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The whole and parts of Aldhelm's De metris et enigmatibus ac pedum regulis (Epistola ad Acircium)

Cardelle de Hartmann, Carmen

Abstract: MEPR is a composite work, including an essay on number seven, two metrical treatises and a riddle collection. Medieval scribes and modern scholarship tend to consider these parts separately. This paper argues that Aldhelm conceived MEPR as a unitary work, which is held together by a careful structure, an overarching meaning, and recurrent themes and motifs, i. e. number as an ordering principle, poetic work and divine help as the sources of poetry, the importance of grammar and metric, and above all aenigma, the hidden meaning, which is mentioned in different contexts and exemplified by the poetic riddles. These employ the traditional generic conventions to convey human learning and a deeply Christian message. Following Paul (1 Cor. 12), Aldhelm portrays the whole and parts of creation as riddles which must be worked out with the help of human knowledge (including pagan works), in order to recognize God's message and his workings. As a letter to Acircius (Aldfrith, king of Northumbria), MEPR carries a defense of the new learning transmitted by the Canterbury school, and, in a deeper level, of all knowledge, and particularly the disciplines of language, as an instrument for a better understanding of Holy Writ and of creation. The structure of MEPR is twofold. On one hand, the whole work is organized as a letter. On the other, its sections are arranged in a ring composition with the poetic riddles in the middle, surrounded by two dialogues on metrical matters and bracketed by the introduction and the final address, both composed in art prose, united by recurring metaphors and directed to the king.

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The Whole and Parts of Aldhelm's *De metris et enigmatibus ac pedum regulis*
(*Epistola ad Acircium*)*

Carmen CARDELLE DE HARTMANN

(Zürich)

Aldhelm's De metris et enigmatibus ac pedum regulis (MEPR) begins and ends as an epistle and combines a treatise on the symbolism of the number seven, two tracts of poetic meter, and a large collection of riddles. Medieval scribes and modern scholarship often have taken or considered those parts separately, but Aldhelm, as shown here, meant his finished work as a single whole. It has an over-arching structure and an integral meaning, grounded in recurring motifs and themes. These are: the number itself as an ordering principle; the interplay of individual labour and transcendent divine favour as tandem sources of poetry; the material implements of grammar and meter; and above all, the central and recurring topos of discoverable meaning, aenigma, exemplified by the poetic riddles. Aldhelm employs those conventional objects to comment on human learning and to underscore a long-standing Christian message. He follows Paul (1 Cor. 12) in viewing all of the elements of creation as riddles to be understood, with the help of human learning (even of pagan origin), so as to grasp God's message and workings. As a letter to Acircius (Aldfrith, king of Northumbria), MEPR carries a defense of the new learning transmitted by the Canterbury school and, at a deeper level, of all knowledge centered in the linguistic arts, as the best human means to understand both Scripture and creation. The whole is organized as a letter with its conventional parts. At the same time, the different parts are organized with the poetic riddles as the center, surrounded by the two treatises on meter, which are both dialogues between master and disciple. The two

addresses to the king in carefully crafted prose encompass the whole as bookends. The resulting work is at once a segmented and focused whole.

hat gelöscht: The organizational logic features, as the outer rhetorical shell (thus aenigma-like), the split epistolary bookends of art prose addressed to the king. Within, the segmented working content falls out as a ring composition with recurring metaphors and themes. The introduction and the final address thus englobe surround as next inward layers the two dialogues on metrics which themselves encompass the inner nucleus of poetic riddles.

Aldhelm's *De metris et enigmatibus ac pedum regulis* (MEPR) is a composite work of 142 chapters in seven sections.¹ It includes: I. a short address to Acircius (Aldfrith, king of Northumbria) (ch. 1);² II. a discourse on the number seven (chs. 2-4); III. remarks on the varied contents of the work (chs. 5-8); IV. a treatise on the hexameter (*De metris*, chs. 9-10); V. a corpus of 100 riddles with a poetic preface (*Enigmata*, chs. 11-111); VI. an account of metrical feet (*De pedum regulis*, chs. 112-141), and VII. a dedication to the king (*Allocutio excusativa*

* This paper was written in the memorable spring term of 2020, the [first](#) "corona term". I had the opportunity of reading and discussing *De metris et enigmatibus ac pedum regulis* in a seminar with my students Marius Fleischli, Annemarie Hüsken, Claudio Lorenzi, Claudia Neuhaus, Livia Studer, Johanna Vogelsanger, and Sigrid Weber. From their sharp questions, their ingenious ideas, and their enthusiasm for Aldhelm I have profited more than I can say. I wish also to express my sincere gratitude to my colleague and friend Michael I. Allen, who considerably improved the language and style of this paper.

¹ The work is quoted from the critical edition: *Adhelmi De metris et enigmatibus ac pedum regulis*, in *Aldhelmi Opera*, ed. by R. EHWALD, Berlin, 1919 (MGH auct. ant., 15), pp. 59-204. After quotations I give the number of the chapter, followed by the page and the lines in Ehwald's edition. Great parts of the work have been translated: Chs. 1 to 5 (the long address to the king including the discussion on the number seven) and the final dedication (ch. 143) by Michael Herren in Aldhelm, *The Prose Works*, trans. by M. HERREN and M. LAPIDGE, Cambridge, 1979, pp. 34-58; the riddles by Michael Lapidge and the metrical treatises by Neil Wright in Aldhelm, *The Poetic Works*, trans. by M. LAPIDGE and J. ROSIER, with an appendix by N. WRIGHT, Cambridge, 1985, pp. 59-93 (riddles) and 181-219 (metrical treatises). The riddles have been translated once more by A. M. JUSTER, *Saint Aldhelm's Riddles*, Toronto, 2015. A complete list of older editions and translations of MEPR and its parts is provided in Aldhelm, *Prose Works*, p. 22.

² *Acircio aquilonalis imperii scepra gubernanti* (c.1, 61, 3-4): *circius* is the northwest and *aquilo* the northeast, Acircius is therefore the man from the Northwest ruling the kingdom of the Northeast, a fitting description for Aldfrith, king of Northumbria, born and bred in Ireland. The name was already decoded by William of Malmesbury, *Gesta pontificum* 5, 196. On this denomination and its source, Gildas, see N. WRIGHT, "Aldhelm, Gildas and Acircius", in N. WRIGHT, *History and Literature in Late Antiquity and the Early Medieval West: Studies in Intertextuality*, Aldershot, 1995, no. 14.

ad regem, ch. 142). Its medieval title, *De metris et aenigmatibus ac pedum regulis*, accounts for the work's miscellaneous character, whereas the modern label, *Epistola ad Acircium*,³ reflects the unifying function of the address to the king.

The complete MEPR survives in four manuscripts with fragments of a fifth:⁴ 1) Brussels, KBR, 4433-4438, eighth century (F); 2) Karlsruhe, Badische Landesbibliothek, Aug. perg. 85, second quarter of the ninth century (K); 3) Vaticano, BAV, Pal. lat. 1753, ca. 800 (N); 4) Paris, BnF, lat. 2339, first half of the ninth century (P¹); and, in isolated parts, 5) St. Gallen, Stiftsbibliothek, Cod. Sang. 1394 (pp. 121-122 and 125-128) + Zofingen, Stadtbibliothek, P. 32 (flyleaf), second half of the eighth century (S).⁵ In two cases, scribes have rearranged the contents in order to achieve greater homogeneity: F gives the work without the riddles on fols. 1r-49v, followed by Servius, *De centum metris*, and then the riddles on fols. 55r-72r; in P¹, the riddles appear first on fols. 47r-58r, with other parts of MEPR (also the poetic *Praefatio* to the riddles) on fols. 58r-74r. In both manuscripts, MEPR seems to have been considered chiefly as a metrical work, with the riddle collection shunted off.

³ This title stems, it seems, from John A. Giles, the first scholar to provide an edition of the full work: *Epistola ad Acircium, sive liber de septenario, et de metris, aenigmatibus ac pedum regulis*, in *Sancti Aldhelmi, ex abbate Malmesburiensi episcopi Schireburnensis opera quae extant omnia*, ed. by J. A. GILES, Oxford, 1844, pp. 216-329. The dedication to Acircius had been highlighted by Angelo Mai in the title he chose for his partial edition (excluding the riddles): *De septenario et de re grammatica et metrica ad Acircium regem*, in A. MAI, *Classicorum auctorum e Vaticanis codicibus editorum*, vol. 5, Rome, 1833, pp. 501-599.

⁴ There is a further very small fragment, which might stem from a manuscript of MEPR, since it transmits vv. 28-43 and 56-71 from the last riddle, *Creatura*, and some sentences of *De pedum regulis*: Miskolc, Zrínyi Ilona Gimnázium, s.n., 8th century, southern England (CLA Supp. no. 1792). See Z. MÁDY, "An VIIIth century Aldhelm Fragment in Hungary", *Acta Antiqua Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae*, 13 (1965), pp. 441-453 (with edition). The text might be related to F.

⁵ On the textual transmission see M. LAPIDGE, "Aldhelmus Malmesberiensis abb. et Scireburnensis ep.", in *La trasmissione dei testi latini del Medioevo. Mediaeval Latin Texts and their Transmission* (Te.Tra. 4), ed. by P. CHIESA, L. CASTALDI, Florence, 2012, pp. 14-38, esp. pp. 19-26 on MEPR.

Medieval readers were often more interested in the work's individual parts than in the whole. The collection of riddles is transmitted on its own in twenty-six manuscripts, in most of which the text has been glossed.⁶ Whether the copyists had the whole MEPR available or just the riddles is not always clear, but at least two manuscripts plainly resulted from focused selection. Ademar of Chabannes (989-c.1034) copied Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Voss. lat. oct. 15 (L), which includes the riddles on fols. 148r-153v, followed by excerpts of chs. 1-4 under the heading *Incipit de metrica arte. Domino glorificando regi Oswaldo Althelmus salutem*. Ehwald believed that Ademar copied and excerpted from P¹.⁷ In London, British Library, Royal MS 12 C XXIII, tenth century, from Christ Church, Canterbury (B¹), fols. 82r-103v, the riddles are directly introduced by chs. 6-8 and parts of ch. 9.⁸ Ehwald, who collated sixteen manuscripts of the riddles, does not give a stemma, but suggests possible filiations.⁹ If he has identified them correctly, three further manuscripts could also be copies of more complete exemplars: Cambridge, UL, Gg.5.35, written towards the middle of the eleventh

hat gelöscht: gloss the text

⁶ See the overview of the manuscripts containing glosses to the riddles (including manuscripts of the MEPR and of the riddle collection) in N. P. STORK, *Through a Gloss Darkly: Aldhelm's Riddles in the British Library Ms Royal 12.C.XXIII*, Toronto, 1990, pp. 10-26.

⁷ Ed. EHWALD, p. 48. The name Oswald is probably Ademar's guess at the identity of Acircius. The excerpts appear in Ed. EHWALD, pp. 205-207. On the manuscript, which seems to be the result of reuniting a series of notebooks, see A. VAN ELS, "A Flexible Unity: Ademar of Chabannes and the Production and Usage of MS Leiden, Universiteitsbibliotheek, Vossianus Latinus Octavo XV", *Scriptorium* 65,1 (2011), pp. 21-66 (it does not discuss Aldhelm's texts).

⁸ In ch. 7, one sentence is missing: *huius etiam tropi ... et reliqua* (77,5-9); ch. 9 ends with *lucem scandentis confundant* (81,7), to which *finis am<en>* has been added. The text of the riddles and its glosses in this manuscript have been edited by STORK, *Through a Glass*.

⁹ In his introduction, Ehwald presents a small selection of common errors, but provides references only to the page and line in Giles's edition, where the order and the text of the riddles markedly differ. The account of variants in Ehwald's apparatus is inconsistent and makes aligning filiations difficult. Checking his conclusions is therefore time-consuming and not always possible.

century at St. Augustine's, Canterbury (C), may stem from the same exemplar as B¹; ¹⁰ Bremen, Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek, ms. 52 (S²), tenth century, from St. Gall, is considered by Ehwald a copy of S; ¹¹ Vatican, BAV, Pal. lat. 1719, from Lorsch, first half of the ninth century (U5) is considered to have the same exemplar as N. ¹²

The transmission of the metrical treatises shows even more clearly that some scribes made a choice among the parts of MEPR: Valenciennes, Bm, ms. 393 (376), written in Saint Amand in the ninth century (A) is closely related to two witnesses of the complete MEPR, N and F, but transmits only *De pedum regulis* on fols. 142v-151v. ¹³ Another manuscript from Saint Amand, Valenciennes, Bm, ms. 395 (378) (A¹), probably had the same exemplar as N, F and A, but transmits on fols. 89r-101r a divergent array of texts under the heading *Incipit de metris et enigmatibus ac pedum regulis*: the complete *capitulatio*, chs. 1-9, and ch. 10 (*De metris*) until the words *sicut poeta prompsit dicens* (96, 2). ¹⁴ It can thus be described as a discontinued copy of MEPR. A further selection from MEPR is given in Brussels, KBR, 9581-

¹⁰ Ed. EHWALD, pp. 51-52, Aldhelm's riddles in fols. 394r-407r. On this manuscript see A. G. RIGG and G. R. WIELAND, "A Canterbury Classbook of the Mid-Eleventh Century (The *Cambridge Songs Manuscript*)", *Anglo-Saxon England*, 4 (1975), pp. 113-130.

¹¹ The riddle collection is on fols. 7r-34v, after glosses on Aldhelm's *Carmen de uirginitate*. The manuscript is fragmentary, the last verse of the last riddle is missing. Therefore, it could originally have transmitted more sections of MEPR.

¹² V. M. LAGORIO, "Aldhelm's *Aenigmata* in Codex Vaticanus Palatinus latinus 1719", *Manuscripta*, 15 (1971), pp. 23-27.

¹³ The text of *De pedum regulis* is incomplete, but reaches to *unde bernaculus* (ch. 133, 185, 6). On the filiation see Ed. EHWALD, p. 39. On two manuscripts giving *De pedum regulis* on its own (Napoli, Biblioteca Nazionale Vittorio Emanuele III, ms. IV. A. 34, fols. 273v-288v, first quarter of the ninth century, from Luxeuil, and Laon, Bm, ms. 464, ninth century) see R. LEOTTA, "Considerazioni sulla tradizione manoscritta del *De pedum regulis* di Aldelmo", *Giornale Italiano di Filologia*, n.s. 11 (1980), pp. 119-134. There are also two small fragments with text from *De metris*, see LAPIDGE, "Aldhelmus", pp. 19-20.

¹⁴ Ed. EHWALD, pp. 40-41.

95, ninth century, northeastern France (F³) in fols. 21v-44r: the *capitulatio* up to ch. 11, followed by *De metris*, *De pedum regulis* and the *Allocutio excusativa ad regem*.¹⁵

Aldhelm himself perhaps had combined earlier texts to formulate MEPR, but settling the question will require further study of the transmission. In his introduction, Ehwald argues that three distinct manuscripts with the riddles transmit a recension that represents the oldest stage of the text, and he thus selects them as the basis of his edition.¹⁶ However, as Michael Lapidge has suggested, that recension could predate the composition of MEPR, since the four manuscripts of the whole work include a recension in which Aldhelm seems to have corrected earlier mistakes.¹⁷ This hypothesis is supported by Aldhelm's assertion in MEPR that the *Enigmata* were his first poetical composition.¹⁸ Of the two metrical treatises, it can only be said that they use divergent sources, which suggests that they were composed at different times.¹⁹ An addition in *De metris* may stem from Aldhelm himself, but both recensions (with and

¹⁵ On these manuscripts, see the edition by EHWALD, pp. 38-41, who considers F³ a probable *descriptus* from F and remarks on the proximity of A and A¹ to manuscript N and, in a minor degree, to F, transmitting both the whole work.

¹⁶ Ed. EHWALD, pp. 43-45.

¹⁷ LAPIDGE, "Aldhelmus", pp. 21-22. Particularly, metrical errors have been corrected. K. O'BRIEN O'KEEFE and A.R.P. JOURNET, "Numerical Taxonomy and the Analysis of Manuscript Relationships", *Manuscripta*, 27 (1983), pp. 131-145, attempted to establish stemmatic relationships using statistical methods and shed doubt on the existence of this first recension, but their method is deficient, above all because it is based on a sample of only 147 verses and fails to distinguish adequately different sorts of variation.

¹⁸ "... centenas enigmatum propositiones componere nitebatur et velut in quodam gymnasio prima ingenioli rudimenta exercitari cupiens, ut uenire possit deinceps ad praestantiorem operis materiam ..." (ch. 6, 76, 5-7).

¹⁹ See A. ORCHARD, "Aldhelm's Library", in *The Cambridge History of the Book in Britain*, ed. by Richard Gameson, Cambridge, 2011, pp. 591-605, at p. 603.

without) appear in the transmission of MEPR. Aldhelm could thus have made the addition in the otherwise common archetype of the four manuscripts.²⁰

In any case, MEPR plainly comprised distinctive parts. The abundance of Aldhelm's prose—characterized by the use of synonyms, distinctive word-positioning, and extremely long but clearly structured sentences—disguises the threads uniting the parts in a whole, with its recurring themes and parallel stylistic strategies.²¹ If Aldhelm imposed by his choices a slow, meditative reading, he also took care as the author to guide readers through his expansive work. Its articulation into chapters listed in a *capitulatio* (found in all the manuscripts) gives preliminary orientation.²² Further, in the text itself Aldhelm gave some hints as to the overall structure.

The problems posed by the work as a whole are already evident in its first section. After a greeting, the work seems to commence with a very short entrée (ch. 1). Careful reading, however, shows that the actual preface is much longer (chs. 1-8). In it, the author spins out threads that will be gathered up in the concluding *Allocutio* (ch. 142) to the king. We shall trace the threads, consider the overarching themes uniting the whole MEPR, and mark out as a capstone the work's structure. To conclude, we shall assess whether there is an overall meaning, a message that the work as a whole would convey to its dedicatee.

²⁰ V. LAW, "The Study of Latin Grammar in Eighth-Century Southumbria", *Anglo-Saxon England*, 12 (1983), pp. 43-71, on this matter pp. 49-50. Law supposes that the change was made in the hyparchetype of K, P¹ and the manuscript known to Boniface, but a change made directly in the archetype after the copying of the hyparchetype of F and N (or their exemplars) is also possible. On the grouping of the manuscripts, see the edition by EHWALD, pp. 35-38.

²¹ The best study of Aldhelm's prose is M. WINTERBOTTOM, "Aldhelm's Prose Style and its Origins", *Anglo-Saxon England*, 6 (1977), pp. 39-76.

²² The division into chapters is the same in all manuscripts, and only in the riddles is there some variation in the numbering (ed. EHWALD, pp. 59-60). It seems likely that the account of chapters stems from the author and is not the result of a scribal intervention.

1. The introduction

The analysis of the introduction follows the work's first nine chapters in order, paraphrasing the key passages and highlighting main points. After a formal address to the king in the form of an epistolary *salutatio*, Aldhelm reminds Acircius of the time, twenty years prior, when they studied together the mysteries of Holy Writ and Acircius received through the hands of the bishop the seven gifts of the Holy Ghost with Aldhelm as his sponsor.²³ As their relationship is based on one of the seven sacraments and on the common study of the Bible, Aldhelm has collected instances of the use of seven—plucking flowers from the fields of scripture—to remind Acircius of the basis on which their friendship and shared learning grew. This first chapter ends with three verbs used to describe vegetative increase: *processerint*, *pullulaverint*, *viguerint* (ch. 1, 62, 16-17). After discussing the uses of seven in the Bible (ch. 2, 62-71) and in secular learning (ch. 3, 71-74), Aldhelm returns to the metaphor of growth: maybe, he says, someone wonders why the discussion of seven has expanded sevenfold and sevenfold. Its roots can be found at the beginning of the letter, from where the saplings of his meagre talent and the shrubs of his words grew with spreading branches (ch. 4, 74, 9-13).

The next brief chapter (ch. 5) heralds the discussion of the contents: as a token of his spiritual parenthood, Aldhelm adds some metrical presents to this modest introduction (*hac prae-fatiuncula [...] aliquantula metrorum munuscula [...] subiunxi*, ch. 5, 75, 16-17). The author thus makes ch. 5 into an explicit statement that all prior chapters are part of one large introduction (the diminutive *prae-fatiuncula* being clearly a conventional sign of modesty). Therefore, the two chapters dedicated to 'seven' are not a separate section of the work, but in

²³ Aldhelm does not name the sacrament, but it must be confirmation. See J. H. LYNCH, *Christianizing Kinship: Ritual Sponsorship in Anglo-Saxon England*, Ithaca (NY), 1998, pp. 112-116; and M. LAPIDGE, "The Career of Aldhelm", *Anglo-Saxon England*, 36 (2007), pp. 15-69, at p. 25.

effect an excursus within the introduction. The *munuscula* are introduced in the next chapters: ch. 6 begins by mentioning the metrical character of the riddles; ch. 7 discusses questions related to the riddles; and ch. 8 presents the subject matter of the second metrical treatise, *De pedum regulis*.

The introduction thus comprises chs. 1-8, which feature traditional prefatory elements: the *captatio benevolentiae*, evoking mutual bonds, and the presentation of the ensuing contents. Ch. 9 continues the introduction, but in substance, it turns to explaining the length of syllables and the use of elisions. It seems, then, to introduce the first metrical treatise (announced in the work's overall title as *De metris*), outside the logic of presenting the work as a whole. The *De metris* consists of ch. 10, presented in the *capitulatio* as *De metrica alternae interrogationis et responsionis vicissitudine duabus litteris discreta*.²⁴ A formal change occurs here from exposition prose to a dialogue.

The interpretation of chs. 1-8 as one single section is supported by a stylistic signal: the continuing use of the metaphor of growth, which commences in ch. 1 with the shared basis of Acircius and Aldhelm followed by Aldhelm's selection of new increments, and ch. 4's account of 'seven'. Ch. 8 portrays the accretion of verse based on metrical feet as branches (the feet) growing from a trunk and intertwining their leaves (ch. 8, 77, 19-21).²⁵ Later in the same chapter, the Latin language itself is compared to a forest and its syllables to wooded lands, where metrical rules sprout as shrubs from the root system of words (ch. 8, 78, 4-6).

²⁴ This is the text in the manuscripts F, K, and N, with some minor variation; F3 adds *prefatione* after *metrica*. I could not consult A1, but to judge from Ehwald's apparatus it has the same text as F, K, and N. P¹ does not transmit the *capitulatio*. Ehwald oddly suppresses the word *metrica* in his edition.

²⁵ M. C. HYER, "Text, Textile, Context: Aldhelm and Wordweaving as Metaphor in Old English" in *Textiles, Text, Intertext: Essays in Honour of Gale R. Owen-Crocker*, ed. by J. FREDERICK et al., London, 2016, pp. 121-138, at p. 122, suspects from the use of *contexuntur* an allusion to the weaving of a poet's laurel wreath.

Throughout, an exuberant and prolific nature stands as a cipher, either for the objects of knowledge—the Bible and Latin—, which risk swamping learners, or for mastered understanding, which ever expands as new connections are made. The metaphor is strategically evoked at the beginning and the end of the introduction, and likewise after the lengthy excursus on the number seven which could indeed mislead the readers into thinking that the introduction had ended with ch. 1.

2. *Allocutio excusativa ad regem*

The final section of MEPR, ch. 142, dedicates the work to the king. Aldhelm begins requesting the king's protection for his work, which the dedicatee should defend with the shield of his metrical and grammatical knowledge from the assaults of envious rivals:

suppliciter imploro, ut hoc opusculum [...] contra omnes aemulorum catapultas et venenata garrulorum iacula, quae de faretra obliqui livoris plerumque intorquere nituntur, inexpugnabili metrorum pelta et grammaticorum parma protegere digneris (ch. 142, 201,23-202,1).

“I suppliantly implore that you deign to protect with the unassailable shield of metres and the buckler of the grammarians this little work [...] against all the catapults of rivals and the venomous darts of the garrulous, which they often strive to shoot from the quiver of sidelong malice.” (Aldhelm, *The Prose Works*, p. 45)

This passage, marked by the use of words for weaponry, is reminiscent of Eph. 6, 11-17, in which Paul exhorts Christians to arm themselves with truth, justice, and faith, here replaced by grammar and metrics. At the same time, the king's function as leader in war and guardian of

peace is conjured, even as his learning is also explicitly highlighted. Aldhelm employs this metaphor as a recurring strand of thought in the *Allocutio*.

After the initial request for protection, Aldhelm proceeds to name the cause of his being envied: he is the first man of Germanic descent who has ventured to write a treatise on Latin metrics, notwithstanding his time-consuming pastoral and administrative duties. This achievement should not prompt critics to turn their weapons on him, since human beings do not earn divine grace, but rather God bestows it. Besides, Aldhelm follows Virgil as a guide for his undertaking, who first adapted Greek models into Latin. The king should accept this offering, because he will profit from Aldhelm's work by exercising his wit. He should not be loath to winnow out and to examine what Aldhelm has piled up, nor be fastidious about chewing and consuming what Aldhelm has milled and baked for his nourishment.²⁶ Shifting the imagery from the land to the ocean, Aldhelm compares the relentless demands of administration on the king to the relentless pounding inflicted on rocks by the sea.²⁷ Nevertheless, Acircius should not neglect his studies. Emperor Theodosius should be his guiding model, who did not look down on toiling to copy the works of the grammarian Priscian, thus fulfilling the precept to meditate on divine law night and day, as proclaimed by celestial trumpets: *caelestis tubae clangor et supernae salpiscis classica concrepauerunt* (ch. 142, 203, 27).²⁸ Aldhelm here privileges the wind instruments used in the military combat, [recalling thus the martial imagery](#)

hat gelöscht; and so reclaims the initial warrior

²⁶ Metaphors comparing learning with nourishment go back to Antiquity and are very frequent in Christian literature. See K. LANGE, "Geistliche Speise. Untersuchungen zur Metaphorik der Bibelhermeneutik", *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur*, 95 (1966), pp. 81–122.

²⁷ This passage might be influenced by Virgil's comparison of King Latinus with a rock in a turbulent sea in Aen. 7, 586–590. See K. R. GRINDA, *Enzyklopädie der literarischen Vergleiche. Das Bildinventar von der römischen Antike bis zum Ende des Frühmittelalters*, Paderborn, 2002, p. 439.

²⁸ "There sounded the blare of the heavenly trumpet and the blast of the supernal bugle" (Aldhelm, *The Prose Works*, p. 47).

used at the beginning of the *Allocutio*, which then concludes proclaiming that the search of eternal salvation and bliss should prevail over all worldly occupations.

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Schriftzeichen: Kursiv

hat gelöscht: . The *Allocutio*

The *Allocutio* refers back to the introduction on various levels. It includes motifs that traditionally belong to prefaces: the literary occupation as a suitable labor for the native wit, allusions to models, the painstaking work of the author, and the dedication with its tributary motifs (reference to critics and need for protection).²⁹ Aldhelm had reminded the king in ch. 1 of their shared early education and now exhorts him in the *Allocutio* to continue it through reading and assimilating the contents of this new work. The king's confirmation is mentioned at the beginning of the work and in ch. 5 Aldhelm recalls his own role as sponsor and thus as Acircius' continuing spiritual father. Both details explain how, after the humble (and short!) request for protection in the *Allocutio*, Aldhelm assumes the role of father and teacher, admonishing his spiritual son to study the work that he has produced for him.³⁰ On a stylistic level, there are parallels between the beginning and the ending. Both sections are written in an elaborate *Kunstprosa*, whereas the intervening discussions have brief sentences and limit the use of rhetorical figures, synonyms, and rare vocabulary (partly because Aldhelm there quotes his sources at length). Further, in both addresses to the king, Aldhelm uses recurring metaphors as a guiding thread to bind the text together: in the introduction, a rampant, growing nature; in

hat gelöscht: *art prose*

²⁹ On the introduction and the *Allocutio* as a dedication in two parts, see C. CARDELLE DE HARTMANN, "Grammatik als Gabe – Aldhelm, Bonifatius, *Expositio latinitatis* (Anonymus ad Cuimnanum)", in *Literarische Widmungen im Mittelalter und in der Renaissance. Konzepte – Praktiken – Hintergründe*, ed. by C.-F. BIERITZ, C. C. BRINKMANN, and T. HAYE, Stuttgart, 2019, pp. 19–50, at pp. 25–28 and 35–50.

³⁰ It has been considered that Aldhelm and Aldfrith might have been related (LAPIDGE, *Career of Aldhelm*, pp. 17–22 on Aldhelm's possible royal descent, esp. p. 18 on his possible kinship to Aldfrith). However, Aldhelm addresses the king at the beginning of the work in a much humbler tone, and maybe the use of *vernaculus*, which he did not use often after being elected abbot (LAPIDGE, "Career", pp. 67) might be explained as self-abasement toward Acircius. Aldhelm takes on the role of father only after he has clearly stated the relationship between him and the king in the introduction, following the example of dedications to a son or a pupil rather than of dedications to emperors or kings (CARDELLE DE HARTMANN, "Grammatik", pp. 42 and 49).

the final address, war and weaponry. The early metaphor of nature even returns as humanized agriculture at the end. The plucking of flowers in the fields of Scripture is mirrored by the heaping up of cereal. In the introduction, nature mostly appears as a forest of trees, growing and expanding, large and even frightening; in the metaphor of the *Allocutio*, cereals represent a domesticated nature, which man harvests, processes and eats; the first metaphor represents expanding knowledge, the final one depicts the ordering of knowledge to foster its assimilation.

3. Recurring themes

Numerical patterns

The recurrence of numbers and numerical patterns is an obvious feature of the work and strikes the reader at first encounter. Seven, which represents the sacramental bond between author and king, is mentioned right at outset of ch. 1. The theme is developed in the excursus on ‘seven’ in different contexts (chs. 2-3). The number’s actual meaning is not much discussed. Aldhelm makes typological or allegorical references, but in most cases the relevant biblical passages are just elegantly paraphrased.³¹

As Carin Ruff has convincingly shown, numerical structures underlie the metrical treatises, which thus protract the approach taken in chs. 2-3:

³¹ On these references and on Aldhelm’s exegesis, see M. HERREN, “Aldhelm the Theologian”, in *Latin Learning and English Lore: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature for Michael Lapidge*, ed. by K. O’BRIEN O’KEEFE and A. ORCHARD, 2 vols., Toronto, 2005, vol. 1, pp. 68-89, at pp. 71-73. A small correction must be made: Aldhelm does not mention Mary as a type of Church, but as a type of Synagogue: “catholici patres [...] allegorice ad sinagogae tipum retulerint, nullatenus tamen sacrosanctae matris personam fuisse historica relatione infitiri noscuntur” (c. 4, 74, 24-26). This surprising statement can be easily explained as a confusion: Myriam, Moses’s and Aaron’s sister, is considered a type of Synagogue by Origen and Jerome. Aldhelm might refer to the latter’s *Commentarii in Prophetas minores*. In *Sophoniam* 2, 527, a work that he quotes in his *Prosa de uirginitate* p. 269 (see M. LAPIDGE, *The Anglo-Saxon Library*, Oxford, 2005, p. 179). Jerome makes this typological reference also in his *Commentarii in Ezechielem* 8,27,88.

“The mathematical approach is foreshadowed by the disquisition on the significance of ‘seven’ that Aldhelm prefaced to his metrical treatises, which signals that number is immanent in everything, especially (perhaps) in language.”³²

The first metrical treatise, *De metris*, takes an unusual approach, seemingly quite inadequate if the reader wants to learn metrics to write poetry. Ruff explains it as based on numerical patterns, since Aldhelm characterizes hexameters by type based on the number of syllables and the possible combinations of dactyls and spondees, including some not even used. In the same way, *De pedum regulis* uses metrical feet as an ordering principle for vocabulary. The treatise has been described as the first metrical dictionary, in which 28 different feet are briefly described and followed by lists of words showing the corresponding prosodic pattern.³³ It could be useful in order to find words suitable for different metrical needs and to learn the syllabic quantities of the listed words. However, since non-dactylic metrical poetry was unusual in Aldhelm’s time, the *De pedum regulis* would have better served to learn Latin words with prosodic patterns as a mnemonic aid. This point seems to emerge from the occasional clustering of semantically related words, as in the case of the sounds of animals (ch. 131, 179, 19-180, 19), which came to be copied also on its own. Without aiming for completeness, Miroslav Marcovich registered fourteen manuscripts and its use in Vincent of Beauvais’ *Speculum naturale*.³⁴ The passage

³² C. RUFF, “The Place of Metrics in Anglo-Saxon Latin Education: Aldhelm and Bede”, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 104 (2005), pp. 149-170 at p. 155.

³³ WRIGHT, in Aldhelm, *Poetic works*, p. 188; and J. LEONHARDT, *Dimensio syllabarum. Studien zur lateinischen Prosodie und Verslehre von der Spätantike bis zur frühen Renaissance*, Göttingen, 1989, pp. 72-86.

³⁴ M. MARCOVICH, “*Voces animantium* and Suetonius”, *Živa antika – Antiquité vivante*, 21 (1971-72), pp. 399-416 at pp. 401-402 and p. 413. See also the contribution by Patrizia Lendinara to this volume.

interested medieval readers far more than the metrical treatises themselves, which were superseded by Bede's clearer and more practical *De arte metrica*.

The collection of the riddles is likewise ordered **by verse count**. In ch. 7 Aldhelm explains that his model, Symphosius, wrote riddles in the form of metrical tercets, whereas he himself first composed them as quatrains, later pentads, and even six or more verses (ch. 6, 76, 9-15). In the manuscripts of the complete work, the collection of riddles features subheadings, dividing it in three sections: before the first riddle, *Incipiunt enigmata quaternis uersibus contexta que grecorum lingua tetrastita* [sic] *dicuntur*³⁵; before riddle 20 (= ch. 31), *haec enigmata quinque uersibus decurrunt* (with small variations)³⁶; before riddle 29 (= ch. 40), *Item senis vel septenis uersibus seu pluribus*.³⁷ It is a rough ordering, which has not been consistently kept, as there is one riddle with five verses in the first section (riddle 18 *Myrmicoleon*). The first modern editors ordered the riddles rigidly after **the verse count** whereas Ehwald restored the original sequence of the manuscripts. The theme of number also makes itself felt at a micro-level. There are many periphrastic evocations of number. For instance, the number of years elapsed since the king's confirmation (ch. 1, 61, 8) and the number of riddles (ch. 6, 76, 4-5) are given as numerical circumlocutions. Some of the riddles likewise include numerical allusions or even amount to numerical riddles, for example, 90 *Puerpera geminas enixa*.

The allegorical interpretation of number is an ancient praxis, and Aldhelm could have made much of it, but did not, so the question arises whether the theme of number has a deeper

hat gelöscht: of verses

hat gelöscht: count of verses

³⁵ K, fol. 15va, not in P¹, F and N.

³⁶ F, fol. 58v; *decurrent* in K, fol. 16vb, N, fol. 88r, and P¹, fol. 48r (this manuscript omits *haec*).

³⁷ F, fol. 59v; S., p. 127; N, fol. 88r (also after riddle 28, but in the lower margin and probably written by a second hand); *iem* in K, fol. 16vb; P¹, fol. 48v, omits *seu pluribus*. This heading can also be read in S, p. 127.

meaning at all.³⁸ In my opinion, it implicitly justifies the subject and study of metrics. Aldhelm never does so explicitly in the way that many Christian grammarians felt obliged to discuss the suitability of learning grammar, but he manages to convey the impression that metrics figure in God's plan.³⁹ As we have seen, Aldhelm announces in ch. 1 that he will only discuss the role of 'seven' in the Bible, as he does in ch. 2, yet in ch. 3 he continues with secular subjects, and thus shows that Holy Writ and human learning are grounded in the same earth. The combinatoric base of metrics corresponds with number's structural role in the Bible and disciplines otherwise used to explain the world. Further, in the poetic preface to his riddles (which has no chapter numbering), Aldhelm makes an explicit connection between metrics and the Bible, which he reasserts in the *Allocutio*.

The sources of poetry

Since the preface to the riddles is a crucial reflection on the sources of poetry—another thematic thread through the work—it is appropriate to quote the combined acrostich and telestich verses in full:

A rbiter, aethereo iugiter qui regmine scepter A
L ucifluumque simul caeli regale tribuna L
D isponis moderans aeternis legibus illu D,
(H orrida nam multans torsisti membra Vehemot H,

³⁸ There is much scholarship on this subject. For a good introduction see H. MEYER, *Die Zahlenallegorese im Mittelalter: Methode und Gebrauch*, München, 1975.

³⁹ The Christianization of grammar in Late Antiquity is an amply discussed question. For a concise and well documented overview, see E. PÉREZ RODRÍGUEZ, "La cristianización de la gramática latina (ss. V-IX)", in *Actas del Congreso Internacional Cristianismo y tradición latina, Málaga, 25 a 28 de abril 2000*, ed. by A. ALBERTE GONZÁLEZ, and C. MACÍAS VILLALOBOS, Madrid, 2001, pp. 49-74.

E x alta quondam rueret dum luridus arc E),
L impida dictanti metrorum carmina praesu L
M unera nunc largire, rudis quo pandere reru M
V ersibus enigmata queam clandestina fat V:
S ic, Deus, indignis tua gratis dona rependi S.
C astalidas nimphas non clamo cantibus istu C
E xamen neque spargebat mihi nectar in or E;
C ynthi sic numquam perlustro cacumina, sed ne C
I n Parnasso procubui nec somnia vid I.
N am mihi versificum poterit Deus addere carne N
I nsprians stolidae pia gratis munera ment I;
T angit si mentem mox laudem corda repetun T.
M etrica nam Moysen declarant carmina vate M
I amdudum cecinisse prisci vexilla trope I
L ate per populos illustra qua nitidus So L
E t psalmista canens metrorum cantica voc E
N atum divino promit generamine nume N
I n caelis prius exortum, quam Lucifer orb I
S plendida formatis fudisset lumina saeculi S.
V erum si fuerint bene haec enigmata vers V
E xplosis penitus naevis et rusticitat E
R itu dactilico recte decursa nec erro R
S eduxit vana specie molimina menti S,
I ncipiam potiora, sui Deus arida serv I,
B elligero quondam qui vires tradidit Io B,
V iscera perpetui si roris repleat haust V.

S iccis nam laticum duxisti cautibus amne S
O lim, cum cuneus transgresso marmore rubr O
D esertum penetrat, cecinit quod carmine Davi D.
A rce poli, genitor, servas qui seacula cunct A,
S olvere iam scelerum noxas dignare nefanda S
(Praefatio, 97-99, 9-36).

“(Eternal) Judge, You Who with heavenly authority rule perpetually the sceptres (of power) and the resplendent royal court of heaven, controlling it with eternal laws – for in punishment You tortured the disgusting limbs of Behemoth when the ghastly (creature) once fell headlong from the lofty citadel (of heaven) – (You), protector, grant now to me, who am composing bright songs in verse, Your aid, that I may be able, (though) unskilled, to reveal by Your decree the hidden mysteries of things through my verse. Thus, God, do You freely bestow Your gifts on unworthy (recipients). I do not declaim my verses in the direction of the Castalian nymphs, nor has any swarm (of bees) spread nectar in my mouth; by the same token I do not traverse the summits of Apollo, nor do I prostrate myself on Parnassus, nor am I entranced by any poetic vision. For God shall be able to augment the poetic undertaking for me, freely breathing His holy gifts into my obtuse mind: if He should touch my mind, my heart shall at once requite (the gift) with praise. For biblical verses make it clear that the prophet Moses long ago had chanted the glorious praises of an ancient victory far and wide among peoples everywhere, where the bright sun, on raising its head from the ocean’s flood, shines forth. And the Psalmist, singing aloud the verses of his songs, announced a Child born through divine procreation which had risen in the skies before the Morning Star had poured its radiant light on the world when the ages were newly formed. But if these (present) *Enigmata* in verse, after all blemishes and awkwardness have been completely

expunged, are to come off well at an hexametrical pace, and if no delusion seduces my mental efforts with empty deception, I shall begin (to sing of) even mightier (themes), if God – Who once strengthened His warrior Job – shall refresh the parched inwards of His servant with a draught of everlasting dew. For You (God) once led streams of water from dry rocks, when the throng (of Israelites), having crossed the Red Sea, entered the desert: David sang of this in a psalm. You, Father, Who protect all ages from the citadel of heaven, deign now to forgive the unspeakable faults of my sins.” (Aldhelm, *The Poetic Works*, p. 70)

The most conspicuous part of the poem is the refusal of ‘profane’ inspiration as a source of poetry in vv. 10-13. The poet refuses Apollo, the Muses, and poetic visions, as well as the inspiration brought by bees. This last point is particularly striking, since in his *Carmen de uirginitate* Aldhelm does indeed relate bees to divine inspiration.⁴⁰ Where he retells an episode from the *Vita Ambrosii* of Paulinus of Milan, a swarm of bees goes in and out of the infant Ambrosius’s mouth and finally vanishes heavenward, which is taken as the infusion of a divine gift to the later exegete and preacher.⁴¹ In the poetic preface to the riddles, the placement suggests that Aldhelm was not thinking of Ambrose, but of a pagan author. Indeed, at this time he may not yet have known Paulinus’s text (which he only quotes in later works).⁴² Yet he perhaps knew a similar passage in Pliny’s *Naturalis historia* about the infant Plato, although it

⁴⁰ *De uirginitate. II. Carmen*, vv. 655-666, ed. by R. EHWALD, p. 380.

⁴¹ *Vita di Cipriano, Vita di Ambrogio, Vita di Agostino*, ed. by A. A. R. BASTIAENSEN, Milano 1975, pp. 56-58. On this episode, see C. NICOLAYE, “*Quam te velim, imitatricem esse huius apiculae*: Die Biene als Symbol bei Ambrosius”, in *Ille operum custos: Kulturgeschichtliche Beiträge zur antiken Bienensymbolik und ihrer Rezeption*, ed. by D. ENGELS and C. NICOLAYE, Hildesheim/Zürich/New York, 2008, pp. 165-182 at pp. 166-169.

⁴² Ehwald pointed to this possibility (ed. EHWALD, p. 98) without suggesting a concrete source.

is a brief remark in a huge work.⁴³ In vv. 10-13 there is an intertwining of pagan and Christian allusions. Aldhelm refers not only to the beginning of Persius' satires (which he quotes literally in ch. 9, 78, 10-14), but also to a passage by the Christian poet Paulinus of Nola (*Natalicia*, c. 15, 30-33).⁴⁴

Ernst Robert Curtius highlighted the topical character of Aldhelm's refusal of the Muses.⁴⁵ One should remember, however, that Aldhelm borrowed much from Isidore, who interpreted pagan gods both euhemeristically, and sometimes as demons bent on deceiving humankind with the poets' help.⁴⁶ Aldhelm's refusal of pagan practices reflects both God's

⁴³ Plin., *nat. hist.* 22, 28: *Sedere in ore infantis tum etiam Platonis, suavitatem illam praedulcis eloquii portendentes*. On Aldhelm's use of Pliny, see LAPIDGE, *Anglo-Saxon Library*, p. 184. There is no indication that Aldhelm might have known other Roman authors relating a similar incident: Cicero, *De diuinatione*, 1,78 and 2, 55 (Plato); Valerius Maximus, 1,6,3 (Plato); Phocas, *Vita Vergilii*, v. 53-44 (Virgil); *Vita Vaccae*, ed. Hosius, p. 335 (Lucan). On these texts, see I. OPELT, "Das Bienenwunder in der Ambrosiusbiographie des Paulinus von Mailand", *Vigiliae Christianae* 22 (1968), pp. 38-44 at pp. 41-43; and S. HERREN, "*Fueritne mulier pulcherrima specie Melissa, quam Iuppiter in apem convertit*: Die Biene in der antiken Mythologie", in *Ille operum custos*, pp. 40-59, at p. 51. For a discussion on the bees as carriers of inspiration in the Middle Ages, see C. CARDELLE DE HARTMANN, "Von Dichtern und Bienen: Die Bienenwelt in poetologischen Gleichnissen", in *Imitationen. Systematische Zugänge zu einem kulturellen Prinzip des Mittelalters*, ed. by M. GRÜNBART, G. SCHWEDLER and J. SONNTAG, Paderborn 2021, in press.

⁴⁴ This poem is also quoted in a similar passage: At the beginning of his *Carmen de virginitate*, Aldhelm also makes a poetic prayer, refusing all pagan sources of inspiration and requesting "words from the Word" (*uerbum de uerbo peto*, v. 33), see N. WRIGHT, "Imitation of the Poems of Paulinus of Nola in Early Anglo-Latin verse", *Peritia*, 4 (1985), pp. 134-151, at pp. 141-143.

⁴⁵ E. R. CURTIUS, "Die Musen im Mittelalter. Erster Teil: bis 1100", *Zeitschrift für romanische Philologie*, 59 (1939), pp. 129-188, at p. 145.

⁴⁶ *Etym.* 8, 11, 5: "Simulacrorum usus exortus est, cum ex desiderio mortuorum constituerentur imagines uel effigies, tamquam in caelum receptis, pro quibus se in terris daemones colendi supposuerunt, et sibi sacrificari a deceptis et perditis persuaserunt." Pagan poets contributed to this deceit. See *Etym.* 8, 11, 2: "In quorum etiam laudibus accesserunt et poetae, et compositis carminibus in caelum eos sustulerunt." On the sources of this passage (mainly Augustine's *De ciuitate Dei*), see K. N. MACFARLANE, "Isidore of Seville and the Pagan Gods (*Origines* VIII.11)", *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society*, n.s. 70 (1980), pp. 3-40.

victory over the devil (here represented by Behemoth, v. 4) and his own intention to avoid *error* (v. 27, doctrinal error or metrical faults). Emily Thornbury has argued that Aldhelm here rejects *all* inspiration, pagan and Christian, and emphasizes technique as the source of poetry.⁴⁷ Indeed, when he quotes Persius in ch. 9 (78, 10-15), Aldhelm states that technical skill achieved through the knowledge of metrics is the basis of poetry. But this is only one side of his overall treatment of the sources of poetry in MEPR, since in most instances he combines the mention of poetic work with appeals for divine inspiration. The *ingenium*, which he also mentions, is a case in point for this conjunction: natural wit, a gift that must be cultivated and exercised.⁴⁸

In the poetic preface to the riddles, after the initial invocation to God, the poet asserts his mastery of metrical technique and asks God for the capacity to disclose the mysteries of his Creation, that is, for exegetical inspiration (vv. 6-9): the poet contributes the form, while God conveys the contents. Later, he entreats God for a poem (*versificum ... carmen*, v. 14), and the poet's heart will respond with God's praise (v. 16). In this second instance, God gives the form and the poet contributes the content. There are, then, two petitions in a chiastic arrangement. After mentioning biblical poetry (to which we shall return in the next section), the poet promises a new and major work, if his first attempt is free from error and fault (vv. 25-29). He again intertwines content and form, and also poetic effort with divine help, to which he refers in the last verses.⁴⁹ The poem as a whole transmits the message that poetry consists of adequate

⁴⁷ E. V. THORNBURY, "Aldhelm's Rejection of the Muses and the Mechanics of Poetic Inspiration in Early Anglo-Saxon England", *Anglo-Saxon England*, 36 (2007), pp. 71-92. Interpretations which put the focus (maybe too strongly) on inspiration are M. SALVADOR-BELLO, *Isidorean Perceptions of Order: The Exeter Book Riddles and Medieval Latin Enigmata*, Morgantown 2015, pp. 175-177; and CARDELLE DE HARTMANN, "Von Dichtern".

⁴⁸ The exposition on 'seven' has grown from the poet's wit, *fragilis et gracilis ingenii frutices* (ch. 4, 74, 11-12); the riddles are *prima ingenioli rudimenta* (ch. 6, 76, 6); the king has a natural disposition for learning, *solertis ingenii gratiam* (ch. 142, 203, 5).

⁴⁹ Such thematic patterning was described by A. ORCHARD, *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm*, Cambridge, 1994, pp. 15-16, as a characteristic feature of Aldhelm's poetic style.

content and accomplished form, and results from the combination of relentless work and divine gift.

hat gelöscht: engaged human drill

Similarly, in the *Allocutio*, when Aldhelm claims recognition for being the first man of Germanic descent to write on Latin metrics, he defends himself against possible critics by appealing to divine grace—which, as is suggested by the text, has enabled him—and to his recourse to Virgil, a pagan model. Here, the poetic work depends on the knowledge of the Latin language and of Roman authors, both of which are necessary for the writing of the metrical treatises. Across the whole of the MEPR, poetry figures as proceeding from a combination of sources: the author's native wit, his effort (learning of metrics, careful reading of older authors), and divine assistance.⁵⁰ The interlacing of poetic work and divine help, and of pagan and Christian models results in a subtle, implicit defense of reading pagan authors.

Metrics and grammar

This leads us back to the point addressed in the chapter on numerical patterns: the justification of dedicating one's time to metrics and poetry. The underlying numeric patterns in the introduction and the metrical treatises implicitly serve this purpose, as I suggested above. Further, as we have just seen, the occupation with metrics and with poetry is warranted because success in these endeavors is possible only with God's help. But Aldhelm goes one step further. The relationship between metrics and the Bible is made more explicit in the poetic preface. In vv. 17-24 the poet justifies the petition for divine help in that Moses and David also wrote

⁵⁰ Aldhelm has this trait in common with most Latin poets, who usually refer to different origins for their poetry. See C. CARDELLE DE HARTMANN, "Kreative Imitation: Die *dramatica series* der Roswitha von Gandersheim", *Mittelateinisches Jahrbuch*, 50 (2015), pp. 359-378, at pp. 360-364.

metrical poetry.⁵¹ Since both biblical authors were divinely inspired—in the most emphatic sense, as prophets acting as God’s mouthpiece to humanity—it follows that God himself composed and communicated in metrical verse. This is the strongest possible assertion of the dignity and worth of metrics. The proximity of biblical discourse and grammar (of which metrics is a part) is also suggested in the *Allocutio*, when Aldhelm exhorts the king to follow the example of Theodosius, who copied out the works of Priscian, thus fulfilling the scriptural command to ruminate on God’s law night and day. An ancient strategy for justifying Christian attention to grammar is rooted in its usefulness for reading the Bible and fulfilling liturgical duties. Aldhelm does not discuss this point, but the example of Theodosius aligns grammatical study with biblical study.

Hidden meanings

God expressed himself through biblical poetry, and his blessing completes technical mastery and human wit. As a Christian, Aldhelm puts his capacity in the service of God. These considerations seem adequate for a major genre like epic poetry, which had been successfully adapted to Christian themes and needs by poets whom Aldhelm knew well, like Juvenius, Sedulius, and Arator.⁵² Aldhelm would later attempt his own Christian epic in the *Carmen de uirginitate*, but his first poems were riddles, a genre characterized by the grammarian Pompeius

⁵¹ Jerome repeatedly discussed the metrical character of some biblical passages. See D. VITALI, “Dichten wie Gott. Metamorphosen eines Topos der alten Bibelforschung”, in *Poesía latina medieval (siglos V-XV)*, ed. by M. C. DÍAZ Y DÍAZ and J. M. DÍAZ DE BUSTAMANTE, Firenze, 2005, pp. 451-470, at pp. 455-458. Aldhelm probably knew as much from Isidore who mentions Moses’s canticle in Deut. 31 as being in dactylic verse (etym. 1,39,11). Aldhelm refers vv. 17-20 to the canticle in Ex. 15, but he perhaps mixed up both passages or else deduced that both were written in the same form. Isidore mentions David (Etym. 1,39,17) as the inventor of hymns.

⁵² ORCHARD, *Poetic Art*, pp. 161-183.

as childish.⁵³ When introducing his riddles in ch. 6, Aldhelm names Symphosius as his model and describes his poetry as written in playful words and having a light subject: *Nam Simfosius poeta, versificus metricae artis peritia praeditus, occultas enigmatum propositiones exili materia sumpta ludibundis apicibus legitur cecinisse* (VI 75, 21-22), “For we read that the poet Symphosius, a versifier endowed with great metrical skill, made playfully worded poems using trivial materials to impart the veiled message of their enigmatic subjects” (my translation). Nevertheless, Aldhelm implies that riddles are also suitable for more serious purposes. In this same chapter, he remarks that even Aristotle did not spurn composing riddles, but more important is the model evoked in the next chapter, namely the Bible.⁵⁴ Characteristic of riddles, Aldhelm says, is the personification of animals and objects and the reification of persons, and these tropes can also be found in the Bible, for which he gives some examples. This parallelism between the riddles and the Bible had been announced in a subtle way in ch. 1, when the mysteries of Holy Writ, which he had studied together with the king, are referred to as *allegorica enigmata* (ch. 1, 62, 5). By asking for divine help in the poetic preface, Aldhelm shows that he rates his riddles as much more than an instructive pastime. Whereas the request for divine inspiration is conventional in Latin exegesis, hagiography, biblical poetry, prayers and visions, it is unexpected in a collection of lyric poetry.⁵⁵ Aldhelm’s request as poet for God’s help to discern the mysteries of creation positions the riddles as an exegesis of nature.

⁵³ Pompeius. *Commentum artis Donati*: “Aenigma est, quo ludunt etiam parvuli inter se, quando sibi proponunt quaestiunculas, quas nullus intellegit”, in *Grammatici Latini*, ed. by H. KEIL, Leipzig, 1864, vol. 4, p. 311.

⁵⁴ The reference is to a pseudepigraphic collection of riddle-like questions, which Aldhelm probably knew through Hieronymus, *Liber tertius adversus libros Rufini* 39,46, in *Variae collectiones aenigmatum Merovingicae aetatis* ed. by F. GLORIE, 2 vols., Turnhout, 1968 (CCSL, 133), vol. 1, p. 371, nn. 5-6.

⁵⁵ F. OHLY, “Metaphern für die Inspiration”, *Euphorion*, 87 (1993), pp. 119-171 has remarked that the request of inspiration seems to be limited to such genres. The exceptions to this rule which he mentions on p. 170 are all much later than Aldhelm.

Late antique grammarians agree in describing riddles as fuzzy evocations. This tradition is followed by Isidore, who also remarked on the difference between riddles and allegory.⁵⁶ A connection between riddle and allegory had already been made, however, Augustine, who thought intensely about biblical obscurity as a channel of divine grace, defined riddles in his *De trinitate* (15, 9, 15), when considering 1 Cor. 13, 12, as a ‘fuzzy allegory’: *Aenigma est autem [...] obscura allegoria*.⁵⁷ Following Aldhelm’s hints, Kevin Dungey has related his riddles (as well as his prose style) to biblical obscurity.⁵⁸ A reading of the riddles shows, however, that allegory does not play a meaningful role in them. On the contrary, Aldhelm sometimes gives the basis for an allegorical or at least metaphorical interpretation of his subject without following it up.⁵⁹ In riddle 18 *Myrmicoleon*, he even refers explicitly to the tropical meaning of the name, *tropica nominibus signans praesagia duplis* (v. 3), without further elaborating. Another good instance is riddle 20, *Apis*:

Mirificis formata modis, sine semine creta
Dulcia florigeris onero praecordia praedis;
Arte mea crocea flavescunt fercula regum.

⁵⁶ Isid., *Etym.* 1,37,22: “Inter allegoriam autem et aenigma hoc interest, quod allegoriae uis gemina est et sub res alias aliud figuraliter indicat; aenigma uero sensus tantum obscurus est, et per quasdam imagines adumbratus.”

⁵⁷ On this passage, see E. COOK, “The Figure of Enigma: Rhetoric, History, Poetry”, *Rhetorica*, 19 (2001), pp. 349-378.

⁵⁸ K. R. DUNGEY, “Faith in the Darkness: Allegorical Theory and Aldhelm’s Obscurity”, in *Allegoresis: The Craft of Allegory in Medieval Literature*, ed. by J. S. RUSSELL, New York / London, 1988, pp. 3-26, at pp. 17-20.

⁵⁹ Apart from the examples given in the text, the following riddles can be mentioned: 26 *Gallus*, 32 *Pugillares* (the final verse could suggest a parallel between the letters cancelled by the stylus on the wax tablets and the martyrs), 39 *Leo* (here again, principally the last verse), 81 *Lucifer*, and 92 *Arca libraria* (which is furthermore very similar in content to 85, *Caecus natus*). See also SALVADOR-BELLO, *Isidorean Perceptions*, pp. 196-199.

Semper acuta gero crudelis spicula belli

Atque carens manibus fabrorum vinco metalla

“Formed in wondrous ways and engendered without seed, I load my sweet inwards with booty from flowers. Through my craft the food of kings grows golden with honey. I always brandish the sharpened arrow-points of fierce warfare and (yet) lacking hands, I surpass the metal-work of smiths.” (Aldhelm, *The Poetic Works*, p. 70)

Aldhelm mentions the characteristics of bees that form the basis of usual metaphors in both pagan and Christian literature (the virginal birth in v. 1, the sampling of nourishment in flowers in v. 2, the sting in v. 4, the dexterity in v. 5) and he uses them himself in other works but not at all here.⁶⁰ As with Augustine, Paul’s words *Videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate* (1 Cor. 13, 12) are surely Aldhelm’s point of departure, but he works from a richer notion of *aenigma*. The obscurity of his riddles is achieved by literary strategies learned from the model of Symphosius: again, personification and reification; unusual similes and metaphors; cunning ambiguity; and above all oxymorons and paradoxes.⁶¹ In Ehwald’s edition, the solution of each riddle is known from its heading, as if to thwart the strategies of obscurity.⁶² Four manuscripts

⁶⁰ For an overview of the use of comparisons with bees in the antique and early medieval literature, see GRINDA, *Enzyklopädie*, pp. 959–991. On Aldhelm, see A. CASIDAY, “St. Aldhelm’s Bees (*De virginitate prosa* cc. IV–VI): Some Observations on a Literary Tradition”, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 33 (2004), pp. 1–22, and CARDELLE DE HARTMANN, “Von Dichtern”, [forthcoming](#).

⁶¹ For a rhetorical analysis of Aldhelm’s riddles, see C. VEYRARD-COSME, “*Lucifica nigris tunc nuntio regna figuris*: Poétique textuelle de l’obscurité dans les recueils d’énigmes latines du Haut Moyen Âge (VII^e–VIII^e siècles)”, in *Obscurity in Medieval Texts*, ed. by L. DOLEŽALOVÁ, J. RIDER and A. ZIRONI, Krems, 2013, pp. 32–48 at pp. 42–44.

⁶² Only manuscripts transmitting the riddle collection on its own have such headings. In his reproduction of Ehwald’s edition with some changes and additions, F. Glorie left out the titles (*Aenigmata Aldhelmi*, denuo ed. Fr. GLORIE, in *Tatuini Opera omnia. Variae collections aenigmatum Merovingicae aetatis. Anonymus de variis*

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of the complete MEPR do not give the solutions as headings, though they are listed in the *capitulatio*. The exception is P1, where the headings very probably represent a scribal intervention, since they are missing in the two closely related manuscripts K and S. The traditional strategies were fully in play and the reader was meant to work in order to understand.

In comparison with his predecessor Symphosius, Aldhelm has been called “bookish”, because he often refers to things and animals that nobody in Britain could know directly, such as a palm (riddle 91) or a basilisk (riddle 88). In the same way, Nicholas Howe has worked out that around 40 riddles incorporate the etymology of a word or explain a Greek or otherwise arcane term.⁶³ Riddle 65, for one, describes a cat quite straightforwardly, but the last verse makes the reader wonder about the solution, because it does not include the usual words *felis* or *catta*: *Gens exosa mihi tradebat nomen habendum* (v. 9, “A hateful race has given me my name to bear”, Aldhelm, *The Poetic Works*, p. 84, slightly changed). Aldhelm means the rare but self-explanatory *muriceps*. Such features respond to a didactic impulse of the poems, which is perceptible in other ways too, such as the references to medical uses (for example, in riddle 56 *Castor*), the descriptions of animals both known and unknown in Britain, and the astronomical rudiments necessary to understand riddles like 58 *Vesper sidus* or 81 *Lucifer*.⁶⁴

nominibus, ed. M. DE MARCO and F. GLORIE, Turnhout 1968 (CCSL 133 and 133A), here vol. 1, pp. 359–540). Thinking that this was an authorial practice, some scholars have tried to discern the function of the anticipated solutions: N. HOWE, “Aldhelm’s *Enigmata* and Isidorian Etymology”, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 14 (1985), pp. 37–59, at pp. 37–38; and R. BORYSLAWSKI, “*Candida sanctorum sic floret gloria rerum*: Aldhelm’s *Aenigmata* as a Riddle of Interpretation”, *Journal of Medieval Latin*, 18 (2008), pp. 203–216, at pp. 204–205.

⁶³ HOWE, “Aldhelm’s *Enigmata*”, *passim*.

⁶⁴ M. L. CAMERON, “Aldhelm as Naturalist: A Re-Examination of Some of his *Enigmata*”, *Peritia*, 4 (1985), pp. 117–133, has argued that Aldhelm might be actually referring in some of these riddles to other animals which could be found in Britain and that actual observation is reflected in some of them. One of his instances has been carefully refuted by H. F. FORBES, “Book-Worm or Entomologist? Aldhelm’s Enigma XXXVI”, *Peritia*, 19 (2005), pp. 20–29, who shows Aldhelm’s use of his sources.

Working out the riddles is not just play, but a means of acquiring (and transmitting) knowledge, rooted in a traditional genre that depends on engaging the reader in a process of reflection and recognition within a game of hitherto unnoted relations: “Riddling is therefore an encapsulation of the learning process”, as Michael Lapidge has remarked.⁶⁵ There is yet a third relevant aspect: the riddles convey deeply Christian messages. Following again Michael Lapidge, who interprets Aldhelm’s riddles as a description of the universe and its hidden structure, the relations among creatures,⁶⁶ Rafal Boryslawski has suggested that Aldhelm’s riddles should guide the reader to see and seek the signs of the Creator in his creations.⁶⁷ The recourse to etymology observed by Howe merits closer thought in this context, since premodern etymology is not primarily a linguistic device, but a hermeneutical one, with the word-origin betraying the essence of the thing so named.⁶⁸ Origins play a fundamental role in describing the world of Isidore of Seville’s *Etymologies*. A further constant theme in the riddles is the recurring weakness of the apparently strong (44 *Ignis*, 72 *Colossus*) and the hidden strength of the seemingly weak (52 *Candela*, 59 *Penna*, 93 *Scintilla*). Such paradox is also the main theme in the *Magnificat*, Mary’s song of thanks and praise (Luke 1,46-55), sung each day at Vespers.⁶⁹ A central Christian message is conveyed by Aldhelm’s favorite riddling strategy—paradox—

⁶⁵ Aldhelm, *Poetic Works*, p. 62.

⁶⁶ Aldhelm, *Poetic Works*, pp. 61-69.

⁶⁷ BORYSLAWSKI, “Candida”, *passim*. SALVADOR-BELLO, *Isidorean Perceptions*, pp. 162-221, analyzes the influence of Books XI-XX of Isidore’s *Etymologies*, basically a description of the universe, on Aldhelm’s riddles.

⁶⁸ On Isidore’s understanding of etymology and its roots, see M. AMSLER, *Etymology and Grammatical Discourse in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, Amsterdam, 1989; and T. DENECKER, *Ideas on Language in Early Latin Christianity: From Tertullian to Isidore of Seville*, Leiden, 2017, pp. 41-44, with further literature.

⁶⁹ The references to liturgy in Aldhelm’s works are yet to be explored, see also my observation in CARDELLE DE HARTMANN, “Von Dichtern” [forthcoming](#).

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which dominates in the final poem of the collection, *Creatura*, which tensely balances the opposing qualities within creation. The paradoxes evoke the central mystery of the Christian message: God becoming a helpless child and dying on a cross, which, as Paul explains in 1 Cor. 1, 18-33 defies all the wisdom of the world. This underlying message becomes explicit in the ending of *Creatura*, where creation itself challenges puffy teachers and scholars to understand it:

Auscultate mei credentes famina verbi,
Pandere quae poterit gnarus vix ore magister
Et tamen infitians non retur frivola lector!
Sciscitor inflatos, fungar quo nomine, sofos (80-83)”

Pay heed, you who believe the words of my utterance! A learned teacher will scarcely be able to expound them orally; and yet the doubting reader ought not to think them trifles! I ask puffed-up wise men to tell what name I bear (Aldhelm, *The Poetic Works*, p. 94, slightly changed).

4. Structure and meaning of the work

In the two first sections of this paper, we considered the two addresses to the king and showed that they are written in similar *Kunstprosa* and deploy complementary metaphors and resonances. Together, they form a dedication that serves as bookends to the work as a whole. Division paradoxically could serve the purpose of unimpaired transmission, since dedicatory writing was prone to be removed or redeployed. In a similar way, the two metrical treatises are thematically related and united by their form: both are dialogues between teacher and pupil. At the end of ch. 9, Aldhelm briefly introduces the riddles as examples of hexametric poetry, but this has not convinced most readers, either medieval or modern. There is a tendency to consider

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them as interruptions to the metrical treatises, which the rearrangement of content in manuscripts F and P¹ sought to ‘correct’. Separate modern editions of parts of MEPR project the same attitude. **The ring composition** suggests, however, that the riddles are more than mere examples or a former work which has been awkwardly placed in this new arrangement. On the contrary, they are the center of the work, which is surrounded by the two metrical treatises with the two addresses to the king as bookends. We shall return to this point.

hat gelöscht: **A ring composition** implies that they

MEPR is, of course, also a letter with all its usual features. It begins with a formal *salutatio* and a *captatio benevolentiae*. The three ‘inclusions’ are the presents thereby introduced and constitute the epistolary *narratio*, the heart of the letter. The *Allocutio excusativa* contains a *petitio*, requesting the king’s protection, and a *peroratio*, urging the dedicatee to read the presents and thus cultivate his mind.

What is the overall message intended? Aldhelm himself says in both addresses to the king that he has assembled the work so that the king might exercise his wit and deepen his learning. The didactic purpose is straightforward in the two metrical treatises, which could teach metrics and expand the vocabulary, and is perceptible in the riddles, which contain information to expand or complete. One might even go a step further and suppose that the letter might be delivered by a person who could elaborate on it and explain rare words and challenges.⁷⁰ Even if nobody came with the letter to explain, an attentive reading revealed that not only exegetical studies, but also engaging pagan authors and learning metrics served a Christian purpose. This meaning must have been clear to a contemporary, as it related to the age-old debate about pagan learning and to the contemporary discussion on Irish and Roman education. Aldhelm had acquired his mastery of metrics at the school of Theodore and Hadrian, where he learned the

⁷⁰ Aldhelm’s choice of vocabulary might prove a challenge even for a learned reader like Aldfrith. On the king’s learning see C. IRELAND, “Where was King Aldfrith of Northumbria Educated? An Exploration of Seventh-Century Insular Learning”, *Traditio*, 70 (2015), pp. 29-74.

sources.⁷¹ Writing from Canterbury to Leuthere (epist. I), Aldhelm explained what he was learning and emphasized metrics, lamenting how rare good teachers of the subject were and rejoicing in the specialized knowledge he could acquire.⁷² Vivien Law observed that he specifically mentioned details for which no sources have been found, and since some of them relate in fact to Greek metrics, she surmised that they reflected Theodore's own teaching.⁷³ The letter to Acircius might also subtly advertise the 'new' Roman learning to the king, who was himself of Irish descent through his mother, was educated by the Irish, and reigned over a kingdom, Northumbria, where Irish and Roman influence met. In a similar, but more assertive, even belligerent way, Aldhelm had pointed out to Heahfrith, just back from Ireland, the superiority of the education that could now be had in England.⁷⁴

MEPR is, however, more than a didactic assemblage and advertisement for new learning. We must pay special attention to the riddles, which **make the center of a ring composition**. Key to interpreting them is Paul's phrase *Videmus nunc per speculum in aenigmate* (1 Cor. 13, 12). Aldhelm uses the words to pursue a programme different from Augustine's. The *aenigma* is creation, which we are called to decipher through both allegorical interpretation and the discernment of nature's structures and workings, with the help of human wisdom. The riddle engages the reader as a sleuth of meanings, a tracker of allusions, and a discoverer of real but hidden connections. The journey and the goal is meditation on the meaning of creation.

⁷¹ On the sources of the metrical treatises see LAW, "Study", pp. 43-57.

⁷² Epist. 1, ed. EHWALD, pp. 475-478, on metrics p. 476, l. 9 - p. 477, l. 11.

⁷³ LAW, "Study", pp. 50-52.

⁷⁴ Epist. 5, Ed. EHWALD, pp. 486-493. The letter has been newly edited, accompanied by a study of the glosses, by S. GWARA, "A Record of Anglo-Saxon Pedagogy: Aldhelm's *Epistola ad Heahfridum* and its Gloss", *Journal of Medieval Latin*, 6 (1996), pp. 84-134.

In the same way, the excursus on the uses of seven, tailored for the dedicatee, must be completed by the reader's own engagement with the number. In the *Allocutio*, Aldhelm equates *De metris et enigmatibus ac pedum regulis* with Priscian and suggests that the reading of MEPR realizes the biblical precept of meditating on divine law. We should take him seriously, since Aldhelm's long letter to King Aldfrith will improve one's Latin—and thus access to Scripture and the teachings of the Fathers—, reinforce allegorical or typological acuity, help the project of meditating on God's word and creation and so strengthen one's understanding of the Christian message.

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