I might be able to solve it. It is a mysterious inscription on an old sword that no one has been able to decipher. I am actually not too keen on games like this, since you can waste an inordinate amount of time on them with nothing to show for it. I have a lot of people in email trying to divert my attention away from more important things, and I feared this might be another one of them. So going in I promised myself that if I didn't see a way to solve it in the first fifteen minutes, I would move on.

But you may be glad to know I did. We have a line of twenty letters here, though for some reason the guy in the video says there are thirteen. Don't know what that is about. The first thing I did was dismiss the first and the last, since they are obviously just decorative crosses acting as bookend ornaments. You can tell that by the curved dashes pointing right at the beginning and left at the end. That brings us down to eighteen letters.

The next thing I saw was that these were runes, not letters of some language. They aren't common Futhark runes, but they are close enough. The fact they are all caps is the first clue. The next clue is the three X's, since the odds of having three X's in 18 letters is very low. But since they are G-runes, not real X's, that answers that. They are more like Marcomannic runes, due to the use of the V-like letter to represent CH near the end, the use of the W to represent Y or W, and the strange use of the cursive N (Hur) to represent N (in the second instance). That is very non-standard, even in Marcomannic runes.

They look like late period-runes, since they are quite close to modern letters, which I guess is what

threw a lot of people off. My guess is the person who wrote this lived at a time when modern letters already existed in his language, but wanted to use runes to give his sword an ancient look, and also to save space. People still occasionally use runes for that reason. But this warrior appears to have been far from expert in their use, having special trouble with the N. That's not really surprising, since N is a difficult character in runes. In Futhark, the N looks too much like a cross, which may be why he looked for something else. He already had the cross. And in Marcomannic runes, the N looks like an X, which he was already using for G. He couldn't use the same letter for both G and N. There is also a letter in Marcomannic runes that looks like a cursive N, but it was usually used to denote U. Since our warrior was ditching all unnecessary vowels, he didn't need a U, and so let the N stand for N.

What I very quickly saw was that we have the runes WDN near the middle, in position 8, 9, 10. Throwing out unnecessary vowels, that would indicate. . . **the god WODEN**.

The next thing I noticed was that at the end we have—translating the runes into modern letters—the word GORCHI, or variously, GORKI. The X is a G-rune. So what we have here is runes to represent Polish or proto-Polish. Gorki in Polish means “hills”.

So, if we take that information back to letters 3, 4, 5, we find the word GOG. The modern Polish for GOD is BOG, not GOG, but I would guess GOG also means GOD, as in Gog and Magog. Perhaps BOG was spelled GOG in proto-Polish.

Since Woden is a god, the two words together confirm one another.

This also helps us translate the D in positions 2 and 13, since the Polish for “to” is “do”. So I intuit the D here stands for “to”, with the O dropped in this position. Local speakers of the language would know that D stood for “to”.

So we now have

N to the god CH Woden CH to the hills.

Given that CH is in the same position after GOD and WODEN, the best assumption is that it is some sort of superlative. Giving us

N to the great god Woden-the-great to the hills.

You may ask, “Why would someone addressing the god Woden bookend the statement with crosses?” Two possibilities. One, this warrior is a Christian warrior fighting against pagan soldiers who worship Woden. So the message is something like

Send the god Woden to the hills.

In other words, defeat him and send him back where he came from.

The other possibility is that this is a warrior of Woden, and the crosses aren't Christian. Crosses were used across Europe before the arrival of Christianity, as a symbol of the Sun. That is confirmed by figures on the reverse of the sword, not normally shown. There, the crosses are inside circles, indicating they are Solar crosses, not Christian crosses. Also three crescent moons, which likewise indicate a pagan author. In that case, the inscription would read something like

Hail to the great god Woden-the-great of the hills.

Meaning, the warrior was asking for Woden's blessing upon his quest.

So we just have the first N to translate. Since our warrior appears to be trying to use Marcomannic runes, that N probably stands for an H. Giving us

H(dropped vowel/s) to the great god Woden-the-great to the hills.

Most probably meaning

Dedicated to the great god Woden-the-great of the hills.

I was going to submit this solution, but it turns out the game ended in 2015, after the British Museum got tired of fielding answers. It appears they are no longer interested in help from the public. But if you want to try to submit this to someone at the British Museum (in my name), have a go. I gave up on submitting anything to the mainstream long ago. It is now dated here, with my name on it, which is enough for me.