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CRUCETHUR : IS IT STILL A MYSTERIOUS WORD ?

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I

In the *OED* (first edition, 1933) we find an entry word :

+**Crucet-hus.** *Obs* [OE ; *crucet* is app. an adaptation of L. *cruciatus* or its OF. form *cruciet*.] House of torment ;

We find no revision whatever made in the second edition (1989). And we also find in the recent fascicle D 1 of the Middle English Dictionary an entry :

Crucet-hūs n. [Cp. OF ppl. *cruciet* tortured & OE *hus*.] A kind of torture chamber.

As far as the form of the word is concerned, the same is true of such standard texts as Clark (1958), Dickins and Wilson (1954), Emerson (1960), and Mossé (1968). But *crucethur*, not *-hus*, is the reading given in Bennett and Smithers (1968) and Burnley (1992). We may well wonder which the correct reading is. And what about the correct etymology, then?

In order to facilitate matters, let us look at the manuscript on the next page first. In *Early Middle English Texts* by Dickins and Wilson, we find a photographic facsimile of the *Peterborough Chronicle*. The word we are concerned with is the fifth word on the third line of the facsimile page. Without doubt its final letter is *r*, not *s*, if we compare it with the final *s* in adjacent words (*nadres*, *snakes*, *pades*, *was*). It is quite different from them, but it is exactly like all the examples of *r* round about, including ones in final position (as in the word *pær* at the end of the fourth line). And, first and foremost, the two *r*'s in the word in question are shaped in exactly the same way. One of the clearest instances would be *-hungær*. *Sume-* (the fourth and fifth words on line 18), where *r* is entirely different from *s*.

... hæued, and uurythen it ðat it gæde to þe hæernes. Hi diden heom in quarterne þar nadres and snakes and pades wæron inne, and drapen heom swa. Sume hi diden in crucethur, ðat is, in an ceste þat was scort and nareu and undep; and dide scærpe stanes þerinne, and þrengde þe man þærinne ðat him bræcon alle þe limes. In mani of þe castles wæron lof and grin: ðat wæron rachenteges ðat twa oþer thre men hadden onoh to bæron onne. Þat was sua maced ðat is fæstned to an beom, and diden an scærp iren abuton þa mannes throte and his hals, ðat he ne myhte nowiderwardes, ne sitten ne lien ne slepen, oc bæron al ðat iren. Mani þusen hi drapen mid hungær. I ne can ne I ne mai tellen alle þe wunder ne alle þe pines ðat hi diden wrecce men on þis land; and ðat lastede þa xix wintre wile Stephne was king, and æure it was uerse and uerse. Hi læiden gældes on the tunes æure umwile, and clepeden it 'tenserie'. Þa þe uerecce men ne hadden nammore to gyuen, þa ræueden hi and brendon alle

the tunes, ðat wel þu myhtes faren al a dæis fare, sculdest thu neure finden man in tune sittende, ne land tiled. Þa was corn dære, and flec and cæse and butere, for nan ne wæs o þe land. Wrecce men sturuen of hungær. Sume ieden on ælmes þe waren sum wile rice men; sume flugen ut of lande. Wes næure gæt mare wrecched on land, ne næure hethen men werse ne diden þan hi diden. For ouersithon ne forbaren hi nouthur circe ne cyrceiærd, oc namen al þe god ðat þarinne was, and brenden sythen þe cyrce and al tegædere. Ne hi ne forbaren biscopes land ne abbotes ne preostes, ac ræueden munekes and clerekes, and æuric man other þe ouermyhte. Gif twa men oþer iii coman ridend to an tun, al þe tunscipe flugæn for heom, wenden ðat hi wæron ræueres. Þe biscopes and lered men heom cursede æure, oc was heom naht þarof, for hi ueron al for-cursæd and forsuoren and forloren. War sæ me tilede, þe erthe ne bar nan corn, for þe land was al fordon mid suilce dædes, and hi sæden openlice ðat Crist slep, and his halechen. Suilc, and mare þanne we cunnen sæin, we þoleden xix wintre for ure sinnes.

(Transcription in modern type by Burnley 1992)

. . . head and were twisted until they went to the brain. They put them in a dungeon where there were adders and snakes and toads; and they killed them in that way. Some they put in a torture-box: that is, in a chest that was short, narrow and shallow. And they put sharp stones in it and pressed the man in there so that they broke all his limbs. In many of the castles there were headband and halter: those were chains such that two or three men had difficulty in carrying one. It was made thus, that is, fastened to a beam. And they put a sharp iron [blade] around the man's throat and neck, so that he could not [move] in any direction, nor sit, nor lie, nor sleep, but had to support all that iron. They killed many thousands by starvation. I do not know nor can I tell all the atrocities nor all the torments that they did to poor men in this land; and that lasted for the nineteen years that Stephen was king, and continuously it got worse and worse. They imposed taxes on the villages again and again, and called it 'protection-money'. When the poor folk had no more to give, they robbed them and burned all the villages, so that you might well travel a whole day's journey and you would not find anyone settled in a village nor the land cultivated. Then corn was expensive, and meat, and cheese, and butter, for there was none in the country. Poor people died of starvation. Some survived on charity who were once rich men; some fled from the land. There was never more misery in the land, and neither did heathens do worse than they did; for too often they spared neither the church nor the churchyard, but they took everything of value that was inside and afterwards burned the church and everything together. Neither did they spare the bishops', abbots' or priests' land, but robbed monks and clerics, and every man robbed any other whom he could overpower. If two or three men came riding into a village, all the villagers fled because of them; they thought that they were robbers. The bishops and learned men continually cursed them, but that was nothing to them, for they were all excommunicated, perjured and damned. Wherever the earth was tilled, it bore no corn, for the land was all ruined by such deeds. And they said openly that Christ and his saints slept. Such, and more than we can say, we suffered for nineteen years for our sins.

(Modern English translation by Burnley 1992)

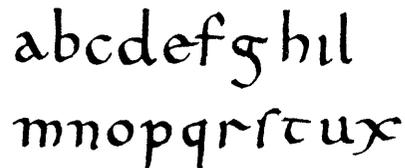
II

In the period when the manuscript was written, two kinds of hands were available ; that is, Anglo-Saxon or insular minuscule (Fig. 1) and Carolingian minuscule (Fig. 2) (both from Petti 1977).



Handwritten alphabet in Anglo-Saxon or insular minuscule. The first row contains letters a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, l. The second row contains letters m, n, o, p, q, r, r, t, u, x, y. The letters 'r' and 's' are notably similar in shape.

(Fig. 1 Anglo-Saxon or insular minuscule)



Handwritten alphabet in Carolingian minuscule. The first row contains letters a, b, c, d, e, f, g, h, i, l. The second row contains letters m, n, o, p, q, r, s, t, u, x. The letters 'r' and 's' are clearly distinguished.

(Fig. 2 Carolingian minuscule)

What is the most striking thing is that *r* and *s* are extremely confusing in Fig. 1, but in Fig. 2 they are never alike ; they can be pretty easily distinguished. According to Petti (1977 : 12), the Anglo-Saxon minuscule survived as a separate graph from the 8th to the end of the 15th century, and was perfected by the early 9th century, and the Carolingian minuscule first made its presence felt in England in the 10th century and was in general use by the following century. By comparing several *r*'s and *s*'s in the manuscript, it is easy to see which hand the scribe of this entry used. He did not use the Anglo-Saxon *s*, but the Carolingian *s* pretty consistently, and, on the other hand, he used the Anglo-Saxon *r* most of the time, but sometimes the Carolingian *r* is found. Anyway, all *r*'s and all *s*'s can be easily distinguished.

III

Whichever the correct reading may be, the sense of the word is clearly enough explained by what follows in the manuscript—*ðat is in an ceste þat was scort, and undep*. But what about its origin? Even those who accepted *crucethus* did not seem confident of its origin. For example, we read such notes as 'the ending due to popular etymology' (Dickins & Wilson), 'origin of first part unknown' (Emerson), 'with -hus due to folk etymology,' (Mossé), etc.

Given that the word is *crcuethur*, the explanation of it as deriving from Latin *cruciatu*s obviously collapses ; and the most plausible explanation is that it is from Latin *cruciator* (tormentor, torturer according to Lewis & Short's Latin Dictionary).

The correct reading was pointed out by Gerritsen (1961) and was accepted by Bennett & Smithers (1968) and later by Burnley (1992) . Since no facsimile was available until 1954, people like the OED editors (first edition) and Mossé are not to blame. In the case of MED, the fascicle containing this word appeared in 1961, perhaps before Gerritsen's article. But the revisers of the *OED* must either have been unaware of Gerritsen's

explanation or rejected it without giving a reason. In reply to the present writer's question, Mr E. S. C. Weiner (Deputy Chief Editor of the *OED*) gave an answer to the effect that they are grateful to the questioner for drawing their attention to it, adding that the *OED* would follow the view of the Toronto Dictionary of Old English: *crucethur* noun, (perh. cf. Lat. *cruciator* which is rare and has a different sense). . . A kind of torture device (early spellings misread the word as *crucet-hus* 'torture chamber'). Obviously his answer reveals their oversight.

We can discern some causes of this misreading. It was caused partly because this is a very rare word, partly because many editors did not consult the manuscript, and partly because *r* and *s* are confusing in some hands. Furthermore, it was an unhappy accident that OE had the word *hūs* (house), which happens to make sense as the ending of the mysterious (?) word.

Although this is a very rare word, a *hapax legomenon* in fact, the manuscript helps us to establish the correct reading. After all, *crucethur* is NOT a mysterious word any longer.

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