

Spirits and Skins: The *Sceapheord* of Exeter Book *Riddle* 13 and Holy Labour

Rachel A. Burns 

While the unnamed creatures of Exeter Book *Riddle* 13 have been read as ‘chickens’ since the early twentieth century, this solution has never fully satisfied either the narrative description or the cryptic puzzles of this short verse text. In this article, I propose a new solution, the Old English word *SCEAPHEORD* (‘flock of sheep’), which fulfils the various clues of the riddle and fits more satisfactorily among the quadruped cluster of neighbouring *Riddles* 12, 14 and 15. Far from settling the meaning of the text, this new solution opens the riddle to a range of interpretative possibilities. Following previous critical work on the role of medieval riddles in teaching interpretative practice, I will demonstrate that the riddle invites readings of the wandering *sceapheord* on several discrete levels, in a process analogous to four-fold biblical exegesis: the literal (a flock of sheep), the historical (allusions to biblical Eden, following Patrick Murphy) and the anagogical (images of renewal and salvation). A fourth, moral level of interpretation is revealed through attention to the riddle’s letter-games and etymological puns, which, in the Isidorean tradition, portray human language as reflective of material reality. By emphasizing this relationship between the textual and the real, the poem encourages monks to apply their skills of exegetical analysis to their daily labour (represented by the ubiquity of sheep-rearing in the early medieval English economy). While celebrating the spiritual meaning of individual acts of manual labour, *Riddle* 13 also reinforces the moral and theological importance of collective monastic work.

I. INTRODUCTION

Ic seah turf tredan, X wæron ealra,
VI gebroþor ond hyra sweostor mid.
Hæfdon feorg cwico; fell hongedon
sweotol ond gesyne on seles wæge
5 anra gehwylces. Ne wæs hyra ængum þy wyr,
ne side þy sarre, þeah hy swa sceoldon,
reafe birofene, rodra wearðes
meahtum awahte, muþum slitan
haswe blede. Hrægl bið geniwad
10 þam þe ær forðcymene frætwe leton
licgan on laste, gewitan lond tredan.

I saw six brothers walking the earth, and their sisters with them; there were ten in all. They had living spirits; the skins of each of them hung plain and clear on the wall of the hall.

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Nor was it the worse for any of them, nor was [any] side the sorer, although they must thus—deprived of garments, woken by the might of the guardian of the heavens—tear with [their] mouths the grey-brown crops. Clothing is renewed for those who, before having come forth, left [their] adornments to lie in [their] tracks, departing to walk the earth.

Exeter Book *Riddle* 13¹

In Exeter Book *Riddle* 13, 10 unnamed creatures walk into view, 6 male and 4 female. They are described by a series of apparently conflicting or contrasting statements: they are possessed of ‘feorg cwico’ (‘living spirits’, l.3a); yet their skins hung ‘on seles wæge’ (‘on the wall of the hall’, l.4b); nevertheless, none of them were injured (ll.5b–6a); but they needed to be ‘aweachte’ (‘awoken’) by God’s might (ll.7b–8a); they were ‘reafe birofene’ (‘deprived of garments’, l.7a); but we are told that these will be ‘geniwad’ (‘renewed’, l.9b).

Though many answers have been proffered for this riddle, none have satisfied on all counts.² The most widely accepted solution amongst those posed by early scholars of the riddle is ‘ten chickens’, put forward by Moritz Trautmann, and this has been supported by analyses from A. J. Wyatt and Erika Erhardt-Siebold.³ However, this solution relies upon a complex interpretation of the creatures’ hanging skins as a metaphor for the membranes which cling to the inside of chickens’ eggs.⁴ Precedent for such a metaphor is found in a riddle of Eusebius, *De Pullo* (‘The Chicken’), and a closer analogue in an opaque riddle among the ‘Flores’ of pseudo-Bede.⁵ Erhardt-Siebold proposes that *TIEN CICCENU* (‘ten chickens’) would fulfil the oblique clue of lines 1b–2b, reading the six brothers as six consonants, and the four sisters as four vowels;

¹ Old English text from George Krapp and E. V. K. Dobbie (eds), *The Exeter Book*, ASPR III (New York, 1936), 187, with the exception of ‘side’ in l.6a, in which I follow the manuscript reading from Exeter, Cathedral Library, 3501, f.104^r. Moritz Trautmann retains the MS reading of this verse (including retaining MS ‘sarra’ where I have adopted the ASPR emendation of ‘sarre’) in *Die Altenglischen Rätsel* (Heidelberg, 1915), 8. Krapp and Dobbie emend to ‘siðe þy sarre’, and discuss the verse’s emendation history, Krapp and Dobbie, 328–9. B. J. Muir gives the same reading of l.6a as I have here, and discusses the verse’s emendation, in *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*, 2nd rev. edn, 2 Vols (Exeter, 2000), I, 297 and II, 583–4. Further on my reading of this line, see below, p. 4. Punctuation of the Old English extract here is my own. All translations in this article are my own unless otherwise stated, and I have consulted translations from *The Riddle Ages: Early Medieval Riddles, Translations and Commentaries*, ed. by Megan Cavell, with Matthias Ammon, Neville Mogford, Jennifer Neville, Alexandra Reider and Victoria Symons (2013; redeveloped 2020), <https://theriddleages.com>. All further quotations from the *Riddles* are from Krapp and Dobbie’s edition, including punctuation. Translation of *hasve* as ‘grey-brown’ follows Carole P. Biggam, *Grey in Old English: An Interdisciplinary Semantic Study* (London, 1998), 276–7, on which see further below, p. 6. Numeration of the Exeter Book *Riddles* are here based on the Krapp-Dobbie system. While I have here retained ‘Riddle 13’ as the title of this text for the sake of brevity, Jennifer Neville proposes the highly suitable alternative title *X Gebroþor ond Sweostor* in ‘A Modest Proposal: Titles for the Exeter Book Riddles’, *Medieval Ævum*, 88 (2019), 116–23 (118).

² On the widely accepted solution of ‘ten chickens’, see below, n. iii. The other major solutions previously offered are: butterfly cocoon (Charles Wright, *Biographia Britannica Literaria*, 2 Vols, I (London, 1842), 80; Louis F. Klipstein, *Analecta Anglo-Saxonica: Selections, in Prose and Verse, from the Anglo-Saxon Literature*, 2 Vols, II (New York, 1856), 443, who also suggests ‘cicada’) or caterpillar (C. W. M. Grein, ‘Kleine Mittheilungen’, *Germania* X (1865), 305–310 (308)); the 22 letters of the alphabet (F. Dietrich, ‘Die Räthsel des Exeterbuchs: Würdigung, Lösung und Herstellung’, *ZfdA* XI (1859), 448–90 (463)); ‘ten fingers’ (Frederick Tupper, Jr, *The Riddles of The Exeter Book* (Boston, 1910), 97–8). For overviews and discussion of these various solutions, see, for example, Tupper, 96–8; A. J. Wyatt, *Old English Riddles* (Boston, 1912), 73–4; Krapp and Dobbie, 328–9; Erika von Erhardt-Siebold, ‘Old English Riddle 13’, *Modern Language Notes*, 65 (1950), 97–100 (97–9); Matthias Ammon, ‘Commentary for Exeter Riddle 13’, *The Riddle Ages: Early Medieval Riddles, Translations and Commentaries*, ed. by Megan Cavell, with Matthias Ammon, Neville Mogford, Jennifer Neville, Alexandra Reider and Victoria Symons (8 Oct 2013) <<https://theriddleages.bham.ac.uk/riddles/post/commentary-for-exeter-riddle-13/>> accessed 08 Feb 2022; Andy Orchard, *A Commentary on The Old English and Anglo-Latin Riddle Tradition* (Cambridge, 2021), 356. In Orchard this riddle is number 11. For another recent article proposing a new reading of an insufficiently-solved riddle, see Matthew Aiello, ‘Books in Battle: The Violent Poetics of Misdirection in Old English *Riddle* 53’, *RES*, 71 (2020), 207–28.

³ Moritz Trautmann, ‘Alte und neue Antworten auf altenglische Rätsel’, *Bonner Beiträge zur Anglistik*, XIX (1905), 167–215 (177f.); Wyatt, 73–4; Erhardt-Siebold. ‘Ten chickens’ is adopted as the solution to this riddle in Orchard, 356. See Krapp and Dobbie, 328; Marie Nelson, ‘The Rhetoric of the Exeter Book Riddles’, *Speculum*, 49 (1974), 421–40 (439); Mercedes Salvador-Bello, *Isidorean Perceptions of Order: The Exeter Book Riddles and Medieval Latin Enigmata* (Morgantown, West Virginia, 2015), 315–6. This solution is accepted and analysed in Dieter Bitterli, *Say What I am Called: The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book & The Anglo-Latin Riddle Tradition* (Toronto, 2009), 115–21.

⁴ Trautmann, 177f. Wyatt suggests that the hanging skins may reference a decorative practice of hanging eggshells in houses (73–4); Erhardt-Siebold, 97–9.

⁵ Discussed by Tupper, 1–3. See also Erhardt-Siebold, 98–9. Orchard compares the two analogues (356). These analogues are appraised and their relevance to *Riddle* 13 questioned by Patrick Murphy, *Unriddling the Exeter Riddles* (University Park, 2011), 54–5. The image of hanging skins is addressed further below.

however, as she herself notes, this requires an unusual spelling of *cicen* with a double 'c'.⁶ Lexical correspondences between *Riddle 13* and other 'bird riddles' of the Exeter Book have been noted by a number of scholars, but these references may not uniquely indicate bird-solutions, and it is noteworthy that *Riddle 13* is situated not among these ornithological riddles, but among a set of riddles about quadrupeds.⁷

In this article, I will argue for a new solution to this riddle, one with particular importance for our understanding of early medieval English materialism and monastic labour. Old English *SCEAPHEORD* ('flock of sheep') satisfies the various narrative clues of the riddle and fits well among the neighbouring quadrupeds of *Riddles 12, 14* and *15*. This riddle-object will have held particular significance for monastic readers: a further salvific level of interpretation elevates a reading of the riddle as a flock of wandering sheep to a contemplation of the resurrection that awaits God's flock. At the same time, the manual labour required of monks and the dominance of sheep-rearing in the early medieval English economy will have meant that sheep-tending was a familiar activity for many early medieval readers.⁸ The images of the wandering siblings and the hanging skins will be shown to be word-puzzles which lean suggestively towards a view of language as reflective of material reality, following a medieval tradition of signification exemplified by Isidore's *Etymologiae*.⁹ This correspondence of the construction of language with the construction of reality offers tacit encouragement to the monastic reader to take the skills of exegetical analysis that they bring to the riddle-texts and apply them to their daily manual labour.¹⁰ Textual and material sheep alike are ripe for a spiritual 'reading', and I will demonstrate that far from closing the debate on *Riddle 13*'s solution, identifying the referent as *SCEAPHEORD* opens up the riddle to new levels of interpretative analysis, in a process analogous to the practice of fourfold biblical exegesis.¹¹ Such encouragement corresponds well with discussions of physical labour in both the Benedictine Rule and the writings of Augustine and Gregory. The moral and theological importance attached to sacred and collective labour in *Riddle 13* may reflect anxieties concerning brethren who refuse to work, similar to those expressed by the early church fathers.

II. *SCEAPHEORD*: A LITERAL AND FIGURATIVE SOLUTION FOR *RIDDLE 13*

As a solution, *SCEAPHEORD* has the advantage of corresponding with the group of quadruped-centred riddles which immediately surround *Riddle 13*: *Riddle 12*, generally solved as 'ox' or 'oxhide'; *Riddle 14*, 'horn', again from an ox, which speaks in line 1; and *Riddle 15*, which has been variously solved as 'fox', 'badger' and 'hedgheog'.¹² Previously, *Riddle 13* was considered

⁶ This puzzle is discussed further below, esp. pp. 6–8. Erhardt-Siebold, 99–100; 'Commentary for Riddle 13'. The only other such spelling I have found is 'ciceno' in the Old English glosses to Matthew 23:37 of the Lindisfarne Gospels (Walter W. Skeat, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew in Anglo-Saxon, Northumbrian, and Old Mercian Versions, Synoptically Arranged, with Collations Exhibiting all the Readings of all the MSS* (Cambridge, 1887), 191), found via Antonette diPaolo Healey, John Price Wilkin and Xin Xiang (eds), *The Dictionary of Old English Corpus on the World Wide Web (DOEC)* (Toronto, 2009) <<https://doe.artsci.utoronto.ca/?p=498>> accessed 12 Jan 2022.

⁷ On these lexical parallels see Salvador-Bello, 312; Bitterli, 37, 116. Note that although 1.3a ('hæfdon feorg cwico', 'they had living spirits') is linked by this scholarship to *Riddle 10* of the Exeter Book (solved as 'barnacle goose'), Orchard identifies a parallel half-line in Exeter Book *Riddle 74*, for which he provides the solution 'AC (ship made of oak)'; 357, 458–9. On identification of the quadruped riddles, see Salvador-Bello, 213–20.

⁸ On manual labour as an aspect of monastic life, see further below, esp. pp. 9–12. On the significance and importance of sheep as livestock, see, for example, Marilina Cesario, 'Weather Prognostics in Anglo-Saxon England', *English Studies*, 93 (2012), 391–426 (414); L. S. Chardonnens, 'Do Anglo-Saxons Dream of Exotic Sheep?', in Michael Bintley and Thomas Williams (eds), *Representing Beasts in Early Medieval England and Scandinavia* (Woodbridge, 2015), 131–50.

⁹ The influence of Isidore's works on early medieval English riddling practice has been discussed extensively by Salvador-Bello, who attributes the organization of the Exeter Book *Riddles* to 'structural criteria deriving from encyclopedic tradition', and from the *Etymologiae* in particular (2, and see also esp. Chapter Two), and also by Bitterli (throughout, see, for example, 114).

¹⁰ My analysis here follows previous critical work by Winfried Rudolf on the role of the Exeter *Riddles* in teaching exegetical skills, on which see further below, esp. pp. 8, 9, 12.

¹¹ For Cassian's account of the fourfold method, see below p. 12.

¹² On these proposed solutions and their histories, see Orchard, 360–3; Salvador-Bello, 313–20.

to have been placed in this group anomalously.¹³ Riddles 12, 13 and 14 are linked not only by their four-legged referents, but also by their more primary focus on the raw material outputs of animal husbandry. Mercedes Salvador-Bello points to the critical distinction between solutions of *Riddle* 12 as either ‘ox’ or ‘leather’, noting that the lifespan of the ox is only lines 1–2 of the text, and that a similar ambivalence is expressed in *Riddle* 14, where the referent begins life as ‘wæpenwiga’ (‘a weaponed fighter’), but after line 1a speaks only as a horn.¹⁴ Following this, I note that the matter of *Riddle* 13 is less the referent sheep than their wool, which is the focus of lines 3b–7a and 9b–11b, over half of the text. These fleeces, referred to periphrastically as ‘fell’ (‘skins’, l.3b) and metaphorically as ‘garments’ (‘reafe’, l.7a; ‘hrægl’, l.9b), are first seen hanging on the walls of a hall, whether woven into cloth or hung intact we do not know.¹⁵ This kind of ornamental practice is referred to in *Beowulf*, where ‘Goldfag scinon web æfter wagum’ (‘gold-adorned tapestries shone upon the walls’, ll.994b–995a) of Heorot.¹⁶

In lines 5b–6a, the speaker of *Riddle* 13 assures us that although these garments or skins have been removed, the creatures are somehow unharmed. In the manuscript (Exeter, Cathedral Library, 3501, f.104^r), these two verses read: ‘ne wæs hyra ængum þy wyrs ne side þy sarra’. Krapp and Dobbie emend l.6a to ‘ne siðe þy sarre’, following earlier practice and citing ‘grammatical difficulties’ with the manuscript reading; they suggest an ‘adverbial sense’ for ‘sarre’, with a proposed translation of this clause as ‘nor the more painful on their journey.’¹⁷ The emendation of MS ‘side’ to ‘siðe’, however, is unnecessary both narratively and grammatically. The repeated ‘ne ... ne’ at the onset of each verse strongly suggests that MS ‘side þy sarra’ may be read in apposition to ‘hyra ængum þy wyrs’, with a repetition of ‘wæs’ and potentially even ‘ængum’ understood. The comparative adjective ‘sarra’ continues to present a problem, as its weak inflection points to a masculine noun in the nominative, and ‘side’ is nominative feminine.¹⁸ The manuscript offers an indication of why the scribe may have made an error here: on folio 104^r, almost directly above ‘sarra’, in the preceding manuscript line, the ‘anra’ of l.5a would have been in the line of sight of the scribe, who may have accidentally reproduced the word-final *-ra* to produce a regular (but here ungrammatical) comparative adjectival form. Further, substitution of *a* for *e* and vice versa is extremely common in Old English manuscript texts. I have therefore emended MS ‘sarra’ to ‘sarre’, following Krapp and Dobbie, and read ll.5b–6a as, ‘none of them was the worse [for it], nor [was any] side the sorer’. Reading Old English ‘side’ as Modern English ‘side’, with a more precise meaning of ‘flank’, the text presents the image of shorn sheep, pink and naked but ultimately unharmed by the shearing process which has deprived them of clothing. The renewal of the garments in line 9b is the re-growth of this shorn wool, and the subsequent description of the creatures leaving their trappings on the ground behind them refers either to the departure of the sheep after shearing, or else to the bits of wool that any walker in a sheep-field is likely to find caught in hedgerows or lying on the grass. Just as with the ox-leather of *Riddle* 12, which becomes straps, pouches and shoes, and the horn of *Riddle* 14, which is decorated with wire and used variously as a trumpet, a drinking vessel and an ornament, the wool of

¹³ According to Salvador-Bello, the quadrupeds form a sub-group of a larger zoological sequence from *Riddle* 7 to *Riddle* 15; following Trautmann’s reading of *Riddle* 13 as ‘ten chickens’, she argues that it has been ‘displaced’ from a neighbouring ornithological sub-group (Salvador-Bello, 301–24).

¹⁴ Salvador-Bello, 313–4, 316. See also Krapp and Dobbie, 329.

¹⁵ Bitterli notes that ‘fell and reafe are deliberately equivocal terms’ in the poem (116).

¹⁶ Further on this image, and on the ornamentation of woven cloth with gold, see Megan Cavell, *Weaving Words and Binding Bodies: The Poetics of Human Experience in Old English Literature* (Toronto, 2016), 23–5. Old English text from E. V. K. Dobbie, *Beowulf and Judith*, ASPR IV (New York, 1953), 32.

¹⁷ See Krapp and Dobbie, 328–9, who note that Trautmann retains the original manuscript reading. Preceding Krapp and Dobbie in the emendation of *side* to ‘siðe’ is Christian W. M. Grein and Richard Paul Wülker, *Bibliothek der Angelsächsischen Poesie*, 3 Vols, II (Goettingen, 1958), 375; on which see Muir, II, 583–4; and on the verse’s emendation history, see Krapp and Dobbie, 328–9. Murphy discusses the difficulty of this half-line, 55–6.

¹⁸ Comparative adjectives always take weak inflections in Old English, on which see further, Bruce Mitchell and Fred C. Robinson, eds, *A Guide to Old English*, 8th edn (Chichester, West Sussex, 2012), 33.

Riddle 13 is harvested from a living, nonhuman creature, and fashioned into objects for human use—here, wall-hangings for a hall.¹⁹

Riddle 13 corresponds thematically and zoologically with *Riddle* 12, but it is through rhetorical parallels and subversions that these two texts form a particular partnership. In *Riddle* 12, a key aspect of the conceit is the change in the referent's activities after its death, which are presented not only as the passive manipulation of leather by human hands (or, specifically, feet in lines 6b–7a), but also as active binding ('fæste binde', l.3b) or a sexualized and participatory handling (ll.10–13).²⁰ The dualism of the referent as wild living creature and tame dead creature is stressed in the final two-and-a-half lines:

Saga hwæt ic hatte,
þe ic lifgende lond reafige
ond æfter deaþe dryhtum þeowige.

Say what I am called, I who plunder the land while living, and after death am a
servant for men

Exeter Book *Riddle* 12, ll.1b–15.

Riddle 13 establishes similar expectations, opening with expressly living referents ('hæfdon feorg cwico', 'they had living spirits', l.3a), whose skins are a moment later displayed 'sweotol ond gesyne' ('plain and clear', l.4a) on a wall. Yet any audience's expectations of a similar dualism to that witnessed in *Riddle* 12 are upended, for we are assured that the creatures are unharmed, that they have been woken by God's might, that they continue to chew the grass as though nothing has happened, and indeed, that their 'garments' will return.

Patrick Murphy has noted the Edenic aspects of the poem, with its naked creatures awoken by God, walking the land, compelled to find food from the earth: the renewed skins form a concrete point of evocation between *Riddle* 13 and Chapter 3 of the Book of Genesis, where God clothes the naked Adam and Eve before their expulsion from the Garden of Eden.²¹ If there is indeed a biblical level of interpretation to this text, then sheep are a more suitable referent than chickens, with Christian readers well-used to considering themselves the flock of God's church. In his homily of the Second Sunday after Easter, Ælfric writes, 'Ic sylf wylle gadrian mine scep þe wæron tostencte, and ic wylle hi healdan on genihtsumere læse... ic hi læswige on dome and on rihtwisnyssse' ('I myself will gather together my sheep, who were scattered, and I will hold them in abundant pasture... I will graze them on judgement and righteousness').²² Such spiritual feasting may be the prompt for the compulsive grazing of the creatures in lines 5b–9a

¹⁹ On the objects made from leather and horn in Riddles 12 and 14, see Cameron Laird, 'Commentary for Exeter Riddle 12', *The Riddle Ages: Early Medieval Riddles, Translations and Commentaries*, ed. by Megan Cavell, with Matthias Ammon, Neville Mogford, Jennifer Neville, Alexandra Reider and Victoria Symons (07 Sep 2013), <<https://theriddleages.bham.ac.uk/riddles/post/commentary-for-exeter-riddle-12/>>; Megan Cavell, 'Commentary for Exeter Riddle 14', *The Riddle Ages: Early Medieval Riddles, Translations and Commentaries*, ed. by Megan Cavell, with Matthias Ammon, Neville Mogford, Jennifer Neville, Alexandra Reider and Victoria Symons (28 Oct 2013), <<https://theriddleages.bham.ac.uk/riddles/post/commentary-for-exeter-riddle-14/>>.

²⁰ For a critique of sexualized solutions to *Riddle* 12, see John D. Niles, *God's Exiles and English Verse: On the Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry* (Exeter, 2019), 173.

²¹ Murphy, 56–7; Murphy here emphasizes the metaphorical role of clothing, and also notes that the epithet for God used in *Riddle* 13, 'rodra weardes' ('[of the] guardian of the heavens') appears in *Genesis A* (as 'rodora wearde') during God's creation of Adam and Eve.

²² Text from P. A. M. Clemons, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: The First Series, Text* (Oxford, 1997), 315. In Chapters 27 and 28 of the Benedictine Rule, monks are identified as a sheep-flock in the care of an Abbot; see H. Logeman, *The Rule of S. Benet* (London, 1888), 57–60.

(‘sceoldon ... muþum slitan haswe blede’, ‘[they] had to [...] rend with their mouths the grey-brown crops’). On the other hand, the word ‘blede’, with meanings ranging from the fruit or shoots of trees, to the fruits of one’s labour, to more general crops or harvest, is also the word used to refer to the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge in the Garden of Eden.²³ The *Dictionary of Old English* indicates that MnE ‘blossom’ lies within the semantic range of *blēd*, and alongside ‘hrægl’ (‘clothing’) across the casesura of l.9, this image perhaps invokes Christ’s words at the Sermon on the Mount: ‘et de vestimento quid solliciti estis considerate lilia agri quomodo crescunt non laborant nec nent’ (‘And why are you troubled regarding clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, the way in which they grow. They neither labour nor weave’, Matthew 6:28).²⁴ The wool of sheep is as apt a metaphor for clothing as the petals of lilies, and the biblical allusion further offers a signal that the renewed vestments of line 9b are granted by God, and may be read as spiritual in nature. The interpretative tension around these lines of the text is heightened by points of lexical ambiguity: the use of *sceolde* is opaque, for it is not apparent why the herd *must* eat these crops or fruits, as is the use of *haswe* (‘grey-brown’), which is used to describe grass here and in *Riddle* 40, the subject of the latter riddle being God’s creation.²⁵ Carole Biggam’s study of the colour grey in Old English shows that ‘haswe’ has a range which ‘extends beyond grey towards brown’, including ‘gray-brown’, which I have here adopted as a translation.²⁶ In this context, the Edenic past develops an analogical counterpart: the renewal of the flock’s clothing signifies the resurrection of the faithful, while the hanging skins and abandoned ‘adornments’ signify the external trappings of the body, left behind in the earthly and secular space of the hall.²⁷ Sheep, as valuable domestic property, and as key religious symbols, provide a fruitful nexus for interlocking planes of meaning in *Riddle* 13.

III. LETTER-PLAY AND THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND REALITY

The numerical puzzle of lines 1b to 2b, in which the 10 creatures are divided into 6 brothers and 4 sisters, has caused consternation among critics.²⁸ Erhardt-Siebold has suggested that an Old English solution may contain six consonants (the brothers) and four vowels (the sisters).²⁹ The word *sceapheord* fits this precisely.³⁰ This word is commonly found in biblical contexts, appearing, for example, in a Palm Sunday Homily, in a gloss to the canticles of the Eadwine Psalter (Trinity College, MS R.17.1), and in the Old English *Heptateuch*.³¹

By allowing the ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’ to represent both inanimate letters and animate creatures, with gender functioning differently at each level of meaning, the numerical puzzle creates a parallel between the composition of the word *sceapheord* and the composition of the real-world

²³ s.v. *blēd*, *bled*, *Dictionary of Old English: A to I* online, ed. Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos, Antonette diPaolo Healey et al. (Toronto, 2018), accessed 7 Jan 2022. Also noted by Murphy, 57.

²⁴ Latin text from Robert Weber and Roger Gryson (eds), *Biblia sacra iuxta vulgatam versionem*, 5th ed. (Stuttgart: 2007), 1534.

²⁵ Murphy questions the description of the grass as grey, and the fact of the referents’ compulsion to eat it, alongside other aspects of the riddle which he believes to have been insufficiently explained (55–7).

²⁶ s.v. *hasu*, *Dictionary of Old English*; Biggam, 277, see also 276. Note that Biggam herself adopts ‘greyish’ as a translation for *haswe* in *Riddle* 13, but she is following Tupper’s ‘ten chickens’ solution, one that she nevertheless suspects is incorrect (295, 303).

²⁷ On late antique and early medieval thought regarding the relationship of soul and body after death, and regarding resurrection on Judgement Day, see Helen Foxhall Forbes, *Heaven and Earth in Anglo-Saxon England: Theology and Society in an Age of Faith* (Oxford, 2013), Chapter 5, ‘The Resurrection of the Body and the Life Everlasting’, 230–83.

²⁸ See above, nn. ii, iii, iv.

²⁹ Erhardt-Siebold, 99. Dietrich also discusses consonants and vowels in relation to this problem, on which see Tupper, 96–7. For a comparable account of letter-play in an Aldhelmian riddle, see Bitterli, 119.

³⁰ While this presumes a West Saxon solution to the riddle, it should be noted that the Anglian form *scepa heord* is synonymous and also fits the numerical puzzle. I am grateful to Richard North for the suggestion of this Anglian alternative solution.

³¹ Homily for Palm Sunday, l. 115, in K. G. Schaefer, ‘An Edition of Five Old English Homilies for Palm Sunday, Holy Saturday, and Easter Sunday’ [Columbia diss.] (1972), 57; B. L. Liles, ‘The Canterbury Psalter: An Edition with Notes and Glossary’ [Stanford diss.] (1967), Canticale 16 Verse 1; S. J. Crawford, *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch* (London, 1922), 201 (sources discovered via the DOEC); s.v. *sceap-heord*, Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller (eds), *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (London, 1882–1898); T. Northcote Toller (ed.), *Supplement to An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Based on the Manuscript Collections of the Late Joseph Bosworth* (1921), 824 <<https://bosworthtoller.com/26584>> accessed 26 Nov 2020.

sheep-flock. This formal correspondence between the written sign and the material signified reflects what Jean Jolivet calls the ‘grammatical platonism’ of early medieval thought: a belief that language is bound up with material reality.³² One of the most expansive and popular manifestations of this theory in contemporary literature is the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville, which imaginatively frames words as arising from or reflecting material realities of their referents.³³ Isidore’s writings on language reflect a much broader medieval (and post-medieval) view that the order of created things reflects divine, spiritual order.³⁴ Part of the riddle’s obfuscating strategy lies in its apparent separation of the material from the spiritual, which, if accepted, will leave a reader unable to interpret the text beyond the literal referent of the *sceapheord*. The numerical puzzle concludes with just such an obfuscation in the apparent paradox of line 3: the creatures had living spirits (‘feorg cwico’), yet their skins (‘fell’) hung on the wall.³⁵ The placement of spirit in the on-verse and body in the off-verse emphasizes this sense of clash, but the alliteration of ‘feorg’ with ‘fell’, and the emphasis granted to this connection by the words’ mutual positions at the head of each verse, hints at the falsehood of this opposition, and gestures towards the spiritually ordered nature of the material world. In *De ciuitate dei*, which Michael Lapidge identifies as one of the ‘staple patristic texts’ of the ‘typical’ early medieval English library,³⁶ Augustine suggests that the contrasts and oppositions of the created world (such as that found between life and death, or between sinners and the pious) can be read as a divine ‘eloquence’, analogous to strategies of antithesis in poetry.³⁷ *Riddle 13* embodies what Augustine implies: that careful textual engagement can lead the reader to recognize signs of divine order (or ‘eloquence’) in the material world.³⁸

While *SCEAPHEORD* is the solution which works most consistently with the clues of *Riddle 13* and the wider context of its placement in the Exeter riddle-collection, an anagogical reading of the text throws up the possibility of a further solution: *SCEAPHIRDE* (‘shepherd’).³⁹ Also fulfilling the conditions of the numerical puzzle, this word represents the person of Christ, who is both shepherd of the faithful on the one hand, and the lamb, the *agnus dei*, on the other. The poem echoes various aspects of the crucifixion: Christ hung, not on a wall, but on the cross; he was stripped of his clothing and his side was injured; he was reawakened by God, and renewed by the resurrection. Several material aspects of the poem, however, do not correspond with a referent of Christ the shepherd: there are 10 creatures, not one; it is their skins that hang, and in a hall; they do not feel pain in their sides (while Christ was impaled through the side by a spear); it is unclear what ‘adornments’ Christ would leave in his tracks. While *sceaphirde* is therefore not a literal (or primary) solution to *Riddle 13*, it is nevertheless highly unlikely that either author or reader would have overlooked the many allusions to the crucifixion. I suggest that Christ the

³² Jean Jolivet, ‘Quelques cas de “platonisme grammatical” du vii^e au xii^e siècle’, *Mélanges offerts à René Crozet à l’occasion de son 70 anniversaire Poitiers*, Société d’études médiévales I (1966), 93–9. The English quotation of Jolivet, accompanied by further discussion, is from Sinéad O’Sullivan, ‘Isidore in the Carolingian and Ottonian Worlds: Encyclopaedism and Etymology, c. 800–1050’, in Andrew Fear and Jamie Wood (eds), *A Companion to Isidore of Seville* (Leiden, 2020), 524–568 (532); John Chamberlin, *Medieval Arts Doctrines on Ambiguity and Their Places in Langland’s Poetics* (Montral & Kingston, 2000), 112.

³³ Discussed further below. See also Salvador-Bello, esp. 63–73. Isidore’s popular text survives as volumes, books and excerpts in 22 manuscripts written or owned in early medieval England (Helmut Gneuss and Michael Lapidge’s *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts: A Bibliographical Handlist of Manuscripts and Manuscript Fragments Written or Owned in England up to 1100* (Toronto, 2014), 916).

³⁴ For example, Faith Wallis writes, ‘the spherical shape of the universe is proof of the rational mind of its Creator’, in ‘Isidore of Seville and Science’, in Andrew Fear and Jamie Wood (eds), *A Companion to Isidore of Seville* (Leiden, 2020), 182–221 (esp. 193). See also Salvador-Bello, 97, and on biblical models for the order of the *Etymologiae*, 100.

³⁵ Bitterli labels this as ‘part of the riddle’s central paradox’, 116.

³⁶ Michael Lapidge, *The Anglo-Saxon Library* (Oxford, 2006), 127.

³⁷ R. A. Markus, *Signs and Meanings: World and Text in Ancient Christianity* (Liverpool, 1996), 28.

³⁸ Augustine’s primary purpose in this part of *De ciuitate dei* is to explain the origins of evil, and corresponding implications for God’s foreknowledge.

³⁹ I am grateful to the anonymous reviewer who offered me this complementary solution, the subsequent observations on its correspondence with the text’s numerical puzzle, and some (but not all) of its narrative clues. The concluding thoughts on how *SCEAPHIRDE* might function in the context of ‘solutions’ are my own.

sceaphirde falls within a broader field of reference created by the riddle, reached through an analogical reading of the text and operating alongside the solution of *SCEAPHEORD*; it extends the possibilities for ruminative focus on the text and illustrates the way in which exegetical reading can open up further avenues of meaning.

This leaves only one puzzle unsolved: the possible source or analogue for the image of skins hanging on a wall, found in an enigma of pseudo-Bede, which has typically been solved as ‘egg’:

Vidi filium cum matre manducantem, cuius pellis pendeat in pariete.⁴⁰

I saw a son eating with his mother, his skin hung on the wall.

The Latin collection known as the Bern Riddles offers a suggestion as to why an allusion to an egg-riddle might appear in a riddle about sheep, for it contains both a riddle on the sheep (*de oue*) and a riddle on the egg (*de ouo*).⁴¹ While neither of the two Latin riddles have any striking similarities to *Riddle 13* (other than a thematic focus on the sheep’s wool, in *de oue*, and a reference to the animal’s hunger), the similarity of the words *oue* and *ouo* to one another in Latin is striking. I suggest that the composer, well-versed in riddles and their tropes, included the image of skins on a wall—so suitable for a woollen hanging—to create an intertextual pun between the sheep (*oue*, singular) of *Riddle 13* and the egg (*ouo*) of the pseudo-Bede source. These two referents have very little in common at first glance, but the poet’s pun relies upon a shared material aspect, realized in the physical image of the hanging skins which connects the tapestries of sheep’s wool with the internal membrane of the egg. This is a typically Isidorean approach to language, which sees lexical or phonological similarity as indicative of some shared quality between subjects; in the *Etymologiae*, such similarities between words are expressed (inaccurately) as etymological relationships.⁴² For example, in Book XII of the *Etymologiae*, ‘De animalibus’ (‘Concerning animals’), Isidore writes that ‘Ova autem dicta ab eo quod sint uvida’ (‘Eggs are so called because they are moist’, XII.vii.79), and that ‘Ovis molle pecus lanis [...] ab oblatione dictum’ (‘A sheep is a soft herd animal with wool [...] so called from [the word] “offering”, XII.i.9).⁴³ The phonological parallelisms between *ova* and *uvida*, and between *ovis* and *oblatione*, are here taken to be indicative of material connections between the signified objects of eggs and moistness, of sheep and offerings. Rudolf sees a pedagogical function in other such moments of etymological play, arguing that by drawing out certain correspondences ‘between categorically unrelated things’, vernacular English riddles ‘teach medieval Christian principles of etymology and typology.’⁴⁴ The *oue/ouo* pun in *Riddle 13*, I suggest, serves primarily to remind the attentive reader that, as O’Sullivan puts it, ‘words represent reality.’⁴⁵ Moreover, a narratively meaningful example of this kind of etymological-phonological punning can be identified in the alliterative conjunction of ‘feorg’ and ‘fell’ discussed above: the correspondence of sound between these two words is not merely the poet’s stylistic method of establishing his theme; rather, it represents a meaningful connection between the spiritual and material manifestations of the flock, between spirits and skins.

⁴⁰ Latin text from J. P. Migne (ed.), *Patrologia Latina* 94 (Paris, 1862), 540.

⁴¹ Latin text here taken directly from the earliest surviving manuscript, which contains 39 of the 63 riddles in the collection (on which see Neville Mogford, ‘The Moon and Stars in the Bern and Eusebius Riddles’, in eds Megan Cavell and Jennifer Neville, *Riddles at Work in the Early Medieval Tradition* (Manchester, 2020), 230–46 (231)): Bern, Burgerbibliothek, Cod. 611, 73v and 76r <<https://www.e-codices.unifr.ch/en/list/one/bbb/0611>> accessed 24 Mar 2020.

⁴² Jacques Elfassi writes, ‘For Isidore, there is usually a natural connection between a word and what it signifies. The word is not an arbitrary sign of the thing, but rather a reflection of its essence.’ (‘Isidore of Seville and the Etymologies’, in Andrew Fear and Jamie Wood (eds), *A Companion to Isidore of Seville* (Leiden, 2020), 245–78 (259, see also 258)). See also Winfried Rudolf on ‘the desire of the medieval mind for a closer, less arbitrary relationship between signs and things’ (‘Riddling and Reading: Iconicity and Logographs in Exeter Book Riddles 23 and 45’, *Anglia*, 130 (2012), 499–525 (507)).

⁴³ Latin text from W. M. Lindsay (ed.), *Isidori Hispalensis episcopi etymologiarum sive originum, libri XX*, II (Oxford, 1911).

⁴⁴ Rudolf, 524.

⁴⁵ O’Sullivan, 532.

The numerical puzzle and the image of the skins represent two different kinds of letter-play, and such play features widely amongst the other riddles of the Exeter Book, with some of these instances also pointing to a material relationship between word and referent.⁴⁶ For example, Rudolf has identified the ‘iconic clue’ of the bow-like capital ‘A’ that opens *Riddle 23* (the solution of which is generally accepted as ‘bow’) as a ‘fusion of sign and image’, while riddles featuring runic puzzles, such as the ‘cock’ and ‘hen’ of *Riddle 42*, may partake of a certain material cachet, drawing on what Tom Birkett has called ‘the unique physicality and materiality of the engraved word.’⁴⁷ Rudolf emphasizes the pedagogical aspect of early medieval literary riddles, which were used by readers to develop their skills of biblical exegesis, and to practice scrutiny ‘of both the sign and the signified’ in pursuit of a greater interpretative understanding of God’s creation.⁴⁸ *Riddle 13* engages in exactly this kind of playful preparation, and the poet’s stylistic choices draw the reader into acts of non-conventional reading. For example, patterns of plurilinear alliteration which include stressed positions *not* required to alliterate for the metre occur in lines 4b–5 (‘wæge’, possibly ‘gehwyrces’, and ‘wyr’s’), 7b–8a (also *w*-alliteration, ‘weardes’ and ‘aweachte’), 10b–11a (‘leton’, ‘licgan’ and ‘laste’) and 11b–1a (‘tredan’ twice, and the numeral ‘X’ for Old English *tien*). Some of these correspondences help to highlight thematically key aspects of the narrative: the alliteration of ‘wæge’ with ‘wyr’s’ emphasizes the surprising discovery that the referents are in fact *not* ‘worse’ off for the fact that their skins are hanging on the ‘wall’; the correspondence of ‘weardes’ and ‘aweachte’ imbue the verb of waking with a divine and salvific tenor. A further stylistic indicator of this significance of the ‘awoken’ creatures may lie in the shadow of the Old English word *rod* (‘cross’, ‘rood’) within the word ‘rodra’ (l.7, ‘[of the] heavens’). This correspondence is primarily visual, as *rod* has a long *o*, while the *o* of ‘rodra’ is short. The playfulness of ‘leton’, ‘licgan’ and ‘laste’ (with ‘leton’ and ‘laste’ not metrically required to alliterate) is a marvelous moment where the materiality of verse form itself rises to the surface, for the *l*-alliteration winding between half-lines creates a phonological representation of the very ‘track’ (‘laste’) that is being described. The alliteration of the Old English cardinal numbers represented by the Roman numerals ‘X’ (Old English *tien*) and ‘VI’ (Old English *siex*) within their respective lines also draws attention to the poem’s material and literary form, as the reader must engage in a double code-switch, mentally changing these numerals into words, while also moving from an essentially Latin frame of reference into the vernacular. The repetition of ‘tredan’ between l.11b and l.1a (with that of l.11b not metrically required to alliterate) creates an envelope pattern, but given the other instances of plurilinear non-metrical alliteration, it also suggests a loop.⁴⁹ This circularity supports the theme of renewal introduced by ‘geniwad’ (‘renewed’, l.9), and furthermore, it draws attention to how a single word can be read in multiple ways: at a literal level of reading, the action of walking is the same for the sheep at the beginning and end of the poem, but interpreting the text at a spiritual level of meaning, the sheep-flock begins walking on earth, and finishes in Paradise.

IV. MONASTIC LABOUR: EXPRESSIONS OF CELEBRATION AND ANXIETY

Collated in the second half of the tenth century, somewhere in the southwest of England (and possibly at Canterbury), the Exeter Book was produced in an era of sharply increased interest in the text of the Benedictine Rule.⁵⁰ An Old English translation of the Rule was produced by

⁴⁶ See further, Chapter 6 (‘Letter Games’) in Bitterli, 114–31.

⁴⁷ Rudolf, 506–7; quotation from Tom Birkett and further discussion of the material aspect of runes within Old English verse in *Reading the Runes in Old English and Old Norse Poetry* (London, 2017), 50, 94. Further on *Riddle 42*, see Bitterli, 121–4.

⁴⁸ Rudolf, 501.

⁴⁹ Envelope pattern noted by Orchard, 356. Bitterli also notes the ‘circular structure’ at work, assessing it in the context of the solution ‘ten chickens’ (120).

⁵⁰ Dating and location of the Exeter Book from Gneuss and Lapidge, 201. On the role of the Rule during the English Benedictine reform, see James G. Clark, ‘The Rule of Saint Benedict’, in Krijin Pansters (ed.), *A Companion to Medieval Rules and Customaries* (Leiden, 2020), 37–76 (esp. 44, 61).

Æthelwold, by then bishop of Winchester (963–984), probably somewhere between his consecration and the death of King Edgar in 975, while around 973, Æthelwold also drew up the *Regularis Concordia*; these documents formed part of a broader effort to disseminate the Rule and its tenets across England in the tenth and eleventh centuries.⁵¹ While we do not know how long before the compilation of the Exeter Book *Riddle* 13 was first composed, its concern with spiritual salvation, exegetical interpretation and manual labour would have been highly meaningful to a tenth-century monastic reader.⁵² Given the strong Christian overtones of *Riddle* 13, and its references to ‘brothers’ and ‘sisters’, it is not unreasonable to speculate that even if it was composed at a fairly early date, it may have been done so by a member of the religious, and possibly in a monastic context with knowledge of the Rule. Nevertheless, my concern here is with the reception of this text by readers of the Exeter Book in and following the tenth century. The poems of this codex, selected and copied in the environment of a monastic scriptorium by the hand of someone in religious service, participate in what Brian O’Camb and John D. Niles call a ‘monastic poetics’: verse which glorifies God, delights its readers and reinforces Benedictine values.⁵³ As part of the theory of ‘monastic poetics’, Niles suggests that the poems of the Exeter Book were broadly produced in the tenth century; this dating, however, is not a necessary prerequisite for reading the poems of the codex in a tenth-century context.⁵⁴ The compilation of the Exeter Book is the result of choices made by its producers, informed by their interests, and the collection is therefore reflective of tenth-century concerns whether or not it was composed in whole or in part much earlier. Certainly, the tenth-century Benedictine Reform period saw the reach of the Rule extended with the regularization of monastic practice; however, monastic living and adherence to the Rule were a feature of many English institutions centuries earlier.⁵⁵

The act of reading was a component of monastic practice stipulated by the Rule, which recommends that monks engage both in ‘labora’ (‘work’) and in ‘lectione divina’ (‘holy reading’) to avoid idleness, demarcating specific hours for such activities.⁵⁶ Working with livestock, and with sheep in particular, would have therefore been a daily reality for many English Benedictines, and the Rule specifically offers encouragement to those who must ‘live by the labour of their hands’ (‘labore manuum suarum vivunt’).⁵⁷ It should be noted that it is not of great importance whether or not a particular monk reading this text worked with sheep or other livestock; the ubiquity of such labour in the period, and in monastic holdings, would have meant that the depiction of shearing sheep was a suitable motif for the representation of manual labour generally. Following the directions for work and reading laid out in Chapter 48 of the Rule, a monk would work in the morning after prayers at Prime (sunrise), and would have time to read from about 10 o’clock until midday, later returning again to work after prayers at None (mid-afternoon). The precise hours recommended by the Rule vary according to the time of year, but the pattern of reading framed by manual labour means that *Riddle* 13 might well have provided a portion of the morning reading for a monk who had come in from work, and who was due to return to work later.

⁵¹ Saint Æthelwold of Winchester, ed. and trans. Jacob Rieff, *The Old English Rule of Saint Benedict: With Related Old English Texts* (Minnesota, 2017), Introduction, esp. 2–3, 6, 9–10, 12.

⁵² The Rule is likely to have entered the north of England in the mid-seventh century, after which its influence spread across the kingdoms (on which see Clark, esp. 40–2).

⁵³ Brian O’Camb, *Toward a Monastic Poetics: Exeter Maxims and the Exeter Book of Old English Poetry* [Unpubl. PhD diss.] (2009); Brian O’Camb, ‘Exeter Maxims, The Order of the World, and the Exeter Book of Old English Poetry’, *Philological Quarterly*, 93 (2014), 409–433 (esp. 411); Niles (2019), esp. 5–6.

⁵⁴ Niles, see, for example, 222. See also Francis Leneghan, Review of John D. Niles, *God’s Exiles and English Verse: On the Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*, *TOEBI Newsletter*, 37 (2020), 93–8 (97).

⁵⁵ On which see further Sarah Foot, *Monastic Life in Anglo-Saxon England, c. 600–900* (Cambridge, 2006), for example, 1–3.

⁵⁶ From Chapter 48 of the Rule: ‘Otiositas inimica est anime et ideo certis temporibus occupari debent fratres in labore manuum certis iterum horis in lectione divina’ (‘Idleness is the enemy of the soul, and therefore the brothers ought to be occupied at certain times in manual labour, and at certain times in holy reading’). Latin text from Logeman, 81.

⁵⁷ Logeman, 82. On the importance of sheep to monastic settlements, see above n. viii.

The regulation of monastic labour, and the problem of brethren who refuse to work, is a concern of the early church fathers. The manual known as *The Didache*, compiled in the Middle East in the first- or second-century CE, instructs Christians to welcome and assist all other Christians, but only to give long-term shelter to those who will work for their food, stating that anyone who will not work is a 'Christ-peddler'.⁵⁸ Some centuries later, Augustine expresses frustration with the hypocrisy of brethren who refuse to work, preferring to read holy texts.⁵⁹ Labour, as Augustine presents it in *De opera monachorum*, is not something separate from reading (as perhaps implied by the binary division of *labora* and *lectio divina* by Saint Benedict). Rather, he reminds readers that the importance of labour is a message that emerges from a reading of the Apostle, and suggests that time spent in labour is a suitable time to complete the work begun in reading, by reciting holy songs from memory. As part of an extended meditation on man's relationship with *labora* in his *Moralia in Job*, Gregory expresses a complementary idea of work and contemplation as a joined process: 'prius mens exsudat in opere, et postmodum refici debeat per contemplationem' (VI.xxxvii.60, 'first the mind toils in work, and afterward must be refreshed through contemplation').⁶⁰

The intertwining of language and object, signifier and signified in *Riddle 13* primes the monastic reader to recognize that both text and material reality reflect the same Godly order of creation, and encourages them to apply their exegetical skills in two ways: firstly to the textual sheep of the poem, and secondly, to the material sheep of the fields, in each case eliciting a salvific layer of meaning above the literal. The daily work of the monastic reader, whether that be with sheep, or with some other aspect of work necessary to their institution, is thus celebrated as a constituent part of their personal devotion. *Riddle 13*, then, does not only contain multiple levels of meaning within its text, but also instills meaning extra-textually, engaging the reader in the integrated processes of *labora* and *lectio divina* held up by both Augustine and Gregory. While the writings of Augustine and Gregory were popular in early medieval England, it is not necessary that the author of this riddle should have personally encountered written copies of these texts, the ideas of which would have also circulated as cultural knowledge between religious communities.⁶¹ *Riddle 13* is a practical poem, attuned to the conditions of monastic life, recognising its own place in the scheme of work and literacy that governs the hours of its readership.

While the individual reader of this text might meditate upon their own work and their prospects of salvation, the poem presents us not with an individual referent, but a flock, a community. The 'brothers' and 'sisters' who come walking are described in terms too much like those used to describe religious brethren to have gone unnoticed by monastic readers. The insistence of the numerical puzzle on the collective noun *sceapheord* as solution, rather than the simpler and (at a literal level) equally applicable *sceap*, may gesture towards the reliance of the community on the work of the entire collective. The anxiety expressed in *The Didache* exposes a very real danger for Christian communities, which would have held true for medieval monasteries: insitutions offering food and shelter without requiring compensation of some kind would be at risk of exploitation from outside. This threat to the administration of a community or institution is only

⁵⁸ On *The Didache*, see s.v. *Didache*, Everett Ferguson, Michael P. McHugh, Frederick W. Norris and Lawrence Wolfson, eds, *Encyclopedia of Early Christianity*, 2nd ed. (New York, 2010), 328. Text of *The Didache* from Robert A. Kraft, *The Didache or Teaching of the Apostles: Updated Electronic Edition* (1995) <ccat.sas.upenn.edu/rak//publics/didache/didache.htm> accessed 24 March 2020.

⁵⁹ 'De opera monachorum', *Sancti Aurelii Augustini*, Joseph Zycha (ed.), CESL XXXXI (Vindobonae, 1900), Chapter 20, 564–5.

⁶⁰ *Sancti Gregorii Papae I Cognomento Magni, Opera Omnia*, Jacques-Paul Migne (ed.) (Paris, 1849), *Patrologia Latina* 75: 764A. Further, on early Church thought on work, and on the 'sanctification of labour', see Sarah Drakopoulou Dodd and George Gotsis, 'Labour is Holy but Business is Dangerous', *Journal of Enterprising Culture*, 15 (2007), 133–63.

⁶¹ Indeed, according to Gneuss and Lapidge, no copies of Augustine's *De opere monachorum* survive from early medieval England.

implicit in those writings of the Church fathers considered here; the patristic authors choose to reify the necessary act of communal work as a point of Christian morality.

V. CONCLUSIONS

SCEAPHEORD is a persuasive solution to the various narrative and cryptic puzzles of *Riddle* 13. Engaging with its neighbours in the quadruped subsection of the Exeter Book animal riddles, it strikingly and even humorously defamiliarizes a common and probably mundane object of physical labour: the sheep and its wool. In proposing this new solution, I aim not to 'close' debate on the text, but rather to open up further interpretative possibilities. To the monastic reader unskilled in exegetical methods, the meaning of the riddle might indeed remain stubbornly at the literal, material level of 'flock of sheep'. For the ruminating reader, further levels of meaning await, including images of Edenic biblical history (following Murphy), anagogical references to the salvation of God's 'flock', and a moral dimension on the importance and spiritual significance of labour. From this perspective, Murphy is right to critique the concept of 'double solutions' in the Exeter Book *Riddles*; he prefers to speak of a riddle's 'solution' and its 'metaphorical focus', while Rudolf maintains that the Old English riddles are designed for ruminative practice, with readers encouraged to seek out additional levels of meaning.⁶² Building on the perspectives of these two scholars, I suggest that we can identify readings of *Riddle* 13 that are literal ('sheep-flock'), historical (the expulsion from Eden), moral (guidance on monastic labour) and anagogical (through salvation imagery). This quartet of readings represents the four aspects of biblical exegesis as described by Cassian in the *Conlationes* (XIV.8):

igitur praedictae quattuor figurae in unum ita, si uolumus, confluunt, ut una atque eadem Hierusalem quadrifarie possit intellegi: secundum historiam ciuitas Iudaeorum, secundum allegoriam ecclesia Christi, secundum anagogen ciuitas dei illa caelestis, quae est mater omnium nostrum, secundum tropologiam anima hominis.⁶³

and therefore, the four aforementioned figures meet together, if you like, so that one and the same Jerusalem may be understood fourfold: according to history [as] the city of the Jews, according to allegory [as] the Church of Christ, according to anagogue [as] that divine city of God, which is mother of all of us, according to tropology [as] the soul of man.

In recomposing the material *sceapheord* from the poem's textual clues and cues, the monastic reader engages in the intellectual labour which is the partner to their physical work, and the poem points to the spiritual value of both types of activity through the salvific image of the reawakened flock, the children of God who, having died, are not harmed, but go forth into heaven leaving the trappings of their earthly bodies behind them. While these moral and anagogical readings point to the individual salvation of the reader, the riddle also fulfils a function at the broader level of monastic operation. The ethics of work was an important matter for the Church fathers, and *Riddle* 13's playful engagement with the reader is also a reinforce-

⁶² Murphy, 59–60. Rudolf, esp. 516, where he discusses fourfold exegesis.

⁶³ Latin text from Michael Petschenig (ed.), *Iohannis Cassiani, Conlationes XXIII* (Vindobonae, 1886), 405.

ment of certain behaviours necessary for the survival of a monastic collective, and a reification of those behaviours as a moral and theological principle of sacred *labora*, partner to *lectio divina*.

University of Oxford, UK