

Conference Report

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CONFERENCE TITLE: SENSORY PERCEPTION AND THE MEDIEVAL WORLD: AN INTERDISCIPLINARY CONFERENCE

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The fifth in the Early Medieval Interdisciplinary Conference Series (EMICS), this two-day conference sought to explore different approaches to medieval sensory experience, and different ways of engaging sensorily with the medieval. The theme is a live issue in medieval and wider scholarship; a report appeared in this journal on a similar event considering 'Multisensory Approaches to Roman Culture' held in late 2013. Papers were balanced between methodological discussions about how scholars can use different senses to engage with the medieval, and attempts to engage with medieval ideas and experiences of the sensory. In seeking to deploy a range of senses in analysis of material, papers repeatedly run up against the same key questions of a relative lack of terminology: the 'philology of smell' for which Wilcox argued remains a desideratum. In connecting with medieval sensory experiences, papers used a wider range of approaches; all to some extent piece together fragmentary evidence of different sorts, and seek to contextualise those pieces.

Richard North (UCL) opened the conference with 'Out of one's senses, or senses out of one: more on the flying *modsefa*'. He gave the conference's exploration of senses as firm a foundation as possible by seeking to identify what Anglo-Saxons understood their senses to be and how they understood them

to function. The evidence for this, like so many questions about the sensory, lies buried within verbal expression. Thus, North sought to identify different uses of Old English words that gloss or are used for different aspects of engaging with the world. In doing so, he proposed that there is a close association of 'mind' and 'the sensory' in the Anglo-Saxon world. Old English *sefa* works for both. And this *sefa* functions not as the passive recipient or perceiver of external forces meeting the mind, but as an active externalised force. The key difficulty North sought to unravel is how we translate this term: to what extent can modern thinking and vocabulary apprehend Anglo-Saxon sensory perception?

This 'flying mind' can be seen clearly in The Seafarer's *modsefa* and connects very closely with Christian ideas. Alcuin developed Lactantius' thinking on the soul, and adapted it to make the body and soul identical. The Seafarer, though, reuses Lactantius' imagery from *De opificio dei* and seems to return to an idea of the two as separable. The Lorsch Riddle, similar in period to Alcuin, also seems to engage with this discourse, suggesting a mind and heart both physical and wandering. The senses here are a function of the mind: understanding and perception seem identical, and *sefa* perhaps closest to our 'intellect'. It is distinct from the more absolutely religious *sawle* and *gæst*, and perhaps therefore enabled some freer consideration of how the senses, mind, soul, and body functioned together.

North pointed out that this travelling mind seems at first glance to be parallel to shamanic ideas. On closer inspection, it has little in common with them and there is no evidence of Anglo-Saxon shamans. Considering, therefore, the 'autonomous mind in an English non-shamanic tradition', he returned us to Old English poetry's immense range of vocabulary for mind, body, perception, and desire. This degree of verbal breakdown overwhelms our more limited range, and implies some degree of fragmentation in the identities it expresses. Grendel and Hrothgar, like the Seafarer, send their thoughts forth and many Anglo-Saxons find it difficult to contain and control their surging minds and emotions.

In short, then, sensory perception is not a passive activity in the Anglo-Saxon world. Sensory experiences are directed from the base station of the body. Perhaps The Seafarer's *sefa* is most like our 'purpose' or, less neatly, 'mood-sense'. And perhaps some Anglo-Saxons were engaged in the same discussions as this conference: attempting to systematise ideas of the mind and its functions, which seem to have been subtler and more complex than our own. Anglo-Saxon senses are not easily pinned down.

Balancing North's paper on medieval senses, **Jon Wilcox** (Iowa) shared some ideas about modern apprehension in 'The sensory cost of remediation; or, sniffing in the gutter of the *Blickling Homilies*'. Wilcox called for a critique of the digitisation of manuscripts alongside a renewed valuing and exploration of the value of the 'original' documents. Digitisation enables wider access to the visual appearance of manuscripts and is a form of democratisation. But the relentless development of digital technology means that such editions are outdated almost as soon as they become widely used: the Bodleian digitisation project (with images made between 1995 and 2000) now appears crude by

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comparison with more recent productions. That so many libraries are now digitising documents raises an urgent need for an exhaustive and regularly updated bibliography of digitised documents.

More consideration should, he argued, be brought to what is lost in the digitisation process. Digitisation makes much visible, but it runs the risk of hiding much more. As libraries and archives tend to focus on their most well-known pieces in such projects, a vast number of less famous or valuable manuscripts run the risk of being lost to our sight. In the process of scanning or photographing documents, parts can be lost: the gutter of the Blickling Homilies, for instance, is not visible in the digitised edition. Paradoxically, as digital facsimiles render some parts of some manuscripts more visible and democratised, the 'originals' become more iconic, more valuable, and more distanced from readers and scholars.

Similarly, digitisation brings such an intense focus to the visual appearance of manuscripts: as Clare Lees noted in the subsequent discussion, we can now see manuscripts much more clearly than their original makers could. But this should call attention to the full range of sensory experiences that help to form meaning when engaging with a manuscript: to consideration of the smell, feel, and weight of books; the sound and texture of their pages; the atmospheric contexts in which they can be seen; the contortions that readers experience when engaging with very large or very small productions. Digital editions enable manipulation of a manuscript, but they require less individual effort or activity on a reader's part. Therein, Wilcox suggested, lies both their greatest strength and weakness: production and use of digital editions should take place in a thoughtful, critical context.

The second session in some senses responded to Wilcox's paper by exploring sensory experiences that can be reconstructed from manuscripts. **Simon Thomson** (UCL) opened it with his paper entitled "Whistle while you work": Some indications of scribing as hearing in Old English poetic manuscripts'. He noted that Anglo-Saxon scribes experienced copying as a physical, mental, and spiritual process. Less glorified figures, such as the small image of a scribe in the Beatus initial on 12r of the Bury Psalter, and the later image of 'Hugo pictor' on Oxford MS Bodley 717 287v, seem to be experiencing scribing as a physically arduous process, in parallel with scribal colophons which complain of the demands of their work. Illustrations of saintly scribes, such as Matthew from the Lindisfarne Gospels or Ezra in the Codex Amiatinus suggest intellectual and spiritual engagement during the copying process. There are numerous instances of scribing being described as a spiritual activity. While Old English codices are usually better known for their poetry, the religious prose pieces in the Vercelli Book and the Nowell Codex show that the scribes who worked on these manuscripts were engaged in the same continuum. The latter manuscript, for example, opens with the prose 'Passion of St Christopher' in which the saint's final words explicitly bless both those who read and those who write about his suffering.

Thomson suggested that these indications of scribal engagement could be extended to consider the extent to which scribes may have 'heard' poetry as they wrote. He noted that the scribes of Old

English poetry have generally been seen as getting in between scholars and texts, rather than being considered as personally engaged with what they write. At their worst, scribes are seen as inefficient manglers of our texts; at their best, they are sometimes seen as creative shapers of it; the harmless drudges who try their mechanical best lie somewhere in the middle of this continuum. Use of pointing in Old English poetry has been used to some extent to place scribes on this continuum, with those who deploy it fairly fully and accurately, such as the main scribe of Junius 11, being assumed to be understanding and re-presenting their texts. Thomson suggested that the shape of verse to the page could be seen as another indication of the degree to which scribes engaged sensorily with the poetry they copied. Presenting examples and statistics from Junius 11, the Exeter Book, and the Nowell Codex, he suggested that some scribes deliberately worked to conclude manuscript pages with poetic verses. For *Genesis* in Junius 11, for instance, the coincidence of the verse ending at the end of a page occurs on 81% of the pages. That it is mostly (80% of the time in *Genesis*) the b-verse which ends a page suggests that the scribes may have been thinking of our full lines. This preliminary study showed considerable variance between texts and gatherings of the same text produced by scribes: there is a complex picture to be explored. But there are considerable indications that scribes were not merely transcribing poetry, but hearing it.

Nick Baker (York) followed on from this by considering how readers may have been expected to respond to the appearance of manuscripts with 'Crying in the Middle Ages: The emotional power of manuscript art'. He explored the importance of compunction in the early church, and in particular Gregory the Great's codification of Cassian's ideas on compunction in his *Moralia in Job*. For Anglo-Saxons engaged with this tradition, compunction meant much more than public penance: it required deeper personal emotional experience. According to Bede, Cuthbert could not say mass without weeping, and Benedict Biscop brought images from Rome which were intended to impact on the viewer and elicit compunction. Baker argued that insular portraits should be seen as on the same continuum: that images, symbols, and form used in portraits can be seen as expressing local and specific meanings with which viewers are expected to engage directly and individually.

The Lindisfarne Gospel St John stares at us: an eye witness to the Last Judgment, we are invited to see those events through his eyes, taking them in place of our own. The decision to frame St Luke in St Chad's Gospels means that his feet can be placed on the edge of the frame, bringing the figure forward and closer to us. Mary Magdalene, placed at the foot of the Crucifixion on the Ruthwell Cross, encourages us to site our emotional response to the scene in parallel to hers. In the rain, such an effect would be significantly enhanced: water would run down the sides, staining and puddling the scene and bringing it into the experience of its viewers. The viewers' gaze, then, could be controlled by Anglo-Saxon artists and exploited to produce experiences both spiritual and emotional.

Mary Wellesley (UCL) brought Thomson's and Baker's ideas about scribes and viewers together by discussing 'Multi-sensory association in the N-town "Magnificat"'. This explored how letter-form and the layout of text may have constructed meaning for readers of the fifteenth-century anonymous pageant plays. The N-Town manuscript, British Library Manuscript Cotton Vespasian D. viii, bears testimony to the scribe's thoughtful activity as a compiler, selecting and copying material as he

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worked. And it is notable, Wellesley argued, that his presentation changes on 72^v during Pageant xiii, at the *Magnificat*. As a set-piece of the liturgy, the *Magnificat* would have been familiar to the audiences of the Pageant, whether they understood the Latin words or not. The encounter between Mary and Elizabeth, at which the *Magnificat* is sung, was also a familiar scene often represented in sculpture and Books of Hours; in both, Wellesley noted, the two women are often touching each other's stomachs.

In the manuscript, the presentation of the *Magnificat* seems to engage with these different sensory experiences. It is given in Latin and a Middle English translation; the latter, though, eschews faithful translation in order to echo the words and sounds of the original, perhaps evoking it in readers' minds. Wellesley suggested that the English is 'compressed and altered' in order to pay homage to the Latin. In this sense, it works in parallel to the foetal John, who bows in his mother's womb to Christ in Mary's. The 'visually arresting' contrast between *Textura Quadrata* with red initials for the Latin and *Anglicana* for the English means that the *Magnificat* is, as the text says, '*Evyr to be sange and also to be seyn*': the words of the song have a talismanic quality.

This raises the question of who was intended to see this text, which is primarily a script for performance. But there are a number of indications that the scribe was aware of his reading audience: there is a great deal of non-performance marginalia; the key figure of *Contemplacio*, who supports devotional engagement with the material, is never named in the script, so is only fully accessible to readers. Thus, Wellesley argued, the scribe is producing a text for both performance and reading: the manuscript is designed to be engaged with by a range of readers, and they are invited to use a range of senses to experience it.

Irina Metzler (Swansea) opened the third session with its focus on aural experience. She shared some 'Changes in the conflation of congenital deafness and mental disability in the medieval world'. Defining congenital deafness as people who have never heard, and therefore do not speak, she noted the de facto exclusion of the deaf from a conventional Christian community. However, unlike other excluded groups, the deaf were not visibly 'other' and so were not barred from approaching the altar. This apparent advantage, though, only makes it harder to recover the experiences of the medieval deaf: they are effectively invisible. And hearing and speaking is fundamental to participation in a faith community: according to Augustine, deafness precludes faith. Similarly, as hearing and discussing ideas formed the basis of intellectual development, it was unclear whether the deaf could be seen as rational in the medieval world.

On this basis, and given that the lack of social interaction could have atrophied intellectual capacity, Metzler suggested that many medieval fools could have been deaf people. There is, indeed, a close etymological connection between deafness and intellectual weakness (being 'daft' or 'senseless') in English and German. In German, indeed, there is also a linguistic link between deafness and disobedience, where *der Hörige* is 'one who hears', but is primarily a serf. To hear, then, places an

individual in a submissive, socially controllable position, and the deaf thus have a potentially subversive role. As this discussion implies, deafness in the medieval world was more of a philosophical issue than a medical one. It provoked discussion of how faith was constructed, but did not lead to engagement with individual experiences. Lacking case studies, the study of deafness in the medieval world is therefore generally limited to the same region, although continued exploration can attempt to recover more of how the medieval world could have been experienced by those who could not hear.

Mariana López (York) was the first to use sound in her presentation; she also shared some more sophisticated technology in a discussion of 'The York Mystery Plays: A case study in the exploration of sound and hearing in medieval vernacular drama'. The 48 plays in the York Cycle were performed at twelve stopping points around the city from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries. But very little is known about the wagons used as stages and sites for their delivery. The key question explored by López is how the plays might have been experienced aurally by audiences. She distinguished between sound elements that were a planned part of performance; those that arose from intrinsic elements of the performance conditions, such as audience response or the wagon wheels; and those that were entirely external, such as animals or weather. Using a sample recording, López demonstrated the potential variation in sound quality that could be experienced in different physical contexts. Suggesting that medieval performers may have been as sensitive to such changes as their modern counterparts, she suggested that they could perhaps have adjusted their delivery according to their performance context.

Acoustic measurements in modern Stonegate, one of the medieval performance sites, demonstrate how suitable it is to intelligible aural experiences. In the Minster, a sound keeps going for up to seven seconds: appropriate for a choral, ceremonial context. But in Stonegate, a sound dies after a single second: much more appropriate for comprehending the relatively swift delivery of aural information during dramatic performance. The use of virtual acoustics – a technique called auralization – makes it possible to experiment with different types of set up and context to identify a range of possible aural experiences of the mystery plays. Given the lack of information about medieval Stonegate and how plays were delivered there, virtual modelling is ideal because it can create a wide range of models in response to the number of variant possibilities. The *Veni Creator* was probably used as part of the Baptism and Pentecost Plays. By playing it to us in some differently modelled contexts, López demonstrated the impact of space on sound. Variables such as the height of buildings and surrounding windows being open or closed alter the quality and type of aural experience. More significantly, she showed that both the type of wagon and how the audience was positioned around it give very different aural experiences for different audience members.

Eric Lacey (Winchester) also entertained the conference with a range of aural effects during his exploration of 'Birds and Words: Aurality, the species concept, and its implications for environmental perception in Anglo-Saxon England'. He argued that hearing was a, perhaps the, principal means of engaging with the world for medieval people. He showed that the construction of different species of animal, and the names given to them, are a type of categorisation that tell us how a group thinks

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about the world around them. In this context, 'folk taxonomy' is not opposed to modern scientific taxonomy: it is a way of thinking about the world.

Looking briefly at Anglo-Saxon visual representations of birds on manuscripts, coins, and sculpture, he argued that ideas about them do not seem to be visually governed, which makes identifying the species being represented extremely difficult. Different types of bird seem, in fact, to be defined by their single most identifiable feature, whether that is colour, sound, or movement. In *The Seafarer*, for instance, it is the sounds produced by birds that define them. Similarly, the beasts of battle and the happy birds encountered by Saint Guthlac are primarily identified by their sounds. This may have influenced the Alfredian 'Boethius', which brings the voices of birds into its translation without warrant in the source.

The primacy of aural perception of birds can be seen in the names Anglo-Saxons gave them. In Old English, the many types of owl in the British Isles are divided into *ule* and *ufe*. The latter is used in glossaries referring generally to large birds; the former seems exclusively used for night-time owls. Playing the familiar call of the nocturnal tawny owl, Lacey showed that *ule* transcribes it; the night-time sounds of one bird, then, defined all night-time owls. Hearing, he argues, was for the Anglo-Saxons a more effective sense than seeing: it provided information about the world before and often beyond that offered by sight; hearing did not complement seeing, but rivalled it as primary in engagement with the world.

Pete Sandberg (UCL) opened the second day of the conference with his paper on 'Disembodied cognition and sensory perception in Old Norse poetry'. Exploring the eddic *Sólarljóð*, he explored how the poet's body effects a poem which has a disembodied voice. Stanzas 39 to 45 show part of the journey between heaven and hell. Mind and body become separated in this cryptic and image-rich sequence. In a close reading, Sandberg showed how the focus is on the visual sense, with the narrating viewer functioning almost as a camera. In a process partly parallel to that suggested by Baker in Anglo-Saxon art, this implies the presence of a perceiving body, but invites the reader to substitute their own in its place. The transmitting poet, however, emphasises his presence and control by repeating ON *ek* ('I').

The sun (ON *sól*) has a key role in these stanzas: its purity, heat, and vitality contrasts with the narrator's broken body, cold tongue, and perplexed emotions. Its presence is experienced sensorily, which means that it resists theological interpretation even when that possibility is brought in during stanza 41. The tortured bodies seen by the narrator in the descent to hell also stand as an overly corporeal contrast to the sun. The agonies they experience problematise the bounds of the body and allow the poet to deploy biophysical language, focusing on sensory experience rather than abstract ideas of theology and emotion. Ultimately, then, these stanzas point to sensory processes as fundamental in cognition and perception: even the disembodied narrator perceives and thinks in bodily, sensory terms.

Meg Boulton (Independent) considered the same issues of perspective, but focused on the experience of the modern scholar rather than the medieval narrator in '(Re)Viewing *Iuxta Morem Romanorum*: Considering perception, phenomenology and Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastical architecture'. Medieval structures are still described in comparison with later work in terms of what they are not, rather than in terms of what they are. Boulton argued that modern viewers need more flexibility to engage effectively with Early Medieval art. In particular, we need to engage with art performatively rather than as a static construct, recognising our own position as embodied viewers.

Early churches often give the illusion of the building giving way to sky, decorated like the world of Revelation with jeweled mosaic borders. There are no mosaics from Anglo-Saxon England, which is perhaps attributable to loss from weather damage: certainly, the Anglo-Saxon artistic aesthetic mirrors the idea of mosaic patterns. Just like the design of Mediterranean churches, display and ornamentation in Anglo-Saxon religious buildings reinforces both earthly value and heavenly aspiration.

This same desire to access the divine and its eternity while remaining engaged with the present can be seen in stone crosses from the period. Seventh and eighth century crosses regularly break frames and their own bounds, demanding and enabling an active, cognitive realignment of viewing person and viewed object. The process of interacting with an object thus changes the space it inhabits and the person viewing it. A similar kind of play, Boulton suggested, can be seen in Anglo-Saxon churches, especially in their liminal spaces.

The penultimate session considered textual means of trying to control meaning through sensory experience. **Eoin Bentick** (UCL) discussed "Bodyly Syght", female devotion and Books of Hours'. The notion of 'bodyly syght' comes from Julian of Norwich: it was one of her ways of experiencing visions. Empathising with Christ's thirst on the Cross, for instance, is for Julian as important as spiritual engagement. The same principle works in reverse: Christ's abstract theological 'desire' for man is made real by being embodied.

Embodiment and 'bodyly syght' are not fundamentally positive, though: Eve allowed sin into her and the world through sight: sin can physically enter through the eyes and women, as daughters of Eve and as vulnerable to penetration, are more vulnerable to the dangers of 'bodyly syght'. The *Ancrene Wisse* resolves this difficulty by focusing the inevitably embodied sight on Christ: as with the *Corpus Christi* plays, the possession of Christ as an embodied individual enables deeper connection and obviates the need for bodily ties to other people. 'Bodyly syght' is thus permeated with sexualised thought. This can be connected with the intensely physicalised depictions of Christ's suffering in Books of Hours where gaping wounds invite penetration. Marginalia that depict patrons and sexualised animals, such as lions, are part of this complex attempt to harness and control desire through the gaze of the reader.

Vicky Symons (UCL) moved the discussion on to the impact of words and sounds in 'Doing Things with Words in Old English Charms and Riddles'. Following the principle, made popular by Isidore's *Etymologiae*, that words organise the world and therefore to some extent replace the senses, she argued that words had great power to mediate and shape the Anglo-Saxon world. The Old English riddles harness this power, showing that the language used to define the world can shift its reality. In Riddle 86, words disrupt the world rather than defining it; in Riddle 25, the definition of two simultaneous realities has the potential to genuinely alter the reader's future perception of mundane objects.

Charms take verbal control of the world beyond shifting perception, and to adjusting the physical reality itself. In part, this plays into the documented power of perception in medicine: by their performance, charms could have healed. However, Symons argued that Old English charms can be much more sophisticated than this. 'Against a Wen' uses relentlessly repetitive sounds and words along with engaging imagery: this may have had a hypnotic or certainly a calming effect on a patient. This approach to words as controlling the world plays naturally into Christian ideas about the physicality and reality of *logos*, and is not dissimilar to the widespread 'Christianisation' of places and activity. Gathering herbs or killing an ox could be un-Christian practices, but chanting a *Pater Noster* or making the linguistic claim that an action was undertaken for God changes the reality of what has taken place and renders it orthodox: for Anglo-Saxons, 'the right words used in the right way change the world around us.'

Francesca Brooks (KCL) considered the attempt to enable engagement beyond the power of words by 'The Partible Text and the Textual Relic: Sensory engagements with the thirteenth-century *Seinte Margarete*'. She suggested that the thirteenth-century version of Saint Margaret's life sought to enable a sensory connection with the saint. Having a number of divisible sections, this text focuses on the power of a seal to join and to mark relations. A seal becomes a form of contact relic: retaining a physical memory of bodily contact. The concept of the text and what it contains as a seal connects the reader with the saint, and the saint with Christ. Margaret is thus constructed as a kind of contact relic enabling the reader to access Christ himself: 'at the heart of *Seinte Margarete* lies the idea of touching the book and touching the body'.

This reading of course focuses attention on the experience of the owner or reader of the book. Brooks suggested that divisible elements of the text show a wider sensory offering. 'The Maiden's Song', for instance, is a separable and poetic piece emerging out of the prose: a local and vernacular element in a story from fourth century Antioch. It offers auditors the opportunity to experience the text in different ways: as hearers distanced from the physical book, but also as singers and dancers as part of a celebration of their particular community while simultaneously joining with the heavenly host in a divine communion.

Melissa Herman (York) opened the final session, returning us to the Anglo-Saxon aesthetic and sensory experience with 'Loops, Twists, and Tangles: Visual perception and Anglo-Saxon interlace'. She argued that Anglo-Saxon decoration is not merely pretty: it is potentially transformative, inviting the viewing eye to discover different shapes and ideas. So, the Sutton Hoo buckle, which is at first glance merely impressive, reveals a range of zoomorphs when studied. This opens a difficult question: given that objects such as this were designed to be worn, perpetually in motion and partially masked by other material, it is difficult to understand how they could have been engaged within the complex and sustained way demanded by their design. On the other hand, we view objects like the buckle frozen in space with a fixed light source: with a moving wearer in a space with shifting light sources would give a sense of fluidity and vitality which we cannot access. There is, Herman suggested, no 'right' way of reading Anglo-Saxon objects; rather, a range of valid and equally powerful experiences can be generated by objects designed to be viewed.

A disc brooch from Faversham illustrates this awareness of the viewing gaze and how it functions. Talking through its design, Herman showed how the eye is drawn through contrastive materials and shapes, and is freed to find patterns within patterns. In particular, sustained gazing reveals a multiplicity of crosses formed by parts of the brooch. The same principle can be seen in the carpet pages of the Book of Durrow, or the Lindisfarne portraits of Saints Mark and Matthew. Crosses appear and disappear as the viewer engages with the page: in effect, the gaze creates what is seen. Connecting with Symons' discussion of the Old English Riddles, and with Sandberg's analysis of *Sólarljóð*, she suggested that the process of engagement and experiencing the shifting, developing meanings was as important – and perhaps more important – than uncovering a permanent solution. From the metal and artwork they produced, Anglo-Saxons seem to have found delight in visual puzzling as a sensory process.

Finally, **Mike Bintley** (Canterbury) moved us from the human gaze to the experiences of plants as he explored some 'Expressions of suffering and sensory engagement with the early medieval world: root and branch thinking'. Trees and plants are often seen as set-dressing in the medieval world, but he argued that Old Norse and perhaps Old English poetry offers a more complex and fuller engagement with them. Snorri Sturlusson, indeed, provides a gendered discussion of trees: those used for weapons are associated with men; those offering protection and stability with women. Trees are often used to explore sorrow and distress: Egil Skallagrimsson uses them in *Sonatorrek* as part of his mourning for his sons, and *Maxims I* sees a tree's loss of leaves as an expression of mourning.

Riddle 21 goes further than this, moving beyond trees as metaphor and empathising with the experience of trees, assaulted as they are by the ox. This seems of a piece with the Anglo-Saxon sensitivity to the past lives of objects, and their sense that objects retained something of their original materials: that the cross in *The Dream of the Rood* is enduringly 'treeish', for instance. The great Norse tree Yggdrasil, as depicted in *Gríminsmál*, experiences pain with which we cannot empathise. This seems to be a symptom of trees' status as 'strange strangers': simultaneously familiar, but utterly inaccessible. It seems, then, that the human sensory experiences explored through much

of the conference did not limit Early Medieval notions of the sensory, but built a platform from which to consider the sensory experiences of others.

Bintley's paper concluded with a summary of papers and exploration of common ideas from the two days. This led into a final discussion, which, in some ways, returned to the two papers with which the conference began: North's discussion of medieval sensory experience and Wilcox's exploration of the challenges in engaging the senses in scholarly analysis of the medieval. Both of those papers, and much subsequent discussion, highlighted the challenge of our critical vocabulary and its relative incapacity to engage with experiences and thought-systems that are in many ways foreign to our own. This makes it essential to both develop classification systems that can describe these medieval sensory experiences and to engage our own senses in an unclassifiable, personal experience of the medieval. The study of medieval sensory experiences, and our own use of multiple senses in approaching the medieval, is a fundamentally phenomenological approach which disrupts the structures we are comfortable with using: it focuses attention on the challenging juncture between objective description and the subjective experiences of scholars and of those we study. The conference ended as such an event should: not with overview and clarity, but with new questions, avenues, and possibilities being opened up.