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THE IGIL AND EXETER BOOK RIDDLE 15

Riddle 15 is one of the longest and most elaborate animal-riddles in the tenth-century Exeter Book of Old English poetry.[1] The debate over which animal appears in this compelling tale of a family's flight and the mother's final stand against their canine attacker has not yet been put to rest. In a recent, comprehensive analysis of this riddle, Dieter Bitterli comes to the conclusion that the creature in question is a porcupine.[2] However, given the fox's rivalry with dogs and wolves, this animal (or, specifically, a vixen[3]) also receives wide support.[4] I am of the opinion that both

[1] According to the numbering system in George Philip Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, eds, The Exeter Book, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records 3 (New York, 1936).

[2] 'Exeter Book Riddle 15: Some Points for the Porcupine', Anglia, cxx (2002), 461–87. This solution was initially suggested by John A. Walz, 'Notes on the Anglo-Saxon Riddles', Harvard Studies and Notes, v (1896), 261–8, at 261–3.

[3] The central creature's sex may be indicated by the feminine form of the adjective onhæle (hidden) in line 7a. See Craig Williamson, ed., The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book (Chapel Hill, 1977), 176.

[4] For a thorough discussion of this solution, see Audrey L. Meaney, 'The Hunted and the Hunters: British Mammals in Old English Poetry', Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History, xi (2000), 95–105; and Marijane Osborn, 'Vixen as Hero: Solving Exeter Book Riddle 15', in The Hero Recovered: Essays on Medieval

solutions have merit and either one could be correct.[5] In suggesting that, rather than 'porcupine', adherents of Bitterli's interpretation should solve the riddle as igil,[6] this

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Heroism in Honor of George Clark, eds Robin Waugh and James Weldon (Kalamazoo, MI, 2010), 173–87. This is the solution supported by Williamson, Old English Riddles, 173–8; Hans Pinsker and Waltraud Ziegler, eds, Die altenglischen Rätsel des Exeterbuchs: Text mit deutscher Übersetzung und Kommentar (Heidelberg, 1985), 172–6; and Bernard J. Muir, ed. The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry, 2nd edn (Exeter, 2000), II, 657. John D. Niles also includes fox ond hund (fox and hound) as the solution to this riddle in Old English Enigmatic Poems and the Play of the Texts, Studies in the Early Middle Ages, 13 (Turnhout, 2006), 141.

[5] Other solutions include 'badger' and 'weasel'. The first is problematic because the riddle's physical description of the animal does not mention the badger's distinctive white head and black stripes (Bitterli, 'Exeter Book Riddle 15', 474–5; Pinsker and Ziegler, Die altenglischen Rätsel des Exetersbuch, 173). Bitterli questions the second on the grounds that the poem does not refer to the legendary tradition of weasels being conceived aurally, which was well-known in the classical and medieval worlds and is attested in Aldhelm's Enigma 82, Mustela (Weasel) ('Exeter Book Riddle 15', 477).

[6] Note that Pinsker and Ziegler (Die altenglischen Rätsel des Exetersbuch, 172) erroneously attribute this solution to Ferdinand Holthausen, 'Zur Textkritik altenglischer Dichtungen,' *Englische Studien*, xxxvii (1907), 198–211, at 206–7. Holthausen's discussion of this riddle actually supports Walz's proposed solution: 'porcupine'. As Bitterli notes ('Exeter Book Riddle 15', 487), this confusion appears to stem from A. E. H. Swaen's comments on Walz and Holthausen: ''porcupine' is

note both supports and nuances his conclusions and reminds solvers that a solution in the language of the riddle is always preferable to one that draws on modern linguistic forms and categorisations.[7]

The riddle opens with a physical description of the creature:

> Hals is min hwit ond heafod fealo,
> sidan swa some. Swift ic eom on feþe,
> beadowæpen bere. Me on bæce standað
> her swylce swe on hleorum. Hlifiað tu
> earan ofer eagum. Ordum ic steppe
> in grene græs.[8] (lines 1-6a)
> (My neck is white and my head dusky, my sides just the same. I am fast on my feet; I bear battle-weapons. Hairs stand on my back, likewise on my cheeks. Two ears tower over my eyes. On spears I step in the green grass.)

The key physical descriptors that scholars focus on when rallying behind either the 'porcupine' or 'fox' reading include the creature's towering ears, speed and colour. Certainly, a fox's ears may be said to tower more than a porcupine's, but, as Bitterli points out, this descriptor may simply be emphasizing the position of the ears above the creature's eyes (in comparison to human ears on the sides of the head).[9] As for

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of course wrong; substitute 'hedgehog''. See Swaen, 'Riddle xiii (xvi)', Neophilologus, xxvi (1941), 228–31, at 228, fn. 3.

[7] As Niles discusses in Old English Enigmatic Poems, 101–48. This is not an issue for 'fox', of course, which remains the same in Old and modern English.

[8] Krapp and Dobbie, Exeter Book, 188. All translations are my own.

[9] 'Exeter Book Riddle 15', 484.

speed, although porcupines do not run quickly over a continuous period of time, they are capable of bursts of speed when in danger; the same is true of hedgehogs.[10] Finally, Old English colour-terminology is famously imprecise compared to modern English, as both Audrey L. Meaney and Bitterli acknowledge in their discussions of the creature's hwit (white) neck and fealu head and sides.[11] Meaney prefers to interpret fealu as 'tawny', while Bitterli translates the same term as 'brownish grey' or 'ashy'.[12] Overall, fealu appears to indicate something between yellow and brown,[13] which makes it equally possible that the poet is signaling the contrast between a fox's body and neck fur or porcupines' (and hedgehogs') darker spines and the whitish fur of their throats.

After this list of physical characteristics, the riddle shifts into an elegiac depiction of the mother as she leads her family into exile rather than await the enemy who comes to their door. Returning to physical and behavioural description, the riddle continues:

ac ic sceal fromlice feþemundum
þurh steapne beorg stræte wyrcan.
Eaþe ic mæg freora feorh genergan,

[10] Ronald M. Nowak, Walker's Mammals of the World, 6th edn, 2 vols (Baltimore, London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), I, 175 and II, 1644.

[11] 'Hunted and the Hunters', 98; 'Exeter Book Riddle 15', 473–4.

[12] 'Hunted and the Hunters', 99; 'Exeter Book Riddle 15', 474.

[13] Antonette diPaolo Healey, Dorothy Haines, Joan Holland, David McDougall, and Ian McDougall, with Pauline Thompson and Nancy Speirs, eds, The Dictionary of Old English: A-G Online, web interface by Peter Mielke and Xin Xiang (Toronto, 2007), s.v. fealu.

gif ic mægburge mot mine gelædan
on degolne weg þurh dune þyrel
swæse ond gesibbe; ic me siþþan ne þearf
wælhwelpes wig wiht onsittan.
Gif se niðsceaþa nearwe stige
me on swaþe seceþ, ne tosæleþ him
on þam gegnpaþe guþgemotes,
siþþan ic þurh hylles hrof geræce,
ond þurh hest hrino hildepilum
laðgewinnum, þam þe ic longe fleah. (lines 17–29)
(but I must boldly with walking-hands produce a path through a high hill. I can easily defend the lives of the precious ones, if I may lead my kindred on a secret track through a hole in the hill, the near and the dear ones; afterward I do not need to concern myself at all with the slaughter-whelp's attack. If the evil-enemy on a narrow trail seeks my track, he will not lack a war-meeting on the opposing-path, when I reach through the hill's roof, and ferociously strike with battle-spears the loathed-foe, from whom I have long fled.)

With the family's predator hot on their trail, the mother defends her children in an aggressive counter-attack.

In support of his 'porcupine' reading, Bitterli provides a range of texts that form an inherited tradition about this foreign creature. Native to Africa and Asia, the porcupine is described in Pliny the Elder's Naturalis Historia, Claudian's De hystrice, Solinus' Collectanea rerum memorabilium, and Isidore of Seville's

Etymologiae,[14] which in particular played a key role in providing information for early Latin riddlers. Together, these texts demonstrate that porcupines were known throughout the classical, late antique and medieval worlds for resembling hedgehogs, but with longer quills, which they supposedly shot at pursuing dogs. These quills are, Bitterli argues, represented by Riddle 15's use of the terms beadowæpen and hildepil in lines 3a and 28b. The compounds are only found together in one other source[15] – Exeter Book Riddle 17 – which reads:

> Frea þæt bihealdeð,
> hu me of hrife fleogað hyldepilas.
> Hwilum ic sweartum swelgan onginne
> brunum beadowæpnum, bitrum ordum,
> eglum attorsperum.[16] (5b–9a)
> (My lord beholds how battle-spears fly from my belly. Sometimes, I begin to swallow black things, dark battle-weapons, bitter points, terrible poison-spears.)

[14] Bitterli, 'Exeter Book Riddle 15', 478–82. See also Pliny the Elder, Natural History, ed. and trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library, 10 vols (Cambridge, MA, 1983–95), III, 88–9 (bk 8, ch. 53, no. 125); Claudian, Carmina minora IX (XLV), in Claudian, ed. and trans. Maurice Platnauer, Loeb Classical Library, 2 vols (London, 1922), II, 180–5; Solinus, Collectanea rerum memorabilium, ed. T. Mommsen, 2nd edn (Berlin, 1895), 135 (bk 30, no. 28); Isidore of Seville, Etymologiarum sive Originum libri XX, ed. W. M. Lindsay, 2 vols (Oxford, 1911), XII.ii.35.

[15] 'Exeter Book Riddle 15', 483.

[16] Krapp and Dobbie, Exeter Book, 189.

Although the solution to Riddle 17 is itself contested, it has been interpreted as 'beehive' or 'lion and bee', with its depiction of flying battle-spears and pointed battle-weapons signaling the stings of bees.[17] This linguistic overlap may support the reading of Riddle 15's weapons as sting-like quills, rather than simply the claws or teeth of a fox or another creature.

A further compound in Riddle 15 also provides strong evidence for the 'porcupine' reading: feðemund (17a) (walking-/feet-hands). In the past, scholars have understood this hapax legomenon as reference to the fact that the creature uses

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[17] For more on Riddle 17's connection to bees, see Peter Bierbaumer and Elke Wannagat, 'Ein neuer Lösungvorschlag für ein altenglisches Ratsel (Krapp-Dobbie 17),' Anglia, xcix (1981), 379–82; Paul Sorrell, 'A Bee in My Bonnet: Solving Riddle 17 of the Exeter Book', in New Windows on a Woman's World: Essays for Jocelyn Harris, eds Cohn Gibson and Lisa Marr (Dunedin, New Zealand, 2005), 544–53; Marijane Osborn, '"Skep" (Beinenkorb [sic], *beoleap) as a Culture-Specific Solution to Exeter Book Riddle 17', ANQ, xviii (2005), 7–18; Marijane Osborn, 'Anglo-Saxon Tame Bees: Some Evidence for Beekeeping from Riddles and Charms', Neuphilologische Mitteilungen, cvii (2006), 271–83; William Sayers, 'Exeter Book Riddle 17 and the L-Rune: British *lester "Vessel, Oat-Straw, Hive"?' ANQ, xix (2006), 5–9; and Patrick J. Murphy, Unriddling the Exeter Riddles (University Park, PA, 2011), 153–73. See also Aldhelm's Enigma 75, Crabro (Hornet), for similar imagery, as well as an account of creatures attacked in their own home. F. Glorie, ed., Variae Collectiones Aenigmatum Merovingicae Aetatis, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina CXXXIII–CXXXIIIA (Turnhout, 1968), CXXXIII, 486–7.

her front feet in a hand-like manner when digging.[18] However, as Bitterli notes, porcupines have 'four well-developed digits',[19] which are not unlike fingers. Porcupines, therefore, may be read as having forefeet that resemble hands, for which feðemund is an excellent descriptor.

However, porcupines are not alone in possessing both sharp spines and distinct digits. In fact, hedgehogs' forefeet resemble human hands to a greater extent, given that they have a full five, individual digits.[20] 'Hedgehog', as a potential solution, has not received the attention it deserves since Cyril Brett suggested it as a likelier possibility than porcupine (although his preferred solution was still 'fox').[21] Bitterli himself devotes only two paragraphs to fleshing out this solution, although he does accept that the poet may have integrated information about the porcupine with knowledge of the more familiar hedgehog and badger.[22] Yet, he ultimately rejects the solution on the grounds that 'hedgehogs do not dig burrows and they were not said to shoot out their spines'.[23]

The fact that hedgehogs do not dig their own burrows is not, strictly speaking, true. Although hedgehogs frequently shelter under vegetation and inhabit

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[18] See Swaen, 'Riddle xiii (xvi)', 230.

[19] 'Exeter Book Riddle 15', 484.

[20] Nowak, Walker's Mammals of the World, I, 170; Gordon B. Corbet and Stephen Harris, The Handbook of British Mammals, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1991), 30.

[21] Brett, 'Notes on Old and Middle English', Modern Language Review, xxii (1927), 257–64, at 259. Although Muir prefers 'fox', he echoes Brett in noting that 'hedgehog' is an option 'if the audience is not learned'. Exeter Anthology, II, 657.

[22] 'Exeter Book Riddle 15', 486.

[23] 'Exeter Book Riddle 15', 487.

holes created by other creatures (as do foxes), their powerful and clawed front limbs allow them to dig burrows when necessary.[24] Additionally, Riddle 15 does not actually refer to the digging of a burrow at all, but to the digging of an escape route. The riddle therefore only demands of its solution that it be a creature capable of digging, whether or not this digging is put toward the construction of a home. An association between hedgehogs and the need for an earthen refuge would, furthermore, be known to anyone familiar with Psalm 103:18: montes excelsi cervis petra refugium erinaciis[25] (lofty mountains [are] a refuge for deer, rock for hedgehogs). A search of the Dictionary of Old English Corpus reveals that this psalm is glossed by various forms of Old English igil in a number of psalters.[26]

Likewise, there is no indication in Riddle 15 that the creature's battle-spears

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[24] David Macdonald, ed., The New Encyclopedia of Mammals (Oxford, 2001), 735; Nowak, Walker's Mammals of the World, I, 170; and Meaney, 'Hunted and the Hunters', 99.

[25] Bonifatius Fischer, Roger Gryson, Jean Gribomont, H. F. D. Sparks, Walter Thiele and Robert Weber, eds, Biblia sacra: iuxta Vulgatam versionem, 5th edn (Stuttgart, 2007), 900.

[26] These include: Cambridge, University Library, MS. Ff.1.23; Cambridge, Trinity College, MS. R.17.1; London, British Library, MS. Cotton Tiberius C.VI; London, British Library, MS. Cotton Vespasian A.I; London, British Library, MS. Cotton Vitellius E.XVIII; London, British Library, MS. Royal 2 B.V; London, Lambeth Palace, MS. 427; and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Junius 27. See Antonette diPaolo Healey, John Price Wilkin, and Xin Xiang, The Dictionary of Old English Corpus on the World Wide Web (Toronto, 2009), s.v. igles, iglum, ilæs, iles, ilum, ilys, and hilum.

are shot. Hildepil has been interpreted as a projectile because of its connection to Latin pilum (javelin), but, as scholars who prefer the 'fox' solution remind us, in Old English can -pil simply refer to a pointed object.[27] Hence, -pil appears in relation to thorns in the Herbarium, the style of a sundial in Ælfric's Glossary, part of what is likely a plough in Riddle 21, and the smith's tools in Riddle 91.[28] The term is also associated with violence when it collocates with iles byrsta (a hedgehog's/porcupine's spines) to describe a hellish torment in an anonymous composite homily from Cambridge, University Library, MS. Ii.1.33:

> þonne læt man hi eft þær rihte to þære foresædan þele, þeo is eall aplantod mid ættrenum pilum, eall swa þicce swa iles byrsta, and hi sceolon þar on ufan sittan swiðe unsofte þriddan dæl þæs dæges and þriddan dæl þære nihte for heora ærgewyrhtum.[29]

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[27] Meaney, 'Hunted and the Hunters', 99. Note that Meaney rejects the solution 'hedgehog' because 'its prickles are not projectile' shortly before she refutes the projectile-reading on the grounds that pil means 'something pointed', rather than thrown and therefore 'could probably have been used for almost any offensive weapon'.

[28] See Hubert Jan de Vriend, The Old English Herbarium and Medicina de quadrupedibus, EETS 286 (1984), 216, no. 173, line 13; Julius Zupitza, Ælfrics Grammatik und Glossar, Sammlung englischer Denkmäler 1 (Berlin, 1880; repr. with intro. by Helmut Gneuss, 1966), 321, lines 5–6 (where dægmæles pil glosses gnomon); Krapp and Dobbie, Exeter Book, 191, line 12a; and Krapp and Dobbie, Exeter Book, 240, line 2a.

[29] Luiselli Fadda, ed., Nuove Omelie Anglosassoni, 179, lines 37–41; and Cambridge University Digital Library <http://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-II-00001-

(Then one leaves them there again directly on that aforesaid spike [i.e. an iron pitchfork], which is entirely planted with poisonous spears just as thick as hedgehog's/porcupine's spines, and they shall sit up there very unpleasantly for a third portion of the day and a third portion of the night because of their past works.)

This homily bears a relationship to the Canons of Edgar and contains part of Vercelli Homily XIX, though the passage quoted here is unique.[30] The manuscript itself dates from the twelfth-century and contains mainly Ælfrician texts.[31] This connection to Ælfric is interesting, given that two of his homilies refer to hedgehogs'/porcupines' spines when describing torture and martyrdom – his Life of Saint Sebastian and Passion of Saint Edmund – the latter of which appears in this same manuscript.[32] A final text that links violence and hedgehogs'/porcupines' is the entry for Sebastian in

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00033/454>, fol. 220v, lines 11–15. Note that Luiselli Fadda's translation of iles byrsta as 'le callosità dei piedi' (the calluses of feet) misunderstands the sense of the phrase and its wider formulaic context (178).

[30] Oliver M. Traxel, Language Change, Writing and Textual Interference in Post-Conquest Old English Manuscripts: The Evidence of Cambridge, University Library, Ii. 1. 33 (Frankfurt am Main, 2004), 31.

[31] Traxel, Language Change, 26–32.

[32] Walter W. Skeat, Ælfric's Lives of Saints, EETS, o.s. 76, 82, 94, 114 (1881–1900; repr. in 2 vols, 1966), I, 144, line 428; Skeat, Ælfric's Lives of Saints, II, 322, line 118. For the reference to ilæs byrsta in the Passion of Saint Edmund from Cambridge, University Library, MS. Ii.1.33, see Cambridge University Digital Library <http://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/MS-II-00001-00033/319>, fol. 153r, line 9.

the Old English Martyrology.[33] Given the Latin tradition of associating the arrows that pierce Saint Sebastian with the spines of a hedgehog (hericius), it would perhaps be wise to translate igil as 'hedgehog' in the Old English references to this saint and his English counterpart, Edmund.[34]

Despite his rejection of the hedgehog-reading, Bitterli also provides a highly relevant analogue in the form of Symphosius' Enigma 29, Ericius.[35] Symphosius' influence on a number of Anglo-Saxon poets is well-established, and we find adaptations of some of his works into Old English.[36] Enigma 29 reads:

> Plena domus spinis, parui sed corporis hospes;
> Incolumi dorso telis confixus acutis
> Sustinet armatas aedes habitator inermis.[37]

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[33] Christine Rauer, ed. and trans., The Old English Martyrology: Edition, Translation and Commentary, Anglo-Saxon Texts 10 (Cambridge, 2013), 52, no. 27 (20 January).

[34] See Abbo of Fleury, Vita Sancti Eadmundi Regis Anglorum et Martyris, in Jacques-Paul Migne, ed., Patrologia Latina Database (Paris, 1853; Cambridge, 1996–2008), CXXXIX, ch. 10, col.0514B; and Acta S. Sebastiani Martyris, in Migne, Patrologia Latina Database (1845), XVII, ch. 23, no. 85, col. 1056B.

[35] 'Exeter Book Riddle 15', 486.

[36] Andy Orchard, 'Enigma Variations: The Anglo-Saxon Riddle-Tradition', in Latin Learning and English Lore: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature for Michael Lapidge, eds Andy Orchard and Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe, 2 vols (Toronto, 2005), I, 284–304, at 284.

[37] Glorie, Variae Collectiones Aenigmatum, CXXXIIIA, 650.

(A house full of spikes, but a host of small stature, with an unharmed back pierced by sharp spears, an unarmed inhabitant supports a fortified home.)

There are links between this poem's emphasis on a weak creature in an armoured home and Riddle 15's emphasis on a weak creature who flees home only to eventually take up arms. Hedgehogs are typically non-aggressive creatures, although their distinctive defensive feature – to curl up into a tight ball – does put persistent attackers at risk of being pierced by the creature's spines.[38] The painful nature of this piercing is clear from the aforementioned saints' lives and homilies.

Given hedgehogs' similarities with porcupines (which were recognized in the classical, late antique and medieval sources Bitterli points to in his discussion), as well as their hand-like forefeet, and given that Riddle 15 nowhere refers to the shooting of the creature's sharp weapons, 'hedgehog' actually appears to be a decent contender, alongside 'porcupine'. Since hand-like forefeet are not mentioned in the inherited tradition about the porcupine, which is not a native animal, there is an argument to be made that the poet of Riddle 15 drew upon natural observation for that particular clue. If such is the case, the hedgehog – as the native animal – is the likelier contender.[39]

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[38] Nowak, Walker's Mammals of the World, I, 176.

[39] Note, though, that it was possible for an Anglo-Saxon to come into contact with a porcupine outside of England. Pilgrimages to Rome were common in the period, and porcupines were introduced into Italy in the late antique/early medieval period. See Marco Massetti, Umberto Albarella and Jacopo De Grossi Mazzorin, 'The Crested Porcupine, Hystrix cristata L., 1758, in Italy', Anthropozoologica, xlv (2010), 27–42. Note also that William of Malmesbury mentions a porcupine in Henry I's

This debate of hedgehog versus porcupine, however, may be an unnecessary one in the first place. The fact that these two animals share an Old English designator – igil – indicates that they were considered to be highly similar and potentially related. Latin-Old English glosses of hystrix (porcupine) refer to the creature as se mara igil (the bigger igil), while the Latin ericius (hedgehog) is glossed as se læssa igil (the smaller igil).[40] Given this shared terminology that links porcupines and hedgehogs, it does not make sense for scholars to impose upon Riddle 15 a taxonomic distinction that did not yet exist. Solving the riddle as igil allows us to have it both ways: a riddle that stemmed from both natural observation of the native hedgehog and inherited tradition surrounding the porcupine. This

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menagerie in Woodstock, Oxfordshire, indicating there was some trade in porcupines as exotic species to England by the early twelfth century at least. See Gesta regum Anglorum, eds and trans. R. A. B. Mynors, R. M. Thomson and M. Winterbottom, 2 vols (Oxford, 1998–9), I, 740–1 (V.409.2–3). The editors note that it is 'possible that the English royal zoo predated Henry; Lambert of Ardres describes a huge bear presented to Arnold lord of Ardres by William Rufus' in Historia comitum Ghisnensium. See Gesta regum Anglorum, II, 372.

[40] See William G. Stryker, ed., 'The Latin-Old English Glossary in MS. Cotton Cleopatra A.III', Diss. Stanford University, 1951, gloss no. 3475 and 3477; and Lowell Kindschi, 'The Latin-Old English Glossaries in Plantin-Moretus MS. 32 and British Museum MS. Additional 32246', Diss. Stanford University, 1955, line 659. In the Corpus Glossary, iil also glosses both ericius (hedgehog) and histrix (porcupine); see Jan Hendrik Hessels, An Eighth-Century Latin-Anglo-Saxon Glossary (Cambridge, 1890), section 5, line 303 and section 8, line 108.

combination of evidence makes the solution igil a strong contender, alongside the more popular fox.

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