

An Arithmetical Crux in the Woden Passage in the Old English *Nine Herbs Charm*

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Abstract *The Nine Herbs Charm* is one of the most extensively researched Old English metrical charms, not only in view of its allegedly corrupt text or its religious focus, but also with regard to its arithmetic. Since *The Nine Herbs Charm* abounds in references to numbers, particularly the number nine, three major arithmetical concerns have been whether the nine herbs, poisons and infections explicitly indicated in the text can actually be matched to referents within the charm. A fourth arithmetical crux, as yet undiscovered, is located in the charm's Woden passage. Here, Woden is said to have smitten a snake into nine parts with nine *wuldortanas* ("glory-twigs"). Interpretations of this passage have focused on the significance of Woden's presence and the nature of Woden's *wuldortanas*. These twigs have traditionally been interpreted as runic weapons of magical power, but this seems unwarranted on the basis of the textual evidence. Yet if the *wuldortanas* are conventional weapons, they cannot possibly strike the snake into nine pieces, unless the nature of the snake is properly understood.

Keywords *Nine Herbs Charm* · Woden · *Lacnunga* · Charms · Old English

The Old English *Nine Herbs Charm* is uniquely preserved in the early eleventh-century English manuscript London, British Library, Harley 585.¹ First published in the 1860s, the charm has received a vast amount of attention,² much of which

¹ For descriptions of the manuscript, see Ker (1957), Doane (1994), Gneuss (2001).

² After Cockayne's *editio princeps* (1864–1866), *The Nine Herbs Charm* has been published at least fifteen times. The standard edition is Dobbie (1942). Two facsimiles have appeared (Robinson and

In memory of Steve Glosecki.

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centred upon the supposedly corrupt textual transmission and the religious stance of the text.³ In addition, three arithmetical cruces have been identified in *The Nine Herbs Charm*, which contains several catalogues of numbered items. The common factor in the charm seems to be the number three or multiplications thereof, notably the number nine:⁴ nine herbs, three and thirty enemies, nine glory-banished ones, nine poisons, nine infections, six blisters, three cardinal directions, nine snakes, the instruction to sing the incantation three times over the herbs, and Woden's nine *wuldortanas* ("glory-twigs") with which he strikes a snake into nine pieces. The three cruces previously identified relate to the exact number of herbs, poisons and infections enumerated in the charm. One more arithmetical crux has escaped attention hitherto, despite it being located in the text's well-known Woden passage. After a brief description of *The Nine Herbs Charm*, I will discuss this crux and provide a feasible solution.

Description of *The Nine Herbs Charm*

The Nine Herbs Charm is an anonymous, unnamed text that has survived in the similarly unnamed *Lacnunga*, a medical compendium which has been described as "a rambling collection", and in a somewhat friendlier manner as "a compilation made by non-medical collectors".⁵ Both the medical compendium and the charm owe their name to modern editors. The *Lacnunga* was named by its first editor.⁶ Grein and Wülcker gave the charm the title *Neunkräutersegen*, which Bradley translated into *The Song of the Nine Magic Herbs*.⁷ Skemp subsequently turned the title into Old English *Nigon Wyrta Galdor*.⁸ In *The Nine Herbs Charm*, the number *nygon* ("nine") is important; *wyrta* ("herbs") play a central role; and the text is referred to as a *gealdor* ("charm").⁹ Therefore, the designation *Nine Herbs Charm* seems justified.

Footnote 2 continued

Stanley (1991; Doane 1994), and over a hundred studies. The most extensive studies are Grendon (1909–1910), Dobbie (1942), Storms (1948), Grattan and Singer (1952), Cameron (1993), and Pettit (2001).

³ This is part of a wider discussion on paganism and Christianity in Anglo-Saxon culture (e.g. Stanley 1975). Many scholars have tried to establish whether *The Nine Herbs Charm* is predominantly pagan with obtrusive interpolations of a mediaeval Christian scribe, or overtly Christian with some pagan flavouring. The debate has now taken a shamanistic and mythical angle (Glosecki 1989, 2000, 2007).

⁴ The only exception is the reference to chervil and fennel, the two herbs sent out by the *witig drihten* ("wise lord", l. 37) *on VII worulde* ("to [the] seven worlds", l. 39), but this is the topic of another paper altogether.

⁵ Talbot (1967, p. 23) and Cameron (1993, p. 34), respectively.

⁶ Cockayne (1864–1866).

⁷ Grein and Wülcker (1881–1898) and Bradley (1904).

⁸ Skemp (1911).

⁹ On the use of Old English *gealdor* to denote a verbal charm, see Serjeantson (1936), Olsan (1992). Meaney (1999, p. 96) defines a charm as "a formula by which an end is attempted by magic means". See also Roper (2005) and Skemer (2006).

In the manuscript, *The Nine Herbs Charm* occupies one hundred long lines, folios 160r4–163v8. In edited form, the charm consists of a 63-line metrical incantation followed by a prose recipe of ten lines.¹⁰ The incantation has the following components: a discussion of six herbs which counteract nine poisons (ll. 1–30); a passage in which Woden kills a snake (ll. 31–35); an account of two more herbs (ll. 36–44); the efficacy of the nine herbs against nine poisons and infections (ll. 45–57); the power of Christ against poison (ll. 58–63). The prose recipe instructs the user to work the herbs into a salve (ll. 64–69), to sing the incantation over the herbs three times, and to sing into the patient’s mouth and ears, and over the wound prior to applying the salve (ll. 69–73).

Which illness *The Nine Herbs Charm* aims to treat is open to speculation. Mention is made of *onflyge* (“infectious disease”), *attor* (“poison”), and *wyrm* (“snake”), suggesting anything from airborne infection to poisoning from snake bite. Dobbie saw in the charm a treatment “for an unspecified malady”.¹¹ Cameron argued that it was intended to treat haemorrhoids on the basis of the plants mentioned in the text and the recipes surrounding the charm.¹² Whatever the purpose, no one has so far put the charm to the test, to my knowledge.

The Arithmetical Crux in the Woden Passage

The so-called Woden passage has been studied extensively by scholars for reasons other than arithmetic, e.g. for the existence of a belief in Woden in Anglo-Saxon England, the presence of pagan elements in Anglo-Saxon literary culture, the significance of the apples, the alleged use of runes and runic twigs, and verbal parallels in other texts.¹³ All these elements are present in, or can be read into the Woden passage:

Wyrm com snican, toslat he man;
 ða genam Woden VIII wuldortanas,
 sloh ða þa næddran, þæt heo on VIII tofleah.
 Pær geændade æppel and attor,
 þæt heo næfre ne wolde on hus bugan.
 Fille and finule, felamihtigu twa,

¹⁰ All quotations from and references to *The Nine Herbs Charm* are from the standard edition by Dobbie (1942). The oldest editions switched to a prose rendering after line 44 (Cockayne 1864–1866; Grein and Wülcker 1881–1898; Wülcker 1882). Grattan (1927) was the first to observe that the metrical part extends up to the recipe. Cockayne (1864–1866) divided the text into two distinct parts (his part-metrical, part-prose incantation is item 45, the prose recipe is item 46). Grattan and Singer (1952) distinguished three “lays” and a prose recipe. The texts in the *Lacnunga* are unnumbered in the manuscript.

¹¹ Dobbie (1942, p. cxxxiii).

¹² Cameron (1993).

¹³ See, for instance, Rohde (1922), Storms (1947), Cockayne (1864–1866, rev. ed. 1961), Ryan (1963), Meaney (1966), Taylor (1967, 1998), Jankuhn et al. (1973–2008), Rubin (1974), Ström and Biezais (1975), Watkins (1995), Jolly (1996), North (1997), Venneman (1998), Rauer (2000), Pettit (2001), Garner (2004), Jackson (2005).

þa wyrte gesceop witig drihten,
halig on heofonum, þa he hongode;¹⁴

Indeed, the Woden passage features a heathen god, apples, and the enigmatic *wuldortanas*, and it shares words with other works: Woden is mentioned in *Maxims I*, in which the name alliterates with *wuldor*, in *The Second Merseburg Charm*, while *Beowulf* mentions the sword Hrunting, which is *atertanum fah*.¹⁵ For all the literature on the Woden passage, however, the arithmetical crux has remained unnoticed. This crux centres upon the nature of the *VIII wuldortanas* (l. 32) and the snake (l. 33).

Parallels have been observed between the Woden passage and a *locus classicus* in the Eddic *Hávamál*.¹⁶

Veit ek, at ek hekk
vindga meiði á
nætr allar níu,
geiri undaðr
ok gefinn Óðni,
sjálfr sjálfum mér,
á þeim meiði
er manngi veit
hvers hann af rótum renn.

Við hleifi mik sældu
né við hornigi,
nýsta ek niðr,
nam ec upp rúnar,
œpandi nam,
fell ek apr þaðan.¹⁷

Here, Odin, undergoing a self-inflicted ordeal by hanging from a tree, is said to have acquired the runic script. If Woden in *The Nine Herbs Charm* is identical to the hanging *witig drihten* (l. 37), then the link to Odin's ordeal in *Hávamál* suggests that the *wuldortanas* may well have a meaning beyond the literal "glory-twigs".¹⁸ Singer was one of the first to speculate that Old English *tan* in the context of the Woden passage is to be interpreted as "specifically a twig used in casting lots", in the light of Tacitus's observation that the Germanic peoples practised sortilege. In Singer's translation:

¹⁴ Lines 31–38: "A snake came crawling, it slew a man. Then Woden took nine glory-twigs; he then struck the adder so that it flew apart into nine bits. There brought apple and venom about, that it (the snake) never wanted to stay in the house. Chervil and fennel, two of great power; those herbs the wise lord created, holy in heaven, when he hung". All translations are mine.

¹⁵ Line 1459b (Klaeber 1922, 3rd rev. ed. 1950, p. 55): "shining with poisonous twigs". On the link between this line and the *wuldortanas* in *The Nine Herbs Charm*, see Cooke (2003).

¹⁶ On the comparison between *Hávamál* and *The Nine Herbs Charm*, see Ohrt (1927–1928, 1929), Storms (1948), Stürzl (1960), Bonser (1963), Braekman (1980), Bremmer (1991), North (1997).

¹⁷ Stanzas 138–139 (Evans 1986, pp. 68–69): "I know that I hung on a windy tree for nine whole nights, wounded with a spear and given to Odin, myself to myself, on the tree of which no one knows wherefrom its roots grow. No bread they gave me, nor drink from a horn; I peered downwards; I took up runes, shouting I took them; I fell back from there".

¹⁸ Bosworth and Toller (1898, p. 1280, s.v. *wuldor-tan*).

“A little bough is cut from a fruit-bearing tree and cut into slips; these are distinguished by runes (*notis quibusdam*), and thrown casually and at random over a white cloth”. From the twig for casting lots, *tan* came to mean the *lot* itself.¹⁹

Singer’s interpretation depends upon an identification of the *wuldortanas* with the supposedly runic symbols inscribed on twigs and mentioned by Tacitus as *notis quibusdam*. Several objections can be made against this claim. For instance, despite intensive debate, there is no convincing evidence that the phrase *notis quibusdam*, which is more accurately translated as “certain signs”, refers to runes. Furthermore, the *Hávamál* analogue relates how Odin acquired the runes, but any reference to the acquisition or use of a script, runic or otherwise, is lacking in *The Nine Herbs Charm*. These counterarguments imply that a comparison between Tacitus’s *Germania*, the Eddic *Hávamál* and *The Nine Herbs Charm* should not be stretched beyond its limits, because a comparison thus extended becomes a false analogy. So although it is true that Tacitus speaks of twigs with inscriptions, and although *Hávamál* speaks of Odin obtaining the runic script, this combined testimony does not warrant Singer’s conclusion that Woden’s *wuldortanas* should be regarded as rune-inscribed twigs, and that the word *tan* is to be identified as “lot”.

Singer’s analysis of the *wuldortanas* does not appear to hold, yet similar views were adopted by later scholars. Storms, for example, construed the following explanation of the *wuldortanas*:

He [Woden] takes nine glory-twigs, by which are meant nine runes, that is, nine twigs with the initial letters in runes of the plants representing the power inherent in them, and using them as weapons he smites the serpent with them. Thanks to their magical power they pierce its skin and cut it into nine pieces.²⁰

The action described by Storms resembles a spectacular feat of magical warfare by which the snake is smitten into as many parts as there are glory-twigs. There is probably no support for such a reading, since all that *The Nine Herbs Charm* relates is that Woden struck a snake with nine glory-twigs to such an extent that the snake flew apart into nine parts. Certainly, there are nine *wuldortanas*, but not “with the initial letters in runes of the plants representing the power inherent in them”. Likewise, the *wuldortanas* are weapons in Woden’s hands, but not therefore weapons with “magical power”. The interpretations by Singer and Storms may be fanciful, but their respective analyses of the *wuldortanas* as runic magic have been accepted by many critics.²¹ In an extensive analysis of *The Nine Herbs Charm*, Pettit opined that the fragmentation of the snake

¹⁹ Singer (1919–1920, p. 355). See also Grattan and Singer (1952). Tacitus wrote: *virgam frugiferae arbori decisam in surculos amputant eosque notis quibusdam discretos super candidam vestem temere ac fortuito spargunt* (1983, p. 8).

²⁰ Storms (1948, p. 195).

²¹ For instance, Singer’s reading is accepted by Philipsson (1929), Grattan and Singer (1952), Stürzl (1960), Orton (2003), Cooke (2003), Storms’s by Elliott (1957, 1959, 2nd ed. 1989), Mayr-Harting (1972), Rodrigues (1993), Herbert (1994), MacLeod and Mees (2006). Page (1973) and Bremmer (1991) are more sceptical of this interpretation of runic magic. Alternative interpretations of the *wuldortanas* are Zaubерzweige (Jente 1921; Magoun 1937; Bierbaumer 1975–1979) and “thunderbolts” (Wülcker 1882; Grendon 1909–1910).

is probably explicable as a sympathetic magical transformation resulting from the ancient (and still pervasive) association of snakes with twigs and rods—since in this through-world like affects and consorts with like, striking a snake with nine twigs may well have been thought to cause it to break into nine corresponding pieces.²²

This argument is subtly different from those of Singer and Storms, because Pettit not only appeals to the magical power of the *wuldortanas* but also specifies that we are dealing with an act of sympathetic magic. Sympathetic magic relies on a transfer or correspondence of qualities between objects that are connected through magic. In this case, the number of fragments of the snake matches the number of *wuldortanas*. Pettit's analysis is more attractive than those of Singer and Storms because sympathetic magic was not unknown in Anglo-Saxon England; the composer of *The Nine Herbs Charm* may have opted for such a form of magic and may in the process have achieved numerical parallelism (or the other way around).

With these comments on the nature of the *wuldortanas* in mind, it is time to turn to the arithmetical crux, which is contained in lines 32–33: *ða genam Woden VIII wuldortanas./sloh ða þa næddran, þæt heo on VIII tofleaþ*. If one takes a glory-twig and strikes a snake, the snake will part in two, that is, if the striking motion is forceful enough to have a cutting effect. Likewise, nine glory-twigs produce nine cuts which strike a snake into ten parts, as Fig. 1 illustrates.

If Woden wanted the snake to fly apart into nine bits, he should have used eight *wuldortanas*. The Woden crux may have resulted from two causes. First, the compiler did not perceive any arithmetical issue at all, because he was more interested in numerical parallelism (sympathetic magic) or number symbolism than in arithmetical exactitude, for example. Alternatively, the compiler knew what he was doing arithmetically. In choosing the former option, one would discard an interesting alternative, so let us assume, for the sake of the argument, that the latter option is correct, in which case the nature of the *wuldortanas* comes to the fore. As has been shown above, the readings by Singer, Storms and Pettit ascribe magical qualities to the *wuldortanas*: these twigs might defy arithmetic through the workings of runic or sympathetic magic. Thus, Woden was able to strike the snake into nine pieces with nine glory-twigs because the *wuldortanas* make whatever they touch fly into as many pieces. In other words, the *wuldortanas* have a magic touch occasioned by runic magic or sympathetic magic.

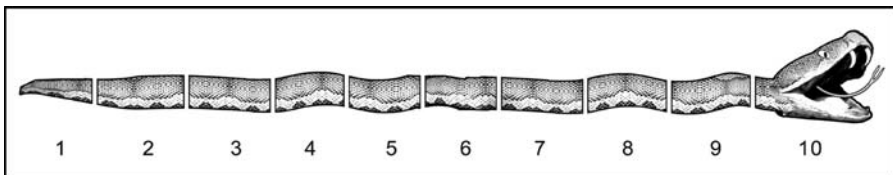


Fig. 1 Nine twigs; snake in ten parts

²² Pettit (2001, II.139).

Close reading of lines 32–33 suggests an alternative: “then Woden took nine glory-twigs;/he then struck (*sloh*) the adder so that it flew apart into nine bits”. The *wuldortanas* are not runic or magical, but a powerful weapon with superb cutting force, comparable to that of an *ealdsweord eotenisc ecgum þyhtig*.²³ The denotations of the transitive forms of the verb *slean* as a forceful, striking, impacting motion, would seem to support such a reading of the *wuldortanas*.²⁴ Moreover, Bremmer distinguished two different uses of the word *tan* in compounds:

The one group refers to twigs of a specific tree, viz. *āctān* “oaktwig”, *ellentān* “eldertwig”, and *misteltān* “mistletoe”. The other group indicates the effect or purpose of the twig, and these compounds are used metaphorically, and therefore require more detailed attention.²⁵

Since it does not refer to twigs of a specific tree, *wuldortan* must belong to the second group, in which “compounds are used metaphorically”, often in connection with swords.²⁶ Bremmer concludes that *tan* in such compounds “should rather make us think of an actual weapon; whether this weapon is a rod, or, by extension, a sword, must remain undecided”.²⁷ Thus, if *wuldortanas* are a kind of physical weapon devoid of the power of sympathetic magic, there is no further need to speculate on magical interpretations. This means, though, that the *wuldortanas* cannot provide a solution to the arithmetical crux in the Woden passage, because a physical striking motion with nine *wuldortanas* will result in a ten-part snake, as Fig. 1 demonstrates. Yet suppose that the snake is not linear but circular. A circle struck once makes a line; a circle struck twice is divided into two parts. Similarly, a circular snake struck nine times is divided into nine parts, as shown in Fig. 2.²⁸

Circular, tail-biting snakes are not unknown from Classical and Germanic cultures. In Greek and Egyptian mythology, such a serpent was known as an *ouroboros*, Greek for “tail-chewer”.²⁹ In North Germanic mythology, the *miðgarðsormr* (“Midgard serpent”) Iormungand encircles Midgard, as Snorri’s Eddic *Gylfaginning* relates:

Þá sendi Alföðr til guðin at taka börnin ok fœra sér. Ok er þau kómu til hans þá kastaði hann orminum í inn djúpa sæ er liggr um öll lönd, ok óx sá ormr svá at hann liggr í miðju hafinu of öll lönd ok bítr í sporð sér.³⁰

²³ *Beowulf*, line 1558 (Klaeber 1922, 3rd rev. ed. 1950, p. 58): “ancient sword of giants, with strong edges”.

²⁴ “[T]o strike an object, smite”, “to strike so as to kill, to slay”, “to strike, drive so as to cause impact”, “to move by a stroke, to strike off a limb” (Bosworth and Toller 1898, pp. 882–883, s.v. *slean*).

²⁵ Bremmer (1991, p. 413).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 413–415. See also Davidson (1962).

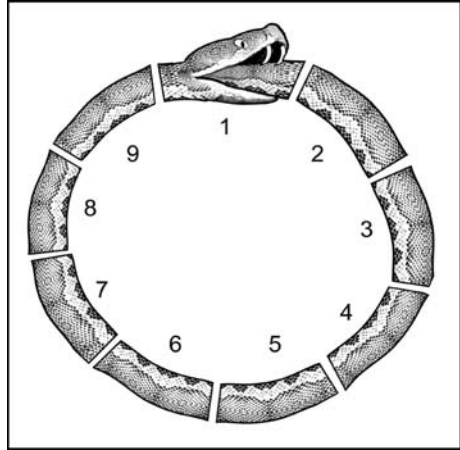
²⁷ Bremmer (1991, p. 415).

²⁸ Whether these nine parts are equal or whether the head and tail is more equal than the other parts is an argument I will not pursue here because my focus is on the number of fragments of snake.

²⁹ See Ackermann et al. (1981–1997), Cancik et al. (1996–2003).

³⁰ § 34 (Snorri Sturluson 1982, p. 27): “Then All-father sent the gods in order to get the children (Iormungand, Fenrir and Hel) and bring them to him. And when they came to him, he threw the serpent

Fig. 2 Nine twigs; snake in nine parts



Since the idea of circular, tail-biting snakes is present in North Germanic paganism, it is conceivable that the Anglo-Saxons might also have been familiar with this phenomenon. The idea of Iormungand being caught by Thor (*Hymiskviða* stanzas 16–24, *Gylfaginning* §§ 46–48) was known in the British Isles in Anglo-Saxon times, as several picture stones attest.³¹ On these stones, however, circular snakes are absent in any other setting than as a border motif,³² i.e. as a so-called *linnormr* also encountered on runic stones in Scandinavia. In Anglo-Saxon literary culture, the only implicit reference to a circular snake motif might be found in the opening line of *Deor*, although definitive evidence is lacking.³³ Anglo-Saxon art offers a better perspective: snake rings and armlets were certainly known, as is illustrated by a Stamford Bridge armlet, with a snake's head biting its own tail.³⁴ Admittedly, border motifs on picture stones and rings have a natural tendency to be circular irrespective of the object or creature portrayed. Nevertheless, the use of tail-biting snakes in these situations testifies to the knowledge of the motif in Britain in Anglo-Saxon times. So even if the crux in the Woden passage is the first indication of a circular snake motif in writing from Anglo-Saxon England, the existence of this motif is corroborated by contemporary sources.

Footnote 30 continued

into the deep sea which lies around all lands. And the serpent grew so that it lies in the middle of the ocean encircling all lands and bites on its own tail".

³¹ The Kirk Bride Manx Cross features what seems to be Thor with an ox-head, and the head of a snake next to it that is part of the border; on the other side of the stone, Thor is seen attacking the serpent at Ragnarok (Kermode 1907, rpt. 1994, plate xlvi). Another Manx stone, the Andreas Thorwald's Cross, portrays Odin's fight with Fenrir on one side, and what I see as Thor's struggle with Iormungand on the other, although Kermode considers the latter an image of Christ—the cross-like instrument seen in the figure's hand looks remarkably like Thor's hammer (*ibid.*, plate lii). Finally, the Cumbrian Gosforth Cross represents a boat with Hymir fishing for whales and Thor fishing for Iormungand with an ox-head (*ibid.*, p. 183).

³² See Kermode (1907, rpt. 1994, plate xlvi).

³³ Cox (1991).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10.

Concluding Remarks

The Nine Herbs Charm in the Old English medical compendium *Lacnunga* presents an arithmetical crux that has not been recognised before on the nine *wuldortanas* with which Woden strikes a snake into nine parts. It would be convenient to observe that the mediaeval composer, like many modern scholars, simply did not perceive any arithmetical issue in the first place, but the Woden passage contains more than meets the eye. Earlier criticism has concentrated upon the supposedly runic or magical qualities of the nine *wuldortanas*, that is, Woden's *wuldortanas* are either imbued with magical power through runes or the act of striking is magical. In either case, Woden strikes the snake into nine pieces. There is, however, no indication in *The Nine Herbs Charm* that the *wuldortanas* are runic or magical. In fact, comparison with other compounds with *tan* would seem to indicate that Woden's weapons are conventional rather than magical. Nine conventional *wuldortanas* would cause Woden to strike the snake into ten fragments. The arithmetical crux can therefore be solved only by a proper understanding of the nature of the snake. I have advanced the notion of a circular snake to account for the division into nine parts when the snake is struck with nine *wuldortanas*. Circular, tail-biting snakes were not unknown in Germanic culture and in Britain in Anglo-Saxon times. The reader is free to interpret the circular snake motif as a pagan element in *The Nine Herbs Charm*, but I wish to stress that this is not the reason why I interpreted the crux in this way. Rather, I read the crux in a way that does justice to the arithmetical complexity of *The Nine Herbs Charm* without doing injustice to the workmanship of the composer or scribe.

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