

## Free in Freemasonry and King Athelstan in England

Arvid Ystad, October 24<sup>th</sup>, 2024.

*This article demonstrates that a text entered in a blank space in a gospel book, reveals that the English King Athelstan could have initiated a person into freemasonry, rather than freed a slave as British scholars claim. The Old English word *frēogan* may have been misinterpreted. Freemasonry seems to be a direct continuation of the old Norse rites that the Scandinavians brought with them to the British Isles. We should therefore look at the original meaning of the Germanic and Old Norse words in Old English. The Old English language was massively influenced by Old Norse language and religious practice. It was arguably King Athelstan who altered the Old Norse rites with their initiations to the gods, to the freemasonry as we know it today.*

The document *Royal 1. B. VIII* in the British Library, is a gospel book probably written in Northumbria in the first half of the 8th century. An Old English (OE) text entered in a blank space tells that King Athelstan *freod*, (*gefreode*), Eadhelm very soon after he first became king. At the ceremony, witnesses were Ælfheah the mass-priest, "the hired", (=the royal household *or* more particularly it's religious part), Ælfric the reeve, Wulfnoth the White, Eanstan the *prafost* (= officer), and Byrnstan the mass-priest.<sup>1</sup> We shall later come back and discuss the two last sentences in this text. Athelstan became king of the Anglo-Saxons in 924 and king of the English from 927.

British scholars mean Athelstan freed the slave Eadhelm since the OE word *frēogan* is used in the text. However, can King Athelstan instead have initiated Eadhelm into freemasonry?

Let's have a closer look at a few words connected to "free" and "freedom".

*Frēogan* means «set free, love», past *frēode*. and is developed from *\*friō-*. according to A. Campbell's *Old English Grammar*.<sup>2</sup>

The word for freedom *frēols*, stems from two words, free + hals (neck) < *\*fri-hals* (Norse *\*frija-halsa*) "which has a free neck", presumably a freeborn as opposed to a slave (chained around the neck). The "h" in "hals" became mute => *frēols*<sup>3</sup>.

The Norwegian linguists Bjorvand and Lindemann says: The Germanic *\*frija-* is handed down in Old English *frēo*, *frīg*, English "free". The adjective *\*frija-* belongs etymologically to words with the meaning "to love", "dear" and "love", as in Gothic *frijōn*, "love", Norse, *frjá* "love", Old English *frēogan*, *frēon* "love", "embrace". Old Norse *frij* "lover", "husband".<sup>4</sup> Note that these two linguists say that *frēogan* means "love" and "embrace", not "free".

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<sup>1</sup> Simon Keyes, *King Athelstan's books*, in *Learning and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England*, Cambridge, 1985, p 185-189

<sup>2</sup> Other OE forms are *frēa*, free, and the older *\*fria*, reflects fri + a, A. Campbell, *Old English Grammar*, Oxford, 1959, §238.1, §761.4, p 335, *frēols*, §238.2. *Friō* §120,3, p. 47, means free.

<sup>3</sup> "Compare Old Icelandic *frjálsgjafi*, a freedman who's right to dispose of property was lower than that of the *leysingar*" ... Sara M. Pons-Sanz, p 417. Bjorvand and Lindemann, *Våre Arveord*, 2007, Oslo, p 304, *frels*.

<sup>4</sup> Harald Bjorvand og Fredrik Otto Lindemann, *Våre Arveord*, Oslo, 2007, p 304,305. The Old English *frēols* meant "freedom". The first term in this composition is the adjective for "free", Germanic *\*frija-*, which has already been replaced by *frjáls* in Old Norse.

The linguist, Professor Sara M. Pons-Sanz at the Cardiff University, does not mention the word *frēogan* at all in her extensive work, but confirms that *frēo* meant “free”.<sup>5</sup>

The Old English word *liesan*, “to loosen, release, redeem”, is used in a treaty between King Alfred and Guthrum (878, or later), where the same amount of money should be paid for the Danes’ freedmen (“heora liesengum”) as for the *ceorl* who occupies rented land”.<sup>6</sup> *Liesan* or Old English *lysing*, “freedman”, that can be associated with Viking Age Norse “løysingi”, “freedman”, is not used in the *British Library Royal 1.B VIII* about Athelstan’s freeing of Eadhelm as perhaps could be expected since the king had close contact with the Scandinavian community. There could, however, be “dialectal distribution” in using the words.<sup>7</sup>

Simon Keynes, the author of *King Athelstan’s books*, claims that the inserted text in the gospel book “must have been written in the south of England” some *two hundred years* (“first half of the tenth century”) after King Athelstan’s manumission of Eadhelm, “to judge from an old English text entered in a blank space...”. However, later in the article, Simon Keynes changes his mind: “...it seems more likely that the manumission was entered in *Royal 1. B. VII* because this manuscript belonged at the time to the king; in which case we could infer that the document was written by a scribe in his service”. Could it perhaps be the use of the word *frēogan*, that caused Simon Keynes to assume it was written in the south of England some two hundred years later? And, could the two last sentences: “He who averts this - may he have the disfavour of God and of all the relics which, by god’s mercy, I have obtained in England. And I grant the children the same as I grant the father”, point to those who meant that the king’s initiating of Eadhelm into freemasonry, the originally heathen rite of a Scandinavian’s goddess, was a shame? What *relics* had to do with manumission of a slave, is difficult to say, but relics are extensively used in freemasonry. Does the second sentence about the grant of the children, point to the fact that sons of freemasons were very welcome in the rites, as is the case today?

When King Athelstone *gefreade* Eadhelm, he might well have “embraced”, “loved”, Eadhelm and initiated him into freemasonry’s first degree which used to be initiation to the goddess Freya, probably pronounced *frija* in Old Norse. Freya’s name may be of Indo-European origin, the Old Indian (Sanskrit) *priyā*, “beloved”, can easily be led to the understanding of a loving Lady or goddess. Among the Germanic people, the word *frī-* had an extended meaning

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<sup>5</sup> Sara M. Pons-Sanz, *The Lexical Effects of Anglo-Scandinavian Linguistic Contact on Old English*, 2013, Turnhout, p 417

<sup>6</sup> LawAGu 2. Sara M. Pons-Sanz, *The Lexical Effects of Anglo-Scandinavian Linguistic Contact on Old English*, 2013, Turnhout, p. 209

<sup>7</sup> Sara M. Pons-Sanz says about a Freedman: OE *lysing*: The *Thesaurus of Old English* gives OE *frēolæta*, *frēolsmann*, and *frēotmann* as (near)synonyms of OE *lysing*, “freedman”. Of them OE *frēotmann* seems to have been the core member of the lexico-semantic field, for the *Dictionary of Old English* does not record OE *frēolsmann*, and all occurrences of OE *frēolæta* are restricted to glossaries. Given the distribution of the Norse-derived term, the difference between it and the main native equivalent seem to lie in their dialectal distribution”. Sara M. Pons-Sanz, 2013, p. 87. “It is noteworthy that the specific association of OE *lysing* with the Scandinavians and their practices is emphasized. “The term “løysingi”, seems to refer to a social class of the Scandinavian newcomers; the *løysingar* being the highest of the two categories of manumitted slaves. The term is only recorded in texts from the period when the Anglo-Scandinavian linguistic contact was already taking place”. Sara M. Pons-Sanz, 2013, p. 87

different from what it means today, namely “the one that belongs to the family or tribe, as well as being protected”.<sup>8</sup>

The holy wedding to Freya takes place at the wall or *mūr*. The young man became her husband at the altar. The Old Norse word for a husband or lover was *frīi*. He became her *frīi* at the *mūr*. The holy wedding to the mother goddess is well known from many cultures’ religious history. Free in freemason may thus point to either Freya, *frija*, or to her *frīi*, her husband or lover. The word *mūr* was a loan word from Latin in Old Norse as well as in Old English.<sup>9</sup> Later the Old Norse/Old English word *mūr* in “*frīimūrer*” or “*frijamūrer*” was replaced by the French “mason”. It was written “*frie mason*” in Scotland in the 1500s.<sup>10</sup>

But *frēa* can also mean “lord” in Old English (<Proto Germanic *\*frawōn*).<sup>11</sup> This word was used in pedigrees for titles for deceased Anglo-Saxon kings, where we find Freawine, Frealaf, Frithogar, Friothulf. In a royal Danish pedigree recorded by Sven Aageson c. 1190, Frotho appears.<sup>12</sup>

If Athelstan was to free a slave, the Old English loan-word from the Scandinavians, *liesan*, could have been used.

However, the symbolism of freeing a slave is still central in freemasonry’s first degree as the picture below shows. The rope is taken off the candidate’s neck at the altar after his initiation.<sup>13</sup>



Now to King Athelstan’s role in transforming the Norse rites to freemasonry. The Norse King Sigtrygg of Dublin and York, married king Athelstan’s sister the year before he died. King Athelstan then took over York and Northumberland, probably without a fight. This could mean that the king was accepted by the Scandinavian settlers and that they knew his rule, so

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<sup>8</sup> Jan de Vries, *Altgermanische Religionsgeschichte II*, 1970, § 533, p 305.

<sup>9</sup> A Campbell, 1959, §505

<sup>10</sup> Bernhard E. Jones, *Freemasons Guide and Compendium*, 2006, p. 158

<sup>11</sup> A. Campbell, 1959, § 120, 2,3, p 46, and Sara M. Pons-Sanz, 2013, p 422.

<sup>12</sup> Kenneth Simsam, *Anglo-Saxon Royal Genealogies*, In *Proceedings of the British Academia*, 1953, vol 39, p 299-339.

<sup>13</sup> *Duncan’s ritual of Freemasonry*, New York, picture p.28, rope off neck, p. 36

that they trusted him. He was known as a gentle man. The king established larger councils of leading men from all parts of his kingdom, probably inspired by *the ting tradition* that the Scandinavian settlers had established. King Athelstan created rituals that were meant to unite the Christian English and the pagan Scandinavians, with he himself as the supreme king. Religion is an excellent way to control people. Three documents from the Middle Ages points to King Athelstan as the reformer of *the craft* (freemasonry); the *Halliwell poem*, the *Cooke manuscript*, and the *Dowland manuscript*.<sup>14</sup>

*The Halliwell poem* is an English script from around 1390. The poem is written in Middle English: lines 61-87 describe how King Athelstan in the year 926 convened an assembly in the city of York, “revived the Craft and gave it new laws”. To this day, the Craft is synonymous with Freemasonry in the English language. The word craft, Norse *kraptr*, was common in Germanic, but I have argued that Freemasonry’s use of the word is connected with the sacred craft, the handicraft that took place at daytime in the ceremonial rooms in the great halls and *hörgr* in Scandinavia.<sup>15</sup> Freya’s *hörgr* and Odin’s *Valhalla* were now replaced by King Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem.<sup>16</sup>

I claim that King Athelstan may have initiated Eadhelm into freemasonry and that free in this context points to the old etymological meaning of the words that is found in the rites to the gods and ancestors. Here the meaning of *free* points to “free”, “love” and “embrace” of the goddess Freya, “belonging to the family” and “being protected” and possibly to “lord”; those who were initiated to the goddess. As in the word “freemason” itself today.

If my theory is correct, the inserted text in *Royal I. B. VII* shows that the freemasons meeting was an initiation of Eadhelm. In this ceremony, King Athelstan was the Worshipful Master, Ælfric the reeve was Senior Warden, Wulfnorth the White acted as Junior Warden and the two mass-priests were the Senior and Junior Deacon. Eanstan the prafost (=officer) was perhaps the Tyler, as the two crossed swords symbolize the Tyler in *Duncan’s Ritual of Freemasonry*.<sup>17</sup>

**Second degree** in freemasonry is called “fellow craft”, the word *fellow* is of Norse origin. The OE *fēolaga*, “partner, associate; fellow, comrade” stems from Old Norse *felaga*, compare *Old Icelandic félagi*, older runic inscriptions *filaki*. “The Old English *fēolagascipe*, which may be a native new formation instead of a Norse-derived loan-blend, is attested not much later than OE *fēolaga*”.<sup>18</sup>

The two basic initiation rites in freemasonry probably had names of Norse origin, perhaps called *frijamūr-scipe* (?) and *fēolagascipe*. Their secret meetings may have been the *husting*

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<sup>14</sup> Albert Mackey, *The History of Freemasonry, The York Legend*, 1996, New York, p 95-110.

<sup>15</sup> Arvid Ystad, *The Freemasons in the Viking Age*, 2023, Oslo, Amazon.com, p. 356,376

<sup>16</sup> Arvid Ystad, 2023, p. 66

<sup>17</sup> *Duncan’s Ritual of Freemasonry*, p. 8

<sup>18</sup> “Compare Old Icelandic *fēlagskapr* “partnership, fellowship; friendship, companionship”. Sara M. Pons-Sanz, 2013, p 95

in Old English and Old Norse, the word “may have been culturally associated with the Scandinavians and their activities”.<sup>19</sup>

It was probably King Athelstan (king 924-939) who gave freemasonry legitimacy for posterity.

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<sup>19</sup> Sara M. Pons-Sanz, 2013, p 176