Anglo-Saxon Studies 29

REPRESENTING BEASTS IN EARLY MEDIEVAL ENGLAND AND SCANDINAVIA
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REPRESENTING BEASTS IN EARLY MEDIEVAL ENGLAND AND SCANDINAVIA

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Abbreviations

ASE      *Anglo-Saxon England*
ASPR     The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records
ASSAH    *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*
BAR      British Archaeological Reports
CSASE    Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England
DOE      *Dictionary of Old English: A to G Online*, ed. Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos, Antonette diPaolo Healey *et al.* (Toronto, 2007)
EETS     Early English Text Society
es      extra series
os      original series
ss      supplementary series
EPNS     English Place-Name Society
ES       *English Studies*
JEGP     *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*
JEPNS    *Journal of the English Place-Name Society*
LSE      *Leeds Studies in English*
ME       Middle English
MedArch  *Medieval Archaeology*
NM       *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen*
OE       Old English
OFr      Old French
ON       Old Norse
PDE      Present Day English
PL       *Patrologia Latina*
Do Anglo-Saxons Dream of Exotic Sheep?

László Sándor Chardonnens

In discussing the archaeological record, art, place-names, historiography and literature, the essays in this volume highlight the coexistence of people and animals in early medieval England. The Germanic tribes and few stray Celts who inhabited it lived in close proximity to a range of domestic and wild animals, the former category including cats and dogs, chickens and geese, horses and asses, cattle and pigs, sheep and goats, while the latter included fish, sea mammals, snakes, birds, deer, otters, badgers, rabbits, hares and all kinds of animal pests; particularly notable among the wild species were wolves, ravens and eagles – the three iconic beasts of battle commemorated in heroic poetry. Yet whereas most Anglo-Saxons would have been familiar with these nytenu and deora, including dragons (as the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle reminds us), it would be a stretch to assume that this familiarity extended to exotic animal species, such as camels, elephants, lions, phoenixes and scorpions. The Bible, the Physiologus, the Medicina de quadrupedibus and other non-Germanic sources testified to the existence of these animals in far-away corners of the world, and readers of the Wonders of the East would have encountered descriptions and depictions of fabulous beasts with eight legs, two heads and Valkyries’ eyes, of lertices with asses’ ears, sheep’s wool and birds’ feet, and many other ungefregelicu deor (‘extraordinary beasts’). However, these written sources represented a world that was utterly different from Anglo-Saxon England, and they targeted highly educated audiences that were presumed to have been able to put these strange beasts into context.

Even though early medieval ideas about the natural world are far more integrative than modern attempts to categorise that world into discrete taxonomic ranks, there would seem to be a divide between the animal world that Anglo-Saxons could readily observe and the beasts that they knew only through religious and learned sources from the Mediterranean and the Near East. While indigenous creatures

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1 On dragons in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, see Symons, Chapter 3 in this volume.
were domesticated, processed, hunted, avoided, feared or venerated, exotic animals were read about and marvelled at, and their absence from the Anglo-Saxon natural world led to their becoming the subject of metaphor and allegory. Animals, therefore, could be understood either as the output of God’s creation, or as the input for symbolic thought.

A similar distinction can be discerned in early medieval techniques for foretelling the future. Taking dreams, natural phenomena, and significant moments in time as signs of future events, prognostication places that which has yet to happen on the same level of certainty as the present and the past. Whereas prognostication today is largely limited to weather forecasts, the Anglo-Saxons had a wide range of prognostic techniques at their disposal. These were inherited from the same Mediterranean and Near Eastern cultures that provided the basis for religion and learning; they first reached Continental monasteries in the late eighth century, and moved into Anglo-Saxon foundations in the ninth. Prognostication offered tools with which to interpret the future in all areas of life, from human concerns such as war and peace, life and death, health and illness, wealth and poverty, happiness and adversity, to noteworthy events in the natural world, including meteorology, agriculture and animal husbandry. This chapter examines the kinds of beasts that feature in prognostications from Anglo-Saxon England. Depending on the technique employed, prognostications may reveal the fate of animals as part of the output of a prediction, or their symbolic value as part of the input. The former tend to be closer to the Anglo-Saxon natural world than the latter, though some Anglo-Saxon scribes interfered with the homely animal

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world displayed in prognostications in order to make the predictions seem more exotic.

That the fate of animals was sometimes not to be envied is poignantly demonstrated by the opening lines of the Old English *De diebus malis*:

Þa ealdan læcas gesettan on ledenbocun þæt on ælcum monðe beoð æfre twegen dagas þe sydan swyðe derigendlice ænigne drenc on to ðicgenne, oððe blod on to lætenne, forðan þe an tid is on ælcum þæra daga gif man ænige æddran geopenad on þære tide, þæt hit bið his lifleast, oððe langsum sar. Þæs cunnode sum læce, let his horse blod on þære tide, and hit læg sona dead.4

The doctors of old wrote in Latin books that there are always two days in each month on which it is very harmful to drink any [medicinal] potion or to let blood, because there is an hour in each of these days during which a vein that is opened will cause death or protracted pain. A certain physician tried this – bled his horse on such an hour – and it lay dead immediately.

This excerpt reports how a physician experimented (OE *cunnode*) on an animal, with lethal consequences, on one of the so-called Egyptian Days. These were the most feared of evil days in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages, because it was thought that those who let blood or took medication on one of these days would almost certainly die.5 Various lists of Egyptian Days existed, recording three, twelve or twenty-four *plihtlice dagas* (‘dangerous days’).6 In the type under discussion, two days were arbitrarily assigned to each month (e.g. 1 and 25 January, 4 and 26 February), which together make up the twenty-four Egyptian Days that survive in thousands of medieval manuscripts, particularly in liturgical calendars. As the *De diebus malis* demonstrates, animals

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suffered the same fate as humans if they were bled on an Egyptian Day. Though it might be considered cruel and unethical to subject an animal to an experiment whose deadly outcome is fixed in advance, the point to be considered here is that the physician decided to use a horse instead of (for instance) a camel. In fact, this reference to veterinary medicine ensured that this hapless horse was the only animal out of approximately 175 Anglo-Saxon prognostications to make it into Frederick Smith’s *Early History of Veterinary Literature and its British Development*. What Smith did not know, however, is that the prognostications which appear in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts do not represent a native Germanic tradition, but reflect older, non-Germanic mantic practices. The reference to a horse, then, is pure chance; it might as well have been a camel, were it not for the fact that the medical experiment in the *De diebus malis* was an *ad hoc* addition by an Anglo-Saxon scribe. The Latin source on which the scribe based his translation reads: *autenticorum in his medicorum cohibentur diuersorum potionum dictione, seu flebotomatum usus adibendi* (*on these [days], they are deterred from [using] various potions or applying bloodletting, on the basis of the assertion of genuine doctors*), which is much more concise than the Old English, and leaves out the medical experiment altogether. Fortunately for Smith, in other words, the horse of the *De diebus malis* had an English pedigree to begin with, because it was introduced into the text by an early eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon scribe.

The same cannot be said for the majority of animals in Anglo-Saxon prognostications. Since most prognostications hail from Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt, Greece and the Mediterranean, the animals mentioned tend to represent species indigenous to these areas. Some of these species, of course, were also native to Britain, or had become native by the time the Anglo-Saxons arrived, as a result of prior introduction by Celtic or Roman settlers. In such cases, references to these exotic animals could conveniently be retained because they had indigenous counterparts in Anglo-Saxon England. Early Continental texts on the twenty-four Egyptian Days, for instance, sometimes warned that cattle should not be broken on these days – an injunction that was retained in Anglo-Saxon manuscripts. Likewise, early Continental texts warn

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8 MS Harley 3271, fol. 122r–v (Chardonnens, ‘Ælfric and the *De diebus malis*’, p. 151).
9 For early Continental versions, see Bern, Burgerbibliothek, MS 318 (facsimile via [e-codices](http://www.e-codices.unifr.ch) [accessed 1 January 2015]); Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, MS Aug. perg. 120, fols. 211v–212r (Wilhelm Schmitz, *Beiträge zur lateinischen Sprach- und Literaturkunde* (Leipzig, 1877), pp. 314–15; facsimile via [Digitale Sammlungen](http://digital.blb-karlsruhe.de) [accessed 1 January 2015]); MS Aug. perg. 167, fol. 49r (Schmitz, *Beiträge zur lateinischen Sprach- und Literaturkunde*, pp. 313–14; facsimile via [Digitale Sammlungen](http://digital.blb-karlsruhe.de)). For Anglo-Saxon examples, see London,
that cattle should not be bled on the Egyptian Days, a stipulation adopted without any change by the Anglo-Saxons; compare the Latin, which notes that *qui in istis tribus diebus hominem inciderit aut pecus, aut statim aut in die quarto morietur* (‘he who is bled on these three days, be it man or cattle, he will die immediately or on the fourth day’), with the Old English, which indicates similarly, *se þe on þysum þrim dagum his blod gewanige, sy hit man sy hit nyten, þæs þe we secgan gehyrdan þæt sona on þam forman dæge of þe þam feorþan dæge his lif geændað* (‘he who is bled on these three days, be it man or cattle, of him we have heard say that he will die immediately on the first day, or on the fourth day’).10 The animals that are affected by prognostications are mostly of the kind described here; that is, they had indigenous counterparts in Britain, ensuring a smooth transition from non-Germanic to Anglo-Saxon mantic practices.

The animals of the *Revelatio Esdrae* are a case in point. Ascribed to the prophet Esdras (Ezra), the *Revelatio Esdrae* is an annual prognostication that predicts meteorological conditions, yields in agricultural produce and animal husbandry, and human affairs, based on the weekday of either 1 January or Christmas Day. For instance:11

*Gif middeswintres messedeg bið on sunnandeg, þonne bið god winter, and lengten windi, and drige sumer and wingeardas gode; and sceap beoð weaxende, and hunii beoð genihtsum and eal sib bið genyhtsummo.*12


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If Christmas Day is on a Sunday, winter will be good, spring windy, summer dry and the harvest season good; sheep will grow and there will be honey in abundance, and there will be peace and abundance on earth.

From their first appearance on the Continent in early ninth-century learned manuscripts, the prototypical news and weather reports in the *Revelatio Esdrae* proved hugely popular in monastic circles, and it did not take long for Anglo-Saxons to become acquainted with them. Though the predictions pertained to issues that were relevant to life on the Continent, the fact that the Anglo-Saxons had similar seasons, crops, animals and worries meant that they had plenty of common ground. One version of a *Revelatio Esdrae* from an Anglo-Saxon manuscript, for instance, makes the following predictions:

Si fuerit kl ianuarius die dominico, hiems bona erit et suavis ac calida, uer uentuosus et sicca estas, uindemia bona; oues crescent, mel habundabit, senes morientur et pax fiet.

Si fuerit kl ianuarius die lunę, hiems mixta, uer bonus, estas uentuosa et tempestuosa, uindemia bona; ualitudo hominum, apes morientur.

Si fuerit kl ianuarius die martis, hiems nobilissima, uer uentuosus et pluuialis, estas bona; mulieres morientur, naues periclitantur in pelago; uindemia laboriosa.

Si fuerit kl ianuarius die mercurii, hiems dura et aspera, uer malus et estas bona, uindemia bona; frumentum bonum, iuuenes moriuntur, mel non erit, mercatores laborabunt.

Si fuerit kl ianuarius die iouis, hiems bona erit, uer uentuosus, estas bona; et habundantia erit, reges et principes peribunt, pax fiet.

Si fuerit kl ianuarius die ueneris, hiems stabilis et nix erit, uer bonus et estas dolor ocularum, uindemia bona; oues et apes peribunt, annona cara fiet.

Si fuerit kl ianuarius die saturni, hiems caliginosa, nix erit; annona cara erit, fructus habundabit, homines egrotabunt et ueterani moriuntur; uindemia bona.13

If 1 January is on a Sunday, winter will be good, mild but warm, spring windy and summer dry, the harvest season good; sheep will grow, honey will abound, old men will die and there will be peace.

If 1 January is on a Monday, winter will be mixed, spring good, summer windy and stormy, the harvest season good; there will be health among the people, bees will die.

If 1 January is on a Tuesday, winter will be most noble, spring windy and rainy, summer good; women will die, ships will be in danger on the sea; the harvest season will be toilsome.

If 1 January is on a Wednesday, winter will be hard and difficult, spring evil, and summer good; the harvest season good; grain will be good, young people will die, there will be no honey, merchants will toil. If 1 January is on a Thursday, winter will be good, spring windy, summer good; and there will be plenty, kings and princes will perish, there will be peace. If 1 January is on a Friday, winter will be stable and there will be snow, spring will be good and summer too; there will be pain in the eyes, a good harvest season, sheep and bees will perish; resources will be dear. If 1 January is on a Saturday, winter will be gloomy, there will be snow; resources will be dear, fruits will abound, people will fall ill and old people will die; the harvest season will be good.

The issues addressed in this text are not so outlandish that Anglo-Saxons would have had trouble relating to them, which is probably why the Anglo-Saxon text does not diverge significantly from the Continental version. A closely related Anglo-Saxon version predicts that sheep will multiply and honey will abound (Sunday); there will be no honey (Wednesday); sheep will die (Thursday and Saturday); and sheep’s eyes will be weak (Friday). These two witnesses of the Revelatio Esdrae deal with sheep and bees exclusively, which Marilina Cesario explains by the fact that ‘both were of great importance to Anglo-Saxon monastic and lay communities: sheep for the production of parchment, milk, cheese, and textiles, and bees for honey and wax’. But while Cesario is right to point out that sheep and bees fulfilled important roles in Anglo-Saxon animal husbandry, which may account for the Revelatio Esdrae’s being one of the most widespread prognostications in Anglo-Saxon England, the absence of other common farm animals (particularly cattle and pigs) is striking nonetheless. Indeed, the earliest Continental texts seem generally to limit themselves to sheep and bees, with cattle and pigs appearing only very infrequently. This might be due to

14 MS Cotton Tiberius A.iii, fols. 41v–42r (Chardonnens, Anglo-Saxon Prognostics, pp. 494–5).
farming practices in the region of origin of this version of the *Revelatio Esdrae*. Though Continental scribes sometimes adapted the *Revelatio Esdrae* to local conditions, the Anglo-Saxons saw no need, apparently, to tailor the prognostication to their own specific needs once they were introduced to the sheep and bees variant.17

A possible exception is a *Revelatio Esdrae* uniquely attested in an English manuscript from the early post-Conquest period. ‘An anomalous text which differs substantially’ from other versions, this *Revelatio Esdrae* scales up the usual predictions by reporting more extreme weather conditions, bigger natural disasters, and greater suffering for humans and the natural world.18 As far as animals are concerned, the text predicts that: *apes proficient, oues morientur* (‘bees will multiply, sheep will die’, Sunday); *quadrupedia plurima morientur* (‘most quadrupeds will die’, Monday); *piscatio multa* (‘much fishing’, Wednesday); *clades quadrupedum* (‘the destruction of quadrupeds’, Thursday); *monstruosa animalia nascentur, ... piscatio plurima* (‘monstrous animals will be born, ... fishing in plenty’, Friday); and *oues et porci morientur, mel multum, ... in mari belue et pisces morientur plurimi* (‘sheep and pigs will die, much honey, ... in the sea most beasts and fish will die’, Saturday).19 Uniquely, this particular *Revelatio Esdrae* covers a much bigger slice of the animal world than any other version. It includes pigs alongside sheep and bees, and it subsumes large numbers of animal species under general labels, such as quadrupeds, fish and sea animals. The most interesting feature, however, is the unparalleled attention given to aquatic creatures, which suggests that this version was adapted to the needs of a maritime culture. Britain is an island, to borrow Bede’s observation, so a *Revelatio Esdrae* reoriented along these lines must have proved helpful. Yet if this is indeed the case, it is a mystery why such a useful prognostication appears only in a single scientific manuscript from the inland abbey of Thorney – a location which can hardly have been conducive to its application in practice.

The example of the *Revelatio Esdrae* demonstrates that it was possible to tailor prognostications to local conditions, but that Anglo-Saxons did not often engage in noteworthy modifications. The sheep and bees from Continental sources were familiar sights in Britain, and Anglo-Saxons would therefore have known which creatures were

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18 Ibid., p. 413.
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meant. Other kinds of prognostications, such as brontologies, probably underwent little modification for the same reason, though Anglo-Saxon brontologies do hold some intriguing surprises. ‘Practised in the ancient world and continued into Christian culture as part of a larger interest in forecasting events by means of signs and portents’, brontologies predict a range of human and natural affairs by means of the occurrence of thunder at various times or from various directions.20 Thunder was perceived as a destructive force, and most predictions have a negative outcome, particularly with regard to agriculture and animal husbandry. Se norð þunor (‘northern thunder’), for instance, becnad scepa deade, and cealfra and geogoðe (‘signifies the death of sheep, calves and youth’).21 Similarly, gif on frigedæg gehunrað, þonne getacnað þæt nytena cwealm (‘if it thunders on a Friday, it signifies the death of cattle’).22 Around the time of the Norman Conquest, this prediction from a weekday brontology was redacted to specify that gif hit on frigedæg þunrige, þæt tacnað sædeora cwealm (‘if it thunders on a Friday, it signifies the death of sea animals’), again testifying to a late eleventh-century interest in maritime life, though early Continental texts indicate that OE nytena probably represents the original reading (e.g. peccora multa moritura esse (‘cattle are to die’)).23 The emphasis on farm animals is also evidenced in hour brontologies. If it thunders in the eighth hour, for instance, it signifies cwylð on heordum and fyþerfetum (‘destruction among herds and quadrupeds’).24 Month brontologies, on the other hand, address a wider array of animals, as the following text demonstrates:

Si tonitrum fuerit in mense ianuario multe conuentiones sunt: una de ouibus, alia de homininibus, .iii. de peccoribus, .iii. de lignis, v. de equis. Timendum est hoc tonitrum.

Si tonitrum fuerit in mense februario ad aurem pertinet uel ad alia, que referuntur in aliam, areas et semen pertenet.

Si tonitrum fuerit in mense martio timendum est, quia ab eo espectatur mortalitas uel iudicium.

Si tonitrum erit in mense aprili semina periclitantur uel nabes.


21 Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 391, p. 714 (Chardonnens, Anglo-Saxon Prognostics, p. 269).

22 MS CCCC 391, pp. 713–14 (Chardonnens, Anglo-Saxon Prognostics, pp. 260–1).

23 Cologne, Erzbischöfliche Diözesan- und Dombibliothek, MS 102, fol. 52r–v (facsimile via Codices ecclesiæ Coloniensis <http://www.ceec.uni-koeln.de> [accessed 1 January 2015]); and MS Cotton Tiberius A. iii, fol. 40r–v (Chardonnens, Anglo-Saxon Prognostics, p. 261), respectively.

24 MS Cotton Tiberius A. iii, fol. 37r–v (Chardonnens, Anglo-Saxon Prognostics, pp. 254–5).
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Si tonitruum fuerit in mense maio pluuiue magne erunt, uel erba uel semina pululabunt.
Si tonitruum fuerit in mense iunio homines perecletantur uel ligna.
Si tonitruum fuerit in mense iulio pisces pericletantur.
Si tonitruum erit in mense agusto bilue uel reptilia perecletantur.
Si tonitruum erit in mense septembi uituli moriuntur.
Si tonitruum erit in mense octobri motantur aure.
Si tonitruum erit in mensis nouembri obes crescunt. 25

If there is thunder in the month of January, there are many conventions: one of sheep, another of men, a third of cattle, a fourth of trees, a fifth of horses. This thunder is to be feared.

If there is thunder in the month of February, it pertains to the ears, or to something else, as is reported elsewhere; it pertains to threshing floors (?) and seeds.

If there is thunder in the month of March, it is to be feared, because mortality or judgement is to be expected from it.

If there is thunder in the month of April, seeds or ships are in danger.

If there is thunder in the month of May, there will be great showers, and weeds or seeds will sprout.

If there is thunder in the month of June, men or trees are in danger.

If there is thunder in the month of July, fish are in danger.

If there is thunder in the month of August, beasts (monsters?) or reptiles are in danger.

If there is thunder in the month of September, calves will die.

If there is thunder in the month of October, winds will blow.

If there is thunder in the month of November, sheep will grow.

This is the only Latin month brontology from Anglo-Saxon England – a late tenth-century addition to the glossed Regius Psalter. The text reports on a number of natural, agricultural and human concerns, but it is nowhere more outspoken than in its predictions for the animal world. The sheep (January, November), cattle (January) and calves (September) already encountered in other brontologies are here joined by horses (January), fish (July) and beasts and reptiles (August). This mix of farm animals, fish and wild beasts is unique to this text – as we have already seen, other prognostications generally limit themselves to one of these groups of animals. Yet, as early Continental analogues corroborate (such as the pseudo-Beden De tonitruis libellus ad Herefridum), an eclectic assortment of animals is a feature of month

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brontologies in general. The Latin month brontology from England is no exception, but the reference to reptiles is unattested elsewhere, and may be the fabrication of an Anglo-Saxon scribe who got carried away by the inauspicious topic of thunder. The same may be said of the readings in the only month brontology in Old English, which ignores animals altogether except for during the months of June and July:

On iunius monðe, hit bodeð mycel wætendes, and wulfene wodnysse and leona. On iulius monðe, hit bodeð wæstme wel gewænde and oref forfarð.27

In the month of June, it [thunder] signifies great storms, and madness among wolves and lions. In the month of July, it signifies crops doing well, and livestock will die.

The reference to oref (‘livestock’) in the prediction for July is not unusual, and wild beasts would not have been out of place either, as the Latin text shows. However, this vernacular text specifically singles out wolves and lions. By mentioning these beasts in one breath, the Old English month brontology bridges the gap between the natural world of Anglo-Saxon England and the exotic world of the Bible and the Wonders of the East. The scribe of this text, in other words, seems deliberately to have veered away from what might actually happen on English soil, towards symbolic ways of creating meaning by bringing in creatures from distant, exotic locations.

Similar motivations must have informed the work of the person who translated the sunshine prognostication into Old English. Sunshine prognostications are annual predictions that deliver mostly positive reports on human affairs, produce, and the finding of metals, depending upon which of the twelve days of Christmas is sunny.28 The English texts feature predictions that can be taken at face value, yet into which a prediction has been inserted that requires some learning before its meaning is understood:

26 For the De tonitris libellus ad Herefridum, see Cologne MS 102, fols. 49r–52v. See also PL 90, 609–14, and its appraisal in Charles W. Jones, Bedae Pseudepigrapha: Scientific Writings Falsely Attributed to Bede (Ithaca, NY, 1939), pp. 45–7. More manuscript copies of the De tonitris have come to light since Jones’s identification of Cologne MS 102; see Hilbert Chiu and David Juste, ‘The De tonitris Attributed to Bede: An Early Medieval Treatise on Divination by Thunder Translated from Irish’, Traditio 68 (2013), 97–124.
If the sun shines on the first day of the Lord’s birth, there will be much joy and abundance among the people.

If the sun shines on the second day, then gold will be easy to get among the English.

If the sun shines on the third day, there will be great strife among poor people, and great peace between kings and powerful men.

If the sun shines on the fourth day, then camels will carry away much gold from the ants that must guard the gold hoard.

If the sun shines on the fifth day, there will be many flowers and fruits in this year.

If the sun shines on the sixth day, the Lord will send much milk.

If the sun shines on the seventh day, there will be much produce on the trees.

If the sun shines on the eighth day, then quicksilver will be easy to get.

If the sun shines on the ninth day, then the Lord will send a great baptism in this year.

If the sun shines on the tenth day, then the sea and all rivers will be full of fish.

If the sun shines on the eleventh day, there will be great suffering of death among the people.

If the sun shines on the twelfth day, men will be weak and there will be great peace on earth.

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29 MS Hatton 115, fols. 149v–150r (Chardonnens, Anglo-Saxon Prognostics, p. 485).
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Most of these predictions can be readily understood, and those pertaining to animals mainly feature creatures already encountered in the *Revelatio Esdrae* and brontologies, that is, cattle (indirectly for day 6) and fish (day 10). But in relation to the discovery of metals, which is a central concern in sunshine prognostications, the prediction for day 4 mentions that ‘camels will carry away much gold from the ants that must guard the gold hoard’. Chances were slim, however, that one could simply steal gold from gold-hoarding ants with the help of camels on English soil, because neither animal belonged to the Anglo-Saxon natural world. Rather, the reference is to a passage in the *Wonders of the East* that describes a curious custom:

Capi hatte seo ea in ðære ylcan stowe þe is haten Gorgoneus, þæt is Wealcyrginc. Þær beó akende æmættan swa micle swa hundas. Hi habbað fet swylce greshoppan, hi syndon reades hiwes and blaces. Þa æmættan delfað gold up of eordan fram foran nihte oð ða fiftan tid ðæges. Ða menn ðe to ðam dyrstige beó ðæt hi ðæt gold nimen, þonne lædrað hi mið him elfenda myran mid hyra folan and stedan. Þa folan hi getigað ær hi ofer þa ea faran. Þæt gold hi gefætað on ða myran and hi sylfe onsitað and þa stedan þær forlætað. Dönne ða æmættan hi onfïndað, and þa hwile ðe þa æmættan ymbe ða stedan abiscode beóð, þonne ða men mid þam myran and þam golde ofer ða ea farað. Hi beóð to þam swifte þæt ða men wenað þæt hi fleogene syn.30

The river is named Capi in the same place, which is called Gorgoneus, that is ‘valkyrie-like’. Ants are born there as big as dogs, which have feet like grasshoppers, and they are red and black in colour. The ants dig up gold from the ground before night until the fifth hour of the day. People who are bold enough to take the gold bring with them male camels, and females with their young. They tie up the young before they cross the river. They load the gold onto the females, and mount them themselves, and leave the males there. Then the ants detect the males, and while the ants are occupied with the males, the men cross over the river with the females and the gold. They are so swift that one would think that they were flying.

This excerpt from the *Wonders of the East* introduces an ingenious method for stealing gold without having to delve for it: one simply diverts gold-hoarding ants with a free meal of male camels. Since the region described here is far removed from England, it seems unlikely that the prediction in the Old English sunshine prognostication could be taken literally. Sunshine prognostications from the Continent do not contain similar statements, which makes it plausible that the reference to the *Wonders of the East* was devised by an Anglo-Saxon scribe who perhaps wanted to recontextualise a prediction concerning

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Why the adaptor felt the need to do so is unclear, because less learned users of the sunshine prognostication are unlikely to have known what to make of this prediction. However, Cesario argues that, since ‘wisdom literature appealed greatly to the Anglo-Saxons’, the obscurity of the reference ‘might have been part of the point, as the lack of explanation challenges the reader to determine the intended meaning’. Cesario convincingly adduces a range of learned sources on camel-lore and myrmecology that were available to educated Anglo-Saxons, including a riddle by Aldhelm, Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologiae*, Gregory the Great’s *Moralia in lob*, the *Physiologus*, and the Bible. In other words, the adaptor may have aimed to showcase the extent of his learning by adding a symbolic layer to the prediction – the part of a prognostication that usually stayed within the bounds of the literal. At the level of output, after all, prognostications had to be as literal as possible, and if the point was to come up with predictions that were concrete enough to give a measure of certainty about the immediate future, then the prediction about the gold-hoarding ants did little to further that agenda, even if it did add an exotic touch.

Symbolism and associative logic were important strategies for creating meaningful patterns at the level of prognostic input. Thunder, for instance, was considered a destructive force, so its occurrence generally did not bode well; sunshine, by contrast, was a constructive force, so its occurrence was a good sign. This is why brontologies tend to predict misfortune whereas sunshine prognostications are auspicious. Thunder and sunshine as symbols of destruction and generation, therefore, condition the outcome of prognostications. A similar mechanism would seem to underlie the *Revelatio Esdrae*, where the day associated with the sun generally offers a positive prediction:

> Si die .i. feria fuerint kl ianuarii, hiemps bona, et uer uentosum erit, aestas sicca et uindemia bona erit; boues crescent et mel abundanter erit, senes morientur et abundantia et pax erit.33

If 1 January is on a Sunday, winter will be good, spring windy, summer dry and the harvest season good; sheep will grow and there will be honey in abundance; old people will die and there will be abundance and peace.

Whereas the day associated with Saturn is viewed with greater ambivalence:

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31 See, for instance, Liège, Bibliothèque de l’Université, MS 77, fol. 70r (Cesario, ‘The Shining of the Sun’, pp. 209–12).
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Si .vii. feria fuerint kal ianuarii, hiemps turbolenta, uer uentosum; et fructus laboriosus erit, oues peribunt et senes morientur.

If 1 January is on a Saturday, winter will be stormy, spring windy; and harvest will be toilsome, sheep will perish and old people will die.

As far as animals are concerned, those at the output level of prognostications generally represent creatures known in the Anglo-Saxon natural world, such as farm animals and fish. Notable exceptions are the lions of the month brontology, and the camels and gold-hoarding ants of the sunshine prognostication, though it is likely that references to these creatures were included by learned scribes with a taste for the exotic. However, animals also feature at the input level of prognostication, where they seem to form an eclectic mix even by Anglo-Saxon standards.

Dream books (collections of dream topics, and their interpretations) are a safe haven for all imaginable concepts, things and creatures, no matter how trivial, controversial or exotic. It mattered little whether the subject of the dream was part of daily life, because the only limiting factor on what takes place in dreams is the human imagination. It was possible, for instance, to dream of having one’s teeth fall out (indicating anxiety), of being made emperor (indicating honour), of sleeping with one’s sister (harm), or of seeing a fierce elephant (accusation), though none of these events was likely to be included in prognostications. Instead, they were taken as signs of what the future held, which is borne out by the wording of dream book predictions; for instance, dracones uidere, dignitatem significat (‘to see dragons signifies honour’).

The dream books known in Anglo-Saxon England were structured on the alphabetical model attributed to the Old Testament prophet Daniel, which went back to Byzantine sources that in turn relied on pre-Byzantine Greek and Near Eastern oneirocritic traditions. As

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34 MS Cotton Tiberius A.iii, fols. 27v–32v (Chardonnens, Anglo-Saxon Prognostics, pp. 305–23).
Vilmos Voigt once posited, ‘dreams reflect place and location’, and in the case of the alphabetical dream books that reached Britain in the eleventh century, these texts were strongly coloured by their cultures of origin: one Anglo-Saxon dream book, for instance, includes dreams of eunuchs, emperors and Hercules. This exotic heritage is also apparent from the kinds of animals featured in Anglo-Saxon dream books, which include creatures known in the Anglo-Saxon natural world, such as farm animals, dogs and dragons, but also animals that never lived in England, yet that were nevertheless part of Anglo-Saxon intellectual and religious culture. The following provides an inventory of animals, animal products, and events involving animals from six Anglo-Saxon dream books:

ANIMALS

Ants: to see ~ of any kind: great strife
Asses: to see ~: toil; to eat/to sit on (L (s)edere) ~: toil; ~ braying or running free: strife with an enemy
Asses or kids: to see ~: wrongs in business
Bear: to be attacked by a ~: treachery of an enemy
Beasts: to be attacked by ~: to be overcome by enemies; to tame ~: esteem of enemies; ~ running: disturbance; ~ talking: serious trouble
Bees: to be attacked or injured by ~: one’s life will be disturbed by men; to be stung by ~: one’s mind will be troubled by foreign men; ~ flying into one’s house: abandonment/burning down of house; ~ bearing honey: one will get money from prosperous people
Birds: to fight with ~: strife; to catch ~: profit; ~ taking something: harm; ~ in a nest: struggle in business; ~ fighting among themselves: powerful people will fight among themselves; many ~: envy, contention and strife
Buck or goats: to see ~: advancement
Bull: to have a ~: neither good not evil
Camels: to be attacked by ~: harm
Chicken: ~ laying an egg: profit with worry; ~ with chicks: increase in business; many ~: good
Dogs: ~ barking or attacking: enemies seek to overpower one; ~ greeting: guard against one’s enemies; ~ playing: thanks; ~ running: much good; many ~: beware of enemies
Doves: to see ~: sadness
Dragons: to see ~: honour / good; ~ flying overhead: treasure

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Eagle: ~ attacking: death/great joy; ~ flying: death of one’s wife; ~ overhead: honour; many ~: evil hostility and treachery among the people

Elephant: to see a fierce ~: accusation

Fish: to see ~: rain; ~ in the sea: great anxiety

Foil: to sit on a ~: deception in business

Frogs: to see ~: anxiety

Geese: many ~: good

Goat: to see a ~: hostile enemy close by; many ~: vanity

Horse: to sit on a white ~: good outcome/honour/good news; to sit on a black ~: anxiety/distress in the mind; to sit on a fallow ~: damage/good; to sit on a bay ~: advancement; to sit on a chestnut ~: bad business/loss of one’s goods; ~ running free or being attacked by ~: harm

Lion: ~ running: success in business; ~ sleeping: bad business; to be attacked by a ~: rebellion among enemies

Mouse and lion: to see a ~: security

Ox: white or big ~: honour; hornless ~: one will overcome one’s enemies; ~ grazing: struggle in business; ~ sleeping: evil in business; to sit on a white ~: honour

Pigs: to see ~: illness; many ~: misery

Quadrupeds: to see ~: anxiety; ~ talking: enmity of a king

Serpent: to see a ~: enemies/malice of an evil woman; to be attacked by a ~: sight of an enemy; ~ coming towards you: guard against evil women

Sheep: shorn ~: harm/not good; white ~: good

Stallions: many ~: destruction of one’s goods

ANIMAL PRODUCTS
Butter: to eat ~: good news
Eggs: to have or eat ~: no effect
Honey: to eat ~: distress; to receive ~: be careful not to be deceived
Lard: to handle ~: a parent will die
Ivory: to handle ~: hindrance; to buy or sell ~: great sadness
Silk or fine cloth: to have ~: sometimes good and sometimes evil

EVENTS INVOLVING ANIMALS
Claws: to see ~: anguish
Fish pond: to wash in a ~: joy; to fall into a ~: happiness
Hunt: to ~: wealth/profit/guard against enemies
Plough: to ~: wealth

37 London, British Library, MS Sloane 475, fols. 217v–218r; MS Cotton Tiberius A. iii, fols. 27v–32v, 38r–39v, 42r–v; MS Cotton Titus D. xxvi, fols. 11v–16r; and MS Hatton 115, fols.
The dream topics and their interpretations provide insight into how alphabetical dream books create meaning through associative logic. Animals with negative connotations, for instance, are associated with misfortune, such as the association between serpents and evil women, which is probably based on Scripture. Animals with positive connotations, such as lions, are good signs, except when they turn against the dreamer. Some types of animals (beasts, for instance) stand for human attributes or fellow human beings, and the nature of their interaction with the dreamer dictates the meaning of the dream. Some dreams, on the other hand, create meaning through opposing values, as in the dream of a dove boding sadness. Since most animals and events involving animals would have been familiar to the Anglo-Saxons from daily life or religion and learning, their meaning would have made sense to the audience. That said, the animals portrayed in alphabetical dream books are not native species, strictly speaking, although some might, of course, have existed in Anglo-Saxon England nonetheless. The exceptions (camels, elephants and lions) are a reminder that the roots of alphabetical dream books did not lie in northwest Europe. The Anglo-Saxons would have known these animals, though, since they made an appearance in religious and learned sources, such as the Wonders of the East (where camels are even depicted in the section on the gold-hoarding ants), while the dream of the mouse and the lion was probably inspired by Aesop’s fable. As far as exotic animal products are concerned, Anglo-Saxons were familiar with ivory, albeit not always from elephants’ tusks, and silk would have been a precious import product. Anglo-Saxons would have had no problems, then, in adopting a non-Germanic form of dream divination, because there was sufficient overlap between their own natural world and that of the Mediterranean and Near East.

Rather than speculate on how far the knowledge of exotic animals extended in Anglo-Saxon England, it is perhaps more interesting to note that the dream books are heavily oriented towards the Mediterranean and the Near East. Asses, for instance, are a stock feature of alphabetical dream books, probably due to their intensive use in the region of origin. Their role in Anglo-Saxon England, however, was minor. Pigs, on the other hand, were important in Anglo-Saxon England, but have strongly negative associations in dream books which probably stem from the earliest Mediterranean oneirocritic sources. Some animals, moreover, are wholly absent from Anglo-Saxon dream books, even though it would have been relatively easy to expand the store of dream images. The Anglo-Saxons would have been familiar with these animals, though, since they made an appearance in religious and learned sources, such as the Wonders of the East (where camels are even depicted in the section on the gold-hoarding ants), while the dream of the mouse and the lion was probably inspired by Aesop’s fable. As far as exotic animal products are concerned, Anglo-Saxons were familiar with ivory, albeit not always from elephants’ tusks, and silk would have been a precious import product. Anglo-Saxons would have had no problems, then, in adopting a non-Germanic form of dream divination, because there was sufficient overlap between their own natural world and that of the Mediterranean and Near East.

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have understood the simple rules of associative logic underlying the way that meaning is created in dream books, but they did not act on this knowledge. So there are dogs but no cats, and some animals of cultural significance to Anglo-Saxons are completely absent, such as badgers, deer, ravens and wolves. As we have already seen from other prognostic techniques known from Anglo-Saxon sources, it would appear that the Anglo-Saxon scribes who copied alphabetical dream books were content to make do with the predictions handed down through the ages — and they were not alone in this. Badgers and deer, for instance, never made it into alphabetical dream books in the medieval period, while cats and ravens first appeared in early printed dream books from Italy and Germany in the 1470s. Wolves, finally, surface in a thirteenth-century French dream book, but occupy a marginal position.

In conclusion, the natural world that Anglo-Saxons encountered in prognostications resembled the one in which they lived, even if the world in which these prognostications had originated could not be mapped fully onto Anglo-Saxon England. The animals whose fate was predicted in prognostications tend to represent species also known in Britain, such as cattle and bees. This made it easy for Anglo-Saxons to adopt these prognostications without having to undertake major revisions. The animals that formed the input of predictions, however, tend to be more exotic, such as the camels, elephants and lions of alphabetical dream books. Since the Anglo-Saxons were familiar with religious and learned sources that featured these same animals, it was possible for them to grasp their symbolic significance. What is puzzling, though, is that the opportunity to add an indigenous touch to alphabetical dream books was not embraced, though other Anglo-Saxon scribes deliberately complicated prognostications by revising predictions or including references to exotic animals like lions, camels and gold-hoarding ants. It is possible that by diminishing the prophetic potential of predictions in brontologies and sunshine prognostications, scribes removed these techniques from the sphere of divination and drew them into a tradition of learning. Certainly, there are few signs that such prognostications ever fully realised their mantic potential, since the manuscripts in which they were transmitted were firmly situated within a monastic culture of learning. By contrast, other types of prognostications, such as alphabetical dream books, displayed an animal world that was manifestly more exotic, and that would actually

38 For a dream about cats, see Ego sum Daniel propheta […] ([Trent: Albrecht Kunne, c. 1475]; GW 7905); for dreams about ravens, see Interpretationes seu somnia Danielis prophete ([Rome: Johannes Bulle, c. 1478/9], GW 7920).
László Sándor Chardonnens have benefited from some domestication and the inclusion of species more familiar from the English landscape. Needless to say, this never happened, which suggests that if Anglo-Saxons ever dreamt of sheep, it would have been of exotic sheep.