

# On the Enigmatic Nature of Things in Anglo-Saxon Art<sup>1</sup>

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One of the more vexing problems facing scholars of Anglo-Saxon art is the simple fact that we often do not know precisely what it is that we are dealing with. I am speaking not so much of the questions of dating and localization that hamper the study of medieval art. Rather, it is that we cannot even say for certain what many of our most famous objects even *are*, or were intended to be. The Franks Casket (Figure 1), for example, has been identified as a treasure chest or a book shrine, and was used in the later Middle Ages as a reliquary, but all we can say with any certainty is that it is a box that likely originally had a latch.<sup>2</sup> Most scholars believe that the noncommittally-named Alfred Jewel (Figure 7) was originally part of a reading instrument known as an *æstel*, but this claim can only be regarded as a likely possibility.<sup>3</sup> And excellent arguments have been advanced that the Ruthwell Cross (Figure 8) began life as an obelisk and perhaps should only be referred to as a “monument.”<sup>4</sup> Even though we allow ourselves to consider each of these objects as particular kinds of things, they remain to us deeply enigmatic.

To call an Anglo-Saxon object “enigmatic” is a very specific kind of description, since riddles or *ænigmata*, in Old English and in Latin, are one of

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the distinctive literary forms of the period.<sup>5</sup> A great many of the riddles, particularly those found in the collections of Aldhelm and the Exeter Book, describe objects both quotidian and extraordinary, often in the first person. Anglo-Saxons were subject to a cacophony of things constantly chattering about themselves, not only through riddles, but also in the form of inscriptions on actual objects, including the three noted above.<sup>6</sup> I propose to listen carefully to what Anglo-Saxon things have to say, both through riddles and inscriptions, and also through their material natures, to consider what it is that the people who gave voice to those things thought to be important about them.

*The Enigma of Things*

Stated briefly, I believe we can read the riddles as putting forward a kind of early medieval “thing theory,” one that has marked affinities with recent currents in ontology.<sup>7</sup> The question of how we might account for works of art as things has been a persistent and fruitful topic for well on twenty years now, and has recently been taken up with particular vigor in response to the work of Bruno Latour, Graham Harman, and Levi Bryant, among others.<sup>8</sup> But even if we agree that the alternative ontological systems offered by contemporary philosophers help us to reconceive of artworks in fruitful ways, we cannot escape the fact that these are still simply alternative systems. If we accept that any ontological system, and its derivative taxonomies, is necessarily culturally and historically situated, we are then still faced with the problem of how accurately the ontologies developed in twenty-first century academic circles can account for historical

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objects. That is to say, once we determine that our conception of the nature of objects is crucial to our understanding of those objects that we class as “art” and/or “artifact,” it seems incumbent upon us also to investigate the ontological systems that were current in the times and places in which a particular object was made. We must ask not only, “what are these things before us now?” but also “what have they been before?”

In reconstructing early medieval ontologies, the most logical sources would seem to be the natural philosophy of Johannes Scotus Eriugena or the encyclopedias of Isidore of Seville, which represent clear attempts to rationalize the created world. The riddles, on the other hand, seem to be little more than versified playthings. Consider Riddle 47 from the tenth-century Exeter Book:

A moth ate words. I thought that a  
Marvelous occurrence, when I learned of this wonder—  
That the worm devoured the sayings of one man,  
—this thief in the dark—the glorious speech,  
and its strong foundation. The thievish guest was not  
a whit wiser—he who devoured those words!<sup>9</sup>

At first glance this seems a light-hearted description on the activities of a bookworm, but upon reflection it develops into a pithy meditation on human knowledge, mediation, orality and literacy, and entropy.<sup>10</sup> The recent renewed interest in the *De rerum natura* of Lucretius has highlighted a long tradition in the west, carried on through the Middle Ages, of pursuing philosophy through poetry, and at least one of the authors of early medieval riddles seems to have seen the philosophical potential of that poetic form.<sup>11</sup> In the verse preface to his *Ænigmata* (c. 695), Aldhelm entreats God:

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Grant as a gift to me a mellifluous poem in meter, that I, though ignorant,  
may reveal in verse  
The enigmatic nature of things, secret to tell....<sup>12</sup>

These lines cast the writing of riddles as an attempt to grapple with the philosophical challenge of understanding the world. Indeed, later in the verse preface, Aldhelm invokes David as the prophet of the incarnate godhead present at the moment of creation, highlighting the cosmological concerns of the psalms.<sup>13</sup> Meanwhile, the prose prologue, although it is largely concerned with meter and seems to cast the *Ænigmata* as an exercise in versification, also evinces an interest in the possible philosophical dimension of the riddles through an assertion that Aristotle wrote riddles, setting Aldhelm in a position parallel to “the most brilliant of philosophers” (“philosophorum acerrimus”).<sup>14</sup>

If Aldhelm alludes to a philosophical project in his prefatory material, discerning it within the body of his text is admittedly difficult. His riddles are clever, sometimes surprising, and occasionally moving, but mostly they come across as, well, *cute*. Part of that effect must stem from his use of *prosopopoeia*, the rhetorical device in which things or abstract concepts are imputed with the powers of speech. The prejudice against anthropomorphism as a simplistic and childish habit to be avoided is well known (if misguided), but this is not a purely modern bias.<sup>15</sup> Aldhelm was concerned enough about how his speaking objects would be received that he made a special point in the prose prologue of providing biblical precedents for anthropomorphism, concluding, “I have given these examples lest anyone should think that I wrote these riddles using a new and unusual way of speaking.”<sup>16</sup> Anthropomorphism, however, has recently been

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recognized as a useful tool for making sense of the alterity of non-human things. Far from reinforcing anthropocentrism, which it is often thought to do, setting the human and non-human in parallel relation to one another serves to highlight the ways in which human experience is incommensurate with that of other things.<sup>17</sup> By working from the resonances between the human and non-human, we might attend more carefully to those points of difference that at first escape our attention, and perhaps can never fully be grasped.<sup>18</sup> As I will soon explain, the riddles highlight the agency of things and the human inability to gain complete mastery over them. The anthropomorphized objects of the riddles have, quite literally, minds of their own.<sup>19</sup>

Another apparent problem is that if Aldhelm is trying to present some sort of comprehensive view of things, he does so without the clarity and apparent rigor of, for example, Isidore's *De natura rerum* and *Etymologiae*, which supplied Aldhelm with source material for some of his riddles.<sup>20</sup> As do many riddle collections, Aldhelm's *Ænigmata* presents itself as a hodgepodge dependent only on the whimsy of the author. But it is clear from the preface that Aldhelm conceived of his one hundred *ænigmata* as a totality, and although modern scholars have attempted to divine a structure to the text, there is no apparent order to it.<sup>21</sup> In fact, I think we can read Aldhelm's apparent disregard for organization as itself a conceptual structure. The *Ænigmata*'s haphazard progression through the world serves to disorient the reader and subtly emphasize the idea that the universe, as a whole, is mysterious. We might in fact see it as a medieval "Latour Litany," those lists of heterogeneous things, so

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named for one of their most adept conjurers, which embody both the complexity of the cosmos and the specificity of individual things within it and which have become commonplace in contemporary object-oriented philosophy.<sup>22</sup> Ian Bogost characterizes Latour Litanies as a type of ontography, “a general inscriptive strategy, one that uncovers the repleteness of units and their interobjectivity,” and consequently a crucial step in recognizing the alterity of things.<sup>23</sup> The one hundred objects riddled in the *Ænigmata* stand in as a synecdoche for the whole of creation; they encourage us to contemplate the enigmatic nature of *all* things.

The universalizing conception of the collection is reinforced in the final riddle, “De creatura,” which at eighty-three lines is nearly ten times longer than the average entry. It is worth quoting a lengthy section (running from line 65 to the end), to demonstrate the fullness of its scope:

I am larger than the black whale on the shining waves,  
And smaller than the minute worm who feeds on corpses,  
Or the tiny mote that dances in the rays of the sun.  
I walk through the country fields on a hundred feet  
Yet I have never been a pedestrian on this earth;  
My wisdom surpasses that of the wisest scholars,  
Yet no one learned in letters has taught me to read books  
And I have never even known what constitutes a syllable;  
I am drier than the summer heat of the burning sun,  
Yet, moister than dew, I give more water than a gushing well;  
I am saltier than the waves of the swelling sea,  
Yet I flow sweeter than the cold, clear waters of the land;  
I am rich-hued, adorned with every color  
Of the spectrum, that glorifies this present world,  
Yet I am also pale and wan, deprived of all color.  
Take heed, oh believers, and listen to my words,  
Which can scarce be explained by a work-skilled master;  
Even a scornful infidel will not find them frivolous.  
I ask all proud philosophers what name I bear!<sup>24</sup>

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Through the thicket of things that Aldhelm presents to us, we can see a clear astonishment at the contradictions of the world, piled one atop another to show that everything is united with its opposite: we live in a world of paradox. The sensuality of creation, as perceived by human subjects, is made explicit in the examples Aldhelm chooses and in his modes of description. In the passage above, action (walking) gives way to thought (wisdom and learning). Touch (dry and wet), becomes taste (salty and sweet), then sight (color and its lack), and finally sound (listening and speech). And yet, even when using all of one's senses (smell is invoked earlier in the poem) and despite what seems to be panoptic understanding, the totality of creation ultimately cannot be understood. Implicit in the closing challenge—"I ask all proud (*inflatos*) philosophers what name I bear!"—is a sense that, even in naming creation, final understanding of it will remain beyond their grasp. The irony of that challenge is that the narrator of this *ænigma*, Creation, is already identified in the manuscripts at the top of the poem as its title, as is the case for the other ninety-nine in the collection. This is likely a feature of the original text, leaving the reader to wonder: why would Aldhelm ruin the fun of the riddle by providing the answer at the very beginning? It has been argued that by shackling the natural world in rhythmic meter, Aldhelm hoped to achieve mastery over it.<sup>25</sup> To the contrary, I read it as being in service to his project of revealing the enigmatic nature of things. In naming the thing, Aldhelm summons it into the reader's mind, and then proceeds to estrange it from everyday understanding through the riddle. These objects were meant to be

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seen darkly, pointing beyond themselves and yet, through their speech, insisting on their own presence.<sup>26</sup>

Aldhelm's use of *ænigmata* as a tool for theorizing things needs to be understood within early medieval intellectual history. Among other things, Aldhelm was a grammarian, so he was well aware of the classical definition of *ænigma* as an "obscure saying by the hidden likeness of a thing."<sup>27</sup> As a churchman, he cannot have failed also to consider Paul's famous characterization of human understanding of the divine as something seen through a mirror in an enigma (I Cor. 13:12). In the early Middle Ages, human knowledge, imperfect though it may be, was thought to derive primarily from two sources: the Bible and the Book of Nature. The concept of the "book of nature" was not fully developed until the twelfth century, but it originated with Augustine and underlay the popularity of works of Christian natural history, such as Isidore's *De natura rerum*.<sup>28</sup> Just as the Bible expresses its ideas obliquely, through poetry and parables, nature was also understood as needing interpretation. For example, the *Physiologus*, which circulated in British Isles at this time, describes the behavior of various animals and interprets them morally and Christologically, and its ideas found regular expression in contemporary art and literature.<sup>29</sup> But, as in Paul's formulation, there was also a clear sense that knowledge of the natural world and its mysteries would always be imperfect and partial. Eriugena, for example, understood the natural world as a structure that both conceals and reveals truth.<sup>30</sup> As Aldhelm's *Ænigmata*, along with other riddles, make clear,



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this mutability and hiddenness applies to particular things just as it does to the universe as a whole.

If the riddles can be seen as insisting on the ultimate obscurity of all things, then perhaps this will allow historians of Anglo-Saxon art (of *any* art) to breathe more easily: the continuing elusiveness of our objects of study comes not from our inability to master them, but from their innate resistance to disclosure.<sup>31</sup> But I think there is more we can glean about things from the riddles, particular tropes or habits of (self-)presentation that lift the veil to let us glimpse some of their particular qualities. To perceive those qualities more distinctly, I would like to read select riddles against the specific things I identified at the outset as particularly vexatious. Each of these things could, and should, be puzzled out more thoroughly on its own, but in order to convey the various ways that Anglo-Saxon things manifested their enigmatic natures, I will limit myself to initial readings here.

*The Franks Casket: Transmutation*

The small, strange box known commonly as the Franks Casket has bewildered and intrigued scholars since it first appeared to public consciousness over 150 years ago (Figures 1-6). It is a famously complex object, featuring scenes deriving from the Bible, Germanic myth, and Roman history accompanied by inscriptions in two languages (Old English and Latin) rendered in two alphabets (Runic and Roman). A quick tour of the scenes on the casket will be helpful. The front panel (Figure 2) features two. On the right, the three Magi, led by a star at

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top, approach Mary and the Christ-child as they sit under an arched structure. At left, the legendary smith Weland offers a cup to Beadohild, daughter of the king who has hobbled and enslaved him. Weland has already killed her brother, whose body lies at his feet, and in a pair of tongs holds the dead man's skull, which the smith will fashion into another cup. After drugging and raping Beadohild he will escape in a flying apparatus with his brother Egil, who is busy at right strangling birds to gather feathers for the machine.<sup>32</sup> Moving to the left-side panel (Figure 3), we see four soldiers who have discovered a wolf suckling two boys, whom the inscription identifies as Romulus and Remus. The panel on the opposite side (Figure 4) has thus far eluded precise identification: it has no iconographic parallels, and the inscription, which has been translated roughly as "Here Hos sits on the sorrow mound; she suffers distress as Ertae has imposed it upon her, a wretched wood of sorrows and torments of the mind," finds no parallels in the written record.<sup>33</sup> The back panel (Figure 5) is subdivided into four sections but the inscription reveals that it shows a single event: the sack of Jerusalem by the Roman emperor Titus. Refugees can be seen fleeing the city at top right while Titus sits in judgment at bottom left. In the middle is the Temple, with the Ark of the Covenant inside. The top panel (Figure 6) has lost its accompanying inscription, and also has no iconographic parallels, so the content can only be guessed at. The runes at top right seem to identify the figure with bow-and-arrow as Egil, who is famous in the myths as an archer, but the overall scene matches no surviving stories. An intriguing alternate case has been made for the word being a

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transliteration of “Achilles,” and identifying instead the figure withdrawn from battle at right.<sup>34</sup>

The box has been dated on stylistic and linguistic grounds to the early eighth century, but there is no historical evidence for who made, commissioned, or used it, although it must originally have existed within a highly educated milieu.<sup>35</sup> The box, however, does itself speak of one aspect of its origins in the inscription on its front panel. It reads, in translation:

The fish beat up the seas onto the mountainous cliff;  
The king of terror became sad when he swam aground onto the shingle.  
Whale’s bone.<sup>36</sup>

It might, at first glance, seem that the inscription serves to highlight the seemingly unusual medium of whalebone, as against the more commonly known walrus ivory.<sup>37</sup> But whalebone was, in truth, not that uncommon a material. While beached whales are uncommon enough an occurrence now to warrant media notices and attract spectators, whale beachings in the medieval period were relatively common. If, by some estimates, there were ten times as many whales in the northern Atlantic as there are now, we can assume that beachings happened with considerably greater frequency than in the present day.<sup>38</sup> The legal record supports the view that beachings were not unusual: the existence of ordinances in England and Scandinavia regulating the distribution of blubber, meat, and bone from stranded whales indicates that it was a common enough occurrence to warrant clear guidance on the matter.<sup>39</sup> The artifactual record also shows widespread use of whalebone for an array of objects, including needles, dice, boards, and other domestic objects; in northern Scotland, the ribs of whales

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were even used in place of timber for houses.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, however, Anglo-Saxons clearly saw whales as fearsome creatures, and the monstrous origins of the material may have raised its prestige.<sup>41</sup> The meaning of the medium is thus mixed: it could hold highly charged associations, but it was still decidedly a downscale material for what was in every other respect clearly a high-status object. The intricacy of the carvings, the disparate literary origins of the narrative scenes, and the blending of two different languages and writing systems all set the casket within the most elite circles of Anglo-Saxon society. Why, we must wonder, would people who saw gold, silver, and gemstones as the highest material markers of status, have wanted a box (which perhaps even held such items) made out of such a quotidian material? And why moreover would the makers emphasize its meager nature?



1. The Franks Casket, general view, whalebone, 229mm x 190mm x 109mm. London, British Museum (photo: © Trustees of the British Museum).

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2. The Franks Casket, front panel, whalebone, 229mm x 190mm x 109mm. London, British Museum (photo: © Trustees of the British Museum).



3. The Franks Casket, left panel, whalebone, 229mm x 190mm x 109mm. London, British Museum (photo: © Trustees of the British Museum).



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4. The Franks Casket, right panel, whalebone, 229mm x 190mm x 109mm. London, British Museum (photo: © Trustees of the British Museum).



5. The Franks Casket, back panel, whalebone, 229mm x 190mm x 109mm. London, British Museum (photo: © Trustees of the British Museum).

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6. The Franks Casket, top panel, whalebone, 229mm x 190mm x 109mm. London, British Museum (photo: © Trustees of the British Museum).

As Leslie Webster has argued, since the front panel originally supported the latch and locking mechanism for the box, the accompanying imagery and text may also have served as a key to “unlock” the box’s meaning as a whole.<sup>42</sup> Crucial here is the fact that the inscription, with alliterating lines of verse followed by an answer standing outside the meter, finds its closest literary comparison in contemporary riddles; this might be understood to signal the riddling nature of the object as a whole.<sup>43</sup> A divide persists among scholars over whether a coherent and directed program can be discerned in the casket, or if its imagery is self-consciously puzzling in nature, and intentionally under-determined. In my view, the very diversity of programmatic interpretations that have been put forward signals the open-ended nature of its imagery: our collective scholarly

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bewilderment does not so much reflect a failure to understand the box, but rather the intended effect of the imagery. The riddle, however, might serve to provide more direction than that by introducing two of the primary themes to be found throughout the casket's imagery. If we accept Page's translation of "gasric" as "king of terror," this would serve to highlight the emphasis in the panels on kingship and imperium: the Roman emperor Titus on the back panel; Romulus and Remus on the left side; Weland, imprisoned by King Niðhad, on the left panel; and the three Magi offering gifts to the Christian King of Kings on the front panel all offer different stories of just and unjust rulership.<sup>44</sup> The description of the whale's distress at finding itself out of the sea and on the shingle reflects a theme of exile also apparent in many panels: Jews flee Jerusalem, Romulus and Remus were cast out of Alba Longa, Hos (on the troublesome right-hand panel) seems to have been exiled to the woods, Weland has been banished to an island prison, and the travelling Magi warn Mary and Joseph of the threat from Herod, prompting the flight into Egypt. Previous scholars have highlighted both of these themes.<sup>45</sup> Another theme, however, has received only cursory notice: the transformation of objects and the fashioning of matter into new things.<sup>46</sup> This theme is most evident on the front panel, where the cup Weland offers to Beadohild has been made out of the skull of her dead brother. The parallel to the casket as another object made out of bone is evident, but the panel features other artifacts. On the right side, the Magi present Christ with finely crafted cups and chalices, containers for their gifts. This emphasis in both panels on wrought containers might inspire a beholder to think of the back panel, where the Ark of



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the Covenant sits in the Temple at the center of the panel. The visual harmony of the arched temple might in turn send the beholder back to the arched structure in which the Virgin and Child sit, perhaps referring to the common practice of likening Mary to the Ark of the Covenant.<sup>47</sup> Her role as a container for the Christ-child is visually emphasized in the concentric circles of her arms and robes surrounding him, and all of these containers together call to mind the role of the box as a container, as well.<sup>48</sup>

Mary did not only act as a container for Christ: she also provided him with his human flesh (and bones), and sustained him through her milk. That is, when we look at Mary and Christ, we see another example of the material transformation of one object into another. This motif finds a parallel in the mother wolf suckling the twins on the left panel, and the interspecies transmutation of wolf milk into human flesh may, in turn, relate to the part-beast, part-human figure at far left of the right panel, and perhaps to Weland's construction of a flying machine out of bird-feathers. The fluid relationships between human and non-human might thus be seen as highlighting the transformation of the whale's bones not just into another thing, but specifically into a thing that depicts humans. The blade of the carver has turned this bone into other bodies.

A fascination with transmutation and the past life of things runs throughout the early medieval riddling tradition. In the riddle collections of Aldhelm and the Exeter Book, the origins of "man-made" things in the natural

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world is a source of essential paradox and mystery for many objects. A fine example of this tradition is the opening lines of Exeter Book Riddle 26:

Some enemy deprived me of my life  
And took away my worldly strength, then wet me,  
Dipped me in water, took me out again,  
Set me in sunshine, where I quickly lost  
The hairs I had. Later the knife's hard edge  
Cut me with all impurities ground off.  
Then fingers folded me; the bird's fine raiment  
Traced often over me with useful drops  
Across my brown domain, swallowed the tree-dye  
Mixed up with water, stepped on me again  
Leaving dark tracks.<sup>49</sup>

In the guise of a book (or, more properly, a leaf of parchment, bound into a book) the riddle speaks of the disparate natural origins of a manuscript: the skin ripped from flesh and stretched into parchment, the bird's feather sharpened into a quill, the horn hollowed out and filled with ink, and the oak galls crushed to make that ink. The violence of the act is emphasized, and many other riddles contrast an object's previous bucolic existence in nature with its new life subject to man.

Exeter Book Riddle 53 reads:

I saw a tree towering in the forest,  
Bright with branches, a blooming wood,  
Basking in joy. It was nurtured by water,  
Nursed by soil, till strong in years,  
Its fate snapped, turned savage—  
It suffered slash, rip, wound—  
Was stripped in misery, chained dumb,  
Its body bound, its head wrapped  
In iron trim. Now it muscles a road  
With head-might for another grim warrior—  
Together they plunder the hoard in a storm  
Of battle. The first warrior swings  
Through dense threat, head-strong,  
While the second follows, fierce and swift.<sup>50</sup>

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In recounting the transformation of a tree into a battering ram, the riddle parallels the violence of its felling and stripping with that of battle. It is interesting to see that, while the sylvan past of the battering ram is still remembered, it is now a “grim warrior” alongside its human captors: it is active and brave in battle. It has become what it was made to be, and yet—particularly in the case of the first-person riddles—it remains also what it was. This view of the world accords with the tendency among other Anglo-Saxon poets to eschew “either/or” dichotomies in favor of what Sarah Larratt Keefer identifies as an “either/and” approach, which she describes as “a pulsating movement between the two disparate elements, shifting from one to the other and examining the one in light of the other.”<sup>51</sup> I think, in fact, that we can expand the definition to include cases in which more than two elements are at work, without diminution of any of the constituent parts: these objects can be solely everything at once.<sup>52</sup> The Franks Casket, while speaking of its past as a whale, is still resolutely a box, made to contain, hold, and protect; and while emphasizing its essential non-humanity, it is a pictorial and linguistic object, made to provoke and inspire. The enigma of it is that, like Weland’s goblet that is skull and cup, or Christ, who is God and man, it is either one *and* the other.

### *The Alfred Jewel: Transformation and Manipulation*

If the Franks Casket speaks to us of its material origins but states nothing about its cultural background, the Alfred Jewel (Figure 7) seems to do the opposite. Discovered in 1693 by a laborer digging peat in North Petherton,

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England, and now in the Ashmolean Museum, the Alfred Jewel has long been recognized as one of the most important pieces of metalwork to survive from the Anglo-Saxon period. It takes its name from the epigraph on its side, which reads: AELFRED MEC HEHT GEWYRCAN, normally translated as “Alfred ordered me to be made.” It measures about seven centimeters long and is of fine craftsmanship. The gold setting, featuring the openwork letters of the inscription and precise beading and filigree, with a beast’s head terminal at one end, encases a very pure teardrop-shaped rock crystal, under which is a figure rendered in enamel. A delicately engraved floral design on the back indicates that it was meant to be handled and inspected from all sides.



7. Alfred Jewel, gold, enamel, and rock crystal, 62mm x 31mm x 13mm, Oxford, Ashmolean Museum (photo: courtesy the Bridgeman Art Library).

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The richness and beauty of the object, as well as its findspot, has led most scholars to assume that the Alfred named in the inscription is Alfred the Great, King of Wessex from 871 to 899.<sup>53</sup> The original use of the jewel is still debated. The open mouth of the terminal has a horizontal rivet through the side, suggesting that it was connected to a small rod of some kind, perhaps as a part of a crown or a scepter. The fact that the rivet is intact, and shows no signs of being wrenched apart, indicates that the rod was most likely made of organic material, either wood or ivory, which has since degraded. With this in mind, some have suggested that this object is one of the “æstels” mentioned by Alfred in the preface to his translation of Gregory the Great’s *Cura pastoralis*. There is disagreement also about the meaning of the word *æstel*, but it appears to have been a pointer of sorts, used to trace the lines of text while reading. Alfred stated in the preface that he had enclosed an *æstel* with each copy of his translation, which he then distributed to the bishops in his realm. Several other objects with a similar fitting at one end have been found in historical Wessex, and I do think it is reasonable to assume that we are looking at the better part of a particularly splendid *æstel* here.

What might this object have to say? Its inscription speaks of its social origins as an object commissioned by Alfred, but, as we have seen, objects were wont also to tell of their material origins, in this case, gold, crystal, and enamel. These are all, ultimately, mineral elements, derived from the earth, but it is doubtful that any of these materials came out of English soil. Compositional analysis of the glass used for enameling other Anglo-Saxon objects indicates that

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it came from the eastern Mediterranean, either imported as chunks or perhaps reconstituted from broken shards gathered from British Roman sites.<sup>54</sup> The gold, as well, most likely came from recycling existing objects; the only gold mines in the British Isles lay outside Alfred's domain.<sup>55</sup> In this regard, it is perhaps telling that Alfred makes a point of stating in his preface that each *æstel* was worth fifty mancuses, the predominant gold coin in northern Europe at this time. At least some of those mancuses spent on the *æstels* may literally have become the *æstels*, since coinage was regularly melted down to be turned into jewelry and other objects.

The crystal, as well, is both a stone and a reused cultural product. Its medieval beholders likely would have understood it to be, as contemporary lapidaries and encyclopedias described, water that had been subjected to such prolonged cold that it had become permanently frozen.<sup>56</sup> The gem's shape and the particularities of its cutting relate it to no other rock crystals known to have come from the British Isles nor the continent at this time. The closest comparanda all come from the late Roman Empire, where gems of similar size and shape were used in decorative inlay on furniture and in architectural settings.<sup>57</sup> As a piece of Roman spolia reconfigured into an Anglo-Saxon object, the *æstel* might be seen as nicely mirroring the text it accompanied, a venerable work from Rome recast into Old English.<sup>58</sup>

Unlike the Franks Casket, the Alfred Jewel is not just a transformed material, but a set of objects which have been transformed and forged together into a single unified thing. The process of unification is a subject of several

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riddles. As parchment speaks of its transformation from skin to pages in a book in Riddle 26, it makes special note of the origins of many of the other things involved in that process (the quill is “the bird's once wind-stiff joy” and ink is “wood-stain”). Other riddles give voice to the new composite, such as Aldhelm’s writing tablet:

My inner part came from the honey-bearing bees,  
But my outer part grew in the woods;  
Hard hides supplied my shoes.  
Now a goad of iron cuts my pleasant face;  
In the likeness of a plough, it bends the furrows with its curving motions.  
But from heaven comes the nourishing seed for the harvest,  
Which brings forth generous sheaves in a thousand-fold fruit.  
Alas that such a holy crop is destroyed by harsh weapons!<sup>59</sup>

The object is not only unified in its voice, but also in the resonances among the organic origins of the wax and wooden tablet and the harvest of heavenly wisdom written on its face. The diverse materials of the object are brought together not only physically, but metaphorically as well. The same might be said for the Alfred Jewel, in which resonances between the age, origins, and magnificence of the materials would have amplified each other.

Considering the working process—gold and glass melted down and shaped around the crystal, and then joined to a piece of wood, bone, or ivory that was carved to create the shaft of the pointer—perhaps then the inscription should not be translated “Alfred ordered me to be made” so much as it should be “Alfred ordered me to be worked,” which fits the Old English root *wyrcean* just as well. The letters of the inscription, after all, are not simply inscribed on the surface of the object, as is usually the case, but are wrought out of its material, serving as

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the setting for the crystal. The stone itself is an important element in the conception of the Alfred Jewel as a worked thing. The odd teardrop shape of the *æstel* is unique among surviving examples, and must surely reflect the need for the jewel to be shaped around the existing stone. Indeed, the shape of the crystal apparently posed somewhat of a problem for the enameller, who clearly labored to find an elegant way to compose the figure within the given format (Figure 7). To say that this object was “made” subtly implies that it was created *ex nihilo*, whereas thinking of it as “worked” more fully recognizes the transformations its constituent materials underwent.

The malleability conjured by “gewyrcean” might be seen as extending to the handlers and users of the object as well. If the stone, in its odd shape, forced the craftsman into an unusual design and cramped pictorial composition, we might recognize a moment in which the worker is subject to the thing on which he works. The Alfred Jewel may similarly have acted upon its original recipient. The *æstels* have often been seen as baubles meant to appeal to the acquisitive nature of Alfred’s bishops, or perhaps more indulgently as luxurious material representations of the value of learning. In use as a pointer, however, an *æstel* would have structured its owner’s experience with the text, encouraging a habit of reading that was directed, attentive, and attuned to the particularities of individual words and phrases. The royal imperative of the inscription presumably also extended to the recipient: “Alfred orders me to read.” As Latour would put it, the *æstel* was a means for Alfred to act at a distance in teaching his bishops how to read and think.<sup>60</sup> Such a back and forth between subject and object is one of



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the most striking elements of the conception of things put forward in the riddles. Again and again, things brag of intoxicating, wounding, or enlightening people they encounter, but at the same time they are clearly subject to human whim. The battering ram described above plunges into battle as a slave to those who have chained it and wrapped its head in iron, and yet it also leads. The relationship between actor and acted-upon is fluid and contested.

It was not only the initial owner of the *æstel* who was subject to its influence. We should consider carefully whom the epigraph addresses. The original recipient of the *æstel* doubtless knew who had given it to him, and likely needed no reminding. Those words were not for him: they are for later beholders who see it and know little of its story. The durability of objects is a hallmark of the riddles, particularly those written as *prosopopoeia*. Objects made from trees and animals continue to speak of their previous lives, even after they are no more. The re-use of the jewel evinces a clear understanding of the ability of objects to persist, and I think we can see in the inscription Alfred's expectation that this new object would persist, as well. Along with all the other functions it served, the Alfred Jewel was formed so that it, too, would speak, even if it was to spend several hundred years mumbling under layers of peat before its voice would be heard again.

### *The Ruthwell Cross: Witness and Testimony*

The Ruthwell Cross (Figures 8 and 9) is perhaps the most famous of the Anglo-Saxon speaking things. An object that presents no fewer problems of

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historical reconstruction and interpretation than the Franks Casket, it has been the subject of several important studies in recent years.<sup>61</sup>



**8.** Ruthwell Cross, as installed in the apse of Ruthwell Church, sandstone, 5.2 m tall, Dumfriesshire, Scotland (photo: © The Royal Commission on the Ancient and Historical Monuments of Scotland).



9. “Runic Monument in the garden belonging to Ruthwell Manse. Drawn by the Rev. Dr. Duncan. Engraved by W Penny,” from Henry Duncan, “Account of the Remarkable Monument, in the Shape of a Cross, Inscribed with Roman and Runic Letters, Preserved in the Garden of Ruthwell Manse, Dumfriesshire,” *Archaeologia Scotica* 4 (1857): 313-26 (public domain)

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It features lengthy runic inscriptions on what were originally its north and south sides, in the margins surrounding elegant carved reliefs of inhabited vinescrolls. Through these inscriptions, the stone monument presents itself as a participant in a crucial moment in history. On the north face (at left in Figure 9), the inscription reads:

*Top and continuing down right side:*

Almighty God stripped himself, when he willed to mount the gallows  
Courageous before all men  
[I dared not] bow

*Left side:*

I [lifted up] a powerful king  
The lord of heaven I dared not tilt  
Men insulted the pair of us together; I was drenched with blood<sup>62</sup>

And on the south face (second from right in Figure 9):

*Top and continuing down right side:*

Christ was on the cross  
But eager ones came thither from afar  
Noble ones came together; I beheld all that:  
I was terribly afflicted with sorrows: I bowed

*Left side:*

Wounded with arrows,  
They laid him down, limb-spent; they took their stand at the head and feet  
of his corpse  
There they looked down upon the lord of heaven<sup>63</sup>

The Ruthwell Cross thus speaks as *the* Cross, reluctant but noble accessory to Christ's death. A full visionary experience of the monument requires the beholder (who must be literate in Anglo-Saxon runes) to suspend his knowledge that what stands before him is stone, and to understand it instead as the True Cross, which was, of course, hewn from wood. Rather than speaking of its material origins, as in the Franks Casket, the Ruthwell Cross seems to ignore or deny them such that

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the beholder is hit more forcefully with a vibrant dissonance between medium and message. That dissonance may have been further compounded if, as was the case with contemporary stone monuments, the cross was painted to evoke the flesh and clothing of people, the plumage of birds, green climbing vines, and gem-like ornamental details (Figure 10).<sup>64</sup> Thus, the cross presents itself as a self-contradicting amalgam of materials, real (stone and pigment), literary (wood), and pictorial (mineral, vegetal, animal, human, and textile).



**10.** The Ruthwell Cross as it may have appeared painted; reconstruction prepared by Darren Worsley (photo: courtesy the Manchester Museum, The University of Manchester, England).

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The runic inscription on the Ruthwell Cross has long been recognized as having a close relationship with the poem known as “The Dream of the Rood,” which survives today in the late tenth-century compendium known as the Vercelli Book.<sup>65</sup> The longest sustained meditation on an object’s being in Anglo-Saxon literature, “The Dream of the Rood,” although not technically itself a riddle, shares with many riddles a fascination with the origins of an object, its transformation, and its actions, and it conveys this through information, as many riddles do, through a first-person account. In the poem, a narrator recounts a dream of the Cross, in which he watches it “change its covering and colors: sometimes it was soaked with wetness, / stained with the coursing of blood; sometimes adorned with treasure...” paralleling the mutable materiality of the Ruthwell Cross.<sup>66</sup> At length the Cross itself begins to speak:

That was very long ago, I remember it still,  
That I was cut down from the edge of the wood,  
Ripped up by my roots. They seized me there, strong enemies,  
Made me a spectacle for themselves there, commanded me to raise up  
their criminals.  
Men carried me there on their shoulders, until they set me on a hill,  
Enemies enough fastened me there. I saw then the Savior of mankind  
Hasten with great zeal, as if he wanted to climb up on me.<sup>67</sup>

Note here the qualification of Christ as “savior *of mankind*,” reinforcing the alterity of the Rood. Later, the Rood recalls its rediscovery by Helena and glorification in Constantine’s Church of the Holy Sepulchre:

Men buried us [i.e. the True Cross and those of the thieves] in a deep pit;  
Nevertheless the Lord's thanes, friends, discovered me there,  
Adorned me with gold and silver.

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...Now the time has come  
That I will be honored far and wide  
By men over the earth and all this glorious creation;  
They will pray to this beacon....<sup>68</sup>

The “Dream of the Rood” casts the Cross as a partner in Christ’s sacrifice, and the use of *prosopopoeia* reinforces the imputation of agency to the Rood. But the role the Cross plays is a seemingly passive one: through being cut down, transported, raised up, drenched in Christ’s blood, buried, rediscovered, and glorified, it cannot resist or act on its own. Instead, it endures. The ability of objects to withstand all manner of injuries and yet continue to exist is a common theme in the riddles. In Aldhelm’s “De caccabo,” a cauldron recounts, “Growing hot from fires and sometimes bubbling like a whirlpool / I suffer from the twinned onslaught of a variable threat / As I endure the surging water and ferocious flames.”<sup>69</sup>

The Ruthwell Cross, like its historical antecedent, has survived considerable change over the course of its history.<sup>70</sup> Quarried out of local sandstone deposits, transported to near its present site and then carved, it was toppled under iconoclastic edict in 1642 and spent the next hundred years as a bench in a church. It was moved out to the churchyard in 1771, re-erected in 1802, and fitted with a new transom, complete with contemporary masonic symbols, in 1823. It was installed, rather awkwardly, back inside the church in 1887, and has remained there ever since.

In its dressing, erection, felling, recovery, and subsequent glorification as a treasure of the past, the history of the Ruthwell Cross fascinatingly parallels the

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True Cross that it mimics. Both crosses are always subject to the desires of men, a passivity that accords with how objects are presented through the riddles. Even as objects in the riddles are depicted injuring, inebriating, and enlightening men, all of their acts are responsive, and they allude constantly to their dependence on humans for their existence, often referring to themselves as subject to a “Lord.” The battering ram described above may plunge into battle, but it does so as a slave to those who have chained it and wrapped its head in iron. Things are still defined by what they do in the hands of humans. The question of what is human and non-human about things is a constant tension within contemporary thing theory: any prolonged consideration of objects seems inevitably to lead us back to the human.<sup>71</sup> It is exceedingly difficult to consider simply what a thing is, as opposed to what it is for me, or her, or us, or them. The recent work by Harman, Bryant and Bogost represents an effort to glimpse things as they exist outside human consciousness, and the riddles seem similarly to be an attempt to recognize the ultimate self-sufficiency of objects, even if the human nature of that knowledge cannot be denied.<sup>72</sup>

Things in the riddles largely have a passive existence, with one notable exception that lies at the very heart of the riddles: things speak, they tell stories. Though the “Dream of the Rood” presents itself as visionary poetry, it is, at its core, an evangelical text. The poem begins with the narrator declaring his need to recount the dream, and later in the poem we find that he was in fact commanded to do so by the Rood. The Cross, through all its transformations, stands most importantly as a witness. Crucial to the act of witnessing, particularly among



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objects, is an ability to persist through periods of time, to withstand change so that the story the object has to tell can be heard again. The Alfred Jewel accomplished that task, though only by a certain amount of luck, for its golden letters might very well have been melted down into an inarticulate mass. Stone, however, exists in a temporality inconceivable to humans.<sup>73</sup> Even without the perspective of modern geology, stone's ability to speak of the past was evident to its medieval beholders: the Anglo-Saxon poem "The Ruin," a meditation on a decayed Roman site, evinces a willingness to read in stones the history of forgotten ages.<sup>74</sup> The community that erected the Ruthwell Cross, and its later beholders, could perhaps even have guessed at its future as a ruin and a relic of a bygone era.

In fact, the Ruthwell Cross, for all its obdurate stoniness, should be seen as an object that exists most fully in the flux of time. Éamonn Ó Carragáin has detailed exhaustively how the imagery and inscriptions on the cross responded not just to the cycles of the liturgical year, but also to the cycles of the seasons and the daily movement of the sun.<sup>75</sup> The stone itself was subject to change: there is a strong, if not entirely convincing, case for the cross having existed initially as an obelisk, with its cross-head and the runic inscription added only later, perhaps in the tenth century.<sup>76</sup> The sandstone from which it is carved is itself an index of change over time, as shifting sands, carried perhaps by water and perhaps by wind, settled and were compressed together into rock; and, of course, the monument weathered considerably in the years before it was moved inside.<sup>77</sup> Its momentary existence has thus always been tied up in what it once was and even

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what it will be, and its nature as stone. If we are to fold the logic of the riddles into our thinking, the Ruthwell Cross speaks *either* of its virtual existence as the Cross *and* of the sand, the rock, the chisels, the paint, the rituals, the destruction, the excavation, the renovation, and, yes, the scholarly fetishization that make up its being.

### *Conclusion*

In an incisive critique of the art historical impulse to catalogue and categorize, Fred Orton describes how the act of “seeing” shades almost immediately into interpretation, into, as he puts it, “seeing... as.”<sup>78</sup> Orton’s immediate goal is to disrupt the casual identification of the Ruthwell monument, and more so the related obelisk in Bewcastle, as “crosses,” but he also notes the concern shown by the riddles with the question of how we perceive objects.<sup>79</sup> To revisit the problem with which I opened this essay, what are we to see these objects as? The riddles, it seems, only complicate the question, as their circumlocutionary logic compels us to see these objects as their materials, as their history, as the things they do, as the things they resemble—really, as anything but themselves. The riddles insist that we only know things through metaphor, and they reveal that process by constructing metaphors that seem strange and arbitrary.<sup>80</sup> Many of the riddles end with the challenge, “Say what I am called,” but not the more direct, “Say what I am.” Such insight, it seems, is forever beyond our grasp.

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<sup>1</sup> This essay has benefited immensely from thoughtful responses by Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, Rachel Dressler, Martin Foys, Eliza Garrison, Herbert L. Kessler, Lilla Kopár, Bibiana Obler, Karen E. Overbey, and the anonymous reviewer for *Different Visions*. Versions of this paper were presented at the Medieval and Early Modern Studies Institute at George Washington University and at the 47<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Medieval Studies at Kalamazoo. Deep thanks are also due to the Material Collective.

<sup>2</sup> James Robinson, “The Franks Casket,” in *Treasures of Heaven: Saints Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe*, ed. Martina Bagnoli, Holger G. Klein, C. Griffith Mann, and James Robinson (New Haven: Yale UP, 2010), p. 59; Leslie Webster, *The Franks Casket* (London: British Museum, 2012), p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> For a review of the competing theories, see David A. Hinton, *The Alfred Jewel: and other Late Anglo-Saxon Metalwork* (Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, 2008), pp. 25-29.

<sup>4</sup> Fred Orton, “Northumbrian Sculpture (the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Monuments): Questions of Difference,” in *Northumbria’s Golden Age*, ed. Jane Hawkes and Susan Mills (Stroud: Sutton, 1999), pp. 216–26; and *idem.*, “Rethinking the Ruthwell Monument: Fragments and Critique; Tradition and History; Tongues and Sockets,” *Art History* 21, no. 1 (1998): 65-106.

<sup>5</sup> The literature on the topic is vast. Relevant texts will be cited as necessary, but some good general introductions for the material covered here can be found in Jonathan Wilcox, “‘Tell me what I am:’ The Old English Riddles,” in *Readings in Medieval Texts: Interpreting Old and Middle English Literature*, ed. David F. Johnson and Elaine M. Treharne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 46-49; *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, ed. Craig Williamson (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977); and *Aldhelm: The Poetic Works*, ed. and trans. Michael Lapidge and James L. Rosier (Dover, NH: Boydell & Brewer, 1985), pp. 61-94.

<sup>6</sup> For an illuminating discussion of this topic, which intersects in productive ways with this essay, see Catherine Karkov, “Object and Voice,” in *The Art of Anglo-Saxon England* (Suffolk: Boydell & Brewer, 2011), pp. 135-78.

<sup>7</sup> In doing so, I am revisiting the approach taken in Daniel Tiffany, “Lyric Substance: On Riddles, Materialism, and Poetic Obscurity,” *Critical Inquiry* 28:1 (2001): 72-98, though with different ends.

<sup>8</sup> There is now a rich literature dealing with “thing theory,” the seminal works of which are: Bill Brown, “Thing Theory,” *Critical Inquiry* 28:1 (2001): 1-22; and *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Relevant works by other authors, and those by Latour, Harman, and Bryant, are cited as needed below.

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<sup>9</sup> “Moððe word fræt me þæt þuhte  
wrætlicu wyrd þa ic þæt wundor gefrægn  
þæt se wyrm forswealg wera gied sumes  
þeof In þystro þrymfæstne cwide  
⁊ þæs strangan stapol stælgieſt ne wæs  
wihte þy gleawra þe he þam wordū swealg”

Trans. Martin K. Foys, “The Undoing of Exeter Book Riddle 47: ‘Bookmoth’” (essay forthcoming, draft available on Academia.edu, accessed January 25, 2013, [http://www.academia.edu/2149551/The\\_Undoing\\_of\\_Exeter\\_Book\\_Riddle\\_47\\_Bookmoth](http://www.academia.edu/2149551/The_Undoing_of_Exeter_Book_Riddle_47_Bookmoth)). The numbering of the riddles follows George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, *The Exeter Book* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936).

<sup>10</sup> For a review of previous interpretations and a compelling new reading of the riddle, see Foys, “Undoing.”

<sup>11</sup> Of those works available in Anglo-Saxon England, we might point to two texts that were hugely influential through the Middle Ages: Martianus Capella, *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, which is attested to in the eighth century in England, see Michael Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 44; and the *Consolatio Philosophiae* of Boethius which circulated in the British Isles from ca. 800, see Susan Irvine and Malcolm Godden, *The Old English Boethius* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), pp. viii-ix.

<sup>12</sup> “Munera nunc largire rudis quo pandere reru / versibus enigmata queam clandestine fat.” Translated in Nancy Porter Stork, *Through a Gloss Darkly: Aldhelm’s Riddles in the British Library ms Royal 12.C.xxiii* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990), p. 94.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 90. We might read Aldhelm’s inclusion of two prefaces as a way of differentiating two kinds of supplemental metacommentaries on his work. The prose prologue, which comes first in the manuscripts, provides an introduction to the grammatical form of the work. The verse preface then speaks to the overall aims of the riddle collection, both poetic and philosophical.

<sup>15</sup> An excellent examination of the conceptual sophistication of anthropomorphism, including evidence that it does not arise from childhood misunderstanding and is, in fact, counter-intuitive can be found in Pascal Boyer, “What Makes Anthropomorphism Natural: Intuitive Ontology and Cultural Representations,” *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 2:1 (1996): 83-97.

<sup>16</sup> “Haec idcirco diximus ne quis forte nouo nos et inusitato dicendi argument <et> nullis quasi priorum uestigiis trito. predicta enigmata cecinisse arbitretur,” trans. Stork, *Through a Gloss Darkly*, p. 91.

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<sup>17</sup> For arguments against the correlation between anthropocentrism and anthropomorphism, see James Meyer, untitled essay in "Notes from the Field: Anthropomorphism," *Art Bulletin* 94:1 (2012): 24-27.

<sup>18</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), pp. 119-20.

<sup>19</sup> See also Jane Bennett, "Thing Power and the Ecological Sublime," in *The Sublime Now*, ed. Luke White and Claire Pajaczkowska. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2009), pp. 24-35. Bennett argues that human fantasies of mastery over the nonhuman world are underwritten by a perception of it as dead matter.

<sup>20</sup> For Aldhelm's dependence on Isidore, see examples in the notes of Lapidge and Rosier *Aldhelm: The Poetic Works*, pp. 247-55.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 63-64.

<sup>22</sup> The phrase first appeared in print in Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or, What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 38-45. Bogost has also created a "Latour Litanizer" to generate such lists automatically: [http://www.bogost.com/blog/latour\\_litanizer.shtml](http://www.bogost.com/blog/latour_litanizer.shtml)

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>24</sup> "Grandior in glaucis ballena fluctibus atra  
Et minor exiguo sulcat qui corpora uerme  
Aut modico phebi radiis qui uibrat atomo;  
Centenis pedibus gradior per gramina ruris  
Et penitus numquam per terram pergo pedester;  
Sic mea prudentes superat sapientia sophos  
Nee tamen in biblis docuit me littera diues  
Aut numquam quiui quid constet sillaba nosse;  
Siccior estiuo torrentis caumate solis  
Rore madens iterum plus udo flumine fontis;  
Salsior et multo tumidi quam marmora ponti  
Et gelidis terrae limphis insulsior erro;  
Multiplici specie cunctorum compta colorum  
Ex quibus ornatur presentis machina mundi  
Lurida cum toto nunc sim fraudata colore;  
Auscultate mei credentes famina uerbi  
Pandere quae potent gnarus uix ore magister  
Et tamen inficiens non retur fribula lector;  
Sciscitor inflates fungor quo nomine sophos"  
Translated in Stork, *Through a Gloss Darkly*, p. 238.

<sup>25</sup> Jennifer Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), p. 195.

<sup>26</sup> Daniel Tiffany argues that the Exeter Book riddles, even though they do not “give away” their solutions, work towards much the same end; Tiffany, “Lyric Substance,” pp. 80-82. With Aldhelm’s headings, the move from identification to lingering mystification may be more immediate, though no less potent.

<sup>27</sup> “Obscura sententia per occultam similitudinem rerum.” Donatus, *Ars Grammatica*, III:6, in *Grammatici Latini*, IV, ed. Heinrich Keil, (Leipzig: B.G. Teubner, 1864), pp. 401-02; see also Isidore, *Etymologiae* 1:37; translated in *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*, trans. Stephen A. Barney, et al. (New York: Cambridge UP, 2006), p. 63.

<sup>28</sup> For the importance of this idea specifically in Anglo-Saxon England, see *Bede: On Genesis*, ed. and trans. Calvin B. Kendall (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008).

<sup>29</sup> See *The Old English Physiologus*, ed. Ann Squires (Durham: Durham Medieval Texts, 1988).

<sup>30</sup> Dermot Moran, *The Philosophy of John Scottus Eriugena* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 243-44; Alfred K. Siewers, *Strange Beauty: Ecocritical Approaches to Early Medieval Landscape* (New York: Macmillan, 2009), p. 26.

<sup>31</sup> We might see this as akin to the insistence by some object-oriented philosophers that objects are always “withdrawn,” meaning that their substance is independent from, and not even accessible through, relations with other objects. See Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Washington: Zero Books, 2011), pp. 35-50; and Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> Philip Webster Souers, “The Wayland Scene on the Franks Casket,” *Speculum* 18:1 (1943), pp. 104-111. The account of Egil strangling birds for Weland’s flying machine appears only later in surviving textual sources, but, as Souers notes, the imagery on the Casket can be taken as evidence of its earlier presence in the tradition.

<sup>33</sup> “Her Hos sitip̃ on harmberga  
agl[.] drigip̃ swa hiræ Ertae gisgraf  
sarden sorga and sefa torna”

The translations of the inscriptions on the casket are notoriously difficult. Here I follow Raymond I. Page, *An Introduction to English Runes*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 1999), p. 175.

<sup>34</sup> Amy L. Vandersall, “Homeric Myth in Early Medieval England: the Lid of the Franks Casket,” *Studies in Iconography* 1 (1975): 2-37. Somewhat curiously, this possibility is largely disregarded in recent scholarship without explanation. The case, while admittedly speculative, is strong enough at least to warrant fuller consideration.

<sup>35</sup> Webster, *The Franks Casket*, pp. 45-53.

<sup>36</sup> “fisc flodu ahof̃ on fergenberig  
warþ gasric grorn þær he on greut giswom

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hronæs ban”

Page, *Introduction to English Runes*, p. 175. The *hapax legomenon* “gasric” is commonly translated as “king of terror,” but this translation is often challenged and based solely on Page’s contextual reading.

<sup>37</sup> Webster, *The Franks Casket*, pp. 7-8. Also Richard Abels, “What Has Weland to Do with Christ? The Franks Casket and the Acculturation of Christianity in Early Anglo-Saxon England,” *Speculum* 84 (2009): 549-81, at 560.

<sup>38</sup> Joe Roman and Stephen R. Palumbi, “Whales Before Whaling in the North Atlantic,” *Science* 301 (July 25, 2003): 508-10.

<sup>39</sup> Vicki Ellen Szabo, “The Use of Whales in Early Medieval Britain,” *The Haskins Society Journal* 9 (2001): 137-58, at 137.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 139-42. For more on the archeological record of whalebone use, see *idem*, *Monstrous Fishes and the Mead-Dark Sea: Whaling in the Medieval North Atlantic* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 147-76.

<sup>41</sup> Carol Neuman de Vegvar, “*Hronæs ban*: Exoticism and Prestige in Anglo-Saxon Material Culture,” in *The Maritime World of the Anglo-Saxons*, ed. Stacy Klein, Shannon Lewis-Simpson and William Schipper (Tempe: ACMRS, 2013), forthcoming. I am grateful to Prof. Neuman de Vegvar for making this paper available to me pre-publication. For a broader view on the place of whales in Anglo-Saxon culture, see Szabo, *Monstrous Fishes and the Mead-Dark Sea*.

<sup>42</sup> Leslie Webster, “The Iconographic Programme of the Franks Casket,” in *Northumbria’s Golden Age*, ed. Jane Hawkes and Susan Mills (Gloucestershire: Sutton, 1999), pp. 233-35.

<sup>43</sup> Accordingly, Webster, *ibid.*, notes that the idea that riddles need to be “unlocked” is reflected in riddle 42 of the *Exeter Book*, which reads in part, “who has unlocked, with the craft of a key, the fetters of the treasure door that held the riddle fast in the mind?” See also Karkov, *Art of Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 151-52.

<sup>44</sup> For considerations of this theme, see Carol Neuman de Vegvar, “Reading the Franks Casket: Contexts and Audiences,” in *Intertexts: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Culture*, ed. Virginia Blanton and Helene Scheck (Tempe: ACMRS, 2008), pp. 141-159; and Abels, “What Has Weland to Do With Christ?”

<sup>45</sup> Karkov, *Art of Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 151-52; Webster, *The Franks Casket*, pp. 50-52.

<sup>46</sup> An exception to this Catherine Karkov, “The Franks Casket Speaks Back,” unpublished paper delivered at the International Medieval Congress, Leeds, UK, 13 July, 2011. I am grateful to Dr. Karkov for making this paper available to me.

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<sup>47</sup> For example, Augustine uses the figure of Mary as ark in his discussion of Psalm 131. *Augustine, Enarrationes in Psalmos CI-CL*, ed. Eligius Dekkers, Johannes Fraipont, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 40 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1953), 131:8.

<sup>48</sup> Karkov “The Franks Casket Speaks Back.”

<sup>49</sup> “Mec feonda sum feore besnyþede  
woruldstrenga binō wætte siþþan  
dyfde on wætre dyde eft þonan  
sette on sunnan þær ic swiþe beleas  
herum þam þe ic hæfde heard mec siþþan  
snað seaxses ecge sindrum begrunden  
fingras feoldan ond mec fugles wyn  
geond sped dropum spyrede geneahhe  
ofer brunne brerd beamtelge swealg  
streames dæle”

Trans. Richard Hamer, *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006).

<sup>50</sup> “Ic seah on bearwe beam hlifian  
tanum torhtne þæt treow wæs on wynne  
wudu weaxende wæter hine ond eorþe  
feddan fægre oþþæt he frod dagum  
on oþrum wearð aglachade  
deope gedolgod dumb In bendum  
wriþen ofer wunda wonnum hyrstum  
foran gefrætwed Nu he fæcnum wæg  
þurh his heafdes mæg hildegiste  
oþrū rymeð oft hy an yst strudon  
hord ætgædre; hræd wæs ond unlæt  
se æftera gif se ærra fær  
genamnan in nearowe neþan moste”

Hamer, *A Choice of Anglo-Saxon Verse*.

<sup>51</sup> Sarah Larratt Keefer, “‘Either/And’ as ‘Style’ in Anglo-Saxon Christian Poetry,” in *Anglo-Saxon Styles*, ed. Catherine E. Karkov and George Harding Brown (Buffalo: SUNY Press, 2003), pp. 179-200, at 180.

<sup>52</sup> A dominant cultural ideology expressing this concept would be the Trinity, which Keefer does not mention. Particularly interesting is that whereas other early medieval thinkers see the Trinity as ontologically unique, the riddles characterize nearly all objects as having such a nature.

<sup>53</sup> Good recent discussions can be found in Hinton *Alfred Jewel*, and Karkov, *Art of Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 214-18.



<sup>54</sup> Ian C. Freestone, Michael J. Hughes and Colleen P. Stapleton, “The Composition and Production of Anglo-Saxon Glass,” in *Catalogue of Anglo-Saxon Glass in the British Museum*, ed. Sonja Marzinzik (London: British Museum, 2008), pp. 29-46.

<sup>55</sup> John Blair and Nigel Ramsay, *English Medieval Industries: Craftsmen, Techniques, Products* (London: Hambledon Press, 1991), p. 108.

<sup>56</sup> The tradition extends back to Pliny, but was probably best known in the Middle Ages via Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae* 16:15,; translated Barney, et al., p. 325. The symbolic potential of crystal as hardened water was not lost on medieval exegetes: see Genevra Kornbluth, *Engraved Gems of the Carolingian Empire* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), p. 18, 53, 73; and Dominic Janes, *God and Gold in Late Antiquity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 73.

<sup>57</sup> Genevra Kornbluth, “The Alfred Jewel: Reuse of Roman Spolia,” *Medieval Archaeology* 33 (1989): 32-37.

<sup>58</sup> Catherine Karkov, *The Ruler Portraits of Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2004), p. 28.

<sup>59</sup> “Melligeris apibus mea prima processit origo.  
Sed pars exterior crescebat caetera siluis;  
Calciamenta mihi tradebant tergora dura;  
Nunc fern stimulus faciem proscindit amoenam  
Flexibus et sulcos obliquat ad instar aratri;  
Sed semen segeti de caelo ducitur alium  
Quod largos generat millena fruge maniplos  
Heu tarn sancta seges diris extinguitur armis”  
Stork, *Through a Gloss Darkly*, p. 138.

<sup>60</sup> Bruno Latour, “Where are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts,” in *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*, eds. Wiebe E. Bijker and John Law (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 225-258.

<sup>61</sup> The most notable being *The Ruthwell Cross*, ed. Brendan Cassidy (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992); Éamonn Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood: Liturgical Images and the Old English Poems of the Dream of the Rood Tradition* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005); and Fred Orton & Ian Wood with Claire A. Lees, *Fragments of History: Rethinking the Ruthwell and Bewcastle Monuments* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2007).

<sup>62</sup> *Top and right*: “[+ Ond] geredæ hinæ God almehttig þa he walde on galgu gistiga, modig f[ore allæ] men [bug][a..]”

*Left*: “[Ahof] ic riicnæ kyniŋc heafunæs h[l]afard hælda ic ni dorstæ [b]ismær[ad]u unket men ba æt[g]ad[re i]c [wæs] [m]iþ blodæ bist[e]mi[d] bi[...]”

Translation follows Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 79-80

<sup>63</sup> “[+] kris[t] wæs on rodi hweþræ þer fus[æ] fearran kw[o]mu [æ]þþilæ til anum ic þæt al bi[h](eald) sar[ræ] ic w[æ]s mi[þ] s[or]gu[m] gidrœ[fi]d h[n]aġ [...]”

“[m]iþ s[t]re[l]um giwundad alegdun hiæ hinæ limwœrignæ gistoddu[n] him [...li]cæs [hea]f[du]m [bih]eal du[n] [h]i[æ] þe[r...]”

Translation *ibid.*, pp. 180-81.

<sup>64</sup> See Richard Gem, “Documentary References to Anglo-Saxon Painted Sculpture,” in *Early Medieval Wall Painting and Painted Sculpture in England*, ed. Sharon Cather, David Park, and Paul Williamson (Oxford: British Archeological Reports, 1990), pp. 1-16; Jane Hawkes, “Reading Stone,” in *Theorizing Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture*, ed. Catherine Karkov and Fred Orton (Morgantown: West Virginia UP, 2003), pp. 5-30; and Warwick Rodwell, et al., “The Lichfield Angel: A Spectacular Anglo-Saxon Painted Sculpture,” *The Antiquaries Journal* 88 (2008): 48-108.

<sup>65</sup> Vercelli, Cathedral Library, MS CXVII. The precise relationship between the two texts is the subject of ongoing debate. For discussions, see Orton, et al., *Fragments of History*, pp. 151-69; and David Howlett, “Inscriptions and Design of the Ruthwell Cross,” in *The Ruthwell Cross*, ed. Brendan Cassidy (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992), pp. 82-93.

<sup>66</sup> “wendan wædum ond bleom;                      hwilum hit wæs mid wætan bestemed,  
beswyled mid swates gange,                      hwilum mid since gegyrwed”  
This and subsequent translations of the poem follow that found in *Old and Middle English: An Anthology*, ed. and trans. Elaine Treharne (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000). The shifting mediations among the True Cross, the Ruthwell Cross, and other signs of the cross are examined in Seeta Chaganti, “Vestigial Signs: Inscription, Performance, and The Dream of the Rood,” *PMLA* 125:1 (2010), pp. 48-72.

<sup>67</sup> “þæt wæs geara iu,                                      (ic þæt gyta geman),  
þæt ic wæs aheawen                                      holtes on ende,  
astyred of stefne minum.                              Genaman me ðær strange feondas,  
geworhton him þær to wæfersyne,                      heton me heora wergas hebban.  
Bæron me ðær beornas on eaxlum,                      oððæt hie me on beorg asetton,  
gefæstnodon me þær feondas genoge.                      Geseah ic þa frean mancynnes  
efstan elne mycle                                      þæt he me wolde on gestigan.”

<sup>68</sup> “Bedealf us man on deopan seape.                      Hwæðre me þær dryhtnes þegnas,  
freondas gefrunon,                                      golde ond seolfre.  
ond gyredon me                                      Is nu sæl cumen  
...                                      wide ond side  
þæt me weorðiað                                      ond eall þeos mære gesceaft,  
menn ofer moldan,  
gebiddaþ him to þyssum beacne.

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<sup>69</sup> “Ignibus ardescens nee non et gurgite feruens; / Sic geminas uario patior discrimine pugnas / Dum latices limphae tolero flammasque feroces.” Trans. Stork, *Through a Glass Darkly*, p. 161.

<sup>70</sup> An excellent summary can be found in Brendan Cassidy, “The Later Life of the Ruthwell Cross: From the Seventeenth Century to the Present,” in *The Ruthwell Cross*, ed. Brendan Cassidy (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1992), pp. 3-34; see also, Orton, et al., *Fragments of History*, pp. 32-40.

<sup>71</sup> This is a central theme in both Brown, “Thing Theory,” and Arjun Appadurai, “Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value,” in *The Social Life of Things*, 3-63.

<sup>72</sup> We might, however, fold the discourse in on itself and start to consider the riddles themselves as objects that, despite their human origins, also fundamentally exist as independent entities. Such an elaboration of the thing theory of the riddles is not outside the realm of possibility for the Anglo-Saxons: Alfred’s verse prefaces to his translations of Gregory’s *Pastoral Care* and Boethius’s *Consolation of Philosophy* present those texts as speaking in the first person, evincing a clear willingness to think of a text as an object equal in being to his *aestel*. See James W. Earl, “King Alfred’s Talking Poems,” *Pacific Coast Philology* 24 (1989): 49-61.

<sup>73</sup> For a meditation on stone’s temporality, see Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, “Stories of Stone,” *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* 1 (2010): 56–63.

<sup>74</sup> Perhaps not coincidentally, “The Ruin” appears in the Exeter Book immediately before the second large grouping of riddles; for a discussion of the structure of the Exeter book, see Patrick W. Conner, “The Structure of the Exeter Book Codex,” *Scriptorium* 40 (1986): 233-242.

<sup>75</sup> Ó Carragáin, *Ritual and the Rood*, pp. 79-222.

<sup>76</sup> On the cross-head, see Orton, et al., *Fragments of History*, pp. 40-61; on the runes, see Patrick W. Conner, “The Ruthwell Monument Runic Poem in a Tenth-Century Context,” *Review of English Studies* n.s. 59 (2007): 1-27.

<sup>77</sup> For a speculative discussion of the geological history of the stones, see Orton, et al., *Fragments of History*, pp. 40-41 and n. 58, pp. 215-16.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 62-68.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 168-69.

<sup>80</sup> The insistence on metaphor resonates with Graham Harman’s thesis that all objects relate to each other through metaphor: *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), pp. 101-24. On the use of metaphor as a philosophical practice, see Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*, pp. 61-84.