

Space for Uncertainty:
The Movement of Celestial Bodies in the *Exeter Book Riddles*
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Abstract

It is a commonplace that astronomy died in western Europe during the Dark Ages: despite the continued observations of computists, who diligently recorded the information needed to calculate the date of Easter, or of monks who sought guidance on blood-letting based on the phases of the moon, the history of astronomy tends to leap from the Greeks to the Arabs as if no one looked at the sky for hundreds of years. In this paper, I look at three short riddles from the tenth-century anthology of Old English poetry known as the *Exeter Book* to explore what the Anglo-Saxons saw when they looked at the sky. For the most part, they saw themselves, and so *Riddles* 6, 22, and 29 reflect social structures and values familiar from other texts of the time ideologies imposed to explain the mysteries of the sky. However, the *Exeter Book Riddles*, unlike the modern conception of riddles as two-part, open-and-shut texts, do not merely present sun, moon, and stars as ambiguous objects to be identified. Instead, they reveal the unsuccessful struggle to assimilate the vast unknown, with the result that the narratives used to describe the movement of celestial bodies across the sky remain ambiguous, consciously inaccurate and insufficient. Although the riddles cannot be considered steps forward in the history of Astronomy, they nevertheless provide insight into a wavering understanding of the shape of the heavens at a time when most commentators assume that Christian doctrine had fixed all meaning and ended all questions.

It is a commonplace that, because of the Church's stranglehold on literacy and education, astronomy died in Western Europe during the so-called 'Dark Ages' (roughly 500-1000 AD).¹ As a result, despite the continuing observations of the computists who diligently recorded the information needed to calculate the date of Easter,² and of the monks who sought guidance on blood-letting and other medical practices based on the phases of the moon,³ the history of astronomy tends to leap from the Greeks to the Arabs as if no one looked at the sky for hundreds of years.⁴ In terms of points on a line leading to our present understanding of the sky, this history cannot be disputed. Nevertheless, in the following discussion I aim to insert something into that gap in the history of astronomy. A continuing interest in the sky can be observed in a collection of riddles contained in a tenth-century, English manuscript now known as the *Exeter Book*. This interest, despite modern derision, is

¹ See, for example, John W. Abrams 'The Development of Medieval Astronomy', in David L. Jeffrey (ed.), *By Things Seen: Reference and Recognition in Medieval Thought* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1979), p. 194.

² For a brief introduction to computus, see Faith Wallis (trans), *Bede: The Reckoning of Time* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), pp. xviii-xxxiv.

³ See discussion in Roy Michael Liuzza, 'Anglo-Saxon Prognostics in Context: A Survey and Handlist of Manuscripts', *Anglo-Saxon England*, Vol. 30 (2001), 181-230.

⁴ See, for example, Peter Doig, *A Concise History of Astronomy* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1950), p. 44; Clarisse Doris Hellman, *The Comet of 1577: Its Place in the History of Astronomy*, Columbia University Studies in History, Economics, and Public Law 510 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1944), p. 65; Giorgio Abetti, *The History of Astronomy*, trans. Betty Burr Abetti (London: Sidgwick and Jackson, 1954), p. 44.

not solely determined by religious interpretations; instead, the *Exeter Book Riddles* reveal both acute observation and ongoing questioning of the nature of the heavens.

The Exeter Book is a large, rather plain, but beautifully executed manuscript.⁵ It is remarkable in many ways, but for this discussion its main interest lies in the texts that constitute its end: a collection of close to 100 riddles, offering paradoxical and puzzling descriptions of a wide range of topics, ranging from the profound to the mundane, and from the obscene to the devout. In particular, there are three riddles that deal specifically with the movement of the sun, stars, and moon across the sky. The first of these is Riddle 6:

Mec gesette soð sigora waldend
Crist to compe. Oft ic twice bærne,
unrimu cyn eorþan getenge,
næte mid niþe, swa ic him no hrine,
þonne mec min frea feohtan hateþ.
Hwylum ic monigra mod arete,
hwylum ic frefre þa ic ær winne on
feorran swiþe; hi þæs felað þeah,
swylce þæs opres, þonne ic eft hyra
ofer deop gedreag drohtað bete.

[The true ruler of victories, Christ, created me for battle. I often burn the living, oppressing the countless races of the earth, (and) I afflict (them) with war when my lord commands me to fight, although I do not touch them. Sometimes I gladden the minds of many; sometimes I comfort those against whom I previously strove fiercely from afar. Nevertheless they feel the latter as well as the former, when I again improve their condition over the deep tumult.]

Solutions to the *Exeter Book Riddles* remain an issue for debate rather than certainty, for the simple reason that there are no solutions in the manuscript.⁶ This is an important fact, and I will return to it, but in the case of Riddle 6 there is little debate regarding its solution: it is almost universally solved as ‘sun’. Solving the riddle does not, however, terminate the text’s interest, for Riddle 6 does not merely present the sun but also reveals the discourses in which the Anglo-Saxons embedded their observation of natural phenomena. The first thing to note is the framing of the action in terms of battle. This is a common literary technique in Old English poetry, which characteristically transforms even the passive suffering of saints into heroic action, but it is not a usual way of describing the sun (in Britain, at least). Here the sun is ‘created for battle’, and it ‘burns’, ‘fights’, ‘strives fiercely’, and ‘afflicts’ the races of the earth. It also comforts and gladdens, but its primary role is as a warrior serving the ‘ruler of victories’. Such unusual views of everyday objects and phenomena are

⁵ The manuscript remains at Exeter Cathedral; it can also be consulted in the electronic facsimile that accompanies the latest edition: Bernard J. Muir (ed), *The Exeter Anthology Of Old English Poetry*, 2 vols (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2006). Citations of the riddles are taken from this edition. All translations are my own.

⁶ For an overview of solutions proposed by scholars, see Donald K. Fry, ‘Exeter Book Riddle Solutions’, *Old English Newsletter*, Vol. 15 (1981), 22-33.

an important feature of the *Riddles*. Throughout the collection, the familiar is made unfamiliar, and the everyday is seen afresh.

One component of the Church's stranglehold on knowledge of the natural world is the tendency to look for spiritual and moral interpretations rather than accurate detail about the natural phenomena themselves. In the Bestiaries, for example, the emphasis is less on facts than on significances.⁷ Although not explicitly allegorical like the Bestiaries, there is room for significance as well as fact in Riddle 6, too: the sun that travels over the earth and oppresses its races may be interpreted as a symbol of the Gospel. That is, the Gospel's metaphorical 'light' may bring either the need for painful repentance *or* hope; regardless, it ultimately 'improves humanity's condition' in the great sea-like tumult to which the earthly condition was often compared. Although Riddle 6 is not often read in this way, this interpretation results in a coherent reading consistent with the ideology of the time. At the same time, however, such a reading does not eliminate the literal meaning of the original text: the sun, with its unaccustomedly fierce relationship with the human race, does not disappear when we compare it to the Gospel.

What allows this comparison to be made is the important fact of the absence of fixed, authoritative solutions in the manuscript, and it is worth returning to this point and exploring its significance a little further. Modern readers have a very limited and limiting expectation of riddles in general. The modern emphasis on solutions means that, once a solution has been found, the text is considered finished.⁸ In contrast, the absence of solutions in the *Exeter Book* means that we can never be certain that the process of interpretation has finished. The text obliges its readers to continue to question, even if a satisfactory solution has been found. As a result, the *Exeter Book Riddles* do not work like a lock and key; it is not enough to unlock a metaphor and discover the correct answer. Instead, interpreting these texts is like opening a can of worms; once the process has started, a tangle of possibilities that overflow the boundaries of categories like 'natural' and 'spiritual' quickly emerges—a tangle that cannot be contained neatly in any box. For Riddle 6, for example, thinking about both the sun and the Gospel in terms of violent attacks requires its readers to think differently about *both* things. This may not be science, or progress toward science, but it is interaction with the heavens that does not reduce them to a simple reflection of social or religious ideas.

Riddle 22 provides a similarly open-ended experience of interpreting the heavens alongside an apparently keen interest in accurate observation:

Ætsomne cwom LX monna
to wægstæpe wicgum ridan;
hæfdon XI eoredmæcgas
fridhengestas, IIII sceamas.
Ne meahton magorincas ofer mere feolan,
swa hi fundedon, ac wæs flod to deop,

⁷ For a discussion of the bestiaries, see, for example, Wilma George and Brunsdon Yapp, *The Naming of the Beasts: Natural History in the Medieval Bestiary* (London: Duckworth, 1991).

⁸ See, for example, Annikki Kaivola-Bregenhøj, *Riddles: Perspectives on the Use, Function and Change in a Folklore Genre*, trans. Susan Sinisalo, *Studia Fennica Folkloristica* 10 (Helsinki: Finnish Literary Society, 2001), p. 19.

atol yþa geþræc, ofras hea,
 streamas stronge. Ongunnon stigan þa
 on wægn weras ond hyra wicg somod
 hlodan under hrunge; þa þa hors oðbær
 eh ond eorlas, æscum dealle,
 ofer wætres byht wægn to lande,
 swa hine oxa ne teah ne esna mægen
 ne fæthengest, ne on flode swom,
 ne be grunde wod gestum under,
 ne lagu drefde, ne on lyfte fleag,
 ne under bæc cyrde; brohte hwæþre
 beornas ofer burnan ond hyra bloncan mid
 from stæðe heaum, þæt hy stopan up
 on oþerne, ellenrofe,
 weras of wæge, ond hyra wicg gesund.

[Sixty men came together, riding horses to the shore; the horsemen had eleven steeds, (and also) four white ones. The warriors could not pass over the sea as they attempted to do; rather the flood was too deep, the crash of waves terrible, the banks high, the currents strong. The men began to climb into a wagon and load their horses together under the pole; then the wagon bore off to land the horses, steeds, and men, proud of their spears, over the water's dwelling, in such a way that neither oxen nor a troop of servants nor a riding-horse pulled it, nor did it swim on the water, nor did it go along the ground under its guests, nor did it disturb the sea, nor did it fly out of the air, nor did it turn back. Rather it brought the men and their mounts with them over the stream—so that those courageous men and their horses stepped from one high bank up on the other, safe out of the wave.]

The basic scenario here—the metaphorical surface of the riddle—is a group of men and horses who are initially unable to cross the sea but then climb into a wagon that transports them all safely to the other side. Such a familiar, homely image is neither dramatic nor enigmatic. However, this wagon is not pulled by oxen, men, or horses, and it does not travel on land or sea, or through the air. The riddle thus requires us to determine what kind of wagon, men, horses, and sea is being described. Unlike Riddle 6, there has been some debate about Riddle 22's solution. The jury has generally been split between those who think that this is a riddle about the passage of time—i.e. a calendar riddle—or a riddle about stars. Recently, the star camp has been in the ascendant, and recent work by Patrick Murphy has shown how much astronomical observation might have gone into this particular text.⁹

The 'wagon' of Riddle 22 can be identified as Charles' Wain, also known as The Plough, The Big Dipper, or part of Ursa Major. Leaving aside the number of men and horses for the moment, the 'pole' under which they load themselves is the Celestial Pole currently marked by Polaris, the Pole Star. The eleven horses, plus another four, may be identified as the fifteen stars in the constellation Draco, which might be seen as being 'loaded' on top of the Wagon and under the Pole. Murphy

⁹ Patrick J. Murphy, *Unriddling the Exeter Riddles* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), pp. 111-23. The paragraph below is deeply indebted to his discussion.

suggests that the four ‘shining ones’, which are distinguished from the other eleven horse, are the four stars in Draco’s head, but, since only two of these four stars are actually very prominent, I would suggest that the ‘shining ones’ refer to the four brightest stars in the constellation (Eltanin, Rastaban, Altais, and Aldibain), two of which are in the head, and two in the body, of the dragon. As for the sixty warriors shining with spears, Murphy argues that these are the stars listed by Hyginus, a classical authority known to the Anglo-Saxons, as constituting the constellations of Andromeda, Cassiopeia, Cepheus, and Ursa Minor. According to Hyginus, the number of stars in these constellations add up to 60, and, like the ‘horses’ in Draco, these stars ‘ride’ on top of the ‘wagon’ of Ursa Major.

Whether or not the riddle has the correct number of stars, however, is less interesting than the close observation of circumpolar stars that it betrays, along with its extended metaphor of the sky as sea. In this text the issue is not, as we might have expected, which stars set below the horizon but rather the question of *how* the stars travel across the expanse of the sky itself, which is seen as dangerous, stormy sea full of strong currents—an image that may reflect the textured appearance of the Milky Way in a sky unpolluted by artificial light.¹⁰ Of course, imagining the sky as a sea does not constitute a scientific breakthrough, but it does reflect some serious thinking about the nature of the sky, and it is worth noting that this image is neither the accepted, scholarly view of the heavens nor reducible to a spiritual reality.¹¹ The text does not simply encode stars going across the sky into a cut-and-dried metaphor but remains uncertain and enigmatic, and so, once again, the sky is not a simple mirror of human issues, nor an allegory of God’s divine plan, nor a site for straightforward observation of the natural world. It remains a space in which the struggle to assimilate the vast unknown into humanly comprehensible structures is acknowledged to be unsuccessful.

Riddle 29 similarly presents the sky through familiar discourses that fail to explain it fully:

Ic wiht geseah wundorlice
 hornum bitweonum hupe lædan,
 lyftfæt leohtlic, listum gegierwed,
 hupe to þam ham of þam heresipe;
 walde hyre on þære byrig bur atimbran,
 searwum asettan, gif hit swa meahte.
 Ða cwom wundorlicu wiht ofer wealles hrof,
 seo is eallum cuð eorðbuendum,
 ahredde þa þa hupe ond to ham bedraf
 wreccan ofer willan, gewat hyre west þonan
 fæhpum feran, forð onette.
 Dust stonc to heofonum, deaw feol on eorþan,
 niht forð gewat. Nænig siþþan
 wera gewiste þære wihte sið.

¹⁰ I am indebted to a personal communication from David Malin for this suggestion (15 October 2011).

¹¹ For the contemporary scholarly idea of the heavens, see Bede’s adaptation of Isidore in his *De Natura Rerum*, ed. C. W. Jones, CCSL 123A, V-VII (pp. 196-9). For translation see *Bede: On the Nature of Things and On Times*, trans. Calvin B. Kendall and Faith Wallis (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), pp. 76-7.

[I saw a creature load up its plunder strangely between its horns: a light-filled sky-cup, adorned artfully. It (brought) that booty home from its battle-journey. It wanted to build a bower in its fortress for it, establish it skilfully, if it could do so. Then (another) strange creature, which is known to all earthdwellers, came up over the wall's roof. It recaptured the plunder and drove the exile home against its will. (The exile) went west from there to escape from the feud (and) hastened away. Dust rose to the heavens, dew fell on the earth, (and) night went forth. After that no man knew that creature's journey.]

As with Riddle 22, it is possible simply to translate the details of this riddle to give a solution: the moon, here identified as a 'horned' creature carrying its stolen booty of light, is pursued by the sun until, deprived of its treasure, it departs from sight. This booty may be understood as earthshine,¹² the light reflected from the earth onto the moon, which is sometimes visible on a slim crescent moon, just before sunset or sunrise.¹³ The scenario in Riddle 29 takes place at sunrise: the moon is observed carrying the reflected glow from the earth, but, once the sun rises, its light obscures the 'stolen' light and thus deprives the moon of its 'treasure'. The rising dust, like the stormy sea of Riddle 22, may be yet another reference to the now hardly visible spectacle of the Milky Way, which once presented a speckled backdrop to the starry sky.¹⁴ As with Riddle 6, it is also possible to create spiritual interpretations, particularly to explain some of the puzzling details: the dust that rises at the end could be a reference to resurrection and the dew to salvation from heaven as the Son of God rescues souls from a horned devil as part of the Harrowing of Hell.¹⁵ I do not find this interpretation compelling, but, even if it were, explaining the details with spiritual references does not finish the riddle any more than providing a solution to it does.

For this discussion what is more interesting than the identity of the two creatures or any spiritual significance that they might have is the way in which the heavens are imagined. Instead of the stormy sea of Riddle 22, Riddle 29 represents the sky as a building with walls and a roof. This image echoes that in another Old English poem, *Genesis A*, which represents the creation of the world as God's construction of a great hall in the midst of a dark sea.¹⁶ There the universe reflects the Anglo-Saxons' own timbered halls, built within defensive enclosures designed to keep out the hostile chaos beyond the known circle of light. In Riddle 29, too, we can observe an Anglo-Saxon poet portraying natural phenomena through a series of familiar scenes and behaviours. Thus the universe is a timbered hall with a roof and walls; the moon is a warrior fighting for treasure; the sun takes vengeance for previous military campaigns against it. At the same time, however, the universe is quite clearly *not* a timbered hall, and the amazing creatures that climb over it are *not*

¹² Craig Williamson (ed.), *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1977), p. 228.

¹³ For a brief explanation of earthshine, see N. J. Woolf, P. S. Smith, W. A. Traub and K. W. Juck, 'The Spectrum of Earthshine: A Pale Blue Dot Observed from the Ground', *Astrophysical Journal*, Vol. 574, issue 1 (2002), p. 430.

¹⁴ Again, I am indebted to David Malin (15 October 2011).

¹⁵ Murphy, *Unriddling*, pp. 123-39.

¹⁶ See my discussion in *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England, 27 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 57-9.

simply warriors conducting military campaigns. The projection of familiar images upon the heavens does not explain them; it holds them up for further questioning.

In conclusion, the heavenly bodies in Riddles 6, 22, and 29 are firmly embedded in traditional, Anglo-Saxon discourses of settlement, war, and feud, but they are not fully contained by them. Thus the *Exeter Book Riddles*, unlike the modern conception of riddles as two-part, open-and-shut texts, do not merely present sun, moon, and stars as objects to be identified. Instead, they reveal the unsuccessful struggle to assimilate the vast unknown, with the result that the narratives used to describe the movement of celestial bodies across the sky remain ambiguous, inaccurate, and insufficient. Although these narratives may strike modern readers as a step backward from the Greeks' observations, they demonstrate that the Anglo-Saxons did indeed continue to look at the sky, and, more importantly, did not believe that the stories that they told themselves about them fully explained them. In the *Riddles* space remains for uncertainty—and for the continuing observations and questions that eventually led to new ideas about the sky.

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