

# ALLEGORIZING AND MORALIZING ZOOLOGY IN ALDHELM'S *ENIGMATA*

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## ABSTRACT

The collection of riddles composed by Aldhelm constitutes an important source of traditional zoological lore. This paper intends to look at a selection of these Enigmata in order to provide an insight into the ways zoology was grasped by this author and his medieval audience. The analysis will show that these riddles transcend the limits of simple zoological description, since they establish subtle allegorical layers of meaning that were surely perceived and much appreciated by readers. From Aldhelm's perspective, animals could illustrate positive or negative examples of conduct for human beings, thus opening a wide range of possibilities for moral instruction. This paper therefore intends to focus on the engaging allegorical components of some of Aldhelm's zoological riddles.

**KEY WORDS:** Aldhelm, riddles, enigmata, riddle pairs, medieval zoology, Christian allegory, moralization.

## RESUMEN

La colección de adivinanzas compuesta por Aldhelm constituye una fuente importante de conocimiento zoológico tradicional. Este artículo va a tener en cuenta una selección de dichas adivinanzas con objeto de aportar una visión sobre el modo en que la zoología era entendida por este autor y su público. El análisis mostrará que estas adivinanzas van más allá de los límites de la descripción zoológica, puesto que establecen estratos alegóricos de sutil significado que seguramente eran percibidos y muy apreciados por los lectores. Desde la perspectiva de Aldhelm, los animales podían ilustrar ejemplos positivos o negativos de conducta para los seres humanos, abriendo un gran abanico de posibilidades para la instrucción moral. Este trabajo, por tanto, pretende centrarse en estos interesantes componentes alegóricos de algunas de las adivinanzas zoológicas de Aldhelm.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Aldhelm, adivinanzas, enigmata, pares de adivinanzas, zoología medieval, alegoría cristiana, moralización.

The natural world and zoology, in particular, have always exerted a great deal of attraction on human beings. Proof of this is the great number of literary works that deal with this subject from antiquity. The persistence of fables over



time is a good illustration of this endless fascination.<sup>1</sup> A further outstanding literary phenomenon related to this interest in zoology is the *Physiologus*,<sup>2</sup> from which many translations into different languages were issued. In turn, Isidore's Book XII (*De animalibus*) from the *Etymologiae* became an extremely influential treatise and was considered an authority on zoology even well after the Middle Ages. Book XII was also a determining factor in the emergence of the *Bestiary*,<sup>3</sup> which proved to be extremely successful with numerous versions.

All these texts bear witness to the relevance that zoology had throughout the medieval period. But early medieval riddle collections constitute a source of zoological description to which scholars have not so often turned their attention to.<sup>4</sup> Aldhelm's *Enigmata* (composed c. 685),<sup>5</sup> constitutes the first illustration of this literary genre produced in England that has survived to our days.<sup>6</sup> Many of the riddles of this collection offer descriptions of animals. This paper intends to look at a selection of Aldhelm's *Enigmata* in order to provide an insight into the ways zoology was understood in these literary texts. The analysis will show that these riddles go beyond a mere reflection on the characteristics of some animals, since they establish subtle layers of allegorical knowledge that were surely perceived and much appreciated by medieval readers. From Aldhelm's perspective, animals could illustrate positive or negative examples of conduct for human beings, thus opening a wide range of possibilities for moral instruction. This paper therefore intends to pay attention to the engaging allegorical components of riddles dealing with zoological subjects, as well as the subtle interconnections that can be observed in them. This study will reveal that Aldhelm's skilful handling of the zoological material, which usually occurs in riddle pairs and in combination with Christian allegory, is precisely

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<sup>1</sup> A comprehensive study of zoological lore and its use in fables and other literary formats is Ziolkowski, *Talking Animals*.

<sup>2</sup> Originally in Greek, the *Physiologus* was probably produced in Alexandria in the second century A.D. It was translated into Latin in the late fourth century. See the introduction to this work in *Physiologus* ix-xxxiii.

<sup>3</sup> Baxter notes that the *Bestiary* has its origin in the Latin versions of the *Physiologus*, to which textual modifications—such as the incorporation of excerpts from the *Etymologiae*—were made. See his entry “*Bestiaries*” (125). Also, see his comments in *Bestiaries* (83-85).

<sup>4</sup> An exception to this is Cameron. Also see Neville.

<sup>5</sup> The riddles of Aldhelm (c. 639-709) were initially part of the *Epistola ad Acircium*, a dense work addressed to some Acircius, who has been convincingly identified with King Aldfrith of Northumbria, a learned man and a personal acquaintance of Aldhelm's. This fact has served to infer the approximate date of composition of the *Epistola* and, hence, of the *Enigmata* as well, since the letter was probably sent by Aldhelm soon after Aldfrith acceded to the throne in 685. Also, see Lapidge and Rosier (11-12) and Lapidge (24-25).

<sup>6</sup> Aldhelm's *Enigmata* proved to be very influential, as two other writers—Tatwine (d. 734) and Eusebius (d. 747)—took up the composition of a riddle collection each. Actually two or more generations of writers followed Aldhelm's style, among others, Boniface (672/75?-754) and his circle of correspondents. For this, see Fell, “Some Implications of the Boniface Correspondence” and Yorke, “The Bonifacian Mission.”



one of the key factors of this collection's literary success and probably the reason why it crossed to the continent and became part of the Carolingian school curriculum.<sup>7</sup>

Zoological description has traditionally been one of the most effective ways for writers to convey allegorical meaning and moralization, as the edifying stories offered by fables for instance evince. It is therefore no surprise to see that a great amount of riddles in Aldhelm's collection, notably thirty-four,<sup>8</sup> deal with zoological topics. The presentation of animals ranges from the simplest pattern with isolated riddles to pairs and series.<sup>9</sup> But zoological pieces in Aldhelm's collection typically appear in pairs, a format which clearly offered many opportunities for the use of allegory for instructional purposes. This is the case of *Enigmata* 63 (raven) and 64 (dove), which occur in a chronological order paralleling the episode of the Flood in Genesis.<sup>10</sup> As other scholars have already argued,<sup>11</sup> the pairing also evokes the antagonistic roles of the raven and the dove. The clues of Riddle 63 thus focus on the raven's disobedience to God: "Primus uiuentum perdebam foedera iuris / imperio patris contemnens subdere colla" (4-5) [I was the first of living creatures to break the covenant of the law by refusing to bow my head (lit. to bend my neck) to the patriarch's command].<sup>12</sup> The dove's compliance with Noah's orders and God's will is expressed in Riddle 64 in a similar way: "Prima praecepti compleui iussa parentis / portendens fructu terris uenisse salutem" (3-4) [I was the first to obey the patriarch's orders, foretelling with the fruit (i.e., the olive branch) that salvation had come to earth]. Aldhelm's parallel reference to the raven as the first to break the pact and the dove as the first to keep it would no doubt help readers notice that the two riddles should be understood as a duo.

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<sup>7</sup> In the continent, probably introduced by Boniface and his circle, Aldhelm's *Enigmata* were eventually "absorbed into the Carolingian school curriculum to judge by the number of extant later eighth- and ninth-century Carolingian copies of that work." Story, "Aldhelm and Old St Peter's, Rome," (13). For the presence of Aldhelm's *Enigmata* in the Carolingian school context, see Irvine (356-357).

<sup>8</sup> Dog (no. 10), silkworm (12), peacock (14), salamander (15), squid (16), pinna (17), antlion (18), bee (20), nightingale (22), cock (26), minotaur (28), stork (31), locust (34), screech-owl (35), midge (36), crab (37), pond-skater (38), lion (39), ostrich (42), leech (43), swallow (47), beaver (56), eagle (57), unicorn (60), raven (63), dove (64), cat (65), fish (71), hornet (75), weasel (82), bullock (83), serpent (88), elephant (96), and camel (99). I am excluding Riddles 84 (sow pregnant with five piglets) and 86 (ram) from this list because the former constitutes an arithmetical puzzle and the latter concerns grammar, as it deals with the multiple meanings of the Latin word "aries."

<sup>9</sup> For an analysis of riddle series in Aldhelm's collection, see Salvador-Bello's "Patterns" and *Isidorean*. For larger zoological strings in Eusebius's *Enigmata*, see Salvador-Bello's "Clean."

<sup>10</sup> The raven was first released by Noah (Genesis 8: 7) and then the dove (8: 8).

<sup>11</sup> Erhardt-Siebold, for example, considered the two riddles as opposite pieces on account of the roles played by the two riddles in Genesis. Erhardt-Siebold (185). Lapidge and Rosier support this idea (62-64). I have also briefly dealt with the meaningful juxtaposition of these two riddles in "The Oyster" (415).

<sup>12</sup> The edition of Aldhelm's Riddles in this paper is from *Aenigmata Aldhelmi*. The translation of the selected passages from Aldhelm's Riddles for this paper is mine.



Apart from epitomizing Christian steadfastness and obedience, the dove was the long-established symbol of the Holy Ghost. Conversely, as indicated by Rowland, patristic authors considered the raven to be an allegorical representation of “the sinner expelled from the church” (Rowland 146). This oppositional relationship is also illustrated in a substantial passage from *Genesis A* (1438-82). In this work, the raven’s behaviour is presented in utterly negative terms: “se feond gespearn fleotende hreaw; / salwig-feðera secan nolde” (1447-1448) [“the enemy perched on a floating corpse; the dark-feathered one did not wish to seek further”]. By contrast, the dove’s strenuous efforts and diligence when seeking land are described as follows: “Gewat se wilda fugel / on æfenne earce secan / ofer wonne wæg, werig sigan, / hungri to handa halgum rince” (1460b-63) [“In the evening, the wild bird went seeking the ark across the gloomy wave, sinking weary and hungry into the holy man’s hands”].<sup>13</sup> The moralizing tinge detected in the treatment of the dove and the raven in these excerpts from *Genesis A* evinces that the allegorical antagonism of the two birds was well-known to the Anglo-Saxon adaptator and, we may infer, the audience. Accordingly, there is little room for doubt that the reading of Aldhelm’s Riddles 63 and 64 would entail the discussion of the allegorical roles of these two birds, respectively conveying positive and negative models of behaviour for human beings.

A further interesting example of zoological pairing, which has been less studied by scholars, is that formed by Aldhelm’s Enigmata 14 (peacock) and 15 (salamander). Riddle 14 presents the peacock as an incredibly beautiful bird, whose flesh does not decay after its death: “et moriens mea numquam pulpa putrescit” (4). From an allegorical point of view, the peacock’s main feature brings up a suggestive topic,<sup>14</sup> which also finds an echo in many hagiographies, in which incorruptibility after death is usually the definite proof confirming a saintly status.<sup>15</sup> Interestingly, in Aldhelm’s poetic *De virginitate* (235) the image of the peacock symbolizes virginity’s rejection of the putrefaction of the flesh (“putridine carnis”),<sup>16</sup> whereas in the homonymous treatise in prose (ch. IX) the bird illustrates the vain trappings of beauty that virginity wisely dismisses. On the other hand, the clues of Enigma 15 describe the salamander’s remarkable capacity to live unscathed in the middle of flames (“Ignibus in mediis uiuens non sentio flammam” 1). Also in the verse *De virginitate*, the twin saints Cosmas and Damian are compared to the salamander as they are said to be thrust into a fiery furnace: “ceu salamandra focus solet insultare

<sup>13</sup> The edition and translation of these two passages from *Genesis A* are from Anlezark.

<sup>14</sup> St Augustine marveled himself at the incorruptible nature of this bird: “Quis enim nisi Deus creator omnium dedit carni pavonis mortui ne putresceret?” (XXVI.4) [“For who if not God, the creator of all things, has granted to the flesh of the dead peacock immunity from decay?”] (14-15). Aldhelm explicitly refers to this source when alluding to the peacock in the prose *De virginitate* (ch. IX).

<sup>15</sup> This is for example the case of St Æthelthryth, whose corpse was found undecayed after she had been buried for sixteen years, as narrated in Bede’s *Historia ecclesiastica* (IV.xxi). For this passage, see Miller 320-321.

<sup>16</sup> The edition of the passages from Aldhelm’s *De virginitate*, both in its verse and prose versions, is from Ehwald, (*Aldhelm, Aldhelmi*).



pyrarum, / quamvis congerie glomeretur forte rogorum” (1115-1116) [(the twins were) as salamanders which, by nature, burning lumps of coal are unable to scorch or consume”.<sup>17</sup> The juxtaposition of Aldhelm’s two riddles would therefore urge readers to reflect on the allegorical significance of the peacock and the salamander, since the former evoked virginity, a virtue which would be much appreciated in the monastic environment, whereas the latter exemplified a strong capacity to resist physical torture, a quality that would be suggestive of the heroic behaviour of saints.<sup>18</sup>

As with the preceding two riddle motifs, some of the zoological subjects offered in Aldhelm’s collection display special figurative connotations that may have been inspired by the corresponding chapters of the *Physiologus*, in which explicit allegorical explanations for each topic are provided. For example, the final lines of Aldhelm’s Enigma 57 allude to the way the eagle renews its youth: “Corpora dum senio corrumpit fessa uetustas, / fontibus in liquidis mergentis membra madescunt; / Post haec restauror praeclaro lumine Phoebi” (6-9) [When old age has corrupted my exhausted body with senile condition, my limbs get wet by plunging into clear water; after this, I am restored in the bright light of Phoebus (i.e., the sun)]. The *Physiologus* (ch. VIII) offers a similar description and adds the following allegorical explanation: “Ergo et tu, si uestitum habes ueterem, et caliginant oculi cordis tui, quere spiritalem fontem dominum” [“Therefore, you also, if you have the old clothing and the eyes of your heart have grown dim, seek out the spiritual fountain who is the Lord”].<sup>19</sup> The bird was accordingly considered to be a symbol of spiritual regeneration<sup>20</sup> and, apart from that, it was traditionally associated with St John. The motif, for example, occurs in a passage from Byrhtferth’s *Vita sancti Oswaldi*, where Oswald is described as “Being renewed daily ‘like an eagle’”—“cotidie renouatus ‘more aquilino.’”<sup>21</sup> The comparison with the eagle is here used to express the renovation of the faith that was constantly sought by this saint.

The fact that the eagle enigma is preceded by that on the beaver (no. 56) in Aldhelm’s collection is also noteworthy. The clues of Riddle 56 offer the following piece of information about this animal: “Humidus in fundo, tranat qua piscis, aquoso / saepe caput proprium tingens in gurgite mergo” (5-6) [I often dive, making my own head go wet in the surging flood, in the deep watery bottom where the fish swims]. Accordingly, the juxtaposition of the two riddles may simply stem from

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<sup>17</sup> All the translations of excerpts from the verse *De uirginitate* in this paper are from Lapidge and Rosier. Also, see a similar reference to the salamander in the corresponding episode in the prose *De uirginitate* (ch. XXXIV).

<sup>18</sup> For a similar moralizing reading in the case of the cauldron (Enigma 49), which endures the flames and boiling water, and the two millstones (no. 66), which stoically accept their unequal lot, see Pavloskis 237, 240.

<sup>19</sup> The edition of all excerpts from the *Physiologus* in this article is from Carmody. The translation of all passages from this work is by Curley in *Physiologus*.

<sup>20</sup> The idea is based on Psalm 103:5, which is cited at the beginning of the entry on the eagle in the *Physiologus*: “your youth is renewed like the eagle’s.” All references to the Bible in this essay are from May and Metzger.

<sup>21</sup> The edition and translation of this passage is from Lapidge 48-49.



the analogical association of one of their clues: like the eagle, the beaver plunges into the water. However, there seems to be a more subtle link that could explain the presence of this riddle pair in the collection. Although Aldhelm's Enigma 56 does not offer any reference to the allegorical role of the beaver, this animal (Latin *castor*) was traditionally thought to be an emblem of chastity (*castitas*). This was supported by the belief that the beaver castrated himself when being chased by hunters, as explained in the *Etymologiae* (XII.ii.21)<sup>22</sup>: "Castores a castrando dicti sunt. Nam testiculi eorum apti sunt medicaminibus, propter quos cum praesenserint venatorem, ipsi se castrant et morsibus vires suas amputant" ["Beavers (*castor*) are so called from 'castrating' (*castrare*). Their testicles are useful for medicines, on account of which, when they anticipate a hunter, they castrate themselves and amputate their own genitals with their teeth"].<sup>23</sup> Even if this idea is not present in Aldhelm's riddle, readers were probably expected to know about the beaver's connection with chastity, as inferred from the occurrence of a gloss from Isidore's entry on the beaver next to Enigma 56 in London, British Library, Royal 12.C.xxiii.<sup>24</sup> *Enigmata* 56 and 57 are therefore linked by the allegorical roles of the two animals, which would undoubtedly evoke spiritual renewal and chastity, two qualities that could have been particularly valued by monastic readers.

As the case of the beaver and the eagle enigmata illustrate, some of the riddle pairs from Aldhelm's collection could be based on the allegorical significance of the animals in question as established by the *Physiologus* tradition or the authority of Isidore's Book XII. However, in some cases the connection seems to be grounded on an allegorical basis of some other sort. For instance, Aldhelm's Riddle 38 describes the pond-skater's extraordinary capacity to walk on water, as offered in the following clues: "Pergo super latices plantis suffulta quaternis" (1) [I walk on the waters sustained by my four soles (feet)]<sup>25</sup> and "pedibus gradior super aequora siccis" (6) [with my dry feet I step on the surface of the water]. This phrasing, as pointed out by Scott, parallels that found in the poetic *De virginitate*: "Ut populus domini liquit Memphitica sceptrā / umida cum siccis pervadens caerulea plantis / et quater annorum complevit tempora dena, / hoc est octeni spatiosa volumina lustrī, / usquequo promissae telluris regna capessit" (2477-2481) ["just as the Lord's people left behind the Egyptian rule, walking through the wet sea with dry feet, and completed a period of forty years—that is to say, a long revolution of eight *lustra*—until they gained the kingdom of the Promised Land"] Scott 139 (n. 21). The

<sup>22</sup> For a similar reference to the beaver's self-castration in the *Physiologus*, see Carmody 128-129.

<sup>23</sup> The edition of all the extracts from Isidore's *Etymologiae* in this essay is from Oroz and Marcos. The translation of all the passages from this work is from Barney, Lewis, Beach, and Berghof.

<sup>24</sup> For the exact text of the gloss, occurring on the bottom margin of fol. 92r of this manuscript, see Stork 170. For information on this codex from the early eleventh century, see Aldhelm, *Aldhelmi* 50-52, and O'Keeffe 64-66.

<sup>25</sup> As explained by Scott, "One can by poetic licence call the water-spiders 'four-footed,' since the two front feet are inconspicuous" (139 n. 21).



description of the pond-skater in Riddle 38 thus calls to mind this biblical allusion, which incidentally is also present in Aldhelm's verse preface to the Enigmata: "Siccis nam laticum duxisti cautibus amnes. / Olim, cum cuneus transgresso marmore rubro / desertum penetrat, cecinit quod carmine Dauid" (32-34) [For you (God) once led water currents from the dry rocks, a long time ago when the crowd (of the Israelites) had crossed the Red Sea and entered the desert, as David narrated in a poem (i.e., in Psalm 78:13-16)].<sup>26</sup> In this excerpt, the writer compares his own literary endeavour with the Israelites' feat. Aldhelm's special interest in conveying this idea may conveniently explain the inclusion of the pond-skater as a riddle motif in the collection, since no encyclopedic source has been found for it.<sup>27</sup>

Apart from evoking the crossing of the Red Sea, the pond-skater could similarly conjure up the image of Christ walking on the water.<sup>28</sup> This assumption gains support if we consider that the pond-skater riddle is juxtaposed to Enigma 39, whose solution "lion" would prompt the allegory of Christ to learned readers. Like Christ, the lion is thus said to be invested with royal status: "horridus haud uereor regali culmine fretus" (5) [Supported by my royal head (i.e., crowned by the mane), I am most awe-inspiring]<sup>29</sup>. The fact that Aldhelm was thinking of the lion as the traditional allegory of Christ is also clear from the last clue offered by Enigma 39: "Dormio nam patulis, non claudens lumina, gemmis" (6) [For I sleep with my eyes wide open, never closing these gem-like lights]. This line alludes to what was habitually referred to as the lion's "second nature," a characteristic that is similarly expounded in the *Physiologus* (ch. I): "Secunda natura leonis est: cum dormierit, uigilant ei oculi, aperti enim sunt ei" ["The second nature of the lion is that, although he has fallen asleep, his eyes keep watch for him, for they remain open"].<sup>30</sup> Accordingly, it was assumed that, when Christ died on the cross and was buried, his body was asleep but his spirit was always awake thanks to his divine nature, as the *Physiologus* further explains: "Etenim corporaliter dominus meus dormiuit in cruce, deitas uero eius semper in dextera patris uigilat" ["And indeed, my Lord physically slept on the cross, but his divine nature always keeps watch in the right hand of the Father"]. The fact that readers were expected to acknowledge the al-

<sup>26</sup> My translation. Cf. Psalm 78: 13-16: "He divided the sea and let them pass through it, and made the waters stand like a heap. In the daytime he led them with a cloud, and all the night with a fiery light. He cleft rocks in the wilderness, and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep. He made streams come out of the rock, and caused waters to flow down like rivers."

<sup>27</sup> According to Cameron, the clues of this riddle must have been based on direct observation" (121-122).

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Matthew 14: 25-26, Mark 6: 48-49 and John 6: 19-20. As Scott has pointed out, the presence of the pond-skater in Aldhelm's collection is grounded on "the figural analogy with the Biblical pictures of Christ walking on the sea of Galilee (Matt. xiv.25) or the Jews in the Red Sea" (125).

<sup>29</sup> As Isidore explains in Book XII (ii.3), the Greek term *λέων* "is translated as 'king' in Latin, because he is the ruler of all the beasts" ("Latine rex interpretatur, eo quod princeps sit omnium bestiarum"). Moreover, Isidore includes *leo* among the terms employed to refer to Christ: "et Leo pro regno et fortitudine" (VII.ii.43) ["Lion (*Leo*) for his kingdom and strength"].

<sup>30</sup> For a further account of the lion's second nature in Isidore's *Etymologiae*, see XII.ii.5.





allegorical significance of this clue is also supported by the presence of a long excerpt from the *Physiologus*, which explains the three natures of the lion and accompanies Riddle 39 in London, Royal 12.C.xxiii.<sup>31</sup> With this gloss at hand, a reader could not miss the relationship between the information given by line 6 of Enigma 39 and its underlying allegorical meaning. Seen in this light, Riddles 38 (pond-skater) and 39 (lion) conform a pair, whose association is once more based on analogical allegory. The linking of the two riddles therefore responds to the fact that the two animals likewise evoke Christ, with the allegorical role of the lion being rooted on traditional zoological lore, as observed in the *Physiologus*, and the pond-skater as an *ad hoc* allegory, we may infer, envisaged by Aldhelm himself.

The study of this selection of riddles from Aldhelm's collection has showed that these texts could well function as an effective vehicle for teaching zoology. Aldhelm probably realized that riddles could be as useful as other works in which medieval "scientific" lore was traditionally transmitted, as is the case of the *Physiologus* or Isidore's Book XII from the *Etymologiae*. As this paper has demonstrated, Aldhelm's description of animal motifs in his Enigmata has proved to be highly prone to the employment of allegory with moralizing aims. Indeed, the riddle pairs that have been analyzed constitute a helpful method that Aldhelm consciously used with the purpose of establishing edifying examples for his readership. The analysis of the allegorical interconnections found in these riddles suggests that they were first-rate pedagogical tools that were used in Anglo-Saxon monastic schools. It was probably the collection's success in England that motivated its transfer to the continent as part of the literary materials that Anglo-Saxon missionaries took for their evangelizing purposes.

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<sup>31</sup> Notably, on the right margin of fol. 89r. For this excerpt as it appears in this manuscript, see Stork 148. The lion also figures prominently in the Bible, particularly in Job 4: 10-11.





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