

The Riddle Game – a look at the Exeter Book Riddles

By Oswyn of Baðon mka Sean Wilson oswyn969@gmail.com

Shire of Caer Gwyn, Middle Kingdom, Known World

While many sources of Anglo-Saxon history and literature have not survived through the years, there is one very remarkable piece that has – the Exeter Book. This book dates from my own time, the 10th century. It contains epic poems like *The Wanderer*, the lives of St Guthlac and St Juliana, some traditional secular poems, and more than 90 riddles.

The Anglo-Saxons had a long tradition of riddles. We see evidence of it in Germanic epic poems that make up the common heritage of the Northern Germans, including the Angles and Saxons. We see it in *Beowulf* and other Anglo-Saxon poems. We see it in kennings, the extended metaphors that often appear in the sagas and poems. We know from Tolkien's writings that he drew inspiration for his riddles from these same sources. Douglas Anderson in the *Annotated Hobbit* tells us that the *Saga of King Heidrek the Wise*, the *Second Dialogue of Solomon and Saturn*, and traditional British nursery rhymes were the source of Tolkien's riddles.

We are not 100% sure who developed these riddles. Scholars believe that many of them are traditional. There have also been individuals named as the authors or compilers of groups of riddles: Aldhelm of Malmesbury (7th c cleric); Tatwine, archbishop of Canterbury (8th c); Hwaetberht, Abbot of Wearmouth (8th c); or possibly Bede himself (8th c).

The subject matter of these 90+ poems are varied. Some are religious, some are mundane, and some are lewd. According to one scholar, the lewd riddles were designed to challenge one's thinking. They were specifically crafted to make one think of the lewd answer. Part of the challenge was to resist that temptation to see the true answer. Given that these were likely recited during a feast, drinking probably made it even harder to resist the trap. Few are about humans in particular though many depict animals and objects in human terms. In short, these were a cross-section of riddles that were known by these churchmen. Even today, we love word-play: riddles, jokes, puns, etc.

In the Meadhall, there were men called *hleatorsmiðs*, 'laughter-smiths'. Given the love of language that has come down to us through the ages, riddling was certainly one of tools in the *hleatorsmiðs*' arsenal.

What follows is a selection of the riddles in the Exeter Book. The answers to the riddles were not preserved. Either the answer was expected to be known (these were traditional) or obvious. Or, the answer was expected to be guessed at. That being said, I do have what is commonly accepted as the answer to these riddles at the end of the document. And since some riddles were intended to have double-meanings, I will give both.

Sources:

- 1) The Exeter Book Riddles translated by Kevin Crossley-Holland
- 2) The Exeter Book: An Anthology of Anglo-Saxon Poetry Presented to Exeter Cathedral by Loefric, First Bishop of Exeter (1050-1071)
- 3) The Mead-Hall: The Feasting Tradition in Anglo-Saxon England by Stephen Pollington

Accepted Answers:

- 5 Shield
- 7 Swan
- 15 Badger (or fox or hedgehog)
- 23 Bow
- 25 Onion (or penis of course)
- 26 Book
- 27 Mead
- 29 Moon and Sun
- 31 Bagpipe
- 37 Bellows
- 44 Key (or penis of course)
- 45 Dough (or penis of course)
- 50 Fire
- 53 Battering Ram
- 54 Churn (or the act of coitus)
- 56 Loom
- 60 Reed
- 65 Onion
- 66 Creation
- 95 Riddle (or Moon or Wandering Singer)