Material Culture in the Religious Narratives of the Old English Exeter Book

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MATERIAL CULTURE IN THE RELIGIOUS NARRATIVES
OF THE OLD ENGLISH EXETER BOOK

BY

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DISSERTATION

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For Mom and Dad, who never once asked me why I didn’t major in Business,

and for Tyler and Payton, who always made me think I was pretty cool.
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Material Culture in the Religious Narratives of the Old English Exeter Book

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Abstract

The term “material culture” represents many different approaches and schools of thought across multiple academic disciplines, but its place in the study of medieval literature is particularly difficult to ascertain. The long tradition of simply using the archaeological record to “fill in” gaps left in the textual historical record does little to expand our understanding of the place that these objects actually occupied in the users’ daily lives, nor does it allow us to make greater connections between the texts, their audiences, and their broader environment. Likewise, the role of the text and its reception has a great deal to do with the physical attributes of the object in which that text is recorded. An examination of this intersection of text and object can thus provide us with a clearer picture of daily life and thought in pre-Conquest England.

This dissertation examines the ways in which references to objects of material culture are used in the context of the first five poems of the Old English Exeter Book, as well as the impact of the Book as a physical thing upon the poetry. After establishing a list of twenty categories of material culture derived from the text of the Exeter Book itself and assigning each reference to material culture to one or more of these categories, the larger patterns of usage become visible, making apparent the thematic and structural functions of such references. Likewise, by examining the physical nature of the Exeter Book and the roles it has played throughout its millennium of history, we gain insight into the ways in which the Book
was valued and used. Taken together, twenty-first-century readers can use this analysis to
gain a greater understanding of the importance of things in the context of pre-Conquest
England, perhaps even including the purpose for which the *Exeter Book* was assembled.
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A Note on Terminology

It is with great sadness that I recognize that it has become not only important, but necessary to address the existence of a certain section of the population here in the United States who, for reasons most of us in the Academy cannot understand, are making concerted efforts to claim Germanic symbols for the purposes of advancing a white nationalist and white supremacist agenda. While it never occurred to me when my work on this dissertation began that I would need to even raise the subject here, the events in Charlottesville in the summer of 2017 leave no doubt that this element is present in our society and that it is working to achieve its goals with unnerving energy and, disturbingly, a possibly growing level of tolerance in broader society.

I do not accept these attitudes, however. As a result, I have made the conscious choice to eliminate a particular identifying adjective from my dissertation that, although still widely used in perfectly acceptable ways throughout the field, has the potential to bring this work to the attention of an audience it is my strong intention never to serve. I have left it in the titles of the works I have referenced, should it appear there, and in quotations taken from those sources if necessary, but I have eliminated it from my own prose. In its place, I have been forced to use the less precise term “early English,” not because it is a perfect replacement, but exactly because it is not perfect. It stands out. It is, in fact, grating to several of the colleagues with whom I have spoken about this. It is not right to exclude a term with a rich scholarly history, but, to be absolutely clear, neither is the fact that individuals who have grown up with the benefit of hindsight, but who have chosen to walk the same destructive paths anyway, now believe that they can twist the truth that scholars uncover every day in order to support their unsupportable agenda. It is a reminder to everyone who reads this dissertation that those who work to misuse our scholarship also fight to rob us of
our identity as fair-minded, egalitarian, and just members of a society built on precisely those values, and a reminder that we must never be willing to sit back and watch these individuals take what was never really theirs to begin with. Though it may be a small protest, I hope it is a clear one.

The difficulty of publication, of course, is that once something has been released into the intellectual wilds, those who read that work can use it in any way they choose. I have taken great care with everything I have written in this dissertation to eliminate the possibility that my arguments, or the original texts and the culture that created them, should ever be misconstrued for such purposes, but I acknowledge that even the greatest level of care cannot prevent misuse if the potential misuser is dedicated and inventive enough. I also realize that this is a dissertation, and that its potential reach and impact are rather small. I merely want to ensure that those who do take the time to read my arguments here understand that they were written in divisive, difficult times, and that, like most in this field, I simply do not accept and will not allow my work to be used in any way to promote hatred, racism, misogyny, or xenophobia. To borrow a phrase from popular culture, I, too, wish to be explicit in the assertion: “Nazis are bad.”

The past contains wonders, and I have been fortunate enough to have seen some of them for myself first-hand, but the past contains nothing that can justify injustice, abuse, or cruelty today.
Introduction: On Narrative and Material Culture

“You know how important that is. That’s the whole meaning of life, isn’t it? Trying to find a place for your stuff.”

–George Carlin, “A Place for Your Stuff”

The importance of material culture is almost impossible to overstate. In our twenty-first-century world, we live in homes filled with furniture, we drive automobiles that require fuel, oil, tires, and bobbleheads attached to the dashboard, and we surround our persons with textiles, tools, electronics, foodstuffs, mementos, printed materials, artwork, and more. This dissertation has been written using several different devices, each with a different look and feel for the user, and it is being read, probably either on a similar device or on a sheet of highly processed wood pulp designed for exactly that purpose. Material culture is everywhere we look; we have positioned material culture in every possible place we can, from the largest buildings in the world, which can contain cities within themselves, to the vast stretches of rural land used to cultivate fields of crops that will eventually become things we eat, wear, and use. As George Carlin pointed out, a great deal of our modern attention goes toward the acquisition, use, maintenance, and disposal of stuff, and it seems highly unlikely that such a trend will decline in the near (or even distant) future.

Of course, if that much effort is expended in relation to the objects of material culture that pervade our existence, then a great deal of our own selves can be seen in those objects as a result. We can look at a car and guess a great deal about the driver, for instance, from their socioeconomic status (age and level of maintenance) to their political leanings (large, powerful trucks or compact, fuel-efficient hybrids) to their family size (two-seat sports coupes or minivans with stickers in the back window for each member). We can also know a great deal about someone just by looking at how they dress, the kinds of things they carry
with them, and, in today’s society, what kind of phone they use. All of these objects give
clear indicators about the values and habits of their users, and the broader patterns of their
use tell us a great deal about the society in which they operate.

What is truly remarkable about this fact, however, is not how much information can
be gathered based just on observations of surviving material culture, but how effective these
objects are at conveying cultural information on groups that are remote from us and
therefore difficult to understand. This is especially important in situations where one wishes
to understand a culture for which little or no textual or other evidence may survive, as is
often the case when one looks to early civilizations. Even in situations when a relatively large
corpus of texts survives, material culture can provide a useful and powerful point of access
into the thoughts of individuals and cultures that may still be difficult to ascertain. In
cultures where written records are available, but only for a portion of the population, either
as a class or an economic distinction, then the textual record only provides access to specific
parts of the culture. On the other hand, even the most economically disadvantaged groups
make use of material culture, and by examining the traits of these objects and attempting to
see how they were used from the physical record that is constituted by the object’s very
matter, we can gain access to any level of a society, including those that left no artistic or
textual records (assuming, of course, that the objects survive to be examined and
interpreted).

Objects are more than just things that people use, though. They are also things
people think about and, indeed, things that people write about, and they also tend to be
things that people use when thinking about other things. In other words, objects have a use
in the physical reality of the everyday world, but they also have uses when they are
referenced or included in the purely conceptual realm of texts. If it is true that we can look
to a car and understand a great deal about the driver, then what do we learn when the car is not a physical object, but instead an idea that has been specifically constructed for use in that scenario?

This dissertation uses these ideas as a springboard to examine five long texts from a single early English manuscript, the *Codex Exoniensis*, known today as the *Exeter Book*. As the largest and most varied of the four surviving codices of Old English poetry, the *Exeter Book* is an excellent subject for this study, not only because it contains a wide variety of texts of various genres and subjects, but also because it is the only one of the four for which we have evidence of its provenance for the majority of its existence. This makes the manuscript valuable not only as a record of historical thoughts on material culture, but of historical action and attitudes in a specific location, even if that record is physical rather than textual in nature.

More to the point, however, the *Exeter Book* is a manuscript that scholars have long considered to have no guiding principle behind the selection of its various texts, nor any clear rhyme or reason for their order. Even the most recent entry on the *Exeter Book* by Patrick W. Conner in *Oxford Bibliographies* states that “less attention has been paid to locating a thematic center for the book’s contents, and the collection is very often assumed to have been an unstructured miscellany” before conceding that “the reading of any poem in it is likely to profit from looking at the other poems adjacent to it and from understanding the logic that editors have employed to isolate and identify the untitled poetic units in the manuscript.”\(^1\) Although scholars’ attempts to this point have been unsuccessful, this dissertation lays the groundwork for a larger study addressing that question in a novel way:

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by examining the attitudes of each of the poems toward material culture, and placing those poems within their codicological and material contexts, we can discern whether the entire manuscript is a warning against the dangers of becoming overly attached to things and an argument to reject material wealth in order to achieve greater glory in the afterlife. Although much of the work necessary to make a definitive case lies outside the scope of this dissertation, the first five poems, and the way they have been included within the physical manuscript, provide compelling reasons to expand this study at a later date.

The Manuscript and the Texts

There are numerous reasons to turn to the Exeter Book when exploring the role of material culture in Old English literature. As the largest and most varied of the four surviving codices of Old English poetry, it provides a broad picture of what poetry and literature meant among the pre-Conquest English. Its content ranges from Christian religious narratives to haunting Germanic elegies to riddles that are, in essence, works of poetry expressly and specifically about how the early English thought about material objects. Moreover, the Book has been used both as a repository for text and as a repository for other things when that text could no longer be accessed, giving it a more diverse résumé than the other manuscripts. Finally, the Exeter Book is uniquely significant for such a study because it has been associated with a single community and culture for roughly one thousand years. That kind of connection allows for inquiries into not only the conditions of its creation, but the impact of its presence over an extended period.

The Exeter Book is physically a large codex, with 131 leaves that measure, on average, 315 mm by 220 mm, or somewhat taller and slightly wider than a standard sheet of A4 or US Letter paper. The first leaf is not included in the foliation, and it and leaves 1-7 were a later
addition, probably at the behest of Matthew Parker, whose use of medieval manuscripts often included the rearrangement of pages. Thus, what survives of the original manuscript spans leaves 8-130 for a total of 123 leaves of poetic content. This number does not reflect an original count, however. There are numerous locations throughout the manuscript where we know at least one leaf has gone missing. The best example of this is the first folio of the manuscript, which begins with an incomplete thought. It is clear that something came before this text, but it has been lost to time and, looking to the surviving leaf that now takes its place as the first in the manuscript, probably abuse. Depending on how one divides up the lines into separate works, arguments can be made that the *Exeter Book* contains anywhere from 127 to 146 poems. As a result, we must clarify why this study is limited to only the first five works and how that sample can be considered representative enough of the manuscript as a whole for such work to be meaningful.

The answers to these questions, as is often the case when looking at medieval texts, can be found in the structure of the manuscript itself and the relationships between the texts themselves. In his landmark study of the manuscript, Patrick W. Conner argues convincingly that the structure of the manuscript was made up by three separate sections, which he calls “booklets,” that were written by the single scribe over time. Looking to P. R. Robinson to define the distinguishing traits of such “self-contained units,” Conner identifies three independent sub-structures, leaning heavily on variations in the script of the text to define “stints” of writing, but also making use of decoration and the condition of “outer” leaves to define the boundaries of each of these booklets. Interestingly, Conner also uses

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paleographical data, specifically the forms of ligatures, to determine the order in which these booklets were copied, with the middle booklet being first, the end booklet second, and the beginning booklet last.\(^4\)

Switching the third and final booklet to the front of the manuscript makes a great deal of sense when one considers the content and the skill with which the single scribe of the manuscript was practicing his craft at the time each booklet was being written. Regarding content, it is worth observing that a larger number of secular or potentially questionable texts would have occurred far earlier in the texts, while the staunchly religious, clearly instructive texts would have been moved to the end had the original order been maintained. Religious narratives such as *Azarias, The Phoenix,* and *Juliana* would have provided less of a buffer before the secular texts such as *The Wanderer* and *Widsith* occur, making it more likely for a reader who begins on the first page to come across a text that is not as immediately recognizable as a Christian poem in a manuscript being produced in a highly Christian context. Likewise, Conner observes that “The scribe exhibited his best penmanship in this codex in the first booklet.”\(^5\) By placing the last work in the front of the manuscript, the scribe is given the opportunity to learn and grow in the craft while simultaneously making the best work more visible (and associating the best work with the holiest subjects, as well).

Thus, although the first “booklet” contains only the first five poems of the *Exeter Book,* it also has been selected to be placed at the front of the manuscript, suggesting that those five poems are potentially more significant in the eyes of those who assembled the codex. Moreover, these five poems span 45 of the 123 leaves of poetry, meaning that the first “booklet” actually makes up 36.6 percent of the leaves of the manuscript, more than a

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\(^4\) Conner, *Anglo-Saxon Exeter,* 129.

\(^5\) Conner, *Anglo-Saxon Exeter,* 143.
full third of the content. As a result, although Conner’s first “booklet” is only one part of the larger manuscript, the evidence supports the argument that it is a significant, if not the most significant, section of the codex and therefore deserves consideration on its own merits.

Narrative

Another powerful reason to choose the first five poems of the Exeter Book as the subject of this study is the fact that all five, to various degrees, display narrative characteristics. Narrative, of course, is a powerful tool for the creation and dissemination of culture, and the stories we choose to tell (and the way we choose to tell them) speak to who we are, both as individuals and as members of broader cultures. In telling them we are able to pass along our thoughts, beliefs, and values to others who use that information to formulate their own understandings of who they are and the places they occupy in society and culture. Of course, the link between narrative and identity is readily observable in the twenty-first-century world we occupy: we have long used favorite books, TV shows, and movies as a shorthand way of describing our own personalities to strangers. Yet, in an age where everyone has a high-quality digital camera in their pockets, it is remarkable that a large population of individuals remains who use images of characters from television shows and movies as their profile pictures on social media platforms. Symbols from comic books and video games appear on the backs of cars. Indeed, references to stories from popular culture even appear on our bodies as more and more people get tattoos of images from these works to express their identities.

This usage of narrative to drive identity functions for groups, as well. Who we are as individuals is tied in various ways to the larger communities in which we are raised, with the most obvious modern example being that of our national identities. Children throughout the
world are taught from an early age about the political landscape, in terms of both formal study and informal social interactions. Schools, of course, often quite naturally present history in the form of a narrative, but the informal education that children receive simply by existing within the national community cannot be overlooked. One need only look to the story of young George Washington and the cherry tree to understand how stories simultaneously promote certain values among a specific population by appealing to national pride (“I cannot tell a lie” coming from the first president is as clear an appeal for his fellow Americans to do the same as it is a declaration of his own personal identity). Similarly, religious identity benefits from narrative, both as a method of instruction and as an intrinsic marker of the faith: Buddhists can look to stories about the life of the Buddha to learn wisdom from example, but they can also look to the way others have implemented this wisdom in order to better understand their place in the social structure. Similarly, those who follow polytheistic religions, such as Hinduism, can learn from stories of the gods who act not only as deities, but as manifestations of very human traits. It can be argued, however, that the Abrahamic religions are more directly shaped by narrative than any other religion, not only because each of these faiths describes itself (and, at times, the others) as “People of the Book,” but also because of the transformative power that narratives possessed between the faiths themselves. Christianity, for example, recognizes the histories and teachings of the Jewish tradition, but must break from those teachings in order to establish itself as significantly different while also retaining the connection to the history that provides the basis of Christian identity (one must think of the bumper sticker that declares “My boss is a

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6 Although many resources discuss the usage of the term, two of the most helpful in this case are David Lyle Jeffrey, People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996) and Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky and Shelley Fisher Fishkin, eds., People of the Book: Thirty Scholars Reflect on their Jewish Identity (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).
Jewish carpenter"). Islam, too, uses narrative to simultaneously identify with and differentiate itself from the other faiths, as in Muslim accounts of the religion’s early interactions with Christian kingdoms.

Narratives, then, are capable of operating as methods of expressing identity, but they require another element in order to fulfill their function as transmitters of culture and shapers of identity: not only must they provide insight into the people and events that shaped individuals and groups, they must also provide a link between the events depicted in the story and the audience who hears it. Returning to Washington’s youthful indiscretion, the story works because it is an amusing anecdote that not only depicts Washington as honest to his very core, but also because it helps create common ground between one of the most significant figures in American history and the people who live their lives in the very nation he helped create. After all, who cannot recall getting into some sort of trouble as a child? It is worth pointing out that, according to the official Mount Vernon website, this story also happens to be a fabrication by the biographer Mason Locke Weems designed to feed a public desire for knowledge about the General in the period shortly after his death. Regardless of the story’s veracity, its popularity and longevity speak to the culture that had grown up in the new United States and the values that the first President came to embody and encourage in the new nation. In other words, its audience latched onto the story not only because it provided an interesting (if apocryphal) view into a beloved public figure’s life, but also because it allowed that audience to identify with the young Washington, and thereby see more clearly what kind of place they occupied in American culture and what they wanted that culture to be.

If the ability of stories to transmit cultural information is dependent on the audience’s ability to connect or identify with the characters and events in the story, then the ability for audiences to be able to recognize their own experiences within a story is a powerful way to forge that identification. In the case of our Washington example, there are two objects of material culture: the hatchet and the cherry tree. Most members of the target audience for the original version of the story would have been intimately familiar with both, and though we may have strayed somewhat from the agricultural basis of Washington’s America, it is fair to say that most twenty-first-century readers still know at least a little about these objects. For instance, although chopping wood for a fire is no longer a daily task for most households in the United States, hatchets are still common enough to be available at hardware stores everywhere. Even individuals with the most urban background would be able to appreciate, when holding such a tool for the first time, the almost overwhelming desire to use it. On the other hand, although the fruit they bear is certainly no stranger to our tables, it is unlikely that the average American could identify a cherry tree while walking in the woods on a summer afternoon. Still, between the fruit and the distinctive reddish tint to the wood harvested from these trees, enough points of cultural contact still exist to be certain that most of those who hear the story today will know that something valuable has been damaged. Additionally, trees in general enjoy a great deal of positive association with most Americans, meaning that even if today’s audience for the story is unable to conjure a vision for a cherry tree specifically, the idea of harming a tree in general is sufficient to create a reaction. The result is that, through the inclusion of these objects in the story, audience members are immediately informed of a thousand small details that make the story more meaningful: the sound and smell of a hatchet cutting wood, the effort needed to repair the damage, or the cost if that damage cannot be undone, the reasoning behind young
Washington’s decision to cut at the tree, and the courage it took for him to own up to his actions. Each of these additional points are evoked by including common objects with which the audience would be familiar.

This same point about the importance of objects within narratives applies to the use of material objects in the religious narratives that the early English would have known. Despite the hundreds of years and thousands of miles that separate the British Isles from the Holy Land, common objects connected the characters within those stories (and the stories themselves) to early English audiences. From the Old Testament, the fruits that grew on the island were ready examples to stand in for the non-specific “fruit” of the Tree of Knowledge in the minds of the English, while ships and boats, certainly common sights on an island, would easily have served as templates for understanding what an Ark might have looked like. Similarly, from the New Testament, the early English would have readily recognized stables, mangers, loaves of bread, fish, water, and wine. Further, from the Passion specifically, scourges, crowns of thorns, spears, and (perhaps especially) the Cross itself would have made Christ’s suffering clearly understandable to early English audiences.

Thus, the material objects in any religious text have a great deal to offer for the purposes of understanding those who wrote it and those for whom it was written. One need only examine the use of material objects in specific texts, then, to access that understanding. In the religious narratives found in the Exeter Book, the inclusion of specific objects of material culture reveals a society that deeply valued order, structure, and social bonds, but simultaneously recognized that neither this world nor the people or things in it could offer

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8 According to Anne Hagen, who points to the documentary record as well as archaeological finds as evidence, the early English would have been familiar with tree-borne fruit such as peaches, pears, plums, cherries, and of course, apples. See Anne Hagen, *Anglo-Saxon Food and Drink: Production, Processing, Distribution and Consumption* (Hockwold cum Wilton: Anglo-Saxon Books, 2006), 57-59.
those values on a permanent basis. Although it has been clear to scholars for decades that the early English envisioned the afterlife in architectural terms, often describing heaven and what awaits the saved there in terms of Germanic halls, it is the significant use of material objects to delineate place and space in the afterlife that allows twenty-first-century readers to understand the subtle differences between this world, heaven, and hell in the minds of the pre-Conquest English.

Thus, to understand the use of material culture in the Exeter Book, one must first understand what “Material Culture” has come to mean in the number of different fields that employ the term and how those ideas intersect with the study of text, something that is indeed distant from the concrete material studied by archaeologists and historians. One must also categorize and evaluate the use of material objects that appear in the Exeter Book. This is a daunting task; although this study only concerns itself with the first five poems (The Advent Lyrics, The Ascension, Christ in Judgement, Guthlac A, and Guthlac B), those five works make up over one third of the text in the manuscript. With so much content to evaluate, it is not surprising to find references to many objects over a large number of categories, and indeed this study identifies 429 terms across 20 different categories. What is perhaps not as expected, however, is the way these terms seem to be distributed over the categories. While objects and stories are clearly related, one might expect religious objects to be among the most prevalent in the genre of religious narratives; strangely, although there are 25 occurrences of objects associated with religion across these texts, that translates to only a bit more than five and a half percent of the terms overall. Other terms one might expect to find in stories about religious subjects, such as objects associated with death, or even landscape, are equally small in number, with 16 and 25 occurrences for each, respectively, while some
others are almost rare, such as references to texts and books, which occur in these stories a mere four times.

On the other hand, several categories of objects would perhaps not be readily anticipated as being used often in the context of religious stories. While many of them are, indeed, rare (restraints, for example, only occur 7 times while objects related to storage and security are only used 6 times, making these occurrences only around 1.6 percent of the total references to material culture), others are more numerous. Examples of this include words associated with food and drink or with martial objects, such as weapons and armor, with 33 and 34 respective occurrences, or between 7.7 to 7.9 percent each. Additionally, words referring to objects of wealth, such as gold and gems appear 43 times, or precisely 10 percent of the total number of objects referenced in this subset of poems.

Methodology

The importance of categorization to our understanding of the world may best be described by a brief passage from Hermann Hesse’s novel *Narcissus and Goldmund*:

> For us, the men of science, nothing is as important as the establishment of differences; science is the art of differentiation. Discovering in every man that which distinguishes him from others is to know him.9

Indeed, differentiation is vital to the enterprise of study, a point perhaps even more true now than it was for Aristotle. Let us, then, begin our discussion of the texts by defining the ways in which this study will categorize its material culture.

It would be tempting to evaluate the material culture in the *Exeter Book* by categorizing according to the practices of archaeologists. After all, material culture, its study,

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and its organization is most clearly aligned with the field of archaeology, whose typical method of separating finds according to the most prevalent and significant constituent material certainly provides a useful framework for understanding:

Functional tasks depend upon physical characteristics of the artifact and these can be realized better in some materials than others. Making stone vessels for storage of liquids is not impossible but it takes substantially more labor to produce a vessel made from stone than a vessel made from clay. Or a projectile point made from clay will not have the physical characteristics needed for the point to penetrate and kill an animal. In brief, our initial classification by distinctive material categories reflects the fact that artisans made artifacts from materials that provide effectively the physical properties necessary for the tasks at hand. The material categories we use for the preliminary sorting of artifacts also happen to be materials that have these physical characteristics.  

Thus, classification according to “distinctive material” is a way to understand how individual creators of objects, and the cultures to which they belonged, navigated the tasks necessary for life and the objects that made those tasks easier. This is significant information: it provides an indication of the industries available to the object’s creators and, when taken into account alongside other finds, may give an even clearer picture of the economic and social forces at play in the location where the object was created, used, and ultimately consumed.

Unfortunately, however, the use of constituent materials to categorize physical finds poses a difficult problem for this study in that we will not be dealing with physical objects, but rather their linguistic echoes in poetry. A knife, for instance, may be made of stone, bronze, or steel, each with its own traits and each with a different story to tell. Similarly, a leather-bound book would be considered significantly different from a book with a limp vellum binding. When dealing with physical finds this approach makes perfect sense, but in

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the case of objects mentioned in poetry, we rarely get such explicit detail. We may learn that an object is made of gold, perhaps, but we are more often than not left with a brief and simple mention of an item for which the audience is left to supply those sorts of details for themselves.

What we need, then, is less of a scheme for categorization of things as they exist in physical space, and instead a way to organize objects using the kind of information that appears alongside them within texts. For instance, we may have no way to determine what material makeup the author had in mind when discussing an object mentioned in a poem, but we certainly have contextual information about the object: its purpose, its relationship to specific individuals and to people in general, its relationship to places or other words or objects, and even how the object might be used. This contextual information provides a more readily available basis for structuring a discussion when little or no information on such a physical artifact exists. Dwight Read’s discussion of this problem demonstrates the importance of recognizing the social dimension of objects when classifying them, suggesting that such a typology provides a way of humanizing artifacts and understanding the values that makers and users imposed upon them:

From this perspective, a typology is a special kind of classification consisting of types, where by a type we mean a class demonstrated to have cultural salience. By a typology we mean our organization of types in accordance with an underlying conceptual system (or systems) for the production of artifacts. In some cases, the arrangement may be intended to have an instrumental purpose such as dating of sites; more generally, it is a way to achieve the oft-stated goal of ‘archaeology as anthropology.’ A typology is thus a way to represent systematically the patterning imposed on artifact material by the makers and users that has subsequently been uncovered analytically by the archaeologist.  

11 Read, *Artifact Classification*, 22, original emphasis.
It is precisely this concept of “archaeology as anthropology” that archaeologists find so challenging, however. Indeed, Read, whose background is in mathematics, spends his entire book pursuing answers to questions he asks in his introduction: “How do we make evident the order imposed on the artifacts by their makers and users? How do we achieve concordance between our methods for artifact class formation and class assignment and the underlying processes that produced the order we are attempting to recover through artifact classification?” Similarly, it is difficult to justify any scheme of categorization for medieval objects that springs entirely from a modern understanding of those objects.

As we evaluate the material culture referenced in the *Exeter Book*, however, it is important to note that we are not examining objects themselves, but the idea of those objects as rendered by a medieval author and as intended for ready understanding by a medieval audience. Although this offers no explicit statement of the value of material objects within the early English culture, the fact that the text gives us direct access to the author’s thoughts and expectations considering these objects makes the application of typologies, if not necessarily less problematic, at least less removed. When archaeologists evaluate artifacts, they must also glean information from wherever other sources are available; in many cases, the place where the object is discovered, as well as the nature and number of objects that surround it, can tell us a great deal about the culture in question. Unfortunately, placement of artifacts within an excavation is often due, at least in part, to chance. A coin found in the bank of a river may tell us that there was traffic near that river and, depending on its condition, may even provide important evidence for the dating of that traffic. What archaeologists are not able to tell, however, is the reason for the coin being in the bank in the first place. Was it dropped into the water accidentally, or was there a purpose to its

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placement? Is this the only specimen, or were there others at the start? Did the coin enter the river near its place of discovery, or was it washed downstream (and if so, how far)? Literally hundreds of such questions may be asked about each artifact uncovered by archaeologists, but quite often, despite the fact that good arguments based on solid reasoning and evidence can be made, there is no way to be certain of any answers because the object itself is the only record.

The nature of text, however, is deliberate; nothing appears in a text that is recorded by accident, and quite often the reason for that choice can be discerned. That reason may be a point central to the meaning of the text, or it may simply be a part of a formula or function of metrical patterns, but one need never wonder how an object came to be where it is within a poem: it was always placed there by the decisive action of the author. Given that point, then, it is far easier to understand the cultural and social significance of objects mentioned within a poem because those objects were included in relationship with times, locations, individuals, other objects; even the words used to name and describe objects of material culture are placed in relationship with other words and ideas. Much like archaeologists, we can use information about where the object in question was found, its physical and textual proximity to similar finds, and the purpose for its inclusion at that point in the poem to help answer additional questions, such as what kind of cultural value such objects had for the author and the intended audience.

Categories of Material Culture

This deliberate nature of text provides the necessary connection between the object being discussed and the value it has in a cultural context in early English poetry, entirely because the connections that are lacking in archaeology are built into the literature. Because
we can look throughout the corpus to understand the way poets makes use of the word *hus* ("house"), we can look to any particular occurrence of that word and have a clear idea of how that term works. Although what the early English meant by *hus* may be somewhat unclear for modern audiences, we do know without a doubt that the early English used it to delineate a space for a particular purpose, be it to live in, to work in, or to spend eternity in.

By applying even such generalized common boundaries to the specific vocabulary of objects, we can examine the references to material culture throughout the *Exeter Book* and build an informed list of categories for the terms that are employed, or at least we can make better educated guesses about how these objects were used within early English culture with some freedom from the assumptions that we bring with us from our twenty-first-century understanding of medieval literature. The following list, assembled from terms found throughout the *Exeter Book*, provides a close manuscript context for each association.

**Ambiguous** terms are those that apply to objects not clearly part of material culture. The clearest example for this type of object is *giefn* ("gift"). Although gifts can certainly be physical things, most of the occurrences in the *Exeter Book* refer instead to those blessings of character or talent bestowed upon humanity. Such gifts are clearly not material culture, but the ambiguity can be used productively to compare material and non-material things within the literature.

**Communication** terms are those used to convey information over distances. Within the five poems studied here, such words only appear twice, and moreover they are the same word: *beacne* or *beacna* ("beacon"). They appear within 20 lines of each other in the first quarter of *Christ in Judgement* and are associated with a *rod* ("rood," "cross") in both instances, meaning that such words may be tied to ideas of religion and, perhaps, transportation or navigation.
**Death** as a category encompasses those objects used in association with the state of death, although not in the act of killing. These objects, such as the literal *byrgeorne* (“grave”) and the more metaphorical *deaðsele* (“death-hall”), appear in each of the five poems in this study, but are most numerous in *Guthlac B*, a poem about the death of the saint.

**Entertainment** terms reflect objects used in the pursuit of amusement. Musical instruments such as the *hearp* (“harp”) belong within this category, as do the various counters and dice used in games. These terms tend to appear more often in the Germanic/Heroic poems than the religious ones.

**Food/Drink** reflects both the food or drink itself, with such terms as *blæd* (“fruit”) and *blæf* (“loaf, bread”), and the objects used in its service or consumption, such as *bædeweg* (“cup”).

**Furniture** terms are associated with smaller structures used for sitting, lying down, and holding other objects. They can be made of multiple materials, including wood or stone, but are distinguished from the larger Structure category by being moveable and transportable, though they are often used as a symbol of authority, such as *heahsetle* (“high-seat”), or as a metaphor for a location.

**Garments** includes any objects worn on the body for a purpose other than defense or protection. It should be noted that clothing can be worn by angels as well as humans. They can be specific types of clothing, but the terms encountered in the first five poems of the *Exeter Book*, such as *hræglum* (“raiment”) and *claþum* (“clothes”), are general.

**Landscape** is a category that can be tricky to determine, as is demonstrated by the word *beorg* (“hill/barrow”) in *Guthlac A*. The difference between nature and material culture can be difficult to discern when the text is vague and no material clues appear at all, so care must be taken to ensure the terms are evaluated correctly.
Martial objects are associated with battle and can be either offensive or defensive in nature. This category will include terms like *bord* (‘shield’), *gar* (‘spear’), *sweord* (‘sword’), and *wapnum* (‘weapons’) and is among the more common types throughout the manuscript.

Material terms refer to the raw material that makes up a thing, from *gold* to *wudu* (“wood”) to *stan* (“stone”); this kind of material is often used as an adjective as well as a noun, but still evokes the culture surrounding such matter.

Municipal is a category that actually represents a collection of other, smaller objects of other types. A *burg* (“city”) is itself made up of Structures and the people who dwell in it, but as it is a physical thing that has been created by human culture, there is no doubt that it is an appropriate inclusion on this list.

Plant terms can be equally complicated, although a poem’s context often provides the clarification needed to make a determination. Words like *sæd* (‘seed’), for instance, carry a clear crop connotation, even when the seed being discussed actually concerns animal fertility.

Religion as a category reflects objects used in religious rites or that represent the relationship between the mortal and the divine. Terms in this category often occur in conjunction with another type, as is the case with *tempel* (“temple”), which is a religious structure, but the category can also be applied independently, as in the word *hergas* (“idols”).

Restraint words are common enough throughout the *Exeter Book* that they deserve their own category, indicating the powerful concern that the early English had for being captured and subjected to such treatment. Terms like *teagum* (“fetters”) and *clommum* (“chains”) can be classified as restraints if they are used to bind a living subject; objects that are used to secure or restrain another object would belong in the next category.
Storage/Security words are often used to describe securable containers of some sort, be they literal or, quite often, figurative; the formulaic compounds wordbord (“wordhoard”) and breastoja (“breast-coffer”) both rely on the image of a collection being closed away in a container, whereas some words, such as cluster ("lock"), are merely the means by which that security is realized.

Structure represents by far the largest group of words in the first booklet of the manuscript. These objects are defined by the fact that they are constructed in place and remain in a single location. The most common form of Structure is a building, but other constructed objects, such as the cross that Guthlac raises in his new hermitage, should also be understood as a type of Structure, as should free-standing structures such as a weall (“wall”) and parts of larger assemblies, such as beldore (“hell-doors”) or geblidu (“roof”).

Text terms are defined by the fact that their value derives from the written word. The most obvious example would be boc (“book”), though other objects used to transmit written text would also apply.

Tool is another broad category that encapsulates any object used primarily to accomplish a specific task that is not martial in nature. As a result, examples can range from ancrum (“anchors”) and naglum (“nails”) to flintum (“flints”) and even objects that one might not readily categorize as tools, such as brond (“brand, torch”) and condel (“candle”). This breadth makes this category apt for metaphors, such as heofoncondelle (“candle of heaven, the sun”).

Transport references objects used in the moving of individuals from place to place. Thus, ceolum (“ships”) are an obvious connection here, but it is worth pointing out that certain Structures, such as a hyde (“harbor”), also fit here. There is also no inherently maritime connotation here; a land-based form of non-animal transport, such as a cart, would
fit into this category if one were present in the text. In terms of this study, the vast majority of these terms occur in *The Ascension* and *Guthlac B*.

**Wealth** as a category for material culture is also broad. Terms in this category include general objects of value, such as *gestreona* (“treasures”), as well as specific types, such as *gemma* (“gems”), and even gold, which also belongs with the Material category. Although these objects may be useful, such as a torc that can be worn, many have no clear use at all.

Although each of these terminology types occurs within the *Exeter Book*, some may only occur a handful of times, and some may not occur at all within the first booklet that is the subject of this study. Observing which kinds of terms are present and which are absent is also useful in helping us understand how the early English used such terms, even if only by reinforcing clear points of disassociation. Their place within different genres and settings is also instructive.

The Road Ahead

This dissertation examines the idea of material culture in its first chapter. From the most general idea of what “material culture” actually means, and in what contexts those meanings apply, we will examine why things are important to the various academic disciplines that use them and how those disciplines approach the problem of understanding the role of objects within their field. From there, we can apply what we have learned to the study of literature, working back from the place material culture occupies in the modern world to its place in the worlds of the past, tracing its development back through the Middle English period and finally into the realm of Old English.

From there, we begin to examine the first of the two major groups of poems from the *Exeter Book*, the *Christ* poems. Chapter Two looks at patterns in the occurrence of
references to material culture within the *Advent Lyrics*, *The Ascension*, and *Christ in Judgement* in order to establish common thematic uses for these terms, but also examines other ways in which material culture operates within the *Book*, including as an element of structure within and between the poems to act simultaneously as a unifying force and a method of demarcating beginnings and endings. These uses all seem to underscore the primary argument made by these texts: The material world is not to be trusted and should instead be disregarded in favor of the world to come.

Chapter Three looks at the remaining two poems in the first “booklet,” *Guthlac A* and *B*, closely examining these tales of a hermit in order to more broadly and precisely engage with this central idea. To do so, we must look to the most common category of object throughout the poems in this study, Structure words, and the way they are presented within the realms of heaven, earth, and hell. Moreover, the idea of what the material world is and what it means to become overly attached to it is interrogated in the light of the saint himself, as well as others with whom he interacts.

Finally, Chapter Four turns from the texts contained within the *Exeter Book* to examine the physical object itself and the importance of its physical form. Closely studying its known history and its changing roles in the community at Exeter Cathedral, we can look to how its physical makeup ties into the central argument against material culture, as well as the ways in which we can access the information that it contains outside of the simple text. We will look at the role of technology in providing access to the manuscript’s most important facets while simultaneously protecting it for future scholars and discuss at what point facsimiles will ultimately eliminate the need to access the original. This chapter also discusses the importance of features that intersect with the text in no discernable way, such as the residue of gold leaf left on the leaves of the manuscript.
Although this dissertation only examines the text contained in roughly the first third of the *Exeter Book*, it is significant for multiple reasons. Not only is this study the first attempt to examine the way material culture as a general concept has been handled within the text of the *Exeter Book*, it is the beginning of a larger study that will eventually address the use of objects within the entire manuscript. This work represents a new way to look through the poetry to see the world as the early English not only would have experienced it, but how they would have understood it and approached it. Their appreciation of the power of the material world, which they had shaped as much as it had shaped them, and the dangers it possessed permeates the first five poems, and gives a strong indication of the attitudes towards material culture for which the *Book* advocates.
Chapter 1: The Study of Material Culture

In 1977, John Chavis published a short article titled “The Artifact and the Study of History” in which he sought “to examine the nature of the conflict between the history museum curator and the academic historian, the historical artifact and the historical document. The two foremost questions to be considered are: Can the artifact serve as an historical source? And, if so, how?”¹ From there, Chavis proceeds not only to discuss the “conflict” itself, but also to provide at least a small level of perspective by pointing out arguments made for either side in the 1950s: William B. Hesseltine,² a professor of history at the University of Wisconsin, who argued that objects are not useful by themselves in the study of history; and E. McClung Fleming,³ the Dean of the Education Program at the Henry Francis DuPont Winterthur Museum, who conceded that objects must be studied carefully, but added that they can be useful to historians, and, in fact, they can answer questions that texts alone cannot. Ultimately, however, Chavis, who was himself a museum curator, was never able to answer his own questions. Indeed, in the space of the brief article he barely had an opportunity to describe what would need to be done in order to bring historians around to his way of thinking:

If history museums are to attract the academic historian and receive the acceptance they so hungrily desire, the curators in these museums are going to have to spell out in detail the techniques for the study of the artifact, the ways in which the artifact can be used by the academic historian, and the questions which can be asked, for surely, the questions which can be properly asked are determined by the answers the historical object can give.

The difficulty for readers in the early twenty-first century, of course, is not that Chavis never managed to accomplish his stated goal, but that no other scholar seems to have managed to do so, either. More than forty years after this article was published, and more than half a century after the publication of his cited material, scholars of numerous disciplines and schools of thought continue to struggle with the role of physical objects in academic study, as evidence not just for the historian, but also for the anthropologist, the sociologist, and even the student of literature. Despite the enthusiasm of scholars, especially in the past twenty years, for what has come to be called “material culture,” a gap remains between the way scholars use evidence provided by texts and evidence supplied by surviving artifacts.

I do not seek to put Chavis’s large and long-standing question to bed; instead, my purpose is to examine the function of material culture in a single collection of poetry: the *Exeter Book*. As such, I will begin defining the term “material culture” and clarifying its study in the context of literature by evaluating what “material culture” and “material culture studies” mean in other disciplines. From there, I will outline the scholarly debate that exists between material and textual culture and the contexts in which these two sources of evidence may be at odds (and where each provides useful corroboration for the other). Most importantly, I will discuss how we can use surviving artifacts from the distant past to inform our understanding of facets of early English culture, especially the day-to-day elements that are often not reflected in the textual record.

In the third section of this chapter, I will turn my attention to the archaeological record and present a brief overview of the kind of material objects that remain from our early English predecessors. Although relatively little survives from pre-Conquest England, the small samples we have may be taken as an indication of what was possible, if not what was popular, and reveal a great deal: knowing the kinds of objects, and indeed the kinds of
materials, that have left remains provides us with solid footing upon which we can begin other work. The fourth and final section of this chapter will discuss the existing scholarship concerning the material culture within early English literature. The massive body of work that ties great works of imaginative poetry like *Beowulf* to amazing real-world archaeological discoveries like those at Sutton Hoo is clearly important to this discussion, but other works, like Rosemary Cramp’s voluminous record of the excavation of the abbeys of Wearmouth and Jarrow, are equally vital, as it provides a broader context in which we can situate the material world of pre-Conquest England. This section will conclude with a short survey of the recent scholarship surrounding Exeter, Dean and Chapter Library, MS 3501 and its long and sometimes hazardous existence as a part of Exeter Cathedral’s holdings.


A great deal of confusion exists in most scholarly quarters concerning the nature of material culture and what it means to “do” material culture. Henry Glassie, in his volume *Material Culture*, distills the central issue behind the term by saying:

> Material Culture is the conventional name for the tangible yield of human conduct. It is an odd term, material culture, for culture is immaterial. Culture is pattern in mind, inward, invisible, and shifting. Material things—red wheelbarrows, for instance—stand solidly out there in the world. But I have become accustomed to the term over time, and I even find virtue in its ungainly conjunction of the abstract and the concrete, for it cautions us to recall that we can know about culture only as it cycles in flashes and scraps through the sensate. We have things to study, and we must record them dutifully and examine them lovingly if the abstraction called culture is to be compassed, if the striving of the human actor is to be met with fellow feeling.⁴

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While Glassie is correct to say that we have an obligation to study it if we are to understand ourselves, the question of what it is we study, and even the tools we use to do so, remains difficult to answer.

It is no mere platitude to say that the answer to these challenging questions depends greatly on whom one asks. In fact, there is a great deal to be said about the fact that material culture and its study are defined, in many important ways, by the number of different, and at times opposing, meanings the terms invoke. Indeed, every discipline that uses the term “material culture” has a different understanding of it, often creating confusion in cross-disciplinary pursuits. Some, like Christopher Tilley, have staunchly resisted any attempt to understand the study of material culture in terms of disciplines at all, writing that “[a]ny distinction between matters ‘sociological’, ‘anthropological’, ‘philosophical’, ‘archaeological’, ‘psychological’ or ‘literary’ is arbitrary and unhelpful.”5 Still, it has become clear that, in some disciplines, the approach to material culture and its study is more than slightly influenced by other prevalent methodologies; it is just as clear that others approach the problem with tools gathered from other disciplines, selected and used in order to accomplish a discipline-specific end. This multifaceted nature is discussed at some length by Dan Hicks, both in the introduction to the Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies6 and in his chapter “The Material-Cultural Turn: Event and Effect”7 in the same volume. He states that those who study history, for example, consider objects of material culture as “‘alternative sources’ that can complement documentary materials in answering the questions posed by economic history and social theory,” whereas geographers are more interested in the way material

objects help to define and build relationships within space; sociological applications of material culture, on the other hand, focus on social relationships and their wider implications in the studies of consumerism and consumption, among others, whereas cultural studies seeks to make the connection between the way cultural identity is shaped by objects and the objects themselves. For Hicks, however, material culture is most clearly understood through the lenses of archaeology and historical anthropology, or at least disciplines that can be considered “field sciences”:

I must underline that I understand this to be the central contribution of the ‘field sciences’ of archaeology, anthropology, geography, and STS. We are united in having distinctive ways of putting methods into practice in order to enact the world. That is how we make knowledge: things emerge from our practices in precisely the same way they do through the vernacular practices of humans, or lives of things, that we study.

Thus, Hicks agrees with Tilley that material culture studies is indivisible from the multidisciplinary approach. Indeed, he spends a great deal of the rather hefty chapter making the argument that things—both material and nonmaterial—exist both as events and as effects, eventually concluding that material culture and its study should be considered in precisely the way that most disciplines have been avoiding:

The argument takes unfolding of the idea of ‘material culture’ in precisely the opposite direction from the phenomenological critique, which seeks to avoid ‘a tendency to ontologise the status of material evidence’ by comprehending ‘culture as a practice’ (J. S. Thomas 2007: 11), towards acknowledging the contingency of our knowledge of the world upon situated material practices that derive from distinctive disciplinary methods and traditions, rather than representing a particular brand of social theory.

Thus, for Hicks, material culture studies is not simply a one-dimensional general approach to understanding the material world around us, but an experience as diverse as the disciplines

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9 “Science and Technology Studies” (STS).
that study it, and perhaps as individual as those who create it; it is a study that requires action (and interaction), not just thought.

What, however, is material culture itself? Glassie’s definition, “the tangible yield of human conduct,” is a serviceable one, but it does little to refine the notion that material culture is simply “stuff.” Clearly, those things we create should belong to this group, as should those things we substantially change in order to fit our needs; an example here might be a piece of jewelry, as well as the cut and polished precious stone used as its centerpiece. Those things we simply use should also be considered material culture, as long as the use is significant. Using a rock by a riverside to dry one’s clothes is of limited value, but a rock that is used thus by many people over a long period of time certainly makes the rock an important piece of material culture. Finally, things that are consumed or destroyed by human action are both used and transformed by human action. Food and drink have cultural value, as does firewood. Inversely, a hornet’s nest, while being an object, is negatively valued and disposed of when discovered, especially near dwellings and other centers of human activity.

It should be noted that everything we can touch or see is, indeed, altered to some degree by “human conduct,” but it is less than useful to argue that a boulder in a remote location, touched once by a human hand, could be understood as material culture because of the subtle alterations of erosion or the deposit of fingerprints. On the other hand, it is important to understand that something as broad as landscape can, and often must, be understood as material culture: a tree planted in a particular location several hundred years ago has the opportunity over the centuries not only to grow, reproduce, affect its immediate environment, and die, but also to shape natural processes like erosion and weather, and to do so over time.
For the purposes of the discussion below, material culture should be understood as anything humanity creates, substantially changes, uses, consumes, or destroys. A flower in a field is a natural phenomenon, but a flower in a vase is material culture. A tree can grow without the intervention of human hands, but when it is cut down, any products of that action, including the remaining stump, the fire it feeds (as well as the ashes that fire creates), the house it builds, and the space it alters in the forest are all material culture. The results of human activity may not always be easy to identify, of course: a burial mound will transform, over centuries, into a hill that common observers may mistake for a natural feature of the landscape. Still, what can be seen can lead us to tremendous discoveries about our past and present, so long as we take the opportunity to look.

Material Culture Across the Disciplines

Let us begin our consideration of the disciplinary approaches to material culture studies, then, by looking at archaeology. The above-mentioned focus on individuality and diversity in the scholarship is striking, but it is therefore no surprise to find that the theme of identity and the individual is echoed through much of the archaeological literature. From Patricia L. Crown’s use of pottery as a means to discuss anthropologists’ and archaeologists’ assumptions about individuals and production models\(^\text{12}\) to A. Bernard Knapp and Peter van Dommelen’s well-reasoned discussion of how far the idea of identity can be correctly assumed with regard to the distant past\(^\text{13}\) (is it, for instance, merely a modern construct that has been thrust anachronistically on the past?), it is clear that the very idea of individuality and identity is at the heart of the general archaeological conversation. More specifically,


Peter S. Wells has argued that something as central as “[t]he essence of the issue of identity in prehistoric archaeology is the question, How did people use their material culture to define themselves as individuals, both in relation to other individuals and in relation to social groups?”14 This assertion, of course, makes clear that material culture creates relationships between individuals, setting one apart from the other while simultaneously providing a common ground between them (individual garments may be customized for their particular wearer, but the style of those garments is often reflected in the society as a whole). It also establishes that material culture is used to accomplish the same ends on a larger scale, as between individuals and groups (as when a member of a society rejects the accepted style and wears garments that do not adhere to the group’s common fashions) or even between groups (styles of garment often differ widely between societies).

If something as internal as the identity of an individual can be expressed or influenced by external material objects, it is also worth mentioning the work being done regarding the “internal” makeup of objects themselves. Of course, a significant amount of the work in the field of archaeology focuses on the manufacture and construction of artifacts, most commonly in fields of historical archaeology where documentary evidence is relatively scarce. For instance, a large body of scholarship examines the chemical makeup of artifacts in order to determine their origin, from the work of Webb et al. using lead isotopes to determine the non-Cypriot origin of a number of Bronze-age artifacts found in Cyprus15 to the article by Mameli et al. providing the first evidence of an ironworks in the region of Sardinia, Italy, and using chemical analysis to determine the origin of the ore used there as

local. More recently, however, researchers have examined the cultural impact of compositional materials, as well. Linda M. Hurcombe’s *Archaeological Artefacts as Material Culture* is a remarkable example of the examination of objects intersecting with the materials of which they are made, engaging with the materials that make up material culture and opening the door for the discussion of how the matter that makes up objects helps create significance and meaning. More important to the discussion at hand, however, are a number of recent volumes that have focused on materials available to the early English, from leather and fur to wood and timber to metals.

If archaeology can be used to answer questions about identity and culture, however, it must rely on the corpus of objects that have been located, studied, and cataloged, where artifacts can be analyzed and compared with other artifacts. This is, in some ways, a difficult position for the student of early English literature who also wishes to consider the question of material culture. Unlike the archaeologist or anthropologist, we have no vast and varied catalog of physical items to consider. Instead, our concerns for actual objects lie mostly with the manuscripts that contain the texts we study. There is certainly no shortage of recent scholarship that adheres to the principles of what has become known as the “Back to the Manuscript” movement, and scholars like Kevin Kiernan have made entire, celebrated

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careers by studying the artifacts that contain the Old English literary corpus. Still, so few manuscripts from early England exist that it is difficult to draw any meaningful, or at least statistically significant, conclusions about relationships between the texts and the objects chosen to “contain” them. Other objects, such as the Ruthwell Monument and the Franks Casket, were also used to transmit texts, but these literary objects are rarer still, making any large-scale archaeology-style study of such relationships nearly impossible.

Similarly, we are unable to consider questions of relationships, either between people and objects of material culture, between objects and other objects, or even between people and other people, if those questions do not arise from an evaluation of words written on the page. Geographers, for example, may study the areas surrounding an object or monument, describing the impact that the landscape may have had on its creation, usage, or ultimate destruction, or they may look at how objects and their use are shaping human use of geographical and natural features. One recent study, for example, looked at the objects used to transport water in the semi-arid nation of Niger, and the place that these objects occupy in the culture of its capital, Niamey, including their associations with gender roles and socio-economic status. In so doing, however, geographers must involve a large number of objects and object types in a necessarily complex web of relationships, including politics, economics, psychology, technology, and environment. So varied are the geographical studies of material culture, in fact, that Ian Cook and Divya P. Tolia-Kelly argue in their survey of the field “that there never has been, nor is there now, a coherent approach to materiality in geography,” a fragmentation that has resulted in “attention to—and language of—

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21 The Ruthwell monument has been inscribed with lines from The Dream of the Rood in runic letters, while the Franks Casket features a riddle about the casket itself, including the answer to the riddle: whalebone.  
‘liveliness’, ‘corporeality’, ‘affect’, ‘material capacities’, ‘animation’, ‘co-fabrication’, and ‘practice’,” as well as discussion of geography’s “de-materialization” and “re-materialization.” Thus, if geography can be said to have its own approach to the study of material culture, it is one of bringing the techniques and points of view of other disciplines into focus on a single location, placing all of the numerous factors into context with one another in order to better understand their interplay with the people and the place being studied.

The social sciences, too, have begun to develop their own approaches to the study of material culture, although that development has been slow in comparison to other fields. In 1999, Michael Brian Schiffer described the situation succinctly when he noted that articles concerning material culture or technology made up less than one percent of the contents of the major journals in these fields from 1986 through 1995. This delay is perhaps surprising: terms like “status symbol” have been bandied about for decades, and even the growing concern about the overmaterialization of American society and the popular alarm about what toys teach our children make clear that material culture has been a part of our understanding of how individuals and society operate for a very long time. Indeed, to fully comprehend how important material culture is to the social sciences, one need only note that many consider the very symbol of psychology itself to be a leather couch.

There have been a number of important developments with regards to material culture in the field of anthropology, but perhaps the most influential is the argument made

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25 See Arthur Asa Berger, Reading Matter (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction, 1992), 73-84, for a more complete and tremendously accessible discussion of the various ways in which objects can intersect with society, complete with a number of excellent examples.
by Claude Lévi-Strauss in *The Way of the Masks*. Published originally in the late 1970s and translated into English in 1982, the text is a case study of the use of a particular type of mask among the native peoples of the Pacific Northwest. In his book, Lévi-Strauss demonstrates that the Swaihwé, a mask “peculiar to a dozen Indian groups, members of the Salish linguistic family,” simultaneously displays consistent recognizable physical (plastic) features and consistent social functions across numerous iterations made by various groups in several locations: Salish Swaihwé masks possess predominantly white markings, eyes with protruding, peg-like pupils, a nose formed from a bird’s head, bird heads protruding from the forehead, a tongue protruding from its mouth, and a straight, almost rectangular jaw or chin, and they function to bring wealth and luck in social situations. Among a neighboring people, the Kwakiutl, however, the same mask, with the same plastic features (and, allowing for linguistic differences, the same name: Xwéxwé), possesses the opposite function, whereas the mask that possesses the Swaihwé’s function is its stylistic opposite, with dark markings, holes for pupils, a smooth forehead and “human” nose, lips pursed in an “o,” and a rounded chin or jaw. Based on these observations of material objects, Lévi-Strauss argues that beings as different in appearance as the Salish Swaihwé and the Kwakiutl Dzonokwa, which no one would have dreamed of comparing, cannot be interpreted each for itself and considered in isolation. They are parts of a system within which they transform each other. As is the case with myths, the masks (with their origin myths and the rites in which they appear) become intelligible only through the relationships that unite them. The white color of the Swaihwé trimmings, the black color of the Dzonokwa mask, the protruding eyes of the one versus the concave eyes of the other, the lolling tongue and the pursed mouth, all these traits mean less in and of themselves than they do as, one might say, diacritical signs.  

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As such, Lévi-Strauss shows that culture and material objects are inseparable, that they cannot be properly understood without placing them within the context of the social structures attached to them, and indeed within the context of the other objects that form a necessary part of those larger structures.

From this, work in the field of structural anthropology has focused on what Christopher Tilley calls “the delimitation of determinate historical contextually situated structures,” which “has involved regarding material culture as a significative system forming a communicative ‘text’, structured in a manner analogous to a language, to be ‘read’ by the archaeologist.”28 Perhaps more to the point, however, is that students of material culture began spending less time understanding the “texts” themselves and set about discussing the “language” they fit into. Igor Kopytoff, for instance, used the institution of slavery to explore the mechanism by which raw resources (including people) become commodities.29 Jacques Maquet made the “language” connection even more explicit by arguing that “Meanings are not inherent to the object (as instrumentality is) or ascribed by the designer (as the meaning of a message is ascribed by the sender): They are given by the group of people to whom the object is relevant.”30 In turn, Maquet’s point has been carried into specialized contexts, such as Sharon Brookshaw’s consideration of children and the objects related to childhood within the specific context of museums.31

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Sociology, too, has seen some publication in the area, although again at a slower pace than other disciplines; as Tim Dant wrote in 1999, “sociology needs to begin to attend to the ways in which interaction with objects is part and parcel with the social interaction which gives rise to social forms.” In 2006, he seemed to have found at least the beginnings of an answer, when he argued that Fernand Braudel’s term “material civilization” could be used to assemble the discussions on objects from other disciplines, notably anthropology, history, and “the sociology of consumption.” He also goes on to discuss the concepts of “material capital” (objects’ value derives from “their origins in production, from their meanings in consumption, from their practical use in everyday life, [and] from the networks associated with their emergence as technical entities”) and “material interaction” (what he defines as “the concrete relationships between people and things”). He then concludes that the result of modern material civilization is a society built, not on interactions with other people, but on our interaction with the things that society has created and placed around us, implicitly drawing a clear line between the world we inhabit and the world that our pre-material-civilization ancestors would have recognized.

Although there has been at least some additional sociological research on the subject of material objects, such as Will Gibson’s exploration of the way that objects “embody” culture through a careful examination of musical instruments and the jazz musicians who play them and Diana Crane and Laura Bovone’s multifaceted analysis of the creation of social and symbolic value in the fashion industry, the vast majority of such research is

34 Dant, “Material Civilization,” 299-300.
concerned not with material culture *per se*. Instead, the majority of this scholarship seems to focus on the impact of materialism on class struggles. In 2001, Dieter Bögenhold examined the impact of “life style research,” concluding that elements of material culture such as clothing intersect with socio-cultural issues of stratification and that more should be done to study the unequal material distribution related to stratification. In the same year, Floya Anthias attempted to realign the “symbolic” stratifications of gender and ethnicity with the “material” stratifications caused by class difference, essentially reimagining the latter two as factors with their own resources, allowing her to more effectively come to terms with the numerous factors that contribute to social stratification. Anthias’s strange twist, then, is at least one scholar’s attempt to adjust the social value of strictly non-material social constructions, which have been the traditional focus of such studies, to align more closely with the material in order to explain more clearly the workings of social stratification.

The most radical shift in the realm of the social sciences, however, has been the emergence of so-called “material agency” scholarship, which, although often misunderstood and oversimplified, nonetheless still argues that the inanimate objects with which we surround ourselves do, indeed, have agency. Andrew M. Jones and Nicole Boivin provide an excellent, although brief, history of this line of thinking, identifying common interactions with objects such as refusing to watch a kettle of water in order to make it boil faster or speaking to a misbehaving piece of technology as only part of what it means for us to understand objects as having a will and the ability to act on their own. Using Anthony Giddens’ basic criterion of agency—that agents act, and through those actions reproduce the

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circumstances through which those actions can be made—they turn to anthropological concepts such as animism and fetishism, which posit different degrees of “life force” imbued within objects, as well as the more traditional western anthropological and archaeological position that any meaning residing in an object is there due to human interaction, not some “spirit” within the object. They then use this position to interrogate the idea of agency itself, calling for a clearer distinction between human agency and material agency and the performative nature of materiality itself.\textsuperscript{39}

One specific field of theoretical inquiry that involves the agency of inanimate objects is Thing Theory, mainly championed by Bill Brown. In essence, Brown sees “objects” as the things that function as they should, both in individual instances and in societal ones. “Things,” on the other hand, are what objects become when they cease to function:

As they circulate through our lives, we look through objects (to see what they disclose about history, society, nature, or culture—above all, what they disclose about \textit{us}), but we only catch a glimpse of things. We look through objects because there are codes by which our interpretive attention makes them meaningful, because there is a discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them as facts. A \textit{thing}, in contrast, can hardly function as a window. We begin to confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy, when their flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition, has been arrested, however momentarily.\textsuperscript{40}

Such a distinction is useful, at least to some degree, because it allows us to acknowledge what material culture is: an object that is defined by the way humans use it. Brown’s argument, then, becomes about the ways in which objects interact with our consciousness and actions, even as inanimate constructs, and how society shapes those interactions.


If objects, like people, have agency, though, how does one distinguish between the two? One of the most influential responses to that question comes in the form of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), an anthropological theory that seeks to replace the idea that there are basic differences between people and things with the understanding that people and things are inextricably enmeshed. This broad network of objects and individuals forces agency to reside not in the members of the network, but within the relationships between them, creating a system in which a mechanical part, such as a pump, can act, just as a person can. Bruno Latour’s *Aramis, or the Love of Technology* is widely regarded as the best case study illustration of ANT’s principles, examining how various political, technological, and social factors came together to cause the eventual downfall of a revolutionary mass transit project in 1970s and 1980s Paris. From these principles, a large body of scholarship has developed, from its application in the development of large-scale telecommunications systems to its influence on the collection practices of museums.

Approaching material culture from the perspective of the social sciences has obvious value, but it is also clear that, once more, literary studies cannot base its approach to the subject on any one of these values or methodologies alone. Although evidence exists for specific manuscripts and their provenance, we have no reliable way of studying how widely the texts contained within them were disseminated, nor in what form. Also, unless a record of the text’s reception happens to survive (as is the case with some of Ælfric’s letters), we have no way of knowing what value the text had among those who read/heard it and how it

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functioned within the society as a whole. While literary scholars may be able to use some of these ideas to enhance what we learn about objects that contain texts, objects as texts, and objects rendered within texts, we must look elsewhere to create a primary form of analysis.

So far, although each discipline has had its own reasons for examining material objects and their relationships with people, the lines between the disciplines and their approaches have been less than clear. This is due, at least in part, to the inseparable nature of the subject that Hicks described: to study how humans use objects to create identity (as an example) is both an anthropological and a sociological concern, and that study, when made broad enough, certainly impacts the work of geography, as well. Likewise, sociologists’ inquiries into the impact of objects on social stratification must, in turn, deal with economics. The study of the psychology of material culture, however, tends to focus less on larger systems and more on the observable interactions between people and things. Eminent psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, for instance, has commented on the relationship between individuals and objects, arguing that objects have an evolution of their own, driven (but not necessarily controlled) by their creators:

We like to think that because objects are human-made they must be under our control. However, this is not necessarily the case. An object with a specific form and function inevitably suggests the next incarnation of that object, which then almost certainly will come about. For instance, the first crude stone missile begat the spear, which begat the arrow and then the bolt, the bullet, and so on to Star Wars. Human volition seems to have less to do with the development than do the potentialities inherent in the objects themselves.\(^4\)

Ultimately, Csikszentmihalyi’s point, that objects “these days do not make life better in any material sense but instead serve to stabilize and order the mind,” strangely echoes the

Thoreauvian argument that the railroad rides on us. Interestingly, however, it should be noted that the evolution of objects is not simply driven by a static humanity; research in evolutionary psychology also indicates that objects have driven human evolution. Ben Jeffares, for instance, argues that the need to care for ever-increasingly complex and valuable tools led to the practice of altering our environment in order to make everyday tasks easier, in turn shaping the way that we think as a species, and Nicole Boivin dedicates an entire chapter to technology’s influence on human evolution in her monograph *Material Cultures, Material Minds.*

Additionally, enough work has been done on the subject of material culture and its influence on memory that it should be mentioned here. One of the most important functions of objects, of course, is as a trigger for memory; one need look no further than the words “memorabilia” and “souvenir” to understand that objects have such a function. Andrew Jones, however, has argued that objects, along with actions that involve them, also act as a way of transferring memory into group consciousness:

> Remembrance is in part produced by the nature and drama of action. Here material culture acts as a means of embodying the past and presenting the future. As material citations, these practices are doubly effective: they serve to reiterate past practices, and they do so because of the sensually and dramatically spectacular nature of the ritual. However, these ritual actions are also directed towards future moments of remembrance. The effectiveness of the performance will be judged on how well it is remembered by both initiates and audience alike. To ensure that this is the case, sensually

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45 “If we do not get out sleepers, and forge rails, and devote days and nights to the work, but go to tinkering upon our lives to improve them, who will build railroads? And if railroads are not built, how shall we get to heaven in season? But if we stay at home and mind our business, who will want railroads?” *Walden: A Fully Annotated Edition*, ed. Jeffrey S. Cramer (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), 89-90.


spectacular objects are employed as a dramatic and repetitious sequence of activities.\textsuperscript{48}

Thus, objects are used to encode memories, both in the present and the future, for groups as well as individuals. These objects can even contain the encoded memories themselves, as a stone with words carved upon it, although scholars such as Marius Kwint have argued against understanding such methods as “storing” memory, instead positing that such records evoke remembrance, a process that may transfer some information, but can never faithfully reproduce everything that such an object would have represented to the one who encoded information on it in the first place.\textsuperscript{49}

Even on these connections and observations, though, the student of literature cannot be entirely dependent. The internal connections with objects that individuals feel and use make up a large part of the force that drives the creation of literary texts, and they contribute to the shaping of those texts. Yet, literary texts are complex things that incorporate more than the author’s views on (and shaped by) objects. Literature is also self-referential, assembling a web of textual as well as material and cultural influences: if, as the saying goes, all books are about other books, then we must understand that those books contain texts that are indeed about other texts, but those texts are also about other physical objects, other bound collections of paper marked with ink. Umberto Eco’s \textit{The Name of the Rose} is, after all, a book about, among other things, a lost book of Aristotle, which is simultaneously a text which has disappeared over the centuries and a physical object, rendered by Eco as a bound volume in a monastery library, destined to cause death and destruction for the community that holds it. In order to grasp the significance of Eco’s

\textsuperscript{48} Andrew Jones, \textit{Memory and Material Culture} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 63.
novel, then, we must not only understand the culture surrounding the Aristotelian text, but medieval thought about those texts, medieval thoughts about the books in which they were recorded, and the modern understanding of all of that, as well. It is clear that the individual, while significant in the study of material culture, cannot be the only force at play in the creation and understanding of objects and their use in literary works. Again, we must look elsewhere.

Finally, we must consider the use of material culture in the study of history. As we learned earlier in the case of Chavis’s article, historians have long made use of material culture, mostly as a corroborative source, only turning to archaeological and material evidence when no documentary evidence might be found, a point that Verity Fisher made succinctly: “It is assumed that history can explain the past, and that archaeology can merely illustrate it.”50 Indeed, even in works that purport to deal with the material culture in the context of history, we find that written records are given precedence over material evidence, often in what appear to be unintentional ways. In the introduction to her study Wild Frenchmen and Frenchified Indians: Material Culture and Race in Colonial Louisiana, Sophie White provides an example of the culture she intends to examine:

In eighteenth-century French colonial Louisiana, Marie Catherine Illinoise, an Illinois Indian woman convert who was legally and sacramentally married to a Frenchman in the Upper Mississippi Valley, could be found dressed in one of her silk taffeta gowns as she sat in an armchair in her home built in the French colonial architectural style. Born Illinois, she was now “Frenchified” and was categorized in official records as French.51

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Although White no doubt intended her example as an illustration of how far the
“Frenchification” of Native Americans could go, it is clear from her language that the actual
text examples given of materiality, the silk taffeta gowns and the armchair and the French
colonial home, are brought in to corroborate already-established factual information:
Illinoise was on record as having been born as an Illinois, she was on record as being legally
and sacramentally married to a man from France and was, by all accounts, considered
French herself in official records. This, of course, is but one recent example of the privilege
given to documentary evidence; nearly every other publication I read dealing with history
had the same bias toward the written record.

Literature, like history, is a discipline that is deeply concerned with the written
record; it is difficult to imagine the study of literature without written text. As a result, we
tend to use the archaeological record as a way to fill in the gaps of periods or places where
documented history (preferably a contemporary record) exists, but is somehow damaged or
otherwise incomplete. By using the evidence of material culture in such a way, we open
ourselves to the dangers of assumption, but that is not the greatest problem. As M. O. H.
Carver points out, the purpose of studying the material culture of a group is not to identify
individual artifacts and put them in a specific context so much as it is to construct a broad
view of the culture being studied, or to “[construct] the image of a people and their
community in transition.”52 This is significant in that, no matter how detailed the description,
any material culture that is used to explain a passage of literature is inherently a specific
instance of work being used to clarify a far more general idea. The most basic understanding
of semiotics makes clear that the language Keats used to render the scenes depicted on a

Hoo: The Seventh Century in North-western Europe (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell, 1992), 349.
Grecian urn, for example, can never truly capture any single object in its completeness. More importantly, though, the lone artifact cannot define the traits of all objects of that type; no one urn, even if it is specifically identified as one of which Keats had detailed knowledge, can stand as a faithful and accurate definition of the idea with which Keats worked.

Material Culture in Literature

As mentioned above, literature requires an approach to material culture that is simultaneously functional in using objects to interpret texts (and texts to interpret objects), but it must also be informed by the role material culture plays in other disciplines. It needs to base its observations on the archaeological record, but those observations must serve the interpretation of text. It must consider and question the roles objects play, both for individuals and the societies in which they live, but it must either access that information indirectly through texts or apply it to our understanding of texts. It must be more systematic than that taken by the study of geography, but it should remain flexible enough to adapt to the conditions that helped to shape, and were shaped by, the works examined. It should give access to the social and economic forces at play in the society and do so without making assumptions, either about the individual artifacts being used or about the individuals who used them. It must be able to accommodate texts and objects as equally powerful tools to expand our knowledge of the other; texts must be able to be used to understand artifacts, and artifacts must be able to be used to understand texts.

Part of the flexibility necessary for material culture studies in literature is the ability to consider objects and their roles in a number of contexts, to “scale up” or “scale down” the lines of inquiry while still retaining the focus on the text and its relationship with artifacts. Like sociology and anthropology, we require the ability to examine what texts teach
us about entire societies, and their relationship with things, but we also require, as in psychology and history, the ability to learn about individuals as individuals, either as characters or the authors who create them. Broadly, literature can consider questions of social value and the way societies transform under various pressures. For instance, as Russell Palmer has pointed out, Coleridge’s comments on the material culture of Malta, where he served as a colonial official for two years, and especially his thoughts on the local architecture, provide a significant (albeit terse) glimpse into the Mediterranean world of the time, as well as the author’s own thoughts on the importance of things. If nothing else, from his letters during that time we learn that he considered books to be “dear companions.”

Alternatively, Anne Green has focused more on the transformation of society by discussing material culture in context of both literary and non-literary texts, such as guide books and manuals from nineteenth-century France. The societal changes she examines occur in a number of different spheres, including public fashion and the nascent technology of photography, but nowhere is the alteration of French society more evident at the time than, of course, in the realm of food:

Writing about food offered a way of thinking about issues that reached far beyond the kitchen. Authors realised how readily the preparation and consumption of food lent itself to interpretation, and their imagination was increasingly coloured by gastronomic analogies. The endless rituals that surrounded the preparation and presentation of food, and the fact that it could be transformed from the natural state into an elaborate confection meant to be enjoyed (or destroyed, depending on one’s point of view), meant that food was an ideal form of symbolic expression; accounts of meals or foodstuffs provided new possibilities for articulating ideas, values, fantasies, or aspirations. […] Writers recognized that food was “good to think with.”

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Indeed, the various trappings that surround food and the act of eating, from its preparation to its presentation and service to its consumption and its by-products, are so readily identified with the social and cultural spheres of our lives that any change in cuisine is hard to separate from a change in the way people behave, think, and feel. Green brings up the boom in restaurants and eating in public that occurs in France in the middle of the nineteenth century, as well as changing tastes for foods that became available as the railroads made rapid transport of goods into urban centers possible. The result was that, as Green writes, “[i]n novels, plays, poetry, guidebooks, household manuals, recipe books and newspapers (where the Baron Brisse was the first to introduce a daily column of recipes), food was being turned into language.”

Broad social change can be approached as a matter of phenomena, as well. Stacy I. Morgan has used material culture to discuss population migration and its impact on the identity of migrants described in literature, Danielle C. Skeehan examines the relationship between women, textiles, and texts in a Caribbean forever altered by the slave trade, and a similar question of the relationship between texts and textiles is raised by Kathryn Sullivan Kruger in cultural contexts as varying as Persia and the ancient African Dogon tribe. Approaching the question from another perspective, Peter Stallybrass has considered the social implications of the Bible’s transformation from scroll to codex while a recent special

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issue of *Women’s Writing* was dedicated to studying the impact of writing materials and implements on women and their social status.\(^61\)

On the more individualized level, however, we also see how authors make use of objects in their texts in order to record or transform the values of the society in which they live. Wordsworth, for example, seems intent on imbuing animacy and agency within all objects in nature, to the point that Onno Oerlemans calls it “virtually a cliché that Wordsworth imagines spirit and being in the external world of things.”\(^62\) Still, Oerlemans is quick to point out in his argument that Wordsworth thought and made use of the materiality in nature as a complex entity: “Far from merely anthropomorphizing nature in the easy and escapist way imagined by some new historicists, Wordsworth may be seen to include an awareness of the indifference, hostility, and inimicalness of material reality to an idea of the ‘one life,’”\(^63\) an argument that aligns perfectly with those who conceptualize material agency as discussed above. We also see transformation of society with regard to the material culture of authors themselves; Jonathan Gil Harris’s “Shakespeare’s Hair: Staging the Object of Material Culture” examines the social and literary significance of a single hair, purportedly (but almost certainly not actually) from the head of the Bard himself.\(^64\) We even see society change through the materialization of non-material things, as what Billy Joe Lancaster argues

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occurs when behaviors and services are substituted for material exchange goods in Steinbeck’s *Cannery Row*.65

In the case of authors who are often considered to be against the use of materials in written works, careful examination can bring to light their concerns about the objects in their societies and their written works. One example would be *Willa Cather and Material Culture: Real World Writing, Writing the Real World*, a collection of essays that convincingly argue that the American author and magazine publisher, who famously called for authors to strip their novels of material objects, was not interested in eliminating material culture from literature, but rather in reducing the clutter, allowing objects in novels to play a clearer, more significant role:

> How wonderful it would be if we could throw all the furniture out of the window; and along with it, all the meaningless reiterations concerning physical sensations, all the tiresome old patterns, and leave the room as bare as the stage of a Greek theatre, or as that house into which the glory of Pentecost descended.66

Responses to this call to remove clutter from the makeup of the modern novel often rejected the idea, arguing as Lionel Trilling did, that “[t]he novel has been démeublé indeed; but life without its furniture is strangely bare.”67 As Mary Ann O’Farrell reminds us, however, this is not a call to remove objects from novels entirely: “Cather’s novel démeublé is readable less as a room unfurnished than as a room sparsely furnished and in which if a thing is there to be found, it is there to work—to mean and to mean hard—as an object in the shadow of character.”68 In the case of Cather, then, we understand that each object

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rendered in the text is included not merely as a piece of background filler, but as an artifact with an impact on the reader, a significant actor on the stage which cannot be dismissed without altering the function of the work.

Material Culture in Middle English Literature

Up to this point, we have seen that the study of material culture in literature not only requires the flexibility to evaluate the way objects are used in a text but also to evaluate the text’s influence on objects and the society that uses them. Material culture is a vitally important part of our mechanism for understanding texts in general, at least in the modern period, as the way a text makes use of references to, and is affected by, material objects that shape the way we interact, be it with the text itself, other texts, other individuals, or society in general. These are, however, not attributes of material culture that developed merely with the advent of the modern age. Objects and their influence on thought and text are far more basic to the human condition, and they are certainly evident throughout the Middle Ages, as well.

Post-Conquest England is an excellent example of a culture that shaped, and was shaped by, the way objects were depicted within texts. The number of instances where the action of the tales in Sir Thomas Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur* is defined by objects is almost too numerous to count: from Arthur’s first arrival at the keep of Sir Ector, separated from his family but wrapped in cloth of gold; to his marriage to Guinevere, who brought the Round Table to Camelot as a wedding gift; to Gareth’s seemingly ill-advised request for a year’s worth of food and drink that Sir Kay took as an indicator of low birth and stature; to the poisoned apples that nearly killed Sir Gawain and that even more nearly led to Guinevere’s execution; time and time again the tales of King Arthur seem to be driven by
objects. Indeed, many of these objects are charged with supernatural attributes or abilities. Swords are particularly numerous, including the sword in the stone, the damsel’s sword that Balin draws from its enchanted scabbard (and the same sword Galahad pulls from the red marble stone in the river), the sword, red as blood with coal-black writing that Galahad finds aboard the ship, not to mention Excalibur. Likewise, there are many other objects and object types, including the Siege Perilous (a chair with changing lettering and a dire curse), the ship upon which Galahad finds the sword mentioned above, and, of course, the Holy Grail itself.

It is no surprise to see the world of romance filled with significant objects. However pious, the knights of King Arthur’s court are warriors and doers of great deeds who require the equipment necessary not only to accomplish their work as forces of order and good, but also to be recognized as who they are. Identity (and its concealment) is an important theme throughout Le Morte d’Arthur, and, as we see in the case of Beaumains, or in each instance where Lancelot wears someone else’s armor, knights without the proper armor and shield cannot be recognized, even by their closest friends or kin. It is also important to note that romance is a genre defined by wondrous events and adventures, and although other characters can certainly help in the creation of a world in which those events can occur, the language of things is often necessary to evoke marvels. After all, even the miracles of Christ included loaves, fishes, and water that turned into wine.

Malory, of course, was not the originator of Arthurian legend. Other authors, with other reasons for writing about the exploits of the greatest of British kings, have also made use of material culture in their versions of the tale. Although there is a great deal of material from a number of significant authors, in the interest of space I will discuss only one: the Alliterative Morte Arthure. Often reading like a catalog of weapons, armor, or other objects, the Arthurian section of the Alliterative Morte is filled with material culture. One of the most
ostentatious displays of material goods in the poem occurs early on, at the feast ordered by Arthur to be served to the Roman Senator and his accompanying knights. The extensive list of dishes and finery is meant to impress the audience with sheer volume as well as detail. A boar’s head, meat from grain-fed cattle, roast peacocks, suckling piglets, herons, and swans, pies, shoulders of wild boars, geese and bitterns baked in pastry, rabbits stewed in milk and spices, and several different wines from distant locales in the medieval world are only a part of what the poet lists. Still, even this partial list is enough to conjure up images of endless bounty in the mind of the audience, images that are then connected to Arthur as a powerful provider of the feast. Moreover, food is a powerful image to use: it is a material with which we all have a deep connection and a great deal of first-hand experience. Such connections make the invoked images more complete, affording the audience a chance to associate the memories of scents, flavors, textures, and sounds with items that are otherwise simply listed.

What is more extraordinary, however, is that this ostentatious display of material wealth and disposable resources for political gain is based in actual practice of royalty at the time of the poem’s composition. Henry L. Harder connects three well-documented feasts in the historic record to Arthur’s own fictional one: a feast held in honor of Richard II by the bishop of Durham on September 23, 1387; Henry IV’s feast on the day of his coronation, October 13, 1399; and the banquet in honor of John Stafford becoming the Bishop of Wells on September 16, 1425. All three of these events presented large numbers of guests with various rare and even exotic dishes, in many cases similar or even identical to the list of foods offered as hospitality to the Senator.

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The romance of Arthurian legend is, despite the clear presence of a Christian ideology, a work of secular fiction. It is worth noticing that the *Book of Margery Kempe* is, in many ways, the exact opposite: the centrality of faith within the text is underscored by Margery’s difficulties with the material world and its inhabitants. In fact, Margery’s book is deeply concerned with the material world: beyond the fact that she has enough wealth to finance her travels, Margery’s very transformation into a pious, mystical figure is marked with material objects. She survived her madness early on because she is denied access to implements with which she could commit suicide, but her restoration by means of Christ’s intervention is only recognized when her husband orders the household keys to be restored to her so that she could take her meals as she used to do.70 Even after she is restored, however, she continues to dress in “pompows aray” and act with pride, even beginning to brew her own ale when her desire for worldly goods outgrows her husband’s ability to support her.71 Her brewing operation succeeds at first, but eventually the effect of her sin drives the entire community to abandon her service, forcing her to realize the problems with her actions; she gives up her rich clothes and does penance for her sins.72 Even within the first three hundred lines of the *Book*, Margery makes use of material goods of several different types. She is restrained from misusing implements to do herself bodily harm, but when she gives up her sinful and destructive ways she is rewarded with objects of symbolic value: the keys to her buttery, which simultaneously allow her the freedom to act on her own once again and invest her with responsibility for the household once more. Moreover, the keys echo those which Christ entrusted to St. Peter, pointing to her ultimate goal of access to eternal salvation.

71 *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 57.
The implications of the use of material objects in *The Book of Margery Kempe* are even broader than the relationships Margery has with objects and with individuals, however. They also impact the way groups, sometimes even large groups, react to her, as is the case when, on her pilgrimage to the Holy Land, the members of her fellowship forsake her repeatedly. When she cannot make it up the side of Mount Quarantania, she first requests help from her fellowship, who will not help her as they are struggling themselves. Margery then speaks with a passing Saracen, “and sche put a grote in hys hand, makyng to hym a token for to bryng hir onto the Mownt. And as swythe the Sarazyn toke hir undyr hys arme and led hir up onto the hey Mownt,” leaving her traveling companions to struggle on their own way up the mount. Then, at the top, these same companions refused to share water with her, so “Than God of hys hey goodness mevyd the Grey Frerys wyth compassyon a thei comfortyd hir whan hir cuntremen wolde not knowyn hir.”

Although the group rejects Margery for her constant outbursts and other annoying behaviors, she finds that she is able to keep up with the fellowship with a little help from God. The groat (a coin worth four pennies), although only a token, is still payment enough that the Saracen helps her to the top, and although it is unclear why the Saracen chose to help her over her countrymen (perhaps God moved him to help her), it is clear that she was the one to offer something in exchange for his assistance. In this case, her desire to climb to the top of the mountain is granted by means of an object of exchange. When at the top, however, the basic biological need for water is all she requires to acquire additional help, and she receives what she requires when God explicitly moves the Grey Friars.

Finally, Margery’s relationship with material objects, specifically religious artwork, also helps define her spaces, transforming both her geography and the communities that

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73 *The Book of Margery Kempe*, 173.
occupy that geography. Laura Varnam points to objects that are central to Margery’s performance of piety and, as a result, her identity, using that performance to redefine the space in which she worships. Looking at Margery’s visit to Rome, Varnam closely examines the pilgrim’s reaction to seeing a *pietà*, a depiction of Mary holding the body of her son after it has been removed from the cross, and determines that her crying, a result of simultaneously experiencing the death of Christ and the grief of Mary, works to circumvent the typical male space of a church by reaching out to a good woman who was also present and who intercedes on Margery’s behalf. As Varnam explains, “For Margery Kempe, the opportunity offered by a performative response to devotional objects enables her to become a devotional mirror at the center of a female community that evades ecclesiastical control and renegotiates the location of sacred space itself.”

Thus, the *pietà*, whether a painting, sculpture, or other medium, becomes a catalyst by which female piety can not only be performed, but by which identity, and even power, can be asserted.

The complex assertions of piety made by Margery Kempe are not the only instances in Middle English literature where women use material culture to navigate the religious landscape. Indeed, it is noteworthy that one of the most compelling treatments of a woman’s ascendancy to a position of religious importance is the one in which that woman is identified from the first word of the poem with a precious object. *Pearl* is not unique in making the comparison between a virtuous female and a flawless jewel, however. James J. Lynch asserted that the pearl was often connected to the most virtuous woman in the church, “perhaps because of its whiteness, which represented the spotlessness of Mary, and because of its different origin, that is, animal rather than the usual mineral, thereby recalling the

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doctrine that she alone was born without having the stain of Adam and Eve’s guilt on her soul.” Nonetheless, it is a remarkable text where a metaphor is then couched in a dream that is an allegory steeped in material objects. The narrator begins the poem by describing a pearl of unrivaled beauty and perfection, often referring to the jewel with feminine pronouns, before mentioning that he lost it in a garden. As the poem continues, the reader comes to understand that the narrator’s pearl is, in fact, his deceased daughter. As he falls asleep and begins to dream, he encounters his Pearl in a new landscape, dressed in flawless finery, where she reveals to him that her death has only brought her into the kingdom of heaven, where she has ascended to the rank of queen. Thus, it is clear that poets made use of the connection between precious gems and materials and the Kingdom of Heaven to underscore the cultural value set on virtues such as chastity. To explicitly identify an object with a human being is also an interesting move for the poet, and one that works well with the dream vision and allegory genres.

The Pearl Poet’s other works, specifically *Cleanness*, *Patience*, and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, also provide some discussion of the importance of material objects in post-Conquest England, but of these three *Gawain* stands out. As a romance, its subject matter is far more concerned with the world of material culture, and the numerous ways in which such material culture is used significantly impacts our understanding of the text as a whole. For the sake of brevity, I will only mention two instances where objects or material culture play a significant role in the poem, but, as with Malory, a more comprehensive study would generate a great deal more information, both about the England of the time and the way

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76 Although well outside the scope of this project, it would be a worthwhile study to see how often this sort of person-object identification occurs in allegories of the same period, as opposed to other forms of identification, such as the anthropomorphization of immaterial concepts, such as virtue and vice.
contemporary audiences (and the author) thought about the things around them. The first set of objects we shall consider are those surrounding the Christmas feast where the Green Knight first appears: food and cheer abound, knights and ladies exchange gifts, and the queen is resplendent in her silks in a hall decorated with rich tapestries. Everything is as it should be for a Christmas feast until the interruption of the Green Knight, who barges in upon a green horse, wearing green clothing and wielding a holly branch in one hand and a mighty axe in the other. Because a great deal of ink has already been spilled about the Green Knight’s connection to nature and the wilderness,77 and its juxtaposition against the “civilized” setting of Arthur’s court has drawn perhaps even more attention,78 I will merely point out that, even in the setting of nature, human agency has created objects that have social significance. Even the holly branch, by virtue of its being removed from the rest of the plant and held in the Green Knight’s hand, is a significant object of material culture. Audience members would have recognized holly’s natural and symbolic values immediately, allowing them to understand the giant being described to them in a way that echoes iconography.

The second, and most significant, use of material culture in the poem is the exchange between Gawain and the Lord and Lady Bertilak. On the first day of the exchange game, Gawain receives a kiss from Lady Bertilak, who seeks to seduce him while her husband and his retinue hunt in the forest. Their success leads to an entire stanza that deals, in precise detail, with the dressing of several deer. That evening, Gawain receives the deer and kisses

his host; the exchange is complete. The next day is almost identical to the first, with Gawain receiving a kiss from his hostess while Bertilak himself hunts a mighty boar, eventually dealing the killing stroke with his own sword. On the third day, however, we receive a greater description of the lady’s attire as she visits Gawain in his bedroom, including a finely furred mantle and gems in the net of her hair, a fact that Gawain notices. She requests a glove as a token before he departs for the Green Chapel, but Gawain possesses no treasures to offer her; instead, she decides to offer something to him: “Þaʒ I nade noȝt of yourez, / 3et shulde ʒe haue of myne.” She first offers a golden ring with a red stone, an object that Jessica Cooke has argued would have been recognized as a talisman of protection. When he refuses, she offers him the green silken girdle instead, which he also refuses until she tells him explicitly that any man who wears it cannot be slain. In the shadow of almost certain doom, this temptation proves too much for Gawain, and he concedes to take the band of green silk from his hostess. That evening, Bertilak provides him with the fox he had hunted that day, but Gawain offers only the kiss he received from his meeting with Bertilak’s wife; going against his agreement, he keeps the supposedly magical girdle for himself. This girdle, however, does not protect him from the Green Knight as promised; instead, it is the one part of Bertilak’s test that he fails, and his failure earns him a scar on the back of his neck from the Green Knight’s axe. He then transforms the girdle, once a protective device, into a personal badge of shame, one which is ironically transformed by the rest of Arthur’s court into a celebration of Gawain’s cleverness and, despite his one failing, great success in his adventure as they all adopt a green girdle of their own.

The Pearl Poet’s works, then, display a reliance on material objects in order to convey their meaning, even in contexts that are decidedly non-material in nature. Concerns about proper social behavior and self-preservation are distilled into rituals of exchange and negotiated in such a way as to provide practical instruction, while issues of spiritual salvation and the nature of heaven are expressed in terms of objects of tremendous value, reinforcing the importance of both through allegory.

Texts from post-Conquest England are, of course, outside the primary scope of this project. Nonetheless, the discussion of Middle English texts and their use of material objects, either as symbols or as common objects that help create a sense of recognizability, is useful because the attitudes of authors and audiences in the Middle English period are directly descended from those of the early English which preceded them. Although they were produced in a different context, the language differences and changes in political power cannot entirely disrupt the way a culture uses or thinks about an artifact. Place names, agricultural terms, and even anecdotes about pre-Conquest times written in Middle English may help sharpen our picture of the Old English texts that this study proposes to examine.

Material Culture in Old English Literature

Within the field of Old English studies, it is necessary only to reach for a copy of Beowulf, a text that was used as a historical document long before scholars such as J. R. R. Tolkien argued for the study of the poem based on its artistic merits, to see how important material objects are. One who does so is more than likely to see the Sutton Hoo helmet gracing its cover. Whether the frequent appearance of the helmet is due to the relative paucity of texts that survive from early England and the resulting need to look to material
evidence to further our understanding, or whether there is an inherent fascinating quality about the Sutton Hoo find, and the helmet in particular, is more than I can say.

It is not difficult to see, however, that we have a developing base of scholarship dedicated specifically to the description of material culture in pre-Conquest England. Maren Clegg Hyer and Gale R. Owen-Crocker’s 2011 collection of studies, *The Material Culture of Daily Living in the Anglo-Saxon World*, discusses an admirable breadth of topics, from the material sources used in early medieval Britain (plants, metals, livestock, etc.) to their application (agriculture, transport, warfare, etc.). Other works in the collection explore specific objects that have survived the long centuries, such as Elizabeth Coatsworth and Michael Pinder’s study of the Fuller Brooch. Expanding the discussion beyond the British Isles, Gitte Hansen, Steven P. Ashby, and Irene Baug published a similar volume, *Everyday Products in the Middle Ages: Crafts, Consumption, and the Individual in Northern Europe, c. AD 800-1600*, which adds to the discussion with essays concerning what it meant to be an artisan in the early Middle Ages. Other volumes have taken a different approach, focusing attention on a particular material. Michael D. Bintley and Michael G. Shapland’s collection is entirely dedicated to the subject of wood and timber in early England, and Esther Cameron’s edited volume on the subject of animal skins and their uses in early medieval Europe, while not specifically limited to Britain, is particularly interesting for its attention to the economy

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85 Bintley and Shapland, *Trees and Timber in the Anglo-Saxon World*. 
surrounding such goods. These edited volumes related to specific materials are just a sample of what has been published in the last fifteen years; both the great variety of subjects and the depth with which they are being examined reflects the growing realization that the early English have left us a great deal more than just artifacts and texts. They have left us texts that make use of artifacts and artifacts that make use of texts, too. As a result, we are able to make use of the relationships between the two in order to further enhance our understanding of pre-Conquest English culture and the functions that objects performed within it.

As mentioned earlier, study of the material culture within a literary work requires some flexibility: the ability to look at the way material objects are referenced within the text, the connections they make with characters, places, and other objects, their location in the language of the text and, if applicable, their function in the poetry of the piece, as well as the ability to find examples of objects within the archaeological record in order to more closely understand the kinds of examples to which the early English would have had access. This last point, specifically, poses some danger to the student of material culture, however, because of so-called “Beowulf and Sutton Hoo Syndrome.” In her examination of the subject, Verity Fisher points out the difficulty of using archaeological finds to inform literary questions, zeroing in on Sutton Hoo and the now popular assertion that the remains interred in the massive ship burial belonged to Rædwald, the East Anglian king who was famously split on the subject of religion, supposedly keeping a temple where both Christian and pagan practices were honored:

[T]he assumptions which underlie this attribution – for example, that the wealth of burial implies a king; that the location is now in East Anglia, so we are looking at an East Anglian king; that the early seventh-century date implies one who died at about that time – are not necessarily wrong. They are

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86 Cameron, *Leather and Fur.*
not, however, particularly useful for adding much to our understanding of the society of which the burial provides a snapshot. Rather, a focus on making such archaeological and textual matches may actually highlight just how little we know how to interpret them.87

Thus, as we examine works of literature, we must be careful to consider our own biases and what we can actually know with regards to an object, rather than what we may extrapolate or argue.

Also, it is important to remember that, even when dealing with instances of material culture as represented in literature, we always have an imperfect understanding of what a word might have represented to a speaker of Old English. This goes beyond the simple problem of linguistic representations of objects and Aristotelian forms because we have no speakers of Old English left who could provide us with a nuanced description of the meaning of words. Thus, although we have multiple words for a single object and we may guess at the differences between them, we will never be able to completely describe the nuances that led to the specific choice of words. A perhaps oversimplistic example of this difficulty is the Modern English concept of “spear.” We understand the noun form of the word to mean a number of things, including a wooden staff affixed with a hard, pointed tip at one end, used both as a weapon in hand-to-hand combat and as a projectile, but other words render a similar image in our minds, such as arrow or javelin, used specifically as missiles, and similar objects, such as a metal staff with a sharpened point, which may or may not be described as a “spear,” depending on a number of factors. Nonetheless, we can at least make a study of how speakers of Modern English understand the word “spear” to work. There is, of course, no one left who can answer our questions about what the differences between gar, defined in Clark Hall’s Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary as “I. m. ‘spear,’

87 Fisher, “‘Beowulf’ and Sutton Hoo Syndrome,” 85.
*dart, javelin,* and *æsc*, defined as “I. m. nap. ascas ‘ash’ -tre G*, *KC; mdf: the name of the rune for æ: (†) spear, lance, *B: ship, A;*” might have been, or even whether a gar made from a wood other than ash could be considered an *æsc*, even in poetry. We can only look to the surviving texts and make our best guess based on all the evidence we can collect.

With all this in mind, we can now determine what the term “material culture” means in the context of Old English literature and what it means to study it. Up to this point, our definition has been quite general: “anything humanity creates, substantially changes, uses, consumes, or destroys.” We have already seen that this definition is limited in a number of important ways, but its core remains more or less serviceable. In the case of early England, however, we must refine the scope of the definition, as well as the impacts such a definition will have: “anything created, substantially changed, used, consumed, or physically destroyed in early England.” Finally, we must also consider that we are looking not at the physical record, but a textual record that reflects the reality with which the early English would have been familiar. The result, although imperfect, provides the necessary focus and guidance to allow an examination of the references to material culture within a specific text: “Early English material culture is anything created, substantially changed, used, consumed, or physically destroyed in early England, whether it exists physically, or is referenced in another form, such as text or art.”

**Old English Literature and the Archaeological Record**

An analysis of the material culture depicted in the *Exeter Book* requires more than an understanding of the theory, however; one must also have a broad understanding of the sorts of artifacts that have survived from early England, a knowledge of at least some of the material world that the authors, scribes, and contemporary readers would have shared.
Although an in-depth study of the archaeological record is beyond the scope of this study, an examination of some of the most important collections and a short discussion of their significance may be helpful and is certainly within reach.

Perhaps the most accessible of these discussions, Andrew Hayes’s *Archaeology of the British Isles* is an excellent place to start considering the archaeological record of early England because the book’s scope is broader than just the Middle Ages.88 Taking the time to show the development of culture on the island, from before the arrival of early English to after the Norman Conquest, Hayes offers a chapter on the picture of daily life as depicted by the archaeological finds from throughout the period.89 Also useful are the connections he draws in this chapter between the architectural and archaeological finds from Germanic continental sites, allowing for the possibility of seeing the influence of native British inhabitants upon the conquering Germanic builders and artisans. Most intriguing in this brief chapter, however, is the relatively detailed description of finds from an excavation in York of Viking-era buildings and the various roles they are thought to have played based on the waste products located in each building, such as metalworking or carpentry.90

A much more comprehensive and detailed study, if a significantly older one, is given in *The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England*, a 1976 volume edited by David M. Wilson.91 Philip Rahtz’s chapter “Buildings and Rural Settlement” provides an in-depth discussion of the archaeology of structures found in farms and other agricultural settlements,92 while Martin Biddle’s chapter, simply titled “Towns,” addresses the characteristics and layout of more urban settings in early medieval England, as well as the buildings and architecture that

defined them. Rosemary Cramp, whose separate studies of Wearmouth and Jarrow in particular are also germane to this topic, contributes a chapter, “Monastic Sites,” that uses the archaeological record to describe the day-to-day function of the tremendously important cultural institutions while making explicit the limitations of what the evidence can clarify. Along with chapters on specific object types, such as pottery and coins, a discussion of the industry that produced these items, and an entire chapter on the influence of Scandinavian settlements, the result is a clear and well-organized overview of the archaeology of early medieval Britain. Even more useful for gaining an understanding of early English archaeology until the early 1970s are the appendices, which include an extensive list of domestic settlement sites and the structures and finds made there, as well as analyses of work done at Whitby Abbey: Cramp provides an analysis of both the finds register and location plan, while Rahtz examines the building plan. Together, these three appendices provide a reader with a view, not only of the raw data that archaeologists use, but also of the process by which they analyze and interpret that data.

Finally, those looking for still more general overviews can find a useful historical perspective in Patrick Ottaway’s 1992 volume *Archaeology in British Towns from the Emperor Claudius to the Black Death*, a source that is not only well-organized and useful, but also displays a rather wry sense of humor when discussing some of the less attractive finds,

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specifically when dealing with organic materials. Likewise, Richard Hodges’ *The Anglo-Saxon Achievement* gives the discussion of archaeology a bit more context, connecting specific finds and using them as evidence and broader context for important developments in English history, with chapter titles like “Archaeology and the Origins of Capitalism” and “The First English Industrial Revolution.”

Such overviews serve to synthesize the findings of thousands of individual archaeologists who have worked in the field for decades. Looking at the reports and data may be more difficult, but discussions of the finds themselves will be necessary when examining references to objects within the poetry of the *Exeter Book*. The field of archaeology has, quite understandably, tended to organize this data in two ways: according to the location of the find, and according to the type of the find. In this case, the most important finds will be centered around Exeter. More meaningful for our purposes, then, is the type of find. Because Exeter was a Roman city, Roman objects occur in the archaeological record there alongside medieval and modern artifacts. *Roman Finds from Exeter*, edited by Neil Holbrook and Paul T. Bidwell, contains chapters that discuss objects found in and around Exeter, and were therefore at least potentially known by the parties responsible for the maintenance, and perhaps even the creation, of the *Exeter Book*. Objects like pottery, coins, and glass are discussed alongside other small finds, and even building

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97 Patrick Ottaway, *Archaeology in British Towns from the Emperor Claudius to the Black Death* (London: Routledge, 1992). Comments such as “The wonderful world of environmental archaeology: tenth-century fly puparia from the Lloyds Bank site, York” beneath a photo of a large pile of unappealing organic objects (page 39), as well as the sentence “The potential of the study of faeces was first realized at the Lloyds Bank site where an object described in the academic report as ‘a single elongate fusiform mass of organic debris, concreted by mineral deposition’, and more commonly known as ‘the Lloyds Bank turd’, was found,” which accompanied another black and white image of the object described (154), display Ottaway’s willingness to depart from dry academic analysis in order to provide a glimpse of archaeology not available in most books.


materials, to provide an overall picture of the material culture that lay beneath what would become medieval Exeter. Likewise, T. Clare’s *Archaeological Sites of Devon and Cornwall* provides a useful pictorial guide to the landscape and ruins found in and around Exeter.\(^{100}\)

Our evaluation of the archaeological record should also travel further afield geographically; the pre-Conquest English of Exeter were not cut off from their cousins in other English cities any more than they were cut off from those on the Continent. There are numerous studies on sites both well-known and obscure, from *Oxford before the University* edited by Anne Dodd\(^ {101}\) and *Two Oxfordshire Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries: Berinfield and Didcot* by Angela Boyle, Anne Dodd, and David Miles\(^ {102}\) to Helen Geake’s and Jonathan Kenny’s *Early Deira: Archaeological Studies of the East Riding in the Fourth to Ninth Centuries AD*\(^ {103}\) and Brian Philp’s *Excavations in West Kent 1960-1970*.\(^ {104}\) Some studies, in fact, are even more specific about their location, such as David Miles’s *Archaeology at Barton Court Farm, Abingdon, Oxon*\(^ {105}\) or Gordon Malcolm and David Bowsher’s *Middle Saxon London: Excavations at the Royal Opera House 1989-99*.\(^ {106}\) Although none of these studies provides a direct link to the archaeology of Exeter, and thus the *Exeter Book*, each one does contribute to a detailed list of objects of various sorts, as well as the context of where they were found and a trained archaeologist’s conclusions regarding how such artifacts were used in that location. Such studies, then, can

\(^{101}\) Anne Dodd, ed., *Oxford before the University: The Late Saxon and Norman Archaeology of the Thames Crossing, the Defences and the Town* (Oxford: Oxford Archaeology, 2003).
\(^{102}\) Angela Boyle, Anne Dodd, and David Miles, eds., *Two Oxfordshire Anglo-Saxon Cemeteries: Berinfield and Didcot* (Oxford: Oxford University Committee for Archaeology, 1995).
be considered “case studies” for material objects in other parts of early England, and can provide a larger picture of objects that were used, how they were used, and who used them, and although it would be unfair to dismiss the potential differences in material culture between Exeter and Oxford, it is far more likely to see similarities here than drastic differences.

Whereas the geographical method of organizing work allows archaeologists to determine locally specific elements of material culture, it does not allow for the sort of typological analysis that will, by necessity, form the basis of this study. It is far more useful, for example, to turn to a study on swords than to examine various studies to see if a sword occurs, and the breadth of objects that have received such attention is perhaps surprising. Thus, such studies provide a valuable resource as we examine the objects that appear in the poetry of the *Exeter Book*.

One of the difficulties of categorizing archaeological finds is the fact that there are often very few clues as to what an object used to be or how it may have been used. As a result, archaeologists often look to the material from which an object is made in order to make sense of their findings. The result is a discussion not just of finished objects, but the use of the materials to construct objects, an interesting and potentially significant addition to information about objects mentioned in poetry. This rings especially true when one considers that object construction is mentioned in a number of the *Exeter Book* Riddles, and figures such as goldsmiths appear in the poetry. There are instances, however, when the material from which something is made can help us understand more about how it was made as an individual object and, possibly, as a part of the general practice of creating such objects in early England. For example, in their study of the chemical makeup of the gold objects found in the Staffordshire Hoard, Eleanor Blakelock, Susan La Niece, and Chris Fern
explain with technical precision that the most visible parts of the golden artifacts found in the hoard were treated with a process that removed copper and silver, leaving a purer gold alloy. Additionally, they argue that the evidence suggests a deliberate, common and widespread workshop practice, undertaken regardless of object date or function. The prominently visible gold sheets decorated with filigree or by incising were the components most often treated; in comparison, in cases where the gold sheet was not visible, for example, used for the cell walls in cloisonné, it was not normally treated. This suggests that the gold enrichment treatment was intended to alter the colour of the metal, with the aim in many cases of achieving greater contrast in designs comprised of different gold components.¹⁰⁷

This is an especially significant development, not only because of the broad impact that such findings can have on our understanding of gold and goldsmiths in pre-Conquest England, but it gives insight into the reason for such action. If the result of this process is a change to the color of the metal, we can infer that gold was not a simple metal; it was worked and subjected to processes that made some gold more attractive and valuable than others.

Although gold is no doubt one of the most dramatic materials associated with the early English, the archaeological record contains many more. I have already mentioned Esther Cameron’s study *Leather and Fur*, but a number of other studies of organic materials also provide insight into the materials the early English would have found familiar and useful. Terence Patrick O’Connor’s 2003 *Analysis of Urban Animal Bone Assemblages* gives evidence for how bone was handled in the specific instance of dig sites in York and what was learned through the process of developing a methodology for dealing with large numbers of bones, but O’Connor’s work also serves as a handbook for others who find bones and wish to make sense of the way in which the material was used.¹⁰⁸ Likewise,

Penelope Walton Rogers’s *Cloth and Clothing in Early Anglo-Saxon England, AD 450-700* offers an analysis of everything from the creation of threads to the weaving and treatment of cloth and the creation and uses of garments.\(^{109}\) Though the scope of the study is too early to coincide with the *Exeter Book* itself, the historical background provides depth to the clothing mentioned throughout the *Book*, making this a valuable resource for examining terms.

More durable objects, such as those made of metal, have a higher chance of survival, and thus have been studied more widely by archaeologists. As the subject of swords has already been raised, H. R. Ellis Davidson’s *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England* should be the first of the sources listed here.\(^{110}\) Ellis Davidson’s work is remarkable in that it attempts to understand a category of objects both from the physical remains and also from the way they are handled in texts, both in the historical record and in literature. She spends a large section of a chapter on the swords of *Beowulf*, and the sword Hrunting specifically, placing the sword within the analogous context of Old Norse literature, as well. As she explains,

> Before we can decide how the sword was forged, we need the practical knowledge which only archaeologists and metallurgists can give us; but we need also to know what poets and saga-tellers and chroniclers have said concerning the qualities of the finest blades, while a contemporary allusion to a particular sword of Wessex or Iceland or the court of Charlemagne gives a breath of new life to theories and generalizations.\(^{111}\)

It is clear, then, that we must understand more than just the physical, historical, and literary aspects of an object separately. As Lévi-Strauss points out, we must understand the ways in which they work together if we are to truly grasp the significance of any object or object type to the culture that created it.

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\(^{111}\) Davidson, *The Sword in Anglo-Saxon England*, 211.
Other studies that concentrate on classes of object must also be mentioned here, including Jeremy Haslam’s *Medieval Pottery*, which provides an excellent selection of illustrations of artifacts found, including several round-bottomed pieces categorized as “Exeter Ware,” and a discussion of the characteristics and creation of such wares. It is a thin volume, but it includes a brief note that

a kiln in Exeter making buff oxidized pottery, previously dated to the thirteenth or fourteenth century, has only recently been recognized as being broadly of late tenth- or eleventh-century date. It produced only a limited range of forms: mainly small and medium-sized cooking pots with convex bases and decorated handled jars – but no spouted pitchers. The vessels are competently thrown on a fast wheel, and several are partially covered with a green or yellow glaze.\(^{112}\)

The new dating described by Haslam means that these pots and jars may have been known by those who created or used the *Exeter Book*. Even small objects of various characters have been examined, most recently by David A. Hinton’s *Gold and Gilt, Pots and Pins: Possessions and People in Medieval Britain*.\(^ {113}\) Placing finds in the context of history and culture, Hinton provides a necessary connection between the types of small, everyday objects that would otherwise be unlikely to merit a discussion on their own and the ways in which identity was displayed in medieval Britain.

The volume of information published on the archaeological record of pre-Conquest England is vast; it would take more than the space of this study to adequately discuss even the most significant works, and certainly even more space to deal with those works that have an impact on the current subject. Nonetheless, the fact that such a large body of artifacts survives and that such thorough scholarship has been done to make those artifacts available for study, even in a removed way, offers an opportunity to inform the discussion not only

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with actual examples, but also with background information about their creation and use that may be crucial in coming to the correct conclusions when examining references to material objects in the poetry of the *Exeter Book*.

The *Exeter Book* and Material Culture

Literary study of material culture necessitates an examination of the object that contains the literature (and the community that maintained that object), as well as an examination of the text’s use of references to objects. Thus, it is important to examine the resources available to place the *Exeter Book* itself into a material context, both at the time of its creation and throughout its long existence. The first of those resources should be the object itself. Currently kept in a box in the climate-controlled archive room of the Exeter Cathedral Library, Dean and Chapter MS 3501 is a large and handsome volume. Several inches thick, it currently has a modern binding that stands out against its tan parchment leaves. The manuscript has suffered damage over its long years, with numerous small cuts on the first leaf of the manuscript, along with a large swath of liquid damage that penetrates several pages into the front of the manuscript. Conner argues that the liquid in question, despite the picturesque hopes to the contrary, is probably not beer, but rather a form of glue used in the binding of books.\(^{114}\) Such speculation received an additional bit of credibility when, during my visit in the early part of 2018, one of the librarians mentioned to me that it was his understanding that the stains had been analyzed and found to be fish glue, but I have been unable to independently verify that information.

Regarding the literature that describes the *Exeter Book* itself, one would be remiss to ignore the rich history of editions and facsimiles that have contributed immensely to our

\(^{114}\) Conner, *Anglo-Saxon Exeter*, 238.
understanding of this manuscript. The natural starting point here, as it is with many
manuscripts, is the catalog of Humfrey Wanley, which, though over three hundred years old
now, still provides excellent context for our understanding of the Book. Writing in Latin,
Wanley is the first to provide a suggested structure for the texts within the manuscript by
breaking the text into ten separate books. He also carefully records a great deal of
information about those books and the individual leaves that make them up. Then, from
Wanley’s catalog, one can proceed through decades of scholarship, the great majority of
which focuses on the text rather than the Book. Still, over time there have been major studies
that discuss the object itself and its physical characteristics. Thorpe’s 1842 edition is brief on
this subject, saying only that

The manuscript consists of a folio volume of moderate size, written on vellum in a fair and rather fine hand of the tenth century. Some leaves both at the beginning and the end, as well as in the body of the book, are wanting, and at the end it has sustained serious damage by the action of a fluid on the ink, whereby much of the writing is rendered wholly illegible; but though fair and well-written, it, nevertheless, abounds in instances of false orthography and ignorance on the part of the scribe, to a greater degree than any other manuscript I have seen of Anglo-Saxon poetry, though these in general are far less correct than those of prose production.

Chambers’ complete facsimile edition of 1933, however, devotes most of its volume to
communicating details about the manuscript. Max Förster contributes a detailed examination
of the eight preliminary leaves that were added, as well as a general description of the
manuscript itself, while Robin Flower contributes a careful analysis of its script. Chambers
himself mainly focuses on the text contained in the Book, but he also works with Flower to
transcribe passages from damaged sections of the book. The work done in the introduction

to Chambers’s edition remains relevant to the discussion of the Book even today, but its most significant contribution is, without doubt, its photographic reproduction of each individual folio in clear, sharp black-and-white photographs published at original scale.\footnote{R. W. Chambers, ed., \textit{The Exeter Book of Old English Poetry} (London: P. Lund, Humphries, 1933).} By making these images available outside the reading room at Exeter Cathedral Library, scholars who were unable to travel to Exeter themselves finally had access to more than just photographs of single leaves and edited texts.

The difficulty with such sources, however, is their relative scarcity. Due to their age (Thorpe) and limited production (Chambers), such sources can be difficult to access. Thus, it is worth mentioning one of the easiest sources for information on the physical \textit{Exeter Book}: the third volume of the \textit{Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records}. The work of George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie is monumental in the study of Old English literature. Although brief, the first five sections of Krapp and Dobbie’s Introduction are dedicated to the description of the manuscript’s physical traits.\footnote{George Philip Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, eds., \textit{The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records}, vol. 3, \textit{The Exeter Book} (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936), x-xxv.} Their treatment of the manuscript is clear and attentive to the details of codicology and paleography while recognizing the history of the \textit{Book} as far as it is known.

Krapp and Dobbie’s edition served as the standard for nearly sixty years, but it was eventually succeeded by the two-volume edition by Bernard J. Muir, which he titled \textit{The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry}.\footnote{Bernard J. Muir, ed., \textit{The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry}, 2 vols., Exeter Medieval English Texts and Studies (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 1994).} The title here is significant: Muir makes an argument by characterizing the \textit{Exeter Book} as an anthology, one that can be useful for twenty-first-century readers if we accept his characterization of the purpose of the manuscript. Muir also
argues in his introduction that the poems of the *Exeter Book* are arranged “thoughtfully,” although he stops short of suggesting a unifying theme that spans the entire work.

More difficult to quantify is the impact of Muir’s publication of the edition, along with accompanying high-resolution color photographs of each leaf, as a digital reference on DVD-ROM.\textsuperscript{121} Although the release of the images as a form of digital facsimile is incredibly important for scholars who seek to access this manuscript in a form as close to the original as possible, we find here the one area in which technology often is substandard when compared to “analog” books: longevity. The software required to access much of the text and additional multimedia content has long since been abandoned as obsolete, such as Microsoft’s Internet Explorer 7. Industrious or technologically-inclined users can find workarounds in order to make the product work more or less as intended, but most users will find that the most important information on the disc, the photos of the manuscript and other related documents, can be accessed easily enough simply by navigating the file structure.

Doubtless, however, the single most important work on the material culture of the *Exeter Book* is Patrick W. Conner’s *Anglo-Saxon Exeter*. The thrust of Conner’s work is to place the *Exeter Book* in the context of Leofric’s scriptorium and library at Exeter Cathedral, creating associations with other manuscripts that were either made or held at that institution. Moreover, Conner argues that the physical object and the act of copying it may, at least in part, be used to explain the broad differences of genre that appear in the book, as the earliest parts include more secular works, the likes of which fell out of favor as the Benedictine Reform, during which he posits the last of the booklets that make up the *Book* was being

\textsuperscript{120} Muir, *Exeter Anthology*, 25.

written, forced monastic society’s tastes in poetry to change.122 Most useful to the study of the *Exeter Book* as a physical object is the detailed discussion of the codicology of the manuscript, including a detailed analysis of each gathering of leaves that provides the opportunity to “see” the manuscript as if looking at an engineer’s exploded diagram.

Moving beyond the manuscript, one must look to the first individual known to have owned it: the bishop Leofric. Although he could not have been responsible for the creation of the *Exeter Book*, Leofric is important because it is under his direction that the *Book* first comes into the possession of the cathedral, but it is also significant to note that, if Leofric donated the book to Exeter Cathedral, he must have acquired it at some point for himself. Thus, to understand the value of the *Book*, we should examine the values of its first recorded owner. Frank Barlow’s brief discussion “Leofric and His Times” gives a number of important insights into the actions, and therefore the character, of the bishop, and allows us to see a bit further into the importance of the *Book* to the Exeter community.123 Perhaps the most important thing one could say about him was that he was a principled man with potentially unpopular views, who nonetheless intended to see to the practical needs of the church for which he was responsible. Barlow writes,

> Once bishop, Leofric almost disappears from the public stage. His name appears among the witnesses to royal charters and like the other bishops he must have attended at least the greater of Edward’s courts. His position was delicate. He was a king’s man in Godwin’s earldom, a representative of foreign culture in a conservative province, an advocate of the Rule of St. Chrodegang in a church which referred the Rule of St. Benedict. His insecurity may have made him prudent.124

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122 Conner, *Anglo-Saxon Exeter*, 149.
Still, he accomplished a great deal for his church, recovering lands and acquiring supplies and materials, including books. In fact, Elaine Treharne argues in her chapter “The Bishop’s Book: Leofric’s Homiliary and Eleventh-century Exeter” that his work in collecting for the scriptorium was itself an act of protection of his church:

Through his instigation of the collection and collation of manuscripts and grants, he can be shown to have modelled himself, perhaps, on a figure like Wiulfstan I of Worcester—as a reformer, a lawgiver, an ecclesiastic with a firm regard for the development, security, administration and pastoral care of his diocese. The pieces selected for inclusion within his homiliary, rather like the wide range of materials gathered in his Missal, Collectar and other Latin and vernacular codices and diplomatic records, indicate Leofric’s personal mission to create a body of texts that protected his own cathedral and canons, but also the parishioners with whom he came into contact.125

It is not hard, then, to understand Leofric’s appreciation for books in general, nor his appreciation for collections of wide variety like the Exeter Book.

One must, then, also examine the institution that has been host to the Book for nearly one thousand years: Exeter Cathedral and its Library. Like the Book, the cathedral’s history is only generally known. Writing in the last years of the nineteenth century, Percy Addleshaw gives a brief but encompassing summary of the establishment of the cathedral in Exeter:

The first record of a church dedicated to SS. Mary and Peter in Exeter, is that of an abbey church founded by Athelstan. But Sweyn destroyed it seventy years later, and it seems frequently to have been attacked by invaders previous to its destruction. But in 1019 Canute endowed a new church and confirmed by charter their lands and privileges to the monks. This building must have been of some pretensions, for it was given to Leofric for his cathedral church in 1050.126

In fact, the inseparable nature of the Cathedral and the Book leads Addleshaw to comment only a few lines lower that

Leofric proved a hard-working and wise prelate, and gave generously of lands and moneys to his church. He had found it but poorly furnished, the wardrobe containing “one worthless priest’s dress.” He also remembered it in his will, and the great “Liber Exoniensis” [sic] was his gift. 127

The following eleven pages are then dedicated to a description of the bishops who followed Leofric and the cathedral that slowly arose from their efforts. Warelwast, Leofric’s successor, tore down the building Cnut had built and raised a Norman-style church in its stead, and the construction work then passed to subsequent bishops, each of whom contributed parts to the long project of building. 128 Addleshaw’s main purpose, however, was to provide a material history of the Cathedral as a whole, looking at the very stuff from which it is wrought, area by area, as well as several of the interesting objects that reside there. Remarkable, as well, are the photographs included with the account, which depict the cathedral before it was damaged by German bombs in the Second World War.

Much more detailed and technical, if less directly applicable to the current study, is Audrey M. Erskine’s The Accounts of the Fabric of Exeter Cathedral, 1279-1353. 129 Over two volumes, Erskine publishes an English translation of the abbreviated Latin text of the Fabric Rolls of Exeter Cathedral, giving a precise account of what materials were acquired, for what purpose, and from where. Such a list is useful for the purposes of determining timelines and getting a general sense of how the construction proceeded, but it does not provide insight into reasoning or purpose. For that, one must turn instead to Jean A. Givens, who uses these Rolls to make larger points about the creation of sculpted elements to the architecture.

127 Addleshaw, Cathedral Church, 3.
128 Addleshaw, Cathedral Church, 14.
Although accounts do not make for exciting reading in themselves, the insight that these Rolls provide gives valuable insight into the social and economic structures that supported the Cathedral’s growth. Givens uses entries for cartage fees and workers’ wages, for instance, to argue that those who performed decorative carving were able to work off-site. This kind of window into day-to-day activities extends beyond sculpture, as well:

Still another form of account is illustrated by the case of Master Thomas the Plumber and his servant, who were paid the high wage of 6s. per week to roof the new building in lead. In this case, materials were provided and the lead purchased separately. Master Thomas was paid for three weeks and three days at the end of Midsummer term 1303-1304, rather than by the week—suggesting a contractual arrangement rather than steady employment. And he was seven times paired with “his boy” (cum garcione) between 1302 and 1317.130

The cost of painters, masons, and laborers and the materials with which they worked gives an even more important insight into the context of the Exeter Book: a cathedral that could afford this kind of construction could also afford a well-stocked scriptorium.

Focusing on the Library itself, however, not as a space within the cathedral but rather as a collection of books, Treharne again provides much-needed context for Leofric’s time. In her article “Producing a Library in Late Anglo-Saxon England: Exeter, 1050-1072,” she points out the scriptorium at Exeter produced a relatively large body of work during his episcopacy. Starting with the work of Elaine Drage131 and her documentation of the growth of Exeter’s library, Treharne examines the evidence not only for manuscript creation at Exeter, but also the impetus behind their creation and the significance of that realization, eventually concluding that, as a monastic cathedral, Exeter should have been less invested in

the production of manuscripts than the surviving manuscripts show it actually was. This is significant for our study of Exeter manuscripts in general, as Treharne points out:

And this issue matters: without having an informed judgement of the reasons behind a manuscript’s compilation; without having a clearer picture of why these particular manuscripts or groups of manuscripts were produced and, as specifically as possible, for whom, scholars working on the production of the vernacular will be researching in a culturally uncertain context.¹³²

In the case of Leofric and Exeter Cathedral Library, however, she provides evidence that a great deal of effort and many resources were dedicated to the production of manuscripts, and the fact the production “seems to have ceased immediately on Leofric’s death demonstrates the motivational drive of the bishop in gathering materials and scribes to provide the tools for his work.”¹³³ It is in the context of Leofric’s understanding of the value of texts and the value he placed in them that we must consider his acquisition of the Exeter Book.

The Big Picture

Thinking about objects and our relationship to and with them is a broad pursuit. There are a number of implications when we consider how we create and use things and how those things, in turn, transform and remake us. Objects that carry the written word, however, are a different class of object than those that simply operate as things. The cultural value of such objects is transformed by text and, in the case of books, is often subsumed by it. A broad understanding of the use of material culture affords us the opportunity to look at the Exeter Book with a wide lens, understanding it in terms of its social, cultural, historical, and individual connections and impacts.

¹³³ Treharne, “Producing a Library,” 172.
Sociologically, these relationships must be understood as a part of larger networks of objects that are, themselves, interconnected. If one accepts Lévi-Strauss’s central argument in *The Way of the Masks*, then we must look to the other objects that form the matrix in which the *Exeter Book* existed if we are to understand the *Exeter Book* itself. Conner’s work on the manuscripts that are known to have been in the Exeter Cathedral Library at the same time provides links to other books, a vital piece of the puzzle, while the archaeological records of the cathedral itself and the surrounding areas are another. Perhaps the most significant element of the equation, however, are the events that shaped the time. As Csikszentmihalyi points out, humanity creates things because it has developed the need for them and, indeed, the things we have shape the needs we have for further things. The *Exeter Book* is a record of a need that had developed in the tenth century and it fulfilled needs as a text until it could no longer be read; at that point, its physical traits allowed it to continue fulfilling needs that further established connections between people, as well as between people and books. Thinking of it in those terms, the *Exeter Book* becomes more than just an anthology of poetry. It becomes a way of keeping that poetry at hand for a purpose about which we may only be able to speculate, but even that speculation is instructive. Looking at why particular texts were saved and why they are arranged as they are allows us to more effectively ask questions about who made the book and what they wanted it to do. It is also important to remember that the *Exeter Book* has a long history in a single location, which means that it has an important connection to not just a single place and time, but to a community as it developed, creating an even more interesting relationship between the manuscript and the building and city that grew around it.

With regards to literature, the *Exeter Book* is unique in its ability to “scale up” to the social level in our understanding due precisely to that long connection with Exeter itself.
Because we can establish a timeline around its whereabouts, we can look to its text and understand the relationship between poetry and history. Equally important, however, are its interesting “scaled down” ties to a single historical individual, bishop Leofric. From this duality, we can attempt to understand how the book and its texts fit in with a figure whose influence was significant to the surrounding community. These connections form a focal point that allows us to look further, to make additional connections, and to establish patterns of action that may not have been clear if the provenance of the physical object were different or unknown. Additionally, we can consider the objects that are depicted within the texts and learn about general social and cultural attitudes about things in an abstract sense. Willa Cather’s attempt to declutter literature by removing its furniture has interesting consequences, as we will see in the discussion of *Guthlac B*, but Trilling’s response is more typical of the texts of the *Exeter Book*: they make use of objects throughout. It is speculation to say that to do otherwise leaves the narratives of these poems feeling bare and flat in the eyes of the intended audience, but it is not difficult to see how it could be the case.

Conclusions

The intersections between textual and material culture are difficult to navigate, and the volume of scholarship on all sides is a testament to the amount of effort and thought that has gone into this enterprise. The distinction between an object of material culture and a textual reference to such an object is an important one to make, however. On the one hand, a physical object is filled with details that can be accessed through the right training and through careful observation. On the other, the vast majority of objects come to us without contemporary context; we know little about what these objects are or what their original users thought of them (if, indeed, they thought anything at all). Objects that are rendered in
text, however, are only given the attributes that their creators intend, and therefore are inseparable from the ideas that those creators and their intended audiences had about the object.

Ideas about material culture that have developed along disciplinary lines are useful, at least to some degree, in the evaluation of these textual representations of objects, as well. Sociologically, the impact of objects on the development of culture, especially a society that values objects, cannot be overstated, while the ability of objects to create relationships with their creators, owners, and users gives us a deeper model of how material culture fits into literature. Anthropologically and archaeologically, complex physical objects that must be interpreted according to every nuanced clue are transformed into simplified, nearly Platonic forms of themselves, but those objects still retain their social and interpersonal significance in relation to each other and the characters with whom they interact. Objects, it seems, can even have agency, a point that is perhaps less strange to consider in a literary context than in one of normal, everyday physical existence.

The specific application of these principles to the study of early English literature produces important insights, especially for a culture from which we are so far removed. Objects that have clear cultural value, such as weapons or ships, may be easy to identify and understand, but other, less obvious objects, such as cups or doors, also have roles to play in the minds of contemporary audiences. By accessing these objects through text, however, we access not the physical form but an early English understanding of it, complete with the context in which those objects appear.
Chapter 2: The Christ Poems

Perhaps the most surprising thing about the types of objects described in the religious narratives of the *Exeter Book* is the sheer number of references to buildings and structures. With 149 of 429 total references to material culture over the span of the first five poems alone, 34.73 percent of these occurrences—over a third—are specifically tied to structures, either in the form of freestanding buildings or objects that define a space (a house or a prison, for example), parts of larger buildings (e.g., gates or doors), or constructions that stand on their own without encompassing a space, such as Guthlac’s cross. Such a frequency of references is clearly disproportionate and leaves little doubt that buildings and other constructions play an important role in the ways the early English made use of religious stories. What remains, then, is to see how these objects are used in each of the poems and what connections can be made between them.

Scholars have long recognized the importance of buildings, structures, and architecture in Old English poetry. P. J. Frankis, in his 1973 article “The Thematic Significance of *enta geweorc* and Related Imagery in *The Wanderer,*” argues that Christian poets capitalized on the similarities between their own tradition and that of the Germanic peoples, evoking Christian themes out of scenes where objects appear. This includes the stone ruins of *The Wanderer,* which are characterized as being the work of giants,1 while only a year later, Kathryn Hume addresses the topic of architecture more directly in her article “The Concept of the Hall in Old English Poetry,” where she asserts that “Both in religious contexts and those not overtly so the hall, its enemies, and the anti-hall provide the vocabulary for what appear to be the principal Anglo-Saxon existential metaphors.”2 Other scholars continued

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this line of inquiry, as well. In 1995, for example, Anita R. Riedinger examined the term “home” in Old English poetry.\(^3\) Indeed, the relationship between what the early English wrote and what they built continues to garner scholarly attention; entire dissertations have recently been written on the subject, not to mention numerous articles and book chapters,\(^4\) while Lori Ann Garner dedicates an entire monograph to the subject with her *Structuring Spaces: Oral Poetics and Architecture in Early Medieval England*.\(^5\) Indeed, construction and creation, in terms of both material culture and its textual counterparts, figure strongly throughout the *Exeter Book*.

For the purposes of this chapter, we will look most closely at the three poems that comprise what was once thought to be a single collection of works that scholars called “*The Crist of Cynewulf*.”\(^6\) Collected in the *Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records* by Krapp and Dobbie as *Christ I*, *Christ II*, and *Christ III*, these works almost certainly were intended to be read as a unit, though most scholars now agree that they do not share an author. Muir, however, decided to provide more descriptive titles for these three works: *The Advent Lyrics*, *The Ascension*, and *Christ in Judgement*. The first presents a few difficulties for the current study, however: although it is clear that there are a number of instances of buildings and structures referenced in its 439 lines, the scholarly community has long been divided on the subject of whether *The Advent Lyrics* should be considered a single poem at all. Strictly speaking, the

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\(^6\) Brother Augustine Philip, “The Exeter Scribe and the Unity of the *Crist*,” *PMLA* 55, no. 4 (December 1940): 903.
“poem” is actually comprised of twelve shorter lyric poems, all loosely united by the common theme of Advent, the season shortly before the celebration of the Nativity. Scholars like Anya Adair have persuasively argued that these poems were written independently from each other by different authors and were never intended by their authors to be part of a connected whole, while others, such as Brother Augustine Philip, have demonstrated that there is no inherent link between them, basing his argument on the use of a systematic scheme “of spacing, capitalization, and end-marking adopted by the scribe.” Given this, one could justify an argument that the poem should be edited as twelve discrete pieces and handled as though they were unrelated. Still, there are other points here that also bear consideration. The first, and certainly not the least, is the fact that although these poems may not have been written together, we do know that they were assembled as a part of a collection. Moreover, as Roy M. Liuzza argues,

Rather than textual unity in the modern sense, these Exeter Book poems—a series extending from Christ I to Juliana and perhaps beyond—share a certain thematic, and to an extent stylistic, harmony that can only be called codicological or scribal unity. To read any of these poems in isolation is to confine oneself to an excerpt from a longer and more complex work; the fact that this work was in all probability done by scribes rather than authors does not detract from its literary value or interest.

Thus, although this could never be construed as an act of authorial intent, the inclusion and arrangement of these elements makes clear that there is value in understanding these works as belonging together. Indeed, because of its nature as a miscellany, the act of including a poem in the Exeter Book is an act of creation itself. Additionally, not all of the collection of

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Lyrics displays an interest in the use of buildings or structures, but those that do make it a subject worth examining.

The Advent Lyrics

Although discussing the way in which the individual poems of the Advent Lyrics are arranged with respect to each other may not seem entirely germane in a study of the material objects depicted in the poetry, there are two important reasons for doing so. First, much like the Exeter Book itself, this smaller, Russian nesting doll of a collection within a collection is a conscious and quite physical grouping of poems designed to stand together as a single unit, by the anthologizing scribe if not the authors. Indeed, the very fact that these independent works have been organized from a particular point of view in order to create a meaningful relationship between them that is greater than the simple sum of their individual meanings forces one to consider the larger question of how meaning is created through relationships.

Deleuze and Guattari’s A Thousand Plateaus provides the groundwork for the discussion of such “assemblages,” establishing that individual parts can exist externally from the system to which they belong and can, indeed, function in other ways within other assemblages.

Perhaps the best example Deleuze and Guattari use throughout their large and rather complex work occurs in their fourth chapter, where they state that

The assemblages are in constant variation, are themselves constantly subject to transformations. First, the circumstances must be taken into account: Benveniste clearly demonstrates that a performative statement is nothing outside of the circumstances that make it performative. Anybody can shout, “I declare a general mobilization,” but in the absence of an effectuated variable giving that person the right to make such a statement it is an act of puerility or insanity, not an act of enunciation. This is also true of “I love you,” which has neither meaning nor subject nor addressee outside of circumstances that not only give it credibility but make it a veritable assemblage, a power marker, even in the case of an unhappy love (it is still by

10 For a full discussion of the sources for each of the Lyrics, see Muir, Exeter Anthology, 2:395-400.
a will to power that one obeys…). The general term “circumstances” should not leave the impression that it is a question only of external circumstances. “I swear” is not the same when said in the family, at school, in a love affair, in a secret society, or in a court: it is not the same thing, and neither is it the same statement; it is not the same bodily situation, and neither is it the same incorporeal transformation.¹¹

For Deleuze and Guattari, then, context plays an integral part not only in the external situation in which communication functions, but also the internal situations under which that communication is both initially composed and then subsequently received and interpreted. It is not just the various settings and their relationship to the phrase itself that alter the meaning of “I swear,” though. The sender and receiver of the phrase are also subtly altered by the change in circumstances, and the circumstances can be subtly changed by the sender, the receiver, and the message. It is, for example, entirely possible to create the circumstances wherein the phrase “I swear” is understood in the same way in the courtroom as it would be between two lovers, but then the circumstances themselves would have additional meaning that the sender and the receiver of the message would need to take into account, and even then the same meaning does not necessarily indicate the same function.

This line of questioning was then refined by Manuel DeLanda, who makes a direct connection between this framework and the study of sociology:

In other words, unlike taxonomic essentialism, in which genus, species and individual are separate ontological categories, the ontology of assemblages is flat since it contains nothing but differently scaled individual singularities (orbecosities). As far as social ontology is concerned, this implies that persons are not the only individual entities involved in social processes, but also individual communities, individual organizations, individual cities and individual nation-states.¹²

One can see how such an approach could be used to consider and organize relationships within the study of literature. The inherent complexity of assemblages places the primary importance of meaning not within the individual parts themselves, but in their relationships to the other parts of the assemblage, meaning that each individual Lyric can and must be understood on its own terms, but also as a part of the whole Advent Lyrics, where they must also be understood in terms of how they relate and connect with one another. This, then, leads to the second, and perhaps more significant reason why a discussion of the assemblage of the Advent Lyrics is significant within a discussion of material culture: the references to material culture are a part of the assemblages that interact, meaning that the objects that are used throughout the discussion have impacts on later poems, even if only by the fact that they were read in a specific order. In this way, the overwhelming importance of Structure terms in Lyric One acts as a first impression, affecting how the rest of the poems must be seen, while also acting as the hub which connects all other instances of Structure references in the poems.

A meticulous and wide-reaching examination of the Advent Lyrics through this lens would be profitable, but this sort of analysis lies outside the scope of our current study. Instead, recognizing the central concept of assemblages and the way they dictate meaning within larger, more complex structures, allows us to consider a more practical example of how these principles come into play. Perhaps the best modern analogy I can make, and one that makes my age uncomfortably clear, is that of the mix tape.\footnote{Paul V. Stock used a similar metaphor in an attempt to describe the work of sociologists. See “Sociology and the Mix Tape: A Metaphor of Creativity,” The American Sociologist 41, vol. 3 (Oct. 2010): 277-91.} The practice of teenagers in the last two decades of the twentieth century of copying specific songs in a specific order onto a cassette was not just an act of (illegally) disseminating songs that the maker of the mix
tape liked. The song selection and organization were often important and had meaning to both the giver and the receiver. We see a similarly discerning eye in the *Advent Lyrics*. There is a clear juxtaposition of earth and heaven in the twelve surviving poems of the *Advent Lyrics*; in the first six poems, the assemblage begins with a focus on the world as it exists before Christ’s return, casting it in terms of a prison, with the focus within that first half slowly shifting to heaven and the celebration of the two figures responsible for humanity’s ability to achieve it: Christ and the woman who bore him as a mortal child.

Moreover, this sort of creation through assemblage and alteration ties in with the questions of the oral tradition and its impact on the literate culture of early England. The nature of the scribe as both a receiver of the text and a transmitter of that same text means that the intermediary will always have some impact on the product, whether simply as a result of error or by some other, more creative impetus, and it does seem as though the alteration of text to a particular purpose would fall within the ideas of acceptable use for early English scribes. As Katherine O’Brien O’Keefe mentions in her study *Visible Song*,

The poet and performer have active roles in producing and reproducing oral verse. The audience, in receiving such performances, remember, approve or disapprove, but their participation is essentially passive. The scribe, in receiving the text, is a special case of audience, and as a reproducer of text is a special case of performer. His performance as a ‘formulaic’ reader is thus always at odds with his normally passive reception as copyist, and muddles often arise from the conflation of the two roles of language-producer and visual-reproducer. Truly formulaic reading is no more consciously productive of variance than oral performance. In formulaic reading (the hybrid of ‘literate’ and oral reception), the relative passivity required of a reader/copyist (as against the activity of a poet or performer) almost guarantees that any modifications other than simple lexical substitution will leave traces of change.¹⁴

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Although the scope of O’Brien O’Keefe’s point is much narrower, the idea that the scribe could not function as a merely passive vector of transmission, but was by necessity an active, thinking element in the process, applies here, as well. Moreover, such transformation may even have been an expected part of the copying process, much as an audience member would have expected some variation in the text of an oral performance of a work, whereas we, from a modern perspective, expect a text to remain essentially static, an attitude that can no doubt be traced to the advent of mechanical means of reproduction of texts (another impact of material culture on the texts we read). Again, O’Brien O’Keefe points out that

[l]iterate ideology is to blame for another difficulty in our understanding of the condition of medieval reading. This difficulty arises from the Platonic abstraction of the modern edited text, be it optimist or recensionist, which presents us with a remade, often hybrid, work, stripped of its context, its spatial arrangement and its points. The brilliant and indispensable philology which produced the edition we study today nonetheless privileges an idea of composition over actual, realized texts which medieval readers had to hand.15

In keeping with the theme of modern music, we can look to the role of the radio disc jockey to understand the function of such alteration. Often responsible for stitching together songs and information into a consistent experience for the listener, a DJ acts in much the same way as the connective changes we can see between the poems of the Exeter Book. Thus, we must look to those texts with the understanding that alteration was an accepted reality in the creation of copied works, just as alteration of a poem by its oral performer would have been. Adjusting the content for a purpose certainly makes sense.

Of the twelve shorter works that appear in The Advent Lyrics, only seven contain occurrences of words that refer to architecture: Lyrics One, Two, Three, Seven, Eight, Nine, and Ten. Of these, perhaps the most significant is Lyric One, which uses not only buildings,
but the act of building and the actions of the builders as a metaphor for God’s creation of
the world and an argument for the builders to return to fix what has fallen into disrepair.
Indeed, of the eleven words evoking objects of material culture in the 17-line poem, four
refer to free-standing buildings or groups of buildings: bealle (“hall,” 4), eorðb[yr]g (“earth-
city,” 7), weorc (“work,” meaning “building,” 11), and his (“house,” 14). A further five of the
terms in the poem refer to parts of buildings, one pointing to the hrofe (“roof,” 14), while the
other four describe walls or what they are made of: weallstan (“wall-stone,” 2), weallas (“walls,”
5), and weall wið wealle (“wall against wall,” 11). The remaining two terms, flint (“flint, stone,”
6) and łamen (“clay,” 15) may not be structures themselves, but they are certainly references
to materials that can be used in building them.

Such an extended metaphor and an extended use of references to related material
objects is significant, if for no other reason than its completeness. With every term of
material culture related in some way to structures or buildings, the effect of the fragmentary
first poem is almost like an overture, providing the audience with a clear prelude to the
upcoming poems. There are other object types used throughout the Lyrics, but none are as
unified or consistent, nor do any of the other object types appear as frequently in subsequent
poems. As such, it is worth our time to examine how this type of object is used through the
rest of the Advent Lyrics.

Lyrics Two and Three make far less use of architecture as a controlling idea,
although the themes still remain important. Lyric Two uses only five terms of material
culture in its 32 lines, with only locan (“enclosure/stronghold,” 19) and careerne (“prison,” 25)
being structures in a clearly recognizable sense. A third, bodman (“grave,” 45), could be
considered a structure, as it is both constructed by humans and most often intended to
house a human, albeit in death. The other two terms, þing (“thing,” 25) and giofu (“gift,” 42),
are far more generic, and do not necessarily refer to a material object at all; in fact, giofu in this case is specifically defined as a giofu gæstlic, or spiritual gift. Lyric Three, similarly, contains only seven terms, and only one, hrof (“roof,” 60), describes part of a structure, although five more can be understood as either literal or figurative references to cities: cynestola (“kin-stool/throne,” 51); burglond (“city-land/native city,” 51); eþelstol (“native seat/native city,” 52); eard (“native place/yard,” 63); and burga (“cities,” 66). The seventh, benda (“bonds,” 68), connects the themes of imprisonment and restraint in Lyric Three to those of Lyric Two.

These occurrences become more significant when one considers their appearance within the context of the poems’ content. Lyric One, as mentioned above, is especially significant because it considers the earth to be the architectural creation of God, extending the metaphor beyond just the creation itself and into the realm of the creator, who also possesses the ability to repair what he has constructed. This poem is, thus, primarily concerned with the mortal world, a place where both buildings and those who live in them are subject to failure. Lyrics Two and Three, on the other hand, increasingly place the afterlife at their centers. Lyric Two begins by addressing God as one who excludes the unworthy from an enclosed heaven:

Eala þu recce… ond þu riht cyning
se þe locan healed…  lif ontyneð,
cadgu[m] upwegas,  ofrum forwyneð
wlitigan wiÐpes,  gif his weorc ne deag. (18-21)

Oh, you ruler and upright King,
he who keeps watch over the stronghold, admits life,
the way to heaven for the happy, refusing to the others
the beautiful desired journey, if his deeds are virtuous.

Indeed, the author even refers to the faithful as those who waste away in prison, a structure that is also meant to exclude, although it keeps the undesirables (in this case, humanity,
which is tainted by sin) in a particular place (the prison of this mortal world) rather than out: “we in carcerne / sittað sorgende” (“we sit, sorrowing in prison,” 25-26). These points, however, are concentrated at the very start of the poem, echoing the metaphor from Lyric One. The remainder of the poem is dedicated to Christ’s arrival on earth and his role as savior, leaving only one more reference to an object of material culture:

Eal giofu gæstlic     grund sceat geondspreot;
þær wisna fela     weard inlihted
lare longsome     þurh lifes fruman
þe ær under hoðman     biholen lægon. . .(42-5)

Spiritual gifts shall grow throughout all the region of earth;
many wise ones became enlightened
to enduring lore through Life’s Beginning
which earlier lay hidden beneath the grave. . .

As mentioned above, a grave is an object of material culture, and it can be seen as a structure that is specifically intended to house the body of a human being, albeit after death. This additional structure at the end, however, stands between the status of the two structures mentioned earlier in the Lyric. Specifically, though hoðman is used here to contain and exclude humanity, entering it was also the only means by which humanity could access the wisdom of the afterlife. The grave, then, was the only gate to the wisdom of heaven until Christ’s birth and His sharing of divine knowledge that will help guide humanity on its desirable journey. Thus, material objects in Lyric Two act to constrain and confine, but they also give rise to an end to that constraint and confinement. Prisons keep people in, but that means there must be an outside, just as graves contain the remains of those who will be raised at Judgement Day. These objects exist, then, at a transition between the earthly constructions of Lyric One and the goal of being admitted into heaven.

Lyric Three, with its direct address to Jerusalem and continued references to cities, completes that transition. Here, the structures do not serve to block or exclude humanity;
instead, they are welcoming places that are impervious to the failings inherent to structures (and people) on earth. This point is made clear almost immediately:

Eala sibbe gesihð, sancta Hicurusalem,
cynestola cyst, Cristes burglond,
engla eðelstol, ond þa ane in þe
saule soðfæstra simle gerestað,
wuldrum hremge. Næfre wommes tacn
in þam eardgerarde eawed weorþeð,
ac þe firina gehwylc feor abugeð,
wærgðo ond gewinnes. (49-57)

O vision of peace, holy Jerusalem,
best of royal seats, city-land of Christ,
native seat of angels, and there in you alone
the souls of the truth-fast rest eternally,
exulting glories. Never a token of corruption
shall become manifest in the yard,
but each sin shall bend far from you,
condemnation and conflict.

The reference to Jerusalem, of course, functions on more than one level. The early English may have been isolated and distant from the Holy Land, but as Katharine Scarfe Beckett points out, Bede was aware of several individuals who had made the pilgrimage from such outlying areas, including Arculf, a Gaul, and even St. Willibald, a nephew to St. Boniface who set out with his father and brother to visit Jerusalem in 720.¹⁶ As a result, there can be no doubt that the English perceptions of the historical and physical city would have been on the minds of the author and intended audiences of the poem.

That does not, however, mean that the earthly city was the only, or even the most important, idea to be suggested by these lines. The Book of Revelation references another, spiritual version of the city, called the New Jerusalem, and it is this city that most early English would have considered more important, not only because they were unlikely ever to

see its earthly counterpart, but also because the New Jerusalem represented the goal of salvation. That is not, however, to say that it remained in heaven; indeed, Revelation is specific that the entire city will descend to earth from above, connecting heaven and earth for those who achieve salvation. The idea of an entire city descending to earth is startling, but Revelation is insistent on this point, with the idea occurring twice:

He that shall overcome, I will make him a pillar in the temple of my God; and he shall go out no more; and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, the new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God, and my new name.\(^17\)

And I John saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband.\(^18\)

New Jerusalem, then, is quite literally a little piece of heaven on earth, complete with the incorruptible and eternal attributes that its heavenly origins imply. This is the nature of the city described in Lyric Three, the “native seat of angels,” where “the souls of the truth-fast rest eternally” and “[n]ever a token of corruption / shall become manifest in the yard.”

Moreover, the material objects listed here are associated with beauty, virtue, and the release of limitations and faults. Even if not understood as metaphors, the cynestola and eþelstol in the first three lines refer to seats of regal and noble character, while the text explicitly associates the burglond with Christ himself. Later in the poem, Christ also “nimeð eard in þe” (“takes dwelling in you,” 63), again associating a location, this time Mary’s womb (described as a dwelling or native place), with the savior, leaving no doubt that these places are as elevated in character as any holy or royal site. This agrees with the description of the burga of Jerusalem being described as betlicast (“most excellent,” 66). Regarding the dismissal of limitations, the expressly structural rodores hrof is not merely a reference to the “roof of the

\(^{17}\) Rev. 3:12 (Douay-Rheims Version, emphasis mine).

\(^{18}\) Rev. 21:2 (DRV, emphasis mine).
heavens,” but is also described as *rume* (“vast,” 60), a word that echoes the elimination of limitations described when Christ *benda onlyseyd* (“loosens bonds,” 68).

The result of these three Lyrics being read together is a progression from a solidly terrestrial and flawed world created by a divine builder to the arrival of a divine and perfect city upon earth. This arc is at least relatable to the subject of Advent itself: the world is oppressed and broken, but Christ is born to Mary and provides a way for the faithful to achieve salvation, so that those who live well can find their way to the New Jerusalem. This same unity is reflected in the material objects. The stone walls and roofs over houses depicted in Lyric One are still limiting, enclosing structures that remain subject to worldly faults; there is a reason that the Measurer, or God envisioned as an architect, is required to come and reconstruct what has fallen into disrepair. The walls and enclosures that are representative of the world in Lyric One give way to a dichotomy in Lyric Two: structures can be places of safety and security or places of incarceration and suffering. Only in Lyric Three do we find that the objects evoked must be associated with nobility and goodness; here, even the bonds are loosened, meaning their function in the poem is to act not as an object of limitation, but an object that, in its being discarded, represents release and newfound freedom. Of course, we cannot forget that at least one folio has been lost from the beginning of the *Advent Lyrics*, so it is entirely possible that there may have been more to this associated arc of lyrics; as Muir points out, however, there is little to be gained from speculating exactly how much has been lost. 19 We can only interpret the data we have, and the beginning of the manuscript as we currently know it indicates that the first three poems achieve a meaningful unity.

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In contrast to the first three, however, Lyrics Four and Five contain no terms of material culture at all. Instead, we see the poems transition from discussions of Christ’s birth and how it affects the world to the celebration of the two central figures of Advent: Mary and Christ. Lyric Four lauds Mary for her unique position as the only virgin to have ever given birth and wonders at the miracle and how it was achieved before allowing her to answer the questions directly in her own voice, saying that the mystery is incomprehensible to the minds of humans. Lyric Five then turns to celebrate Christ himself and asks Him to light the darkness of the world while reiterating the fact that He dwelled among humans. Even this point, however, does not serve to focus the attention of the audience upon earthly concerns:

God wæs mid us
gesewen butan synnum; somod eardedon
mihtig meotudes bearn ond se monnes sunu
geþwære on þeode. (124-27)

God was seen with us
without sin, dwelled together
the mighty child of the Measurer and the son of man,
accord among the people.

Here, the lack of material objects and location serves to remove the earthly context entirely. Thus, instead of placing Christ on earth, the passage seems to associate Christ and humanity together in an agreeable relationship, an arrangement that will be enjoyed in the New Jerusalem referenced earlier. Even the point made at the end of the poem, which states that “he hine sylfne us sendan wolde” (“he wished to send himself to us”), makes clear that the welfare of the people is the central concern of the poem, not their flawed nature as denizens of a sinful world. These two poems, then, continue the arc from earth to the afterlife by expanding the discussion of humanity’s ability to achieve salvation and gain access into
heaven, and the removal of material objects from their contents helps the focus remain on that goal.

This arc, however, has another possible destination, and thus the scribe returns again to the concerns of the world in Lyric Six, in which the poet entreats Christ to see the suffering of the peoples of the world and release them from it. Like the previous poem, Lyric Six opens with a direct address to Christ, and again the central theme of the poem is an appeal to the Savior to free and protect the faithful. Although the poem contains only one reference to objects of material culture, bendum (“bonds,” 147), it occurs 18 lines into the 34-line poem, placing it as close to the absolute center as possible in a poem with an even number of lines. Moreover, the use of bendum echoes the themes of incarceration and suffering so strongly created in Lyric Two, a point that is strengthened by the fact that it follows the only reference to hell in any of the Lyrics:

þætte sunu meotudes sylfa wolde
gefälsian foldan mægðe
swylce grundas eac gestes mægne
siþe gesecan. (143-46)

… that the son of the Measurer himself wished
to cleanse the tribes of the earth,
(and) likewise seek a journey
to the depths with might of spirit.

The “depths” (grundas) here, of course, refers to Christ’s harrowing of hell, reinforcing Christ’s role as a liberator and savior while also creating parallels between the tormented souls He rescues from hell and those who remain on earth, awaiting salvation. Thus, not only does the single instance of an object of material culture stand out due to its singular nature in the poem itself, it stands out as an exception for the past three poems while connecting to an earlier poem in this arc. The addition of hell to the landscape here is an exception, and the brevity and subtlety of its mention certainly do not distract from the
central focus on Christ’s birth, as opposed to His actions after his death, but hell’s presence in the poem also provides the missing side of the equation. Yes, the emphasis is on the Nativity, but the Second Coming is a direct result of the First. As such, the occurrence of bendum of line 147 provides a point of connection that binds the first half of the Advent Lyrics together in a single, concentrated point.

Lyric Seven begins the second half of this small collection of poems by breaking dramatically from the tone and format of the preceding works by shifting into a dialogue between an understandably unhappy and concerned Joseph and an unwavering Mary. This shift is also marked by a return of material objects, and specifically structures, occurring within the poem, and although the number is relatively small, their use also helps to create a distinction between what came before and what follows after. Material objects are referenced four times: temple (“temple,” 186), stanum (“stones,” 192), geardum (“yards” or “dwellings,” 201), and tempel (“temple,” 206). Of those, only two describe a structure, and, in fact, they both describe the same structure, albeit in different ways. The first, temple (“temple,” 186), refers to the quite literal temple in which Joseph took Mary as his wife, while the second, tempel (“temple,” 206), acts as Mary’s description of the transformation of her body into the vessel that would deliver Christ into human form. It is worth pointing out, as well, that the other two terms used in this Lyric, although not Structure words themselves, are clearly related to them: the stanum (“stones,” 192), used here to indicate a potential method of execution for a possibly adulterous Mary, are also objects used in the earlier group of Lyrics as a building material (one that is specifically employed by God the creator); and geardum (“yards/dwelling places,” 201) indicate occupied spaces, such as those that surround structures.
Words associated with Structure objects appear in Lyric Eight, as well, although the number of terms drops again, this time to two, which occur together in the latter half of the poem. The phrase *gyldnan geatu* ("golden gates," 251) describes a structure that separates heaven from earth:

\[
\begin{align*}
\tau u \ \tau isne \ \tau middangeard & \quad \text{milde geblissa} \\
\tau urh \ \tau ðinne \ \tau hercyme, & \quad \text{hælende Crist,} \\
ond \ \tau ga \ \tau gyldnan \ \tau geatu, & \quad \tau e \ \text{in \ geardagum} \\
\tau ul \ \tau longe \ \tau ær & \quad \tau bilocen \ \tau stodan, \\
\text{heofona \ heahfrea,} & \quad \text{hat \ ontynan} \\
ond \ \tau usic \ \tau þonne \ \tau gesce & \quad \tau urh \ \tau þin \ \tau sylfes \ \tau gong \\
\tau eaðmod \ \tau to \ \tau eorðan. (249-55)
\end{align*}
\]

Mildly make you this middle-earth joyous through your coming here, holy Christ, and the golden gates which, in days of yore, full long before stood locked, high lord of heaven, command to open and then seek us through your own course, humble, on earth.

The golden Gates of Heaven, of course, continue as a trope within our own modern consciousness. Just as they did for the early English, those gates now represent the point at which the soul ultimately is judged. They are the means by which God excludes those whom He finds unworthy, as was mentioned in Lyric Two, and they offer a clear and powerful representation of earthly structures influencing spiritual ideas.

Johanna Kramer’s recent monograph *Between Heaven and Earth* also provides an informative and valuable insight into the literary and theological significance of gates and similar structures. While the majority of her argument on the subject involves their role in the theology of the Ascension, she also explores the relationship between the two sides of
such barriers, the inside and the outside. In her discussion of “In Ascensione Domini,” a hymn for Vespers of Ascension Day credited to Bede,\(^\text{20}\) she points out that

Bede reinforces the barrier that Christ faces by emphatically underscoring the separation between the outside and the inside of heaven. One way in which he does this is by redistributing the speaking roles of the lines in Psalm 23, the source for this section. When Christ approaches the gates, accompanied by angels and the freed souls, Bede seizes the occasion to dramatize this moment. Rather than entering heaven without much difficulty, Christ has to stop before the gates and a verbal exchange occurs between the angel-heralds accompanying him and the angels on the celestial ramparts.\(^\text{21}\)

Gates, thresholds, and doorways, as well as the larger structures of which they are a part, thus clearly hold symbolic theological value well beyond their practical, everyday uses in the minds of the early English. In the hands of accomplished authors like Bede and Cynewulf, they become tools by which to understand complex ideas inherent in Christian doctrine. In this case, Kramer points out Bede’s assertion that it is Christ’s ability to open the gates of heaven that allows the souls He rescued from hell to enter heaven along with Him; His mortal life and sacrifice placed Him outside of paradise, and by opening the heavenly gates for Himself, he created the same opportunity for humanity. The fact that the gates are the only structures visible in the poem until the last line, then, helps to isolate and highlight their importance to the reader as the catalyst by which salvation is made possible.

Still, it is the practical value that informs and underlies the various metaphorical uses of such structures, and city walls and gates clearly had important impacts on the daily lives of those who lived and worked in those cities. Even in the case of old walls, such as the Roman construction that surrounded Exeter, the value was great enough to allow them not only to remain, but to be actively rebuilt and maintained. According to the nineteenth-century

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historian Alexander Jenkins, Æthelstan not only renovated and strengthened the walls and gates of Exeter in the early tenth century, he completely destroyed the Roman fortifications and built the city walls from the ground up, although more recent work by T. Clare finds that while the face may have been replaced, the core structure of the wall is “substantially Roman.” Regardless of when these renovations occurred, however, there can be no doubt that the wall was a significant defensive structure by the time of Alfred, who made Exeter one of four burhs in Devon. Such an expense of time and funds would have been noteworthy to anyone living nearby, including those who lived outside Exeter but needed to travel there in order to do business. Both Conner and Muir contend that the Exeter Book was written either at Exeter or in the nearby town of Crediton, so it is not unreasonable to consider Exeter’s walls and gates as a model, in basic form if not in scale or opulence, for those being referenced in the poetry. Sadly, none of the five gates survive, but what records remain indicate that the South and East gates in particular were large and imposing structures designed to discourage potential troublemakers as much as to physically block their access. As such, a bit of extrapolation and imagination would prove more than enough to transform these examples into a vision of their heavenly counterparts.

The gate in Lyric Eight is even more significant when we realize that its function of separating the worthy from the unworthy may be more than a simple action of judgement; it, too, can be an act of rescue:

\[
\text{Forþon we, nergend, þe} \\
\text{biddað geornlice breostgehygdum} \\
\text{þæt þu hrædllice helpe gefremme} \\
\text{wergum wreccan, þæt se wites bona} \\
\text{in helle grund hean gedreose,}
\]

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23 Clare, *Archaeological Sites*, 140.

24 Clare, *Archaeological Sites*, 93.
ond þin hondgeworc, hæleþa scyppend,
mote arisa ond on ryht cuman
to þam upcundan æþelan rice,
þonan us ær þurh synlust se swearta gest
forteah ond fortylde, þæt we, tires wone,
a butan ende sculon ermpu dreogan
butan þu usic þon ofostlicor, ece dryhten,
æt þam leodsceaþan, lifgende god,
helm alwihta, hreddan wille. (261-74)

Therefore, savior, we ask you yearnfully with (our) breast-thoughts that you quickly render aid, raise up the offenders, so the killer of wits shall fall away, abject, into the abyss of hell, and the work of your hands, shaper of men, may arise and come to the right to the honored celestial kingdom, from where, earlier, through lust for sin, the dark spirit misled and seduced us so that we, wanting in glory, without end must suffer misery unless you, Eternal Lord, then so much more hastily against the harmer of men, Living God, helmet of all creatures, decide to defend us.

The implication here is that, apart from His role as the final Judge, Christ is a defender and protector of humanity who separates us not only from the temptations of Satan, but from the spaces in earth and hell which he occupies. Thus, to ascend “to þam upcundan æþelan rice” (“to the noble, celestial kingdom,” 268) is to be separated from all those things that tempt and seduce one into wickedness. Heaven is the place where sin cannot exist, and, therefore, those in heaven are defended against it. Again, as in Lyric One, Christ is not just the builder of a defensive structure but is intrinsic to it: He is the wall, or, as the last line puts it, the “helmet of all creatures,” that separates humanity from external suffering, but He is also what stands between humanity and the suffering caused by its own synlust, or at least the places where that synlust can gain enough of a hold on one’s thoughts to create misery.

The imagery of gates and their function of either blocking or allowing access continues into Lyric Nine, which makes use of Isaiah’s vision of a massive, ornate heavenly
gate in order to underscore the importance of Christ’s birth and the assertion that He will be the only one to open that gate. Lyric Nine is also the poem with the greatest number of references to material culture in the *Advent Lyrics*, with a total of 16 terms. As one might expect, a large number (11 in total) of those terms refer specifically to a doorway or gate or to a part thereof: *ingong* (“entryway,” 308), *daru* (“door,” 309), *wundurclommum* (“wonderful bands,” 310), *forescyttelsas* (“fore-bolts,” 312), *ceasterblides* (“city gate,” 314), *cluster* (“lock,” 314), *gyldnan gatu* (“golden gates,” 318; the two words are separate terms), *locu* (“locks,” 321), *wealllor* (“wall-door,” 328), and, with the association to locks, *liopuægan* (“limb-key,” 334). Two others, *ham* (“home,” 305) and *burgissende* (“city-dwellers,” 337), are associated with buildings and structures, and it is reasonable to expect that the prevalence of discussion about gates, doors, and locks would create an insistence in the mind of the audience that would link these additional terms, if only tangentially.

Like Lyric One before it, Lyric Nine uses the imagery of buildings and structures as a central focus; the very real and concrete objects with which individuals in the audience would have interacted every day provide a solid footwork upon which the poem can draw in order to create understanding of complex theological concepts. Moreover, like Lyric One’s clear declaration of Christ’s identity (“*Đu eart se weallstan*”), Lyric Nine’s description of Isaiah’s vision of the gates of heaven concludes again with a simple declaration of how the metaphor should be interpreted by declaring to Mary, “*þu eart þæt wealldor*. There is no ambiguity in either case because, like the wall (and the door in that wall), Christ’s role as savior is to be understood as solid and unmoving, as real as the physical barrier that surrounds a city and protects it from external threats, while Mary’s is to be a conduit, first for the arrival of the Son of God and then as a direct mortal connection to the divine.
Further, the description of Isaiah’s vision holds another important but subtle point that serves to create a cohesive whole out of the separate poems in the *Advent Lyrics*, as well.

In order to underscore the impressiveness (and preciousness) of the door, the poem describes the moment in which Isaiah first sees it in the distance:

Wlat þa swa wisfæst     witga geond þeodland
ôðæt he gestarode     þær gestæþelad wæs
æþelic ingong.     Eal wæs gebunden
deoran since     duru ormæte,
wundurelommum bewriþen. (306-10)

Then the wise-fast prophet gazed throughout the peopled land until he stared at where was established a noble entryway. The enormous door was entirely bound in dear treasures, wrapped in wondrous bands.

Although the details of the door deserve such a dramatic (almost cinematic) moment, it is also worth pointing out that the gates are not simply protecting real estate. The poet could have used the more generic *geard* or *land*, or perhaps *wang* if alliteration was necessary.

Indeed, according to Jonathan Davis-Secord, *þeodland* in fact should be in an alliterative position as a compound word since compound words are nearly always used as alliterators. 25 The fact that it appears outside this expected context further highlights the term and forces the attention of the audience upon not just the compound word itself, but the initial segment of that compound. We must conclude, then, that the poet considered the word *þeod* an important element for the purpose of the poem. 26 This makes sense, however, when one


26 I have chosen to translate the term as “people” in the passage above, but it is worth mentioning that there is another translation of the word, “Lord,” which simultaneously changes the meaning of the passage and yet leaves that meaning intact. Understanding *þeodland* in the former sense, Isaiah looks about a land filled with people, whereas the latter would have the prophet look about the land of the Lord. The question of to whom the land belongs is a tricky one in such contexts, but in either case, one can conclude that people exist in that
considers the fact that, although all cities, both heavenly and terrestrial, are defined in great part by the architecture that provides their physical shape and structure, their most important and valuable trait is comprised of those who dwell in that architecture. The gate (again, understood as Mary) serves to allow the saved through the wall (Christ), which protects not just the space of heaven, but those who dwell in it, a number which, since the Ascension, also includes mortal souls.

It is this insistence on the fact that heaven is inhabited that provides the transition into Lyric Ten, which provides some context for the scene above by reminding the audience of Christ’s role in the creation of all things, including heaven, which was not always populated:

Eala þu halga heofona dryhten
þu mid fæder þinne gefyrn wære
efenwesende in þam æþelan ham.
Næs ænig þa giet engel geworden
ne þæs miclan mægenþrymmes nan
ðæ in roderum up rice biwitigað,
þeodnes þryðsteald ond his þegnunga,
þa þu ærest wære mid þone ecan frean
sylf settende þæs sidan gesceaft,
brade bry tengrundas. (348-57)

O you holy Lord of the Heavens,
you with your father of old were
equal in existence in the noble home.
There was not any angel yet that had come to be
nor any of that great majesty
which up in the firmament administers the realm,
the splendid settled place of the Lord and his thanes,
when you first were with the eternal Lord,
yourself sitting, amid spacious creation,
broad expansive earth.

space; otherwise, there will be no one over whom to be a Lord, or, to paraphrase Kirk Hammett, James Hetfield, and Lars Ulrich, he might point his finger and issue a command, but there would be no one around to follow it. A ruled population is intrinsic to any sort of ruler.
There are a number of points to unpack here. First, although heaven is a well-established place populated by many at this point, this passage points to a time when, in its vast expanse, only the Father and Son were there, alone in creation. This is significant within the context of the previous poem simply because it points out that not even the Angels are inherent to heaven; they had to be let in, too. Thus, there is no reason why mankind should be excluded save for its own actions that make humanity unworthy. Additionally, this again recalls Lyric One and Christ’s role as the architect of creation. The act of making, then, both in terms of creation and construction, appears to be something of which the early English were cognizant when considering where people exist.

Two of the three terms of material culture in Lyric Ten occur in that passage: *bam* and *prégesteald*. The latter, which I have translated above as “splendid settled place,” uses the first translation listed in the Bosworth-Toller dictionary for the term *gesteald* because it makes absolutely clear the connection between Lyrics Nine and Ten on this point. Other definitions, however, allow for the material culture implicit in the word to surface, such as “station” and “abode.” Even the definitions like “settled place” or “dwelling place” afford some connection to the material, even if they lie beyond the realm of things that are made, changed, or consumed by virtue of the fact that acts of dwelling and settling are intrinsically tied to altering the landscape, as well as building and using objects.

These objects act as ties to the preceding poem, but the literal ties of *bealorapum* (“baleful ropes,” 365) connect the poem to a larger theme that has occurred throughout the *Advent Lyrics*: that of pleas from an imprisoned or otherwise oppressed humanity to Christ for liberation and salvation. We have already seen these appeals in Lyrics Two, Six, Eight, and Nine; we have also seen further appeals to Christ for other kinds of aid, such as guidance or relief from one’s sins, in Lyrics One, Five, and Seven. Other similarities exist, as
well. Once again, as in several previous poems, a term for an object of material culture occurs in relative isolation from other such words, and as before, the effect is to draw the attention of the audience, and again the object and the poetic discussion surrounding it are central to the purpose of the poem (and perhaps even the *Advent Lyrics* as a whole). Here, the term occurs in a section of the poem that requests Christ to release humanity from the terrible bonds caused by its own sinful nature:

Habbað wrecmæcgas    wergan gæstas,  
hetlen helsceæþa,    hearde genyrwad;  
gebunden bealorapum.    Is seo bot gelong  
eall æt þe anum,    ece dryhten.  
Hreowcearigum help,    þæt þin hidercyme  
aafrefe feasceafte,    þeah we fæhþo wið þec  
þurh firesn lust    gefremed hæbben. (363-69)

The wretches, the cursed spirits,  
the hateful hell-harmers have severely oppressed (us),  
bound (us) with baleful ropes. The remedy is dependent  
entirely on you alone, Eternal Lord.  
Help the sorrowful, that your coming hither  
might comfort the poor, though we have committed  
feud against you through lust for sinful deeds.

By eliminating other instances of reference to material culture, the attention of the audience is focused on the one instance that does occur, just as when a poet deviates from a metrical norm, the effect is to make that deviation stand out. By choosing to make that single instance an object of restraint and subjugation, the poem heightens the stakes and increases the importance that the plea is heard and answered, but it also serves to remove the supplicants from any sense of space or location. Unlike Lyric Nine, where the *burgsittende* are making requests of Mary, in Lyric Ten there are only the *bealorapum* and those who are afflicted by them, in direct contrast to the two earlier occurrences of structures and defined places which exist, within the poem at least, for the Father and Son alone.
This kind of juxtaposition between the æþelan ham and þryðgesteald in the first half of the poem and the bealorapum of the second again reinforces Christ’s role as the one to bring humanity into heaven, but it also begs a question: if the Father and Son are the original occupants of heaven, where none save them alone could be, and if humanity is thus excluded from heaven, at least at that point, then where else could it be? As mentioned above, Kramer points out that Bede uses Christ’s approach to the heavenly gates as a way to clarify His role in opening them for humanity; her larger point, however, is less about Christ and more about the spaces between the gates of heaven and hell. Specifically, in discussing Bede’s depiction of the gates of heaven, she argues that

> [e]ven with only brief references to the physical aspects of this liminal space, Bede renders the basic surroundings noticeably concrete, most importantly the boundary to heaven. The bastion-like heaven starkly pitches those inside and outside against each other and fortifies the barrier between them, increasing the challenge set before Christ. All of this emphasizes the magnitude of Christ’s eventual conquest of this divide and the importance of its outcome, the promise of redemption, which through his Entry into heaven is permanently and unchangeably extended to all humanity.²⁷

This is an interesting way of approaching the problem presented by the references to material culture in Lyric Ten. If the poem places these realms and their eventual occupants into a binary opposition (inside vs. outside, within vs. without), it is also important to note how those two spaces are characterized. Here, we know that heaven has been described as a noble palace as well as a home, and although the majesty of the angels and the thanes of the Lord aren’t there yet, they will be. To the contrary, the outside is given no physical description at all; the only thing we know about the area outside heaven is that those whom the poem describes as existing there are bound with baleful ropes and oppressed by betten helseaca. No structures are mentioned.

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Lyric Eleven offers a twist to the pattern of pleas that runs throughout the *Advent Lyrics*: rather than asking Christ or Mary to intercede on behalf of humanity in the mortal world, the poem simply states that honoring and worshipping the divine is a responsibility, something that must be done. This shift is accompanied by the creation of a number of significant changes in the situation described by the previous poems, most notable among them the fact that, in Lyric Eleven, Christ has now been born on earth. As a result, the poem reads as a culmination of the earlier works that have been praying for a savior to rescue humanity from the suffering of the world:

O the comely, the entirely respected high and holy ones, the heavenly Trinity, throughout the broad, blessed, spacious world who with righteousness the speech-bearing ones must, the wretched men of earth, all kinsmen, praise highly, now God has made known to us, the faithful, so that we can understand Him.

This is not the only significant change from the earlier Lyrics, however. Lyric Ten’s focus on the Father and Son as the only two in heaven has now changed to the Trinity, reintroducing the Holy Spirit into the discussion. Each of these alterations to the setting and situation of the previous poem creates a sense of development, a dynamism within the poem that ultimately arrives at a setting that reflects the world which the early English would have recognized: post-creation, not only of the earth but of the angels and the rest of the denizens of heaven, and post-nativity, which brings along with it the promise of the New Covenant to come. This bridge to more familiar ground creates an opportunity for the audience to feel as
though they had experienced these moments in time and watched the way the world changed as the later events occurred, giving them a perspective on history based solely on the transition from Lyric Ten to Eleven that arguably would not have even been possible had a single poem dealt explicitly with the subject matter in that way.

This feeling of culmination is accompanied by four terms of material culture that appear in two groups. The first occurs in a passage that describes a scene that is, once again, characterized by its location and the geographies that appear there.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Him ðæt Crist forgeaf} \\
\text{ðæt hy motan his ðætwiste } eacum brucan \\
\text{simle singales, } swegle gehyrste, \\
\text{weorðian waldend } \text{wide ond side,} \\
\text{ond mid hyra fiprum } \text{frean ælmihtiges} \\
\text{onsyne wreað, ecan dryhtnes,} \\
\text{ond ymb þeodenstol } \text{þringað georne} \\
\text{hwylc hyra nehst mæge } \text{ussum nergende} \\
\text{flihte lacan } \text{friðgeardum in. (391-99)} \\
\end{align*}
\]

Christ allowed them to enjoy his presence with their eyes always and forever, adorned the heavens to worship the Ruler far and wide, and with their wings, ward the countenance of the almighty Ruler, the eternal Lord, and about the king-seat throng eagerly which of them can nearest to our savior swing in flight in the yards of peace.

The two terms in question here, \textit{þeodenstol} and \textit{fríþgeardum}, are both complex terms that render objects that have multiple representational meanings. Although the \textit{þeodenstol} is literally a king-seat, and therefore a piece of furniture that we would call a throne, it is used here to represent the kingdom of heaven entirely in the same way that modern usage of the word “throne” is used to refer to the broader bureaucracy that surrounds a monarch or “the White House” refers to the various offices that operate directly under the President of the United States. \textit{Fríþgeardum}, however, functions as a synecdoche, a swath of land (\textit{geard}) that
represents the whole of the rest of the kingdom. Here, then, we may not have structures, but
we have objects and places of relatively small scope used to represent something much
larger, a rhetorical move that gives a sense of growth that lends itself to a more expansive
perception of heaven in turn.

The second pair of terms describing objects of material culture occurs at the end of
Lyric Eleven during a passage that describes the adoration of the angels from the above
passage. These angels address Christ directly, saying

Þu eart weoroda god,
forþon þu gefyldest foldan ond rodoras,
wigendra hleo, wuldres þines,
helm alwihta. Sie þe in heannessum
eece helo, ond in eorþan lôf,
beorht mid beornum. (407-12)

You are the God of hosts,
for you have filled the earth and firmament,
shelter of warriors, with your glory,
helmet of all creatures. Let there be eternal salvation
for you in the heights, and praise in the earth,
bright amongst men.

Like the earlier pair, these two objects, *hleo* and *helm*, also have their similarities, not least of
which being the fact that both objects are defensive or protective in nature. They are also
similar in sound, a remarkable trait considering that they occur in different lines with
different alliterators.\(^{28}\) Additionally, we can note that the former, *hleo*, is a term associated
with buildings or structures,\(^{29}\) while the latter, a martial term, serves a similar function on a

\(^{28}\) This is a form of “linked alliteration.” See Jun Terasawa, *Old English Metre: An Introduction*, Toronto Anglo-

\(^{29}\) We should also note that the Bosworth-Toller dictionary defines the term as “A shelter, protection, covering,
refuge; often applied to persons.” Thus, we must at least acknowledge the question of idiomatic usage and
whether the author expected the audience to connect the physical object with its metaphorical meaning or
whether the metaphorical meaning had surpassed its physical origins, in much the same way that “to shield”
today retains the meaning of actively interceding and absorbing harm for someone or something else while
having, to varying degrees, lost its connection to the martial object. Although textual evidence can provide
some insight into this question, this study lacks the space and focus to make this determination. As such, I have
chosen to categorize the term as a structure.
somewhat smaller scale. What is most interesting here, however, is that while the earlier pair of terms described the setting or place in which Christ rules, this pair of terms is specifically applied as descriptors of Christ himself, and while the earlier two terms act as extensions, either metonymic or synecdochic, in order to function as representations of the kingdom, the latter two are simply metaphorical, providing objects as physical representations not only of Christ himself, but of the most important function He serves within the mortal world.

The last of the *Advent Lyrics*, Lyric Twelve, also serves as a culmination, both of the cycle of poems assembled here and as a single retrospective from the point of view of someone looking back upon the events of Advent and summarizing their importance. To once again turn to the mix tape analogy, this is the concluding track, and one that has been consciously chosen to finish the cycle because it provides a bookend, a close to a narrative chapter and a transition to the next. Like the end of the first section, Lyric Twelve looks back at the previous five poems and distills their central concerns; it speaks of Christ and His assumption of human flesh within His mother Mary, whom the audience is reminded once more is a virgin, and then exhorts the audience to praise and worship Him, for which they will gain entrance into heaven. Also like Lyric Six, Lyric Twelve contains little reference to objects of material culture; both contain only one reference, but while the single object in Lyric Six, *bendum*, is a word of restraint and captivity, the final term of material culture in the second section (and thus the poem as a whole) is *sæd* ("seed,") 420). Although the term here is unambiguously a reference to semen, the fact that seed is also used, even within the same section of the *Exeter Book*, to refer to seed in its agricultural sense, makes it clear that the audience would have been readily familiar with this meaning of the word. Thus, the first six poems, which use themes of heaven, earth, and even hell, to build unity, also conclude with a

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30 See *The Phoenix*, line 253.
reference to an object of captivity, repression, and powerlessness, whereas the second six 
Lyrics are more concerned with the matter of humanity gaining access to heaven and Christ’s 
role in making salvation possible, and this group comes to a close with a reference to an 
object that cannot help but be recognized as a symbol of growth, fertility, and (eternal?) life. 

This discussion of the *Advent Lyrics* has been long, but it is illuminating and 
particularly relevant to the subject at hand for several reasons. First, we have seen that even a 
collection of poems by different authors and written at different times and for different 
purposes can be assembled into a cohesive whole that tells a meaningful, if fragmented, 
story, and we have seen that the references to objects of material culture throughout the 
twelve Lyrics also have an important impact on the way the poems function, both 
individually and as a part of a group and subgroup of poems. Although not as 
straightforward as other narratives, through these poems we do see the events and 
implications of Mary’s pregnancy and Christ’s birth, from references to the Annunciation to 
the pleas of the people of the world for the Virgin to make her Son known. Characters 
develop, such as the understandably confused Joseph in Lyric Seven, and the faithful do, as 
well, as when they learn that not only *should* they honor God, but it is truly their duty to do 
so. The most important story of all, however, discusses the events that lead to the ability of 
mortal souls to be accepted into heaven. As these points are woven together throughout the 
various poems, it also becomes clear that order and connection between the Lyrics has an 
impact on the way the story develops.  

31 Lapidge points out that *Beowulf* is problematic narratively, as well, but argues that the poem’s looking-back-
then-looking-forward-again structure is, at least, intentional. See Michael Lapidge, “*Beowulf* and Perception,” in 
*Proceedings of the British Academy* 111 (2001): 62. Davis-Secord argues that this non-linear approach was an 
attempt to control the pacing of the poem; see *Joinings*, 168-70. This point merits discussion in terms of modern 
narratives, as well. Novels like Doris Lessing’s *The Golden Notebook* and films like Quentin Tarantino’s *Pulp 
Fiction* play with disjointed narrative and garner a great deal of attention from critics and fans alike. For a fuller 
study of the ways in and purposes for which narrative is constructed, see Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: 
The second point, however, is far more central to the purpose of our exploration. Words that evoke objects of material culture, and specifically words that evoke images of buildings, structures, and place, are vitally important to the way these poems function together, both individually and as an assemblage. Over the course of the first arc of six Lyrics, Structure words reveal several important points. The first is that Christ Himself is imagined in these poems in terms not just of structures, but of the very parts that are used to build those structures (*bū eart se wallstan*). He is the builder and the building block within the context of the first Lyric, and those objects built, specifically walls, buildings, and houses, are thus necessarily of Him, as well, but also of the world, and therefore subject to falling into disrepair. The discrepancy between the eternal architect and his ephemeral constructions is addressed in the second Lyric, when heaven, described as a *locan* (“stronghold”), is placed in juxtaposition against the worldly *carenne* (“prison”) in which humanity waits for salvation, a condition that is only accessible once they have entered a different structure: a *būðman* (“grave”). Lyric Three then spends the majority of its lines describing heaven in terms of cities (collections of structures and buildings) under the *rodores hrof rume* (“wide roof of the heavens,” 60). This arc highlights the transition from the context of earth to that of heaven. To underscore that transcendence, Lyrics Four and Five offer only words of praise for Christ and Mary, their two subjects; these poems offer no references to objects of material culture, allowing the objects in the earlier poems that feature more worldly objects to stand out even further from the context of the materially sparse context of heaven. Next, Lyric Six features only a single reference to an object of material culture: *bendaþ*, leaving humanity to await the arrival of Christ in a state of imprisonment on the earth that He had, in the first Lyric, been charged not only with creating, but also with repairing.
The Structure and building terms of the second half of the *Advent Lyrics* do more to separate the mortal world from heaven while simultaneously placing a great deal of emphasis on the entrance of humanity into heaven. Lyric Seven uses the word *temple* for both an earthly religious building and Mary’s pregnant body; meanwhile, since Christ now occupies Mary’s womb, the stones described in the poem are no longer Him; rather than forming structures, they are suggested as a possible method for Mary’s execution once her condition is made clear. Lyrics Eight and Nine focus on walls and gates, but other references to general structures appear in the latter poem, as well, including *ham* (“home”) and *burgsittende* (“city-dwellers”), while Lyric Ten echoes those general terms with another occurrence of *ham*, as well as *pryðgesteald* (“splendid settled place”), and Lyric Eleven then shifts to emphasize words that evoke a sense of place that does not necessarily include a structure (*feodenstol, friðgarðum*) and structures that are often metaphorical (*hlao*).

The overall pattern of structures within the *Advent Lyrics*, then, begins with physical objects in an earthly context that either fail or are part of humanity’s oppression at the hands of its own inclination towards sinful behavior and moves towards non-specific, less concrete heavenly structures that are characterized as eternal and are defined solely by their function. This movement from more to less concrete follows the same motion that Kramer concludes was at the heart of the depiction of theology in early English religious expression:

Christ’s actual footprints are in Jerusalem and can be visited there; the Rogationtide processions physically move congregants through space; the artistic depictions of the Ascension can be viewed in manuscripts with one’s own eyes. All of these belong, in one way or another, to the material culture of Anglo-Saxon England. While the gates are a concrete image, they belong to a purely imagined place. This makes them no less powerful as a symbol for Ascension theology, but reveals that their appeal to audiences plays on a different sensibility. They direct their audiences’ mental gaze towards heaven.
rather than to symbols of earthly materiality, as the other, more materially grounded ways of teaching theology do.\textsuperscript{32}

The \textit{Exeter Book}, then, is not alone in using references to objects of material culture in such a way as to capitalize on the culture embedded in these objects. By tying nonmaterial values and expressions to material things, the authors, scribes, and audiences of early Exeter make possible the expression of highly complex theological thoughts in more accessible ways; they concretize what is inherently unworldly and therefore indescribable except in the most amorphous and abstract terms. Moreover, by assembling a “mix tape” of smaller, shorter poems, the scribe of the \textit{Exeter Book} was able to insert further meaning into the collection by placing poems within a framework of relationships with one another. Most significantly for the purposes of this study, though, the \textit{Advent Lyrics} do so as a part of a larger tradition that can be recognized throughout the literary and archaeological record of pre-Conquest England.

\textit{The Ascension}

Recognizing the importance of seeing the \textit{Advent Lyrics}, as well as their references to objects of material culture, in a relationship with one another provides a useful lens through which we can evaluate other texts, as well. Let us turn, then, to the next of the \textit{Christ} poems, \textit{The Ascension}. Just as the twelve Lyric poems often seemed to transition from one to another through the use of connecting themes and even similar usage of material objects, the introduction to \textit{The Ascension} also harkens back to the subject matter of the previous works:

\begin{verbatim}
Nu du geornlice gæstgerynum, 
mon se mæra, modcraeftes sec
þurh sefan snyttro, þæt þu sóð wite
hu þæt geode, þa se ælmihtiga
acenned weard þurh clænne had,
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{32} Kramer, \textit{Between Earth and Heaven}, 136.
siþan he Marian, mægða weolman, mærre meowlan, mundheals geceas, þat þær in hwitum hræglum gewerede englas ne oðcowdun, þa se æþeling cwom, beorn in Betlem. (1-10)

Now seek you eagerly spiritual mysteries, celebrated man, by means of mind-skill through the wisdom of the heart, that you (might) know truth how that went, when the Almighty became born through a pure person, after he chose the safety of Mary, best of maidens, excellent virgin, so that there, clothed in white raiment, the angels did not show themselves, when the noble one came, the baby in Bethlehem.

The inclusion of the Nativity, the culmination of the season of Advent, at the start of this poem allows for a smooth and understandable transition between the two works, but it also provides a clear internal starting point from the beginning of Christ’s mortal life when, as the modern title indicates, the poem itself is actually about events after the end of that mortal existence and his return to the kingdom of heaven. Doing so provides a powerful structure in the discussion of Christ’s comings and goings, rather than focusing on his interactions with humanity. Such a structure also has the powerful effect of forcing the audience’s focus on the world before Christ’s arrival, but then immediately shifting that focus to the next world in the second poem. In essence, this allows for the poems to directly juxtapose the hopes of humanity for the coming savior in the material world against the results of that life, highlighting the existence that awaits the righteous in the next world.

More broadly, the patterns of usage for terms of material culture are not quite as overwhelming as those of the Advent Lyrics, though they still indicate a clear interest in specific classes of object. The most common type of material culture depicted in The Ascension is that of martial objects: weapons, armor, shields, and similar trappings of battle.
The recasting of Christian narratives in terms of Germanic culture is typical of Cynewulf; writing about the poet’s treatment of *Elene*, Cynthia Wittman Zollinger points out that

Cynewulf sought to heighten the legend’s connections to his own culture’s circumstances. While the poet adhered closely to the events of the *Inventio Crucis*, his poem reveals echoes of the Anglo-Saxons’ own history, a national narrative combining elements of the Roman *imperium*, Germanic tradition, and Christian conversion.\(^\text{33}\)

There can be no doubt that such cultural ties were meaningful for Cynewulf; he includes 17 references to martial objects, or nearly 21 percent of the 82 total references in the poem. Another class of object one would expect to see in Germanic poetry, wealth, also has a large number of references, 12, or nearly 15 percent. Between these two categories, however, we again see the importance of structures, references to which occur 15 times, or over 18 percent of the total terms in the poem. Together, these three types of objects make up nearly 54 percent of the references to objects of material culture in *The Ascension*; they were clearly important to Cynewulf and the argument he wished to make.

Regarding their use throughout the poem, like most of the works in the *Exeter Book*’s first half, the words occur in groups that are often associated naturally through the topic being discussed. This does not seem to be the case with the first grouping of object terms, however. The opening lines of *The Ascension* establish a transition between the two poems. Rather than simply opening upon a scene set forty days after the Resurrection, the first several lines allow for the audience to shift their thoughts from the birth of Christ to the scene after His death. This transition, however, must not only ease the move from one topic to another; it must also serve to delineate one from another. Such acts of separation-while-joining can be difficult, but here, evocations of material culture help to make clear where one

poem ends and the next begins. This is, in part, accomplished with sheer numbers. Whereas the final poem in the \textit{Advent Lyrics} featured a single term that could be associated with material culture in its entire 24 lines, \textit{The Ascension} features seven in the same span. Moreover, while one can find no patterns in a sample size of one, there is equally little association among the objects depicted in \textit{The Ascension}: two occurrences of \textit{hræglum} (“raiment,” 8 and 15), \textit{bocum} (“books,” 14), \textit{singiefan} (“treasure-giver,” 21), \textit{byrg} (“city,” 22), \textit{tacna} (“tokens,” 23), and \textit{helm} (“helmet,” 24). Such a scattering of objects may or may not reflect a conscious poetic decision here, but there can be no doubt that the only real association at this point is the two occurrences of \textit{hræglum} within seven lines of each other, bringing some unity to the discussion of angels in the context of either Mary’s conception of Christ or His departure from this world and return to heaven. The remaining objects fit in as part of the scene, but without any cohesive unity. It is their number, the frequency of their type, and their diversity that help create a clear shift in the minds of the audience from one subject to the next, alongside the move from Christ’s birth to his Ascension in the topics discussed, a bookend that helps texts on either side stand up on their own.

This bookend structure is also used at the end of the poem, where the conclusion of \textit{The Ascension}, which comments at some length on the punishments that the unrighteous will face, helps to transition into the next poem, \textit{Christ in Judgement}.

\begin{quote}
Bið nu eorneste  þonne eft cymeð, 
reðe ond ryhtwis.  Rodor bið onhrered 
ond þas miclan gemetu  middangeardes 
beheofiað þonne  beorht cyning leanað 
þæs þe hy on eorþan  eargum dædum 
liðdon leahtrum fa. (385-90a)
\end{quote}

(He) will be now earnest when (He) comes again, fierce and righteous. The skies will be stirred up and the great boundaries of the middle realm will bewail when the bright king rewards
those who lived on earth with cowardly deeds,  
hostile sins.

The passage then goes on to describe the fates of these judged souls, who will be subjected to *fyrbaðe* (“baths of fire,” 391) and “Dær bīþ oðywed egsa mara / þonne from frumgesceape gefrægen wurde / æfre on eorðan” (“There will be displayed more horror than has become known from the first creation ever on earth,” 399–401). These scenes, of course, are not what one would associate with a poem that spends the better part of its 427 lines depicting the scene of heaven upon Christ’s return, and thus they seem a bit out of place. Instead, they echo the scene one would expect during the Harrowing of Hell, when Christ descended into hell after the Crucifixion to liberate the otherwise worthy souls who could not make it into heaven because the way had not yet been opened. Again, it is important to remember the order of events here: the Harrowing of Hell occurs between the Crucifixion and the Ascension. Despite the close theological association of these events, and although there are a number of possible explanations as to why such imagery appears where it does, one must also admit that these passages set the tone for the coming poem rather effectively. The “rewards,” then, must be seen as a preview for a more thorough discussion of the fate that awaits those who proved themselves unworthy of salvation in this life.

Moreover, there is a similar pattern of usage for references to objects of material culture in that the last section of the poem features a somewhat dense collection of terms, whereas the next poem features only a few, although this collection is also far more unified thematically than the one at the beginning of *The Ascension*. Although there is a 30-line gap between the closest previous occurrence and the beginning of this small group, the group itself only spans 14 lines: *ceolum* (“ships,” 412), *flodwudu* (“ship,” literally “flood-wood,” 414),

hype (“harbor,” 420 and 425), ceoles bord (“side of the ship,” 422), sundhengestas (“sea-steeds” or “sea-horses,” 423), yðmearas (“wave-horses,” 424), and ancrum (“anchors,” 424). These nine words, of course, are all associated with transportation, specifically maritime transportation, helping to create an extended metaphor that casts humans as a ship at sea, sailing through dangerous waters.\(^\text{35}\) In this metaphor, the body becomes a ship captained by the soul and Christ becomes a harbor that protects the ship from the storm that threatens to sink it, meaning that objects are depicted here as representative not only of human lives, but also of the remedy to the dangers that those lives face. Significantly, however, the dangers themselves are entirely natural in this extended metaphor, outside the realm of material culture and therefore outside the control of those who must traverse those waters. As Discenza points out, to traverse water in this poem is to enter into a situation over which no one but God has mastery:

> Water in Old English literature never turns from chaotic space to a place that humans can order and inhabit. Though Anglo-Saxons seek to understand and thus to some extent to control space and wasteland, water eludes them… Men can live on the water on boats, but to do so makes clear to them that they have no control and must rely on God, as in The Wanderer and The Seafarer. The ocean may be endured or crossed on the way to a more proper space: literally, land; allegorically, the heavenly homeland.\(^\text{36}\)

Uncontrollable, dangerous wastes are exactly the kind of place where material objects would be most useful; when the very place one allegorically stands is defined by an object built by human hands, there can be no doubt that material culture plays a role in the way the early English conceptualized life and its relationship with things.

\(^{35}\) Although the metaphor of the human soul as a ship at sea is classical in origin, Miranda Wilcox points out that the idea of a ship traversing a stormy sea seems to originate with Gregory the Great. See Wilcox, “Alfred’s Epistemological Metaphors: eagan moðes and scip moðes,” Anglo-Saxon England 35 (2006): 183-84.

\(^{36}\) Discenza, Inhabited Spaces, 177-78.
Identifying human souls with human-made objects while simultaneously casting the dangers to those souls either as natural forces or objects is only one way that material culture is used throughout the poem. Several of the groups of terms throughout the poem are still drawn together by a common object type, but in several instances it is specifically due to the literal meanings in the passages, and significantly many of these passages make use of Structure words. Some of these groups, such as the one that occurs 21 lines after the first collection, are small and spread out, featuring only two words: *Hergas* (“Idol” or “Sacred place,” 46) and *stapoleæstre* (“foundation-fast,” 51), connected less by proximity or theme than by the context of the passage in which they appear (in this case, both objects appear in the directions Christ gives his followers before He departs for heaven). Others may be spread over far larger areas, but because they are more numerous, they occur far closer to one another and are easier to recognize as clusters, groups of three or more words that occur not more than five lines away from the nearest neighbor in the cluster, and usually much closer than that. Again, we can look to the next group, which occurs as direct speech in which Christ’s angelic escort addresses the crowd that had gathered to see Him depart. The quotation spans sixteen lines and the group of object references extends beyond even that, continuing for another eight lines and four terms, bringing the total to eight in this group altogether: *eard* ("dwelling place, yard," 75), *geblidu* ("ceiling, roof," 79), *byrg* ("city," 80), *frætwum* ("ornaments," 83), *brofas* ("roofs," 89), *helm* ("helmet," 90), *burgum* ("cities," 91), and *burg* ("city," 95).

In fact, these groups seem to function as connections, even across divisions within the poem. For instance, *eard* can be included in this grouping of terms not only because it is relatively close to other terms here, but also because, as a word that denotes a place where people dwell, even as part of a landscape, it seems to tie together with other words that
describe places where people live, such as *byrg* and *gebliðu*. Strangely, however, the manuscript itself inserts a boundary here; a blank line of space occurs after poetic line 77, two lines after *eard* and one line before *gebliðu*, while line 78 begins with a large, decorated initial *Ƿ*.

Additionally, this character strongly resembles (though is perhaps more intricate than) a large decorative initial of the same letter that occurs at the beginning of *Widsith*, a poem later in the manuscript. While this is not particularly out of place in the manuscript itself, it is odd that such a break would occur in the middle of a speech, a fact that raises a number of questions with regard to how the scribe conceived of the texts with which he was working. For their part, modern editors deal with this break in different ways. Krapp and Dobbie briefly discuss the use of these large initials as a method of dividing texts, but do not mention this instance or attempt to explain its significance and do not indicate this division in the *ASPR*, even with an indented line.  

Muir, likewise, briefly discusses the use of these “Ornamental Initials,” disagreeing with Conner’s use of these letters to justify his assertion of “booklets” within the manuscript, although his text does provide a line of white space to reflect the manuscript.

Although such editorial differences can in no way be understood as a failure on the part of these editors (a decision must be made as to how to best render the text for a modern audience), it displays their privileging of the text here above the other indicators in the manuscript, a point worth remembering as we continue to evaluate how these poems were fit together and how we can understand them. The same angels are speaking throughout, they continue to address Christ’s followers, and the topic being discussed is the same. Thus, there is confusion as to why such a visual cue in the text would appear at this

point in the manuscript, but whatever that reason might be, we see that the grouping of
terms related to material culture spans this divide. Moreover, the final term in this grouping,
*burg*, which is appositionally identified as Jerusalem in the line above, occurs after a transition
to the next events of the poem: Christ has already been taken bodily into heaven, and now
the wise men (*gewita*) return to the city. As such, these references to objects span more than
one break, and more than one type of break, serving to create points of similarity in the text
that help to guide the audience through the poem, easing the transitions between topics,
events, and even structural units, and creating a form of unity through these transitions,
acting similarly to *Beowulf*’s famous envelope patterns.³⁹

To return to the central argument of this study, however, the idea that the material
world should be disregarded in favor of the world to come is supported by the
characteristics of objects referenced throughout the poem and how such references, in
general, seem to remind the audience to keep their attention fixed above them. Of course,
that is not to say the poem denies the value of the material world that was created for us,
such as when the poem points out the great number of things for which all men should be
grateful:

```
Dæt is þæs wyrðe  þætte wælpeode
secgen dryhtne þone    duguða gehwylcre
þe us sið ond ær    simle gefremede
þurh monigfealdre    mægna geryno.
He us æt giefeð    ond æhta sped,
welan ofer widlond,    ond weder liþe
under swegles hleo.    Sunne ond mona,
æþelast tungla    callum scinað,
heofoncondelle,    hæleþum on corðan.
Dreoseð deaw ond ræn,    duguðe weccaf
```

³⁹ For a list of the ten specific envelope patterns in the poem, as well as a complete discussion of the function
of these patterns, see Constance B. Hieatt, “Envelope Patterns and the Structure of *Beowulf*,” *English Studies in
It is indeed worthy that nations say thanks (to) the Lord (for) each virtue which for us, earlier and later, (He) always performed through mysteries of manifold power. He gave us food and success with possessions, wealth over the wide land, and mild weather under the shelter of heaven. Sun and moon, noblest of all heavenly bodies, candles of heaven, shine for men on earth. The dew and rain fall, proven men awaken to salvation for the kin of mankind, earth-wealth increases.

In this passage we see a number of important types of material culture represented as boons granted by a benevolent God: æt (“food”) and æhte (“possessions”) in line 165 seem quite basic, but welan (“wealth,” 166) is a great deal more inclusive. Wealth, of course, can include items useful for more than just the kinds of status and exchange value that the idea of wealth evokes in us as modern readers, but for the early English, this word had additional connotations. Clark Hall, for instance, defines welan as “prosperity” and “happiness” as well as “riches,” and this idea may come closer to the idea that the intended audience would have associated with the term, even as the term has a definite material meaning. For instance, the word occurs in Genesis in the passage “Gif hie brecað his gebodscipe, þonne he him abolgen wurðeþ; / siððan bið him se wela onwend and wyrô him wite gegarwod” (“If they break his commandment, then he (will) become angry with them; afterward wealth (will) be changed for them and punishment for them (will be) prepared,” 431-32). Later in the same poem, we find a scene in which Noah passes away having enjoyed three and a half centuries with his family after they survived the Flood: “Siððan his eaforan ead bryttedon, / bearna stryndon; him wæs beorht wela” (“Afterward, his successors divided his possessions, begat children; bright wealth was for them,” 1602-03). Thus, there can be no denying the existence
of at least some relationship between the ideas of “wealth” and “prosperity” and “happiness” in Old English. Whatever that relationship is, however, it remains clear throughout that such *wela* is also always dependent upon the will of God.

Anyone who has read more than a few short poems, of course, realizes that, at least in the surviving literature, the early English did not understand it to be God’s will that humanity spend their lives in pursuit of worldly possessions. Instead, these moments look to the material wealth of the world as a gift to which one must respond with gratitude; indeed, to do otherwise is to risk the anger of the God responsible for granting those gifts. Nothing should be taken for granted, and nothing in this life is something that one has the right to expect will always be there. Much like Job, who had his entire life stripped away by a God who wished to test his soul, the early English recognized that wealth and prosperity could evaporate at any minute, and indeed, the poem underscores this point by bringing Job into the discussion:

```
Bi þon giedd awræc     Iob, swa he cuðe,
herede helm wera,     hælend lofede,
ond mid siblufan     sunu waldendes
freonoman cende,     ond hine fugel nemde,
þone Iudeas     ongietan ne meahtan
in ðære godecundan     gæstes strengðu. (194-99)
```

Job sang a tale about this, as he knew how, praised the helmet of men, venerated the savior and with kind affection for the son of the Ruler a noble name conceived, and named him “bird”; the Jews could not perceive him in the divine strength of the spirit.

Job, of course, cannot be separated from the story of his trials at the hands of God. Even when his test is not the point in question and he is taken out of his Old Testament context, his name is enough to evoke that episode in the minds of the audience. As such, when discussing others who, from Cynewulf’s point of view, cannot understand the nature of
God, such as the Jews’ refusal to recognize Christ as the Messiah, the poem also applies that same limitation of understanding to those who would focus their energies on the material wealth of this world. This point is made even more clearly in the passage in question, which compares Christ to a bird who has the freedom to seek out the homeland of the angels (“hwilum engla card up gesohte,” “at times (he) sought upwards (to) the homeland of the angels,” 207).

Perhaps the best example in *The Ascension* of the use of material culture to underscore the importance of eschewing wealth and objects in one’s pursuit of salvation occurs within the passage that also contains Cynewulf’s runic signature. Indeed, the presence of the signature has the effect of raising the importance of the passage in general, and the objects used in the passage carry even greater significance because of the way in which they interact with that signature, but ultimately the power in this passage comes from the ruthless destruction of the objects of material culture by fire that God himself releases on the world:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Þonne} & \kappa \text{ cwacað, gehyreð cyning mæðlan,} \\
\text{rodera ryhtend, sprecan řeþe word} \\
\text{þam þe him ðer in worulde wace hyrdon,} \\
\text{þendan} & \hbar \text{ ond þþpast meahtan} \\
\text{frofre findan. Þær sceal forht monig} \\
\text{on þam wongstede werg ãidan} \\
\text{hwæt him æfter dædum deman wille} \\
\text{wræþa wita. Biþ se} \P \text{ scæcen} \\
\text{eorþan frætwa.} \cdot \hbar \text{ wæs longe} \\
\text{f} & \text{ flodum bilocen, lifwynna dæl,} \\
\text{·} & \text{ on foldan. Þonne frætwæ sculon} \\
\text{byrnan on bæle; blæc rasetteð} \\
\text{recen reada leg, řeþe scriþed} \\
\text{geond worulde wide. Wængas hrcosað,} \\
\text{burgstede ðerstað. Brond bið ã on tyhte,} \\
\text{ældæ aldgestreon unmnurnlice,} \\
\text{gæsta gifrast, þæt geo guman heoldan,} \\
\text{þenden him on eorþan onmedla wæs.} \text{ (358-75)}^{40}
\end{align*}
\]

Then [C – “the keen ones’’] quake, hear the king pronouncing, ruler of the heavens, speaking just words
to those who to him before in the world weakly listened, while [Y – “sin’’] and [N – “need’’] fluctuates, might
find consolation. There many fearful ones must
in that open place, weary, await
what he wishes to deem for them according to (their) deeds, wrathful wise man. The [W – “joy’’] for earthly ornaments
will depart. [U – “our’’] portion of life-joy
was long locked up by [L – “water’’] floods,
[F – “wealth’’] on earth. Then ornaments must
burn in the pyre; brightly rages
the ready red flame, justly it travels
throughout the wide world. Fields fall to ruin,
city-steads burst. Brands shall be in motion,
setting fire to old treasures unmercifully,
greediest of spirits, which formerly men held
while for them on earth there was glory.

While I have been careful to translate these runes using meanings that create the most
reasonable and understandable text possible, it is worth mentioning that these characters
have not always been understood to allow multiple meanings. As recently as 2006, John D.
Niles argues that the rune characters used in Cynewulf’s signature can be interpreted less
strictly, allowing for the Þ “ur” rune to be understood as its homophone ure (“our”) instead
of the more literal “ox” definition that would otherwise be required here. I have, as a result,
expanded upon k “cen” as the homophone cene (“keen”), a term that allows for a far more
sensible reading than the traditional reading/translation of the rune as “torch.” Likewise, the
rune Æ “sin” can also be interpreted as “horn,” for example, an object that has material
cultural value as a musical instrument and an object that can also be used in martial
situations. The final rune, þ “wealth,” also has a deeply material meaning, especially in the
context of Judgement Day. Additionally, we find fraetwa (“ornaments,” 366 and 368), baðe
(“pyre,” 369), burgstede (“city-stead,” 372), brond (“brand” or “torch,” 372), and ealdgestreó
(“old treasure,” 373) in this section, a rather stark mix of material objects and the constructs
used to destroy them. Ultimately, the effect of this passage, and the poem on the whole as a result, is the recognition that nothing material in this world will last. Tom Birkett, in considering the narrator of the poem, points out that

He is an example of every sinning man looking with dread upon the second coming, the noun læn employed yet again to play on the distinction between the transitory (or læne) life and the eternal ‘reward’ of heaven (l. 783b). The stress in the signature passage again falls on universal judgement, the deconstruction of earthly name and fame, and the eventual fate of the soul.41

Cities and treasures alike will be destroyed on Judgement Day, Cynewulf argues, so rather than putting effort into amassing material goods one will simply lose, one will be better served to look to the well-being of one’s soul.

*Christ in Judgement*

*Christ in Judgement* begins with few references to objects of material culture, a move that helps create differentiation between poems that are, at the transition from one to the next, otherwise closely related. The dark turn of the former poem is remarkable, however, for its deviation from its main topic of Christ’s Ascension and the promise of salvation that his entry into heaven provides. Such is not the case for the third *Christ* poem, as its subject matter is precisely the events of the Day of Judgement, complete with all of the frightening and disturbing imagery that such an event demands. As such, this poem more than the others in this cycle is a direct comment on the role of material culture in the salvation or damnation of humanity.

It is worthwhile, then, to examine the opening lines of the poem in order to establish the way in which the poem integrates objects into its description of Christ’s second coming

(or, more accurately, how it does not integrate them). Even if these poems were written by separate authors, the scribe has expended a great deal of effort to ensure that the poems lead from one to the next, and the rather dire tone set in the last lines of *The Ascension* serve well as a transition into the topic of the third poem:

> Donne mid fere foldbuende  
> se mielc dæg meahtan dryhtnes  
> æt midre niht mægne bihæmeð,  
> scire gesceafte, swa oft sceadæ fæcne  
> þeof þristlice þe on þystre færed  
> on sweartre niht, sorgleæ hælec  
> semninga forfeðð slepe gebundne,  
> eorlas ungearwe yflæ genæged.  
> Swa on Synæ beorg somod up cymeð  
> mægenfolc micel, meotude betrywe,  
> beorht ond bliðe— him weorþed blæd gifen. (1-11)

Then with fear, the great day of the mighty Lord shall fall upon the earth-dwellers, might in the middle of the night, bright creation, as often a deceitful criminal, bold thief, who travels in darkness in black night, greets those free of sorrow, surprises suddenly those bound in sleep, unready earls assaulted by evil. Thus on Mount Sinai up will come together a mighty people, true to the Measurer, bright and joyful—to them the fruits shall come to be given.

Although it may seem counterintuitive to compare the second coming of Christ to a lawless brigand who operates from the shadows in order to avoid detection, the “thief in the night” simile and its underlying idea of being taken unawares is an important aspect of the way the early Christian world as a whole, and thus the early English, understood Christian theology: one cannot know when Christ will return, so one must be prepared at all times or suffer the consequences. It should be pointed out, however, that this thief is not actually depicted as stealing anything. Indeed, the poem seems more concerned with the thief’s interactions with people rather than things, leaving the audience to ponder if the “thief” might be better
described as an “assassin,” one who takes lives rather than belongings. This passage is not, however, entirely without reference to material culture: after discussing the thief who comes for the unsuspecting, it points out that those who are ready shall receive blæd, “fruits,” the first reference to material culture in the poem. Thus, those who have spent their lives preparing for Christ to come again will be rewarded, but those who have not will have everything taken from them.

Terms of material culture continue to be somewhat rare (and categorically scattered) for almost 130 lines, with a total of six occurrences in that space: blæd (“fruit,” 11), byman (“trumpet,” 15), ham (“home,” 31), heofonbyman (“heaven-trumpet,” 82), burgweallas (“city-walls,” 111), and weax (“wax,” 122). Over the course of these lines, however, a great deal is depicted in troubling detail. Apart from the lines translated above, angels blow trumpets from the four corners of the earth, triggering the rising of the dead from their graves, and the world will be filled with fearful, miserable people while the good and evil are grouped together. Christ himself is then revealed from the peak of Mount Sinai, appearing beautiful in the eyes of the good, but terrible and grim in the eyes of the evil, and He then spreads fire throughout the world. The stars and moon fall from the sky, the sun is darkened, and Christ’s army directs the two groups of humans to their ultimate destinations. Meanwhile, the fire spreads, scorching mountains and boiling seas. All beasts, fowl, and fish are killed by this flame, and “byrneþ wæter swa weax” (“water burns like wax”). The scene is dire and worrisome, especially to those who have spent their time on earth in the pursuit of material gains; as mentioned in the previous chapter, we are capable of developing relationships with objects as well as people, and by limiting the number of objects in such a long section of the poem (and by using those objects that do occur either as triggers for these events or as examples to be destroyed), those unable to give up their connections to the objects of
material culture with which they have surrounded themselves are thus even more isolated and, as a result, uncomfortable.

As the poem progresses, however, references to material culture begin to make their way into the text at both an increasingly frequent and regular pace. Only seven lines after weax, the first tight, recognizable grouping of objects occurs: goldfrætwe (“gold ornaments,” 129), gleða (“burning coals,” 129), and ærgestreon (“ancient treasure,” 130) all occur in rapid succession over the course of three half-lines in a passage that continues to describe the destruction of material treasures during Christ’s Second Coming. Almost 30 lines after that, the next reference to material culture occurs, starting another grouping of three terms, this time spread out over seven full lines: foldgrafum (“earth-graves,” 159), eardes (“yard, dwelling,” 163), and lichoman (“body-home,” 165); this time, the small grouping is mainly concerned not with the destruction of objects, but with the dead rising from the grave for judgement. In fact, the emphasis on earth and structure here is noticeable, especially in light of the fiery end described above. While this juxtaposition may not seem as pivotal as some in these poems, it is notable that, while the wealth and riches of the world are being destroyed, even the structures in which the dead lie are no longer viable; souls must leave their graves and, instead, once again inhabit their body-homes, the one worldly object that truly belongs to the soul. In fact, the place where one dwells is an especially important concept in Christ in Judgement since its entire purpose is to describe the scene where one’s fate and eternal home are determined; indeed, the poem’s third reference to material culture occurs in a passage that describes the fact that angels and demons both had homes created for them.

Christ in Judgement is not merely prophetic, however. It also looks to the past in order to see how the physical world reacted upon Christ’s death, providing a precedent for the destruction that is to come upon his return:
The scene above depicts events described in the accounts of the death of Christ as recorded by three of the Evangelists: Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Each recounts essentially the same events, although there is some discrepancy in the order: Christ cries out and gives up the ghost, and the veil of the temple is rent entirely in two.\(^{42}\) The veil of the temple, of course,

refers to the large curtain used in the Second Temple in Jerusalem to separate the nave, where priests would gather daily to perform sacrifices, from the inner sanctum, the Holy of Holies, which was only to be entered once a year and then only by the high priest.\textsuperscript{43} As Daniel M. Gurtner points out,

\begin{quote}
For the evangelists, this is the veil that was torn as a result of Jesus’ death. Similarly, in Hebrews its prohibitive function is penetrated by means of the sacrificial death of Christ. Though it is difficult to consider harmonization of these two traditions, it may be the case that the collective voices of the evangelist and author of Hebrews indicate that the veil is torn to open the way for Jesus to ascend to God and offer his sacrifice there.\textsuperscript{44}
\end{quote}

Moreover, the passage seems to describe the destruction of that same Temple while Christ is also recorded as prophesying the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE:

\begin{quote}
And Jesus being come out of the temple, went away. And his disciples came to shew him the buildings of the temple. And he answering, said to them: Do you see all these things? Amen I say to you there shall not be left here a stone upon a stone that shall not be destroyed.\textsuperscript{45}
\end{quote}

If one could choose only a single powerful symbol of the end of the Old Covenant and the beginning of the New, one could do much worse than the destruction of the Second Temple.

The destruction of such holy structures and objects, while a bit out of place in \textit{Christ in Judgement} due to its having occurred in the past, provides some context to the wholesale destruction of the world presented earlier in the poem. The rending of the veil at the moment of Christ’s death was necessary; the piercing of the object that separated the Holy of Holies from the outside world mirrored the piercing of the barrier that stood between humanity and heaven. Similarly, the Second Temple, which represented the old traditions

\textsuperscript{43} Hebrews 9:1-10.
\textsuperscript{45} Matt. 24:1-2 (Douay-Rheims).
and beliefs, had to be utterly destroyed in order to make way for the New Covenant. Such necessary unmaking stands as a reminder to the audience that, though valuable or even holy, worldly objects as a whole are a means of separating humanity from the ultimate goal of salvation. They must all be destroyed in order to clear the path to heaven.

The poem takes some pains, however, to ensure that its audience understands that the Veil was not the only object of material culture to react to Christ’s suffering. In fact, inanimate objects of all kinds are explicitly described as being able to sense His death:

Þæt asecgan ne magum foldbuende þurh frod gewit, 
hu fela þa onfundun þa gefelan ne magum dryhtnes þrowinga deade gesceafte. 
Þa þe æþelast sind eorðan gecynda, ond heofones eac heahgetimbro, 
eall fore þam anum unrot gewearð, forhtafongen. Þeah hi ferðgewit of hyra æþelum ænig ne cuþen, wendon swa þeah wundrum, þa yra waldend for of lichoman. (310-20)

No earth-dweller may speak through wise intellect (about) that, how many unliving creations which are incapable of feeling then experienced the suffering of the Lord. Those which are most noble of earthen nature, and the high timbers of heaven, also, entirely for the One became sorrowful, seized by fear. Though they know nothing of understanding from their virtues, they nevertheless considered it a miracle, when their ruler departed from (His) body-home.

The effect of placing a passage such as this in a poem about the end of the world is problematic. By anthropomorphizing inanimate objects and connecting them so intimately to the suffering of Christ, the poem reminds its audience that all things on the earth are God’s creations, including those things that may not be able to otherwise react or interact with their surroundings. As such, these objects are subject to the will of God, just as all
things are. Still, these objects, unable to sense anything else, can detect the death of Christ and react to that death with a profound sadness. Such a response can work to elicit different responses in the Christian audience of the poem. One reaction the audience might have to the realization that even inanimate objects suffer at the death of Christ is to feel shame. After all, humanity is the beneficiary of Christ’s sacrifice; if his death made even the unliving matter of the world react in sadness, humanity should also feel not only sadness, but an overwhelming amount of pressure not to squander the gift for which Christ paid so dearly.

Another reaction might be to create sympathy for these newly conscious inanimate objects. Even if they are understood to be nothing more than nonliving matter, by granting them some sort of awareness and emotional response to one of the most significant moments in the Christian perception of existence, the poem creates an opportunity for those who also feel anguish over Christ’s death to make an emotional connection with these objects. This sort of sympathy works to make Christ’s Second Coming even more painful for those who are unwise enough to be enamored with the material world, despite such attraction springing from a perceived shared sense of loss at His death. Such a conflict would be a potentially serious imperfection in the poem, indeed, if not for the notable fact that there are no specific worldly objects listed in this passage. The single type of defined object listed, beahgetimbro (“high-timbered [building],” 315), is explicitly tied to the heavens and therefore is not subject to the destruction of the last day. As it is, other objects are merely vague forms at which the poem gestures in a general way, making it far harder to solidify the relationship necessary for the audience to truly mourn their loss.

Not everything lost should be mourned, however: although many of the objects evoked throughout Christ in Judgement serve as temptations, references to the objects used to torment and torture Christ as He died on the Cross also occur. In one of the densest
collections of material object terms in the poem, we hear about the Crucifixion from Christ’s own point of view:

Likewise they blended together a bitter unsweet drink for me of vinegar and gall. Then in front of the people I received the enmity of my foes, (they) followed me with crimes, reckoned not with the feud, and beat me with lashes. For you, the entire injury I suffered with humility, the contempt and reproach. Then a sharp, hard ring they twisted hard about my head, pressed (it) on with rebukes, which was worked of thorns. Then I was hanged on a high beam, made fast to the rood; then with a spear they immediately spilled out guts from my side, blood on the ground, so that you through that from the tyranny of the devil might be delivered.

Of course, some of these objects, such as the Cross, are famously depicted as sympathetic characters in other works of early English literature (The Dream of the Rood, for example), but the cluster of objects mentioned above still remains remarkable for its rather unpleasant character as well as its numerous examples over a relatively short number of lines: *drync* (“drink,” 572), *ceedes* (“vinegar,” 572), and *geallan* (“gall,” 572) occur in a single line, with *sweopum* (“lashes/whips,” 575), *beag* (“ring,” 577), *pornum* (“thorns,” 579), *beam* (“beam/tree,” 580), *rode* (“rood/cross,” 581), and *sper* (“spear,” 581) in quick succession immediately
afterwards, with no more than two lines between any of them, thus creating a group of nine words over ten lines. Of these, the mix of *eeedes* and *geallon* would have been recognized as being an unpleasant beverage, *sweepum* and *pornum* would have been familiar as objects that cause pain, and the dangers of being stabbed by a *spere* would have been universally recognized, as well. Likewise, *rode* describes a method of execution, and though the word *beam* itself is much more neutral, it is also often used to refer to the cross, creating at least the potential for lasting negative connotations. Each of these objects and the roles and relationships they took on would have been familiar to Christians and concentrating them all over the course of ten lines in rapid succession would have created an effect in the poem’s intended audience. If the objects that mourned Christ’s death can make the audience react with either shame or sympathy, then the objects involved in causing that death can elicit a similar response: shame arising from the fact either that these objects were wielded by people or that objects like the Rood also suffered in knowing that they were instruments of Christ’s suffering.

Moreover, the rate of occurrences begins to wane after this passage. Christ continues to speak, but the material objects to which he refers drop off, with two references to his body, *lichoman* (“body-home,” 587) and *flaschoma* (“flesh-home,” 599), occurring in the 32 lines that follow the above grouping of terms (and with a dozen lines separating even those two references). We then find a pair of Structure terms, *selegesceot* (“tabernacle,” 614) and *hus* (“house,” 615), followed by another pair of references to the Cross, *rode* (“rood,” 621) and *rod* (623), before we find the next grouping of references. The terms *pace* (“roof,” 637), *bragles* (“garments,” 639), *moses* (“food,” 640), *meteleasum* (“the foodless,” 640), *wetan* (“water,” 641), and *drynes* (“drink,” 642) occur as Christ scolds the sinners of the world for denying shelter to the poor, clothing to the naked, food to the starving, and water to the
thirsty. Each of the items mentioned in this passage, of course, represents an object of material culture that addresses a basic biological need, but it is worth noting that three of the four are also consumable items; food and water, of course, are literally consumed in their use, while clothing is subject to literal wear and tear as it is used. The only non-consumable Christ is concerned with here, then, is the roof that gives shelter, another reference to structures.\footnote{It is worth noting that roofing materials in early England would have been far more durable than many modern-day readers may expect. Thatch, probably the most common roofing material at the time due to the relatively low cost, prevalence, and portability of the material, would also have served well as a long-term solution. Although Peter J. Reynolds writes in his discussion of the archaeological reconstruction known as the Pimperne Roundhouse that the lifespan of a straw-thatched roof would have been about 15 years, many of the professional thatchers working in the UK today indicate on their (admittedly sales-biased) websites that straw can reliably last up to 30 years, with reed-thatched roofs lasting up to half a century. See Peter J. Reynolds, “The Life and Death of a Post-Hole” (paper presentation, Interpreting Stratigraphy, May 5, 1995: http://www.butser.org.uk/Life%20&%20Death%20of%20a%20Post-hole.pdf). Additional possibilities for roofing materials in the context of early English literature have been discussed in Karl P. Wentersdorf, “The Beowulf Poet’s Vision of Heorot,” Studies in Philology 104, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 409-26. That longevity, however, was never meant to last forever: see John Blair, “Houses for the Living: Life Cycles in Timber and the Transience of Earthly Dwellings,” in Building Anglo-Saxon England (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018), 84-91.}

This decrease in frequency of material objects continues for the remainder of the poem. Another loose group of three words follows more than twenty lines after the last, when Christ wields his sigemece (“victory-sword,” 664) and condemns the sinful to the witelus (“house of torment,” 669) and deadsele (“death-hall,” 670). From this point to the end of the poem, which specifically describes the fates of those who are condemned to hell or raised up to heaven, the references to material culture become scarce. In fact, from line 671 to the end of the poem in line 798, a total of only seven references to material culture occur, for an average of approximately one instance every 18 lines: banfast (“home-fast,” 688), ealdgestreon (“old treasure,” 704), bus (“house,” 737), morþerhusa (“murder-house,” 758), clommum (“chains/bonds,” 763), frætwe (“treasures,” 769), and blæd (“fruit/leaf,” 769). To provide more context, the Structure words banfast, bus, and morþerhusa all refer to hell and the fact that it is inescapable as well as horrific, while ealdgestreon are objects for which the sinful
grieve and *clomnum* bind the sinful. Only the last two objects, *frætwe* and *blæd*, occur in the context of salvation, and, even then, that context remains ambiguous:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Þonne þa gecorenan} & \quad \text{fore Crist berað} \\
\text{beorhte frætwe.} & \quad \text{Hyra blæd leofað} \\
\text{æt domdæge,} & \quad \text{agan dream mid gode} \\
\text{liþes lifes,} & \quad \text{þæs þe alyfed bip} \\
\text{haligra gehwam} & \quad \text{on heofonrice. (768-72)}
\end{align*}
\]

Then the chosen ones bear before Christ bright treasures. Their spirit will live at doomsday, (they) will have joy of a life together with God, which will be granted to every one of the holy in the kingdom of heaven.

It remains unclear what the nature of these treasures might be, but it seems clear that they are intended as gifts or tribute to Christ since they are borne before him. Likewise, *blæd* can be interpreted as “fruit,” and even potentially “cup” or “leaf,” although the translation of “spirit” is clearly the most sensible choice in this context. These small ambiguities, along with the decreased presence of references to material culture, once again serve to detach the mind of the audience from material things, encouraging them to focus instead on a world without possessions.

**Conclusions**

The fact that the *Christ* poems can be recognized, even today, as a subgroup of poems in the larger collection of the *Exeter Book*, and the fact that they were written in the manuscript in such a way as to almost insist that they be read together, despite the fact that they are likely to have been composed by different authors at different times, makes clear how important it is for readers to understand these poems in their collective context. Just as we cannot properly understand the various poems of the *Advent Lyrics* without placing them in their proper order among the rest of those works, we cannot understand the *Advent Lyrics*
as a whole without then continuing to read *The Ascension* and *Christ in Judgement*. This, of course, is not to argue that these works cannot stand on their own; rather, it is a statement of the artistry that can be (and was) created by the anthologizer of the *Exeter Book*. Each of the works may function on its own, but when assembled into a collection, as a part of a “mix tape” complete with transitions from one work into another, these works take on additional, individual meanings specific to their relationships with other poems.

Despite being a collection of poems itself, the *Advent Lyrics* is clearly part of a program of poems. From the first Lyric, that program clearly seems to have a great deal to do not only with objects of material culture, but specifically with buildings and structures. Throughout the remaining eleven Lyrics, the program begins to take shape, focusing the audiences’ attention from the solid, material world of walls and stones that surrounds them to the more difficult, non-material concepts that can inform those who wish to live less in that world. By making use of references to material objects and taking care to look at the relative frequency and context of their appearance, these poems construct a path that leads away from the material and toward the divine.

The transition from the *Advent Lyrics* to *The Ascension* makes use of material objects to both connect and delineate the two works, with the second poem harkening back to its predecessor in terms of initial subject matter, dealing with Mary and the Nativity, while increasing the number of occurrences of words referring to material objects over the number from the last two Lyrics. This structural use of references to material objects is secondary, however, to the use of such references to describe Christ’s arrival in heaven and the world that awaits those who are saved. Passages that make use of extended metaphors, such as the boat-on-the-sea passage, make effective use of material objects not only by carrying forward a meaningful comparison. By also packing that comparison full of references to material
objects, the poem allows the audience a greater opportunity to situate the idea in relation to familiar physical forms. That metaphor, of course, was most effective due to the unorderable and untamable nature of water and the fact that all things on the sea are impermanent, just as worldly possessions and objects in this life are ephemeral. Even the passage in which Cynewulf gives his runic signature makes use of terms that evoke material objects in order to illustrate the transitory nature of this life and the importance of letting go of material possessions, and the runes themselves help to underscore that point through their multiple potential meanings and associations.

The second *Christ* poem then continues the strategy of transitioning from one poem into the next by taking on the subject matter of the third poem in the group, *Christ in Judgement*, and continuing to use the number of material objects in order to make the delineation clearer to the audience. Unlike the previous poems, however, the groupings of objects in the poem most dedicated to the damned and their punishments seem chaotic, scattered, and generally less unified than the references to material culture in the first two poems. Even those groups that do display a focus on a single type of object and occur more often over a smaller number of lines, such as references to worldly treasure or the passage describing the events in the Temple following Christ’s death, draw the audience’s attention to the destruction of worldly wealth and the importance of not being attached to it.

Overall, the poems’ focus on the transitory nature of material objects seems to be complicated by the semi-permanent nature of buildings and structures throughout. Although Christ ultimately destroys the world, the three poems also seem to recognize the important fact that He also created it, and that the places these structures create are an important way of understanding both the world in which we live and the world the early English hoped to inhabit after Judgement Day. Christ and Mary, indeed, are treated as structures themselves in
the *Advent Lyrics*, and the importance of Christ’s role in opening the gates of heaven cannot be overstated. Even if the buildings that exist in the world must be maintained and rebuilt, they are still representations, however imperfect, of the places we inhabit after death, from the heavenly city of Jerusalem to the murder-houses of hell, and they are therefore extremely useful in an extended argument about the importance of distancing one’s self from worldly wealth.

There is, of course, a great deal more to be said about the ways material culture is rendered in the *Christ* poems, how they come together as meaningful groups, and how the various types of objects relate to one another. By recognizing that objects have a part to play, both in the structures of individual poems and the relationships between them, we see that references to material objects help to shape and delineate the Old English poetry in the *Exeter Book*. Critically, their use within these poems also helps to shape the overall argument of the anthologist of the *Exeter Book* that the material world is a dangerous one, unworthy of the audiences’ attentions. Together, these points make it possible for us to more fully appreciate the subtle ways that Old English poetry uses material culture as a marker. This knowledge will help us approach the next chapter, which will look to the Guthlac poems and the role of material objects in defining holiness and space.
Chapter 3: The *Guthlac* Poems

The previous chapter discussed the strange ending of *Christ in Judgement*, a poem that expends most of its efforts describing the torments that await those who do not seek to live in accordance with the will of God, only to turn in its final lines to describe the joys of heaven. Of course, such an ending is in keeping with the poems that came before it, each ensuring that the transition into the next work is a smooth one and clearly indicating that these poems were intended to be read together, one after the other, in the order they were included in the manuscript. It is, however, worth noting that this program of natural continuation does not conclude when the subject of the poetry changes. Indeed, as the *Exeter Book* continues on to its new subject, the soldier-turned-hermit St. Guthlac, the line between *Christ in Judgement* and *Guthlac A* becomes so blurred that a fair amount of scholarly ink has been spilled trying to discern exactly where *Christ in Judgement* ends and *Guthlac A* begins.\(^1\)

More striking than the fact that a poem about Judgement Day almost seamlessly merges into a poem about a local saint, however, is the fact that the local saint in question is a hermit whose most celebrated accomplishment is his reclaiming of the wild fenlands of Croyland from both natural and supernatural forces. As discussed in the previous chapter, the three poems about Christ use references to material culture in order to make a clear argument that humanity should abandon its worldly wealth and share what it has in order to ensure that everyone may have what they need to live a healthy, pious life, and to await their reward when they arrive in heaven. One cannot ask for a better example of this than a hermit, but the Guthlac portrayed in the poems of the *Exeter Book* does more than simply act

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\(^1\) For an extensive discussion of the history of this debate, beginning with Benjamin Thorpe’s 1842 edition of the *Exeter Book*, see Liuzza, “Old English *Christ* and *Guthlac*,” 1-5.
as a role model for audiences; he is also a builder and reclaimer of space for Christianity and a powerful voice for the importance of landscape as material culture in the religious life of the early English. Because, as has been previously shown, these poems were not only included in an anthology but included with a specific purpose, we must ask why St. Guthlac’s story is included, why it is included at this point in the manuscript, and what significance is created by its relationship with the previous poems. In this chapter, I argue that Guthlac’s inclusion in the Exeter Book not only builds on the arguments already made in the Christ poems, but also serves to illustrate the ways in which material objects, including structures and landscape, can be used to define space and further expand the influence of Christianity, both for individuals and for geographies, without burdening the soul with temptation.

First, though, it would be beneficial to discuss, however briefly, the important background information about this relatively obscure early English saint. Born c. 674, Guthlac was related to the royal house of Mercia and served as a military commander of some sort before he became a monk, moving to an island in the fens around the year 699. After his death in 714, King Ethelbald founded Crowland Abbey near the location of the saint’s hermitage. He was a contemporary of Bede and of Wilfrid of York, with whom Eleanor Shipley Duckett speculates Guthlac may have had some direct contact: “Guthlac was twenty-six when he reached Crowland; Wilfrid must have reverenced in him another young Cuthbert, whose call to solitude differed so widely from his own vocation.” In fact, the association between Guthlac and Cuthbert is merited on a number of points, including their desire to seek out a solitary existence and their role in shaping the landscape through

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their efforts at living a pious life. Another similarity is that, as a local saint, Guthlac’s cult also grew to be relatively strong. One need only look to the East Anglian monk Felix’s *Vita S. Guthlaci* and the Guthlac Roll to see the impact the saint had within English communities. The former was composed between 713 and 749, during the reign of Ælfwald, and is often considered the best source for information about the historical figure, while the latter is a thin strip of parchment made in either the late twelfth or early thirteenth century that contains 18 portraits of events from the life of the saint. Such a span of time between the creation of these two works of art, along with the presence of the two remarkable *Exeter Book* poems and the foundation in his honor, leave no doubt about his influence.

It is also worthwhile to point out that Guthlac, like many other holy figures depicted in Old English verse, straddles the line between saint and Germanic hero. As a warrior-turned-hermit, his actions not only place his incredible strength of will and faith on display, but do so in such a way as to defy all odds, placing himself at the center of an epic struggle against powerful enemies. This places Guthlac in the company of figures like St. Edmund, who reacts with defiance in the face of Danish invasion and certain death, St. Juliana, who physically wrestles a demon in her prison cell (and who will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter), and even Christ himself, who, in *The Dream of the Rood*, does not wait to be affixed to the cross, but instead strips down for battle and then climbs upon the instrument of his execution of his own volition. Alexandra Hennessey Olsen saw the Guthlac of the *Exeter Book* poems as a hero-saint for reasons beyond his described actions, as well, stating

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that “the heroic vocabulary of Guthlac A is not merely metaphorical, for the post has
transferred the language from a description of secular heroism to one of religious heroism.”

This fusion of heroic and hagiographic language and actions is significant within the context
of this study because it is an excellent example of one of the most successful strategies
Christians used to spread the church throughout England: they took established practice and
adopted it for Christian contexts. The most famous example of this policy is Bede’s account
of the explicit order of Pope Gregory I in a letter to Abbot Mellitus:

[W]e have been giving careful thought to the affairs of the English, and have
come to the conclusion that the temples of the idols among that people
should on no account be destroyed. The idols are to be destroyed, but the
temples themselves are to be aspersed with holy water, altars set up in them,
and relics deposited there. For if these temples are well-built, they must be
purified from the worship of demons and dedicated to the service of the true
God. In this way, we hope that the people, seeing that their temples are not
destroyed, may abandon their error and, flocking the more readily to their
accustomed resorts, may come to know and adore the true God.

The idea that a point of cultural familiarity, and specifically a physical object with cultural
meaning, can help ease the conversion of a group to a new religion is certainly significant,
but equally significant is the fact that such cultural familiarity seems not to have been
“phased out” in the case of Germanic heroic values being applied to certain saints and other
church figures. As a result, we are given an opportunity through these narratives to
understand the way the early English not only chose to depict saints in order to make them
more meaningful and appealing, but also how they chose to maintain them over the years.
This has implications for the way we understand the characters in the text, of course, but it
also complicates our understanding of references to material culture.

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In many ways, the natural extension of the ideas already presented in the first three poems in the *Exeter Book*. Although the subject matter of the earlier works is complete in its arc, covering the birth, ascension, and return of Christ, the admonitions given throughout certainly provide audiences with ample opportunity to think about how they can avoid the direst of fates described and, instead, gain entry into heaven. The next two works, concerned with the life and death of a native English saint, are well-placed to provide audiences with an example of how to do just that, all while retaining many of the themes used in the earlier poems. Looking at *Guthlac A* as an answer to questions raised by the *Christ* poems also allows us to realize the importance of Guthlac being an English saint. Eleanor Shipley Duckett’s study of four important men of the church in early England identifies, in its epilogue, a brief list of the traits that Aldhelm, Wilfrid, Bede, and Boniface shared, including their attitudes towards relationships with family, an appreciation of nature, a sense of purpose, and a love for craftsmanship, but she also writes that

> they were all Anglo-Saxon, born of that warrior race which had descended on the coasts of Britain to conquer and to hold. The characteristics that marked the life and literature of early England were found in them, children of her soil. They shared in the feeling towards their own people which had been the heritage of every Germanic tribe from the time of Tacitus.

Just as it is imperative to provide something familiar to which converts can cling as they become Christians, it is equally imperative to provide guidance from familiar sources. Bertram Colgrave, for instance, argues in his edition of Felix’s *Life of St. Guthlac* that although there may be some exaggerations in the *Life* regarding the young saint’s nine-year military career, “it is clear that he must have gained some fame as a leader, for we are told that his

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followers came from various races and from all directions, a true indication of his military prowess.” Inclusion of such information in the *Life* is important not only because it is a biographical fact or it gives context to some of the later struggles between the saint and the demons he must expel from his new home. The fact that he was a warrior who then turned to God gives the intended audience of the poem another point of contact they can use to understand Guthlac’s actions, since they would be informed by the same culture with which the audience themselves would have been familiar. Through this lens, and in response to the *Christ* poems, *Guthlac A* attempts to depict an appropriate balance between the material needs of Christian life, such as food and shelter, the relationship between that life and the natural world, and the religious need for rejection of the material world in order to create an exemplary path to salvation for its audience.

Evidence that *Guthlac A* acts as a response to *Christ in Judgement* is once more a function of the transition between the works, but, as briefly mentioned above, there has been some scholarly debate as to where the text of *Guthlac A* actually begins. Thorpe’s edition of the manuscript separates what we now consider to be one poem into three separate works, which he titles “Of Souls After Death, etc. II” (lines 1-29), “Poem Moral and Religious” (lines 30-92), and “The Legend of Saint Guthlac I-VI” (lines 93-818). This is certainly understandable to some degree, both on textual and paleographic grounds; the first 29 lines, sometimes referred to as the “prologue,” begin with visual cues that a new work is starting and the text itself has little explicitly to do with *Guthlac A* at all; likewise, lines 30-92 are only obliquely related, discussing the subject of rejecting the world and living as a hermit, and the lines following the conclusion of this section are also marked by visual cues.

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Alternatively, citing connections in the subject of the text, Edwin J. Howard believed that the first 29 lines more closely resembled *Christ in Judgement* than *Guthlac A*, implying that those lines should be included with the end of the previous poem rather than the beginning of the subsequent one.\(^\text{11}\) Clearly there is a disconnect between these various parts of the poem.

Still, the paleographical evidence flatly opposes Howard’s suggestion; the end of *Christ in Judgement* occurs towards the bottom of folio 32r, but that end is both punctuated with the same mark used throughout to separate different works (~ : ~) and is then followed by three and a half blank lines. The text at the top of folio 32v then begins with a large initial decorated in a simple but elegant style and a line of text in capital letters. Clearly there is a division of texts at this point. Moreover, T. A. Shippey reluctantly argued that the lines beginning on f. 32v belonged with *Guthlac A*, giving the poem a greater sense of purpose,\(^\text{12}\) while Jane Roberts points out the significant number of corresponding stock phrases that are used between these initial lines and lines included in the later parts of the poem. She concludes, “In effect, there is no new beginning at line 30. Attention shifts from the heavenly home which righteous souls will attain to ways of serving God in the world so as to be numbered among the holy.”\(^\text{13}\) On the whole, editors have agreed; both Krapp and Dobbie’s *ASPR* and Muir’s *Exeter Anthology* have drawn the line to include these lines within *Guthlac A*.

This is significant because the two passages, while not directly associating Guthlac to the end of *Christ in Judgement*, certainly make a point of connecting them. Every attribute given for the souls deemed worthy to be saved would have been readily recognized by any


contemporary audience as being one of Guthlac’s traits, as well. Within the second section of the poem, for example, we find a passage that declares that heaven will be the destination of all those who subdue evil spirits:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Ðider soðfæstra} & \quad \text{sawla motun} \\
\text{cuman æfter cwealme,} & \quad \text{Þa þe her Cristes æ} \\
\text{lærað ond læstað,} & \quad \text{ond his lof ræað.} \\
\text{Oferwinnad þa awyrgdan gæstas,} & \quad \text{bigytað him wuldres ræste,} \\
\text{hwider sceal þæs monnes} & \quad \text{mod astigan,} \\
\text{ær ðpe æfter,} & \quad \text{þonne he his Ænne her} \\
\text{gæst bigonge,} & \quad \text{þæt se gode mote,} \\
\text{wommaclæne,} & \quad \text{in geweald cuman. (22–29)}
\end{align*}\]

Thence the souls of the soothfast may come after death, those who teach and follow the law of Christ here, and raise up his glory, (who) then vanquish cursed spirits, obtain from them the respite of glory, whither the mind of man must climb, before or after, when he attends in this world his singular soul, so that the good may, clean of corruption, come into (God’s) power.

Of course, Guthlac’s greatest achievement is the fact that he struggled and ultimately triumphed against demons who wished to evict him from his hermitage, which they had occupied before him. Despite the general nature of the statement, there can be no doubt that the line’s presence directly relates to Guthlac by implication.

Even more descriptive of Guthlac, if not explicitly attached to him, is the description of holy hermits in general that occurs before the narrative turns to his life properly:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Sume þa wuniað} & \quad \text{on westennum,} \\
\text{secað ond gesittað} & \quad \text{þylfra willum} \\
\text{hamas on heolstrum;} & \quad \text{hy ðæs hefoncundan} \\
\text{boldes bidað.} & \quad \text{Oft him brogan to} \\
\text{laðne gelædeð,} & \quad \text{se þe him lifes ofonn,} \\
\text{eawæð him egsan,} & \quad \text{hwilum idel wuldor,} \\
\text{brægðwis bona} & \quad \text{hafað bega cæft,} \\
\text{eahlæð anbuendra.} & \quad \text{Fore him englas stondað,} \\
\text{gearwe mid gesta wæpnum,} & \quad \text{beþ hyra geoca gemyndge,} \\
\text{healdæð haligra feorh,} & \quad \text{witon hyra hyht mid dryhten. (81–90)}
\end{align*}\]
Some live then in the deserts,
seek out and settle by their own will
homes in concealed places; they await
the celestial building. Often the loathsome (one)
leads terror to them, he who begrudges them life,
makes horror manifest to them, sometimes empty glories,
the crafty killer has the power of both,
persecutes the lone dweller. Before them stand angels,
equipped with spiritual weapons, (they) are mindful of their safety,
(they) hold the soul of the saint, (who) know their joy (is) with the Lord.

This is as accurate a depiction of Guthlac as a hermit as one could expect to find. Although
he lives in the fenlands, scholars have long compared the early English saint with the likes of
St. Anthony, who did dwell in the desert. With this difference aside, the English saint does
live in a concealed location of his own volition. Likewise, he is tested by demons who show
him both unfit young monks as a temptation to follow their model and the gates of hell as a
threat. Most important, however, is the fact that Guthlac is protected; he has the guidance of
an angel early in the poem and is rescued from hell by the intervention of St. Bartholomew.
This section of the poem, then, is certainly addressing the major attributes of the subject of
the coming lines.

Additionally, this sort of tripartite balance is unique to Guthlac A. Felix’s Life
mentioned above is more concerned with the description of the hermitage and its
surroundings than the Exeter Book poem is, brief though it may be. Laurence K. Shook
provides as concise a summary of this description as one could ask for:

Crowland . . . was one of several wooded islands situated in the dismal black-
watered Fens between Cambridge and the sea to the north. Crowland’s
barrow was a burial-mound (tumulus) built of clods of earth, with some kind
of cistern in its side. When Guthlac came to Crowland, he built a hut or
shelter over the cistern and used it for his dwelling. It is not clear from Felix
whether Guthlac erected any other buildings near the barrow, but he was
able at least to receive visitors there.15

---

However meager this list of details may seem, it stands in contrast to what *Guthlac A* provides; in fact, Shook asserts that the poet “appeared neither to know nor very much care about the geography of the Fens, where he had perforce to set his poem.”\(^{16}\) This difference in setting is part of a larger disconnect between the *Life* and the poem, as well. Muir points out that a long line of scholars, reaching back to Charitius in 1879, have argued that Felix was not used as source material.\(^{17}\) Roberts’s 1979 study very specifically states that she finds insufficient proof that Felix’s *Vita sancti Guthlac* was used as a source of the poem,\(^{18}\) and much more recently, Stephanie Clark concurs, arguing that “while we cannot state for certain that the *Guthlac A* poet did not *know* Felix’s *Vita*, we can confidently state that he did not *use* it.”\(^{19}\) Thus, although Felix and the *Guthlac A* poet clearly knew of their subject, and though the *Guthlac A* poet is known to have written after Felix, a lack of evidence that the former served as a source for the latter means that we must look to the poem on its own merits.

So far, we have established that *Guthlac A* is a work not directly based on any known source material; we also know that, despite assertions to the contrary, its various disparate parts do connect with one another in a unified structure and that it seems to be included in the *Exeter Book* as a response to the questions posed by the three *Christ* poems, making it a part of a larger assemblage. As a result, we also know that many of the central ideas of the previous poems will receive some treatment in *Guthlac A*, as well, creating a larger response to the questions raised in this section of the manuscript. All this is necessary in order to understand the impact of Guthlac’s *Life*, and the use of material culture in that *Life*, on the broader argument developing within the anthology, namely that there is danger in being lost.

\(^{16}\) Shook, “Burial Mound,” 2.
in the attraction to worldly goods and that, though some objects and material possessions are
necessary, they should become so important that they stand between their owner and God.

We may now turn our attention to the way objects are employed to shape the
relationship between Guthlac and his environment, both natural and constructed, and the
effects of that relationship on his impact as a saint among the early English audiences of the
poem. As before, we can learn a great deal by identifying and categorizing the terms
associated with objects of material culture within the poem. Broadly speaking, there are 98
references to material culture throughout the 818 lines of the poem, or an average of one
occurrence approximately every 8.35 lines. This makes material culture terms less common
in Guthlac A than in the Advent Lyrics (one in 7.84), The Ascension (one in 5.21), or Christ in
Judgement (one in 8.06). This may be due, at least in part, to the fact that Guthlac was a hermit
living close to nature, thereby reducing the role that material culture could play in the
narrative, but other factors may also contribute to this decreased frequency, such as the
desire of the poet to focus on spiritual matters and thus to use material culture only when
necessary.

It is important to point out, however, that while Martial and Wealth words make up
approximately 8.16 percent and 12.24 percent of the total references within the poem,
respectively, Structure terms once again make up the most common category of material
culture in the poem by far: 41 terms, or nearly 42 percent. Again, buildings and structures
have an important role to play in the poem, but unlike the Christ poems, which were set up
to use objects either to show the impermanence of worldly possessions or the superior and
permanent nature of similar objects in heaven, Guthlac A has relatively little to do with the
afterlife. Instead, the structures and buildings described here concern the natural world, its
reclamation by Christianity, and what remains when these structures, be they actual buildings or bodily metaphors, eventually and inevitably fail.

References to material culture within the prologue seem to indicate that structures continue to be a significant part of the depiction of heaven in *Guthlac A*. Within those first 29 lines, only three material culture terms are used: *ham* (“home,” 10), *ceastrum* (“cities,” 17), and *getimbru* (“buildings,” 18). The fact that all three refer to either buildings or collections of buildings certainly stands out, but the context in which they appear is even more significant.

As a soul arrives in heaven, an angel greets it and offers it welcome:

```
Nu þu most feran     þider þu fundadest
longe ond gelome.     Ic þec lædan sceal.
Wegas þe sindon wepe     ond wuldres leoht
torht ontyned.     Eart nu tidfara
to þam halgan ham. (6-10)
```

Now you may travel thence (where) you have long and frequently (wished to) visit. I must lead you. For you the paths are pleasant and the light of glory brightly covers (you). Now is your time to travel to the holy home.

Much like the harbor described in *Christ in Judgement*, the *ham* mentioned here is not merely a place to dwell: it is the destination at the end of a long and dangerous journey. The angel then goes on to proclaim that this is a place where sorrow never comes, spending several lines on the description of joys to be found where they were going before giving the reason such joy is possible:

```
He him ece lean
healdeð on heofonum,     þær se hyhsta
ealra cyninga     ceastrum wealdeð.
Dæt sind þa getimbru     þe þær tydriað,
ne þam fore yrmþum     þe þær in wuniað
```

20 The word *tidfara* literally translates as “time-traveler” or “tide-journeyer,” indicating a traveler whose time to make the journey has come. Although this translation takes a few liberties, I argue that it renders the idea more elegantly and appropriately into modern English.
He holds for them
in heaven eternal reward, where the highest
of all kings rules the cities.
Those are the buildings which do not weaken,
nor (does) misery spring before those who dwell
dwell there in life, but it will be better for them the longer (it lasts)—
(t)ey enjoy youth and the favor of God.

Buildings that never weaken or fail are a strong counterpoint to the structures described in
the first of the *Advent Lyrics*, which likens the world itself to a crumbling wall that the
narrator of the Lyric must ask the architect, Christ, to repair. As the angel speaks and leads
the blessed soul to its reward, it also leads the audience to the most important piece of
information in the prologue: God himself governs these structures and they, as well as those
who use them, are immune to the ravages of time. The fact that the divine hand is actively
involved in the governance of the cities of heaven, ensuring that all is as it should be,
inexorably ties the inhabitants of the city to the city itself and to its ruler.

The section of *Guthlac A* that lies between the prologue and the beginning of the
saint’s life itself is a meditation on the life of those who will go on to eventually be
welcomed into heaven as the soul in the prologue was; that is to say, it addresses the way
holy individuals live in this world in preparation for the poem’s presentation of St. Guthlac
himself as an example. As a result of being grounded in this existence, though, this section is
more diverse in the type of material culture it references, though much of it is presented as
undesirable and distracting from the purpose. The terms also tend to occur in pairs and
groups. Twenty-five lines after the last instance of material culture, the group *blæd* (“fruit,”
43), *wæstma* (“fruits,” 44), and *sæda* (“seeds,” 45) occur. Although fruit and vegetation in
general is often thought of as a mark of fertility and growth, here these words are used to
create a sense of loss and decay:
This rather somber meditation on the withering of good things is followed by a statement that makes explicit the lesson of this poem:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Forþon se mon ne þearf} & \\
\text{to þisse worulde wyrpe gehycgan,} & \\
\text{þæt he us faegran gefean bringe} & \\
\text{ofe r þa niþas þe we nu dreogað,} & \\
\text{æþpon endien ealle gesceafte} & \\
\text{ða he gesette on siex dagum,} & \\
\text{ða nu under heofonum þadas cennað,} & \\
\text{micle ond mæte.} & \\
\end{align*}
\]

Therefore a man need not think of the cast to this world, because He brings us fair joys greater than the evils we now do before the end of all creation which he set together in six days, when (he) now brings forth decrees under the heavens for the mighty and the meager.

This argument has already been made throughout the Christ poems, and as it stands in these lines, it seems almost as if it has the weight of a thesis, especially considering the preceding lines. The purpose of the poem is clear: the wealth of this world matters little and the joys of the afterlife are far greater than anything we experience here, so it is better to embrace a simple and pious life now and await one’s reward in the world to come.

The remainder of this section then goes on to make clear what the proper use of material wealth and goods must then be. Words such as *eorðwela* ("earthly wealth," 62) and *worulgestreon* ("worldly treasures," 70) are used in contexts that reduce their desirability,
either by pointing out that they cannot be kept or by offering them in exchange for that
which is truly important:

Swa þas woruldgestreon
on þa mæfran god bimutad weorþað,
donne þæt gegyrnað þa þe him godes egsa
hleonaþ ofer heafdu. (70-73)

So the worldly treasures
will be exchanged for a more valuable good,
when those with the fear of God over (their) heads
yearn for shelter.

The word *ham* (“home,” 69), too, is evoked here in reference to heaven, or what one might
consider to be the only “home” that matters. Other examples of acceptable uses of objects
of material culture are then given afterward:

Wuldres bycgað,
sellað ælmesan, carme frefrað,
beoð rummode ryhra gestreona,
lufiað mid lacum þa þe læs agun,
dæghwam dryhnte þeowiaþ; he hyre dæde sceawað. (76-80)

(They) procure glory,
give alms, console the poor,
are generous with (their) rightful wealth,
show affection with gifts for those who own less,
serve the Lord daily; He looks upon their deeds.

Only after the discussion has addressed what average individuals might do in order to
dispose of their excess worldly wealth in a manner consistent with God’s commands does it
turn to the matter more directly at hand: the ascetic life of the wilderness hermit. Dividing
the actions of those who still engage in the world from those who choose to leave it is
effective here in reinforcing the divide between average Christians and saints, but it also
provides more practical guidance. Hagiography of any sort can be problematic if it is read as
an explicit model or guide on how to live; after all, the Church would cease to exist if all of
its members chose to move to the wilderness to pursue a life of quiet contemplation, as
would have medieval society as a whole. Instead, the poem provides an explicit list of the uses of material culture that can be emulated without turning to extremes.

Saints, however, are not average Christians, and saints by definition are extreme in their actions as well as their faith. As mentioned above, the final lines of this section describe the choices that truly dedicated individuals make for their faith and the protections that they are granted in return. As one might expect, there are fewer references to material culture here, partially because the section is so brief and partially because one would not expect to see a great deal of material culture tied to the description of someone who has literally walked away from the things that define worldly existence. Three terms do appear in the twelve-line remainder of the section, however: *hamas* (“homes,” 83), *boldes* (“building, dwelling,” 84), and *wæpnum* (“weapons,” 89). As Structure words that appear in consecutive lines, the first two are especially interesting in that the former explicitly refers to earthly homes that are sought out by saints and the latter is specifically heavenly. 21 The juxtaposition of these two structures once again demonstrates the sort of inverse relationship that has been argued throughout the *Exeter Book* so far: accepting, or indeed seeking out, the least desirable material trappings of the world is, in essence, a sort of investment into one’s existence after death.

The third term, *wæpnum*, also creates a dual relationship by means of its context, specifically the kinds of weapons they are and who wields them. 22 Here, the weapons belong not to the saint, 23 but to the angels who stand to defend him or her from a hostile world, one that is made even more dangerous by virtue of the locale chosen for his or her home. In fact, there is no mention at all of any sort of physical weapon that might be wielded by the saint

21 See above, lines 81-84.
22 See above, lines 88-91.
23 Later lines do give Guthlac his own spiritual weapons, as well as raiment. See lines 177-81.
him- or herself, even if that saint was widely known to have been an accomplished warrior, as was the case with Guthlac. The model set up just lines earlier, where the worldly and the non-worldly versions of the same object (homes) are compared directly, is not maintained here, and the absence of a physical weapon and the refusal to create a parallel structure force the audience to ask why. All individuals, including saints, are entitled to defend themselves, especially when the source of the danger is as much a spiritual threat as it is a physical one, but the poem declines even to mention that the saint has chosen to lay down material arms and to trust in the protection of the angels. The idea is simply not brought up. This sort of palpable absence may be a lost opportunity to reinforce the idea of conscious investment in the world to come, but the importance placed on communicating that point as clearly as possible makes such an oversight seem implausible. Instead, if we consider that it was a conscious choice to leave physical weapons out of the picture, we can then recognize that such a move does create the opportunity to stress a different point. Not only does the saint consciously choose to turn his or her back on the world, but he or she also has such strength of conviction and faith that such choices are simply abandoned and forgotten. Picking up a weapon is not merely something the saint has chosen not to do; it is something that never really occurs to him or her because the angels and their spiritual weapons will ensure that no harm befalls them. That level of conviction is once again beyond the scope of what typical Christians may experience, but it certainly strengthens the saintly stature of Guthlac while simultaneously reiterating how his needs are entirely provided by the Lord.

Looking at patterns of usage throughout these two introductory sections of the poem, then, it becomes even clearer that the current practice of including these 92 lines in Guthlac A is not only correct, but important to understanding the work. The brief passage describing the soul being welcomed into heaven by an angel is matched by the description of
the actions of saints while still on earth, a description that also includes protection and assistance by angels. In turn, that passage clearly describes the very saint whose *Life* is related immediately afterward and whose status as a saint is also associated with angels. All of this is further solidified by the way material objects are employed throughout, from the Structure words associated with heaven to the terms of worldly wealth that the saint rejects. The poem argues that worldly concern with wealth and material objects is misplaced and one should instead develop concern for one’s soul and the improvement of the lives of others by means of one’s additional resources, which is the best use of wealth. Moreover, the number of objects listed in this brief set of prefatory lines is relatively consistent with the numbers seen throughout the rest of the poem, including five Structure terms (a full third of the 15 total terms in this section), four Wealth terms (26.7 percent), three Plant terms (20 percent), and single occurrences of Municipal, Religion, and Martial terms (6.7 percent each).

Having already discussed the use of such references to material culture in the creation of structural ties within the poetry in the previous chapter, it will prove more profitable here to turn our attention instead to another significant aspect of object terms in *Guthlac A*. Although there can be no doubt that the poem explicitly argues for the reduction of the role material objects play in the values and everyday worldly lives of its audiences (it does so numerous times), things themselves could never be mistaken as a theme of central importance. Instead, the poem focuses on the relationship between the saint and the environment that surrounds his hermitage, which is transformed through the construction of buildings from an inhospitable waste to a pleasant spiritual retreat for the benefit not only of the saint himself but for all Christendom.

For the sake of clarity, however, one must not understand “surrounding environment” as uninhabited, untamed wilderness. Although it is true that the hilltop is
described as being isolated from human society, the poem spends little time at all on the
geography or ecology of the saint’s chosen home beyond his reaction to it. Already
mentioned above is Shook’s observation that the author of Guthlac A seems to have had
little idea about the geography of the area in which the poem is set, but Neville points out
even more specifically: “Guthlac, however, contains almost no description of the land, water,
vegetation and animal life that help to make the saint’s home so pleasant for him.”24 Indeed,
nearly the only thing we know about where the saint resides in the poem is that it lies upon a
hill, or beorg, a word that has been the subject of a great deal of debate. Shook, relying on
evidence from the Life of Felix and its term tumulus, argues that although beorg is usually
interpreted to mean “hill,” it can be used to mean something closer to “burial mound,” a
point that offers a dramatic upgrade to the setting of the poem:

> Since the simplex beorg appears 12 times in the poem, any attempt to render it
> as “hill” or “mountain” is bound to destroy its geographical accuracy. But beorg also means “barrow” or “burial mound.” Indeed, Ælfric gives it as the
> normal gloss for Latin agger, a word denoting any kind of artificial elevation
> of earth, stone, rubbish, and so forth. Since beorg has this technical meaning,
> the poet ought to be using it in the strictly technical sense.25

Shook’s evocative reading certainly tempted many in the later twentieth century, because, as
Clark later writes, “Grave-mounds are more romantic than hills and thus seem more suitable
to modern tastes as a symbolic center for the poem; since barrows are more highly colored
than hills.”26 Still, Clark’s study ultimately concludes that the evidence for Shook’s
interpretation is weak, and that the only acceptable understanding of the term beorg is that of
a hill. Concerning the role of the geography within the poem, however, Clark also notes:

> Perhaps more suggestively, in Guthlac A the poet never varies beorg with
> something less ambiguous, either moldern or even hlæw as synonyms for

---

26 Clark, Guthlac A, 49.
“barrow,” or *dun* or any of the other synonyms for hill or mountain. Rather, the other words used to indicate the landscape of Guthlac’s hermitage are *lond* (land), *wong* (plain), *eard* (habitat, region), *eþel* (homeland), and *stow* (place). Almost as frequently, the poet opts to refer to the buildings on the site: *ham* (home), *setl* (seat, residence), *wic* (house, settlement), *bold* (house), and *hus* (house). This indicates that what is important to the poet is the nature of the place as a site of contest (*wong*), a place that both Guthlac and the devils can claim, a place where Guthlac belongs, and a place that he settles and cultivates, in contrast to the devils who leave it waste.  

For the purposes of this study, there are numerous reasons why this point is significant. The first, and simplest, is that a hill is a natural formation that has no value as material culture, whereas a barrow would be the product of human alteration of the landscape. Thus, the act of settling on the top of a hill is an act of claiming natural space for Christian usage, as opposed to doing so atop a barrow, which would then be a reclaiming of an area that had either already been Christian or was perhaps pagan at some point. The difference between the two also changes the reason for the demons’ occupation of the space. As Clark points out, however, the importance of the location lies not in its representation of the expansion of Christianity into a pagan area of the island, or even in the saint’s reclaiming an ancient burial site. Rather, the poem is about how that feature is used by those on either side of the struggle for its possession.

Discenza’s concept of space and place is useful in this context specifically because it allows us to clearly define the ways in which Guthlac and the demons want to use the hill. Although she explicitly points out that space for the early English is not the kind of void that modern readers might understand, and indeed space is often filled not just with matter, but life as well, Discenza does argue that there is a useful distinction between space and place:

The Anglo-Saxons did not simply exist in ready-made spaces and places but constructed the places around them mentally and often materially. To make place is to make sense of the world around one and take ownership of it. The Anglo-Saxon constructed space is a proper place, in Michel de Certeau’s

27 Clark, *Guthlac A*, 53.
terminology, in which the French *propre* means both “proper” (fitting, right) and “owned” or “belonging to.” Place becomes proper as Anglo-Saxons impose a mental order upon it, whether or not they have physically made it.\(^{28}\)

Thus, we can see that the two sides of this struggle are concerned with matters of possession, but they must also then deal with matters of definition. The space could be used by the demons as long as it remained outside the realm of order and ownership, but once Guthlac claims that space, occupies it, and renders it a recognizable spot within the wilderness, then the hilltop space becomes a place, a location that was constructed both mentally and physically by the saint and, therefore, was no longer accessible to its previous demonic tenants.

The first mention of the hill in the poem occurs as the protagonist himself is introduced after the prologues:

\begin{verbatim}
Magun we nu nemnan þæt us neah gewearð
þurh hāligne had gecyþed,
hu Guðlac his in godes willan
mod gerehte, man eall forseah,
eordlic æþelu, upp gemunde
ham in heofunum. Him wæs hyht to þam,
siþþan hine inlyhte se þe lifes weg
gæstum gearwað, ond him giefe scalde
ingelecunde, þæt he ana ongan
beorgeþel bugan, ond his blæd gode
þurh eaðmedu calne gesealde,
ðone þe he on geoðude bigan sceolde worulde wynnum. (93-105)
\end{verbatim}

We may now name what latest became related to us from a holy person, how Guthlac corrected his mind by the will of God, despised all wickedness, earthly honors, mindful of the home above in heaven. The highest hope for him was to (achieve) that (home), after he who prepares the way of life for spirits illuminated him, and gave him an angelic gift, so that he began to inhabit a hill-dwelling alone, and for humility.

entirely gave away his good cup,
the one (with) which in youth he was obliged to enjoy
the pleasures of the world.

Again, the rejection of material wealth and the embracing of an unencumbered life that will
lead to a greater reward in the afterlife is made an explicit theme of the poem, but it is
striking here that we are given more information about the cup he gave away than the hilltop
to which he is guided by divine intervention. In fact, there are no details about the location
at all except its placement on an elevated piece of ground, and further reference to his new
home only offers how the saint comes to feel about it:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{sib\textipa{7}}\textipa{bam frofre gest} \\
in Gu\textipa{hlaces geoece gewunade,} \\
lufade hine ond lærde lenge hu geornor, \\
\text{hæt him leofedan londes wynne,} \\
bold on beorhge. (136-40)
\end{align*}
\]

after that the comforting spirit
resided (there) for the aid of Guthlac,
loved him and instructed him more earnestly the longer (it stayed),
so that the joys of the land endeared (themselves) to him,
the house on the hill.

Indeed, the poem adds nothing to the general description of the scene until line 148a, “beorg
on bearwe” (“hill in the forest”). Clark’s observations, then, are accurate insofar as the land
does not seem to be important for its own sake, but it merits mentioning that while the land
itself remains utterly anonymous, Guthlac learns to appreciate the joys of the land, and even
his house. Accepting it as it is, then, leaves the location as unusable and unenjoyable; it is
through the addition of a home that the place begins to have value to the saint, not just as a
home, but as a place where he can endeavor to become closer to God.

The importance of Guthlac’s hermitage in the reclaiming of wildlands extends
beyond the context of Christianity, however. Justin T. Noetzel notes that the expansion of
Christianity into the wilds of England also has a potential impact on a sense of national
identity: “Therefore, when Guthlac settles the liminal Fens and drives the native demons away, he claims the landscape for Christianity and helps develop the cultural identity of the developing Anglo-Saxon nation.” More significant than that, however, is the fact that the antagonist demons from whom Guthlac has taken the hill had never bothered to build anything themselves, choosing instead to make use of the land in its natural, unchanged form:

An essential act of settlement in the Fens is the physical improvement of and building on the land, and Guthlac adds this element to the cultural narrative through the construction of his hermitage. When he redefines the meaning that the land and water possess, and begins the transformation from desolate wilderness to a sacred destination, the demons fight back against this transgressive action.

Thus, for Noetzel, it is the act of building itself that transforms the hilltop and that act is what differentiates Guthlac from the previous demonic inhabitants and eventually validates his claim over theirs. Kristin Boivard-Abbo, however, contends that it is not the act of building, but what one chooses to build, that matters most when considering Guthlac’s ability to resist the attacks of the demons who wish to reclaim the hill, stating that the same necessary transformation occurs as a result of Guthlac’s raising of the Cross and his subsequent love of the land and its natural nonhuman occupants. Guthlac’s expulsion of the transient demons encourages a variety of birds to roost—birds which will help to regulate insect populations while in turn providing sustenance for other animals in the food chain. This expulsion would not have been possible without Guthlac’s raising of the Cross, for not only does it strengthen Guthlac spiritually against his enemies. The Cross also provides a nesting place for the tree-dwelling birds, further encouraging the propagation of their species.

Boivard-Abbo’s argument thus expands Noetzel’s point by demonstrating that what one chooses to build is as important as the simple fact that one builds, and that the reason the construction in question is effective is not just its Christian nature, but the fact that the Christian symbol Guthlac erects serves a purpose within the natural habitat. One must, it seems, not just enforce the will of humanity onto the landscape through the construction of material culture but allow that landscape to have a role in the material culture, as well. This idea pairs well with Discenza’s balance of place and space; although locations that have been entirely shaped by civilization are certainly places, it is not the physical alterations that transform spaces to places. Even a wild forest can become a place once it is defined by humanity as something, such as royal hunting grounds, so the simple shelter and raised cross that Guthlac erects on the hilltop are enough to transform that landscape from untamed space to holy place.

It is this acknowledgement of the balance that must be struck between the artificial and the natural that seems to underlie the way that Guthlac A makes use of material culture to serve the physical needs of life while not crossing the boundaries of attachment. In no way does the poem assert that the saint, or anyone else, should forgo all material possessions, and it makes clear that some objects of material culture are a part of how God works through his agents on earth, as when Guthlac addresses the demons he has displaced by building his hermitage:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ic me anum her} & \quad \text{eaðe getimbre} \\
\text{hus ond hleonað; me on heofonum sind} & \quad \text{lare gelonge. Mec þæs lyt tweoþ} \\
\text{þæt me engel to} & \quad \text{ealle geledeð} \\
\text{spowende sped} & \quad \text{sprea ond ðæda.} \\
\text{Gewitað nu, awyrge, werigmode,} & \quad \text{from þissum earde þe ge her on stondað.} \\
\text{Fleoð on feorweg. (250-57)} & 
\end{align*}
\]
Alone, I will easily build a house and shelter
for me here; the lore for me is
from the heavens. (There is) little doubt for me of this,
that an angel leads me to all
prosperous success in my words and deeds.
Know now, corrupted ones, weary in mind,
from this ground which you stand on here,
flee far away!

It is not much of a leap to say that if the knowledge of how to build these structures is sent
from above, then Guthlac must be meant to build them, and if an angel is being dispatched
to ensure his success, then he is also meant to succeed in his bid to live on the hill. Although
the reason that such efforts are taken is not explicitly stated, it is reasonable to look to the
next lines for some guidance: although the saint may exist for his own sake, he was
presumably guided to this hilltop location for a reason, and the most immediate result of his
establishing his hermitage is the removal of the demons who had previously occupied the
hill. Indeed, later lines confirm as much when they state that “Ne motun hi on eorþan eardes
brucan, / ne hy lyft swefed in leoma nœstum” (“They may not enjoy a dwelling of the earth,
nor do they sleep in the air in the rests of splendor,” 220-21). Thus, the construction of
buildings and modification of the landscape through that construction is not just a worldly
matter of using natural materials to create material culture, but also a spiritual matter of using
that material culture to achieve a divine purpose.

We may also infer that the structures themselves are merely the vehicles of this
transformation, and not the catalysts that create the change, by looking to the demons and
their actions in the campaign to regain their space, which always targeted the saint himself
rather than the architecture in which he took shelter. In the first instance, taking the form of
soldiers, the demonic band surrounds the saint and threatens him with bodily harm:

Stoddan him on feðehwearfum,
cwædon þæt he on þam beorge byrnan sceolde
ond his lichoman lig forswelgan,
They stood before him as a company on foot, pronounced that he must burn on the hill and the flames swallow his body-home, that all hardships (and) mind-cares would befall his kin if he wished not to turn again from the hostility (and) seek the joys of men for himself, and assert with greater might his right to peace and pleasures among mankind, (and) let the misery alone.

The demons have the saint surrounded and outnumbered and they possess the ability to burn everything there, so it is a bit surprising that the only structure under explicit threat in the scene is Guthlac's body-home, a metaphor for his physical body that casts it as a dwelling for the soul.

The second instance of Guthlac's torment at the hands of the demons again has nothing to do with the structures on the hilltop at all, though the passage does make reference to monasteries in other locations:

They then heaved him into the high air, gave him power beyond the kin of men, that he beheld everything before his eyes under the command of holy pastors that men bring forth in minsters, those who enjoy their lives by means of lust, frivolous possessions and ostentation,
proud garments, as is the custom of youths
who are not guided by dread of (their) elders.

Again, the demons leave Guthlac's hermitage alone, opting instead to show him the moral
failures of supposedly pious men in other, grander structures dedicated to the service of
God. Such a strategy has some advantages for the demons, who may be hoping that the saint
will give up when presented with the fact that no one else rejects the material world as he
does but may also expect that the saint will abandon their hilltop in order to return to the
company of men in order to provide guidance to his lost brethren. In either case, the
hermitage does not enter into the equation; rather, the minster becomes either a welcome
home for a fallen saint or a distraction for the holy man, who cannot dwell in two places at
once. In either scenario, the hilltop reverts from defined place to undefined space once
Guthlac is disassociated from it.

The final attempt by the demons to remove Guthlac from the hilltop plays upon the
ultimate fear of all Christians, that one will be judged unworthy and relegated to an eternity
in hell, a practice that the poet concedes is not reserved just for Guthlac or other saints:

Hwæðre hine gebrohton bolgenmode
wraðe wræcmæcgas, wuldres cempan,
halig husulbearn, æt heldore,
þæt firenfulra fæge gastas
æfter swyltcwale secan onginnað
ingong ærest in þæt atule hus,
niþer under næssas neole grundas.
Hy hine bregdon, budon orlege,
egasan ond ondan arleaslice,
frecne fore, swa bið feonda þeaw,
þonne hy soðfaestra sawle willað
synnum beswican ond searocræftum. (557-68)

Still, those enraged in mind, wrathful wretches,
brought him, the champion of glory,
holy child of communion, to the doors of hell,
where the sinful doomed souls
first begin to seek entry,
after death-pangs, into that terrible house,
down beneath the headlands, deep under the ground.
They dragged him, wickedly
offered hostility, terror and malice,
horrible journey, as is the custom among fiends
when they desire to deceive a truth-fast soul
with sins and treacherous crafts.

In this instance, not only have the demons left Guthlac’s own buildings alone, they have brought him to the structures of their own domain, specifically the gates of hell. As in the rest of the poem, there is little description of the gates beyond the fact that they function as the first stop for unfortunate souls who must suffer damnation. Even hell itself is given little mention here, being described only as an *atule hus*, a move that provides little specificity, while later the saint himself states that his oppressors cannot “in bælblæsan bregdon on hinder / in helle hus, þær eow is ham sceapen” (“drag into the flame-blaze on the other side, in the hell-house, where a home is created for you,” 676-77), which further characterizes hell as a dwelling structure and only adds that it contains fire, as general a description of the infernal realm as one can imagine.

The metaphor of a house for the realm of hell does, however, create an interesting three-way juxtaposition. Throughout, the narrator of the poem repeatedly mentions that Guthlac is unafraid of anything the demons might do to him because he has invested himself completely in the rewards of the afterlife. For him, heaven is where “min se eca dæl / in gefean fareð, þær he fegran / bottles bruco” (“the immortal part of me travels in joy, where he enjoys the fair abode,” 381-83) because he “sette / hyht in heofonas, hælu getreowde” (“set hope in the heavens, trusted in salvation,” 434-35). That “fair abode,” then, stands in stark contrast to a “terrible house” that even the demons wish to avoid by dwelling on the hilltop from which Guthlac removed them. More to the point, however, between the two we find Guthlac’s hermitage, a place he claims by stating “Her sceal min wesan / eorðlic eþel” (“Here shall be my earthly homeland,” 260-61) and which is described as “þam leofestan /
earde on eorðan” (“the most beloved dwelling-place on earth,” 427-28), but which receives little characterization as a house itself, the notable exception being when the demons threaten “We þas wic magun / fotum afyllan” (“We can knock over this hut with our feet,” 284-85). Strikingly, in fact, the demons’ second-choice dwellings receive more characterization in this regard than the hilltop hermitage does, being described as “wræcsetla” (“exile-seats,” 296) and “wic” (“hut, house,” 298).

This disregard for Guthlac’s hermitage is strange. Not only is it at odds with the fact that the central conflict of the poem is motivated by possession of that small patch of earth, but it also leaves a number of questions unanswered. For instance, as the demons themselves claimed, they could easily knock down Guthlac’s shelter, making his tenancy there even more difficult. The fact that they threaten such action without ever following through may be indicative of the fact that they know, as does the reader, that such measures would have been futile, but the ease with which they claim they could do so and their cruel character, which the poet mentions repeatedly, still leaves one to wonder why such destruction never occurs. Instead, one must look to what is actually important about the structures and location in order to appreciate the actions taken against Guthlac: the demons choose not to destroy the buildings of the hermitage because structures as a whole do not manifest any sort of threat, but the action of their construction (and re-construction) does. Anything they knocked down would simply be built up again as long as Guthlac resolves to call the hilltop his earthly home, but each time the buildings are rebuilt, Guthlac’s investment in the hermitage grows, making it less likely for him to want to abandon it. Thus, the only way for them to reclaim their resting place is by convincing its new occupant that maintaining the

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32 Although other references exist, they tend to be in the negative, stating what the demons notably will not have. See the discussion of lines 220-21 above.
location will cost him more than he receives in maintaining it and convincing him to simply walk away, allowing its status as a place, in Discenza’s terms, to revert once again into space.

These points collectively allow us to make two observations about the use of material culture, and specifically the use of architecture, in *Guthlac A*. The first is that earthly structures are often given little description; those buildings that are at least mentioned are characterized either as weak and impermanent or as centers of sin and vice. Even Guthlac’s own hilltop hermitage is described more in terms of being a second choice, no matter how pleasant and soothing the birds and plant life might be to one who is looking for quiet and solitude. Likewise, the structures mentioned in the context of hell are all associated, quite understandably, with highly negative language. As a result, all dwellings outside of the ones in heaven are depicted as being either entirely undesirable or, at the very least, inferior, thereby reinforcing the message that the only home worth having is the one in the afterlife that must be earned through pious action here in the mortal world. Although this may be an obvious point to argue, the poetry seems to operate more as a subtle reminder, echoing many of the points first seen in the three *Christ* poems earlier in the manuscript. More than even that, though, is the fact that numerous passages explicitly argue against attachment to possessions and material culture, ensuring that the audience receives the right message from the poem.

The other point, however, is perhaps a bit counterintuitive. Although it is true that there are numerous instances where the poem makes clear that one should not concern oneself overmuch with the material, it also makes clear that the basic needs of life can only be fulfilled by objects that, as a result, have cultural value. It is, therefore, not necessary to eschew all material goods, but one must never indulge in or become overly attached to those goods. Simple clothing and a nutritious meal are not sins, but flamboyant dress and feasts
that last for days are. In short, things can be used for holy purposes as well as selfish, personal ones, and in the case of *Guthlac A*, those holy purposes seem to be achieved when those things exist alongside and in concert with the natural world, not over the top of it. The clearest evidence in support of this point comes near the end of the poem, after Guthlac has survived the demons’ assaults and has achieved victory over his otherworldly foes:

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Smolt wæs se sigewong ond sele niwe,
fæger fugla reord, folde geblowen;
egacas gear budon. Guþlac moste
eadig ond onmod eardes brucan. (742-45)
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The victory-yard was peaceful and the hall new, fair birds spoke, the earth flourished; cuckoos summoned the (new) year. Guthlac was allowed to enjoy the prosperous and bold residence.

Although his shelter is transformed in the text into a “hall,” such characterization runs counter to the repeated purpose of the poem. We can be relatively sure that any and all construction on the hilltop would have been modest in size and complexity, enough for him to get out of the weather and not much more, but structures are only one small part of a larger scene here, one that is also steeped in nature. From the multiple references to birds and their singing to the fertility of the earth, Guthlac’s triumph here is a model for the right balance of material culture used in the right way and natural material objects.

The remainder of the poem serves as a discussion of a few key points. The first is a brief passage that remarks on the wonder that such events could transpire in the poet’s own time: “Eall þas geeodon in ussera / tida timan” (“All this went on in the hours of our time,” 753-54). Although only nine lines long, the passage serves as yet another reminder to contemporary audiences that the central figure in the poem is connected to them, and indeed is one of them, before stating once again that the same opportunity and the same reward is available for all people:
Thus the almighty loves all creatures under the sky in body-homes, the kin of men throughout middle-earth. The Ruler wishes that we always prudently swallow up wisdom, that before us his truth is valued as current, payment for his gifts, which he grants and sends to us, for honor, and for understanding, makes room for souls on gentle life-ways that reached for the light.

The message here is clear: Guthlac is a model for the poem’s audiences, and although he may be celebrated for his unwavering faith in the face of remarkable circumstances, his choices are informed by early English values and, unlike some saints, his actions are repeatable. He has been set up here as a quintessential English saint, and the message of the poem, then, is an appeal to those who identify with him.

To reinforce this point, the poem then returns to Guthlac, who spends his remaining days quietly devoting himself to God before he is allowed the eternal reward towards which he had labored:

Thus the spirit of Guthlac was conducted in the bosom of angels to heaven,
led lovingly before the face of the eternal judge. (His) reward was given to him, a seat in the sky, where he may always exist earthfast forever to ancient (days), abide in happiness. To him the Son of God is a benign advocate, the mighty Lord, holy shepherd, warden of the heaven-realm.

Throughout all these lines, from immediately after Guthlac’s victory until his welcome into heaven, only three references are made to material culture and two of them are associated with structures. The first and second, *lichoman* and *giefena*, occur in the passage discussing the benefits that humanity had already received from God and what humanity is asked to do in return for such kindness. The third term, *setl*, occurs in the context of heaven, specifically describing Guthlac’s eventual destination. The term that does not directly relate to structures, *giefena*, is difficult because of its nature as anything that can be given, be it material or not, and although this case seems to be general enough to include the kinds of material objects that God would provide as well as the non-material blessings that are prevalent elsewhere in the *Exeter Book*, the nature of its context makes it more probable that these gifts are of the spiritual or aptitude variety.

As the poem comes to a close, the topic shifts from Guthlac’s death once again to what awaits the blessed in general when they die. Mirroring the first part of the poem, the final 28 lines describe their arrival in heaven briefly, but then turn to the topic of what they did in life to get them there:

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Swa soðfæstra     sawla motun
in ecne geard     up gestigan
rodera rice,     þa þe refnad her
wordum ond weorcum   wuldorcinges
lare longsome,   on hyra lifes tid
carniað on corðan   ecan lifes,
hames in heahþu.   Þæt beoð husulweras,
cempan gecorene,     Criste leofe,
berað in breostum    beorhtne geleafan,
haligne hyht,     heortan claene
```
Thus the truth-fast souls may
climb up into the eternal yard,
the kingdom of fixed stars, those who here suffer
the words and works of the King of Glory,
the long lore, during the time of their lives
(they) earn on earth an eternity of life,
homes in the heights. Those are the communion-men,
chosen champions, beloved of Christ,
who bear in (their) breasts bright belief
holy hope, pure hearts,
(they) honor the Ruler, have wise thoughts,
prepared on the way forth to the Father's homeland,
(they) prepare the house of the spirit, and with skill
overthrow the enemy, and endure sinful lust
in (their) breasts . . .

As was the case with the first 29 lines of the poem, three terms occur, although this time somewhat more spread out from each other, and as in the first lines, two of those three are Structure terms, with the third being somewhat related. Here, geard (“yard, dwelling place,” 791) may not indicate a structure directly, but it does refer to the geography of heaven, which is also described using the two other words, bames (“home”, 796) and bus (“house,” 802). Together, these terms evoke an image of heaven that is both open and inhabited, a space that has buildings and order; very much what Discenza describes as a “place.”

Finally, although no further material culture terms occur for the last 16 lines of poetry, there is one further reference to material culture in the form of a named city. Throughout, the poem provides no specific names for anything besides Guthlac himself and Bartholomeus, the name of the angel who rescues him from hell, but another name is explicitly given as the poem closes with the lines:

Him þæt ne hreoeð æfter hingonge,
ðonne hy hweorfað in þa halgan burg,
It grieved them not, after going hence, when they journeyed to the holy city, went forward to Jerusalem, where they might eagerly behold the face of God with joy for the world, peace and vision, where she truly dwells bright, glory-fast, the entire broad life in the joy of the living land.

Once again, we see that location, that place means a great deal to the early English, and that heaven itself is best understood (and perhaps best appreciated) when it is clearly defined not only as a structure, but as a city full of them. Moreover, the identity of that heavenly city, attached as it is to the identity of an earthly town, provides another link between the tangible (if exotic and inaccessible) world and the spiritual afterlife for which all Christians yearned.

Guthlac B

As mentioned above, although scholars generally agree that Guthlac A and B were written by separate authors at separate times, they also seem to agree that the two were included together in the Exeter Book as a part of a unit, with careful transitions linking the poems not just as poems in a manuscript, but as parts of a reading program. The practice of ensuring smooth transitions between works carries on into the fifth poem of the Exeter Book with a similar method that the previous poems used: bringing up the central theme of the next poem in the conclusion of the first while recalling the central theme of the previous poem in the introduction of the next. Indeed, Guthlac A brought its discussion around towards death, but in turn Guthlac B waits 60 lines before addressing the saint and his
encounters with demons. Instead, *Guthlac B* begins with a discussion of the reason death exists in the first place: the original sin in the Garden of Eden. Although this choice certainly makes sense in this context, the balance of transitions seems to be tipped here in favor of *Guthlac B*. Even in the case of the transition from *Christ in Judgement* to *Guthlac A*, the scribe seems to have either chosen or altered the model texts in order to bring two poems together that share practically nothing except heaven and angels.

Why, then, would two poems about the same saint not merit that same care? The missing move to make the two as equal as possible through transition seems to create an opportunity to spark conversations. Some even see the two as being placed where they are in order to invite debate between the two works, as Benjamin D. Weber writes:

> Whatever their dates of composition, the differences between the Guthlac poems allow us to understand why these two poems might have been placed next to one another in the Exeter Book. The compiler was not concerned with a ‘rough attempt at biographical unity’ but with staging a debate over the proper goals of monastic living that would have resonated with his contemporary audience.33

Indeed, there is a great deal to unpack as to why the two poems are so different and why that (non-)relationship is celebrated with a deviation from the patterns we had come to expect as we looked towards a new work. Again, Weber articulates the heart of both poems and their differences as clearly as one could hope for:

*Guthlac A*, on one hand, is a poem about the solitary pursuit of spiritual perfection, which demonstrates how a man can pull himself up by his contemplative bootstraps and (with a little help from on high) create a microcosm of paradise where he may live out his days “synnum asundrad” (cut off from his sins, l. 515a) until he drifts off peacefully to his eternal reward. *Guthlac B*, on the other hand, is much more concerned with the monk’s role as a teacher of eternal truth in a world subject to death. From Eve’s “bitre drync” (bitter drink, l. 868b) to Guthlac’s painful illness, the

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poem poignantly situates Guthlac’s spiritual ministry against the background of a corrupt and transitory world.34

Still, if the reason for the change in transitions is truly one of simple juxtaposition, the opportunity to place one beside the other to evaluate the flaws in both, then there could hardly be a more effective choice than the two Guthlac poems, as they differ not only in subject matter, but also in tone, in source material, and in purpose.

Ultimately, to return to the question of transitions, the passages that concern Adam and Eve must come first in this poem because they, too, were first, and their decisions and the consequences that followed them are far more central to the story of Guthlac’s death than his life is. Even more important for this study, though, is the pattern of usage that the introductory passage about Adam and Eve sets up, the links it creates, and the eventual point such usage allows the scribe of the Exeter Book to make: Guthlac B is a poem about consequences. Just as Adam and Eve must learn to live with the choices they make in the Garden, regardless of who talked them into it, so too must the two main characters in Guthlac B reap what they sow. While the character of Guthlac is set up as an example of an individual who appreciates the temporary nature of this “corrupt and transitory” life and looks towards his heavenly reward, his thane is attached to this world, to the people and things in it, and this attachment results in his transformation into an exile at the end of the poem, giving audiences a clear view of the consequences of each path.

As before, a general picture of how material culture is used will be important for our coming discussions. First, one should note that Guthlac B is 561 lines long, making it several hundred lines shorter than its predecessor. Throughout the poem, I have located 94 occurrences of material objects, making the occurrence rate a fraction below one every six

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lines. Words associated with Death and those associated with Transport each appear nine times, or approximately 9.47 percent of the total, while there are 11 instances of Food and Drink words, or roughly 11.58 percent of the total. Finally, once again, Structure words appear most often, with a total of 33 occurrences, making up 34.74 percent of the total, over a full third of the poem’s references to objects. This distribution of references to material culture is similar in many respects to what we have seen previously, again with the Structure words representing the lion’s share of the objects depicted in the poem. The differences, however, are worth noting.

Although we have seen a high occurrence rate with Food and Drink terms before in Christ in Judgement, their appearance in Guthlac B provides an opportunity to think about material culture in completely different and useful ways. This is, in part, due to the fact that the poem opens with Adam and Eve and their famous encounter with fruit, but there are additional metaphorical arguments made in the poem that also require analysis. Still, it is best to begin at the beginning, and so we shall turn to the first 60 lines of the poem, which cover the creation of Adam, the fall of man, and the reality of death as a result of that fall. Over the space of those 60 lines, a total of seven references to material culture occur: ham ("home," 16 and 53), blede ("fruit," 29), gyfl ("morsel," 32), drync ("drink," 50), gebihpum ("dwelling," 56), and stedewonga ("yard-stead, fields," 57). Thus, over this space, material culture terms are significantly less common, with the average occurrence rate in excess of one in every 8.57 lines, with the categories remaining focused on Structures, Food and Drink, and Landscape words.

The relationship between Landscape and Structure that defined the material culture of Guthlac A is not the central concern of Guthlac B, even if the majority of the terms in the first section of the poem belong to those two categories. Instead, Guthlac B seems to be
interested in the way Food and Drink represent the relationship between individuals and the
world in which they live. Beginning in the Garden with Adam and Eve and mentioning fruit,
morsels, and drinks creates a new level of specificity that was lacking in *Gutblæc A*
concerning the pleasures of a garden, even one to which a saint has been led by divine
means. Moreover, these terms are accompanied by adjectives with clear negative
connotations. Whereas fruit itself may be a pleasant image to evoke, the idea of a *blæde
forbodene* (“forbidden fruit,” 29) has associations that remain clear to this day. Likewise, it is a
deaðberende gyfl (“death-bearing morsel,” 32) that Adam consumes, perhaps conjuring up
associations with poison, and the beverage, like that offered to Christ on the cross in *Christ in
Judgement*, is a *bitran drync* (“bitter drink,” 50).

This inversion of such pleasant things into something distasteful certainly works
when considering the poem’s efforts to dissuade its audience from the attractive but
ultimately dangerous material world, but it is not the only instance where food is used in this
way. Later, the same events are recounted yet again, this time advancing into an extended
drinking metaphor:

*Bryðen wæs ongunnen
þætte Adame  Eue gebyrmde
æt fruman worulde.  Feond byrlade
ærest þære idese,  ond heo âdame,
hyre swæsum were,  sīþðan scencet
bittor bædeweg.  Þæs þa byre sīþðan
grimme onguldþon  gafulrædenne
þurh ærgewyrht,  þætte ænig ne wæs
fyra cynnæ  from fruman siððan
mon on moldan,  þætte meahte him
gebeorgan ond bibugan  þone bleatan drync
deopan deaðweges,  ac him duru sylfa
on þa sliðnan tid  sona ontyneð,
ingong geopenað. (162-75)*

The brew was begun
that Eve fermented for Adam
at the origin of the world. The enemy first
served that woman, and she poured after that
for Adam, her own man,
a bitter cup. Since then
the children grimly paid a tax
for a deed long done, so that no
child of that kin, no man on earth
since the beginning, might defend himself
from that and avoid that wretched drink,
deep death-cup, but to him the door itself
at the dire time immediately opens,
the entrance opens.

Drink, of course, is a powerful metaphor for the material world. As something that is itself material culture, alcohol metonymically comes to represent all the benefits an individual receives from social interaction, as well as the intoxicating effects that such worldliness possesses, all of which are countered by disassociation from what is most often considered most important. In this passage, however, drink takes on the additional metaphorical identity of the judgement of God and the consequences of disobedience, which must then by extension also transform the rest of material culture. Even the questions of scale work well in this metaphor: one cannot live without drinking something, but drinking too much leads to careless and destructive behavior, an impairment of mind and body that makes decisions and action more difficult and less likely to be in one’s self-interest. More important than any of these other points, however, is the time frame in which drink operates: the temporary euphoria that results from indulging too much is soon over, but the consequences remain, some of which are immediate and some long-term. The satisfaction one gains from drinking, however, is temporary; regardless of how much one drinks, one will eventually become thirsty again.

A similar point can be made about the use of structures in Guthlac B. Although buildings and other constructed objects have been shown in disrepair and decay before, even from the very beginning of the manuscript, Guthlac B provides the clearest indication yet that
such decay is a metaphor for mortal bodies by placing the two in direct comparison in context of Guthlac’s impending death:

“Íc wille secgan þæt me sar gehran,
wære in gewod in ðisse wonnan niht,
lichord onleac. Leomu hefegiað,
sarum gesohte. Sceal þis sawelhus,
fæge flæschoma, foldærne biþeaht,
leomu, lames gepacan, legerbedde fæst
wunian wælæste.” (209-15)

“I wish to say that pain touched me,
waded in the sea in this dark night,
body-hoard unlocked. (My) limbs grow heavy,
(they) sought soreness. This soul-house must (be),
doomed flesh-home, covered over with earth,
limbs thatched with clay, fast in (my) deathbed,
dwell in the rest of the slain.”

This passage is remarkable for the fact that the body, characterized as a house, is to be covered over within the earth, forming another, perhaps more enduring structure in the form of a grave, but that grave remains an earthly structure. It is no more permanent than the body-house it covers, which will be reunited with its eternal soul on the last day as the scenes describing the raising of the dead show in Christ in Judgement.

Ultimately, however, the relationship that defines Guthlac B is not the strictly utilitarian and minimalistic one between Guthlac and material culture, or even the one between the saint and his devoted disciple, although that relationship is the lens through which the poem is read most effectively. Instead, we must look to that disciple’s relationship with the world that surrounds him in order to see that Guthlac B is less the account of the final days of a saint’s life and more a resigned comment on the nature of human emotional attachment and the admission that even those given the best of instruction will, at times, learn the wrong lesson.
We first encounter Guthlac’s nameless disciple\(^\text{35}\) as he enters into Guthlac’s hermitage and finds his master looking ill:

\begin{verbatim}
Hine wunade mid
an ombchþęegn,  se hine æghwylce
daga neosade.  Ongan ða deophydig,
gleawmod gongan  to godes temple,
þær he eþelbodan  ine wiste,
þone leofestan  lareow gecorenne,
ond þa in eode  eadgum to spræce,
wolde hyrcnigan  halgas lara,
mildes meþelcwida. (181-89)
\end{verbatim}

An attendant-thane dwelled with him, who each day sought him out. Then he approached, deep-thinking, wise-minded, went to God’s temple where he knew the native preacher (would be) inside, the most beloved, distinguished master, and then went in, happy to speak, wished to harken to the teachings of the holy one, the gentle one’s discourse.

This passage makes clear that Guthlac’s attendant is a student of the most dedicated kind, willing to make the trek to Guthlac’s isolated hermitage each day in order to learn at the feet of his master. In fact, so dedicated is this disciple that the passage contains only a single reference to material culture, temple, an aggrandizing depiction of Guthlac’s living quarters which makes clear that the visitor values both the saint and the level of access to him he enjoys.

Upon entering his master’s living quarters, he immediately notices that something is wrong and that his master looks gravely ill:

\begin{verbatim}
Fonde þa his mondryhten
adlwerigne.  Him ðæt in gefeol
hefig æt heortan—  hygesorge wæg,
micle modceare. (189-92)
\end{verbatim}

\(^{35}\) Guthlac B diverges from its source, Felix’s Life, in not naming the disciple, who is called Beccel in the earlier work.
He found then his lord
weary with sickness. For him, that fell
heavy on the heart—thought-sorrow weighed (on him),
a great mind-care.

Again, we are presented with explicit knowledge that Guthlac’s disciple is emotionally
attached to the saint, but the saint’s illness upsets him so much that the poem provides three
consecutive and parallel iterations of the same idea in order to ensure that the point is driven
home for the audience. Further, he is given an opportunity to speak for himself:

“How did you become thus, my gracious lord,
father, shelter of friends, a spirit afflicted,
assailed so strictly? I never before,
most beloved lord, encountered you thusly,
met (you) thus, exhausted. Can you wield
discussions with words? The thought occurs to me
that weakness from the starting out of disease
on this last night occupied,
sought a painful wound. That sorrow is to me
the hottest in my breast, until you comfort
my thoughts and mind. Do you know, master,
how this illness must proceed in the end?

This passage represents the entirety of the disciple’s own words on the occasion when he
first learns of Guthlac’s impending death. Although much in this short speech is moving, it
is worth noting that it is also remarkably self-centered. Only a single instance of material
culture appears throughout: a reference to Guthlac as hleo, or shelter, of friends. There is no
mention of remedies, nor of comforts that Guthlac presumably would have dismissed
anyway, but there is also no reference to deathbeds, crosses, or other items that might have a role to play in the passing of a holy man. Instead, his mind is clearly on himself. He points out how ill his master looks and asks that same master for consolation so that he can feel better himself. It is as if, taking Guthlac’s ascetic and eremitical lifestyle as a model, the disciple has attempted to purge his entire vocabulary of material culture but has failed to understand the purpose of such asceticism is either to use those resources for others who need them or to eliminate the desire to contemplate any other subject but God.

Strangely, it is the hermit who responds with a number of references to material culture in a dense cluster, although those words are tied very clearly to death. In the lines 209-15 above, Guthlac references six terms over the space of five lines, a far greater average than that which occurs over the entire poem. More terms occur a few lines later in the same bit of dialogue, after the saint prophesies that he will die seven days later:

\[
\text{Þonne dogor beoð} \\
on \text{moldwege} \quad \text{min forð scriþen}, \\
\text{sorg gesweðrad} \quad \text{ond ic sipþan mot} \\
\text{fore meotudes cneowum} \quad \text{meorda hleotan}, \\
\text{gingra geafena} \quad \text{ond godes lomber} \\
in \text{sindreamum} \quad \text{sipþan awo} \\
\text{forð folgian;} \quad \text{is nu fus ōider} \\
gæst sipes georn. (220-27)
\]

Then will my days on the mould-way glide forth, sorrow destroyed, and afterward I can share in the reward before the knees of the Measurer, gifts for the disciple, and follow forth the lamb of God in everlasting joy forevermore; (my) soul is now eager for the journey thence.

The first of these terms, \textit{moldwege} (“mould-way,” 221), gives a similar sense of desired detachment to the world in which we live; like \textit{flæschoma} and \textit{lichord}, the first element of the compound characterizes the entire word with a concreteness that is matched with a sense of
mortality. The second, geafena (‘gifts,’ 224), on the other hand, clearly occurs in the context of heaven and is, thus, not subject to the same eventual failure that the others must face, but it is also ambiguous; there is no clear indicator if these gifts are material in nature, even beyond their heavenly status. There is, then, a divide between the way Guthlac intends these objects of material culture to function: the majority of them provide depictions of the things he is leaving behind in death, while the last object is one that he will gain upon his acceptance into heaven, reinforcing his statement that he is ready to depart this life by giving good reason for him to do so.

The next appearance of Guthlac’s disciple is similar in most respects to the first: he approaches the hermitage and encounters his master, who lies ill in his home, and asks him if he still has enough strength to speak. This time, however, Guthlac has a task for his student: after his death, he is to travel to give the news to Guthlac’s sister, a duty that he willingly accepts, saying “Næfre ic lufan sibbe, / þeoden, æt þearfe, þine forlæte / asanian.” (“Never will I allow (our) relationship of love, lord, in your need, to diminish,” 355-57). Again Guthlac’s speech is full of references to material culture, including leana (‘rewards,’ 352), weg (“way, path,” 362), byrig (“city,” 373), banfæt (“bone-vessel,” 375), beorge (“mound, barrow,” 375), lame (“clay,” 376), and sondhofe (“sand-house,” 378), which again seems divided between worldly things that do not concern him and things which he looks forward to in heaven. Then, as before, the disciple speaks to his master and asks for, rather than offers, comfort. Throughout the following 21-line passage, he speaks about the holy man’s death being close at hand and how his sorrow reminds him that he must ask a question that he had always been afraid to ask before, specifically with whom he had overheard the saint speaking when Guthlac was alone. Once again, that passage includes only a bare minimum usage of material culture, in this case two metaphors that render the sun as either a beofones gim (‘gem of
heaven,” 394) or wyncondel weara (“joy-candle of men,” 395). No other material culture appears in the passage.

With so many similarities between these passages, the overall effect is inevitably similar, as well. Guthlac simply uses the question as an opportunity to admit that he has been speaking with an angel since shortly after he first arrived in the location that would become his hermitage. He informs his disciple that he had not wanted that information to get out while he was still alive, since he was unwilling to be burdened by the attention that such a revelation would bring, but at the end of his life he is willing to share it with his closest companion. This confession is frank and unconcerned, but it does show the lengths to which Guthlac was willing to go in order to maintain his hermit’s lifestyle against involvement of the outside world:

“Hwæt, þu me, wine min, wordum nægast, fusne frignest, þæs þe ic furþum ær æfre on caldre ængum ne wolde monna ofer moldan melda weordan, þegne on þeode, butan þe nu ða, þy læs þæt wundredan weras ond idesa, ond on geað gutan, gieđđum mænden be me lifgendum.” (409-16)

“One must admit that such things as songs and stories about a hermit who speaks with angels would certainly be prone to attracting attention and other worldly distractions down upon Guthlac’s hermitage; still, it is noteworthy that Guthlac’s disciple remained excluded from this secret, as well. Although the poem never mentions the saint’s intentions for keeping this
information from his dear friend, it is at least possible that he recognized in the disciple a connection to the world that he dared not trust.

The third and final instance that demonstrates how Guthlac has disengaged from the world while his disciple has not comes after Guthlac’s death. Having exited the body, the saint’s spirit is conducted to heaven:

\[
\text{Then Guthlac’s spirit was borne happily on its way to heaven. Angels carried (it) to that long joy, the body cooled, lifeless under the sky. Then a light shone forth there, brightest of columns. That beacon was entirely around that holy house, heavenly splendor, arose straight up like a fiery tower from the ground to the roof of stars, visible in its brilliance, brighter than the sun, the face of a noble star.}
\]

As before, the saint’s journey into heaven is marked (ironically) with a number of references to material culture, including beam (“beam, column,” 491), bus (“house,” 492), tor (“tower,” 493), and brof (“roof,” 494), which are notably all Structure words. Also worth noting is the fact that Guthlac’s soul is carried into heaven by angels, providing him a mode of transportation that is both splendid and utterly devoid of material culture.

It is at this point that the disciple turns to fulfill his promise; though lacking courage, he accepts his duty to his friend and departs by ship to find Guthlac’s sister:

\[
\text{Da afyrhted wearð ar, elnes biloren, gewat þa ofestlice}
\]
As a counterpoint to Guthlac’s journey, which was full of joy, his disciple’s travels seem bleak and remorseful, but there are other points of similarity that cannot be ignored. Some, like the fact that the passages that relate both journeys are identical in length at 22 lines each, are subtle but remarkable when noticed, while others are almost unmissable, such as the vast number of references to watercraft: *bat (“boat,” 510), wæghengest (“sea-steed,” 511), waterþisa (“water-rusher,” 511), brimwudu (“sea-wood,” 513), lagumearg (“sea-steed,” 514), and hærnflota (“wave-floater,” 515). Such an emphasis on the form of transport here forces one to consider not just the ships, but also the journey, especially when another journey only a few lines earlier had gone so smoothly without such an emphasis on what had carried the traveler.

The two could not, it seems, have had more different experiences, a point upon which the poem expands when the disciple begins to deliver his message. Speaking to Guthlac’s sister, the disciple begins by comparing himself to a thane who has lost his lord:

“Ellen biþ selast þam þe oftost sceal
 dreogan dryhtenbealu, deope behyegan

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This comparison is apt, especially when one considers that the disciple is literally described as an *ombbehtþegn* ("servant-thane," 182) and that Guthlac had served as a military commander early in his life. Still, this characteristically Germanic sadness feels out of place in a poem that supposedly celebrates the entry of an English saint into heaven. As Stephen D. Powell writes in his discussion of the elegiac elements of *Guthlac B*,

The heroic, elegiac elements incorporated into *Guthlac B* make the death of a saint seem actual and relevant to typical, mortal human beings, just as in, say, *Beowulf*, where the characters’ expressions of genuine, human emotions enrich the meaning of the poem’s conflict for the non-warriors in the audience. The poet’s words and kennings implicitly compare the saint’s death, and thus all death, to the voyages of the solitary wanderers and seafarers of the Old English elegies and impart to death an explanatory but not necessarily consolatory flavor foreign to the poem’s primary source or its most important analogues.36

What Powell does not address, however, is the fact that Guthlac’s death and his journey towards heaven is celebrated; not only does the saint himself state multiple times that he is ready and looks forward to taking his place in heaven, but the description of his death and

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subsequent ascent into his eternal home is complete with accompanying angels who not only
carry him there, but also sing while his home is enveloped by a shaft of brilliant light. There
is, however, a very clear elegiac journey in *Guthlac B*: the one upon which the surviving
servant and student must embark. Where the saint successfully detaches himself from the
world by seeing it as a temporary precursor to the reality of eternal life, ultimately even
detaching his own soul from the world by dying, his disciple sees the world as reality and
therefore is bound to mourn the fact that a very dear part of that world is no longer present.
The disciple’s own words, then, clearly link him with the world that Guthlac himself had
been so happy to leave only a short time ago.

    Still, the passage above remains oddly lacking in references to material culture. The
single instance, *singejan* (“treasure-giver,” 534), is almost obligatory in a passage that speaks
to the kind of loss that the disciple is describing, and with it comes the close association of
the *comitatus*, the heroic gift-giving economy, and the culture of the hall. Even in his despair,
the speaker seems to realize such a description of Guthlac may be a bit on the nose,
especially when giving such news to a sister whom the saint himself had admitted earlier that
he had not seen in years: “þæt ic me warnade / hyre onsyne ealle þrage / in woruldlife”
(“that I abstained from her face all the seasons of this worldly life,” 365-67), and thus only
really remembered the saint from his days as a warrior. He abruptly ends his elegiac
ruminations and turns to the business at hand, remembering to characterize the deceased
using Christian terminology instead:

    Huru, ic swiðe ne þearf
hinsiþ behlehhan.    Is hlaford min
beorna bealdor,  ond broþor þin,
se selesta  bi sæm tweonum
þara þe we on Engle  ðvre gefrunen
acennedne  þurh cildes had
gumena cynnes,  to godes dome
werigra wraþu,  worulddreamum of,
In any case, I need very much not deride the departure. My lord is the hero of men and your brother, the best by the two seas whom we among the Angles ever discovered, begat in the body of a child, the kin of men, to the judgement of God the aid of the weary, away from world-joys, delight of (his) loving kinsfolk, into the multitude of glory, passed on, protector of friends, to seek out an abode, a dwelling place on the way to heaven.

Noteworthy here is, again, the way in which the disciple minimizes the use of material culture within his own speech. Once more, there are a few occurrences, but the number of occurrences keeps rising, from a single instance when he discovered Guthlac’s illness to two before Guthlac’s death, to three as he relates the news of that death to the next of kin. Also significant is the fact that the three, bleo (“shelter,” 547), wica (“dwelling, abode,” 547), and eardes (“dwelling place,” 548), are again either Structure words themselves or are closely tied to the idea, and they all exist within the context of heaven rather than earth.

It is at this point, however, that the disciple’s patterns concerning material culture change. His previously restrained use of references to objects is abandoned, and over the space of the remaining 13 lines of the poem, he nearly doubles the number of occurrences in his own speech. The character of his rhetoric also changes, reverting to the Germanic tone with which he had begun and giving additional strength to the elegiac quality of the poem:

“Nu se eorðan dæl,
banhus abrocen burgum in innan
wunað wælreste, ond se wuldres dæl
of licfæte in leoh godes
sigorlean sohte; ond þe seegan het
þæt git a mosten in þam ecan gefean
mid þa sihgedryht somud eard niman,
weorca wuldorlean, willum neotan

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“Now the portion of earth,
the broken bone-house from within fortified places
remains on the bed of the slain, and the part of glory
sought reward for victory, out of the body,
in the light of God; and bade me say to you
that you two may always take a dwelling-place together
in prolonged joy with the peaceful band,
glorious rewards (for your) work, to enjoy the wells
of life in bliss. My victory-lord
also bade me to relate to you, when he was ready for the journey,
that you, dear maiden, cover over
his body-home with earth. Now you know forthwith
my journey. I must, sad in soul,
dejected, depart, (with) sinking mind…”

This sudden increase in usage may indicate that the disciple has realized that his master, for
whose benefit he may have worked to eliminate material culture from his speech, is now
gone, giving him less reason to eschew such words, or it could simply be that the concepts at
play in this section of the poem finally require the metaphors that Guthlac himself had been
using throughout. Regardless of whatever personal reasons the disciple might have been
thought to have, the poem now places words like *banhus* (“bone-house,” 549) and *licfæte*
(“body-vessel,” 551) in the mouth of Guthlac’s student and connection to society, serving to
connect him even further to the material world from which the saint has so recently become
permanently separated.

The incomplete last line of the text does little to help raise the spirits of the audience
with encouragement that the disciple will eventually find solace and accept the death of his
master, both as a part of God’s order and as what Guthlac himself wished. Indeed, if such
sentiments were to have been the author’s intent, then the author has done a remarkable job
of concealing those intentions. Instead, it seems evident that the disciple’s main function is to serve the function of illustrating the consequences of being that which Guthlac is not. His role as counterpoint eventually serves to highlight the most important distinction between the two: while Guthlac escapes society while living in order to be accepted into the structures of heaven when he dies, that death leaves behind a wake of strong emotions and severed connections that transforms his dutiful disciple into the precise opposite of what Guthlac himself had become. This impact is described as a sort of macrocosm of the effects of death on the individual by Powell, who points out that

> Death on the personal scale, that is, the separation of soul and body, is shown to be just a smaller representation of the impact of death on the social scale, which entails the separation of the blessed fated ones from the living, still stained by the sins of Adam and Eve. And the vocabulary reflects this parallel. Death is presented in all its many aspects and effects, as the separator of lord and servant, as well as of body and soul, as a negative fact of postlapsarian life, an enemy or a bitter drink, and as the journey away from the cares and pains of mortality. Throughout, moreover, there is a clear sense of the inexorableness of death’s march.  

Inevitable or not, however, the various pains that the disciple must suffer through are a reminder that although objects are dangerous, and desire for them must be carefully managed, this world contains a number of snares that can catch up the unwary and lead them down a most miserable path.

Ultimately, the diverging paths that Guthlac and his disciple must face in *Guthlac B* provide the audience with an opportunity to explore two opposing paths. The first, that of Guthlac himself, is most clearly difficult, as was illustrated by the numerous terrifying trials the saint had to survive in *Guthlac A*. Still, as the saint lies dying, he remains unconcerned about the world around him, knowing that his efforts will bring him the reward he desires most. The cost of his disregard for this world, however, is not merely in the realm of

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material objects, which seem to mean so little to him that he is able to speak referring to material culture with no connection to the objects these words represent, but also in his ultimate lack of insight into how his death will affect those few others with whom he shared some sort of relationship while alive. His disciple, on the other hand, while being as focused on himself as his master, cannot simply disengage from the world, despite the fact that his own dialogue shows that he wishes to be as cut off from material culture. He is tied to the things, and especially the people, who exist in the material world, and his separation from his master leads to his separation from the rest of society as he allows his misery to cut him off from everything. By the end of the poem, he has become an exile, a hermit who longs for company while he wanders instead of shunning it while remaining voluntarily isolated in a single place. There can be no doubt that the relationship between individuals defines the paths that these two figures take, but it is also remarkable to note that each one makes use of material culture in many of the ways we have already seen from earlier poems in order to express those connections between people and, ultimately, the path that each one will take.

Conclusions

The figure of Guthlac is not one that looms large over the medieval landscape from our perspective in the twenty-first century, but he is clearly a saint who was revered amongst the English of the tenth. The inclusion of two poems about his life and death in the *Exeter Book* is certainly evidence of this, but even stronger evidence is pride of place. Located near the front of the manuscript, the pair of poems (the “Guthlac Block,” perhaps?) follows immediately after a group of three poems about Christ himself, a spot not appropriate for any but the most holy of men. Even more compelling is the nearly seamless transition between the end of *Christ in Judgement* and the beginning of *Guthlac A*, which means that part
of a poem about Guthlac was integrated into part of a poem about Christ; clearly the saint was held in high regard when the *Exeter Book* was being written.

He is also a saint for whom material culture is particularly important. Although many of the techniques that made use of material culture in the *Christ* poems, such as referencing material culture with different frequencies to differentiate between poems, continue to be used in *Guthlac A* and *B*, his poems are explicit about the dangers of becoming too attached to material objects. One would expect no less from a man who enters the wilderness and cuts himself off from society in order to become closer to God, but the arguments made within the poem also originate from the use of nature as a counterpoint to material culture. In his struggles against the demons in *Guthlac A*, for example, the role of structures is once again clearly significant. Whereas the demons had left the hilltop entirely untouched, Guthlac constructs a hermitage and erects a cross when he arrives, thereby transforming the raw hilltop. Using Discenza’s terminology, we see the hermitage grow from an undefined space without meaningful connection to English culture to a very clearly identifiable place that would go on to inspire the foundation of a monastery. Moreover, the transformation occurs due to Guthlac’s own resilience and his refusal to abandon the site, either for his physical safety or even the safety of his own soul. Finally, even the world of nature seems to respond to the creation of a Christian place amongst all that wild fenland space: as flora and fauna begin to thrive under its new management, the hilltop’s transformation from a natural object to an object with cultural meaning makes clear the power that material culture could have for the early English.

That same power is then illustrated even further in *Guthlac B*. Rather than focusing on the life and actions of the saint, this poem instead focuses on the illness that leads to his death and the way that death impacts both him and his nameless disciple. By providing a
side-by-side comparison of the two and showing the way they interact with material culture, *Guthlac B* creates the opportunity to understand the difference between attachment to material things and attachment to the world, and it makes clear that neither is a trait that is worth cultivating. Throughout the poem, Guthlac himself has no difficulty referencing material objects, nor does he hide the fact that he looks forward to his death. He is clearly detached from the entirety of the world, even failing to regret that in death he must leave behind the disciple that is so clearly attached to him. That attachment, in fact, is what differentiates the disciple from his master, and it does so sharply. Despite being far more limited in his references to material culture in his own speech, the disciple is clearly still attached to the world in which he lives, a world that becomes empty and hollow without his master. In contrast to Guthlac, who is carried by angels in his ascent to heaven surrounded by music, light, and glory, Guthlac’s student must travel by boat to the saint’s sister and deliver the news of his passing while suffering deeply from the loss himself. Even the incomplete last line of the poem makes the disciple feel more cut off and alone, transforming him from a Christian servant to an exiled thane who is unable to understand the difference between attachment to material goods and attachments within the material world.

The *Guthlac* poems, then, have a great deal to say on the dangers of material culture and their place in the lives of Christians. Although there is never an argument that one should entirely abandon all things, including those one needs to live, such as clothing and food, both poems make a very clear case for removing one’s desires for the material world that will simply vanish once one enters the grave. Understanding this argument as a comment and expansion on the points raised in the *Advent Lyrics, The Ascension*, and *Christ in Judgement*, one can see a very clear line being drawn across the entirety of the first booklet of
the *Exeter Book* and a comment being made in the most prominent of places in the manuscript.
Chapter 4: The *Exeter Book* as Material Culture

Looking at the references to material objects and material culture within the first “booklet” of the *Exeter Book* provides an excellent opportunity to view early English attitudes toward the material world in a novel way. The booklet’s explicit calls to reject wealth, excess, and material desires are not only echoed by the use of things in these poems, they are informed and sometimes even accelerated by them, and the central figures of the first five poems make uncommonly clear the importance of making the choice to embrace the reward of heaven specifically because of the character of their relationships with material culture. Those relationships, however, are not the only ones that color these poems, nor are the poems the only place in which one should look for arguments against the sin of becoming too attached to material goods. These texts exist within a physical construct that has navigated over one thousand years of history in order to be present and readable today, and that construct, the *Exeter Book* itself, must be recognized and understood, at least in relation to the culture that produced it and the cultures that used it, in order to understand the importance of the texts it contains.

The *Exeter Book* as an Object

It is a hallmark of modern readers that they often have some trouble distinguishing between a book as a physical object and a book as a text that exists independent of the format in which it is represented. This is, of course, only possible because of the vast capacity of nineteenth-, twentieth-, and twenty-first-century presses to produce enormous numbers of copies of a single text, and, more specifically, to do so with incredible levels of accuracy. Once a copy of a novel goes to press, that novel only rarely changes, and only when changing editions or versions of the text. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is famous for its
two separate editions, the original published in 1818 and the subsequent, and thoroughly revised edition that became the version best known today, which appeared in 1831. Modern readers, then, must grapple with a vexing question: which is the real *Frankenstein*? How can one make that decision, and on what values does one base such a determination?

Students of medieval literature, however, and early English poetry in particular, count themselves as extremely unlucky not to have that problem. Since few copies of Old English poetic works exist and nearly every one is unique, we have no other version to call “definitive.” Later works, such as Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, exist in multiple versions, and unlike those books produced on modern printing presses, each medieval manuscript was written by hand, meaning that each copy of a work introduced changes, whether intentionally or quite by accident. As such, students of medieval studies often have a deeper appreciation of the idea that a particular version of a text not only can be tied to a physical object, but is often inseparable from it, each being a part of the genesis of the other.

Students of medieval literature, then, know that *both* versions of *Frankenstein* are “real,” that they represent different ideas and must be understood on their own terms, just as each version of the *Canterbury Tales* is significant for its differences, be they minor or extensive.

Thus, especially when dealing with manuscript culture, no text can be separated from the unique physical object that contains it, and to study the text is to study the book or other device in which it occurs. In the case of the *Exeter Book*, the object is large, with each leaf around one-half inch wider and approximately one and a half inches taller than a standard sheet of US Letter-sized paper. It is also, as one might imagine, quite thick and heavy, with a

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1 See Johanna M. Smith, Introduction to *Frankenstein*, by Mary Shelley, ed. Johanna M. Smith, 3rd ed., Case Studies in Contemporary Criticism (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2016). I am indebted to Thomas Bredehoft, who was the first to explain to me the difference between a book and a text, and who used this example to do so.
modern blue binding that now keeps the manuscript together and provides some protection from potential damage. That binding was added in the 1930s after the entire manuscript was unbound for Chambers’ 1933 photographic facsimile and replaced the one that had been on the book for roughly 230 years.² Placed on a supporting cushion and opened on the table, the book is an imposing sight, and one that demands both care and awe.

Figure 1. Exeter Book, ff. 8v-9r, with the opening of The Advent Lyrics.³

The parchment throughout ranges in color from a light to a slightly darker tan, providing excellent contrast for the dark brown ink of the script. The exception to this, of course, is the liquid damage that occurs through the first six leaves, which has caused significant darkening in the affected areas, often making the script difficult to read. Other splotches of a different color on the first surviving folio, 8r, indicate that more than one

² Muir, Exeter Anthology, 1:3.
³ All photographs are my own unless otherwise stated.
substance has been dropped on the Book. The additional damage caused by knife cuts on the first leaf of the manuscript, as if it had been used as a cutting board, also contribute somewhat to the difficulty of reading the text on that page. The cuts, however, are mostly shallow and do not often pierce the verso side of the leaf, although one long cut on the bottom of the leaf has been stitched back together. The most serious damage occurs at the end of the manuscript, where the last 13 leaves have been scorched along a line, as if a piece of burning wood or hot metal were set down on the manuscript, leading to a loss of text as the leaves get closer to the end, and thus the source of the heat.

Figure 2. Exeter Book, ff. 76v-77r, The Wanderer.

Despite the damage, the manuscript is strikingly beautiful to behold. Though plain, the text is even and regular and the letters are formed with precision and grace, a point that adds to a visual appeal, which could almost be called “minimalistic.” The lack of proper illustrations in the Exeter Book makes the simple beauty of the text even more pronounced,
although there are nine folios upon which images have been impressed on the vellum using dry point.\textsuperscript{4} Instead, the manuscript features large decorated initials in a number of locations throughout. These initials, which set off the beginning of new works, also seem to be made using the same ink and pen as the rest of the text, according to Conner, leading him to conclude that the initials were drawn by the same scribe responsible for the text.\textsuperscript{5}

Significantly, Conner points out for specific praise these initials in the first booklet, saying:

\begin{quote}
The decorative initials of the first six gatherings are truly well made. They are the most carefully drawn, with a smoothness of line indicative of a competent craftsman. This is a judgment which cannot be readily demonstrated in the facsimile, but it can be seen in the original in a good light.\textsuperscript{6}
\end{quote}

The fact that these initials are found to be superior to those in subsequent parts of the manuscript supports Conner’s argument that the first booklet was actually written after the second and third, giving the scribe an opportunity to perfect the technique.

Moreover, this simple beauty is a physical reflection of the central argument made within the text and discussed in Chapter Three, namely that material objects are dangerous, though they are necessary, and one should take care not to be drawn in by worldly trappings of wealth and luxury. Just as Guthlac himself had all those things which may be deemed necessary to live, including clothing, food, and shelter, but avoided excesses by removing himself from the society of others, the \textit{Exeter Book} was copied by a single individual using basic materials. Also like Guthlac, however, the Book transcends its simplicity by being an example of purity and dedication, something that does not need bright colors or flashy gold in order to be beautiful.

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{4}] See Conner, \textit{Anglo-Saxon Exeter}, 123-25.
\item[\textsuperscript{5}] Conner, \textit{Anglo-Saxon Exeter}, 120.
\item[\textsuperscript{6}] Conner, \textit{Anglo-Saxon Exeter}, 120.
\end{itemize}
First, we must, however briefly, make note not just of the object’s physical nature, but also its physical environment. Since at least 1072, the Exeter Book has been a part of the library of Exeter Cathedral. Nothing certain is known about the manuscript before it was donated to the Cathedral by Leofric, the first bishop of Exeter, a fact recorded in a donation list dated from 1069 to 1072, but most scholars accept that the book itself was probably written in the latter half of the tenth century. Conner suggests a time frame from 950-968, while Muir proposes a similar but narrower window, from 965-975. Both scholars likewise believe that the Book was written in Exeter or in the nearby town of Crediton, which served as the seat of the Devon see until Leofric moved it to the more defensible old Roman town of Exeter in 1050. Upon that move, the Book is likely either to have been transported to Exeter as a part of the bishop’s library or became part of that library when the bishop took over the established monastery in Exeter as his new cathedral.

Robert M. Butler argues that the history of the Book is more complicated, however, and notes that there are other possible houses that could have created it. For instance, he mentiones that Canterbury is a possible site of production, but ultimately he suggests that Glastonbury, either at the time of Dunstan or shortly thereafter, is the most likely place and time of origin. Perhaps his most compelling reasoning for this is the rather minor reforms that Dunstan put into place during his time as abbot, which he argues created the kind of environment that would have been able to support the creation of a manuscript with such heavy secular influence. He writes,

It is difficult to imagine any other monastery, reformed under stricter dictates of spirituality and chastity, that would devote its resources to gathering almost a hundred of such riddles, predominantly secular, into an expensive manuscript, much less permit transcribing and reciting the several obscene ones. Dunstan, however, appears to have been amenable to such bwdry. His

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7 Conner, Anglo-Saxon Exeter, 94.
8 Muir, Exeter Anthology, 1:1.
famous “Classbook” (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Auctarium F.4.32), which he had almost certainly owned and used at Glastonbury, contains Book I of Ovid’s *ars amatoria*, the only surviving copy of the work from Anglo-Saxon England; its final 26 lines were copied into the Classbook by Hand D, the scribe usually identified with Dunstan himself.7

This would take into account the seemingly strange nature of the manuscript and its place in an episcopal library, and it would also address concerns raised by Richard Gameson that the donation list itself asserts that Leofric brought these items with him when he came to Crediton and then moved to Exeter.10 Still, as Butler himself notes, “[s]hort of the discovery of some striking new piece of evidence, any case for the earlier history and origin of the Exeter Book is of necessity circumstantial.”11 Thus, it remains unlikely that we will ever know where the Book was written with any sense of certainty.

Whatever the origins of the Book, we know that Leofric was active in the welfare of his own cathedral, as well as the flock he served. Frank Barlow distills the many small achievements in Leofric’s episcopal tenure by pointing out that “The bishop alleged that when he received the monastery only one of its estates, and this a miserable one, remained. By his death he had recovered fifteen of its manors, and four of these he had assigned to the canons.”12 Likewise, the smaller trappings necessary for religious service were also expanded once Leofric became Bishop:

He provided five complete mass vestments, three epistle vestments, chorister’s copes and staffs, dalmatics for the deacons, and subdeacons’ maniples. He gave his cathedral church a collection of crosses, five silver chalices and a silver tube for drinking the wine out of the chalice, a silver censer, basins, vessels and bowls of every kind; eight candlesticks; altar-coverings, carpets, seat-covers, and wall-hangings; standards and banners; three ornamental reliquaries; boxes and chests; twelve hand bells for calling the canons to the church services, and sixteen fine hanging bells where


formerly there had been seven. Leofric also left a collection of gospel and service books and his personal library to the church.\textsuperscript{13}

This list of donations to the cathedral, which appears on the first two folios of the eight which had been added at the beginning of the manuscript, also specifically records one item as “"i: mycel englisc boc be gehwilcu(m) þingu(m) on leoðwisan geworht” (“one great book in English about various things, wrought in verse”). Muir dates this list to 1069-72 based on internal evidence.\textsuperscript{14} Nearly all scholars agree that this catalog reference is to Exeter, Dean and Chapter MS 3501, giving us our first reliable date for the existence of the manuscript.

The historical record lists little else about the \textit{Exeter Book}'s existence throughout the Middle Ages. Muir points to two inventories, one conducted in 1327 and the other in 1506, that disregard the volume, saying it “is not surprising since the condition of the manuscript suggests that it has survived only because it could be put to practical use in the scriptorium.”\textsuperscript{15} Of course, the scriptorium at Exeter Cathedral occupied multiple different places on the cathedral grounds over the years. According to Peter Thomas, Librarian to Exeter Cathedral, the library is known to have existed in the Lady Chapel at the eastern end of the cathedral proper, in the late medieval cloisters, in the chapter house on two separate occasions, and in the Bishop’s palace where it is currently located.\textsuperscript{16}

What we do know, however, comes from the physical evidence provided by the manuscript itself. The score marks, liquid damage, and burns that have already been noted above are proof of the hazards that the manuscript has survived, and those hazards have been used by scholars to argue, as Muir does in the quotation above, that the \textit{Exeter Book} had

\textsuperscript{13} Barlow, “Leofric,” 13.
\textsuperscript{14} Muir, \textit{Exeter Anthology}, 1:2n7.
\textsuperscript{15} Muir, \textit{Exeter Anthology}, 1:2.
\textsuperscript{16} My sincerest thanks to Peter Thomas for taking the time to grant me access to the areas of the Cathedral where the library is thought to have been housed.
a “second career” of sorts after changes in language and culture rendered the manuscript unreadable. Score marks and burns, however, are hardly specific enough on their own to draw any conclusions as to which role the Book had been reassigned. The liquid damage and the circular stain on the first surviving leaf provides better evidence so long as one accepts Conner’s argument that it represents a pot of size or fish-glue rather than, as Krapp and Dobbie had suggested, a tankard of ale. Instead, one must look to another point of evidence within the pages of the Exeter Book, specifically the presence of residual gold, to draw a reasonably certain conclusion that the manuscript functioned as a tool within the scriptorium at some point.

The presence of gold within the pages of the Exeter Book is not a new finding. In his 1989 article “A Preliminary Report on a New Edition of the Exeter Book,” Muir writes,

> The presence of these traces in a manuscript lacking illumination indicates that at some stage after the Exeter Book was copied, and probably when its texts could no longer be understood, it became a repository for sheets of goldleaf used to decorate other manuscripts produced in the scriptorium. The high number of folios on which traces can still be found today (90) indicates that the scriptorium was well-equipped and well-endowed in its heyday.

This information is both important and relevant for the student of the Exeter Book, not because it provides insight into the world that created it or even the world it was created for, but it certainly offers access into the existence of the object itself and the place it occupied in the Exeter community over the long years between its donation and its rediscovery. Moreover, in the same article, Muir includes a large and rather complex table that indicates the presence or absence of a number of attributes, folio by folio, including whether gold was detectable on the page. According to this table, evidence of gold leaf can be found on 90 of

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17 Conner, Anglo-Saxon Exeter, 238; Krapp and Dobbie, The Exeter Book, xv.
the 236 folia of the manuscript, often in groups where facing pages would have contacted
the same sheet of thin foil. Thus, one can conclude that the role the *Exeter Book* played in its
second life as an object to store other objects (rather than texts) was more than an
occidental one; it was used often and for many sheets of gold foil, and though there is no
way of knowing how long the *Book* served this purpose, it is at least possible that it did so
for a very long time, indeed.

Unfortunately, little work has been done on the gold on the leaves of the *Exeter Book*
at all. Muir’s article is the most detailed study of the phenomenon, but no entry on the table
exists to give additional information where the gold can be located on the page, nor how
large the spot may be, or even how many spots might exist. As a result, though every edition
mentions the gold, there is no real record of how much there is or what it looks like because
such questions lie outside the realm of most literary and historical scholars’ interests; the
gold is an accidental addition to the *Book* that was in no way related to the texts it contains.

Conner argues that

the most likely period for this to have taken place would have been the
middle of the fourteenth century. That seems to have been the period when
Bishop Grandisson’s magnificent books were being produced, presumably at
Exeter. Grandisson’s are the earliest books extant which may have been
written at Exeter and which also include gold in their decorations.  

As such, centuries stand between the creation of the manuscript and the addition of the gold
to its leaves in a seemingly random and entirely accidental manner. Thus, without any real
connection to the Old English poetry in the *Book*, scholars of the text have relatively little
reason to inquire further.

The Role of Facsimiles

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Any medieval scholar who is also on Twitter knows how exciting the world of digital manuscripts is right now. Even on a social media platform that is renowned for being more like a fire hose than a steady stream of information, the pace of announcements and promotion for collections of manuscripts that have been digitized using high-resolution cameras and made available to the public is astounding. Now, students and scholars alike can access beautiful, highly detailed digital images of manuscripts that had previously been, for numerous reasons, simply inaccessible. Examples such as Stanford’s Parker on the Web and the Vatican’s DigiVatLib abound, and more is being added regularly, both to the contents of the extant projects and to the list of new projects.

This is amazing news, of course. As little as half a century ago, scholars’ options were limited if they wanted to look at the original version of the text they were reading or examine visible details of the manuscript. If lucky, the researcher would be working on a volume that had been photographed, with those photographs being widely published in a facsimile, either in the form of a book or, less lucky for the detail of the images, in microform. Since facsimiles required the printing of many high-quality photographs, however, they were often not published in great number, making some of them only slightly less difficult to access than the original. Otherwise, the only options left would be to rely on published descriptions and other second-hand ways to interact with the manuscript, or to travel to where the manuscript is held and request to examine it for one’s self, an opportunity that, for obvious reasons, can only be afforded to those with the necessary credentials and demonstrable need to see the object.

21 See the Digital Vatican Library’s Manuscripts List in its Digital Collection, https://digi.vatlib.it/mss. As of June 17, the site claims to house 16,235 digitized manuscripts.
With the advent of the digital facsimile, however, a great number of limitations were eliminated. Works like Kevin Kiernan’s *Electronic Beowulf*\(^\text{22}\) and Muir’s *Exeter DVD*\(^\text{23}\) not only provided full-color images of each manuscript page in the highest detail possible at the time, they paired those images with commentary and additional tools, such as hypertext links to significant scholarly transcriptions and detailed zooming and image manipulation in their custom-programmed interfaces. Moreover, because the greatest cost in producing such works is in the initial programming stages, the costs of actual production can be reduced significantly over multiple editions compared to traditional book facsimiles, placing works like *The Electronic Beowulf* within reach for scholars and the public alike.

Like everything else distributed on a disc, however, the popularity of these kinds of physical media has declined significantly in recent years, with the vast majority of all content now being delivered over the internet. This is, in part, due to the fact that fixed media means that the software distributed on disc must either be updated online anyway or be left behind as the technology upon which it depends becomes obsolete. As I mentioned in Chapter One, this is the fate of Muir’s *Exeter DVD*, but it bears pointing out that with the majority of the work already accomplished in some form, it is entirely possible that the editors and publishers of such content can, with relative ease, move their content to the web for public use. These developments coincide with the large-scale digitization projects that were mentioned above, allowing instant access to unprecedented numbers of manuscripts anywhere in the world, and though some of these databases are only accessible to subscribers, many are available without cost to the public, making a significant portion of


our world’s cultural heritage freely available to anyone with a computer and internet connection.

As mentioned above, however, there are some parts of a manuscript that simply cannot be reproduced due to limitations in technology at a particular time. For instance, Wanley’s catalogues continue to be useful to the manuscript scholar even today, but he lacked the ability to reproduce these manuscripts efficiently, even in careful transcriptions. It took the development of monochrome photography to create an effective system that could accurately reproduce even one aspect of a manuscript: the relative shape and position of letter forms on a page. Even with this new technology, however, the images were lacking in the ability to relate important information, such as rubrication. The development of color photography allowed for far easier detection of different inks and allowed for even more useful work to be done in looking for lost letters and texts on manuscript leaves, but even this technology cannot represent certain important physical parts of a manuscript. For instance, it takes a far more well-trained eye to detect whether a folio has been written on the flesh or hair side of a manuscript sheet from a photograph than it does in person.

The presence of gold on a folio is another instance where photography of the trait is, at least, problematic. R. W. Chambers’ 1933 *The Exeter Book of Old English Poetry* is, by all accounts, a monumentally important work in the study of early English literature. With contributions by Max Förster and Robin Flower, Chambers’ detailed study of the manuscript was matched only by the accompanying photographs that allowed readers to access the text of the original in an authentic way. Those photographs, however, were done in collotype, a monochrome process.\(^{24}\) Without the ability to distinguish color or to look for reflectiveness,

\(^{24}\) The specifics of the technology used are listed in the Contents of the volume.
the irregular, splotchy nature of the residual spots of gold make identifying them in the 1933 facsimile nearly impossible.

Figure 3. Detail of *Exeter Book*, fol. 100v, *Deor*, from Chambers, *Exeter Book of Old English Poetry*.

Although there are some darker areas that could potentially be gold, there is no way to actually confirm it. Examining this detail makes clear the fact that, though certainly an advancement in the accessibility of the manuscript, the Chambers facsimile is unable to capture enough detail to make possible a comprehensive study of the manuscript on the basis of its merits alone.

Muir’s facsimile, which appeared nearly three quarters of a century after Chambers’ work, was able to take advantage of a number of advancements in technology, in terms of
both imaging and distribution, which led to two important advancements in two significant facets of the facsimile. First, and most noticeably, by taking high-resolution digital photographs of the manuscript, Muir was able to reproduce the colors of the manuscript with a high degree of reliability while still retaining the level of detail from the earlier work. Moreover, the fact that these photographs were taken in digital format meant that the photographer had immediate access to the image captured and could use that information to adjust the conditions to improve the final product. Likewise, digital post-processing can be used in order to make the image clearer and the colors more accurate. As a result, the images produced for Muir’s facsimile are the best ever taken of the original manuscript.

The second advantage that the 2006 digital facsimile has over its predecessor is one of logistics. Because of the need to represent the original manuscript at its actual size, and because the collotype process was costly, Chambers’ final product was expensive to produce. As a result, only 262 copies were ever printed. Certainly, it is simpler to gain access to one of hundreds of copies than it is to see a unique original, but that does not mean that finding a copy of *The Exeter Book of Old English Poetry* is necessarily simple. It remains a rare and expensive volume, and therefore one that libraries are disinclined to send out on loan requests. Muir’s *Exeter DVD*, however, is much more cost-effective to produce, and is therefore more widely available. Moreover, the data that the *DVD* contains is much more portable; the data can be made accessible on the web as well as on disc, making worldwide distribution on demand not only possible, but desirable.
With these advantages, however, Muir’s facsimile images are still unable to overcome the difficulty of representing the gold on the page. The image below is a detail of the same section of text from the same folio presented from the Chambers facsimile above. Again, there is no indication at all that any sort of precious metal could be present here. Spots of discoloration occur throughout, and those spots are all consistent with one another in terms of color and relative size. Even zooming in on the image provides no more useful information in this regard. One might, in fact, be tempted to discount the idea that gold is
present at all, or to conclude that it is present in such small amounts that it can hardly be worth notice.

When one has the good fortune to be able to access the original, though, there are a number of approaches that one can take to look for this sort of evidence, however. As my time with the manuscript was short, and I had only a few hours to examine it in its entirety, I opted for an approach that was simultaneously simple and indirect. Using only the camera on my smartphone, I placed the manuscript as much in natural light as possible and began looking at its leaves from all angles, trying to detect the small glints of gold that I expected to see scattered in isolated spots on the pages indicated by Muir in his 1989 article. Instead, I began noticing not just glints, but spots, sometimes quite large, that stood out easily against the parchment.

My photo, of course, could never be mistaken for one taken by a professional. The lack of careful focus (indeed, I used autofocus) and the dark yellow cast to the color make clear that this is an amateur shot using a basic camera. Unlike those earlier images that privileged the text, however, this photo makes clear which dark spots are simply discoloration of the parchment and which are, in fact, residual gold leaf. Also obvious is the large amount of gold, as well as the large amount of space that the spot occupies, extending horizontally over the four characters “ƿɪnt” in *wintra* and vertically over five entire lines, from the descender of the “g” in *beodeninga* to the blank line beneath the “l” in *eorla*. The brightness here stands in stark relief from the other dark areas, such as the one within the word *monegum* two lines above or the round spot above *æbegan* in the second line of *Wulf and Eadwacer* below.
During my morning with the manuscript, I took dozens of photographs from several unorthodox angles in an attempt to capture the location and size of these gold spots on each of the folios listed in Muir’s 1989 article. Working closely with Library staff, I was unable to locate gold on each of the 90 leaves Muir identified. This could be due to multiple reasons,
including the simple fact that some of the spots of gold were little more than flecks; other occurrences of gold may have been even smaller. Still, we managed to identify and document the presence and location of gold on 50 leaves, the record of which is included in this dissertation as Appendix 3. Further study of these photographs, in conjunction with other evidence from the physical Book, may uncover the location of more of the gold Muir located in the manuscript.

Ultimately, photography is a powerful tool of study when we wish to examine an object that must remain out of reach for the majority of potential viewers. Its importance in no way precludes the presence of limitations, however, and it is vital that one also understand the subject to be photographed and the purpose of photographing that subject if one is to create a facsimile that represents the original in as many aspects as possible. Had Muir considered that the gold leaf in the manuscript might have been a point worth including, there is little doubt that the photographer could have easily taken such photographs and added them to the collections in the Exeter DVD. The difficulty lies in the fact that it is impossible to anticipate all conceivable needs when preparing a facsimile; just as when one prepares an edition of a text, one must make specific decisions on what information to include. Facsimiles, however, are not editions, because their purpose is not to re-represent the chosen information in a more understandable form; instead, they attempt to record the original as it exists (or as it existed) as closely as possible, so that questions of a physical nature can be answered without subjecting the original to additional, unnecessary exposure. Thus, the best way to create a facsimile is not to reproduce it, but to model it.

Beyond Images
The digital revolution of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries has already sparked a great deal of change in the way manuscripts are studied throughout the world. The fundamental challenge of access can be circumvented, if not solved, by the creation and distribution of detailed digital images that provide scholars with the opportunity to at least see the thing about which they are writing and thinking, even if they cannot gain access to the original document. This has been enough for most scholars, whose interests are often centered on questions of textual interpretation and for whom access to the original would not prove vital. As the twenty-first century continues, however, and new technologies are developed that can make detailed information about physical objects available just as easily and just as readily as photographs made such information available about text, scholars will need to learn to ask questions about material culture alongside their discussions of the text.

Before discussing the various high-tech solutions that will command the attention of the public and academia alike, it is worth pointing out that one does not need massive computers with special equipment in order to create a facsimile that addresses physical as well as textual culture. One need only take great care to reproduce the original manuscript in physical form, bringing over every possible detail to the copy, from stray lines and errors in the copying to decorative elements and even holes in the leaves. This is, of course, a costly undertaking in time as well as resources, but the result is a physical object that can be held and used in much the same way as the original, with most of the original features in place exactly where they would belong. One such facsimile, *El Beato de la Universidad de Valladolid: Original Conservado en la Biblioteca de Santa Cruz de la Universidad de Valladolid*,\(^{25}\) one of a series

of similarly detailed facsimiles, does exactly that. In fact, the publishers have gone so far in creating this facsimile that the book is bound in leather with metal clasps designed to replicate the binding on the original. Opening such a volume truly does provide an experience that simulates working with a manuscript, making such works exactly what a facsimile should be. Unfortunately, such work comes with a steep price tag, as well, which makes such books less likely to be circulatable, even between institutions, which means that the problem with the original is also an issue with the facsimile: access is limited.

Another solution, one that is still in its infancy but certainly within the realm of usability in certain situations, is the use of 3D scanning technologies. Academic endeavors like the Visionary Cross Project make use of multiple techniques in order to generate remarkable computer-generated copies of real-world objects, describing themselves in language that may seem foreign to a typical discussion of medieval literature, but clearly articulating their purpose nonetheless:

The Visionary Cross project is an extensible, multi-object, multi-media edition of a Cultural Matrix in Anglo-Saxon England. It is built around mediated representations of sculpture, buildings, and text. It employs XML transcriptions, high resolution 2D photography, 3D laser scans, 3D photogrammetry, and a socially focussed game engine. The project is about both the objects it includes (several of which are among the most studied from the period) and the relationships among them.

Practically speaking, the Project has used laser scanning technology, which uses focused beams of light to measure the distance to a target across thousands of points in order to recreate the contours of a physical object, to digitally reconstruct the Ruthwell Monument, an eighth-century standing stone cross. This is significant not only in terms of simple access,

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26 According to the publisher’s website, this edition retails for 5,720€, or approximately $6,500 as of June 2018. See https://www.tarahumaralibros.com/es/tienda/productos/facsimiles-102/beato-de-valcavado-universidad-de-valladolid-850
giving interested parties from all over the world the chance to see a highly accurate and detailed reconstruction of an object of great significance, but it also represents an advancement in access to the object in terms of its context. Since its reconstruction in the nineteenth century, the monument has been maintained in an apse in the Ruthwell church, but in order to make the 18-foot tall carved stone shaft fit, a hole in the floor of the apse was created, lowering its entire body and thereby changing the height at which observers view it. By scanning the monument and creating a digital model, the Project has created the opportunity for users to view the standing stone in a more authentic-looking, if entirely artificial, setting: outdoors, from the proper height. Moreover, the scanning process is, by its nature, best accomplished from multiple angles. This means that even difficult-to-capture traits like reflective bits of gold leaf can be observed and included in the model in useful ways.

This sort of interactive modeling, however, is not limited to large stone structures. It is entirely possible that such technologies could be used to recreate the physical structures that make up a manuscript. As scan resolutions become even finer, it will soon be possible not only to scan every single physical aspect of the manuscript and recreate it in a digital space, it will also be possible to use the detailed dimensional data created by such a scan to measure and compare attributes at the very smallest levels and between separate objects or parts of objects and do so with a level of precision unachievable with physical rulers or other traditional measuring devices. Additionally, virtual constructs can be disassembled and reassembled without difficulty, giving even greater access to the manuscript than could ever be offered any but the most fortunate of scholars working on the most significant of projects.
This sort of fine level of manipulation is practical and effective for academics, but three-dimensional models also lend themselves to a more dramatic use for the general public and those just starting their study of the Middle Ages: virtual reality. There is little doubt that remarkable objects like medieval manuscripts can draw a crowd: the rare book display at the British Library is enough evidence of this. The significance of offering a “virtual museum” exhibit, where members of the general public could interact with the same models used by scholars, then, is potentially far greater than has previously been explored. In part, such a use of digital models opens the opportunity for other, smaller interactions that can have powerful impacts on the ways the public understands, and therefore values, the study of the Middle Ages; even something as small as the presentation of books in the background of a virtual “library” as being stored flat, rather than standing with the spine out, can create a lasting impression on those who engage with such a virtual experience. More than that, though, by giving the public access to the same tools that scholars use breeds understanding and appreciation for the work that scholars do, a point of no small importance in an age where educational focus seems to exclusively reside in the so-called “STEM” fields.

Of course, perhaps the most significant way in which 3D modeling can impact real-world interactions is through the nascent field of 3D printing. If any part of this discussion sounds like science fiction, the ability to create an object simply by loading a model into a computer and allowing a device to “print” a physical version of that model is certainly it. Nonetheless, as numerous industries turn to these processes for the purposes of rapid prototyping and custom part creation, the possibility of using printers to create facsimiles of manuscripts and other objects of material culture seems not just possible, but inevitable. These devices already print in a number of different materials, including metal, wood, glass, and even concrete, as well as the typical plastic. Machines that print in a medium similar to
sandstone can even add photorealistic color images to their creations. As materials become more flexible and less expensive, there will come a point when printing precise replicas of objects, even books, becomes not only viable, but commonplace. Under such circumstances, the classroom can become a museum, allowing students to interact with models in ways that are simply not possible now, and on scales that have certainly never been achievable before. Moreover, because these printed copies will be physical, students can interact and learn from these copies in intuitive ways, inviting questions and observations that may not otherwise have occurred.

Back to “Back to the Manuscript”

There will, however, remain a number of traits and aspects of the original that 3D modeling and printing, or even painstaking reconstruction, cannot successfully render in facsimile. For instance, questions about the chemical makeup of the original will never be able to be answered by a copy; likewise, traits like the stiffness of a folio would be difficult to reconstruct, regardless of the precision with which the facsimile is made. For such inquiries, then, the original must remain available, even if the vast majority of other questions can be answered reliably by an alternative. For decades, scholars have debated the extent to which it is necessary to go “Back to the Manuscript” in order to answer basic questions. R. I. Page, for instance, argues that simply looking at printed editions is not enough:

This is because the information is preserved visually not verbally, depending upon positioning and arrangement, ink quality and so on. Indeed, the whole point of my present paper is to stress non-verbal aspects of communication, that manuscripts need more careful examination and record than is given in many existing editions of their texts. It is sometimes said nowadays that the diplomatic edition has been superseded by the facsimile, the microfiche or microfilm. But of course this is not so. Even if facsimiles could reproduce all the details I have adumbrated — variations in the surface of the vellum, change in ink quality or the way it has reacted through time, erasures and rewritings — even if they presented the scholar with all the diverse bits of
information he should be aware of, they would still not provide him with the sensitivity to spot them.\textsuperscript{28} Page does not, however, go on to explain how original manuscripts can provide the training that he argues facsimiles do not, except to assert that those who spend years studying manuscripts do develop this ability. This, of course, begs several questions about the purpose of the creation of such facsimiles. What is the appropriate equilibrium between access to these rare objects and protecting them from unnecessary damage at the hands of users? Where should that line be drawn? Will there ever be a point at which granting access to a manuscript is simply no longer feasible?

The balancing act between access and conservation is a difficult one, especially as viable alternative methods for answering questions become more developed and reliable. Clearly, with each interaction, the potential for harm to the manuscript increases, so limiting access is an excellent way of ensuring that the manuscript remains undamaged. Likewise, at one time there was a clear need for anyone studying the manuscript to turn to the original, but now an increasing number of questions can be addressed through the facsimiles that have become (or will become) available. There seems to be little reason to maintain a policy of access to an object once inquiries can be answered by a facsimile, but using need as the single criterion for determining whether an object should be made available for study also seems overly simplistic.

We must also take into account the fact that material culture recognizes the relationship between people and objects, as well as the relationship that objects can facilitate between people. Medieval manuscripts were objects meant to be used, and they certainly were used, both by their intended audiences and by those who came after them. Severely

restricting access, either to the public or to scholars, has an impact on the relationships that later generations have with those who came before them. Material culture, including (and especially) manuscripts, provides a sense of connection to the past that cannot be created with text alone. Holding a book that was written over a thousand years ago provides a perspective on the contents of that book that no facsimile, however faithful, could ever provide, and that perspective has implications on the way we think about the subjects of our studies. The sense of relationship that comes from handling an original manuscript represents much of the reason for studying the past in the first place, and we must consider that connection as well when making decisions regarding access.

The “Back to the Manuscript” movement has insisted for years that any serious scholarship about historical texts must take into consideration the manuscript itself and the contexts it provides. Unless one takes extraordinary care every time the manuscript is made available, however, it is inevitable that these unique relics of our collective heritage will degrade. Additionally, this raises questions about access. Unless one lives near where the manuscripts are housed, access is limited to those who can afford to travel. Likewise, the entities who act as gatekeepers must be as objectively fair and transparent as possible when determining who is allowed to see the manuscripts and who is not. These are the difficult waters that facsimiles help us to navigate, providing imperfect but useful access to scholars who may not have the means or clout to gain access to the manuscripts they study but still have legitimate questions that require good information to answer. Thus, there can be no doubt that facsimiles can and should be used, and even preferred, in many of the instances where the original manuscript is not necessary. Still, there remains a need for scholars to develop and maintain relationships with these physical objects and to use them to gain access to the past in ways that text alone simply cannot create. We must be careful, yes, and
we must be protective of these objects, because they are precious cultural touchstones, but they are also objects that must be used in order to retain their value. As such, although facsimiles can help keep these objects around, it is the fact that they can be used that gives meaning to that existence, and therefore access must remain a priority.

Conclusions

Exeter, Dean and Chapter MS 3501 is a remarkable object, not just as a container for some of the most beautiful poetry to survive from early England, but also as a physical entity in itself. As a work of art, it reflects the attitudes promoted in its text, relying on simplicity and a sense of appreciation for a task well executed to represent beauty rather than any ostentatious or dazzling display. Like any interesting personality, it has its scars, but those scars tell stories, which are at least part of the reason we are drawn to such figures. Its uncertain origins, its long history as a part of a single institution, and the roles it has occupied over more than a thousand years in that institution are themselves worthy of serious study, if not a historical novel, and the simple beauty of its highly regular but developing script on the page make it an appealing object to look at, as well.

The fact that this beauty can be shared with the public because of the efforts of scholars who use the best technology available to them at the time to reconstruct and distribute facsimiles is an indicator of the inherent value that these manuscripts have, even amongst those who cannot read them. As with a volume that has been opened up and placed inside a display case, though, most of those who see medieval manuscripts do so in a setting that cuts them off from the object which, in nearly all cases, was designed to be used. Facsimiles help to bridge the gap, giving the public access to certain traits of the original while acting as a wall that keeps the manuscript safe.
Importantly, the technology behind those facsimiles is not static. Less than a century ago, monochromatic reproductions of photographs were the best anyone could hope for. Color followed afterward, and then digital images that could be circulated without the need to publish expensive books in limited runs that do little to actually make the work accessible. Now, with the creation of 3D scanning and the improvements in resolution and cost, we are poised to be able to create digital models of manuscripts, which we can use for technical analysis as well as public demonstrations of the value of these objects. Finally, we are also on the cusp of being able to make high-resolution copies of these objects, bringing the physical to the digital and back to the physical again and opening up the opportunity to engage with accurate recreations of the material culture of our past.

The physical and the material have a real connection to the way we study and understand the Middle Ages. Although this is true of archaeological finds made throughout the world, it is a particularly important connection when the physical object also has a connection to a text. There is no better way to know what the people of early England thought than to read their own texts, but one must also acknowledge that there is no better way to know what the people of early England did than to look at what they used to do it. Just as Lévi-Strauss argued in The Way of the Masks, when one looks to the products of a culture to understand that culture, the object of examination must not be placed in isolation. Culture is, by its very nature, a multidimensional construct that connects many things; it is an assemblage that has different connections and sub-groups and parts that function completely independent of one another, but it is imperative that one understand that the connection is still there. To understand culture through only one part of that assemblage is to misunderstand the culture. We must look at both texts and the objects that have been used
to transmit them in order to properly understand the context in which they were produced and used.
Appendices

Appendix 1: Category Word Counts by Poem

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Appendix 2: Categorized Word Lists by Poem

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**Christ in Judgement (Christ III)**

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Appendix 3: Photographs of Gold Leaf in the *Exeter Book*

What follows is a collection of photographs taken during my brief hours with the *Exeter Book* in late January of 2018. They were taken in the reading room of Exeter Cathedral Library using the camera on my smartphone employing no special settings and using autofocus throughout. In order to make reflections from the gold easier to see, the Librarians were kind enough to provide me with a desk lamp. No advanced techniques have been used or post-production alterations performed on these images.

I chose to use this most pedestrian of techniques for this project in order to highlight the ease with which information about material culture can be illustrated and transmitted, if only we take the time and effort to do so. It is my hope that, with the steady advancement of technology and accessibility to it, scholars will continue to add to our understanding of the physical objects that contain our texts, even in such small ways as this. Those reading this dissertation electronically will benefit from the ability to electronically zoom in and out. Those who prefer physical copies should insist on the images being printed in color and at as high a resolution as possible, as many of the traces of gold leaf are small and may easily become invisible at lower settings.

It is truly striking to turn a page in such a beautiful but unadorned manuscript and see the flash of gold. It is a part of the experience of reading a manuscript like the *Exeter Book*, even if not by design, and students, scholars, and the public in general deserve to have access to this knowledge because it helps shape our expectations of what the Middle Ages were and are, and how we have come to know what we know about them.
Two large strips of gold are visible between lines 5 and 6.
A small fleck of gold can be seen above the “m” in *fram* in line 18.
Gold appears above him in line 7.
Folio 27r

A large patch of gold is visible on the right side of the page between lines 6 and 10.
Gold visible at the end of line 5 and into the margin, up to the prick marks.
A scattered patch of gold spreads from above the last word on line 5, *pillian*, into the margin.
Gold appears above the ligatured “e” in gece at the end of the penultimate line.
A small fleck of gold appears in the margins to the right of line 16.
Extensive traces of gold through the bottom right quadrant of the page, with areas of ruling the lines 5-7 from the bottom being filled.
Although folio 53 is missing, by my measurements, approximately 70mm from the top, it was still used to store gold leaf, although these spots occur between six to eight lines from the bottom of the page.
Gold also occurs on the verso side, however, and this time it is a mere 5 lines from where the parchment was cut, after *hebban*. 
The gold on the first line here, however, would have been stored along a cut piece of parchment, which would have introduced a line into a sheet of gold leaf if it extended past the fourth line of text. This suggests the cut occurred after the gold was removed, leaving a trace of its presence.
A small patch of gold between the eighth and seventh lines from the bottom, beneath torhte.
Another small fleck of gold between the seventh and eighth lines from the bottom, beneath

feallep in very near to the same place as the other side of the folio.
This leaf has three rather distant instances of gold. The first occurs on the fourth line, above the “o” in *oceanne*, while the second is a trio of minute dots beneath *kohtes* in line 6. The third and brightest instance in this photo occurs after *geond* on line eight.
A bright line of gold occurs under *fleogan*. Since this photo lacks any clear boundaries, it should be noted that this is on line 14 of the manuscript page.
Tiny remainders of gold occur above *lifē* in line 11.
Four flecks of gold occur across a significant space on the page: above *westma* in line nine, between *pide* and *to* in line ten, between *gelwam* and *nest* in line eleven, and below the word *mað* in line twelve.
Gold appears here in the third line, above þær, and beneath gewyrceð in line ten.
Large spots of gold on the top line of this leaf are hard to miss. Indeed, this is one of the few instances where gold is clearly visible in Muir’s digital facsimile.
Toward the bottom of the same leaf, we find two smaller flecks of gold, one below the alleluia of *The Phoenix* and the other between the words *deman deorbwate* from the second line of *Juliana*. Unlike the large spot above, these do not appear clearly in Muir’s facsimile.
Here, two spots of gold occur near the center of the leaf, one on top of the “u” in Ḟu, the other below the “d” in dohtar, both on line 10. These spots are also visible in Muir. One can see the storage case for the manuscript in the background of this photo, as well.
An irregularly shaped spot of gold over the “d” and below the “e” of *deaþe* in line nine. This spot can be detected in Muir’s facsimile when zoomed in.
Gold occurs here within the “m” of guma on line nine.
A single fleck of gold above the “n” in *fremman* in the fifth line from the bottom.
Four scattered spots of gold on the outer (right) side of this leaf: the largest above the “a” in *gumcysta* in line seven, with a smaller fleck to the right, beneath *hyran* in line six. Another, small and faint, appears above the “e” of *gemete* in line eight, and another small spot below the “d” in *modigne*. 
Small traces of gold in the bottom margin of this folio.
Medium-sized spots of gold after the tall “s” of cynnes in line nine and below the “m” of leoman in line ten.
Gold forms a line in the bottom left corner of the text, near a hole in the parchment of the leaf. The irregular shape of the line evokes the end of a sheet of gold leaf, as if the edge remained when the sheet was removed. Proximity to the hole indicates that creases in the gold leaf may not have been assiduously guarded against.
A spot of gold can be seen at the ends of lines three and nine on this leaf.
Here we find two flecks of gold: one beneath the “bi” in *bideleð* on the seventh line from the top, the other below the “e” in *scrafe* in the ninth line.
Flecks of gold, some smaller than the parchment’s hair follicles, appear in the “a” and below the “m” of *pam* in the penultimate line, as well as above the “a” in *last* of the final line. More small flecks occur in the margin below *last* and *nales*. Here we see how difficult it can be to use a static photograph: the parchment’s natural gloss can hide the tell-tale reflection of gold.
Small patches of gold in the margin near the last lines are accompanied by two smaller flecks on the right of the image, beneath *seo* on the penultimate line and after *ƿære* in the final line.

The gold here occurs, quite by accident, immediately after the famous *ubi sunt* passage of *The Wanderer*, where the narrator asks, among other questions “Hwær cwom mæþumgyfe?” (“Whence the treasure-gifts?”). This text appears in the photo on the line fourth from the bottom.
This photograph demonstrates the ability of even the most rudimentary equipment of today to capture physical details, such as gold below "beard," even when the image is out of focus.
A different angle on the same leaf shows another fleck of gold, this time between the words *gestrona* and *sum* in the fifth line from the bottom.
A pair of small spots of gold leaf below the “h” in hupreax.
The small spot of gold leaf above the “ƿ” in *inpis* is distant from the holes in the parchment along the spine edge of this leaf.
A spot of goldleaf in the lower margin beneath end punctuation.
Gold has been retained atop the word *mæga* in the fifth line from the bottom. This leaf contains the beginning of *The Seafarer*. 
Gold above and within the “g” of *cyninges* in the sixth line of the text, as well as before the initial “p” in *praifes*. 
A small, sharply angled spot of gold in the upper right corner of the leaf, near the foliation mark.
A streak of gold in the margin next to the penultimate line, as well as a small patch in the bottom margin, below the word *werum* in the last line.
Three spots of gold, two of which occur beside the descender of the tall “s” of *geþoht*. The other occurs four lines further down, above the “n” in *mon*. 
Two spots of gold in the tenth line, before the “t” and at the top of the “m” in *timbres*, are relatively easy to see. Close inspection, however, also shows the yellowish spots on the fifth line, below the “a” in *eordan* and between the words *leafum* and *lipan*, are also gold, although their reflection of light was not captured well at this angle.
Three flecks of gold occur around the word genimeð, two above the “g” and one below the “ð” and a few millimeters to the side.
Two spots in the fifth line from the bottom, one above flo\pen, the other above flab.
A grouping of three small flecks around the “eo” in *ceolas* in the fourth line from the bottom.
Two spots of gold leaf occur in the eighth line from the bottom, above the “t” in the word *nedest* and almost placed as a dot above the “i” in *ic*. The miniscule “i,” of course, had no dot at this point.
A great deal of gold has been left behind on this leaf. The occurrences range from above the “I” in *agieldan* in the line fourth from the top to the lines of gold that appear on top of *tohliden bonda* in the third line from the bottom, a span of nine lines.
This image appears in Chapter 4, as well. Here, another large patch of gold extends from below the ninth line from the top to the blank line that would have been line 13.
A single fleck of gold appears here, five lines from the bottom and into the margin.
Another lone fleck appears on this folio, in the margin five lines from the bottom of the image.
The gold that appears in the margins here, six lines down from the top of the image, matches up with the fleck on the facing page above, suggesting that they may be from the same sheet of gold leaf.
Additional gold can be found on the same leaf under the “h” in habban in the fifth line from the bottom, as well as under the words swa ic in the line below that.
Remnants of gold leaf appear near the arm of the large initial “F” on the eighth line from the bottom.
A fleck of gold is visible in the empty space of the tenth line, above the “o” in word from the line below.
On this leaf, one can see a series of flecks of gold above the words *sod is* in the seventh line from the top.
A small fleck occurs atop the “l” of æghyrlic in the seventh line from the top, while another spot of gold, this one nearly imperceptible, beneath the word þæt in the sixth line from the top. Those viewing this dissertation electronically may benefit from zooming in.
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