

The *Beasts in the Anglo-Saxon World* Conference, UCL Institute of Archaeology, 11th – 12th June 2011

Reviewed by Melissa Hermann*

Beasts in the Anglo-Saxon World was held at the Institute of Archaeology over the weekend of 11-12 June 2011, following on from an earlier conference which also focused on the natural world in Anglo-Saxon England: *Woodlands, Trees, and Timber in the Anglo-Saxon World* (2009). Like this earlier conference, *Beasts* took an interdisciplinary approach to examine how the Anglo-Saxons interacted with and understood the real and imagined animals that inhabited their world.

Noël Adams opened the proceedings with a discussion of the intricacies and elusiveness of animal ornament found in early Anglo-Saxon art. Her paper, "Riddle and reality: early Anglo-Saxon art styles in context", examined the use of zoomorphic decoration and attempted to identify some of the motifs. By showing numerous examples of the Germanic type ornament of Anglo-Saxon England, Adams endeavored to track the evolution of the art style from Style I to Style II and to connect some of the animal motifs to Mediterranean and Byzantine prototypes. Jennifer Neville also examined some of the puzzling aspects of animals in Anglo-Saxon society in her paper, "The clarity of distortion: beasts as mirrors in the Old English riddles". Selecting several Old English riddles from the Exeter Book, including one which has no known definitive answer, Neville questioned whether it was the answer that was important in reading the riddles or the process of

reading and thinking about the puzzle itself. She also suggested that there were aspects of self-reflection within the riddles, superficially about animals, which illustrate certain social qualities that are to be respected or, conversely, avoided.

The first paper of the second session, "Identity and transformation: the roles of animals in Anglo-Saxon funerary ritual", was given by Julie Bond and addressed, on a very technical level, the large amount of animal remains found in urns in cremation burials. She was able to identify with much more specificity the types of animals cremated, wild and domestic, and disprove some long-held beliefs about the purpose of such offerings. She also suggested how and possibly why the animals were apparently ritualistically killed, cremated and buried in Anglo-Saxon graves. Victoria Symons then gave a paper on "Serpents on Scandinavian rune stones" examining the appearance of serpentine decoration on Scandinavian sculpture. She related the serpents on the rune stones to descriptions of serpentine ornament and runes on metalwork and armament and further connected the relationship between serpent and rune with the inclusion of the writing within the serpent body on the stones.

Richard North started things off again after lunch with a paper entitled "You sexy beast: the pig in a villa in Vandalic North Africa and boar-cults in Old Germanic heathendom". Here he looked at movement and cultural changes among the Vandals in North Africa at the end of the Roman Empire, and in this

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context he examined the associations of the wild pig in Vandal society and the role that boar decoration played in Germanic art styles. Clive Tolley also looked at the role of the beast in a pagan context in his paper “Thor’s goats”, exploring the beast as divine companion. Using as a model the story of Thor’s goats which could be eaten and resurrected the next day (provided the bones remained intact), he examined the role of those animals associated with gods or supernatural entities in the mythology of different cultures across Northern Europe.

Mike Bintley then presented a paper, “Where once dragons lay shall be grass with reeds and rushes: beasts and men in rural and urban landscapes”, that looked at the relationship, in Anglo-Saxon literature, between man and beast, and specifically at men behaving badly (and therefore ‘bestially’). He illustrated how, for the Anglo-Saxons, people and places could become ‘bestial’ by being forsaken by God and, conversely, how land could be reclaimed and cleansed through holiness and godliness. Carrying on the theme of man and beast, Andrew Reynolds ended the first day with a paper on “Relationships between man and beast: a deviant perspective”. He discussed the close and important role fulfilled by animals in medieval society as evidenced by archaeological finds and mythology as well as how the distinctions were drawn between man and beast, living and non-living, in ways incompatible with modern taxonomy. He also discussed some of the unsavoury and deviant behaviour performed with animals that had been recorded, often with the manner of punishment described, and he presented a number of possible reflections of such practices in the Anglo-Saxon burial record.

Opening the second day, Chris Fern discussed Anglo-Saxon England and the role of horse riding and the cult of the horse in a paper entitled “Horse-power: the significance of the horse to early Anglo-Saxon identity and beliefs c. AD450-700”. By means of some thought-provoking examples he suggested

that the role of the horse and rider culture in England may have been a prominent one, with similarities to continental cultures with horse cults, and that the horse is more prevalent in the art and ornament of the Anglo-Saxons than has been previously acknowledged. Following this, Tom Williams’s “Wolves beyond the border: confronting the bestial in Anglo-Saxon warfare” looked at the role of the borderlands of Anglo-Saxon civilization and the animals that inhabited them, paying special attention to how ideas of monstrous lands and wild beasts affected the choice of battle ground in Anglo-Saxon warfare. He suggested that borderlands and wilderness areas were considered more appropriate for battles as warfare released bestial forces that were imagined to be more easily accessed and safely discharged away from settlements.

László Sándor Chardonens explored the role of animals in prophecy and magic in a paper entitled “Animals and their significance in Anglo-Saxon prognostics”. These portentous animals were more varied than the oft-cited ‘beasts of battle’ - the wolf, raven, and eagle - and signified future predictions, good or bad, in complex and specific prognostics. The role of the raven as ominous portent in *Beowulf* has often been discussed. Eric Lacey, however, offered a new interpretation in his paper “Beowulf’s blithe-hearted raven”. Here he revisited the original language of the poem and offered an alternate nuance to the translation of the Old English, suggesting that the raven was in fact considered ‘bright’ and therefore a positive trope rather than a warning.

The last two papers of the conference, given by John Baker (“Little beasties: creepy-crawlies in English place-names”) and Della Hooke (“Beasts and birds in pre-Conquest charters and place-names”), both examined the evidence of animal life in Anglo-Saxon England preserved in the roots of Old English place names. They argued that such names can be seen as records of the interaction between the Anglo-Saxons and the animal world, be it as pest or property.

Overall the conference was successful in bringing together a wide range of scholars from multiple disciplines with differing approaches to the role of animals in Anglo-Saxon England, and many of the papers delivered had a touch of humor and irreverence about their subject matter that allowed moments of levity to balance the serious and scholarly points that were being presented. Most of the sessions were composed of

papers with clear and interesting relationships to each other, although there were a few papers that, while very compelling in their own right, seemed oddly matched in a single session. That said, the broad topics covered by the papers brought about interesting juxtapositions and provided a valuable opportunity for reevaluating perceptions and understandings of animals in the Anglo-Saxon world in new and different ways.

