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THE DEORHORD



THE DEORHORD

An Old English Bestiary



Hana Videen

P

PROFILE BOOKS

First published in Great Britain in 2023 by
Profile Books Ltd
29 Cloth Fair
London
EC1A 7JQ

www.profilebooks.com

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Illustrations by Joanna Lisowiec
Text design by Crow Books

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978 1 80081 5797
eISBN 978 1 80081 5810



For my *sunu* Kai and my *nefene* Charlotte,
who came into the world alongside this book

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Prologue

An Old English Bestiary



IN 2018 THE CITY OF Toronto wheeled out a solution to its infamous trash panda dilemma. ‘Trash panda’ is the half-affectionate, half-resentful epithet for the raccoon, a chubby creature with a bandit’s mask of black fur around its eyes and an exceptional ability to survive on scraps from the green plastic food waste bins that residents use throughout the city. While municipal politicians claimed the new design for these bins was ‘raccoon-proof’, engineered with special handles to prevent the critters from breaking in, Toronto’s raccoons seem to have missed the memo. Instead of keeping the raccoons out, the new design merely challenged them to become more innovative in their methods for extracting people’s trash. Before long, stories were popping up on social media and news networks about ‘genius’ and ‘superhuman muscular’ creatures. The raccoon seemed to have outwitted humans once again with its determination and ingenuity. One article jokingly suggested that the cleverest thieves must be ‘armed with diagrams and spreadsheets’, spreading their knowledge throughout the raccoon community. Of course, the raccoons were just being raccoons, looking for food in their urban habitat, but the people

who live alongside them can't help but grant them 'human' characteristics and motivations.

Toronto isn't the only city whose streets are shared with creatures that the human inhabitants begin (begrudgingly) to see as neighbours: partly beloved, partly vilified, entirely personified. Toronto has its raccoons, New York its rats and London its foxes. There are an estimated 10,000 foxes living within the sprawling reaches of London, and they can be spotted everywhere from the steps of Downing Street to the suburbs. Although London foxes receive even more vitriol as a wildlife menace than Toronto's raccoons, and though they might not have a cute moniker like 'trash panda', there is no shortage of media reports that describe their activities like any other person getting on with life in the big city. An article in *Metro* describes them enjoying recreational activities like 'bouncing on a makeshift trampoline or sunbathing on a roof'. A Bloomsbury resident refers to a pair who were 'such polite neighbours that they used our dog toilet area for its intended purpose', and the Internet delights in tales of foxes living 'rent-free' in skyscrapers, mugging walkers for their snacks and stealing entire collections of shoes. Some city-dwellers wish these daring denizens were quieter – too much loud sex at night – but such a complaint could apply equally to human neighbours as to those of a furrier nature.

Sometimes loved, sometimes hated, animals are often assigned human attributes, whether it's disregard for one's neighbours or innovation in urban exploration. Perhaps it is an attempt to understand another way of being, to imagine a city or the world or ourselves through the eyes of other creatures. Whatever its motivation, this habit has a long history, one that began centuries before the invention of TikTok or memes of trash pandas eating pizza. Humans love to tell stories about animals, and across cultures we imbue them with the same qualities we admire or abhor in ourselves. I grew up hearing stories about the loyal dog, the eager beaver, the wise owl,

the wily fox and the busy bee. Perhaps you are more familiar with the antics of Anansi, the trickster spider, or tales of the jolly but mischievous *tanuki* (Japanese raccoon dog). Some animals are inextricably tied to certain stories and legends, like the tortoise who wins the race against the hare at its slow and steady pace, the wolf who consumes grandmothers and foolish pigs, or the serpent who deceives unsuspecting humans. The fables and fairy tales we grow up with, as much as any nature documentary, influence our perspectives on the animal world.

Even the multitude of stories about ‘real’ animals is not enough to satisfy our imaginations. Our personal libraries include numerous fantastic, mythical creatures, drawn from the stories we are told as children and the media we consume as adults: legends about the phoenix who burns and rises from its ashes, fire-breathing dragons who guard treasure hoards, monsters who lurk in the deepest and darkest of places, and many more. These mythical creatures, too, take on human traits in stories about love, hate, greed and desire.

But where do these associations come from? Humans’ obsession with real and mythical creatures is nothing new: it stretches to antiquity and beyond. In ancient Greece Homer wrote about the fire-breathing chimera, in Persian mythology we had the simurgh, a giant bird, and during the medieval period, books of animal lore were bestsellers. These illustrated books, known as bestiaries, contained descriptions and allegorical tales of the various creatures to be found across the medieval world. Some ideas from medieval bestiaries have stayed with us: the lion is still the king of beasts and a white dove still symbolises peace. But other animal associations may be less familiar. In the medieval period, for instance, one might see Jesus in a panther or Satan in a whale. Medieval bestiaries often highlighted lessons in morality through analogies that have gradually become obscure. Be long-sighted like the industrious ant. Take shelter in God’s shadow

like the dove in the peridexion tree. Remember that through penitence even a sinner can shed past deeds as a snake can shed its skin.

Ancient origins: the *Physiologus*

Although bestiaries were popular texts in medieval Europe, many of their tales derive from a far older text from northern Africa known as the *Physiologus*. The *Physiologus* (meaning *Natural Philosopher*) was originally written in Greek by an unknown author, probably someone living in Alexandria during the third century CE. This text in turn is made up of stories whose influences can be traced even further back in time to texts on natural philosophy and religion by ancient Greek and Roman writers. As the *Physiologus* further developed over the centuries, its age-old tales were often shaped by contemporary authorities like the third-century geographer and grammarian Solinus, or Ambrose, a fourth-century bishop and theologian. So while the bones of a story might stay the same, the interpretation and moral might shift according to the ideas that pleased the contemporary scribe. Perhaps the most significant influence on later versions of the *Physiologus* text came from Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies*. In this text, Isidore, a seventh-century Spanish cleric, explains the supposed stories behind animal names: their 'etymologies'. Foxes, for instance, which are *vulpes* in Latin, are so called because they are 'shifty on their feet' (*volubilis + pes*), choosing a twisting path over a straight one. The vulture (Latin *vultur*) is supposedly named for its 'slow flight' (*volatus tardus*). A bird is an *avis* because it has no set 'path' (*via*) but travels by means of 'pathless' (*avia*) ways. Isidore would eventually become canonised after the medieval period, and due to his insatiable desire for the world's knowledge – and compelling need to record it – he is sometimes called the patron saint of the Internet. (And like 'facts' on

the Internet, some of Isidore's etymologies are legit, but you shouldn't believe everything you read.)

The original forty or so animals in the Greek *Physiologus* grew to number over a hundred, and the versions of the text itself proliferated, with translations in many languages, especially Latin, the language of learning and the Christian Church. By the ninth or tenth century, these collections of stories – *Physiologi* – were popular across western Europe. No matter the language or country, era or religion, it seemed that people were hungry for tales of animals and their exploits.

Beastly bestsellers

And so the *Physiologus* remained highly influential for more than a millennium, gathering new material over the centuries. By the time these more extensive, often illustrated compendiums of animal lore reached the medieval period, they had become the books known as bestiaries.

In Europe, the heyday for bestiaries was from around 1000 to 1300. But their tremendous popularity was by no means limited to medieval Europe. Just as European bestiary compilers drew upon animal descriptions from the *Physiologus* and other ancient Greek texts, so did Muslim writers from Persia. The scholar Ibn Bakhtishu' wrote the *Manafi' al-hayawan* (*Usefulness of Animals*), an illuminated bestiary, in Arabic during the tenth century, and Zakariya al-Qazwini, a physician, astronomer and geographer, composed his own *'Aja'ib al-makhlūqat* (*Book of the Wonders of Creation*) during the thirteenth century. Like those of Christian tradition, Islamic bestiaries contained moralised tales about real and mythical animals, often accompanied by lavish illustrations.

During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, most of the development of the bestiary tradition was happening in England. During this

period, monastic orders involved in preaching, like the Cistercians, often possessed the most bestiaries. Itinerant preachers needed stories for their sermon-making that would be vivid and memorable, and so they turned to animals and illustrations. Monastic scribes produced bestiaries to teach proper living and thinking, following the idea that the world's creatures were created by God for the purpose of instructing humankind. As well as on the road, bestiaries served as teaching tools in schools and monasteries. You can tell they were used in classrooms because of their glosses (translations from a less familiar tongue – usually Latin – into the vernacular), rubrics and other teaching aids.

But some of the lessons in these bestiaries have a dark side. Throughout, there are textual and visual references that were intended to encourage anti-Semitic and misogynist beliefs. They are not always obvious to us today, but their meaning would have been clear to people in medieval England. A story about a siren may seem like a harmless myth, but it was a tale used to demonise women who feel and express sexual desire: the lesson here is that such feelings turn women not only into threats to men but unwomanly 'beasts'. Today, owls are often seen as 'wise' because they are associated with Athena, the Greek goddess of wisdom. Yet medieval bestiaries compare the owl's daytime blindness to the spiritual 'blindness' of the Jews, who refuse to accept the 'light' of Christianity. One bestiary depicts an owl surrounded by other birds. While we might assume this is meant to portray people flocking to the wisest bird in the room, the medieval illustrator would have intended something much more troubling: many virtuous birds pecking at a blind owl, a tacit endorsement of anti-Semitic violence. Is it a mere coincidence that the popularity of bestiaries with anti-Semitic messaging became significantly less popular (and perhaps less relevant) after the expulsion of the Jews from England in 1290? Historians think not.

The owl is just one example of how our perceptions of animals – real or imagined – change over time. Were foxes still wily and bees busy a thousand years ago? No matter what message the scribe hoped to communicate, their words reveal something about the world they lived in and their place within it.

The oldest of Englishes

The earliest European bestiaries are written in Latin, the language of learning and the Christian Church. These were then translated into a variety of vernacular languages, including Middle English, Icelandic, German, French, Italian, Occitan and Catalan. The earliest bestiary made in England that still survives today dates from the early twelfth century.

But what about prior to that? Given the wide distribution of the *Physiologus* in earlier times, it would be surprising if there wasn't also an interest in animal lore in the early medieval period. There is even written evidence for a bestiary from this time in England: a list of gifts made to Peterborough Abbey in 970 includes a *Liber Bestiarum* (*Book of Beasts*), a Latin bestiary now lost to time. But no bestiaries from early medieval England survive today, and none are known to have existed at all in England's vernacular. To read the *Liber Bestiarum* would have required knowledge of Latin, a language limited to the well educated. In early medieval England (c.550–1150), the language that most people spoke and could understand was *englisc*, or 'Old English'. And no bestiaries exist in that language.

Old English is the language we think we know until we see or read it. It is quite different from the English used by Wordsworth (modern), Shakespeare (Early Modern) or even Chaucer (Middle), though these are all, of course, 'old' relatively speaking. Old English, though, is the

oldest of them all: it was written and spoken over a thousand years ago, as the main language of early medieval England. The vocabulary of Old English is primarily Germanic, with only a small percentage of words borrowed from Latin: it was not until the Norman invasion that the language was forever shaped by a major influx of words from Latin and French. Some words in Old English can look quite familiar to modern English speakers (like **word** itself), but much of the time it is as foreign as any new language, incomprehensible without immersion or study.

One challenge to immersing yourself in Old English, though, compared to even Latin (never mind a language like French or Spanish), is that only a relatively small number of texts survive; the content of all unique works written in Old English could be contained in the space of about thirty novels. This is far less than the records we have in Latin, a language written for millennia, spanning ancient and medieval periods. The best-known work in Old English today is *Beowulf* (which contains 3,182 lines of verse), a poem that may have started out as an oral tale, something to be spoken or sung at feasts. It survived in only one manuscript that made it to modern times, a manuscript that was nearly destroyed in a library fire.

The Old English words that have survived represent the experience of a relatively small portion of the population – those people who could read and write and had the time and resources to do so. When we look at daily life during this period through the words that remain, we understand that we must be seeing the world based on this fairly limited perspective. Another limitation to our view is that some of the words appear only once in the entire body of Old English literature. Such a word may have been commonly used in everyday conversations, may have appeared in many other manuscripts that were lost over time, or may have been the isolated coinage of one lone scribe who couldn't get it to catch on. We will never know. Regardless, like

peering through a keyhole, we can still get a sense of the richness of the vast world beyond: these words give us glimpses into lives lived long ago.

Cats and sea-cargo

Although many bestiaries have survived from medieval England, these date mainly from the time when Middle English was the vernacular, from around 1150 to the end of the medieval period (c.1450). And even those are in a different language: Latin, not the vernacular. A Middle English translation of the *Physiologus* does survive from the thirteenth century, but it lacks the extensive additional material and illustrations of a proper bestiary. An Old English version of this text is even more limited. The so-called Old English *Physiologus* has only two complete poems and one poetic fragment, which appear together in the tenth-century Exeter Book.

But despite there being no Old English bestiary, there is no shortage of stories about animals. They play a vibrant role in Old English tales, poems and medical texts, riddles and travel logs, sermons and saints' lives: there are many creatures and lessons for the *englisc* speaker to find.

In the world of Old English there is no 'creature' and no 'nature'; instead we have **sceaft** (creation). *Sceaft* includes everything in the world made by God – humans, animals, plants, rocks and the sun, even dragons, phoenixes and other fantastical creatures. People saw themselves as part of *sceaft*, and they looked to other aspects of it to gain a deeper understanding of themselves. There were lessons to be learned from serpents and spiders, eagles and elephants. When we read about animals in Old English, what we get is a human perspective on animal life. Even when animals have the power to speak in words, these words belong to

a human scribe and reflect that scribe's own experience. Animal stories reveal far more about the people who wrote them, how these humans interpreted their world, than they do about the animals. If God created animal life to teach humans about themselves, medieval scribes created their books of animal lore for the same purpose. The words and stories that are associated with certain animals reveal something of the beliefs of the people who made them and their cultural background; and maybe they can reveal something about us too, those who weave words into stories in modern English, continuing to tell tales about the animals of our daily lives and imaginations.

What roles did animals play in early medieval life and legend? What Old English words were used to describe them? Would these animal descriptions be as recognisable to us today as a word like *cat* (cat) or as foreign as *brim-hlæst* (sea-cargo, a poetic word meaning 'fish')? And what might they tell us about ourselves? These are some of the questions we will explore in the pages of *The Deorhord* – the Old English bestiary that never existed . . .

A new Old English bestiary

The Old English word for 'animal' is *dēor*. It resembles the modern English word 'deer' but is pronounced DAY-or, and in early medieval England every animal was a *dēor*, not just those with antlers. *Dēor* derives from the Proto-Germanic root *dhus* (to breathe), and in this way it is etymologically similar to our modern word 'animal', which comes from Latin *anima* (breath, life).

This book's title is a compound I invented from real Old English words: *dēor* + *hord* (hoard). *Deorhord* (pronounced DAY-OR-HORD) is not a word that actually appears in Old English but is inspired by the real compound *wordhord* (word-hoard). A *wordhord* is a poet's mental stockpile of

words to be used in their stories and songs. Tales in the early medieval period were often transmitted orally, with some of the composition done on the spot, so it would have been handy to have a *hord* of poetic words and phrases at the ready. Like a poet's *hord* of words, this is a *hord* of *dēor*, a collection to be kept near and cherished; and as we read stories of creatures big and small, we'll be stocking our own word-hoards too.

Because bestiaries derive from a shared tradition, they all tend to follow the same ordering of creatures, beginning with land animals and continuing with birds, snakes and water-dwellers. *The Deorhord* isn't a traditional bestiary – it's a *hord* of *dēor* – and so I've gone with a different kind of order, collecting creatures into the ordinary and the extraordinary, the good, the bad and the baffling. When humans attempt to generalise and categorise a thing, it quickly becomes clear that that thing is far too complex, and my categories of Old English animals are no different. Something as seemingly ordinary as an ant is in fact extraordinary, and the much-maligned serpent may in fact be 'good' (at least in some ways). Some creatures are baffling due to their limited descriptions, while others are described in great detail – but with utterly bizarre characteristics. Perhaps a *dēor* that baffles modern scholars would have been familiar and easily recognisable in the early medieval period; we'll never know, and must continue to rack our brains. I hope you'll join me in the puzzle.

This Old English bestiary brings together a *hord* of animal words from the farms, forests, rivers and seas of the early medieval landscape. Many of these *dēor* descriptions echo ideas that appeared in the earlier northern African *Physiologus* text, as well as offering a glimpse of the tales yet to be told in later European bestiary lore. Within each chapter we'll often see both, alongside the Old English.

Some of *The Deorhord's* creatures are real and others legendary, some mythical and others mundane. They pad softly through collections of Old English poetry and soar through saints' lives and

homilies. They might necessitate a leechbook remedy, or in fact be a vital ingredient. They creep through the riddles and crawl through the Psalms. They slither into accounts of the world's greatest marvels, even lurking in the letter of an emperor and conqueror to his tutor. Wherever they appear, these *dēor* reveal more about the word-hoarders who underestimate, fear or admire them.

The Prologue's Wordhord

At the end of each chapter I include a *wordhord*, a stockpile of its Old English words. Any time a word appears for the first time in this book I put it in boldface, and you can turn to the chapter's *wordhord* to remind yourself of its meaning or learn its pronunciation. A complete list of all the words is at the end of the book.

Old English spans several centuries, and there are variations to its pronunciation across this period, not to mention differences in dialect. My pronunciations thus reflect only one version of Old English. The pronunciations of each word are given in two styles: a simpler but slightly less precise one, and one that uses the International Phonetic Alphabet.

The macron (the horizontal bar above some vowels) is not used in Old English texts, which is why you'll never see it in a quotation. It is a common editorial device in modern-day Old English dictionaries, indicating that a vowel sound is long rather than short. (A short 'u' sounds like the 'u' in 'pull', for instance, while a long 'ū' is pronounced like the 'oo' in 'cool'.)

brim-hlæst, noun (BRIM-H'LAST / 'brim-,hlæst): Fish (sea-cargo).

cat, noun (KAHT / 'kat): Cat (plural: *catas*).

dēor, noun (DAY-or / 'de:ɔr): Animal (plural: *dēor*).

englisc, noun (ENG-glish / 'eŋ-gliʃ): English, the English language.

hord, noun (HORD / 'hɔrd): Hoard.

sceaft, noun (SHEH-oft / 'ʃæft): Creation.

word, noun (WORD / 'wɔrd): Word.

wordhord, noun (WORD-HORD / 'wɔrd-,hɔrd): Word-hoard, a store of words.

The Ordinary

‘ORDINARY’ IS A RELATIVE TERM. When I lived in London, foxes were quite ordinary sights in the city, although the first time I saw one I was completely taken aback. I had never seen a fox outside of a zoo before. Similarly, when I saw my first Canadian raccoon, I excitedly took a photo and showed it to my friends. The Canadians were about as impressed by it as I would have been by a photo of a mourning dove or a squirrel, prominent denizens of my own home town in the American Midwest.

The animals I label ‘ordinary’ in this book are creatures that would not be surprising to see in early medieval England. ‘Ordinary’ changes over time. The animals you’ll most likely come across while walking along the city streets are dogs and pigeons, and inside houses you might find cats and spiders. Today it is unlikely you’ll see an ox, cow or sheep in central London, but that wasn’t always the case. Most people in the early medieval period were farmers, so horses and oxen would be a familiar sight. If you lived in a high-status, urban area you may have come across more cattle, while in a small village the sheep might have outnumbered the human residents. Most cats and dogs you’d see would not be sheltered, household pets but working animals, dogs used for hunting, herding and guarding and cats for controlling the mice population. In a time when acres of land remained wild and

unsettled, it was unlikely that the sight of a soaring eagle or a wild boar would be a cause for surprise.

Sometimes 'ordinary' creatures are granted extraordinary abilities – like the urban exploration and clever sabotage technique of a trash panda. The 'ordinary' animals in this book generally have abilities that are not far beyond the realm of reality. Eagles do indeed fly high, even if they don't reach the sun. Doves are gentle creatures and spiders weave webs to catch their prey. These details may not be surprising to us, even if we aren't familiar with the stories that were told about them a thousand years ago.

I

Eagle (*earn*)



PEOPLE HAVE BEEN EAGLE-EYED since the fifteenth century, when the English monk and poet John Lydgate described someone as ‘egle-eyed, bryght and cler’. But sharp sight had been associated with the eagle for even longer. The Latin for ‘eagle’, *aquila*, supposedly comes from the creature’s keen sense of sight (*acumen oculorum*: sharpness of the eyes), at least according to Isidore’s seventh-century *Etymologies*. Isidore explains that eagles soar high above the ocean, too distant for human eyes to see, and yet the sharp-eyed birds can still spot small fish swimming far below. (The *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests a less appealing but more probable etymology, that *aquila* comes from Latin *aquilus*, or ‘dark brown’.)

Our modern English word ‘eagle’ comes from the Anglo-Norman *aigle*, but before the influence of French this bird was called an **earn**. ‘Erne’ is in fact still used today, usually referring to the golden eagle or sea-eagle (though ‘erne-eyed’ doesn’t have quite the same ring to it . . .). Old English *earn* has Germanic roots, with cognates in Old Norse (*ørn*), Middle Low German (*arn*) and modern Dutch (*arend*). (Incidentally, Old English is closest in structure to Frisian, a

language from the coastal Netherlands and north-west Germany, so it is sometimes more easily understood by speakers of modern Dutch or German.) *Earn* even has cognates in non-Germanic languages, like the Greek *órnīs* (bird), a word from which we get ‘ornithology’, the study of birds. Only two species of eagle feature among Britain’s native birds, so the word *earn* would probably have been used to talk about either the golden eagle or the white-tailed eagle – and often we can tell which one the writer had in mind by the way they describe it. The golden eagle, known in Scotland as the black eagle, may be the bird referred to in the Old English poem *Judith*, which has an *earn* that is *saluwig-pād* (dark-cloaked). And it is undoubtedly the white-tailed eagle that the poet is thinking about in *The Battle of Brunanburh*, where the *earn* is a *hasu-pāda* (grey-cloaked one) with a *hwīt* (white) tail.

Seeker of the sun

Whether dark-cloaked or grey-cloaked, an eagle is easiest to spot when it is soaring high in the sky. On a sunny day you might have to squint to see it up above the treetops. Bestiaries of the later medieval period seem to be particularly interested in the eagle’s flying ability, which – ordinary though it may be – contributed to the bird’s role in myth and allegory. These bestiaries explain why the eagle flies so high: it must burn off its old feathers and the mist in its eyes by flying close to the sun, renewing itself in the blazing heat. The eagle is thus made young again. This story of renewal doesn’t appear in ancient literature and may have derived from Psalm 102, which says, ‘thy youth shall be renewed like the eagle’s’ (in Old English *bið geedneowod swa swa earnes geogod ðin*).*

* Throughout this book psalms are numbered according to the Latin Vulgate Bible.

The religious eagle comparisons don't stop there. Flying towards the sun is not just an extreme rejuvenation: when the eagle looks to the sun it is like Christians looking to God, not allowing their spiritual vision to become clouded over time. The way the eagle gazes fearlessly upon the sun is also compared to the way the saints turn their faces towards Christ with unflinching eyes. The notion that eagles can stare directly at the sun without pain or injury goes back at least as far as ancient Rome. Lucan, a Roman poet of the first century CE, refers to the eagle as the 'bird of Jove', who makes his fledglings look upon 'Phoebus' rays', the rising sun, with an unwavering gaze. In the seventh century, Isidore writes that only fledglings who successfully pass the sun-staring challenge are considered worthy enough to belong to the eagle family. A fledgling that draws back from the sun is cast out by its own parents. A thirteenth-century Latin bestiary explains that the parent eagle carries out this harsh sentence 'without any bitterness in its nature, but as an impartial judge'. To the parent, the flinching fledgling is nothing but a stranger. While this image of the cruel eagle parent is present in Latin bestiaries, it doesn't appear in Old English texts or the Middle English *Physiologus*, which focuses on the individual eagle's renewal, not mentioning fledglings at all. And in Old English we only have references to the eagle as a protective parent, like in the Old English translation of Deuteronomy: the baby eagles, *briddas*, are encouraged to fly, but the parent flutters over them to make sure they are safe. **Bridd** is specifically a young bird or chick in Old English but has grown up to become 'bird' today – while *fugel*, far more commonly used to mean a bird generally in Old English, is an etymon of our more specific 'fowl'.

The *earn*'s habit of staring directly at the sun does appear in Old English, though not in the context of testing one's offspring or even of self-renewal. In a homily of the tenth-century English abbot and writer Ælfric of Eynsham, the *earn*'s ability to look unflinchingly at the

sun is compared to a saint's ability to behold the full extent of God's glory. The keen eyes of an eagle see God clearly.

Ælfric explains that each of the four evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) is represented by a different living creature. He says in an Old English saint's life that the prophet Ezekiel had a vision of the four evangelists as four *nýtenu* (beasts): a *mann* (human), a *lēo* (lion), an *earn* and a *stirc* (calf). The *mann* represents St Matthew because his gospel explicates Christ's human lineage. St Mark has a *lēo* because his gospel begins with a reference to St John the Baptist, whose voice is compared to a lion's roar. The Gospel of St Luke emphasises Christ's sacrifice, so Luke is accompanied by a *stirc*, an animal traditionally used for sacrifices. The *earn* is a symbol of St John the Evangelist, as Ælfric clarifies:

The eagle's likeness belongs to John because the eagle (*earn*) flies the highest of all birds and can stare the most fixedly upon the light of the sun. So did John, the divine writer. He flew far up, as with an eagle's wings (*earnas fyðerum*), and wisely beheld how he could write most gloriously (*mærlicost*) of God.

Here we find all the familiar qualities of our *earn* – high-flying, fearless, keen-sighted and able to look directly at the light. **Fēþer** (pronounced FEH-ther) in the singular form means 'feather', the same as in modern English, but in the plural *fēþra* (or *fyðerum* as it is written here) means 'wings'. St John flies like an *earn* into the heavens, leaving behind earthly concerns to contemplate the divine. Christian allegory has transformed an ordinary bird into a symbol of new life and renewal. The adjective *mær-līc* can mean 'great', 'magnificent', 'glorious', 'splendid' or 'illustrious'. John's perspective from his great height, face to face with God, makes his gospel the most *mær-līc* of the four.



St John the Evangelist and his eagle in the Lindisfarne Gospels
(England, c.700)

In later medieval bestiaries, the eagle's flight to the sun is followed by a quick descent into a spring below, the water of which further renews it. Only its beak remains crooked; the eagle must sharpen it on a rock until it's the right size, the way a Christian is meant to 'sharpen'

their soul on Christ, improving their faith through close contact with the Word of God. The eagle also dives into the spring to catch fish, which bestiaries liken to Christ's descent into hell to rescue deserving souls. This episode, the Harrowing of Hell, was a popular subject of art and literature throughout the Middle Ages (the analogy is not perfect, of course, since during the Harrowing of Hell the souls do not become Christ's dinner). The eagle's renewal through immersion in water can also symbolise the Christian sacrament of baptism, and for this reason the bird sometimes appears on medieval baptismal fonts. Christians who turn their eyes to the Lord, the way the eagle turns its eyes to the sun, will find their spiritual vision refreshed.

A bird of contradictions

As we've seen with the eagle's parenting styles, interpretations of the bird's behaviour sometimes seem to contradict each other. The eagle's rapid fall from on high for the sake of food can also be read as an allegory of Adam's metaphorical fall, when he disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. The eagle can thus signify human frailty, falling for fish the way man falls for forbidden fruit. Like the human soul, the eagle can soar, but it can also fall. Medieval bestiaries also compare the eagle to persecutors who lie in ambush for one's spirit, as well as to secular rulers who fail to focus on spiritual concerns.

So, on the one hand the eagle seems to represent Christ rescuing sinners from hell; on the other it represents Adam, falling again and again. These contrasting attitudes towards the *earn* are not only the preserve of religious texts and poems. Although they too would have been written down by monks and nuns, Old English prognostics are not religious in nature. They are reference texts that make predictions about the future based on everything from the human body to

the stars to the days of the week. Seeing an *earn* in your dreams can be either good or bad. Two prognostic texts claim that if you dream about an *earn* above your head, you will have *weorþ-mynd* (honour, glory, favour, fame). Today the eagle is still used as a symbol of leadership and authority, which perhaps align with *weorþ-mynd*. But these texts also warn that if you dream about many eagles together it indicates *nīþ* (hatred), the snares and deceits of men. When eagles gather, it is usually around dead bodies. An Old English translation of the Gospel of Matthew says, 'Wherever the body (*hold*) shall be, eagles (*earnas*) shall be gathered there.' A *hold* is a corpse or carcass, cognate with Old Norse *hold*, which means 'flesh'.

Sometimes, contradictions can be found between predictions that seem otherwise almost identical. Take these two different copies of the same prognostic text, for instance:

Gif him þince, þæt hine earn swyþe ete, þæt byþ deaþ.

(If it appears to him that the eagle fiercely devours him, that means death.)

Þonne him þynce, þæt his earn ehte, þæt bið eað.

(When it seems to him that an eagle pursues him, that means happiness.)

It is odd that these predictions should differ so drastically in texts that otherwise seem like duplicate copies. But if you look carefully, you'll notice some crucial differences – ones that belong to the hand of the scribe rather than the *swefen-reccere* (dream interpreter). *Ete* is a form of the verb *etan* (to eat), while *ehte* is a form of *ēhtan* (to pursue or chase). Did the scribe leave out an 'h', turning the *earn*'s pursuit into a feast? *Eað*, which is read as an alternate spelling of *ēad* (happiness or well-being), easily becomes *deað/dēaþ* (death) if you add a 'd'. Are these scribal errors, or are the dreambooks portraying two different scenarios? If there is an error, which prognostic is the original and

the ‘correct’, and which is the badly copied? Certainly, if one is being devoured by an eagle, that probably means death. It’s less clear why an eagle pursuing you would mean happiness, but this concept is echoed in another prognostic text, which says:

Gif him þince, þæt his earn swyþe eahte, þæt byþ mycel gefea.

(If it seems to him that an eagle fiercely pursues him, that means great joy.)

It’s essentially the same as the other prediction but uses *ge-fēa* (joy) instead of *ēad* (happiness). But repetition of the idea doesn’t mean that the joyful interpretation is the correct one: yet another text claims that if you dream about an *earn* flying, it means *dēaþ* for your wife. There are no prognostics, however, that claim that dreaming about an eagle is simply a sign of a mildly upset stomach. It seems that dreams about eagles lead either to joy and prosperity or to malice and death – there’s really no in-between.

Beasts of battle

The ordinary sight of an eagle soaring high in the sky might be inspiring, as we imagine the *ge-fēa* (joy) we’d experience with such freedom, but maybe you associate this behaviour with impending *dēaþ* – and this isn’t simply due to dream prognostics. If an eagle is circling high above, it is very likely looking for prey, ready to kill for its supper. Or, if it’s feeling lazy, it might feed on a pre-killed *hold* (corpse). Eagles hunt for their own food, but they also feed upon the remains of other animals’ kills, scavenging like a vulture or raven. For this reason, the *earn* is one of the ‘beasts of battle’, a trope that appears throughout Old English poetry: three fearsome creatures whose presence accompanies war and destruction.

The Old English poem *The Battle of Brunanburh* describes one such scene of bloody destruction: the battle of English forces (King Athelstan and his brother Edmund) against an alliance of enemies (the kings of Scotland, Dublin and Strathclyde). In the aftermath of the conflict, three beasts of battle come into view: the *earn*, the black and horny-beaked *hræfn* (H'RAV-un) and the grey *wulf* of the woods. If you read these words out loud, it's easy to see how these latter two creatures have become the modern raven and wolf – even if the spelling and pronunciation have morphed along the way. Most noticeably, Old English *hræfn* contains a letter that no longer appears in English words: æ (æsc, pronounced ASH), a ligature that sounds like the 'a' in 'cat'. This is just one of the letters that have disappeared as Old English became new. In this book you'll come across two others: þ (thorn) and ð (eth), which are used interchangeably for a voiced or voiceless 'th' sound (as in 'this' or 'path').

But what is our sharp-eyed *earn* doing among these beasts of battle? The trio of *earn*, *hræfn* and *wulf* loiters near battlefields, waiting to have their fill of carrion: battles mean corpses, and corpses mean dinner. The creatures are depicted as heartless scavengers following their natural instincts, which the medieval literature scholar Heidi Estes compares to the way Old English texts portray pagans plundering the bodies of Christians. In *The Battle of Brunanburh* the poet chooses language that emphasises these negative traits. The *earn* is described as *grædig* (greedy), a *gūþ-hafoc* (GOOTH-HA-vock) or 'war-hawk', and elsewhere it is a *gūþ-fugel* (war-bird). Its feathered companion doesn't get off any lighter: other poems describe the *hræfn* as a *wæl-cēasiga* (chooser of the slain) and a *lyft-sceaþa* (robber of the air). *The Battle of Brunanburh* is a political text, written for the purpose of celebrating the heroism and victory of the West Saxon dynasty. But Christian heroes can't be seen heartlessly plundering the bodies of the slain, so the poem has the beasts of battle collect the spoils of war rather than the victorious warriors.

In *The Battle of Brunanburh* it is only the excitement of the victorious humans that gets transferred to the beasts of battle, but in *Beowulf* we find a raven with the ability to speak. Having defeated a fierce dragon fighting at King Beowulf's side, the warrior Wiglaf returns to the men who refused to join him, who cowered beyond a nearby cliff. The dragon is dead, Wiglaf says, but so is their leader. He looks towards the imminent future, when their enemies learn that they no longer have a powerful king to protect them. He paints a grim vision of the aftermath of the unavoidable battle:

Many a morning-cold spear shall be clasped in fists, held in hands.
The warriors will not be awakened by the sound of the harp. Instead,
the dark raven (*hræfn*), eager for the fated, speaks (*reordian*) at length,
telling (*secgan*) the eagle (*earne*) how he was successful at his meal,
while plundering the slaughtered with the wolf (*wulf*).

This scene is devastating, utterly devoid of human life. It is less about the specific enemy who will bring down Wiglaf's people than the inevitability of their demise. The warriors cannot be awakened by music because they lie dead, and it is the beasts of battle who speak up in the absence of humans. The *hræfn* boasts like any warrior after battle, going into detail (we imagine – since he does talk 'at length'), describing the exploits that led to his sumptuous feast. There is something here that might remind us of the dinner-party bore, and the poet uses words like *reordian* (to speak) and *secgan* (to tell) to emphasise the raven's human qualities. The eagle, noticeably, stays silent.

The eagle is more vocal in *Judith*, a retelling of the story of the Old Testament heroine who beheads an enemy general and saves her people. It is just before Judith's people, the Hebrews, launch their successful attack on the Assyrian camp. The warriors march

confidently, newly inspired by Judith's bravery – they are *hæleþas* (heroes). Meanwhile, both the lean *wulf* and the black *hræfn* rejoice at the thought of impending slaughter, knowing the *hæleþas* will provide them with a feast. The *earn* eagerly follows along behind the marching men, singing a *hilde-lēoþ* (battle-song) as if to inspire them further. This is no normal birdsong: a *lēoþ* usually refers to a poem, ode or song with verses. *Lēoþ-craeft* is the art of poetry, a musical medium that uses words. Just as the beasts of battle take on the traits of human blood-thirstiness, here the *earn* takes on the role of a *scop* (poet) . . .

Isolation or inspiration?

While the song of the *earn* in *Judith* inspires warriors to victory, to the ears of the traveller in the poem *The Seafarer* the eagle's cries are only desolate screeches. In the midst of stormy weather, this lonely soul hears the dewy-feathered eagle *bigeal* (pronounced bih-YEH-all). This verb, *be-gyllan* (beh-YUEL-lahn), is a hapax legomenon, or a word that appears only once in extant Old English texts. If the pronunciation 'YEH-all' makes you think of 'yell', you wouldn't be far off: the *Toronto Dictionary of Old English* defines *be-gyllan* as 'to cry out against or in answer to', which seems quite specific to this scenario: a man alone at sea, speaking about his hardships, with no one to respond to his stories but the birds. The slightly more common verb *gyllan* has been defined in a variety of ways:

1. (of birds) to make a loud cry, to screech
2. (of a wolf/dog) to bay, howl
3. (of an inanimate object) to make a strident, grating or crashing noise

Regardless of who or what makes the sound, it seems that it is never pleasant.

In *The Seafarer* a lonely man is isolated by storms and unable to see a better future. He cannot see, only hear the eagle who soars with a freedom far removed from the man's own state. But what if instead he had the perspective of the eagle soaring above the clouds? In an Old English translation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, *Wisdōm* tells *Mōd* that when he ascends he will look down upon the tempestuous world below, *swa se earn ðonne he up gewit bufan ða wolcnu styrmen-dum wedrum* (like the eagle when he goes above the clouds in stormy weather). Boethius, a Roman statesman and philosopher, wrote his *Consolation of Philosophy* while in prison before his execution in 524 CE, so it is no wonder that he is fantasising about an eagle's freedom and fearless flight. Boethius' text is written in the form of a conversation between Philosophy personified and his own suffering soul. In the Old English translation, Boethius' soul is *Mōd* and Philosophy *Wisdōm*. The meaning of *wisdōm* was the same as it is today, referring to knowledge, learning or philosophy. *Mōd* can be translated in many ways: 'the inner person or spiritual element of a person', 'soul', 'heart', 'spirit' or 'mind'. It eventually became modern English 'mood'. Not every Latin text was translated into Old English, but Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* was popular throughout the Middle Ages. Its translation into different languages tells us that it spoke to many people, some of whom may have felt 'trapped' by their situation, even if they weren't actually imprisoned. Could the idea that one's *mōd* eventually rises above all earthly ills have been a comfort? Whether we are a lonely seafarer or not, the ability to imagine our spirits ascending like the high-flying *earn* soars above the clouds – where no troublesome storm can harm it or hinder its flight – is an inspiring vision. As long as you don't also think about the eagle's grim, haunting screech.

Sometimes *earnas* can actively show us inspiration by guiding our

souls to wondrous visions. In the Old English poem *Andreas*, some young seafarers say that while they were sleeping, *earnas* allowed them to glimpse the wonders of heaven. They describe their dream or vision to St Andrew:

Eagles (*earnas*) came over the surge of the waves, flying, exultant in their wings (*feðerum*). They carried away our souls as we slept, conveying them joyfully, flying through the air with happy (*blīðe*), clear (*beorhte*) and gentle (*liðe*) sounds. They jubilantly showed us affection, dwelling in love. There was unending singing and heaven's circuit, many beautiful troops and a host of glory.

The *earnas* guide the sleeping souls to heaven, allowing them – even while still alive – to glimpse the eternal, heaven and a host of angels singing. They contrast significantly with the screeching, dewy-feathered *earn* of *The Seafarer* and the chattering scavenger of *Beowulf*. Instead of eliciting a sense of loneliness or doom, the song of the eagle is **blīþe**, **beorht** and **liþe** (happy, bright and gentle), a line which is itself musical in its use of alliteration and rhyme (BLEE-thuh, BEH-orh't and LEE-thuh).

The eagle's behaviour in Old English texts is fairly ordinary but heavy in meaning, whether inspiring hope or reminding us of our isolation. *Earnas* fly over desolate waters, screeching at lonely seafarers, making us realise we are ultimately alone on the journey to our salvation. Alongside the *hræfn* and the *wulf*, the *earn* haunts the battlefield, eager to plunder the corpses, reminding us that death comes to us all. But there is also something joyful in the *earn's* flight as it soars through the air. *Earnas* can escape storm clouds, finding security in the rays of the sun. And, of course, their eagle eyes see all.

Eagle's Wordhord

- be-gyllan**, verb (beh-YUEL-lahn / bɛ-'jyl-lan): To cry out against or in answer to.
- beorht**, adjective (BEH-orh't / 'bɛɔrxt): Bright, clear, lucid.
- blīpe**, adjective (BLEE-thuh / 'bli:-θə): Happy, joyful; gentle, kind, gracious.
- bridd**, noun (BRID / 'brid): Young bird, chick.
- dēaþ**, noun (DAY-ath / 'de:aθ): Death.
- ēad**, noun (AY-ahd / 'e:ad): Happiness, well-being.
- earn**, noun (EH-arn / 'ɛarn): Eagle (plural: *earnas*).
- ēhtan**, noun (AY-h'tahn / 'e:x-tan): To pursue or chase.
- etan**, noun (EH-tahn / 'ɛ-tan): To eat.
- fēþer**, noun (FEH-ther / 'fɛ-θɛr): Feather; (in plural) wings (plural: *fēþra*).
- fugel**, noun (FUH-yell / 'fʌ-jɛl): Bird (plural: *fuglas*).
- ge-fēa**, noun (yeh-VAY-ah / jɛ-'vɛ:a): Joy, gladness.
- grædig**, adjective (GRADD-ih / 'græ:-dɪj): Greedy, covetous.
- gūþ-fugel**, noun (GOOTH-FUH-yell / 'gu:θ-,fʌ-jɛl): War-bird (an epithet for the eagle).
- gūþ-hafoc**, noun (GOOTH-HA-vock / 'gu:θ-,ha-vɔk): War-hawk (an epithet for the eagle).
- gyllan**, verb (YUEL-lahn / 'jyl-lan): To make a loud cry, to screech; to bay, howl; to make a strident, grating or crashing noise.
- hasu-pāda**, noun (HA-zuh-PAH-da / 'ha-zʌ-,pa:-da): Grey-cloaked one (an epithet for the eagle).
- hæleþ**, noun (HAL-eth / 'hæ-lɛθ): Hero, (noble) man (plural: *hæleþas*).
- hilde-lēoþ**, noun (HILL-duh-LAY-oth / 'hil-də-,le:ɔθ): Battle-song.
- hold**, noun (HOLD / 'hɔld): Corpse, carcass.
- hræfn**, noun (H'RAV-un / 'hræ-vɛn): Raven.
- hwīt**, adjective (H'WEET / 'hwi:t): White.

- lēo**, noun (LAY-oh / 'le:ɔ): Lion (plural: *lēon*).
- lēoþ**, noun (LAY-oth / 'le:ɔθ): Song, poem, ode.
- lēoþ-cræft**, noun (LAY-oth-KRAFT / 'le:ɔθ-,kræft): The art of poetry.
- līþe**, adjective (LEE-thuh / 'li:-θə): Soft, gentle, mild, serene.
- lyft-sceaþa**, noun (LUEFT-SHEH-ah-tha / 'lyft-,ʃea-θa): Robber of the air (an epithet for the raven).
- mann**, noun (MAHN / 'man): Man, human being (plural: *menn*).
- mær-lic**, adjective (MAER-leech / 'mæ:r-li:tʃ): Great, magnificent, glorious, splendid, illustrious.
- mōd**, noun (MOAD / 'mo:d): Inner person, soul, mind, heart, spirit.
- nīþ**, noun (NEETH / 'ni:θ): Hatred, enmity, rancor, spite, malice.
- nȳten**, noun (NUE-ten / 'ny:-tɛn): Animal, beast (plural: *nȳtenu*).
- reordian**, verb (REH-or-di-ahn / 'rɛɔr-di-an): To speak, say.
- saluwig-pād**, adjective (SA-luh-wi-PAWD / 'sa-lɑ-wij-,pa:d): Dark-cloaked, having dark plumage.
- scop**, noun (SHOP / 'ʃɔp): Poet.
- secgan**, verb (SEDG-ahn / 'sedʒ-an): To say words, tell.
- stirc**, noun (STIRK / 'stɪrk): Calf.
- swefen-reccere**, noun (SWEH-ven-REH-cheh-ruh / 'swɛ-ven-,rɛ-tʃɛ-rə): Interpreter of dreams, soothsayer.
- wæl-cēasiga**, noun (WÆL-CHAY-ah-zi-ga / 'wæl-,tʃɛ:a-zi-ga): Chooser of the slain (an epithet for the raven).
- weorþ-mynd**, noun (WEH-orth-muend / 'wɛɔrθ-mynd): Honour, glory, favour, fame.
- wīsdōm**, noun (WEEZ-doam / 'wi:z-do:m): Wisdom, knowledge, learning, philosophy.
- wulf**, noun (WULF / 'wʌlf): Wolf.

Spider (*gange-wæfre*)



THE OLD ENGLISH *wyrm* is far grander than its humble descendant is today. Today a ‘worm’ is usually a small, slender, segmented creature that lives in gardens and occasionally one’s intestines. In Old English, a *wyrm* is essentially any ‘creepy-crawly’ – an insect, a worm, a snake, a reptile or even a dragon. Isidore of Seville explains that worms come into the world mainly ‘from flesh or wood or some earthy substance, without any sexual congress’, although sometimes they hatch from eggs, like the scorpion. Isidore puts his ‘worms’ into categories based on the source from which he believed them to be generated: earth, water, air, flesh, leaves, wood and clothing. An example of an ‘air worm’ is the spider, with its Latin name *aranea* deriving from *aer* (air).

Words for ‘spider’ in Old English sound like poetry – *gange-wæfre* (walker-weaver) and *wæfer-gange* (weaver-walker). These are kennings, or riddle-like compounds of two ordinary nouns that when combined mean something else. ‘Walker’ and ‘weaver’ on their own do not mean ‘spider’, but when they are joined together in a kenning they do. Not many animal kennings survive from Old English, and