Exeter book riddle 15: Some points for the porcupine

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Abstract

The subject of Riddle 15 of the Exeter Book is an animal that lives with its cubs in a burrow where it is hunted by an aggressive intruder. The poem describes how the family escapes through the tunnels of the burrow and how the mother reaches the open; there, she turns on her enemy to strike him with her ‘war-darts’. The proposed solutions to the riddle are usually either ‘badger’ or ‘fox’, whereas the alternative, ‘porcupine’, which was first suggested more than a century ago, has traditionally been rejected on the grounds that the porcupine is not an indigenous species in England.

However, there are several strong arguments in favour of the porcupine. In the Latin tradition, the porcupine occurs not only in the zoological writings of Pliny the Elder and Solinus, but also in the Etymologies of Isidore of Seville, which already provided the Anglo-Latin enigmatists (Aldhelm, Tatwine and Eusebius) with both facts and legends about beasts. Among these is the old belief that the porcupine is able to shoot out its long, sharp quills, especially at dogs pursuing it - just like the animal in Riddle 15. Other details and clues, too, tally with the characteristics of the porcupine, which was said to resemble the hedgehog and, therefore, was known to the Anglo-Saxons as se mara igil (‘the larger hedgehog’).

This paper explores the imaginative language and rhetoric of Riddle 15 and discusses the solutions hitherto proposed in the light of Latin animal riddling and animal lore, both of which informed the Old English riddles of the Exeter Book. In this context, the ‘porcupine’ - though exotic and long refuted - emerges as the most likely solution to Riddle 1.
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I

Among the ninety-five Old English riddles of the Exeter Book (Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS 3501), there are at least fifteen poems about animals. This number, however, includes only poems

whose solutions have met with universal approval or which are considered very likely to deal with some animal. The reasons why many of the Exeter Book riddles have remained unsolved are well known. Firstly, unlike the earlier Latin riddles that were written or copied in Anglo-Saxon England, the Old English poems are not accompanied by their solutions in the manuscript and only rarely offer any textual clues such as runic letters or words spelt backwards naming their subject; secondly, although the debt to Latin riddle-making is manifest throughout the collection, many of the Old English riddles have no earlier analogue or source; thirdly, the text of the final group of riddles (nos. 61–95) concluding the Exeter Book is often so defective and fragmentary that some items are actually insoluble.

The animal riddles are: no. 7, the ‘swan’; no. 8, the ‘nightingale’; no. 9, the ‘cuckoo’; no. 10, the ‘barnacle goose’; nos. 12, 38 and 72, all describing an ox; no. 13, the ‘ten chickens’; no. 15, which is discussed in detail below, where I shall argue that the most likely solution is ‘porcupine’; no. 24, with the answer, ‘jay’ (OE higora), spelled out in runes; no. 42, ‘cock and hen’, again with runic clues; no. 47, the famous ‘bookworm’; no. 57, probably swallows or similar birds; no. 77, the ‘oyster’; and no. 85, the ‘fish in the river’. More uncertain are nos. 20 (a falcon or hawk?), 36 (a sea monster?), 74 (a water bird?), 75 (a hunting dog?), 76 (a hen?), 78 (a water animal?) and 82 (a crab?). Individual animals also occur in the long poem about the Creation (no. 40), in the Latin riddle no. 90, or in nos. 19 and 64, both of which describe a ship in terms of a man riding on a horse and carrying a hawk. In addition to these, allusions to animals are made in some riddles whose solutions are mostly everyday objects, such as no. 17, the ‘beehive’, referring to the bees that are kept in it, or the two ‘inkhorn’ riddles (nos. 88 and 93), with

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their descriptions of the stag and its antlers, from which the inkhorns are made.

Written in the south of England towards the end of the tenth century, the Exeter Book contains the oldest extant collection of vernacular riddles in Western Europe. Yet, riddling is an ancient art, and we already find riddles about animals in the various Latin collections of *aenigmata* (riddles) that have come down to us and that where either known or produced in Anglo-Saxon England. The oldest of these are the ones written by Symphosius, an otherwise unknown secular Late Latin writer who lived in the 4th or 5th century and whose series of one hundred hexametrical, three-line riddles set the standard for all later collections of riddles.2 Symphosius’ *Aenigmata*, which also circulated in the early medieval *Anthologia Latina*,3 encompass a wide range of subjects, both animate and inanimate, including a remarkable number of animals such as the fish, the chicken, the viper, the bookworm, the spider, the snail, the frog, the tortoise, the mole, the ant, the fly, the weevil, the mouse, the crane, the crow, the bat, the hedgehog, the louse, the fabulous phoenix, the bull, the wolf, the fox, the goat, the hog, the mule, the tigress, the mythical centaur and the sponge.

In imitation of Symphosius, the Anglo-Saxon scholar and bishop Aldhelm of Malmesbury (d. 709/10) wrote one hundred riddles in Latin verse.4 His splendid century of riddles provide a virtuoso display of the author’s command of hexametrical verse and its various patterns, which is the reason why Aldhelm himself included them in his extensive work on Latin metre. In his treatise, Aldhelm, “the riddling saint”,5 praises Symphosius for his metrical skill and

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playful language, and quotes excerpts from several of his riddles, including those about the spider, the ant, the weevil and the hog. Aldhelm’s own *Enigmata* are generally longer and less light-hearted than those of his model, yet both collections share a notable fondness for the animal world. More than a third of Aldhelm’s riddles deal with beasts – both real and mythical, indigenous and exotic – and it appears that Aldhelm, although he was inspired by the Late Latin poet, carefully avoided writing about those animals that had already been dealt with by the latter. In his menagerie, we now find the leech, the silkworm, the water-spider or pond-skater (as if to complement Symphosius’ bookworm and spider), the crab and the bizarre ant-lion, the locust (and not the equally voracious weevil), the midge, the hornet and the bee (Symphosius had only the fly), the mussel, the cuttlefish and the sea-fish (not the freshwater fish), the salamander and the devilish serpent (instead of the frog and viper), together with the cock, the peacock and the stork (cf. Symphosius’ chicken and crane); Aldhelm added the dove, the owl, the nightingale, the raven, the swallow, the ostrich and the eagle (to Symphosius’ crow), the sow (to the hog), the steer (to the bull), the ram (to the goat), the beaver, the dog, the cat and the weasel, as well as the camel, the elephant and the lion (to the tigress); and since Symphosius had already included the centaur from Greek mythology and the legendary phoenix, Aldhelm took the Minotaur and the unicorn.

Following Aldhelm, the Mercian grammarian and archbishop Tatwine (d. 734) composed forty short verse riddles, to which the

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8 An ant-like insect described by Gregory the Great and Isidore of Seville; see Lapidge and Rosier 1985, 249, note 16.
Anglo-Saxon Eusebius (perhaps Hwætberht, an 8th-century Northumbrian abbot) added another sixty to complete the traditional one hundred.\(^9\) There is only one animal riddle among Tatwine’s *Enigmata* – the ‘squirrel’ – but Eusebius added many more, again quite unsystematically, covering quadrupeds and other land animals (the ox, the cow, the calf, the tiger, the panther, the chameleon, the leopard, the hippopotamus, the lizard, the scorpion and various kinds of serpents), birds (the chicken, the stork, the ostrich, the owl and the parrot) and water animals (the fish, the remora or ship-retaining fish, the torpedo fish and the water-serpent) as well as the fabulous dragon and the chimera.

It has been observed that the anonymous poet(s) who wrote the Exeter Book riddles must have been familiar with these or similar collections. Anthologies of Latin *aenigmata* were already compiled for school use in England in the 10th century. There are two codices extant, copied at Canterbury before the Conquest, containing Symphosius’ riddles alongside those by Aldhelm, Tatwine and Eusebius, and there must have been more such class-books both in England and on the Continent.\(^{10}\) The influence of Latin riddle-making on the Old English collection is arguably most evident in the fact that two items are close translations from Aldhelm: Riddle 35 (the ‘mail-coat’) and the incomplete Riddle 40 (the ‘Creation’), by far the longest riddle in the Exeter Book,

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running to 108 lines. Moreover, towards the end of the collection and for no apparent reason, the compiler incorporates a poem (Riddle 90) that is written entirely in Latin. Its five hexameters are composed in the vein of the Latin *aenigmata*, but there is no analogue in any of the extant collections, and since its character is obscure and its lines are partly corrupt, none of the proposed answers has gained general acceptance. Besides such adaptations and interactions, there are several Exeter Book riddles that have direct or indirect models and counterparts in Latin – a fact that is hard to overlook, even though it has been strenuously denied by some critics. The Exeter Book poems, therefore, must be seen as part of a long-standing tradition of riddle-making that appears to have been particularly favoured in the Anglo-Saxon world of learning, and any scholarly attempt to solve them should include the Latin *aenigmata*. It is important to realise that these are learned and bookish pieces, though often witty and playful, composed to teach as well as to entertain and to stand as elegant examples of how much could be said – and left unsaid – in just a few words.

Of the animal riddles in the Exeter Book, the ‘bookworm’ (Riddle 47) and the ‘fish in the river’ (Riddle 85) are based upon Latin models from Symphosius’ *Aenigmata*. Riddle 85 is a brief series of antithetical comparisons between the animal (the fish) and its habitat (the river), and it can serve as an excellent illustration not only of how far the dependence could go, but also of how skilfully the poet expanded his source:

\[
\text{Nis min sele swige, ne ic sylfa hlud ymb [...] unc dryhten scop sip ætsomne. Ic eom swiftre þonne he, þragon strengra, he þrohtigra.} \\
\text{Hwilum ic me reste; he sceal yrnan forð. Ic him in wunige a þenden ic lifge; gif wit unc gedælað, me bið deðað wiod.}
\]

[My hall is not silent, nor am I myself loud / about . . .; the Lord created us / a journey together. I am swifter than he, / at times stronger, he (is)]

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12 As edited by Krapp and Dobbie 1936, 238; there is a gap in line 2.
more enduring. / [5] Sometimes I rest; he must run forth. / I dwell in him forever, as long as I live; / if we two separate, I am doomed to death.]  

This ultimately goes back to a three-line riddle by Symphosius about the same subject (*Flumen et piscis*):

> Est domus in terris clara quae voce resultat.  
> Ipsa domus resonat, tacitus sed non sonat hospes.  
> Ambo tamen currunt, hospes simul et domus una.  

[There is a house on earth which echoes with a clear voice. / The house itself resounds, but the silent guest makes no sound. / Yet both run on together, the guest and the house.]  

The basic elements are all there: the metaphorical framework (the house and its occupant), the antithesis of the silent fish in the noisy river, and their travelling together. Yet, the Old English poet does not just give a boring paraphrase of his charming little source; he rather explores the imagery more extensively by adding a vivid description of the common journey (ll. 3–5), and by making the dumb fish the speaker of the poem – a paradox in itself.

II

There is no such obvious parallel for Riddle 15. It is a much longer piece; in fact, it is the longest of all the animal riddles in the Exeter Book:

> Hals is min hwit ond heafod fealo,  
> sidan swa some. Swift ic eom on féhe,

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13 The translations in this paper are, unless otherwise indicated, my own.  
beadowæpen bere. Me on bæce standað  
her swylce swe on hleorum. Hlifiað tu  
eaean ofer eagum. Ordum ic steppe  
in grene græs. Me bið gyrm wítod  
gíf mec onhæle an onfindeð  
wælgrim wiga þær ic wic buge,  
bold mid bærnum, ond ic bide þær  
mid geogûðcnosle hwonne gæst cume  
to durum minum, him biþ deað wítod.  
Forþon ic sceal of eðle eaforan mine  
forhtmod fergan, fleame nergan,  
gíf he me æfterweard ealles weorþed;  
hine berað breost. Ic his bidan ne dear,  
repes on geruman – nele þæt ræd teale –  
ac ic sceal fromlice feðemundum  
þurh steapne beorg stræte wyrcan.  
Eæþe ic ðæg freora feorh genergan,  
gíf ic ðægburge mot mine gelædan  
on degolne weg þurh dune þyrrel  
swæse ond gesibbe; ic me siþæn ne þearf  
wælhwelpes wig wiht onsittan.  
Gif se niðseaþa nearwe stige  
me on swaþe seceþ, ne tosæleþ him  
on þam gegnþæþe guþgemotes,  
siþæn ic þurh hylles hrof geræce  
ond þurh hest hriðo hildepilum  
laðgewinnan þam þæ ic longe fleah.15  

[My neck is white and my head fallow, / (my) sides likewise. I am swift in  
walking, / (I) bear battle-weapons. On my back stand / hairs just as on (my) cheeks; two ears / [5] rise above my eyes. I step on toes / in the green  
grass. I am doomed to sorrow / if one bloodthirsty warrior finds me / hidden where I inhabit (my) dwelling, / (my) abode with (my) children, and  
(if) I wait there / [10] with (my) young progeny until the stranger comes  
to my doors, they are doomed to death. / Therefore I must carry my off-  
spring / from home in fear, save (them) by flight, / if he pursues me hard,  
/ [15] crawling on (his) breast. I dare not await him, / (this) cruel one in  
(my) place – that would be foolish – / but I must boldly work with my  
forepaws / a road through the steep mound. / I may easily save the lives  
of (my) freeborn / [20] if I can lead my family / along a secret way  
through a hole in the hill, / (my) beloved and related ones; then I need not  
/ fear the attack of the slaughter-whelp. / If the hateful foe follows the nar-  
row passage / [25] on my track, he will not fail to find / a fight on the  
opposing path, / when I get through the roof of the hill / and violently  
strike with (my) war-darts / the hated enemy whom I long (have) fled.]

15 Krapp and Dobbie 1936, 188; my punctuation.
The poem falls into four sections, each introducing a new element or theme. These are: the description of the animal (ll. 1–6a), the enemy and the danger for the young (ll. 6b–11), the escape through the burrow (ll. 12–23) and the encounter between the two opponents in the open (ll. 24–29). As often in riddles, both Latin and Old English, the subject of the riddle is at the same time the speaker of the poem. In the opening lines, the animal describes itself, making explicit reference to its neck, head, sides, back, hair, cheeks, ears, eyes and toes. Further clues refer to the colour of its pelage (ll. 1–2a: the neck is white, the head and sides are fallow), its locomotion (ll. 2b and 5b: it walks swiftly on its toes) and its habitat (ll. 5b–6a: the green grass). This is a rather matter-of-fact portrayal, almost like a passage in a field guide. The only metaphorical expression in this first section concerns the ‘battle-weapons’ (beadowæpen; l. 3a) that the animal is said to bear, and which seem to denote some effective means of self-defence or aggression.

The language of war continues into the second section (ll. 6b–11), where the animal’s enemy is introduced as a ‘blood-thirsty warrior’ (wælgrim wiga, l. 8a) and murderous intruder. It is clear from the feminine adjective onhæle (‘hidden’) in line 7 that the speaker is the mother animal. We learn that the lives with her cubs in their ‘dwelling’ (wic, l. 8) or ‘abode’ (bold, l. 9), and that the ‘stranger’ (gæst, l. 10) lurking behind the ‘doors’ (durum l. 11) would kill the young if the mother stayed at home with them. There is a mournful note in this passage, intoned by the portentous half-line Me bið gyrn wîtod (literally: ‘sorrow is appointed to me’, l. 6b) and intensified by its shattering echo him biþ deð wîtod (‘death is appointed to them’, l. 11b) at the end of the long paratactic construction.

The third and longest section (ll. 12–23) gives a detailed account of the escape and further specifies that the dwelling is a burrow in a mound or hill. It is the family’s ‘home’ (eðle, l. 12), the ‘place’ or ‘room’ (geruman, l. 16) in which they live. To escape from it, the ‘fearful’ (forhtmod, l. 13) mother will not use the entrance, where the enemy is waiting, but will work a new ‘road’ (stræte, l. 18), a ‘hidden’ or ‘secret way’ (degolne weg, l. 21) through the burrow in the ‘steep mound’ (steapne beorg, l. 18), quickly and ‘boldly’ (fromlice, l. 17) digging a tunnel through the
'hill' (dune, l. 21) with her ‘forepaws’ – literally: with her ‘walking-hands’ (febemundum, l. 17) – to reach the open. Again, the strikingly personal and sorrowful tone is strongly reminiscent of the so-called Old English elegies of the Exeter Book, with their plaintive accounts of the misfortune, separation and danger that have afflicted the lone and outcast speakers of these poems.\textsuperscript{16}

The remaining verses of the riddle (ll. 24–29) first again refer to the escape route, this time called the ‘narrow passage’ (nearwe stige, l. 24)\textsuperscript{17} leading to the top or ‘roof of the hill’ (bylles hrof, l. 27). There, the two opponents meet for a decisive fight or ‘battle-meeting’ (guðgemotes, l. 26), and the poet returns to the martial language of the first half of the riddle: the ‘hateful foe’ (nið-sceafpa, l. 24), who has hunted the family through the burrow, is waiting on the ‘opposing path’ (gegnaðe, l. 26), ready for his ‘attack’ (wig, l. 23); but the mother animal now goes on the offensive. Turning on her enemy, she is able to gain the upper hand thanks to her ‘war-darts’ (hildepilum, l. 28), which appear to be identical with the ‘battle-weapons’ (beadowæpen) of line 3 and which finally strike the enemy.

There are altogether seven terms employed to characterise the cubs, each distinct from the other and used only once in the poem. The mother fondly refers to the cubs as her ‘children’ (bearnum, l. 9), her ‘young progeny’ (geoguðcnosle, l. 10) and her ‘offspring’ (eaforan, l. 12); they are ‘freeborn’ (freora, l. 19) like noble sons and daughters, and they are the mother’s ‘family’ (mægburge, l. 20), her ‘beloved and related ones’ (swæse ond gesibbe, l. 22). Similar lexical variation is employed in referring to the unrelenting enemy: he is a ‘bloodthirsty’ – literally ‘slaughter-fierce’ – ‘warrior’ (wælgrim wiga, l. 8), an unwelcome ‘stranger’ (gaest, l. 10), a fierce and ‘cruel’ one (refes, l. 16), a murderous hound or ‘slaughter-whelp’ (wælhwelpes, l. 23), a ‘hateful foe’ (niðsceafpa, l. 24), or simply ‘the hated enemy’ (ladgewinnan, l. 29). Not much more is said about him, except


that his ‘breast carries him’ (*hine berað breost*, l. 15), which means that he has to crouch and crawl to track his quarry through the tunnels and chambers of the burrow, for he is bigger than those he intends to kill. The poet is clearly well-versed in the “heroic register”, as can be seen from the dramatic clustering of different compounds revolving around the ‘war’ (*wig*, l. 23) between the two adversaries: both *wælgrim* (l. 8) and *wælhwelpes* (l. 23) go back to OE *wæl* ‘slaughter, carnage’, whereas the first elements of *beadowæpen* (l. 3) and *hildepilum* (l. 28) are OE *beadu* ‘battle’ and *bild* ‘war, combat’ respectively, and in *guégemotes* (l. 26) there is the OE lexeme *gué* ‘battle, war’. No fewer than six expressions in this riddle are hapax legomena, and the poet never tires of inventing a new word or metaphor when circumscribing the main elements of his story and its protagonists, adding colour after colour and layer after layer to complete the picture. It is, indeed, a highly elaborate and effective way of simultaneously “revealing and concealing” the answer to the riddle, and it is done here with particular inspiration and skill.

III

Over the years, scholars have disagreed about the solution to Riddle 15, and some have even mused that the poem is not a riddle at all, but rather an elegiac meditation lacking the usual for-

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19 *geogudčnosle* (l. 10), *fethemundum* (l. 17), *wælhwelpes* (l. 23), *niðsceafa* (l. 24), *gegnaðe* (l. 26), *ladgewinnan* (l. 29).

mula, ‘Say what I am called’, which concludes many other pieces in the Exeter Book.21

Yet, who is the speaker in this “drama of heroic encounter”;22 who is the mother who tells us how she will flee from her home to save her young and how she will defeat her enemy in the end? It is generally agreed that the subject to be guessed is an animal, a mammal and a quadruped (cf. the forepaws in l. 17).23 Most modern editors, translators and critics have favoured either the answer ‘badger’ or, more recently, ‘fox’; but also ‘weasel’, ‘porcupine’ and ‘hedgehog’ have been put forward.

‘Badger’ (OE brocc24) was first suggested by Dietrich as early as 1859 and supported by Prehn (1883), Tupper (1910), Wyatt (1912), Trautmann (1915), Mackie (1934), Swaen (1941), Baum (1963), Nelson (1975) and Whitman (1982), among others.25 This solution is chiefly based on the badger’s coloration and its habit of digging extensive burrows or setts. Both characteristics have been described well enough by modern zoologists, but interestingly, they are not mentioned at all in the few handbooks on animals that were known in Anglo-Saxon England. Although the Eurasian badger was once a common, if shy and nocturnal in-

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22 Nelson 1975, 449. Similarly, Irving 1994, 202, discusses the “heroic subtext” of Riddle 15, but he wrongly concludes: “The animal, cowering and desperate, cannot confront its enemy and fight formally out in the open”.
habitant of the woodlands and open fields of Europe, it is virtually absent from the canonical works of classical and early medieval zoology: in the *Natural history* of Pliny the Elder and in the *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville, the animal is merely mentioned in passing and the first detailed description of its general characteristics only occurs in the *Liber de natura rerum* (c. 1240) of the 13th-century encyclopedist Thomas of Cantimpré.\textsuperscript{26}

As far as the creature’s coloration is concerned, the riddler says that its head and flanks are *fealo*, which – like the etymologically related ModE ‘fallow’ and German ‘falb’ or ‘fahl’ – can denote either a pale yellow shading into brown, like “withered grass or leaves”, or the dusky grey and “muddy” appearance of the sea.\textsuperscript{27} A similar spectrum can be observed in the OE compounds *æppel–*, *æsc−*, *dun−* and *musfealu*, ranging from the brownish yellow of an apple to the dark greyish or “dun” hue of ashes or a mouse. Even if we look at the occurrence of *fealo* within the Exeter Book alone,
it is difficult to determine its precise meaning. In The Phoenix, it refers to the pale, yellowish flame that consumes the bird in its nest, whilst the poet of The Wanderer uses the formulaic expression of the *fealwe wegas* for the open sea. In the riddles, the adjective occurs – outside our poem – in two other instances: in Riddle 55, *fealuwa* is used for the brownish grey or ashy bark of the holly, and in Riddle 73, the pale brownish sides (*sidan*) of the spear or lance are said to be *fealwe*. Although the prevailing meaning of *fealo* in the riddles appears to be something like ‘brownish grey’ or ‘ashy’, the translation of *fealo* in our poem depends on the accepted solution to the riddle, rather than vice versa. If the poet actually wanted to describe a badger’s fur, the adjective would be appropriate when speaking of its general coloration, since the dorsal and lateral hair of the European badger does appear “grey from a distance”.30

Things are, however, different with the animal’s head. The badger’s most distinctive mark is its white head, with its dark stripes on either side of the face, including the eyes; it is almost like a mask, leaving the neck only partly white, while the throat is dark like the underparts of the body.31 The animal of Riddle 15, by contrast, has a *fealo* head and a white neck (l. 1), and nothing is said about the striking, black-and-white striped face.32 Most supporters of this answer would tolerate such an inaccuracy and point to the well-known fact that the badger is an excellent and fast burrower. Armed with long claws on its forepaws, it is capable of building an underground labyrinth of tunnels and chambers; there, badgers often live in groups or clans together with their young.33 Their enemy and *wælhwelp* (l. 23), then, could be any predator that takes badger cubs, such as a fox, a wolf, an intrud-

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28 The Phoenix, ll. 74, 218 and 311 (Krapp and Dobbie 1936, 96, 100 and 102); The Wanderer, l. 46 (ibid. 135).
29 Riddle 55, l. 10, and Riddle 73, l. 18 (Krapp and Dobbie 1936, 208 and 233).
31 Corbet and Harris 1991, 415.
32 Trautmann 1915, 77, suggested changing *Hals* and *headfod*, but a ‘white head’ and a ‘fealo neck’ would still be vague and not account for the distinctive dark stripes on the badger’s head.
33 Corbet and Harris 1991, 415 and 420.
ing boar from another badger clan, or a dog. Badger sows, in fact, “aggressively defend cubs against potential predators”, and most will use their powerful jaws and front claws if necessary.

Thus, the creature’s mysterious ‘battle-weapons’ (l. 3) and ‘wardarts’ (l. 28) have been interpreted metaphorically as the badger’s sharp claws and teeth, a view which is partly sustained by two riddles in Aldhelm’s collection, where the dog’s jaws and the beaver’s teeth are likened to weapons of war.

Yet, despite the evidence, which can be found in favour of the answer ‘badger’, the fact remains that the description of the creature’s head in the opening line does not fit the distinctive facial pattern of the badger. Nor, as has been unanimously observed, is the stocky badger particularly swift of foot (cf. l. 2: Swift ic eom on fepe). This has led Brett (1927), and later Williamson (1977) and Pinsker/Ziegler (1985), to conclude that the only viable solution to Riddle 15 is ‘fox’ (OE fox) or ‘vixen’. The throat of the fox, they argue, is white, and its head and flanks are fealo, which Williamson – guided more by his answer than by linguistic evidence – interprets as “ruddy or tawny”. Supporters of this solution further highlight the erect ears as a main characteristic of the fox, along with its swift walk on its toes (cf. ll. 4–6). Nothing, however, is said about the typical long bushy tail that makes the animal so easily recognisable and distinguishes it from other predators like the wolf. Moreover, even those who argue for the fox

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34 Corbet and Harris 1991, 422–3.
35 Corbet and Harris 1991, 420.
36 Aldhelm, Enigm. 10 and 56 (Glorie 1968, 393 and 449).
38 Jordan 1903, 66–8.
40 Williamson 1977, 173. The translation “fallow” (as in Williamson’s glossary, ibid. 421) would be perfectly acceptable if one wanted to make out a case for the fox, whose coat is yellow-brown, varying “from sandy colour to (rarely) henna red” (Corbet and Harris 1991, 354).
41 Brett 1927, 259, in an attempt to account for the omission, postulates that the fox’s tail “might be likened to a weapon” (i.e. the ‘battle-weapons’ of line 3), but this suggestion can be dismissed as highly improbable.
concede that it is not a very keen digger and burrower. Foxes may
dig earths in banks and occasionally enlarge the disused burrows
of rabbits and badgers, but they prefer to take cover above ground
and generally choose natural holes in rocks or under sheds as
earths or dens.42 What is more, classical and medieval tradition
assigns the fox an altogether different role: far from being fearful
(forhtmod, l. 13), the Reynard of animal poetry, natural history
and folklore is a sagacious thief and wily trickster, as in Symphos-
ius’ riddle about the fox (Vulpes):

Exiguum corpus sed cor mihi corpore maius.
Sum versuta dolis, arguto callida sensu;
Et fera sum sapiens, sapiens fera si qua vocatur.43

[Small is my body, but greater is my wisdom. / I am versed in trickery, cun-
ning, keen-witted; / and a wise beast am I, if any beast is termed wise.]

This proverbial astuteness is exemplified by Pliny the Elder, who
notes that, before crossing a frozen river, a fox will gauge the
thickness of the ice by putting its ear to the frozen surface.44 In the
same vein, Isidore of Seville reports that when a fox is hungry, it
lies on its back pretending to be dead and waits for unwary birds
that take it for a cadaver45 – a story that already appears among
the allegorized animal tales of the early Christian Physiologus and
that became part of the later medieval bestiaries.46

42 Corbet and Harris 1991, 359.
43 Symphosius, Aenigm. 34, Glorie 1968, 655, with Ohl’s translation which
I reprint here.
44 Pliny, Nat. hist. VIII.103. For the fox in classical literature and thought,
see M. Wellmann, “Fuchs”, Pauly’s Realencyklopädie 7: 189–92;
45 Isidore, Etym. XII.ii.29, after Gregory the Great, Moralia 19.1; see Isidore
de Séville, Étymologies, livre XII: Des animaux, ed. and trans. Jacques
Nikolaus Henkel, Studien zum Physiologus im Mittelalter, Hermaea 38
(Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1976) 188–9; Wilma George and Brunsdon Yapp,
The Naming of the Beasts: Natural History in the Medieval Bestiary (Lon-
don: Duckworth, 1991) 70–1; Debra Hassig, Medieval Bestiaries: Text,
The answer ‘weasel’ (OE wesle\textsuperscript{47}) was offered by Young in 1944 as an alternative to Dietrich’s ‘badger’ and Brett’s ‘fox’, but, for obvious reasons, it has found no support in later criticism.\textsuperscript{48} Weasels are very small and slender carnivores with tiny heads and short hair that is “russet to ginger-brown”, except for the throat, which is white like the fox’s; they are not burrowers but use dens and nests taken over from rodents and birds.\textsuperscript{49} Young thinks that the weasel’s crawling enemy (cf. l. 15) might be a snake, but – as Williamson rightly notes – Isidore of Seville points out that it is, on the contrary, the weasel that preys on snakes.\textsuperscript{50} If the poet had indeed wanted to write about the weasel, he would undoubtedly have included the legend of the animal’s aural conception, which was known from classical and medieval animal lore\textsuperscript{51} and which had inspired Aldhelm to compose his riddle about the weasel (\textit{Mustela}):

Discolor in curvis conversor quadripes antris  
Pugnas exercens dira cum gente draconum.  
Non ego dilecta turgesco prole mariti,  
Nec fecunda viro sobolem sic edidit alvus,  
Residuae matres ut sumunt semina partus;  
Quin magis ex aure praegnantur viscera fetu.\textsuperscript{52} (lines 1–6)

[A motley-coloured quadruped, I dwell in curving caves, / engaging in battles with the deadly race of dragons. / I do not become pregnant with beloved children, / nor does my womb, made fertile by a male, produce offspring / [5] in the way other mothers receive the sperm of the embryo. / Instead, my inwards become pregnant with child from my ear.\textsuperscript{53}]

\textsuperscript{47} Jordan 1903, 41–3.  
\textsuperscript{49} Corbet and Harris 1991, 388 and 395.  
\textsuperscript{50} Williamson 1977, 174; see Isidore, \textit{Etym.} XII.iii.3 (Lindsay 1911): “Serpentes etiam et mures persequitur”; Pliny, \textit{Nat. hist.} XXIX.60.  
\textsuperscript{52} Aldhelm, \textit{Enigm.} 82 Glorie 1968, 501.  
The history of the ‘porcupine’ solution is almost as long as that of the ‘badger’. It was first proposed by Walz in 1896 and was supported by Holthausen eleven years later, but it has found no further acceptance since.54 In his article, Walz argues that the porcupine, though it does not occur in England, was known to the Anglo-Saxons as se mara igil (‘the larger hedgehog’), a name that is listed in pre-Conquest glossaries for Latin hystrix (‘porcupine’).55 Walz notes that the appearance and characteristics of the animal described in the riddle very closely fit the porcupine – rather than the badger – and that the ‘war-darts’ of line 28 must refer “to a weapon which is thrown”; the passage, he concludes, contains an allusion to the fabulous mode of defence, the ‘shooting’ of quills, which the porcupine is said to practise when attacked. This was known to Pliny [the Elder] and has long been a popular belief.56

Picking up Walz’s ‘porcupine’ solution, Holthausen, in one of his brief notes, presents further evidence by quoting the late Roman writer Claudian, whose poem about the porcupine (De hystrice) contains some striking parallels to our riddle. Though one critic has called Walz’s and Holthausen’s arguments “tempting”,57 their solution has been rejected on the grounds that the porcupine “is not an English animal”.58 This is, of course, true. Outside Africa and Asia (and perhaps northern Greece and Albania), the Old World porcupine only occurs in Italy, where it can be found between Sicily and Tuscany, and where the North African Hystrix cristata or crested porcupine was possibly introduced by the Ro-

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55 Other Old English glosses are: se mara il and simply il. See Thomas Wright, Anglo-Saxon and Old English Vocabularies, ed. R. P. Wülcker, vol. 1, 2nd ed. (London, 1884) 25 and 430; Bosworth and Toller 1882–98, 587, and Supplement, Toller 1908–21, 589 (s. v. ‘igil’); Jordan 1903, 73.

56 Walz 1896, 262.

57 Wyatt 1912, 74, who favours ‘badger’.

58 Brett 1927, 259, who argues for ‘fox’; similarly Young 1944, 305, proposing ‘weasel’. 
There, Pliny the Elder (23–79 AD) might even have seen a living specimen; in his *Natural history*, he writes:

Hystrix generat India et Africa spinea contectas cute irenaceorum genere, sed hystrici longiores aculei et, cum intendit cutem, missiles: ora urguentium figit canum et paulo longius iaculatur. hibernis autem se mensibus condit, quae natura multis et ante omnia ursis.

[The porcupine is a native of India and Africa. It is covered with a prickly skin of the hedgehogs’ kind, but the spines of the porcupine are longer and they dart out when it draws the skin tight: it pierces the mouths of hounds when they close with it, and shoots out at them when further off. In the winter months it hibernates, as is the nature of many animals and before all of bears.]

The supposed shooting out of the porcupine’s quills is already mentioned in the spurious ninth book of Aristotle’s *Historia animalium*; and in the late second and early third centuries AD, a detailed account of it was given in the Greek works of Aelian and of Oppian, who presents a particularly vivid description of the enmity between the porcupine and the hunting dog. Similarly, the Greek-Latin author Claudian (Claudius Claudianus, d. after 404) elaborates on the dreadful ‘missiles’ in his poem *De hystrice*, which – like the Exeter Book riddle – opens with a description of the animal’s appearance:

mentitae cornua saetae
summa fronte rigent. oculis rubet igneus ardor.
parva sub hirsuto catuli vestigia dorso.
... stat corpore toto
silva minax, iaculis rigens in proelia crescit
picturata seges; quorum cute fixa tenaci
alba subit radix, alternantesque colorum
tincta vices, spatiis intermigrantibus ...

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60 Pliny, *Nat. hist.* VIII.125, Rackham 1938–63, 3: 88–9; I reprint Rackham’s translation.


[Stiff bristles like horns stand up from [the porcupine’s] forehead. Red and fierce are his fiery eyes. Under his bristly back are short legs like those of a small dog . . . All over the body grows a threatening thicket: a harvest of brightly coloured spears bristles up ready for battle. The roots of these weapons are white and are firmly fixed in the animal’s skin. The quills are themselves parti-coloured with black bands . . .]

Claudian continues:

Sed non haec acies ritu silvestris echini
fixa manet. crebris propugnat iactibus ulтро
et longe sua membra tegit, tortumque per auras
evolat excusso nativum missile tergo.
interdum . . . sequentem
vulnerat; interdum positis velut ordine castris
terrificum densa mucronum verberat unda
et consanguineis hastilibus asperat armos . . .
. . . fert omnia secum:
se pharetra, sese iaculo, sese utitur arcu.
unum animal cunctas bellorum possidet artes.63

[But his armoury is not fixed like that of the woodland hedgehog. He can take the offensive and also protect himself at a distance by the frequent discharge of these darts of his, hurling through the air the flying missiles which his own back supplies. At times . . . he wounds his pursuers; at times he entrenches himself and strikes his foe by the discharge of a storm of these terrible weapons which bristle on his shoulders out of which they grow . . . He carries all his own arms; himself his own quiver, arrow, and bow. Alone he possesses all the resources of war.]

In support of their solution, Walz and Holthausen quote Pliny and Claudian respectively, but neither of them looks into the medieval Latin tradition of natural history and animal lore, in which the porcupine occurs, too. Here, the late Roman polyhistor Gaius Iulius Solinus was an important intermediary, for, drawing heavily on Pliny’s monumental work, he offered a much shorter and handier compendium that proved more suitable for copying. In his Collectanea rerum memorabilium, compiled in the early 3rd century AD, Solinus notes about the porcupine:

hystrix . . . erinacii similis, spinis tergum hispida, quas plerumque laxatas iaculatione emittit voluntaria, ut assiduis aculeorum nimbis canes vulneret ingruentes.64

64 Solinus, Collect. 30.38, ed. T. Mommsen, 2nd ed. (Berlin, 1895) 135.
[The porcupine . . . resembles the hedgehog; its back is covered with prickly spines that it often discharges and shoots out at will to wound the pursuing dogs with a storm of stings.]

From Solinus’ Collectanea, the legend of the porcupine entered the Etymologies of Isidore of Seville (c. 560–636), which in turn became the primary source for the bestiaries and the encyclopedias of the 13th and 14th centuries. As often, Isidore follows Solinus almost word for word and only adds an explanation of the name ‘histrix’:

Histrix animal in Africa erinacii simile, vocatum ab stridore spinarum, quas tergo laxatas emittit ut canes vulneret insequentes.65

[The porcupine is an African animal resembling the hedgehog, named after the hiss of its spines that it discharges from its back and shoots out to wound the pursuing dogs.]

Throughout the Middle Ages, from Isidore to Albertus Magnus, the legend of the porcupine was retold and taken for granted;66 and it was another five hundred years before the “fretfull porpentine” (Hamlet) stopped darting its quills through the encyclopedias and emblem books of early modern Europe.67 Even when what were probably the first captive species of Hystrix were brought to England shortly after 1100, Pliny’s and Isidore’s authority was not questioned. In his History of the English Kings, William of Malmesbury (d. ca. 1143) gives us a unique first-hand account of the royal zoo at Woodstock near Oxford, where – among other outlandish pets such as lions, leopards, lynxes and camels – King Henry I kept a porcupine he had been given as a present by a Frenchman. This most interesting passage reads (in Mynors’ translation):

65 Isidore, Etym. XII.ii.35 (Lindsay 1911); cf. André 1986, 116–9.
He [i.e. Henry] had put there an animal called a porcupine \textit{(strix)}, sent him by William of Montpellier, which is mentioned by Pliny in the eighth book of his \textit{Natural History} and by Isidore in his \textit{Etymologies}; they report the existence of an animal in Africa, called by the Africans a kind of hedgehog, covered with bristling spines, which it has the power to shoot out at dogs pursuing it. The spines, as I have seen for myself, are a palm or more in length, and sharp at both ends, something like goose quills at the point where the feather-part leaves off, but rather thicker, and as it were black and white.\footnote{William of Malmesbury, \textit{Gesta regum Anglorum} V.409,2–3, ed. and trans. R. A. B. Mynors, R. M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998–9) 1: 741; cf. 2: 372–3.}

William of Malmesbury’s observations are amazingly accurate, even though a porcupine’s sharp spines are much longer than he claims, with a length of up to thirty-five centimetres. They are, in fact, thick and stiff hairs that cover the animal’s head and body.\footnote{Nowak 1999, 1644.}

Porcupines fan and rattle them when they encounter other animals, and if they are bothered, “they stamp their feet, whirr their quills, and finally charge backward, attempting to drive the thicker, shorter quills of the rump into the enemy”.\footnote{Nowak 1999, 1646–7.} Thus, the spines are easily detached – but, of course, they cannot be thrown or shot out as was once believed.

V

The crested porcupine (\textit{Hystrix cristata}) has conspicuously erect and long quills along its head, sides and back that can be raised into a crest. These must be the \textit{beadowæpen} and \textit{her} (ll. 3–4) of our riddle. The poet explains that the creature ‘bears’ these ‘battle-weapons’, and he continues: \textit{Me on bæce standað / her swylce swe on hleorum} (‘On my back stand / hairs just as on my cheeks’, ll. 3–4); and the same spines are again referred to when the animal finally hurls its ‘war-darts’ (\textit{hildepilum}) at the enemy (ll. 28–9). The term \textit{hildepil} is one of the key clues in the riddle, since the informed reader will identify the powerful ‘battle-weapons’ and ‘hairs’ of the opening passage as the typical pointed and arrow-like quills of the porcupine, which were said
to keep a pursuing hound at bay. The only other instance in which OE *hildepil* and *beadowæpen* occur together is in Riddle 17 of the Exeter Book, which follows our poem in the manuscript on the facing folio (f. 105a). The speaker of the riddle – and the subject to be guessed – is the beehive, which declares:

\[
\ldots \text{me of hrife fleoga} \quad \text{hyldepilas.}
\]

\[
\text{Hwilum ic sweartum \quad swelgan onginne}
\]

\[
\text{brunum beadowæpnum, \quad bitrum ordum, eglum \quad attorsperum.}^{71}
\]

(lines 6–9a)

[. . .war-darts fly from my belly. / Sometimes I begin to swallow dark / brown battle-weapons, bitter spikes, / hideous venom-spears.]

The parallel is striking and most revealing. Here, the same imagery is again applied to the animal world, except that the ‘war-darts’ and ‘battle-weapons’ now refer to bees and their sharp stings. Obviously, the poet was guided by Aldhelm’s riddle about the bee (*Apis*), where the animal says:

\[
\text{Semper acuta gero crudelis spicula belli.}^{72}
\]

(line 4)

[I always bear the sharp darts of cruel war.]

Aldhelm’s *spicula belli* are the ‘war darts’ of the bees in Riddle 17, and they are sharp and terrifying like the quills of the porcupine in Riddle 15. But the creature’s ‘hairs’ are not the only detail that tallies with what we learn about the porcupine from modern zoology. The porcupine’s long stout quills are “mostly marked with alternating light and dark bands”, giving the animal a “brownish or blackish” coloration,\(^73\) which matches the creature’s *fealo* head and sides (ll. 1–2), while its white neck (l. 1) could refer to the white band round the porcupine’s throat.\(^74\) Although porcupines are large rodents that have a “heavysset body” and walk “ponderously on the sole of the foot”, they run or “gallop” when

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71 Krapp and Dobbie 1936, 189; my italics. The parallel is all the more remarkable because *ordum* also occurs in both riddles. The solution ‘beehive’ was first proposed by Peter Bierbaumer and Elke Wannagat, “Ein neuer Lösungsvorschlag für ein altenglisches Rätsel (Krapp-Dobbie 17)” *Anglia* 99 (1981): 379–82.


73 Nowak 1999, 1644 and 1646.

74 The latter was suggested by Walz 1896, 262, who refers to Brehm’s *Tierleben.*
alarmed or pursued\textsuperscript{75} and can thus be \textit{swift on fepe} (l. 2), though porcupines do not truly step on their toes (cf. l. 5). Their small ears do rise above their eyes (ll. 4–5: \textit{hlifia\textsuperscript{d} tu \ earan ofer eagum}), even though they may not exactly “tower”, as Williamson would have it in support of his ‘fox’ solution.\textsuperscript{76} Yet, the decisive implication here is that the subject of the riddle must be an animal, since it is, generally speaking, characteristic of animals – and not of humans – that their ears are placed above their eyes. The creature’s habitat, too, matches that of the Old World porcupine, which inhabits the \textit{grene græs} (l. 6) of forests, plantations and mountain steppes; but most of all, porcupines “shelter in caves, crevices, holes dug by other animals, or burrows they have excavated themselves”\textsuperscript{77}. These large and deep burrows often have several entrances and escape holes (cf. the ‘doors’ and the ‘hole in the hill’ in lines 11 and 21), and there are chambers within the burrow where the female stays with her one to four offspring during their first year. The porcupine is perfectly equipped for burrowing: each of its broad forefeet (cf. \textit{fepe\textsuperscript{emundum}}, l. 17) has “four well-developed digits”, which are “armed with a thick claw”.\textsuperscript{78} Lions, leopards and hyenas are listed as the porcupine’s natural enemies, which it may attack when cornered; but porcupines have always been hunted by man – Pliny, Oppian, Solinus and Isidore all mention the pursuing dogs – and with its sharp quills, an adult porcupine is able to kill an aggressive dog.\textsuperscript{79} The hostile \textit{wælhwelp} (‘slaughter-whelp’, l. 23) of the riddle, therefore, must be a hound, for OE \textit{hwelp} means ‘whelp’ or ‘young dog’\textsuperscript{80} – a hint that is deliberately given only towards the end of the poem.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{75} Nowak 1999, 1644 and 1647.
\item \textsuperscript{76} Williamson 1977, 173, points out that porcupines “have tiny ears”, but the riddle says nothing about the size of the creature’s ears.
\item \textsuperscript{77} Nowak 1999, 1644 and 1647.
\item \textsuperscript{78} Nowak 1999, 1646.
\item \textsuperscript{80} Bosworth and Toller 1882–98, 573, and \textit{Supplement}, Toller 1908–21, 580; Jordan 1903, 55–7. The common word for a dog in Old English is \textit{hund}, a masculine noun like \textit{hwelp} (see Jordan 1903, 46–51); \textit{hund} (a swift hound pursuing its prey) is the most likely solution to Riddle 75.
\end{itemize}
There are good reasons to believe that the author of the Exeter Book riddle knew about the porcupine and its formidable weapons from Pliny’s *Natural history*, Solinus’ *Collectanea* or Isidore’s *Etymologies*, or even from Claudian’s poem. Manuscripts of Claudian’s *Carmina minora* were copied in Western Europe from the 8th century onwards, and even though they were scarce in Anglo-Saxon England, we know at least from Aldhelm that he was familiar with some of Claudian’s verse.\(^{81}\) Pliny’s, Solinus’ and Isidore’s compendia, on the other hand, were widely circulated in the early Middle Ages,\(^{82}\) and Isidore’s *Etymologies*, in particular, survive in a large number of codices from early England.\(^{83}\) A copy of the *Etymologies*, probably together with the Exeter Book, was among the sixty-six books bequeathed by Bishop Leofric to the church of Exeter in 1072.\(^{84}\) Book XII of Isidore’s work deals with various kinds of beasts, including the porcupine, and it is no surprise that it already provided the Anglo-Latin riddlers with material for their animal poems. Aldhelm worked both Isidorian lore and etymology into his *Enigmata*; and Eusebius, exploiting Isidore more fully, often appears to have recast a passage from the *Etymologies* as a verse riddle revolving around some peculiar habit or mark that distinguishes the subject of the poem from other beasts.\(^{85}\) In a similar way, the Old English riddler might have started from what he had read and remembered as being the unmistakable characteristic of the porcupine, name-

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ly the shooting out of its quills and its enmity with the hunting dog. The whole poem is built up around this characteristic, beginning with the animal’s ‘battle-weapons’ and reaching its climax in the violent discharge of the ‘war-darts’ at the end. To some degree, however, it remains a mystery why the poet had such detailed knowledge of the porcupine’s appearance and its burrowing habits, which are not mentioned at all by any of the early zoologists, including Pliny the Elder, who only adds that porcupines hide away during the winter:

hibernis autem se mensibus condit, quae natura multis et ante omnia ursis.86

[In the winter months it hibernates, as is the nature of many animals and before all of bears.]

Perhaps the poet expanded this into his dramatic story of the animal’s flight from its shelter; or he may have amalgamated what he had read about the porcupine with what he knew about related and more familiar animals like the hedgehog – or even the badger. The porcupine, as we have seen, was considered a kind of ‘larger hedgehog’, and its spiny coat had already been compared to that of the hedgehog by Pliny, Solinus and Isidore. There is a riddle about the hedgehog (Ericius) by Symphosius that bears some resemblance to our poem:

Plena domus spinis, parvi sed corporis hospes
Incolumi dorso telis confixus acutis
Sustinet armatas aedes habitator inermis.87

[A house filled with prickles, but an occupant of slight form; / with an unharmed back, though pierced by sharp spears, / an unarmed dweller bears an armed dwelling.]

Symphosius says nothing about the animal’s coloration, but one can well imagine that the Anglo-Saxon poet knew himself that hedgehogs have a brown spiny pelage, except for their grey-brown face and whitish crown and throat88 – rather like the creature in our poem, with its fallow or brownish grey head and sides and its white neck.

86 Pliny, *Nat. hist.* VIII.125, Rackham 1938–63, 3: 88–9; Rackham’s translation. European porcupines may spend the winter in their burrows “but do not truly hibernate” (Nowak 1999, 1647).
87 Symphosius, *Aenigm.* 29, Glorie 1968, 650, with Ohl’s translation.
Oddly enough, the answer ‘hedgehog’ was suggested for Riddle 15 by Brett as an alternative to his ‘fox’, but it can be ignored here, because hedgehogs do not dig burrows and they were not said to shoot out their spines. Nevertheless, several scholars have mentioned the ‘hedgehog’ solution in the past with reference to Walz and Holthausen, though neither of them ever actually proposed or supported it. The reason for this lies in an early misunderstanding that was perpetuated by Swaen, who, refuting Walz’s and Holthausen’s solution, wrote: “‘porcupine’ is of course wrong; substitute ‘hedgehog’.”\textsuperscript{90} We can only speculate as to whether, in the hundred years since it was first proposed, the answer ‘porcupine’ has been eclipsed by this misapprehension, or whether the majority of critics simply have felt that the porcupine is too outlandish to be the subject of Old English literature. Yet, the Exeter Book contains riddles not only about the majestic swan, the humble ox or the astounding barnacle goose, but also longer poems about the fabulous phoenix and the exotic panther, both of which had been described by the earlier Latin riddle-makers. Like the latter, the Anglo-Saxon poets who wrote in the vernacular embraced the domestic and the exotic alike, mixing the known with the unknown. In this context, it seems, the wondrous and heroic porcupine fits in well, and it should not, therefore, be denied its place among the Old English riddles of the Exeter Book.

\textsuperscript{89} Brett 1927, 259.
\textsuperscript{90} Swaen 1941, 228.