

NOTES ON ANGLO-SAXON RIDDLES

The Anglo-Saxons were great poets, and the most famous Anglo-Saxon epic poem is of course *Beowulf*. But perhaps less well-known is a tenth-century manuscript called *The Exeter Book* which contains a wide range of poetry, including a collection of more than ninety riddles. These poems would very likely have been passed on orally for many years (possibly as many as two hundred years) before they came to be written down. The riddles are usually quite short and they are almost always written in the first person, providing ambiguous clues about the object in question. They all contain much in the way of metaphorical narrative. The natural world features strongly in this collection, and the Anglo-Saxons especially enjoyed taking objects that had begun their life as something else – perhaps a tree, a rock or a seed. The following modern English extract from one of the riddles will give you some idea about how these riddles were constructed.

*I grew in a field, where the earth and the clouds of heaven fed me,
Until, when I was old, fierce enemies changed me from what I'd been, alive;
They took me, and shook me from the earth
And made it so that I must – against my nature – sometimes bow to a soldier's service.
Now, in my master's hands I'm busy.
He cherishes me, and in the skirmish, fights with skilful control.
Sometimes, in full sight, I streak
Towards a stronghold that was peaceful before. Say what my name is.*

Bibliography

K. Crossley-Holland (ed., trans.), *The Exeter Book Riddles* (Enitharman Editions, 2010)

Answer To The Riddle Above

Spear or Battering-Ram