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## Anglia Journal of English Philology

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4 Issues per year

CiteScore 2017: 0.17

SCImago Journal Rank (SJR) 2017: 0.148

Source Normalized Impact per Paper (SNIP) 2017: 0.672

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# Exeter Book Riddle 15: Some Points for the Porcupine

**Dieter Bitterli**

**Published Online:** 2007-12-10 | **DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.1515/ANGL.2002.461>

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## Abstract

The subject of Riddle 15 of the Exeter Book is an animal that lives with its cubs in a burrow

where it is hunted by an aggressive intruder. The poem describes how the family escapes through the tunnels of the burrow and how the mother reaches the open; there, she turns on her enemy to strike him with her 'war-darts'. The proposed solutions to the riddle are usually either 'badger' or 'fox', whereas the alternative, 'porcupine', which was first suggested more than a century ago, has traditionally been rejected on the grounds that the porcupine is not an indigenous species in England.

However, there are several strong arguments in favour of the porcupine. In the Latin tradition, the porcupine occurs not only in the zoological writings of Pliny the Elder and Solinus, but also in the *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville, which already provided the Anglo-Latin enigmatists (Aldhelm, Tatwine and Eusebius) with both facts and legends about beasts. Among these is the old belief that the porcupine is able to shoot out its long, sharp quills, especially at dogs pursuing it – just like the animal in Riddle 15. Other details and clues, too, tally with the characteristics of the porcupine, which was said to resemble the hedgehog and, therefore, was known to the Anglo-Saxons as *se mara igil* ('the larger hedgehog').

This paper explores the imaginative language and rhetoric of Riddle 15 and discusses the solutions hitherto proposed in the light of Latin animal riddling and animal lore, both of which informed the Old English riddles of the Exeter Book. In this context, the 'porcupine' – though exotic and long refuted – emerges as the most likely solution to Riddle 15.

## About the article

**Published Online:** 2007-12-10

**Published in Print:** 2003-06-23

**Citation Information:** Anglia - Zeitschrift für englische Philologie, Volume 120, Issue 4, Pages 461–487, ISSN (Print) 0340-5222, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1515/ANGL2002.461>.

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