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I

Eagle (*earn*)



PEOPLE HAVE BEEN EAGLE-EYED since the fifteenth century, when the English monk and poet John Lydgate described someone as ‘egle-eyed, bryght and cler’. But sharp sight had been associated with the eagle for even longer. The Latin for ‘eagle’, *aquila*, supposedly comes from the creature’s keen sense of sight (*acumen oculorum*: sharpness of the eyes), at least according to Isidore’s seventh-century *Etymologies*. Isidore explains that eagles soar high above the ocean, too distant for human eyes to see, and yet the sharp-eyed birds can still spot small fish swimming far below. (The *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests a less appealing but more probable etymology, that *aquila* comes from Latin *aquilus*, or ‘dark brown’.)

Our modern English word ‘eagle’ comes from the Anglo-Norman *aigle*, but before the influence of French this bird was called an *earn*. ‘Erne’ is in fact still used today, usually referring to the golden eagle or sea-eagle (though ‘erne-eyed’ doesn’t have quite the same ring to it . . .). Old English *earn* has Germanic roots, with cognates in Old Norse (*qrn*), Middle Low German (*arn*) and modern Dutch (*arend*). (Incidentally, Old English is closest in structure to Frisian, a

language from the coastal Netherlands and north-west Germany, so it is sometimes more easily understood by speakers of modern Dutch or German.) *Earn* even has cognates in non-Germanic languages, like the Greek *órnīs* (bird), a word from which we get ‘ornithology’, the study of birds. Only two species of eagle feature among Britain’s native birds, so the word *earn* would probably have been used to talk about either the golden eagle or the white-tailed eagle – and often we can tell which one the writer had in mind by the way they describe it. The golden eagle, known in Scotland as the black eagle, may be the bird referred to in the Old English poem *Judith*, which has an *earn* that is *saluwig-pād* (dark-cloaked). And it is undoubtedly the white-tailed eagle that the poet is thinking about in *The Battle of Brunanburh*, where the *earn* is a *hasu-pāda* (grey-cloaked one) with a *hwīt* (white) tail.

Seeker of the sun

Whether dark-cloaked or grey-cloaked, an eagle is easiest to spot when it is soaring high in the sky. On a sunny day you might have to squint to see it up above the treetops. Bestiaries of the later medieval period seem to be particularly interested in the eagle’s flying ability, which – ordinary though it may be – contributed to the bird’s role in myth and allegory. These bestiaries explain why the eagle flies so high: it must burn off its old feathers and the mist in its eyes by flying close to the sun, renewing itself in the blazing heat. The eagle is thus made young again. This story of renewal doesn’t appear in ancient literature and may have derived from Psalm 102, which says, ‘thy youth shall be renewed like the eagle’s’ (in Old English *bið geedneowod swa swa earnes geogoð ðin*).*

* Throughout this book psalms are numbered according to the Latin Vulgate Bible.

The religious eagle comparisons don't stop there. Flying towards the sun is not just an extreme rejuvenation: when the eagle looks to the sun it is like Christians looking to God, not allowing their spiritual vision to become clouded over time. The way the eagle gazes fearlessly upon the sun is also compared to the way the saints turn their faces towards Christ with unflinching eyes. The notion that eagles can stare directly at the sun without pain or injury goes back at least as far as ancient Rome. Lucan, a Roman poet of the first century CE, refers to the eagle as the 'bird of Jove', who makes his fledglings look upon 'Phoebus' rays', the rising sun, with an unwavering gaze. In the seventh century, Isidore writes that only fledglings who successfully pass the sun-staring challenge are considered worthy enough to belong to the eagle family. A fledgling that draws back from the sun is cast out by its own parents. A thirteenth-century Latin bestiary explains that the parent eagle carries out this harsh sentence 'without any bitterness in its nature, but as an impartial judge'. To the parent, the flinching fledgling is nothing but a stranger. While this image of the cruel eagle parent is present in Latin bestiaries, it doesn't appear in Old English texts or the Middle English *Physiologus*, which focuses on the individual eagle's renewal, not mentioning fledglings at all. And in Old English we only have references to the eagle as a protective parent, like in the Old English translation of Deuteronomy: the baby eagles, *briddas*, are encouraged to fly, but the parent flutters over them to make sure they are safe. ***Brid*** is specifically a young bird or chick in Old English but has grown up to become 'bird' today – while ***fugel***, far more commonly used to mean a bird generally in Old English, is an etymon of our more specific 'fowl'.

The *earn*'s habit of staring directly at the sun does appear in Old English, though not in the context of testing one's offspring or even of self-renewal. In a homily of the tenth-century English abbot and writer Ælfric of Eynsham, the *earn*'s ability to look unflinchingly at the

sun is compared to a saint's ability to behold the full extent of God's glory. The keen eyes of an eagle see God clearly.

Ælfric explains that each of the four evangelists (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John) is represented by a different living creature. He says in an Old English saint's life that the prophet Ezekiel had a vision of the four evangelists as four *nýtenu* (beasts): a *mann* (human), a *lēo* (lion), an *earn* and a *stirc* (calf). The *mann* represents St Matthew because his gospel explicates Christ's human lineage. St Mark has a *lēo* because his gospel begins with a reference to St John the Baptist, whose voice is compared to a lion's roar. The Gospel of St Luke emphasises Christ's sacrifice, so Luke is accompanied by a *stirc*, an animal traditionally used for sacrifices. The *earn* is a symbol of St John the Evangelist, as Ælfric clarifies:

The eagle's likeness belongs to John because the eagle (*earn*) flies the highest of all birds and can stare the most fixedly upon the light of the sun. So did John, the divine writer. He flew far up, as with an eagle's wings (*earnas fyðerum*), and wisely beheld how he could write most gloriously (*mærlicost*) of God.

Here we find all the familiar qualities of our *earn* – high-flying, fearless, keen-sighted and able to look directly at the light. *Fēper* (pronounced FEH-ther) in the singular form means 'feather', the same as in modern English, but in the plural *fēþra* (or *fyðerum* as it is written here) means 'wings'. St John flies like an *earn* into the heavens, leaving behind earthly concerns to contemplate the divine. Christian allegory has transformed an ordinary bird into a symbol of new life and renewal. The adjective *māer-līc* can mean 'great', 'magnificent', 'glorious', 'splendid' or 'illustrious'. John's perspective from his great height, face to face with God, makes his gospel the most *māer-līc* of the four.



St John the Evangelist and his eagle in the Lindisfarne Gospels
(England, c.700)

In later medieval bestiaries, the eagle's flight to the sun is followed by a quick descent into a spring below, the water of which further renews it. Only its beak remains crooked; the eagle must sharpen it on a rock until it's the right size, the way a Christian is meant to 'sharpen'

their soul on Christ, improving their faith through close contact with the Word of God. The eagle also dives into the spring to catch fish, which bestiaries liken to Christ's descent into hell to rescue deserving souls. This episode, the Harrowing of Hell, was a popular subject of art and literature throughout the Middle Ages (the analogy is not perfect, of course, since during the Harrowing of Hell the souls do not become Christ's dinner). The eagle's renewal through immersion in water can also symbolise the Christian sacrament of baptism, and for this reason the bird sometimes appears on medieval baptismal fonts. Christians who turn their eyes to the Lord, the way the eagle turns its eyes to the sun, will find their spiritual vision refreshed.

A bird of contradictions

As we've seen with the eagle's parenting styles, interpretations of the bird's behaviour sometimes seem to contradict each other. The eagle's rapid fall from on high for the sake of food can also be read as an allegory of Adam's metaphorical fall, when he disobeyed God and ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden. The eagle can thus signify human frailty, falling for fish the way man falls for forbidden fruit. Like the human soul, the eagle can soar, but it can also fall. Medieval bestiaries also compare the eagle to persecutors who lie in ambush for one's spirit, as well as to secular rulers who fail to focus on spiritual concerns.

So, on the one hand the eagle seems to represent Christ rescuing sinners from hell; on the other it represents Adam, falling again and again. These contrasting attitudes towards the *earn* are not only the preserve of religious texts and poems. Although they too would have been written down by monks and nuns, Old English prognostics are not religious in nature. They are reference texts that make predictions about the future based on everything from the human body to

the stars to the days of the week. Seeing an *earn* in your dreams can be either good or bad. Two prognostic texts claim that if you dream about an *earn* above your head, you will have *weorþ-mynd* (honour, glory, favour, fame). Today the eagle is still used as a symbol of leadership and authority, which perhaps align with *weorþ-mynd*. But these texts also warn that if you dream about many eagles together it indicates *nīþ* (hatred), the snares and deceits of men. When eagles gather, it is usually around dead bodies. An Old English translation of the Gospel of Matthew says, ‘Wherever the body (*hold*) shall be, eagles (*earnas*) shall be gathered there.’ A *hold* is a corpse or carcass, cognate with Old Norse *hold*, which means ‘flesh’.

Sometimes, contradictions can be found between predictions that seem otherwise almost identical. Take these two different copies of the same prognostic text, for instance:

Gif him þince, þæt hine earn swyþe ete, þæt byþ deaþ.

(If it appears to him that the eagle fiercely devours him, that means death.)

Þonne him þynce, þæt his earn ehte, þæt bið eað.

(When it seems to him that an eagle pursues him, that means happiness.)

It is odd that these predictions should differ so drastically in texts that otherwise seem like duplicate copies. But if you look carefully, you’ll notice some crucial differences – ones that belong to the hand of the scribe rather than the *swefen-reccere* (dream interpreter). *Ete* is a form of the verb *etan* (to eat), while *ehte* is a form of *ēhtan* (to pursue or chase). Did the scribe leave out an ‘h’, turning the *earn*’s pursuit into a feast? *Eað*, which is read as an alternate spelling of *ēað* (happiness or well-being), easily becomes *deað/deaþ* (death) if you add a ‘d’. Are these scribal errors, or are the dreambooks portraying two different scenarios? If there is an error, which prognostic is the original and

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the ‘correct’, and which is the badly copied? Certainly, if one is being devoured by an eagle, that probably means death. It’s less clear why an eagle pursuing you would mean happiness, but this concept is echoed in another prognostic text, which says:

Gif him þince, þæt his earn swyþe eahte, þæt byþ mycel gefea.

(If it seems to him that an eagle fiercely pursues him, that means great joy.)

It’s essentially the same as the other prediction but uses *ge-fēa* (joy) instead of *ēad* (happiness). But repetition of the idea doesn’t mean that the joyful interpretation is the correct one: yet another text claims that if you dream about an *earn* flying, it means *dēaþ* for your wife. There are no prognostics, however, that claim that dreaming about an eagle is simply a sign of a mildly upset stomach. It seems that dreams about eagles lead either to joy and prosperity or to malice and death – there’s really no in-between.

Beasts of battle

The ordinary sight of an eagle soaring high in the sky might be inspiring, as we imagine the *ge-fēa* (joy) we’d experience with such freedom, but maybe you associate this behaviour with impending *dēaþ* – and this isn’t simply due to dream prognostics. If an eagle is circling high above, it is very likely looking for prey, ready to kill for its supper. Or, if it’s feeling lazy, it might feed on a pre-killed *hold* (corpse). Eagles hunt for their own food, but they also feed upon the remains of other animals’ kills, scavenging like a vulture or raven. For this reason, the *earn* is one of the ‘beasts of battle’, a trope that appears throughout Old English poetry: three fearsome creatures whose presence accompanies war and destruction.

The Old English poem *The Battle of Brunanburh* describes one such scene of bloody destruction: the battle of English forces (King Athelstan and his brother Edmund) against an alliance of enemies (the kings of Scotland, Dublin and Strathclyde). In the aftermath of the conflict, three beasts of battle come into view: the *earn*, the black and horny-beaked *hræfn* (H'RAV-un) and the grey *wulf* of the woods. If you read these words out loud, it's easy to see how these latter two creatures have become the modern raven and wolf – even if the spelling and pronunciation have morphed along the way. Most noticeably, Old English *hræfn* contains a letter that no longer appears in English words: æ (æsc, pronounced ASH), a ligature that sounds like the 'a' in 'car'. This is just one of the letters that have disappeared as Old English became new. In this book you'll come across two others: þ (thorn) and ð (eth), which are used interchangeably for a voiced or voiceless 'th' sound (as in 'this' or 'path').

But what is our sharp-eyed *earn* doing among these beasts of battle? The trio of *earn*, *hræfn* and *wulf* loiters near battlefields, waiting to have their fill of carrion: battles mean corpses, and corpses mean dinner. The creatures are depicted as heartless scavengers following their natural instincts, which the medieval literature scholar Heidi Estes compares to the way Old English texts portray pagans plundering the bodies of Christians. In *The Battle of Brunanburh* the poet chooses language that emphasises these negative traits. The *earn* is described as *grædig* (greedy), a *gūþ-hafoc* (GOOTH-HA-vock) or 'war-hawk', and elsewhere it is a *gūþ-fugel* (war-bird). Its feathered companion doesn't get off any lighter: other poems describe the *hræfn* as a *wæl-cēasiga* (chooser of the slain) and a *lyft-sceaþa* (robber of the air). *The Battle of Brunanburh* is a political text, written for the purpose of celebrating the heroism and victory of the West Saxon dynasty. But Christian heroes can't be seen heartlessly plundering the bodies of the slain, so the poem has the beasts of battle collect the spoils of war rather than the victorious warriors.

In *The Battle of Brunanburh* it is only the excitement of the victorious humans that gets transferred to the beasts of battle, but in *Beowulf* we find a raven with the ability to speak. Having defeated a fierce dragon fighting at King Beowulf's side, the warrior Wiglaf returns to the men who refused to join him, who cowered beyond a nearby cliff. The dragon is dead, Wiglaf says, but so is their leader. He looks towards the imminent future, when their enemies learn that they no longer have a powerful king to protect them. He paints a grim vision of the aftermath of the unavoidable battle:

Many a morning-cold spear shall be clasped in fists, held in hands.
The warriors will not be awakened by the sound of the harp. Instead,
the dark raven (*hræfn*), eager for the fated, speaks (*reordian*) at length,
telling (*secgan*) the eagle (*earne*) how he was successful at his meal,
while plundering the slaughtered with the wolf (*wulf*).

This scene is devastating, utterly devoid of human life. It is less about the specific enemy who will bring down Wiglaf's people than the inevitability of their demise. The warriors cannot be awakened by music because they lie dead, and it is the beasts of battle who speak up in the absence of humans. The *hræfn* boasts like any warrior after battle, going into detail (we imagine – since he does talk 'at length'), describing the exploits that led to his sumptuous feast. There is something here that might remind us of the dinner-party bore, and the poet uses words like *reordian* (to speak) and *secgan* (to tell) to emphasise the raven's human qualities. The eagle, noticeably, stays silent.

The eagle is more vocal in *Judith*, a retelling of the story of the Old Testament heroine who beheads an enemy general and saves her people. It is just before Judith's people, the Hebrews, launch their successful attack on the Assyrian camp. The warriors march

confidently, newly inspired by Judith's bravery – they are *hæleþas* (heroes). Meanwhile, both the lean *wulf* and the black *hræfn* rejoice at the thought of impending slaughter, knowing the *hæleþas* will provide them with a feast. The *earn* eagerly follows along behind the marching men, singing a *hilde-lēoþ* (battle-song) as if to inspire them further. This is no normal birdsong: a *lēoþ* usually refers to a poem, ode or song with verses. *Lēoþ-cræft* is the art of poetry, a musical medium that uses words. Just as the beasts of battle take on the traits of human blood-thirstiness, here the *earn* takes on the role of a *scop* (poet) . . .

Isolation or inspiration?

While the song of the *earn* in *Judith* inspires warriors to victory, to the ears of the traveller in the poem *The Seafarer* the eagle's cries are only desolate screeches. In the midst of stormy weather, this lonely soul hears the dewy-feathered eagle *bigeal* (pronounced bih-YEH-all). This verb, *be-gyllan* (beh-YUEL-lahn), is a hapax legomenon, or a word that appears only once in extant Old English texts. If the pronunciation 'YEH-all' makes you think of 'yell', you wouldn't be far off: the *Toronto Dictionary of Old English* defines *be-gyllan* as 'to cry out against or in answer to', which seems quite specific to this scenario: a man alone at sea, speaking about his hardships, with no one to respond to his stories but the birds. The slightly more common verb *gyllan* has been defined in a variety of ways:

1. (of birds) to make a loud cry, to screech
2. (of a wolf/dog) to bay, howl
3. (of an inanimate object) to make a strident, grating or crashing noise

Regardless of who or what makes the sound, it seems that it is never pleasant.

In *The Seafarer* a lonely man is isolated by storms and unable to see a better future. He cannot see, only hear the eagle who soars with a freedom far removed from the man's own state. But what if instead he had the perspective of the eagle soaring above the clouds? In an Old English translation of Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy*, *Wisdōm* tells *Mōd* that when he ascends he will look down upon the tempestuous world below, *swa se earn ðonne he up gewit bufan ða wolcnu styrmendum wedrum* (like the eagle when he goes above the clouds in stormy weather). Boethius, a Roman statesman and philosopher, wrote his *Consolation of Philosophy* while in prison before his execution in 524 CE, so it is no wonder that he is fantasising about an eagle's freedom and fearless flight. Boethius' text is written in the form of a conversation between Philosophy personified and his own suffering soul. In the Old English translation, Boethius' soul is *Mōd* and Philosophy *Wisdōm*. The meaning of *wisdōm* was the same as it is today, referring to knowledge, learning or philosophy. *Mōd* can be translated in many ways: 'the inner person or spiritual element of a person', 'soul', 'heart', 'spirit' or 'mind'. It eventually became modern English 'mood'. Not every Latin text was translated into Old English, but Boethius' *Consolation of Philosophy* was popular throughout the Middle Ages. Its translation into different languages tells us that it spoke to many people, some of whom may have felt 'trapped' by their situation, even if they weren't actually imprisoned. Could the idea that one's *mōd* eventually rises above all earthly ills have been a comfort? Whether we are a lonely seafarer or not, the ability to imagine our spirits ascending like the high-flying *earn* soars above the clouds – where no troublesome storm can harm it or hinder its flight – is an inspiring vision. As long as you don't also think about the eagle's grim, haunting screech.

Sometimes *earnas* can actively show us inspiration by guiding our

souls to wondrous visions. In the Old English poem *Andreas*, some young seafarers say that while they were sleeping, *earnas* allowed them to glimpse the wonders of heaven. They describe their dream or vision to St Andrew:

Eagles (*earnas*) came over the surge of the waves, flying, exultant in their wings (*fēðerum*). They carried away our souls as we slept, conveying them joyfully, flying through the air with happy (*blīðe*), clear (*beorhte*) and gentle (*liðe*) sounds. They jubilantly showed us affection, dwelling in love. There was unending singing and heaven's circuit, many beautiful troops and a host of glory.

The *earnas* guide the sleeping souls to heaven, allowing them – even while still alive – to glimpse the eternal, heaven and a host of angels singing. They contrast significantly with the screeching, dewy-feathered *earn* of *The Seafarer* and the chattering scavenger of *Beowulf*. Instead of eliciting a sense of loneliness or doom, the song of the eagle is ***blīpe***, ***beorht*** and ***lipe*** (happy, bright and gentle), a line which is itself musical in its use of alliteration and rhyme (BLEE-thuh, BEH-orh't and LEE-thuh).

The eagle's behaviour in Old English texts is fairly ordinary but heavy in meaning, whether inspiring hope or reminding us of our isolation. *Earnas* fly over desolate waters, screeching at lonely seafarers, making us realise we are ultimately alone on the journey to our salvation. Alongside the *hræfn* and the *wulf*, the *earn* haunts the battlefield, eager to plunder the corpses, reminding us that death comes to us all. But there is also something joyful in the *earn*'s flight as it soars through the air. *Earnas* can escape storm clouds, finding security in the rays of the sun. And, of course, their eagle eyes see all.

Eagle's Wordhord

be-gyllan, verb (beh-YUEL-lahn / bɛ-'jyl-lan): To cry out against or in answer to.

beorht, adjective (BEH-orh't / 'bɛɔrxt): Bright, clear, lucid.

blīpe, adjective (BLEE-thuh / 'bli:-θə): Happy, joyful; gentle, kind, gracious.

bridd, noun (BRID / 'brɪd): Young bird, chick.

dēap, noun (DAY-ath / 'de:əθ): Death.

ēad, noun (AY-ahd / 'e:əd): Happiness, well-being.

earn, noun (EH-arn / 'ɛarn): Eagle (plural: *earnas*).

ēhtan, noun (AY-h'tahn / 'e:x-tan): To pursue or chase.

etan, noun (EH-tahn / 'ɛ-tan): To eat.

fēper, noun (FEH-ther / 'fɛ-θɛr): Feather; (in plural) wings (plural: *fēþra*).

fugel, noun (FUH-yell / 'fʌ-jɛl): Bird (plural: *fuglas*).

ge-fēa, noun (yeh-VAY-ah / jɛ-'ve:a): Joy, gladness.

grædig, adjective (GRADD-ih / 'græ:-dɪj): Greedy, covetous.

gūþ-fugel, noun (GOOTH-FUH-yell / 'gu:θ-,fʌ-jɛl): War-bird (an epithet for the eagle).

gūþ-hafoc, noun (GOOTH-HA-vock / 'gu:θ-,ha-vɔk): War-hawk (an epithet for the eagle).

gyllan, verb (YUEL-lahn / 'jyl-lan): To make a loud cry, to screech; to bay, howl; to make a strident, grating or crashing noise.

hasu-pāda, noun (HA-zuh-PAH-da / 'ha-zʌ-,pɑ:-da): Grey-cloaked one (an epithet for the eagle).

hæleþ, noun (HAL-eth / 'hæ-lɛθ): Hero, (noble) man (plural: *hæleþas*).

hilde-lēoþ, noun (HILL-duh-LAY-oth / 'hɪl-də-,le:ɔθ): Battle-song.

hold, noun (HOLD / 'hɔld): Corpse, carcass.

hræfn, noun (H'RAV-un / 'hræ-vən): Raven.

hwīt, adjective (H'WEET / 'hwi:t): White.

lēo, noun (LAY-oh / 'le:ɔ): Lion (plural: *lēon*).

lēoþ, noun (LAY-oth / 'le:ɔθ): Song, poem, ode.

lēoþ-cræft, noun (LAY-oth-KRAFT / 'le:ɔθ-,kræft): The art of poetry.

līfe, adjective (LEE-thuh / 'li:-θə): Soft, gentle, mild, serene.

lyft-sceaþa, noun (LUEFT-SHEH-ah-tha / 'lyft-,ʃea-θa): Robber of the air (an epithet for the raven).

mann, noun (MAHN / 'man): Man, human being (plural: *menn*).

mār-līc, adjective (MAER-leech / 'mæ:r-li:tʃ): Great, magnificent, glorious, splendid, illustrious.

mōd, noun (MOAD / 'mo:d): Inner person, soul, mind, heart, spirit.

nīþ, noun (NEETH / 'ni:θ): Hatred, enmity, rancor, spite, malice.

nȳten, noun (NUE-ten / 'ny:-tɛn): Animal, beast (plural: *nȳtenu*).

reordian, verb (REH-or-di-ahn / 'rɛɔr-di-an): To speak, say.

saluwig-pād, adjective (SA-luh-wi-PAWD / 'sa-lɑ-wij-,pɑ:d): Dark-cloaked, having dark plumage.

scop, noun (SHOP / 'ʃɔp): Poet.

secgan, verb (SEDG-ahn / 'sɛdʒ-an): To say words, tell.

stirc, noun (STIRK / 'stirk): Calf.

swefen-reccere, noun (SWEH-ven-REH-cheh-ruh / 'swɛ-vɛn-,rɛ-tʃɛ-rɔ): Interpreter of dreams, soothsayer.

wæl-cēasiga, noun (WAEL-CHAY-ah-zi-ga / 'wæl-,tʃɛ:a-zi-ga): Chooser of the slain (an epithet for the raven).

weorþ-mynd, noun (WEH-orth-muend / 'wɛɔrθ-mynd): Honour, glory, favour, fame.

wīsdōm, noun (WEEZ-doam / 'wi:z-do:m): Wisdom, knowledge, learning, philosophy.

wulf, noun (WULF / 'wʌlf): Wolf.