

Ant-lore in Anglo-Saxon England

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ABSTRACT

Two Old English versions of a sunshine prognostication survive in the mid-eleventh century Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 391, p. 713, and in a twelfth-century addition to Oxford, Bodleian Library, Hatton 115, 149v–150r. Among standard predictions promising joy, peace, blossom, abundance of milk and fruit, and a great baptism sent by God, one encounters an enigmatic prophecy which involves camels stealing gold from the ants. These gold-digging ants have a long pedigree, one which links Old English with much earlier literature and indicates the extent to which Anglo-Saxon culture had assimilated traditions of European learning. It remains difficult to say what is being prophesied, however, or to explain the presence of the passage among conventional predictions. Whether the prediction was merely a literary exercise or carried a symbolic implication, it must have originated in an ecclesiastical context. Its mixture of classical learning and vernacular tradition, Greek and Latin, folklore and Christian, implies an author with some knowledge of literary and scholarly traditions.

The surviving corpus of Anglo-Saxon prognostics is preserved in a number of eleventh- and twelfth-century manuscripts.¹ It comprises an eclectic assortment of texts in both Latin and English which includes lists of lucky and unlucky days, predictions based on the weather on Christmas Day and New Year's Day, such as the occurrence of wind and sun during the twelve nights of Christmas, dream prophecies, thunder divination, identification by means of the lunar calendar of auspicious and inauspicious days for bloodletting, the use of birthdays to determine an individual's character, and much besides. The predictions frequently involve groups or classes of people rather than individuals, except for prognostics by birth, and even here we are far from the strict determinism of the kind of astrology which predicts the future according to the exact moment at which one is born. Being generic, the predictions apply to many people and thus can more easily yield occasions when they come true. The most frequent concerns are illness and death, weather conditions, crops and livestock.

¹ R. M. Liuzza, 'Anglo-Saxon Prognostics in Context: a Survey and Handlist of Manuscripts', *ASE* 30 (2001), 181–239, and 'What the Thunder said: Anglo-Saxon Brontologies and the Problem of Sources', *RES* 55 (2004), 1–23. L. S. Chardonnens, *Anglo-Saxon Prognostics, 900–1100. Study and Texts* (Leiden, 2007).

Anglo-Saxon prognostics represent a genre which has been largely ignored by modern scholars until recently. The various texts have been erroneously and superficially associated with magic and heathen worship, and classified as ‘folklore’, ‘popular superstition’, ‘monastic superstitions’, or ‘secular works’.² As Roy Liuzza argues, labelling these texts as folklore and *Aberglaube* has significantly affected the response to them: ‘One does not “edit” folklore; its individual material contexts are irrelevant. The relative neglect of these texts in modern studies of monastic life and of the history of science seems to arise from the categories into which they have been placed, an unfortunate side-effect of the disciplinary differences that have shaped modern scholarship.’³

Liuzza points out the frequent occurrence of Anglo-Saxon prognostics in religious and scientific manuscripts. He therefore rejects the label of ‘folklore’ or ‘learned folklore’, stressing instead the probable monastic origin of these texts. Similar views on these compositions include that of L. S. Chardonnens, who recently published a comprehensive edition of prognostics in Old English and Latin from Anglo-Saxon and early post-Conquest manuscripts. Chardonnens argues that prognostics were a form of codified science which travelled from the Continent during the Benedictine Reform, and that most of the Old English versions are translations from lost Latin originals.⁴

As a contribution to this reappraisal of Anglo-Saxon prognostics I shall examine a single enigmatic prophecy in a prognostication about the shining of the sun during the twelve nights of Christmas.⁵ Two very similar Old English texts of the prognostication survive: one is in the mid-eleventh century Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 391, p. 713, the other appears in an extra

² See M. Förster, ‘Beiträge zur Mittelalterlichen Volkskunde’, *ASNSL* 110 (1903), 346–58; at 120 (1908), 43–52 and 265–305; 121 (1908), 30–46; 125 (1910), 39–70; 127 (1911), 31–84; 128 (1912), 55–71 and 285–308; 129 (1912), 16–49; 134 (1916), 264–93. See also M. Förster ‘Die altenglischen Traumlunare’, *ES* 60 (1925), 58–93; ‘Die altenglischen Verzeichnisse von Glücks und Unglückstagen’, *Studies in English Philology. A Miscellany in Honour of Fedrerick Klaeber*, ed. K. Malone (Minneapolis, MN, 1929), pp. 258–77; ‘Vom Fortleben antiker Sammelunare im Englischen und in anderen Volkssprachen’, *Anglia* 67/68 (1944), 1–171. See also H. Henel, ‘Altenglischer Mönchsaberglaube’, *ES* 69 (1934), 329–49.

³ R. M. Liuzza, ‘What is and is not Magic: the Case of Anglo-Saxon Prognostics’, *Societas Magica Newsletter* 12 (2004), 1–6, at 2. Liuzza investigated the origin and source of thunder prognostics in ‘What the Thunder said’, 1–23.

⁴ Chardonnens, *Anglo-Saxon Prognostics*. See also *Anglo-Saxon Prognostics. An Edition and Translation of Texts from London, British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius A.iii*, ed. and trans. R. M. Liuzza (Woodbridge, 2011).

⁵ For a general discussion of the Old English versions of the sunshine prognostication and their relationship to Latin and Middle English analogues, see M. Cesario, ‘The Shining of the Sun in the Twelve Nights of Christmas’, *Saints and Scholars. New Perspectives on Anglo-Saxon Literature and Culture in honour of Hugh Magennis*, ed. S. McWilliams (Woodbridge, 2012), pp. 195–212.

quire added, by a twelfth-century hand, to Oxford, Bodleian Library, Hatton 115, 149v–150r. CCC 391 originated at the cathedral priory of Worcester and contains, as far as I know, the oldest surviving example of a sunshine prognostication. Hatton 115 was in the Worcester scriptorium at the end of the thirteenth century, when the Tremulous Scribe added four lines on the lucky and unlucky days in both manuscripts. In CCC 391 the prognostication begins imperfectly owing to the loss of one or more leaves before p. 713, and in Hatton 115 it follows the wind prognostication on the same folio. Whereas prognostics based on the occurrence of the wind during the twelve nights of Christmas are negative predictions, those based on the sun are generally positive in the sense that they foretell that something good is going to occur. Among standard predictions promising joy, gold, quicksilver, peace, blossom, abundance of milk, leaves and fruit, and a great baptism sent by God, there is the following enigmatic statement which does not seem to fit the normal conventions:

Gyf ðy iiii dæge sunne scineð. Ðonne oðbeoreð olfendas mycel gold⁶ þam æmetum þe þonne goldhord heoldan sculon⁷ (CCC 391, p. 713)

If the sun shines on the fourth day, then the camels will bear off much gold from the ants which then must guard the treasure.

On first view this prophecy, oddly bringing together camels and ants which guard gold, looks quite out of step with the rest of the prognostic, and might provoke suspicion that the text has been interpolated and corrupted. The association of ants with gold is in fact a long-established literary *topos* which occurs in both Western and Eastern traditions.⁸ But why was this classical story

⁶ A reference to gold and treasure in the context of the twelve nights of Christmas appears in Matthew's account of the visit of the Magi. See Matthew II.:10 'Soplice þa ða tungelwitegan þone steorran gesawon, fægenodon swyðe myclum gefean. 11 and gangende into þam huse hi gemetton þæt cild mid marian hys meder and hi aðenedon hi. and hi to him gebædon; And hi untyndon hyra goldhordas. and him lac brohton. þæt wæs gold. and recels. and myrr. 12 And hi afengon andsware on swefnum. þæt hi eft to herode ne hwyrfdon. ac hi on oðerne weg on hyra rice ferdon; Ecce angelus domini apparuit' ('Truly, when the magi saw the star, they rejoiced with great joy. 11 And entering into the house, they found the child with Mary his mother, and they adored him and they prayed to him. And they opened up their treasure-hoards, and they brought him gifts, namely gold, frankincense, and myrrh. 12 And they received an answer through dreams that they should not return to Herod, but they went back another way into their kingdoms. *Behold, the angel of the Lord appeared.*'). Cf. *The Old English Version of the Gospels*, vol. I, Text and Introduction, ed. R. M. Liuzza (EETS os 304; Oxford, 1994), p. 5.

⁷ The prophecy in Hatton 115 reads: 'Gyf þy .iiii. dæge sunne scyneð. þonne þa olfenda mycel gold oðberað þan ætmettum þa þone goldhord healden scolden'.

⁸ The classical Greek mythology mentions Gryps (gryphus), the griffin, a fabulous bird-like animal, which was said to be the guardian of the gold of the north India. The Arimaspians mounted on horseback and attempted to steal the gold. This myth has undergone modifications

inserted into the Christian context of the sunshine prognostication alongside conventional prophecies? Was there a religious or allegorical significance attached to it? And if so, how does the prediction relate to human affairs? How would it have been received by an Anglo-Saxon audience? Answering, or at least exploring, these questions prompts us to reconsider some of our assumptions about Anglo-Saxon prognostics.

To begin with, this is not the only mention in Anglo-Saxon literature of ants guarding gold. The prediction becomes less obscure when one compares another contemporary work in Old English, the *Wonders of the East*,⁹ where ‘dog-sized ants’ are described as digging gold from the ground and attacking camels:

Capi hatte seo ea in ðære ylcan stowe þe is haten gorgoneus, þæt is wælcyriginc. Ðær beoð akende æmættan swa micle swa hundas. Hi habbað fet swylce græshoppan, hi syndan reades hiwes 7 blaces. Ða æmættan delfað gold up of eorðan fram foran nihte oð ða fiftan tid dæges. Ða menn ðe to ðam dyrstige beoð þæt hi þæt gold nimen, þonne nimað hi mid him olfenda myran mid hyra folan 7 stedan. Ða folan hi getigað ær hi ofer þa ea faran. Ðæt gold hi gefætað on ða myran 7 hi sylfe onsittað 7 þa stedan þær forlætað. Ðonne ða æmættan hi onfindað, 7 þa hwile ðe þa æmættan ymbe ða stedan abiscode beoð, þonne ða men mid þam myran 7 þam golde ofer ða ea farað. Hi beoð to þam swifte þæt ða men wenað þæt hi fleogende syn (Tiberius B. v, 80v).¹⁰

over the centuries. The griffin has been replaced by the ants and the horses by camels; see *Dictionary of Classical Mythology*, ed. R. E. Bell (Oxford, 1982), s. v. ‘Gold’, p. 103. Herodotus, in book IV of the *Histories*, reports that ‘above them dwelt the Arimaspi, men with one eye; still further, the gold-guarding griffins; and beyond these, the Hyperboreans, who extended to the sea’ (*Herodotus: the Histories*, ed. and trans. R. Waterfield (Oxford, 1998), IV. 27, p. 244).

⁹ The three versions of the *Wonders of the East* appear in London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. xv (98v–106v), which contains a version in Old English; London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B. v (78v–87v, eleventh century) where the Latin is followed by a version in Old English; and Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley 614 (fols. 36–51, twelfth century) which is in Latin. Ker dates Vitellius A. xv ‘s. x–xi’. See N. R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford, 1957, repr. 1990), pp. 281–2, and D. N. Dumville, ‘Beowulf Come Lately. Some Notes on the Palaeography of the Nowell Codex’, *ASNSL* 225 (1988), 49–63. See *Marvels of the East. A Full Reproduction [in facsimile] of the Three Known Copies [Of the Tractatus de Diuersis Monstris quae sunt in Mundo]*, ed. M. R. James (Oxford, 1929), p. 43. M. Förster refers to the ant-episode in the *Wonders of the East* in a footnote in *Archiv* 128 (1912), n. 34, p. 64.

¹⁰ My transcription. ‘The river is named Capi in the same place, which is called Gorgoneus, that is ‘valkyrie-like’. Ants are born there as big as dogs, which have feet like grasshoppers, and are of red and black colour. The ants dig up gold from the ground from before night to the fifth hour of the day. People who are bold enough to take the gold bring with them male camels and females with their young. They tie up the young before they cross the river. They load the gold onto the females, and mount them themselves, and leave the males there. Then the ants detect the males, and while the ants are occupied with the males, the men cross over the river with the females and the gold. They are so swift that one would think that they were flying’ (the translation is taken from *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf Manuscript*, ed. A. Orchard (Cambridge, 1995), § 9. p. 191). The Latin text of the *Wonders* in Tiberius B. v reads: ‘Capi



Figure 7: London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B. V, 80v

fluiuis in eodem loco qui appellatur gorgoneus ibi nascuntur formicae statura canum habentes pedes quasi locustae rubro colore nigroque, fodientes aurum. et quod per noctem fodiunt sub terra profertur foras usque diei horam quintam. Homines autem qui audaces sunt illud tollere. sic tollent apud camelos masculos et feminas illas quae habent foetas. Foetas autem trans flumen gargulum alligatos relinquunt et camelis foeminis aurum inponunt. Illae autem pietate ad suos pullos festinant. ibi masculi remanent. et illae formicae sequentes inueniunt eos masculos et comedunt eos. dum circa autem eos occupatae sunt feminae transeunt flumen cum hominibus sunt autem tam ueloces ut putes eos uolare' (My transcription).

London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B. v has two drawings on 80v (Fig. 7)¹¹ in which ants are pictured as bizarre hybrid quadrupeds (of reddish colour),¹² very similar to dogs but with leonine features,¹³ grasshopper feet and long tails.¹⁴ The first drawing shows them digging the gold from the ground. In the second, these ‘formicae statura canum, habentes pedes quasi locustae rubro colore nigroque’ (Tiberius B. v, 80r) attack a male camel while a rider mounted on a female camel’s back escapes with a sack of gold.¹⁵ The river in the background is another significant element. The female camel runs faster than the males because her foals have been tied up on the other side of the river, and she is impatient to rejoin them.

London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A. xv, which contains an Old

¹¹ According to T. Reimer, the Anglo-Saxon manuscripts of the *Wonders* contain the first illustrations of gold-digging ants. See T. Reimer, *Kleiner als Hunde, aber größer als Füchse – Die Goldameisen des Herodot* (Münster, 2006).

¹² Dog-sized ants with leonine features are described in Solinus’ *De mirabilibus mundi* which says: ‘Iuxta Nigrim fluvium catoblepas nascitur modica atque iners bestia, caput praegrave aegre ferens, aspectu pestilenti: nam qui in oculos eius offenderint, protinus vitam exuunt. Formicae ibi ad formam canis maximi arenas aureas pedibus eruunt, quos leoninos habent: quas custodiunt, ne quis auferat, captantesque ad necem persequuntur’ (‘By the river Niger, the catoblepas is born, a medium-sized and sluggish beast that can scarcely carry its very heavy head; it has a baleful gaze, and anyone who comes into its line of sight immediately dies. Ants live there the size of a very big dog, and they dig up golden sand with their feet; they have [feet] like a lion, and guard [the sand] so that no one can snatch it, and they chase to death those who take it away’). Cf. *C. Iulii Solini Collectanea Rerum Memorabilium sive Polyhistor*, ed. T. Mommsen (Berlin, 1864), xxii. 12, p. 150.

¹³ Dog-sized ants are also illustrated in two drawings in London, British Library, Royal 2 B. vii, a fourteenth-century bestiary produced in England, on fols. 95 and 96r. The first drawing shows the ants as tiny dogs in a heap which looks like an anthill. The other depicts three dog-like creatures attacking two men who carry shields and swords.

¹⁴ The same description and illustrations occur in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley 614, fols. 39–40.

¹⁵ The Old English version of the *Wonders* derive from a Latin text on a similar subject contained in various continental manuscripts. Some versions of it are attributed to a character named Feramus or Fermes who writes to Hadrian, others to Premonis or Perimenis who addresses his letter to the Emperor Trajan. M. H. Omont drew attention to a Latin text he discovered, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, nouv. acq. 1065 (s.ix/x), which he entitled *Lettre à l’empereur Adrien sur les merveilles de l’Asie*. See M. H. Omont, ‘Lettre à l’empereur Adrien sur les merveilles de l’Asie’, *Bibliothèque de l’École des Chartes* 74 (1913), 507–15. The text was reprinted by E. Faral, ‘Une source latine de l’histoire d’Alexandre *La Lettre sur les Merveilles de L’Indie*’, *Romania* 43 (1914), 199–215. In BN, nouv. acq. 1065, the gold-digging ants are described, among other things, as ‘formice myrmidones, magnitudine catulorum, habentes pedes senos et centrios quasi locustae marine’ (‘myrmidon ants, the size of puppies, with six feet and claws (?) like lobsters’). The term ‘myrmidones’, which does not appear in any of the English versions, clearly refers to the skilled and brave Greek warriors commanded by Achilles. This association stems from the legend of the Princess of Phthia, Eurymedousa, who is seduced by King Myrmidon disguised as an ant. The ants are unequivocally compared to courageous warriors who would fight until the end to protect their possessions or land.

English version of the *Wonders*, has a single picture on 101r in which there is a hole in the ground containing gold and ants stand guard on either side. On the right a male camel is attacked by three ants, while on the left a man with a female camel is stealing the gold. In neither manuscript did the artist or artists try to follow the description in the text. Instead of an ant-like creature he depicted a reddish dog-like animal with four long feet. The presence of giant ants in Cotton Vitellius A. xv, which contains the poems *Beowulf* and *Judith*, and the Old English prose texts *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle*, *Wonders of the East* and an incomplete *Life of St Christopher*, is not surprising given the collection's concern with grotesque creatures.¹⁶

Monstrous and abnormal ants, again associated with gold, also appear in the *Liber monstrorum*, where they have six feet and run with incredible speed. We are not told about their size, but their connection to gold is made clear: 'Et inter ipsa quae dicunt inania, ferunt formicas in quadam esse insula, et quod sex pedes et atrum colorem et miram habeant celeritatem, depromunt. Cum quibus incredibilis auri abundantia describitur, quod ipsae sua seruant industria.'¹⁷

Where did these Anglo-Saxon authors find this bizarre idea? It is not a home-grown invention. These gold-digging ants have a long pedigree, one which links Old English with much earlier literature and indicates the extent to which Anglo-Saxon culture had assimilated traditions of European learning. Gold, camels and dog-sized ants are associated long before the Anglo-Saxon period, in Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis historia* (c. AD 77):

Indicae formicae cornua Erythris in aede Herculis fixa miraculo fuere, aurum hae cavernis egerunt cum terra, in regione septentrionalium Indorum qui Dardae vocantur, ipsis color felium, magnitudo Aegypti luporum erutum hoc ab iis tempore hiberno Indi furantur aestivo fervore, conditis propter vaporem in cuniculos formicis, quae tamen odore sollicitatae provolant crebroque lacerant quamvis praevelocibus camelis fugientes: tanta pernecitas feritasque est cum amore auri.¹⁸

¹⁶ See K. Sisam, 'The Compilation of the Beowulf Manuscript', in his *Studies in the History of OE Literature* (Oxford, 1953).

¹⁷ 'Among the other empty things which they say, they maintain that there are ants on a certain island, and claim that they have six feet and a black colour and amazing speed. Alongside them there is described an incredible abundance of gold, which they guard in their diligence' (text and translation are taken from *Pride and Prodigies*, ed. Orchard, II.15, pp. 296–7).

¹⁸ 'The horns of an Indian ant fixed up in the Temple of Hercules were one of the sights of Erythrae. These ants carry gold out of caves in the earth in the region of the Northern Indians called the Dardae. The creatures are of the colour of cats and the size of Egyptian wolves. The gold that they dig up in winter time the Indians steal in the hot weather of summer, when the heat makes the ants hide in burrows; but nevertheless they are attracted by their scent and fly out and sting them repeatedly although retreating on very fast camels: such speed and such ferocity do these creatures combine with their love of gold' (text and translation are taken from *Pliny Historia naturalis*, ed. H. Rackman, vol. 3 (Cambridge, MA, 1940), XI.xxxvi.111, pp. 500–1)

A similar description appears in Isidore's *Etymologiae* (seventh century): 'Dicuntur in Aethiopia esse formicae ad formam canis quae arenas aureas pedibus eruunt, quas custodiunt ne quis auferat, captantesque ad necem persequuntur'.¹⁹

Outside Western literature, there may be a trace of the idea in the Sanskrit epic, *Mahābhārata* (1000 BC) where there is the term *pīpilika* 'ant-gold', meaning 'gold-dust'.²⁰ The earliest complete version of the legend is in the *Historiae* of Herodotus (fifth century BC).²¹ Book III, which describes India, has a chapter entitled 'gold-digging ants', and concerns ants as big as foxes or dogs which dig gold from the ground and then guard it. Indians then steal the gold with the help of camels.²² In Herodotus's account there is another element which anticipates the Anglo-Saxon prognostication: the sun. The place where the ants reside is very hot, and the sun shines all the time, and this makes it easier for the Indians and their camels to get the gold because the heat drives the ants underground.

[hereafter *HN*]. Another reference to gold-digging ants says: 'Aurum invenitur in nostro orbe, ut omittamus Indicum a formicis aut apud Scythas grypis' (*HN*, XXXIII. xxi. 66, p. 50).

¹⁹ Cf. San Isidoro De Sevilla, *Etymologias*, ed. O. Reta, 2 vols. (Madrid, 1994) II, XII. iii. 9, p. 78 [hereafter *Ethymol.*]. 'It is said that in Ethiopia there are ants in the shape of dogs, who dig up golden sands with their feet, they guard this sand lest anyone carry it off, and when they chase something they pursue it to death' (the trans. is taken from S. A. Barney, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 254–5). The same passage occurs in Rabanus Maurus, see *Beati Rabani Mauri Fuldensis Abbatis et Moguntini Archiepiscopi de Universo libri viginti duo*, PL, ed. J. P. Migne (Paris, 1844–64), 111, col. 0227D.

²⁰ 'The Khastas, Ekasana, the Arhas, the Pradaras, the Dirghavenus, the Paradas, the Kulindas, the Tanganas, and the other Targanas, brought as tribute heaps of gold measured in drones (jars) and raised from underneath the earth by ants and therefore called after these creatures' (*The Bhagavad Gītā*, ed. and trans. F. Edgerton, 3 vols. (Cambridge, MA, 1925–44) II, section LI).

²¹ The present article is mainly concerned with the occurrence of gold-digging ants in those works which were of importance to the Anglo-Saxons. For a study of 'gold-digging ants' from classical times to modern days, see Reimer, *Kleiner als Hunde*.

²² In other sources the Indians steal the gold with the help of horses. Megasthenes in his description of India reports: 'They get the gold from ants. These creatures are larger than foxes, but are in other respects like the ants of our own country. They dig holes in the earth like other ants. The heap which they throw up consists of gold the purest and brightest in the world. The mounds are piled up close to each other in regular order like hillocks of gold dust, whereby all the plain is made effulgent. It is difficult, therefore, to look towards the sun, and many who have attempted to do this have thereby destroyed their eyesight. The people who are next neighbours to the ants, with a view to plunder these heaps, cross the intervening desert, which is of no great extent, mounted on wagons to which they have yoked their swiftest horses. They arrive at noon, a time when the ants have gone underground, and at once seizing the booty make off at full speed. The ants, on learning what has been done, pursue the fugitives, and overtaking them fight with them till they conquer or die, for of all animals they are the most courageous. It hence appears that they understand the worth of gold, and that they will sacrifice their lives rather than part with it' (*Megasthenes and Arrian's Ancient India*, trans. J. W. McCrindle (London, 1877), Frag. XXXIX, pp. 90–1).

Other Indians live at the border of the town of Caspatyrus and Pactyican territory, to the north of the rest of the Indians. They are the most warlike Indians, and it is they who mount expeditions to search for the gold; the region in question is too sandy for human habitation. Now, in the sand of this desert there are ants which are bigger than foxes, although they never reach the size of dogs. Anyway, these ants make their nests underground, and in so doing they bring sand up to the surface in exactly the same way that ants in Greece do (they are also very similar to Greek ants in shape), and the sand which is brought up to the surface has gold in it. It is this sand that the Indians search for on their expeditions into the desert. Each of them harnesses three camels together – two males, which carry the traces, and a female in the middle, on which the Indian rides, because their female camels run as fast as horses, as well as being far more capable of carrying loads. The Indian makes sure that the female camel in the team is one with a very recent litter, from which he has to tear her away . . . So that is the system the Indians use for the team with which they ride out in search of the gold. They time their trip so that the actual taking of the gold will coincide with the hottest part of the day, because the heat drives the ants away underground. Whereas the sun is hottest at noon elsewhere, for these people it is hottest in the morning, from dawn until the forenoon . . . The Indians reach their destination, fill the bags they brought with sand, and make their way back home as quickly as possible, because – as the Persians say – the ants' sense of smell lets them know what is going on and then they give chase. They say that there is no faster creature on earth than these ants, and so the Indians have to get a head start while the ants are gathering, or none of them would survive. Male camels are slow runners than females, so the two males are cut loose when they begin to fall behind, but not both at once. Meanwhile, the females remember their offspring back home and show no sign of weakness. That, according to the Persians, is how the Indians get most of their gold, although a small quantity is also dug out of the ground in their country.²³

There is no evidence that the Anglo-Saxons had direct knowledge of Herodotus, though they would have encountered references to him in works by Pliny and Isidore.²⁴ Nevertheless, the similarities between the two Old

²³ *Herodotus: the Histories*, Waterfield, III. 102–5, pp. 212–13.

²⁴ For works by Isidore and Pliny contained in Anglo-Saxon libraries, see M. Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 309–16 and p. 325. Herodotus is mentioned several times as the father of historiography in Pliny's *HN* and once in Isidore's *Etymol*, and with particular emphasis on his descriptions of the East. 'Herodoto quidem si credimus, mare fuit supra Memphim usque ad Aethiopum montes itemque a planis Arabiae' (*HN*, II. lxxxvii. 201, p. 332); 'Ut tradit Herodotus, centesimo die cum crescit, reges aut praefectos navigare eo nefas indicatum est' (*HN*, v. x. 57, p. 262) and xiv. 68, p. 272; 'Sed maxime inlustres Herodotus et Aristetas Preconnesius scribunt' (*HN*, VII. ii. 10, p. 512); 'Herodotus tanto antiquior et consuetudo melius dentes' (*HN*, VIII. iv. 7, p. 6); 'Herodotus eam Aethiopiae intellegi maluit in tribute vicem' (*HN*, XII. viii. 17, p. 12); 'Cinnamomum et casias fabulose narravit antiquitas princepsque Herodotus avium nidis et privatim phoenicis, in quo situ Liber pater eductus esset, ex iniviis rupibus arboribusque' (*HN*, XII. xlii. 85, p. 62); 'Sunt Herodotus, Euhemereus, Duris Samius, Aristagoras inter omnes eos non constat, a quibus factae sint, iustissimo

English versions of the ant story (in the sunshine prophecy and *Wonders of the East*) and Herodotus's account indicate use of the same material.

In the prophecy, as in Herodotus, camels are the antagonists of the gold-digging ants. They have a difficult task: 'mycel gold oðberað þan ætmettum þa þone goldhord healden scolden'. This introduces another question. To what extent were the Anglo-Saxons acquainted with camels? They would have come across them in the Bible, in Greek and Latin Bestiaries, in travellers' letters²⁵ and in Isidore's *Etymologiae*.²⁶ As for the specific association of camels with the nativity, Christianus Stabulensis's mid-ninth-century exposition of St Matthew's Gospel is an example:

Quidam autem dicunt post annum et xii dies aduenerunt ad Christum et quidam dicunt quod cum dromedis in xii dies uenerunt postquam stellam uiderunt. Est autem dromeda genus camelorum, minoris quidem staturae sed uelocioris, unde et nomen habet a uelocitate, nam dromos Grece 'cursus' et 'uelocitas' appellatur: unde et naues ueloces *dromones* appellant. Centum enim miliaria et eo amplius in uno die dromeda currere dicitur.²⁷

The presence of camels in the context of the twelve nights of Christmas may be a deliberate attempt on the scribe's part to recall to the reader's mind the biblical episode.

Herodotus's account mentions three camels, two males and one female, and three camels are illustrated in one of the two drawings in the Tiberius manuscript of the *Wonders*, when the text does not give the exact number. This might

casu obliteratis tantae uanitatibus auctoribus. aliqui ex iis prodiderunt in raphanos et alium ac cepas MDC talenta erogata (*HN*, XXXVI. xvii. 79, p. 342). 'Post Daretem autem in Graecia Herodotus historiam primus habitus est' (*Etymol*, I. xlii. 2, p. 358).

²⁵ Anglo-Saxon knowledge of the Orient was mainly due to second-hand information, despite the links created by trade and pilgrimage. Only a few direct contacts with the East are known. Bede, for example, in the *Historia*, writes about Arculf, a bishop from Gaul, who went to Jerusalem and travelled to Damascus, Constantinople, Alexandria and many islands, probably about the year 670 (*Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969, repr. 1992), V. 15, p. 506). The letter of Willibald, reports: 'Then they travelled across a wide plain covered with olive trees, and with them travelled an Ethiopian and his two camels, who led a woman on a mule through the woods'. C. H. Talbot, *The Anglo-Saxon Missionaries in Germany* (London, 1954), p. 170.

²⁶ See *Etymol*. XII. i. 35–6, p. 62.

²⁷ Cf. *Christianus Dicitur Stabulensis, Expositio super librum Generationis*, ed. R. B. C. Huygens (Turnhout, 2008), c. 2, p. 97. 'Some people say that they came to Christ after one year and twelve days; others say that they travelled on dromedaries for twelve days after they saw the star. Dromedaries belong to the same breed as camels, they are smaller in size, but are swifter. They take their name from their speed; for *dromos* in Greek means *cursus* (running) and *uelocitas* (speed), whence fast boats are called *dromon*. It is said that dromedaries can run one hundred miles in a day' (my translation). I am indebted to Professor Malcolm Godden for bringing this passage to my attention.

be coincidence, but it might equally well indicate indebtedness to the same narrative material used by Herodotus.

It seems reasonable to believe that the person responsible for inserting this prophecy in the sunshine prognostication was familiar with the gold-digging ants' tale, and was perhaps aware of its treatment in earlier literature. As he turned the anecdote into a prophecy the author omitted the central role human beings play in the story and made ants and camels the only creatures involved. What sense would his readers have made of the prophecy?

Its obscurity might have been part of the point, as the lack of explanation challenges the reader to determine the intended meaning. Wisdom literature appealed greatly to the Anglo-Saxons: this is evidenced by the many surviving riddles and by the Dialogue of Solomon and Saturn. Did camels and ants have the status of allegorical creatures which could be used to impart moral lessons?

A possible clue is another tradition concerning ants, which may or may not be linked to the gold-digging variety, and their association with lions. The term 'ant-lion' is of very ancient origin. M. I. Gerhardt notes that the early Hebrew version of Job 4: 11 included the word *layish* meaning 'lion', and the Greek translator of Job for the Septuagint (first century BC) misunderstood the term and translated it as *murmékedeón*, 'ant-lion', which in Latin became *Myrmicoleon*.²⁸ The word was linked with Job, and acquired moral and religious associations.

It is not clear whether ant-lions are the same creatures as the gold-digging ants. According to S. Bochartus, there is no connection between the term 'myrmicoleon' and the gold-digging ants of India and Ethiopia, while G. C. Druce takes gold-digging ants and ant-lions to be the same kind of creature: a vicious quadruped at once insect and animal.²⁹ The *Physiologus*, in which animals' habits and peculiarities illustrate Christian doctrine, contains a description of an ant-lion.³⁰ It is a monstrous creature, half lion and half ant,

²⁸ M. I. Gerhardt, 'The Ant-Lion. Nature Study and the Interpretation of a Biblical Text, from the *Physiologus* to Albert the Great', *Vivarium* 3 (1965), 1–23, at 1–2.

²⁹ See S. Bochartus, *Hierozoicon sive bipartitum opus de animalibus S. Scripturae*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt, 1675). See G. C. Druce, 'An Account of the Μυρμηχογέων or Ant-Lion', *The Antiquaries Journal* 3 (1923), 347–64.

³⁰ 'The ant-lion is described thus: its father has the face of a lion and eats flesh: its mother has the face of an ant and eats plants. When the "mirmicoleonta" is born, it dies because of its two natures, unable to eat either flesh or plants because of its lion's face and ant's body'. The *Physiologus* was written probably in Alexandria in the fourth century, intended for use as a schoolbook, and addressed to a Christian community in Syria. Its main aim was to elucidate various Christian mysteries allegorically, by means of animal parallels. Each chapter begins with a biblical text about the animal in question, followed by an explanation by the author, the so-called 'physiologus', and finally by the moral lesson that each Christian should remember and apply to his life. No early Greek copies of the *Physiologus* survive. The earliest surviving texts are in Latin. They are: 1) the so-called 'y' version, Bern, Lat. 611 (eighth–ninth century); 2) 'A' version, Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale 10074 (tenth century); 3) 'B' version, Bern,

both carnivorous and vegetarian.³¹ The lion side wants to eat meat, but the ant half cannot digest it, so the creature dies for lack of food.³² The moral point is that a twofold nature, and therefore a double-minded man, is inconstant in all its ways. The Greek *Physiologus* had considerable influence upon several classical encyclopaedists,³³ such as Isidore, who in the *Etymologiae* describes the ant-lion thus: 'Formicoleon ob hoc vocatus, quia est vel formicarum leo vel certe formica pariter et leo. Est enim animal parvum formicis satis infestum, quod se in pulvere abscondit, et formicas frumenta gestantes interficit. Proinde autem leo et formica vocatur, quia aliis animalibus ut formica est, formicis autem ut leo est'.³⁴

That this form of ant was well known to the Anglo-Saxons is demonstrated by one of Aldhelm's riddles, the solution of which is clearly 'Myrmicoleon' (Ant-Lion):

Dudum compositis ego nomen gesto figuris:
Vt leo, sic formica uocor sermone pelago
Tropica nominibus signans praesagia duplis,
Cum rostris auium nequeam resistere rostro.
Scrutetur sapiens, gemino cur nomine fungar!³⁵

Lat. 233 (eighth-ninth century); and 4) 'C' version, Bern, Burgerbibliothek, Lat. 318 (ninth century). For detailed studies of the *Physiologus*, see B. White, 'Medieval Animal Lore', *Anglia* 72 (1954), 21–30; F. N. M., Diekstra, 'The *Physiologus*: the Bestiaries and Medieval Animal Lore', *Neophilologus* 69 (1985), 142–55; and F. McCulloch, *Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries* (Chapel Hill, 1962).

³¹ See J. Hastings, *Dictionary of the Bible*, 2nd ed. (Edinburgh, 1963), s.v. 'lion', and Bochartus, *Hierozyicon*.

³² 'In Iob Elefas Temaneorum rex dixit de mirmicoleon: Perit eo quod non habeat escam' (F. J. Carmody, 'De bestiis et aliis rebus and the Latin Physiologus', *Speculum* 13, n. 2 (1938), 153–9, at 155). See also Carmody, *Quotations in the Latin Physiologus from Latin Bibles Earlier than the Vulgate* (California, 1944), pp. 1–8.

³³ The early Greek *Physiologus* and Latin natural historians looked at animals in terms of their relevance to mankind, and they emphasized the characteristics that could be interpreted as aspects of human personality. For a study of animal allegories in the Christian Church, see B. Rowland, 'St Basil's *Hexaemeron* to the *Physiologus*', *Épopée Animale Fable Fabliau*, ed. G. Bianciotto and M. Salvat, Actes Internationales Renardienne, Evreux, 7–11 Septembre 1981 (Paris, 1984), pp. 489–98.

³⁴ 'The ant-lion has acquired its name from "ant" and "lion"; it is both ant and lion. It is a little animal very dangerous to ants; it hides in the dust and kills ants carrying corn. It is called both ant and lion because it is the lion among the ants.' The description of the ant-lion follows that of the gold-digging ants in Isidore (*Etymol.*, xii. 3, pp. 78 and 80).

³⁵ (*Aldelmi Opera*, ed. R. Ehwald (Berlin, 1919), p. 401). 'For a long time I have borne a name of two components, inasmuch as I'm called a "lion" and an "ant" in Greek, giving rise to metaphorical meanings in my two names, since I am unable to fend off the beaks of birds with my own beak. Let a wise man investigate why I have this two-fold name!' (f86r). The translation is taken from M. Lapidge, *Aldhelm: the Poetic Works* (Cambridge, 1985), pp. 73–4. See also *The Riddles of Aldhelm*, ed. J. H. Pitman (New Haven, 1925), p. 13. Aldhelm strategically placed the

The ant-lion in Aldhelm's *Enigmata* suggests that the Anglo-Saxons were acquainted with monstrous ants, whether digging gold or in the shape of lions. The majority of his *Riddles* are based on familiar animals and objects, so that the solutions are not hard to work out.³⁶ The ant-lion riddle does not appear in Symphosius's *Enigmata* (a collection of one hundred riddles) whose influence is evident in works of Aldhelm, Tatwine, and Eusebius.³⁷ Aldhelm's source must therefore be looked for elsewhere.

Aldhelm was among those very few Anglo-Saxon scholars who knew Latin and Greek, and his familiarity with 'Myrmicoleon' may derive from the Greek version of the Septuagint, one of the Latin copies of the *Physiologus*, Isidore's *Etymologiae*, or Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Job*. Gregory describes the origin and allegorical significance of the ant-lion thus:

Translatione autem septuaginta interpretum nequaquam dicitur tigris, sed *Myrmicoleon periiit, eo quod non haberet praedam*. Myrmicoleon quippe paruum ualde est animal formicis aduersum, quod se sub puluere abscondit et formicas frumenta gestantes interficit, interfectasque consumit. Myrmicoleon autem latine dicitur, uel formicarum leo, uel certe expressius formica pariter et leo. Recte autem leo et formica nominatur, quia siue uolatilibus, seu quibuslibet aliis minutis animalibus formica est, ipsis autem formicis leo. Has enim quasi leo deuorat se ab illis quasi formica deuoratur. Cum igitur Eliphaz dicit: *Myrmicoleon periiit*, quid in beato Iob sub myrmicoleontis nomine, nisi pauorem et audaciam reprehendit? Ac si ei aperte dicat: Non iniuste percussus es quia contra erectos timidus, contra subditos audax fuisti. Ac si aperte dicat: Contra astutos te formido pressit, contra simplices temeritas inflauit. Sed praedam iam myrmicoleon non habet quia timida tua elatio dum uerberibus premitur, ab aliena laesione prohibetur. Sed quia amicos beati Iob haereticorum tenere speciem diximus, urguet necessario ut haec eadem Eliphaz uerba quomodo etiam typice sentienda sint intimemus (V.xx.40).³⁸

'ant-lion' between riddles XVII, 'The Bivalve Mollusc', and XIX, 'Salt', probably because of their shared concern with duplicity and ambiguity.

³⁶ According to A. Orchard, 'the solutions to Aldhelm's *Enigmata* circulated separately in the ninth-century manuscript St Petersburg, Russian Library, Q. I. 15, and a system of only employing marginal first letters of solutions for 16 of Aldhelm's *Enigmata* is found in Wölfenbittel, Herzog August. Bibliothek, Gud. lat. 331 (s. x/xi); likewise, a ninth-century manuscript, Vatican City, BAV, Pal. lat. 1719, containing Aldhelm's *Enigmata* 1–86.3, gives solutions for *Enigmata* 2–34, written in the margin in a ninth-century hand.' See A. Orchard, 'Enigma Variations: the Anglo-Saxon Riddle Tradition', *Latin Learning and English Lore, Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature for Michael Lapidge*, ed. K. O'Brien O'Keefe and A. Orchard, vol. 1 (Toronto, 2005), pp. 284–304, at 285.

³⁷ See M. Lapidge and M. Herren, *Aldhelm: the Prose Works* (Cambridge, 1979), and A. Orchard, *The Poetic Art of Aldhelm* (Cambridge, 1994).

³⁸ *S. Gregorii Magni Moralia in Job*, ed. M. Adriaen (Turnhout, 1979, repr. 1985), V. 40, p. 87. 'But in the translation of the Septuagint, it is not said "the tiger" but "*the Myrmicoleon perisbeth for lack of prey*". For the *Myrmicoleon* is a very little creature, a foe to ants, which hides itself under the dust, and kills the ants laden with grains, and devours them thus destroyed. Now "*myrmicoleon*" is rendered in the Latin tongue either "the ants' lion" or indeed more exactly "an ant and lion

It is clear from this that ‘ant-lion’ had a negative religious and moral connotation which could refer to heretics. In V.xxii.43, Gregory describes Satan as *leo recte vocatur et tigris et myrmecoleon*, a lion for his brutality and a tiger for his cunning, and compares the fallen angel to an ant-lion:

Hunc vocabulo tigridis repetit quem leonis appellatione signavit, Satan quippe et propter crudelitatem leo dicitur, et propter multiformis astutiae varietatem non incongrue tigris uocatur. Modo enim se sicut est perditus humanis sensibus obicit, modo quasi angelum lucis ostendit. Modo stultorum mentes blandiendo persuadet, modo ad culpam terrendo pertrahit. Modo suadere vitia aperte nititur, modo in suis suggestionibus sub uirtutis specie palliatur. Haec itaque belua quae tanta uarietate respergitur, iure tigris uocatur quae apud septuaginta interpretes ut praefati sumus, myrmecoleon dicitur. Quod uilicet animal absconsum puluere, formicas ut diximus, frumenta gestantes interficit; quia nimirum apostata angelus in terram de caelis proiectus, iustorum mentes quae bonorum sibi operum refectionem praeparant, in ipso actionis itinere obsidet; cumque has per insidias superat quasi formicas frumenta gestantes improuisus necat. Recte autem myrmecoleon, id est leo et formica dicitur Formicis enim ut diximus, leo est uolatilibus formica, quia nimirum antiquus hostis sicut contra consentientes fortis est, ita contra resistentes debilis. Si enim eius suggestionibus assensus praebetur quasi leo tolerari nequaquam potest; si autem resistitur quasi formica atteritur.³⁹

at once”. Now it is rightly called “an ant and lion”; in that with reference to winged creatures, or to any other small-sized animals, it is an ant, but with reference to the ants themselves it is a lion. For it devours these like a lion, yet by the other sort it is devoured like an ant. When then Eliphaz says, “The ant-lion perisheth,” what does he censure in blessed Job under the title of “ant-lion” but his fearfulness and audacity? As if he said to him in plain words, “Thou art not unjustly stricken; in that thou hast shewn thyself a coward towards the lofty, a bully towards those beneath thee”. As though he had said in plain terms, “Fear made thee crouch towards the crafty sort, hardihood swelled thee full towards the simple folk, but the “ant-lion” no longer has “prey”, in that thy cowardly selfelation, being beaten down with blows, is stayed from doing injury to others.” But forasmuch as we have said that the friends of blessed Job contain a figure of heretics, there is a pressing necessity to shew how these same words of Eliphaz are to be understood in a typical sense likewise’ (The translation is taken from *S. Gregory The Great, Morals on the Book of Job* ed. J. Bliss (Oxford, 1899), p. 271.

³⁹ (*Ibid.* p. 248) ‘By the title of a “tiger” he again represents him, whom he formerly designated by the name of a “lion”. For Satan both for his cruelty is called “a lion”, and for the variousness of his manifold cunning he is not unsuitably designated “a tiger”. For one while he presents himself to man’s senses lost as he is, one while he exhibits himself as an Angel of light. Now by caressing he works upon the minds of the foolish sort, now by striking terror he forces them to commit sin. At one time he labours to win men to evil ways without disguise, at another time he cloaks himself in his promptings under the garb of virtue. This beast, then, which is so variously spotted, is rightly called “a tiger”, being with the LXX called and “Ant-lion”, as we have said above. Which same creature, as we have before shewn, hiding itself in the dust kills the ants carrying their corn, in that the Apostate Angel, being cast out of heaven upon the earth, in the very pathway of their practice besets the minds of the righteous, providing for themselves the provender of good works, and while he overcomes them by his snares, he as it were kills by surprise the ants carrying their grains. And he is rightly called “Ant-lion”, i.e. “a lion and ant”. For as we have said, to the ants he is “a lion”, but to the birds of the air, “an ant” in that our

Did Aldhelm intend to convey such a moral and biblical significance in his ant-lion riddle? Whatever the precise meaning, it seems clear that the riddle is intended to mean something beyond itself. According to St Augustine, a sign is a thing which, over and above the impression it makes on the senses, causes something else to come into the mind.⁴⁰ But signs require interpretation, and this requires knowledge by those who interpret them and agreement on their meaning among the interpreters: ‘Scrutetur sapiens, gemino cur nomine fungar’.

Whatever Aldhelm’s intention, we can conclude that monstrous ants, whether the gold-digging kind or ant-lions, were part of the literary heritage of the Anglo-Saxons. They were *monstra*, terrifying, but mercifully belonged to an exotic location very far from England. According to St Augustine, *futura prae-dicant*: ‘Unde illorum quoque miraculorum multitudo silvescit, quae monstra ostenta portenta prodigia nuncupantur. Quae recolere et commemorare si velim, huius operis quis erit finis? Monstra sane dicta perhibent a monstrando quod aliquid significando demonstrent, et ostenta ab ostendendo, et portenta a portendendo, id est, praeostendendo, et prodigia quod porro dicant, id est, futura praedicant.’⁴¹ As *monstra* they were portents which demonstrated God’s power to influence human affairs. They were not to be understood as literal representations of anything, but as symbols conveying a message to human beings, though they did not offer explicit clues as to how to read such portents.

Symbolic meaning of this kind may explain the presence of gold-digging

old enemy, as he is strong to encounter those that yield to him, is weak against such as resist him . . . Therefore to some he is “a lion”, to others “an ant”, in that carnal minds sustain his cruel assaults with difficulty, but spiritual minds trample upon his weakness with virtue’s foot . . . The ant-lion, or probably the tiger perisheth for lack of prey. As though the words were plainly expressed; the old foe has no prey in us, in that, as far as regards our purpose, he already lies defeated.’

⁴⁰ *De doctrina Christiana*, ed. and trans. R. P. H. Green (Oxford, 1995), II, 4–5, pp. 58–60.

⁴¹ ‘From this power comes the wild profusion of those marvels which are called omens, signs, portents, prodigies. If I should try to recall and enumerate these, where would this treatise end? The various names *monstra*, *ostenta*, *portenta*, *prodigia* come from the verbs *monstrare* “show”, because they show something by a sign, *ostendere* “display”, *portendere* “spread in front”, that is, display beforehand, and *porro dicere* “say aforesaid”, that is, predict the future.’ (*The City of God against the Pagans*, trans. E. M. Sanford, 7 vols. (London, 1965), XXI, viii, p. 57). Isidore connects *monstra* with *monere*, ‘to warn’: ‘Portentum ergo fit non contra naturam, sed contra quam est nota natura. Portenta autem et ostenta, monstra atque prodigia ideo nuncupantur, quod portendere atque ostendere, monstrare ac praedicare aliqua futura videntur. Nam portenta dicta perhibent a portendendo, id est praeostendendo. Ostenta autem, quod ostendere quidquam futurum videantur. Prodigia, quod porro dicant, id est futura praedicant’ (*Etymol.*, XI, iiiii, 2–3, p. 46). ‘A portent is therefore not created contrary to nature, but contrary to what is known of nature. Portents are also called signs, omens, and prodigies, because they are seen to portend and display, indicate and predict future events’ (the translation is taken from Barney, *The Etymologies of Isidore*, pp. 243–4).

ants in the sunshine prognostication. It remains difficult to say what is being prophesied, however, or to explain the presence of the passage among conventional predictions. The authors of the prognostic texts may have encountered descriptions of gold-digging ants and ant-lions in other contemporary works including the *Wonders of the East* and Aldhelm's *Enigmata*, and curiosity about oriental places and monstrous creatures may have induced them to make use of their reading by adding new material during transmission. It is also possible that the authors or scribes combined a reference to the tale of the gold-digging ants with the ant-lion tradition in order to convey some sort of moral or religious meaning. The description of gold-digging ants generally follows one of the ant-lion in classical sources. For example, Strabo in his *Geography* seems to be conflating the two types of ants when he reports that 'One comes also to pillars and altars of Pytholous and Lichas and Leon and Charimortus along the known coast extending from Deire as far as Notuceras, but the distance is unknown. The country abounds in elephants, and also in lions called ants, which have their genital organs reversed. They keep the gold and are golden in colour, but are less hairy than those in Arabia'.⁴²

The gold-digging ants prophecy in the sunshine prognostication permits a curious open-ended game of constructing pattern and meaning. One interpretation might be that since camels are generally described in the Bible as humble animals, kneeling in order to receive loads, they represent the pious men whose faith in God is undoubted. They bear off the gold (gold intended as a spiritual reward?) from the ants ('ant-lion' signifying two-faced men) which die for lack of prey (in this case the gold). In the Old Testament, camels often appear as carrying gifts, particularly gold. Isaiah 60:6 is an example: 'inundatio camelorum operiet te dromedariae Madian et Efa omnes de Saba venient aurum et tus deferentes et laudem Domino adnuntiantes'.⁴³ An interpretation along similar lines is that the ants represent selfish people ready to do anything to guard their wealth (*tanta pernicitas feritasque est cum amore auri*). This idea is expressed in Ecclesiasticus 31:5–11:

Qui aurum diligit non iustificabitur et qui insequitur consumptionem replebitur ex ea multi dati sunt in auri casus et facta est in facie ipsius perditio illorum lignum offensionis est aurum sacrificantium vae illis qui sectantur illud et omnis imprudens deperiet in illo beatus dives qui inventus est sine macula et qui post aurum non abiit nec speravit in pecunia et thesauris quis est hic et laudabimus eum fecit enim mirabilia in vita sua

⁴² The *Geography* of Strabo, ed. E. Capps et al., trans. H. L. Jones (London, 1854–7), XVI.iv.15, p. 335.

⁴³ 'The multitude of camels shall cover you, the dromedaries of Madian and Ephraim: all they from Saba shall come, bringing gold and frankincense: and showing forth praise to the Lord.' See *The Holy Bible: Douay Version, Translated from the Latin Vulgate* (Douay, A.D. 1609; Rheims, A.D. 1582), ed. R. Challoner and B. W. Griffin (Dublin, 1816, repr. London, 1957).

quis probatus est in illo et perfectus est et erit illi in gloria aeterna qui potuit transgredi et non est transgressus et facere mala et non fecit ideo stabilita sunt bona illius in Deo et elemosynas illius enarrabit ecclesia sanctorum.⁴⁴

A possessive relationship with gold is clearly condemned here; ‘blessed is the rich person who is found blameless, and who does not go after gold’.

A further interpretation is offered by Susan M. Kim in her comments on the reference in the *Wonders*. She believes that the tale refers to the parable of Egyptian gold, and notes that ‘the ant-dog episode is one of the few episodes in the *Wonders* in which the human is able to take something away from the monstrous territory’: ‘The ‘Wonders’ ant-dog episode invites a straightforward reading in an Augustinian context, with the monsters as figures of the pagans, and the gains for the Christian plunderers as appropriated wisdom.’⁴⁵ While this may be the intended meaning in the *Wonders* episode, human beings are not mentioned in the sunshine prophecy; it is the camels who will steal the gold from the ants. A rare positive interpretation is supplied by Clemens Alexandrinus (145–216 AD), who believes the ants to be generous and helpful creatures guarding God’s gold from greedy people.⁴⁶ However, this idea does not seem appropriate here: that the camels are stealing the gold from the ants seems meant as a positive omen, given the auspicious prophetic function of the sun.

All the prophecies in the sunshine prognostication have an obvious literal meaning; they all unequivocally promise prosperity and abundance of various kinds. Thus, if the main concern of the ant prophecy is implicitly that of predicting abundance of gold, why did the scribe include another prediction, in the same prognostication, which unambiguously prophesies a profusion of gold? It seems likely that the gold-digging ant prediction, which involves exotic creatures such as camels, was not meant to prophecy anything in particular or to serve any practical purpose, apart from perhaps that of entertaining and

⁴⁴ ‘He that loveth gold, shall not be justified: and he that followeth after corruption, shall be filled with it. Many have been brought to fall for gold, and the beauty thereof hath been their ruin. Gold is a stumbling block to them that sacrifice to it: woe to them that eagerly follow after it, and every fool shall perish by it. Blessed is the rich man that is found without blemish: and that hath not gone after gold, nor put his trust in money nor in treasures. Who is he, and we will praise him? for he hath done wonderful things in his life. Who hath been tried thereby, and made perfect, he shall have glory everlasting. He that could have transgressed, and hath not transgressed: and could do evil things, and hath not done them: Therefore are his goods established in the Lord, and all the church of the saints shall declare his alms’ (Ecclesiasticus 31:5–11).

⁴⁵ S. M. Kim, ‘Man-Eating Monsters and Ants as Big as Dogs’, *Animals and the Symbolic in Medieval Art and Literature*, ed. L. A. J. R. Houwen (Groningen, 1997), pp. 39–52.

⁴⁶ Clementis Alexandrini *Paedagogus*, ed. M. Marcovich, *Vigiliae Christianae*, Supplements 61 (Leiden, 2002), xii.120, 1–2.

teasing the reader. On the other hand, why does the prophecy say that the ants ‘must’ (sculon) guard the gold? Is it their duty to protect the gold? One must finally admit that the solution to the ant prophecy awaits clear elucidation and may be irrecoverable.

Did the gold-digging ant prophecy originate in an Anglo-Saxon scriptorium or was it copied from a continental version of the sunshine prognostication? According to Max Förster, the only Latin analogue to the sunshine prognostication appears in the fifteenth-century Oxford, Bodleian Library, Digby 88, 40r.⁴⁷ However, I have identified a related text which seems never to have been published. This is Liège, Bibliothèque de l’Université, 77, fol. 61, which was copied in France between the end of the eleventh and the beginning of the twelfth century. The Old English versions differ in both content and style from the Latin ones. They share with Liège 77 and Digby 88 only some general predictions referring to *aurum* (OE ‘gold’), *pax* (OE ‘sib’), and *piscēs* (OE ‘fixum’) which the Latin versions put in a different order. The Latin versions predict abundance of *argentum* whereas the Old English ones have *cwicseolfor*.

There is no allusion to the gold-digging ants in either Latin manuscript. Therefore, the possibility that this enigmatic prophecy is an Anglo-Saxon invention cannot be ruled out. In both CCCC 391 and Hatton 115 (though on different days) there is a clear reference to the English people. Hatton 115, for example, reads (second night): ‘Gyf þy æfteran dæg sunne scyneþ. þonne byð ængel cynne on gold eað begeate,’ and CCCC 391, for the eighth night, promises: ‘Gif þy viii dæge sunne scineð beorhte þonne bið cwic seolfer on angel kynne yð geate.’⁴⁸ It is obvious that *ængel cynne* or *angel kynne* is an Anglo-Saxon interpolation. It is unlikely that a non-English writer would suddenly show an interest in the destiny and wealth of the English. If the scribe was transcribing from an earlier Latin text, he must have changed the name of the nation in order to make the prediction apply to an English audience more concerned with the future of its own country than with future events abroad. The lack of Latin antecedents and the clear references to the English people as the main addressees suggest that an independent version of the sunshine prognostica-

⁴⁷ Digby 88 was published by M. Förster in *Archiv* 128 (1912), p. 65.

⁴⁸ ‘If the sun shines on the second day, then gold will be easy to obtain among the English’ (Hatton 115); ‘If the sun brightly shines on the eighth day, then quicksilver will be obtained by the English people’ (CCCC 391). Together with gold, the Anglo-Saxons must have thought of quicksilver as an important metal. It appears twice in Old English recipes: 1) For a pain of the jaw; let the man taste at night fasting, seed of rue, and quicksilver, and vinegar; 2) Against lice; pound in ale oak rind and a little wormwood, give to the lousy one to drink. Against lice; quicksilver and old butter; one pennyweight of quicksilver and two of butter; mingle all together in a brazen vessel (*Leechdoms, Wortcunning, and Starcraft of Early England*, ed. O. Cockayne, vol. 2 (London, 1864–6), pp. 12–15).

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tion may have originated in Anglo-Saxon England. As for the particular prophecy of the gold-digging ants, perhaps the idea of the sun shining in England at the end of December was itself sufficiently incongruous to prompt the author to include exotic material.

Whether the prediction was merely a literary exercise or carried a symbolic implication, it must have originated in an ecclesiastical context. Its mixture of classical learning and vernacular tradition, Greek and Latin, folklore and Christian, implies an author with some knowledge of literary and scholarly traditions, and this effectively narrows the possible candidates to clerics, who included copyists who were capable both of departing from their Latin source (if one does underlie this prognostication), and of adding material which would have meant something to the audience to whom such prognostications were primarily addressed.

This riddle-like prophecy encourages us to consider prognostics as forming part of the scientific works which were among the standard holdings of Anglo-Saxon monasteries. It gives further proof of the clerics' scholarly eclecticism and of their knowledge of the diverse kinds of classical literature from which some of the individual prophecies derive.⁴⁹

⁴⁹ I would like to thank Dr Kathryn Powell for her valuable suggestions and Dr Roger Holdsworth for having read numerous drafts of this article. I am also grateful to Professor Malcolm Godden and Professor Donald Scragg for their helpful comments and to Professor Andy Orchard for assisting with some translations.