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# The Structure of the Exeter Book: A Reading Based on Medieval Topics

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## Introduction: the structure of the Exeter Book – old and new approaches

MS 3501 in the library of the Dean and Chapter of Exeter Cathedral, more commonly known as the Exeter Book, is often thought to be referred to by an entry in the list of books and religious objects that Bishop Leofric intended to leave to the cathedral and its community: ‘i mycel englisc boc be gehwilcu[m] þingu[m] on leoðwisan geworht’, ‘one big English book on various things in verse’.<sup>2</sup> Modern scholarship since the nineteenth century has by and large echoed this characterization with its emphasis on diversity of content rather than coherence. ‘The Exeter Book differs from the other three [Old English] poetic codices in that it is a poetic miscellany in which there does not appear to have been a recognizable principle of selection,’ says N. F. Blake in his edition of *The Phoenix*.<sup>3</sup> John C. Pope calls it ‘the most varied’ of the four poetic codices<sup>4</sup> and Kenneth Sisam maintains that ‘the order of contents is generally haphazard’, wondering whether ‘we [shall] ever know more about the way in which this miscellany was compiled’.<sup>5</sup> But why have scholars been so keen on trying to detect order in the Exeter Book anyway? After all, might we not just content ourselves to see the Exeter

<sup>1</sup> I thank Alaric Hall and the two anonymous reviewers for *Leeds Studies in English*, from whose comments this article has profited considerably. I would also like to thank Kirsten Middeke for reading the article prior to submission and, most importantly, Andrew James Johnston, who not only made invaluable suggestions but also directed my attention to encyclopaedias in the first place.

<sup>2</sup> Titles and quotations from *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry: An Edition of Exeter Dean and Chapter MS 3501*, ed. by Bernard J. Muir, 2nd edn, 2 vols (Exeter: Exeter University Press, 2000), II; unless otherwise noted, translations from the Old English are my own. The list, which is usually referred to as ‘Leofric’s donation list’ in modern scholarship, is now prefixed to Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS 3501, the Exeter Book, as folios 1–2. While most modern scholars think it at least ‘reasonable’ to infer that the entry refers to the Exeter Book (e.g. Bernard Muir in *The Exeter Anthology*, I, 3; Patrick W. Conner, *Anglo-Saxon Exeter: A Tenth-Century Cultural History*, Studies in Anglo-Saxon history, 4 (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1993), p. 34; John C. Pope, ‘Paleography and Poetry: Some Solved and Unsolved Problems of the Exeter Book’, in *Medieval Scribes, Manuscripts & Libraries: Essays Presented to N. R. Ker*, ed. by M. B. Parkes and Andrew G. Watson (London: Scolar Press, 1978), pp. 25–65 (p. 65) goes as far as stating this as a fact), we cannot, of course, be certain of this.

<sup>3</sup> *The Phoenix*, ed. by N. F. Blake (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1964), p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> Pope, p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> Kenneth Sisam, *Studies in the History of Old English Literature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), p. 97.

Book as a loose collection of texts whose order may well have been determined by practical constraints, such as the availability of the material or the predetermined structure of different exemplars?

Yet the majority of scholars working with the Exeter Book have felt that the compiler not only chose the texts with care, but also structured various sections of the manuscript, possibly even altering individual texts so as to better fit their environment.<sup>6</sup> Table 1 summarises the contents of the manuscript, giving the titles as they appear in Muir's edition and in the Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records.<sup>7</sup> I also provide some descriptive comments: these are naturally simplistic and cannot do justice to the complexity of the poems. I have included them to make it possible to trace the various thematic, formal or functional sequences discussed here, but also to highlight their fuzziness.<sup>8</sup>

Careful handling of the texts on part of the compiler is suggested, for instance, by the textual and thematic coherence of the three *Christ*-poems, the following sequence of poems concerning saints and Old Testament righteous (*Guthlac A and B, The Canticles of the Three Youths, The Passion of Saint Juliana*), the three successive *Physiologus*-poems (*The Panther, The Whale, The Partridge*) and the two collections of riddles toward the end of the manuscript. A scan of the Exeter Book's contents will reveal further sequences that exhibit at least some degree of formal or thematic coherence. Thus, many of the poems between *The Passion of Saint Juliana* and the *Physiologus*-group are either presented as catalogues listing pieces of advice or items of knowledge (*God's Gifts to Humankind, Precepts, Widsith, The Fates of Mortals, Maxims I*) or are otherwise didactic in tone (*Vainglory, The Order of the World*). Likewise, the section of poems between the two groups of riddles has been observed to show a strong concern for penitential and paschal themes.<sup>9</sup> That these last two groups are interspersed with the so-called 'elegies' (*The Wanderer, The Seafarer, The Riming Poem, Deor, Wulf and Eadwacer, The Wife's Lament, The Husband's Message, The Ruin*) may indicate that these poems were not perceived as a homogeneous group by the compiler(s) of the codex, which might in turn potentially undermine the thesis of a sequential arrangement just presented.

Pope has drawn attention to the fact that all the longer poems (up to and including *The Passion of Saint Juliana*) are assembled in the first half of the manuscript, while the second half comprises shorter poems, with the split occurring within the tenth of the codex's seventeen quires.<sup>10</sup> The manuscript's size and the care and skill with which it was written, as well as the extensive corrections made by the scribe, likewise indicate that some thought went into the manuscript's production.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, modern scholars' desire for some kind of organising principle is also prompted by the relative coherence of other contemporary compilations in Old English, such as the Blickling Homilies or the Junius and Vercelli

<sup>6</sup> For the last claim, see for instance Roy M. Liuzza, 'The Old English *Christ* and *Guthlac* Texts, Manuscripts, and Critics', *Review of English Studies*, 41 (1990), 1–11 (p. 5) and the discussion below.

<sup>7</sup> *The Exeter Book*, ed. by George Philip Krapp and Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, *The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records*, 3 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1936).

<sup>8</sup> See also Table 5.1 in Michael D. C. Drout, *Tradition and Influence in Anglo-Saxon Literature: An Evolutionary, Cognitivist Approach* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), p. 139.

<sup>9</sup> See *Two Literary Riddles in the Exeter Book. Riddle I and The Easter Riddle: A Critical Edition with Full Translations*, ed. by James E. Anderson (Norman and London: University of Oklahoma Press, 1986) and Muir's introduction in *The Exeter Anthology*, 1, 23.

<sup>10</sup> Pope, p. 40; *The Exeter Anthology*, p. 22.

<sup>11</sup> Richard Gameson calls it 'a handsome codex, [...] of large dimensions for one written in the vernacular' and 'a major work written by a skilful scribe at a centre that was not short of resources and that had access to an interesting range of texts both in Latin and the vernacular' (Richard Gameson, 'The Origin of the Exeter Book of

manuscripts.<sup>12</sup> Why should the Exeter Book have been different? And indeed, variety does not by necessity entail randomness. As James E. Anderson remarks, 'Even if the Exeter Book is a poetic miscellany, [...] it is not necessarily of wholly arbitrary or random order. Like many other medieval collections it was probably assembled on some more or less definite but unstated plan.'<sup>13</sup> Speaking of medieval manuscripts in general, Fred C. Robinson likewise encourages modern readers to look beyond the individual text:

[W]hen we read an Old English literary text we should take care to find out what precedes it in its manuscript state and what follows it. [...] For medieval books often constituted composite artifacts in which each component text depended on its environment for part of its meaning. If a text is detached from its codicological environment (as texts normally are in our modern editions), we risk losing that part of its meaning.<sup>14</sup>

More recent studies of the Exeter Book from the 1980s onward have accordingly tended to stress the coherence rather than the variety of the collection. Thus Bernard Muir, the manuscript's most recent editor, states:

I was prompted to undertake this new edition by a feeling that it was time to focus attention on the collection as an anthology. I have found in my own study of the texts that there is much to be gained by reading the manuscript from beginning to end, and recent scholarship suggests that the anthologist's design and intention can sometimes be perceived in the texts as they are preserved today.<sup>15</sup>

Old English Poetry', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 25 (1996), 135–85 (pp. 135, 179)). On alterations and corrections, see *The Exeter Anthology*, I, p. 32, 'The large number of deliberate alterations and corrections made to the texts in *The Exeter Anthology* [...] indicates that the scribe is a much more conscientious worker than has previously been thought. He (and others) made numerous alterations to the text, sometimes systematically, indicating that what appears in the manuscript is for the most part what he (or they) wanted to be there.'

<sup>12</sup> This is not to say that these manuscripts have not raised considerable discussion. Thus, while the structure of the Junius manuscript is comparatively straightforward in gathering a number of paraphrases of Biblical texts in verse (*Genesis, Exodus, Daniel, Christ and Satan*), arranged chronologically, the Vercelli Book, containing prose homilies as well as poetry, has been censured for its intermingling of prose and verse and its lack of thematic development as compared to other collections of homilies. Nevertheless, as Elaine Treharne has shown, the Vercelli texts are all related by their homiletic function and their applicability as didactic and devotional meditations for specific Church feasts, especially with respect to lay audiences (Elaine Treharne, 'Form and Function of the Vercelli Book', in *Text, Image, Interpretation: Studies in Anglo-Saxon Literature and Its Insular Context in Honour of Éamonn Ó Carragáin*, ed. by Alastair Minnis and Jane Roberts, *Studies in the Early Middle Ages*, 18 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2007), pp. 253–66). This 'pragmatic unity' resonates with the present paper's engagement with the formal and functional characteristics of the Exeter Book poems. The Nowell Codex, the fourth major poetic manuscript in Old English, in spite of containing far fewer texts, would seem to rival the Exeter Book in its thematic eclecticism, mixing materials associated with Christianity (*Saint Christopher, Judith*), classical antiquity (*Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*), Germanic heroic legend (*Beowulf*), and a description of marvellous creatures (*The Wonders of the East*), as well as mingling verse and prose. It has long been noted, however, that all of these texts engage with marvels and monstrous creatures, and if *Judith* originally preceded *Saint Christopher*, as Peter Lucas has argued, the first four texts were arranged in thematically and geographically related pairs (*Judith and Saint Christopher; The Wonders of the East and Letter of Alexander*), resulting in thematic echoes between consecutive texts (Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the 'Beowulf'-Manuscript* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1995)). For a comprehensive study of all four poetic codices see Gunhild Zimmermann, *The Four Old English Poetic Manuscripts: Texts, Contexts, and Historical Background*, *Anglistische Forschungen*, 230 (Heidelberg: Winter, 1995).

<sup>13</sup> *Two Literary Riddles*, p. xii.

<sup>14</sup> Fred C. Robinson, 'Old English Literature in Its Most Immediate Context', in *Old English Literature in Context: Ten essays*, ed. by John D. Niles (Cambridge: Brewer, 1980), pp. 11–29 (p. 11).

<sup>15</sup> *The Exeter Anthology*, I, ix–x.

Table 1. The contents of the Exeter Book

<b>Folios</b>	<b>Titles in <i>The Exeter Anthology</i></b>	<b>Titles in <i>ASPR III</i></b>	<b>Comments</b>
8r–14r	<i>The Advent Lyrics (Christ I)</i>	<i>Christ (I)</i>	biblical history: Christ's birth (translation of Latin antiphons for advent)
14r–20v	<i>The Ascension (Christ II)</i>	<i>Christ (II)</i>	biblical history: Christ's ascension
20v–32r	<i>Christ In Judgement (Christ III)</i>	<i>Christ (III)</i>	biblical history: Christ's Second Coming
32v–44v	<i>Life of Saint Guthlac A</i>	<i>Guthlac (I)</i>	saint's life
44v–52v	<i>Life of Saint Guthlac B</i>	<i>Guthlac (II)</i>	saint's life
53r–55v	<i>Canticles of the Three Youths</i>	<i>Azarias</i>	Old Testament righteous: the three youths in the furnace (Daniel 3)
55v–65v	<i>The Phoenix</i>	<i>The Phoenix</i>	nature allegory
65v–75r	<i>Passion of Saint Juliana</i>	<i>Juliana</i>	saint's life
76v–78r	<i>The Wanderer</i>	<i>The Wanderer</i>	'elegy' (spiritual biography, homiletic exemplum)
78r–80r	<i>God's Gifts to Humankind</i>	<i>The Gifts of Men</i>	'wisdom poem' (catalogue)
80r–81r	<i>Precepts</i>	<i>Precepts</i>	'wisdom poem' (catalogue)
81v–83r	<i>The Seafarer</i>	<i>The Seafarer</i>	'elegy' (spiritual biography, homiletic exemplum)
83r–84v	<i>Vainglory</i>	<i>Vainglory</i>	'wisdom poem' (minor catalogue element)
84v–87r	<i>Widsith</i>	<i>Widsith</i>	'wisdom poem' (catalogue, biographical element)
87r–88v	<i>The Fates of Mortals</i>	<i>The Fortunes of Men</i>	'wisdom poem' (catalogue)
88v–92v	<i>Maxims I (A–C)</i>	<i>Maxims I</i>	'wisdom poem' (catalogue)
92v–94r	<i>The Order of the World</i>	<i>The Order of the World</i>	'wisdom poem'
94r–95v	<i>The Riming Poem</i>	<i>The Riming Poem</i>	'elegy' (spiritual biography?)
95v–96v	<i>The Panther</i>	<i>The Panther</i>	nature allegory (Christ)
96v–97v	<i>The Whale</i>	<i>The Whale</i>	nature allegory (Satan)
97v	<i>The Partridge</i>	<i>The Partridge</i>	nature allegory (Satan/Man)
98r	<i>Homiletic Fragment III</i>	[treated as part of <i>The Partridge</i> ]	homiletic
98r–100r	<i>Soul and Body</i>	<i>Soul and Body II</i>	soul-body allegory (homiletic)

<b>Folios</b>	<b>Titles in <i>The Exeter Anthology</i></b>	<b>Titles in <i>ASPR III</i></b>	<b>Comments</b>
100r–100v	<i>Deor</i>	<i>Deor</i>	'elegy'
100v–101r	<i>Wulf and Eadwacer</i>	<i>Wulf and Eadwacer</i>	'elegy'
101r–115r	<i>Riddles (1–59)</i>	<i>Riddles (1–59)</i>	riddles
115r–115v	<i>The Wife's Lament</i>	<i>The Wife's Lament</i>	'elegy'
115v–117v	<i>Judgement Day I</i>	<i>The Judgment Day I</i>	homiletic
117v–118v	<i>Contrition A</i>	<i>Resignation</i>	penitential prayer
119r–119v	<i>Contrition B</i>	[treated as part of <i>Resignation</i> ]	
119v–121v	<i>The Descent into Hell</i>	<i>The Descent into Hell</i>	Christian history: the harrowing of hell
121v–122r	<i>Almsgiving</i>	<i>Alms-Giving</i>	homiletic
122r	<i>Pharaoh</i>	<i>Pharaoh</i>	biblical history: the drowning of the Egyptians in the Red Sea (Exodus 14); dialogic (question-answer)
122r	<i>The Lord's Prayer I</i>	<i>The Lord's Prayer I</i>	verse adaptation of Lord's prayer
122r–122v	<i>Homiletic Fragment II</i>	<i>Homiletic Fragment II</i>	homiletic
122v	<i>Riddle 30</i>	<i>Riddle 30b</i>	riddle
122v–123r	<i>Riddles 60</i>	<i>Riddle 60</i>	riddle
123r–123v	<i>The Husband's Message</i>	<i>The Husband's Message</i>	'elegy'
123v–124v	<i>The Ruin</i>	<i>The Ruin</i>	'elegy' (no biographical element)
124v–130v	<i>Riddles (61–94)</i>	<i>Riddles (61–95)</i>	riddles

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Muir does not give any further indication as to what this design might have been, and other studies have mainly focused on short poetic sequences or thematic links between individual poems and refrained from giving an interpretation of the collection as a whole.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, as Gunhild Zimmermann points out, ‘the number and diversity of texts make it difficult to discern a wholly satisfying structural concept behind this amalgam of Old English texts.’<sup>17</sup> Thus, while it seems possible to detect a sort of coherence at the micro-level, in that the immediate succession of two or more poems can often — though not always — be explained by a similarity of subjects or general themes, it has proved more difficult to detect a more general principle or plan on the macro-level of the manuscript. Zimmermann, who has undertaken the most comprehensive study of the collection, comes to the conclusion that the poems are all concerned with the human individual and the social and religious aspects of his or her earthly life:<sup>18</sup> ‘Man’s fundamental experience is defined as the constant threat of loneliness and of a meaningless life.’<sup>19</sup> The Exeter Book, she argues, ‘proposes rules and models of identification’ through which religious and social integration can be achieved.<sup>20</sup>

While Zimmermann’s reading is in many respects helpful and persuasive, it tends to require stretching as soon as the actual order of the poems is considered. Her theory suggests a thematic unity that is sufficiently general to encompass all of the texts, but it throws no light on the principles of arrangement, the way in which the collection is organized.<sup>21</sup> This deficiency is evidenced by her practice of discussing individual poems out of sequence, often in relation to other poems not found in their immediate manuscript vicinity.

The search for thematic coherence, this paper proposes, has to some extent obscured an understanding of other structural features that can help shed a light on the principles that organize the Exeter Book as a collection. As I will argue in the next section, it is important to take into consideration formal and functional aspects, such as a text’s genre, structure, style,

<sup>16</sup> See for instance *Two Literary Riddles*; Karma Lochrie, ‘Wyrð and the Limits of Human Understanding: A Thematic Sequence in the Exeter Book’, *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 85 (1986), 323–31; Liuzza; Patrick W. Conner, ‘Four Contiguous Poems in the Exeter Book: A Combined Reading of *Homiletic Fragment III*, *Soul and Body II*, *Deor*, and *Wulf and Eadwacer*’, in *The Genesis of Books. Studies in the Scribal Culture of Medieval England in Honour of A. N. Doane*, ed. by Matthew T. Hussey and John D. Niles (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), pp. 117–36.

<sup>17</sup> Zimmermann, p. 91.

<sup>18</sup> Zimmermann, pp. 98–99.

<sup>19</sup> Zimmermann, p. 180.

<sup>20</sup> Zimmermann, pp. 179, 281–82.

<sup>21</sup> To my knowledge, the only studies to have focused on the actual structure of the Exeter Book were undertaken by Patrick W. Conner, ‘The Structure of The Exeter Book Codex (Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS. 3501)’, *Scriptorium*, 40 (1986), 233–42 and Conner, *Anglo-Saxon Exeter*. Conner saw palaeographical and codicological evidence for the assumption that the Exeter Book is in fact made up of three distinct booklets, copied by the same scribe but over a prolonged period of time (for a discussion of the evidence, see Conner, *Anglo-Saxon Exeter*, pp. 112–28). According to Conner, the first booklet in the sequence (comprising folios 8–52, i.e. *The Advent Lyrics* through *Guthlac B*) was the last to have been written, while the second (comprising folios 53–97, *The Canticles of the Three Youths* through *The Partridge*) was written first. This order of composition, Conner claims, is paralleled by a difference in subject matter reflecting the tastes of different periods: the second booklet, which he believes to have been copied first, is supposed to have been compiled from Continental, possibly Carolingian models, whose content ceased to be appropriate in a monastic context after the Benedictine Reform (Conner, *Anglo-Saxon Exeter*, pp. 148, 150–51). The other two booklets supposedly reflect the return to stricter monastic ideals after the minster of Exeter’s reform in 968 under abbot Sidemann (Conner, *Anglo-Saxon Exeter*, pp. 148–50; Conner believes the Exeter Book to have been composed at Exeter; cf. Conner, *Anglo-Saxon Exeter*, p. 94). Muir, who had the opportunity to study the manuscript in its unbound state, refutes Conner’s booklet theory, arguing that it is not supported by the codicological evidence (*The Exeter Anthology*, 1, pp. 7–8).

rhetorical strategies or manner of presentation, or the ends to which the text may have been employed. More importantly, the Exeter Book shows extensive use of catenulate links between poems and sections that connect otherwise only vaguely related texts via their less obvious or subsidiary aspects. Taking this observation as its point of departure, this paper attempts to trace the Exeter Book's seemingly conflicting combination of catenulate and category-based textual links to late antique and early medieval principles of organizing knowledge based on mnemonic and topical practices, as reflected in contemporary florilegia, encyclopaedias and inventories.<sup>22</sup> Rather than constituting a rigid and inflexible order, topical organization — the practice of systematizing by reference to an item's properties or characteristics — highlights and actively employs the material's polysemous character in order to shift focus or introduce new ordering principles without having to renounce preceding ones. The collection's seeming diversity and patchiness can thus be linked to medieval semiotic procedures, which allow for the concurrence of multiple meanings and multi-dimensional structural principles.

### Form, function and catenulate linking

For the past thirty-odd years, scholars have become increasingly aware of the fact that, to a certain extent at least, medieval texts rely on their material presentation to generate meaning.<sup>23</sup> This may include paratextual features such as layout, form, illuminations or rubrics, as well as intertextual relations with the surrounding texts. 'Medieval books often constituted composite artifacts in which each component text depended on its environment for part of its meaning'.<sup>24</sup> These intertextual relations, Peter von Moos notes in his study of the historical exemplum, do not necessarily appear on the level of content. He urges us, therefore, to scrutinize aspects such as form, function, methods or categories in order to understand the way texts were read during the Middle Ages:

Medieval studies ought to address *a fortiori* the forms, functions, methods, rules, signs, mathematical categories of the Middle Ages: not so much the individual statements of the 'parole' as the general figures of the 'langue' that recur in variation; not so much aspects of the 'literary' in its modern sense (for instance, the genuineness of subjectivity) as the structures of rhetoric as it is shaped by society; not so much the narrative material [...] as narration itself as a means of entertainment and argumentation; not so much the

<sup>22</sup> I take this opportunity to cite Mercedes Salvador-Bello, *Isidorean Perceptions of Order: The Exeter Book Riddles and Medieval Latin Enigmata*, Medieval European Studies, 17 (Morgantown, WV: West Virginia University Press, 2015), who traces the arrangement of medieval Latin and Old English riddle collections, including the Exeter Book riddles, to medieval encyclopaedic principles, with Isidore's *Originum seu Etymologiarum libri XX* constituting a major model. Salvador-Bello's observations in many respects corroborate my own, for instance with regard to the way the compiler(s) employed different principles in structuring the collection, such as association, analogy/contrast and organisation by subject matter. This important study was published when the present article was already in the review process, so that I have not been able to discuss its observations in any detail. I thank Alaric Hall for giving me the opportunity to include a few references.

<sup>23</sup> See Matthew J. Driscoll, 'The Words on the Page: Thoughts on Philology, Old and New', in *Creating the Medieval Saga: Versions, Variability and Editorial Interpretations of Old Norse Saga Literature*, ed. by Judy Quinn and Emily Lethbridge (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 2010), pp. 87–104 for a discussion of scholarly approaches that stress the material aspects of the transmission of medieval literature. The classic examples are, of course, Bernard Cerquiglini, *In Praise of the Variant: A Critical History of Philology*, trans. by Betsy Wing (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999) [first publ. *Éloge de la variante: Histoire critique de la philologie* (Paris: Seuil, 1989)], and Stephen G. Nichols, 'Introduction: Philology in a Manuscript Culture', *Speculum*, 65 (1990), 1–10. For the specific context of the Exeter Book, see Liuzza, pp. 8–11.

<sup>24</sup> Robinson, p. 11.



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brilliant achievements of great thinkers as the forms of thought and the logical instruments through which knowledge is constituted; not so much the contents of consciousness within historical experience (this is what the historians' 'history of events' never seems to be capable of escaping from) as the 'habits of consciousness' within the perception and appraisal of reality.<sup>25</sup>

Formal aspects, von Moos argues, are integral to the way texts were perceived during the Middle Ages, as are the means to which a text could be employed, in other words, its perceived function. 'Function', of course, is a problematic term, dangerously close to a notion of 'authorial intention' as famously criticized by the New Criticism.<sup>26</sup> As far as medieval literary categories are concerned, however, we often find a convergence of function and form that seems to have been traditionally agreed on. This is not to say that texts could only be interpreted in a single way, but that certain formal features would have evoked specific contexts in which a particular text might be read. This is true for instance of didactic or hortatory texts which employ certain stylistic and formal features instantly recognizable by a contemporary audience. Lists and catalogues, to name two examples that feature heavily throughout the Exeter Book, and especially in the sequence of poems following *The Wanderer*, were known as mnemonic tools frequently used in didactic and educational contexts. Even in contexts that are not primarily educational, the presence of lists often lends the respective texts an appearance of authoritative knowledge, wisdom and learning.<sup>27</sup> One well-attested form is the glossary, used for learning vocabulary. As Nicholas Howe points out,

an Anglo-Saxon reader who had worked his way through various glossaries would have come to regard the list as an entirely respectable and efficient didactic form. He would, for this reason, bring to a poem such as *The Gifts of Men* [Muir's *God's Gifts to Humankind*] an immediate understanding of and appreciation for the list as a form.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Peter von Moos, *Geschichte als Topik: Das rhetorische Exemplum von der Antike zur Neuzeit und die 'historiae' im 'Policraticus' Johanns von Salisbury*, Ordo. Studien zur Literatur und Gesellschaft des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit, 2 (Hildesheim: Olms, 1988), p. xliii (my translation): 'Die Mediävistik [...] sollte sich *a fortiori* auf Formen, Funktionen, Methoden, Regeln, Zeichen, mathematische Kategorien des Mittelalters richten: weniger auf die individuellen Aussagen der „parole“ als auf die allgemeinen, variiert wiederkehrenden Figuren der „langue“; weniger auf Aspekte des „Literarischen“ im heutigen Sinn (etwa Echtheit der Subjektivität) als auf die Struktur des gesellschaftlich geprägten Rhetorischen; weniger auf Erzählstoffe [...] als auf das Erzählen selbst als Mittel des Unterhaltens und Argumentierens; weniger auf die genialen Leistungen großer Denker als auf die Denkformen und logischen Instrumente der Wissensbildung; weniger auf die Bewusstseinsinhalte der geschichtlichen Erfahrung (daran klebt die „Ereignisgeschichte“ der Historiker) als auf die „Bewußtseinsgewohnheiten“ der Wirklichkeitswahrnehmung und Wirklichkeitsbewertung.' See also Martin Irvine, 'Medieval Textuality and the Archaeology of Textual Culture', in *Speaking Two Languages: Traditional Disciplines and Contemporary Theory in Contemporary Medieval Studies*, ed. by Allen J. Frantzen (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 181–210, who proposes a model of analysis based on Foucauldian archaeology, reception theory and semiotic theory.

<sup>26</sup> See, for instance, René Wellek and Austin Warren, *Theory of Literature*, 2nd edn (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1956), pp. 135–38. Treharne discusses Paul E. Szarmach's notion of the 'intended function' of the Vercelli Book — for instance, as a form of personal book or as a book with a public, liturgical function — but also draws attention to the manuscript's 'pragmatic unity', that is, its functionality in devotional or homiletic contexts. Pointing out the applicability of texts has the advantage of stressing *possible* rather than (hypothetical) actual or intended uses. See Treharne, pp. 260, 264–65 and Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England, 4 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 14–21 for reception-based approaches to Old English manuscripts.

<sup>27</sup> On this issue, see for instance Tobias Bulang, *Enzyklopädische Dichtungen: Fallstudien zu Wissen und Literatur in Spätmittelalter und früherer Neuzeit*, Deutsche Literatur. Studien und Quellen, 2 (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2011).

<sup>28</sup> Nicholas Howe, *The Old English Catalogue Poems*, Anglistica, 23 (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1985),

There is a connection between function and form, established through convention, which can help us recognize links between otherwise unrelated texts. This convergence has long been recognized in modern scholarship, which has employed, for want of a better term, the label ‘didactic’ or ‘wisdom poetry’ to characterize the respective ‘catalogue’ poems.<sup>29</sup> Poems like *God’s Gifts to Humankind*, *Precepts* and *Widsith*, in spite of their differences in content, can thus be seen as linked through their form, an aspect which, if we follow von Moos, may have had greater significance for the medieval compiler than subject matter.

In addition, even formally dissimilar texts may still be related functionally. For instance, the ‘wise narrator’ figures that introduce teachings, maxims and even narrative in poems like *Precepts*, *Vainglory*, *The Order of the World* or, for that matter, *The Wanderer*, likewise evoke a didactic context: indeed, the narrator figures of *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, as well as of several other so-called ‘elegies’ such as *Deor* or *The Riming Poem*, can be understood as passing on a form of ethical knowledge not fundamentally different from that presented in *Precepts* or *Vainglory*, the main difference being that the former combine their teachings with hints of a personal story that is never actually spelled out but largely stays on a general or metaphoric level.<sup>30</sup> Yet this is perhaps more a question of emphasis than of actual difference since indeed most of the ‘wisdom’ poems maintain a fiction of oral deliverance, either by presenting their catalogues as the speech of a ‘wise man’ or by feigning a direct dialogue with the reader, as in the case of *Maxims I*:<sup>31</sup>

Frige mec frodum wordum. Ne læt þinne ferð onhælnæ,  
degol þæt þu deopost cunne. Nelle ic þe min dyrne gesecgan,  
gif þu me þinne hygecræft hylest ond þine heortan gēpohtas.  
Gleawe men sceolon gieddum wrixlan. (*Maxims I*, lines 1–4)

Interrogate me with learned words. Don’t let your mind be hidden, the mysteries that you know most deeply. Nor will I tell you my secrets if you hide from me your intellect and the thoughts of your heart. Wise men should exchange wise words/riddles.

The structural similarity between ‘elegies’ and ‘wisdom poems’ is perhaps most apparent in *Widsith*, a poem that consists chiefly of long and often apparently disconnected lists of peoples and rulers that the eponymous narrator, a wandering poet, has supposedly visited or at least heard of. Because of the catalogue format, the poem has often been assigned to the category of wisdom poems. Yet the main part of the poem, presented as the protagonist’s speech, is not merely introduced and concluded by a general narrator, as it is in the other ‘catalogue poems’

p. 23.

<sup>29</sup> See, for instance, *Poems of Wisdom and Learning in Old English*, ed. T. A. Shippey (Cambridge: Brewer, 1976); Thomas D. Hill, ‘Wise Words: Old English Sapiential Poetry’, in *Readings in Medieval Texts: Interpreting Old and Middle English Literature*, ed. by David F. Johnson and Elaine Treharne (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 166–79; Michael D. C. Drout, *How Tradition Works: A Meme-Based Cultural Poetics of the Anglo-Saxon Tenth Century* (Tempe, AZ: ACMRS, 2006), pp. 219–92.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. T. A. Shippey, ‘*The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* as Wisdom Poetry’, in *Companion to Old English Poetry*, ed. by Hendrik Aertsen and Rolf H. Bremmer, Jr. (Amsterdam: Vrije University Press, 1994), pp. 145–58.

<sup>31</sup> This combination of formal and stylistic features suggestive of oral delivery with subject matter seemingly derived from both ecclesiastical literary and (presumably) lay oral contexts illustrates Irvine’s assertion that ‘Old English poetic texts are constituted by an interplay between the textual memory of an oral culture, known to us only as a dialectical inverse of textual culture inscribed as a trace or absence within a text, and the culture of *grammatica* [i.e., Latin-influenced literary culture]’ (Irvine, p. 185). The only poems of the group that lack such features of feigned orality are *God’s Gifts to Humankind* and *The Fates of Mortals*, although the former could well be read as a continuation of *The Wanderer* and hence the protagonist’s speech; see below.

## *The Structure of the Exeter Book*

that employ a narrator-figure; here, as in *The Wanderer*, it is the speaker himself who interrupts his enumeration of peoples and rulers in order to refer to his personal experiences. These, indeed, provide a striking echo of the loneliness and separation from friends and relatives lamented by *The Wanderer*'s and *The Seafarer*'s protagonists:

Swa ic geondferde fela fremdra londa  
geond ginne grund — godes ond yfles  
þær ic cunnade cnosle bidæled,  
freomægum feor folgade wide. (*Widsith*, lines 50–53)

So I journeyed through many foreign lands throughout the wide earth — good and evil  
there I experienced, bereft of family, distant from kinsmen, I served far and wide.

Conversely, both *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* include long sections of teachings and statements so general that, to paraphrase Pope, 'they could be attached to almost any edifying poem.' In *The Seafarer*, some of these statements echo *Maxims I*.<sup>32</sup>

Bearing these observations in mind, it is thus possible to group these poems together, irrespective of whether they use the catalogue format or not: the one feature they all share is their engagement with — and, indeed, transmission of — various forms of knowledge. This sequence, starting with *The Wanderer*, can even be extended to include the three poems usually referred to as the 'Old English *Physiologus*', *The Panther*, *The Whale* and *The Partridge*, which immediately follow the 'catalogue poems' and 'elegies' just mentioned and likewise belong to a tradition associated with knowledge and wisdom, the medieval bestiary.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, in its specific selection of animals whose allegorical interpretations refer to God, Satan and Man's choice between the two,<sup>34</sup> the Exeter Book *Physiologus* presents a form of ethical knowledge that fits well with the teachings presented, on the one hand, in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* and, on the other, in such poems as *Precepts* or *Vainglory*. At the same time, the *Physiologus* purports to explicate phenomena of the natural world (the behaviour of animals).<sup>35</sup> Similarly, the two collections of riddles that take up most of the last third of the Exeter Book playfully engage with questions of knowledge, exploiting school texts and bestiaries for their subject matter and often presenting their subject by recourse to Pliny's *Historia naturalis* or Isidore's *Etymologiae*.<sup>36</sup> There is also an obvious formal resemblance between the dialogic question-answer structure of the riddles and interrogative dialogues in didactic contexts, such as Alcuin's

<sup>32</sup> Pope, p. 33.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Florence McCulloch, *Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries*, University of North Carolina Studies in the Romance Languages and Literatures, 33 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1962), p. 15: 'From the early centuries of our era through the Middle Ages the *Physiologus* and its later, expanded form, the bestiary, were among the most popular and important of Christian didactic works.' Cf. also Nikolaus Henkel, *Studien zum Physiologus im Mittelalter*, Hermaea, germanistische Forschungen, 38 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1976).

<sup>34</sup> Pope, pp. 34–35.

<sup>35</sup> This latter concern links the Exeter Book *Physiologus* to the two preceding poems, *The Order of the World* and *The Riming Poem*, the former of which celebrates the greatness of God's creation, while the narrator of the latter has been interpreted as God's will personified: Ruth P. M. Lehmann, 'The Old English Riming Poem: Interpretation, Text and Translation', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 69 (1970), 437–49 (p. 444). See further footnote 138.

<sup>36</sup> Dieter Bitterli, *Say What I am Called: The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book and the Anglo-Latin Riddle Tradition*, Toronto Anglo-Saxon Series, 2 (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2009), p. 19. The indebtedness of the Exeter Book riddles to Isidore's *Etymologiae*, not only with regard to subject matter and treatment but also to their internal structuring, is discussed in detail by Salvador-Bello, according to whom the Exeter Book riddles evince a 'manifest didactic intent' (p. 343). Riddles, she argues, 'permitted authors to effectively channel knowledge of grammar, rhetoric, encyclopedic lore, lexicography, metrics and other

*Disputatio Pippini cum Albino* or Ælfric's *Colloqui*. The opening of *Maxims I*, 'Frige mec frodum wordum [...] Gleawe men sceolon gieddum wrixlan' ('Interrogate me with learned words. [...] Wise men should exchange wise words/riddles'), with the term *gied* covering a semantic range from 'song', 'poem', 'tale', 'speech' to 'proverb', 'maxim' and 'riddle',<sup>37</sup> followed by a catalogue of proverbs and commonplace wisdom, gives a good illustration of this overlap. Indeed, Patrick Murphy's observation that a 'sense of the miraculous in the mundane is at the heart of Old English riddling', with many of the Exeter Book riddles revealing 'the great wonder of a commonplace thing'<sup>38</sup> could well apply to many of the 'wisdom' poems, whose contents likewise frequently border on the banal.

If we follow this line of argument, a substantial section of the Exeter Book emerges as being devoted primarily to the transmission of knowledge, its elements connected by formal and functional features rather than content.<sup>39</sup>

Von Moos' injunction that we address aspects such as form, function, method, style or rhetorical strategy is important for studying the Exeter Book in its entirety because the search for thematic coherence has biased our understanding of the manuscript's arrangement and hindered a clearer perception of some of the structural principles behind the compilation as a whole.<sup>40</sup> If we consider the Exeter Book poems according to formal and functional criteria, it is striking that a great number of them can be assigned quite easily to a set of well-established medieval genres, such as the riddle, the bestiary, the homiletic exemplum or hagiography. And yet, assigning poems to genres or categories cannot adequately explain the make-up of

disciplines into a compact literary format' and thus constituted an 'ideal vehicle for didactic and instructional purposes' (p. 448). There is ample evidence that riddling was perceived as related to other forms of knowledge transmission in Anglo-Saxon England. Several Anglo-Saxon ecclesiastics (Aldhelm, Tatwine, Eusebius) are known to have composed and exchanged collections of riddles in Latin as well as in the vernacular, although the latter have not survived, and collections of riddles are often transmitted in medieval manuscripts together with proverbs, fables and dream interpretations (Patrick J. Murphy, *Unriddling the Exeter Riddles* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2011), p. 36).

<sup>37</sup> Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Based on the Manuscript Collections of the Late Joseph Bosworth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1898), s. v. *giedd*. The word is related to Old English *gieddan* 'speak', 'sing', 'recite'.

<sup>38</sup> Murphy, p. 7.

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Shippey, 'The Wanderer' and *Poems of Wisdom and Learning*, pp. 3–4; Michael D. C. Drout, *Tradition and Influence*, pp. 135–69.

<sup>40</sup> In his most recent monograph, Michael D. C. Drout suggests a similar strategy for analysing part of the Exeter Book, based on 'smaller units of form, content and style' as opposed to 'presumed themes' (Drout, *Tradition and Influence*, p. 251). Drout, in his analysis of the distribution of vocabulary and features such as style and structure in the Exeter Book wisdom poems (Conner's booklet II), makes observations similar to mine regarding the generic ambivalences in this part of the Exeter Book. He, however, attributes these generic ambivalences to the ambiguities of a new genre in the process of evolving (cf. e.g. Drout, *Tradition and Influence*, p. 148), whereas my approach highlights the ambiguities inherent in literary texts per se. While I find Drout's analysis highly suggestive, I feel somewhat uncomfortable with its strong reliance on methods that seem to emulate procedures more typical of the natural sciences than of the humanities. Nor am I sure that biology and literature can be compared quite as easily as Drout's 'evolutionary, cognitivist' approach suggests. As Drout himself remarks in his earlier book *How Tradition Works*, the memetic theory is weakened by its inability to adequately explain the workings of memory or account for literary aesthetics (Drout, *How Tradition Works*, p. 294), a problem he hopes will be solved by future psychological and neurobiological research (a confidence I do not share). Such a hope is by no means new: already in 1924 I. A. Richards was referring to future neurological research 'as insuring the solutions of all literary problems', as René Wellek and Austin Warren observe (Wellek and Warren, p. 4). Another point where my approach diverges from Drout's is his contention that 'it is extremely difficult for us, using only current literary theory, for us [sic] to interpret works whose genres we cannot identify' (Drout, *Tradition and Influence*, p. 167). It is worth quoting here von Moos's critique of the modern preoccupation with genres, which he thinks obscures the actual formal principles that guided the medieval way of categorizing texts: 'The actual [...] theoretical

the collection, in spite of the fact that poems falling into these categories tend to occur in sequence. This is because these sequences are neither fully coherent internally nor clearly delimited — were this the case, it would be possible, even reasonable, to assume the existence of different exemplars from which the respective sections were copied. As it is, it often proves difficult to pin-point precisely where one category ends or where another starts,<sup>41</sup> nor can a division according to categories explain why some sequences are interrupted by poems that cannot properly be assigned to the same category, as in the case of the two riddle collections or the hagiographic sequence of *Guthlac A and B*, *The Canticles of the Three Youths* and *The Passion of Saint Juliana*, the last of which poems is preceded by the bestiary allegory *The Phoenix*. However, a closer look at the respective passages often reveals striking textual or thematic links, if not between complete poems, then at least between the adjoining ends and opening passages. *The Wanderer*, for instance, is linked both to the preceding encomium of the hagiographic *Passion of Saint Juliana* and the opening lines of the following catalogue poem *God's Gifts to Humankind* in that all three allude to God's mercy and grace.<sup>42</sup> It is only in *The Wanderer*, however, that the theme plays a central role; both *The Passion* and *God's Gifts* give it no more than a passing allusion. *The Wanderer*, to adopt Thomas P. Dunning and Alan J. Bliss's interpretation, can be read as a spiritual biography, an *exemplum* of how an individual came to find God's grace, and thus fits into the sequence of hagiographical poems that precede it.<sup>43</sup> The link to the preceding *Passion* is established through that poem's encomium, 'forgif us mægna god, | þæt we þine onsyne [...] | milde gemeten' ('grant us, God of powers, that we find your face mild [i.e. merciful]', lines 629b–631a, my emphasis), which is followed by *The Wanderer*'s opening line, 'oft him anhaga are gebideð, | metudes miltse [...]' ('often the lonely one awaits for himself grace, the Measurer's mildness [i.e., God's grace or mercy]', lines 1–2a, again my emphasis). Similarly, *God's Gifts* takes its cue from *The Wanderer*'s closing words ('wel bið þam þe him are seceð, | frofre to fæder on heofonum', 'it will be well for the one who seeks grace for himself, comfort from the Father in heaven', lines 114b–15a), asserting that God's grace can be seen in the many gifts he dispenses among mankind:

Fela bið on foldan forðgesynra  
geongra geofona, þa þa gæstberend  
wegað in gewitte, swa her weoruda god,  
... monnum dæleð. (*God's Gifts to Humankind*, lines 1–4).

Many there are, visible on earth, the fresh gifts that the spirit-carriers [i.e., human beings] carry in their minds, which the God of multitudes here deals out to men.

question about the principles, formal laws, methods of presentation, *modi tractandi* valid in the Middle Ages themselves remains largely unanswered. Medieval forms of narrative, for instance, are treated morphologically, according to the narrative material, not functionally, according to situational intentions and strategies. This can be seen in the studies of the fable, the parable and the exemplum, which were conducted quite independently from each other: the discussion revolves around problems of definition and assignment with regard to content, hardly around rhetorical aspects' (von Moos, pp. XLIV–XLV, my translation). 'Demgegenüber bleibt die eigentliche [...] theoretische Frage nach den im Mittelalter selbst gültigen Prinzipien, Formgesetzen, Darstellungsmethoden, *modi tractandi* weitgehend unbeantwortet. Mittelalterliche Typen der Erzählung etwa werden morphologisch nach Stoffen, nicht funktional nach situativen Absichten und Strategien betrachtet. Dies zeigen die ziemlich unabhängig voneinander durchgeführten Untersuchungen zur Fabel, zur Parabel und zur Beispielgeschichte: Die Diskussion kreist um Definitions- und Zuordnungsprobleme nach inhaltlichen Merkmalen, kaum um rhetorische Aspekte.'

<sup>41</sup> Note, for instance, Murphy's observation that 'even today the defined boundaries of the [riddle] collection remain somewhat in flux' (p. 27).

<sup>42</sup> See the commentary in *The Wanderer*, ed. T. P. Dunning and A. J. Bliss (London: Methuen, 1969), p. 79.

<sup>43</sup> Dunning and Bliss, pp. 80–81.

*God's Gifts* continues as a catalogue enumerating the various gifts that God has dispensed amongst mankind, ignoring the preceding poem's actual theme and form.

An even more striking example of this associative way of sequencing can be seen in the linking passage between *Christ in Judgement* and *Guthlac A*, in which the closing theme of the former, the coming of the souls of the blessed into heaven, is taken up and related to various ways of leading a virtuous life, one of which — monastic life — is then treated in the following poem, *Guthlac A*. The passage connects equally well to either of the two poems and has consequently been assigned to either by different scholars, although the manuscript division makes it clear that the scribe treated it as part of *Guthlac A*.<sup>44</sup> In any case, the similarities between the two descriptions of the soul's entrance into heaven suggest that the passage may have prompted the poems' order in the manuscript, as Jane Roberts argues.<sup>45</sup> One might even surmise that it was especially written for the purpose of joining the two poems, a possibility implied by Roy M. Liuzza.<sup>46</sup>

There are more examples of this kind scattered throughout the Exeter Book.<sup>47</sup> Zimmermann draws attention to the same phenomenon when she observes that many of the poems are linked in an associative way, by a principle of concatenation, with individual poems taking up phrases, themes or ideas from those preceding or following them and developing them into new directions, resulting in differences of genre or mode of presentation.<sup>48</sup> A similar term is used by Fred C. Robinson when he describes the arrangement of lists and catalogues as 'catenulate'.<sup>49</sup> The Exeter Book, one might argue with Zimmermann, resembles medieval lists and catalogues in so far as many of the poems are likewise arranged in a 'series of joined rather than unified elements'.<sup>50</sup>

Robinson's term 'catenulate' echoes, whether deliberately or not, the mnemonic tool of the chain or *catena*, employed as a means of structuring items stored in one's memory and, by extension, the contents of written lists and catalogues. Indeed, late antique and early medieval florilegia and encyclopaedias — genres that by the time the Exeter Book was compiled had gained new popularity through Carolingian works like Hrabanus Maurus's *De universo* — frequently employed a combination of categories and associative links between individual subjects.<sup>51</sup> The Exeter Book is no encyclopaedia, but it shares with the genre a number

<sup>44</sup> Cf. the discussion and literature cited in *The Guthlac Poems of the Exeter Book*, ed. by Jane Roberts (Oxford: Clarendon, 1979), pp. 49–51; Liuzza, pp. 1–4.

<sup>45</sup> *The Guthlac Poems*, p. 49.

<sup>46</sup> Liuzza, p. 5. He similarly draws attention to the transitional nature of *The Ascension*, which may have been written or at least reworked in order to conjoin the two other *Christ*-poems, possibilities first entertained by, respectively, Dolores W. Frese, 'The Art of Cynewulf's Runic Signatures', in *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: Essays in Appreciation*, ed. by Lewis Nicholson and Dolores Warwick Frese (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1976), pp. 301–11 and Colin Chase, 'God's Presence through Grace as the Theme of Cynewulf's *Christ II* and the Relation of this Theme to *Christ I* and *Christ III*', *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3 (1974), 87–101 (Liuzza, p. 6).

<sup>47</sup> Cf. for instance Bitterli's discussion of the 'storm' and 'bird' riddles (pp. 35–36) and the many verbal echoes in the Exeter Book wisdom poems observed by Michael D. C. Drout (Drout, *How Tradition Works*, pp. 239–86; Drout, *Tradition and Influence*, pp. 138–69) and Brian O'Camb, 'The Inscribed Form of *Exeter Maxims* and the Layout of Quire XI of the Exeter Book', in *The Genesis of Books: Studies in the Scribal Culture of Medieval England in Honour of A. N. Doane*, ed. by Matthew T. Hussey and John D. Niles (Turnhout: Brepols, 2011), pp. 137–59.

<sup>48</sup> Zimmermann, p. 159. Brian O'Camb similarly surmises that 'the Exeter Book scribe or compiler crafted thematic and verbal connections' in order to arrange the texts 'into thematically meaningful sequences' (p. 158).

<sup>49</sup> Robinson, p. 26.

<sup>50</sup> Howe, p. 27.

<sup>51</sup> For an argument that the compilation of the Exeter Book is at least partly influenced by Continental, Carolingian models, see Conner, *Anglo-Saxon Exeter*, pp. 148, 150, and footnote 21 above. I have not studied Latin poetic

of structural principles that can ultimately be traced to classical and medieval methods of organization as discussed in the theories of mnemonics and topics.<sup>52</sup> As a compilation of miscellaneous poetry, some of which seems to have been reworked or abridged in order to fit the manuscript context, the Exeter Book may indeed have been planned as a kind of florilegium of vernacular poetic texts, perhaps because these could be quoted in hortatory or wisdom-related contexts or were at least thought worth preserving for posterity. Yet whatever the actual or intended function(s) of the Exeter Book, it is not unreasonable to assume that methods of organisation known from Latin models may have influenced the compilation of Old English manuscripts. As Martin Irvine points out,

*grammatica* [i.e., the discipline that governed literacy, the study of literary language, the interpretation of texts, and the writing of manuscripts] and the technology of book production were the historical preconditions for the culture of the monastery and church, and, consequently, this culture was the historical precondition for the appearance of Old English texts. [...] The very fact that Old English poems were recorded in manuscripts signifies that they functioned within the library of textual culture.<sup>53</sup>

In order to gain a better understanding of the way the Exeter Book is organized, we will have to look more closely at these collections and the theories that shaped them.

## **Mnemonic and dialectic topics and the organization of encyclopaedic knowledge**

Florilegia, compilations of excerpts from larger works, served both as textbooks and memorial aids. They usually contained texts on a variety of topics, from maxims and the sayings of great writers to exempla of virtuous behaviour and even divine learning and natural history. While florilegia did not necessarily aspire to the same universal scope as encyclopaedias, there were overlaps, as in the case of Hrabanus Maurus's encyclopaedia *De universo*, whose stated purpose is essentially that of a florilegium. In the prefatory address to his friend, bishop Haimon, for whom the work was compiled, Hrabanus states: 'cogitabam, quid Tuæ Sanctitati

collections in any detail, but at least some of them likewise arrange their material into categories. For instance, the *Carmina* of Venantius Fortunatus, which appear four times in Helmut Gneuss, *Handlist of Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts: A List of Manuscripts and Manuscript Fragments Written or Owned in England up to 1100*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, 241 (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2001), in manuscripts dated to the ninth and tenth centuries (with one possible eleventh-century exception), are divided into thematically coherent books, with some inconsistencies and overlaps. It is not unlikely that Latin encyclopaedic compilations were used as models for vernacular collections, given that all of them were produced or at least copied in the same literary environment.

<sup>52</sup> A related approach that the present paper does not follow is Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe's thesis of 'residual orality' that would allow for a concomitance of primarily 'oral' and 'literary' techniques in Anglo-Saxon textual culture. According to O'Brien O'Keefe, Old English texts and manuscript differ from Latin ones in showing a higher frequency of 'oral' traces, such as a lack of punctuation and stress marks, which suggests 'a strong overlay of oral habits of transmission in the copying of Old English formulaic verse' as well as a certain amount of familiarity with Old English poetic rhetorical strategies on part of the reader (O'Brien O'Keefe, pp. 21–22). While the rhetorical strategies discussed in the present contribution parallel O'Brien O'Keefe's argument in that both the mnemonic and the dialectical topical method were originally developed for 'oral' contexts (debates and orations) yet were quickly integrated into practices of literary composition and compilation, they would have been known to Anglo-Saxons compilers and readers of manuscripts via Latin literary works, and indeed recent studies have traced the 'formulaic' characteristics of the 'wisdom' poems to Latin models (see the studies by Howe and Drout mentioned above).

<sup>53</sup> Irvine, p. 186.

gratum et utile in scribendo conficere possem: quo haberes ob commemorationem in paucis breviter adnotatum quod ante in multorum codicum amplitudine [...] legisti' ('I considered what I could produce in writing that would be welcome and useful to Your Holiness: through which you would have for your recollection in briefly annotated selections that which you have previously read in the abundance of great codices').<sup>54</sup> As compilations of extracts, florilegia reflected the excerpting habits of medieval scholars who, while reading, would make mental notes or even memorize whole passages of text.<sup>55</sup> As Mary Carruthers points out: 'A florilegium is basically the contents of someone's memory, set forth as a kind of study-guide for the formation of others' memories.'<sup>56</sup> Consequently, the arrangement of florilegia was often based on the same structural principles as those used by scholars to memorize texts. These could vary depending on subject matter; some florilegia arrange their excerpts by moral topic, others in alphabetical order according to subject, incipit or author's name.<sup>57</sup> Some compilations show no discernible order at all, which does not mean that they were wholly unstructured. As Carruthers points out, 'An unorganized compilation could hardly be used unless it were to cue an already-formed *memoria*, readers slipping the material into their own basic schemes, as they had been taught to do.'<sup>58</sup> Indeed, classical and medieval texts on the art of memorizing constantly stress the benefits of using one's own schemes rather than ready-made ones.<sup>59</sup> Nevertheless, Carruthers adds, 'collections that come with their own organization were also designed to stock or cue the memories of their users'.<sup>60</sup>

Encyclopaedias likewise follow a variety of different ordering principles, sometimes even within one and the same work. Works like Pliny's *Historia naturalis*, Cassiodorus' *Institutiones divinarum et humanarum lectionum* or Isidore's *Originum seu Etymologiarum libri XX* are arranged categorically according to fields of knowledge, that is, they place their contents in categories like geography, zoology, medicine, mineralogy, astronomy, houses, peoples, the heavenly hierarchies and so on.<sup>61</sup> Within these fields, subjects may be arranged alphabetically (as in the case of Book x of Isidore's *Originum seu Etymologiarum*, where etymologies and word-formation are discussed) or in descending cosmological or utilitarian importance, and the fields themselves may similarly follow various kinds of order, according to cosmological significance or the order of the trivium and the quadrivium, to give just two examples. The principles of arrangement can even vary within one and the same work, depending on the subject and the arrangement most suitable to it.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>54</sup> *B. Rabani Mauri Fuldensis abbatis et Moguntini archiepiscopi opera omnia: Variis praeterea monumentis quae suppeditarunt Mabillonii, Martenii et Dacherii collectiones memoratissimae aucta et illustrata*, ed. by J.-P. Migne, *Patrologiae cursus completus: Patrologia latina, series secunda*, 111 (Paris: Migne, 1852), pp. 11–12 (my translation).

<sup>55</sup> A discussion of medieval practices of mentally excerpting material from books can be found in Mary J. Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, *Cambridge Studies in Medieval Literature*, 70, 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 105 and 136–37.

<sup>56</sup> Carruthers, p. 218.

<sup>57</sup> Carruthers, p. 220.

<sup>58</sup> Carruthers, p. 221.

<sup>59</sup> Carruthers, p. 180.

<sup>60</sup> Carruthers, p. 221.

<sup>61</sup> See Robert Collison, *Encyclopaedias. Their History Throughout the Ages: A Bibliographical Guide with Extensive Historical Notes to the General Encyclopaedias Issued throughout the World from 350 B.C. to the Present Day* (New York: Hafner, 1964), pp. 21–73 for an overview of classical and medieval encyclopaedias.

<sup>62</sup> Howe, pp. 19–21.



Usually the principles employed had some foundation in general or traditional practice. Pliny's *Historia naturalis*, for instance, begins with the universe and ends with the minerals, which are again arranged according to the traditional hierarchical order.<sup>63</sup> Similarly, Hrabanus Maurus's *De universo*, albeit arranged by key-words, is organized not alphabetically but 'logically', starting with God and the angels.<sup>64</sup> Hrabanus is thus following the advice of Saint Augustine, who had criticized the arrangement of the contents of Varro's encyclopaedia on the grounds that he had placed secular matters before things divine.<sup>65</sup> (It might be noted here that the Exeter Book, too, begins with matters divine by opening with a trinity of poems on the Incarnation, the Ascension and the Last Judgement, in a poetic sequence centring on man's relations to Christ.<sup>66</sup>) But while this arrangement is called 'logical' in the quotation above, it must be stressed that it is not uniquely so. Christian writers might prefer to put divine matters before secular ones, but this is a question of ideology or convention: Hrabanus or Augustine would have readily conceded that Varro's arrangement is equally 'logical' — logical here meaning 'systematic', i.e. by subject rather than by schemes unrelated to the topic, like alphabetical or numerical ones.

To a great extent, the order actually employed is determined by the material in the collection, but even here the compiler is free — indeed required — to make innumerable choices. The variability of these structural schemes — as opposed to the predictable but inflexible alphabetical order usually employed in modern encyclopaedias — can be traced to two distinct yet related traditions of structuring knowledge: the dialectic, which promoted systematic order, and the mnemonic, which worked on principles of association.<sup>67</sup> We have seen earlier how both categorical and associative principles contribute to shaping the order of the Exeter Book poems. Both the dialectic and the mnemonic tradition involve the use of so-called *loci* (Greek *topoi*), literally 'places' in which information can be stored and from which it can be drawn. This coincidence of terminology suggests to Eleonore Stump that the use of *loci* has its origin in the ancient methods of memorization, in which a 'topic' literally denotes a place that the memorizer pictures in his mind in order to store or retrieve information.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>63</sup> Howe, pp. 35–39.

<sup>64</sup> Carruthers, p. 219.

<sup>65</sup> Collison, p. 44.

<sup>66</sup> Salvador-Bello, p. 342, notes that the first of the two riddle sequences in the Exeter Book likewise starts with a cosmological theme (wind in its various manifestations), while the last of the Exeter Book riddles bar one is one of three 'creation' riddles. Even more importantly, the first group of riddles at least initially follows a twofold pattern (also found in the second decade of books in Isidore's *Originum seu Etymologiarum*) of *opera-dei* and *opera-hominis* themes.

<sup>67</sup> The following, very much simplified discussion will focus on the way these methods were understood at and around the time the Exeter Book was compiled. I will treat historical developments only where necessary. I direct the reader to the following excellent works, from which my discussion is mainly drawn: Carruthers, *The Book of Memory*; Niels Jørgen Green-Pedersen, *The Tradition of the Topics in the Middle Ages: The Commentaries on Aristotle's and Boethius' 'Topics'* (München: Philosophia Verlag, 1984); Boethius's *'De topicis differentiis'*, ed. by Eleonore Stump (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1978); Boethius's *'In Ciceronis topica'*, ed. by Eleonore Stump (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988); Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, 'Sinnfülle, Einsicht, System. Bemerkungen zur topischen Arbeitsweise im Humanismus', in *Entwicklung der Methodenlehre in Rechtswissenschaft und Philosophie vom 16. bis zum 18. Jahrhundert: Beiträge zu einem interdisziplinären Symposium in Tübingen, 18.–20. April 1996*, ed. by Jan Schröder, Contubernium. Tübinger Beiträge zur Universitäts- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte, 46 (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1998), pp. 27–46; Frances A. Yates, 'The Ciceronian Art of Memory', in *Medioevo e Rinascimento: Studi in onore di Bruno Nardi*, ed. by G. C. Sansoni (Florence: Pubblicazioni dell' Istituto di Filosofia dell' Università di Roma, 1955), pp. 871–903; Frances A. Yates, *The Art of Memory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966).

<sup>68</sup> *De topicis differentiis*, p. 16.

During the Middle Ages, one of the most influential mnemonic techniques was the architectural method described in Cicero's *De oratore*, Quintilian's *De institutione oratoria* and the anonymous first-century B.C. *Rhetorica ad Herennium*, a work attributed to Cicero during the Middle Ages.<sup>69</sup> According to Cicero's *De oratore* (II, 86),

[E]is qui hanc partem ingeni exercerent locos esse capiendos et ea quae memoria tenere vellent effigenda animo atque in eis locis collocanda: sic fore ut ordinem rerum locorum ordo conservaret, res autem ipsas rerum effigies notaret, atque ut locis pro cera, simulacris pro litteris uteremur.

([P]ersons desiring to train this faculty [of memory] must select localities and form mental images of the facts they wish to remember and store those images in the localities, with the result that the arrangement of the localities will preserve the order of the facts, and the images of the facts will designate the facts themselves, and we shall employ the localities and images respectively as a wax writing tablet and the letters written on it.)<sup>70</sup>

The fullest account of this method is given in Book III of the *Rhetorica ad Herennium*. According to this account, the memorizer associates the imaginary *loci* with real places, e.g. corners, columns or arches in a building. If he cannot find a suitable building, he can also devise an imaginary sequence of places.<sup>71</sup> In these *loci* he stores images, forms, marks or simulacra (ideally striking or unusual ones, since these are easier to remember), with which he associates the pieces of knowledge he wishes to remember.<sup>72</sup> As Richard Sorabji notes, the two sets of images have the advantage that 'one will remember not only the points in one's speech, but also, thanks to the background places, their order. [...] The background places can supply a connexion in cases where the items one is memorizing have no memorable connexion of their own.'<sup>73</sup> Ideally, of course, the parts of a particular speech will already follow an inherent train of thought that makes it easier to memorize their order, but this is not necessarily the case with unconnected items of knowledge: Seneca the Elder, for instance, claimed he could repeat two thousand names after a single hearing or two hundred disconnected lines of verse either in the order given or in reverse order,<sup>74</sup> and similar accounts abound in classical and medieval sources.<sup>75</sup>

Methodologically, the architectural method represents a whole chain of associations: items of knowledge are associated with images, images with *loci*, and *loci* with real or imagined

<sup>69</sup> According to Carruthers, p. 87, the treatise was written *circa* 86–82 B.C., possibly by someone who had the same teacher as Cicero. The treatise is directed at someone named Herennius, hence the title. It was referred to by Thomas Aquinas and others as 'Tullius's [i.e., Cicero's] Second Rhetoric' (the first being Cicero's *De inventione*) and thought to present the author's mature views on rhetoric (Yates, 'The Ciceronian Art of Memory', p. 881). Although Carruthers maintains that 'there is little evidence of anyone, classical or medieval, systematically teaching the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* before the end of the eleventh century' (p. 154), this does not mean that the method was discontinued or forgotten in the earlier Middle Ages. For instance, the same practice seems to be referred to in St. Augustine's *Confessions*, another highly influential text in the period under discussion, who speaks of 'the fields and palaces of memory (*campos et lata praetorian memoriae*) where are the treasures of innumerable images, brought into it by things of all sorts perceived by the senses' (Yates, 'The Ciceronian Art of Memory', p. 880).

<sup>70</sup> Text and translation from Cicero: *De oratore*, ed. by E. W. Sutton and H. Rackham, The Loeb Classical Library, 348, 2 vols (London: Heinemann, 1948), I, 254–55.

<sup>71</sup> Yates, 'The Ciceronian Art of Memory', p. 877.

<sup>72</sup> Yates, *The Art of Memory*, p. 6.

<sup>73</sup> Richard Sorabji, *Aristotle on Memory* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1972), p. 24.

<sup>74</sup> Sorabji, p. 22.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. for instance Carruthers, pp. 21, 133, 143.

architectural constructions. Quintilian notes that it is easier to link pieces of knowledge to the images if there is some resemblance or associative link between the two, such as, for instance, an anchor which can serve as a reminder of navigation.<sup>76</sup> This idea goes back to Aristotle's discussion in *De memoria* of the process of recollection, which is said to work like a chain of associations: a starting image gives rise to a train of thought which leads through a number of steps to the idea one wishes to recollect. *De memoria* was not available at the time the Exeter Book was compiled, but the idea of developing ideas through an associative process can be detected in many other works on mnemonics.<sup>77</sup>

The architectural mnemonic was not the only mnemonic method known during the Middle Ages; others make use of the alphabet, numbers or key-words — the latter being especially relevant in the light of the Exeter Book's way of sequencing poems via verbal or phrasal echoes. But what unites all these different memory schemes is the way they use various levels of association in order to keep together and structure what is supposed to be remembered. A recurring image is that of the *catena* or chain that binds together the various images or ideas. Carruthers quotes Quintilian's remark that 'however large the number [of items] we must remember, all are linked one to another like dancers hand in hand, and there can be no mistake since they join what precedes to what follows, no trouble being required except the preliminary labor of memorizing'.<sup>78</sup> The emphasis on correct sequential order is very characteristic of classical and medieval treatises, whose writers seem to have been impressed not so much by the ability to memorize items, but to arrange and re-arrange them in various kinds of order, like the ability to recite poetry backwards that Augustine lauds in *De natura et origine animae*.<sup>79</sup>

Nicholas Howe has shown how in classical and late antique encyclopaedias the order of items within categories often follows catenulate principles, that is, as a series of joined rather than unified elements, and how these principles recur in Old English catalogue poems like *God's Gifts to Humankind* or *Widsith*.<sup>80</sup> There is every reason, then, to likewise link the catenulate method of sequencing poems that we have observed, for instance, between *Christ in Judgement* and *Guthlac A* or *The Passion of Saint Juliana*, *The Wanderer* and *God's Gifts to Humankind* to the mnemonic techniques reflected in the encyclopaedic tradition.

Due to their usefulness in composing and remembering speeches, mnemonic methods were taught as a part of rhetoric,<sup>81</sup> although in practice they could be used for any effort at

<sup>76</sup> Carruthers, p. 135.

<sup>77</sup> Yates, 'The Ciceronian Art of Memory', p. 885; Carruthers, pp. 80–81.

<sup>78</sup> Carruthers, p. 78.

<sup>79</sup> Carruthers, p. 21; Yates, 'The Ciceronian Art of Memory', p. 879. This does not, however, preclude digressions or excursive developments. Indeed, an associative development of ideas is especially apt for digressions, since associations can work in all sorts of directions. Carruthers illustrates this with the tree-model Hugh of St. Victor employs in his *De archa Noe*. In this work, a commentary on Genesis 6–7, the discussion is divided into successive stages modelled after the growth of a tree. 'Within this essential structure, a number of excursive topics are developed from a phrase or word of the rubric; these may bring in other linked texts. Basically the structure is that of a concordance, or *catena*, in which the parts are associated by key-words, each of which pulls other texts and sayings with it' (Carruthers, p. 259). This twelfth-century work is later than the Exeter Book, but it provides a useful parallel to a poetic sequence like that from *The Wanderer* through *The Seafarer*, where certain ideas expressed in one poem give rise to digressions about the nature of God's grace or monastic advice before returning to hitherto undeveloped themes.

<sup>80</sup> Howe, p. 27.

<sup>81</sup> Cicero in *De oratore* discusses memory as one of the five parts of rhetoric, *inventio, dispositio, elocutio, memoria, pronuntiatio* (Yates, *The Art of Memory*, pp. 2, 5).

repeating something from memory, such as laws or lines of verse.<sup>82</sup> By contrast, the other great tradition dealing with *loci*, the topics, were associated with dialectic (philosophical disputes) and hence with logic. The association of the dialectical topic with the organizing of knowledge, which became the basis of the early modern obsession with systematization and hence of the great encyclopaedic endeavours of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, was originally only a by-product, yet, I shall argue, one that was inevitable and whose presence can be detected even in medieval encyclopaedias.

The association of topics with dialectic goes back to Aristotle, who calls the discipline he discusses in his *Topics* ‘dialectic’. Aristotle never actually explains what a topic is; according to Stump, ‘he seems to assume that the meaning of “Topic” as a technical term is familiar’.<sup>83</sup> Aristotle mentions rhetorical and mnemonic topics, but he uses the term mainly in the context of dialectic, where it seems to denote both a strategy of argumentation and a principle of confirming an argument.<sup>84</sup> The method makes use of ‘accepted views’ or ‘plausible standpoints’ that are commonly held to be true, but may or may not be.<sup>85</sup> Thus, dialectic is not a science; it cannot prove but only point out what is probable. For this reason, it was later also known as *logica probabilis*, in contrast to the *logica demonstrativa*, which concerned things that could be *shown* (i.e., proved) to be true.<sup>86</sup>

Aristotle’s *Topics* were not known at first hand in Western Europe before the twelfth century, and even then they were interpreted through Boethius’s works on the subject, in spite of the fact that the latter’s conception of Topics is very different from Aristotle’s.<sup>87</sup> Boethius’s two works on topics, *In Ciceronis Topica* and *De differentiis topicis*, through which the theory was chiefly known during the early Middle Ages, were introduced in the West earlier. Niels Green-Pedersen surmises that the former was known by the year 1000, and that *De differentiis topicis* was certainly read and commented upon well before the middle of the eleventh century.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, there are allusions to both works in Alcuin’s *Dialectica*,<sup>89</sup> which means that their contents at least seem to have been familiar during the eighth century, even

<sup>82</sup> Cf. Yates, ‘The Ciceronian Art of Memory’, p. 877.

<sup>83</sup> *De topicis differentiis*, p. 165.

<sup>84</sup> *In Ciceronis topica*, p. 4; see however the discussion in Green-Pedersen, pp. 23–25.

<sup>85</sup> Green-Pedersen, p. 17; *De topicis differentiis*, pp. 18–20.

<sup>86</sup> The *logica probabilis* was supposed to convince through the similarity of the examples used in a specific argument to the original proposition. Cf. Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, ‘Was ist eine probable Argumentation? Beobachtungen über Topik’, in *Topik und Rhetorik: Ein interdisziplinäres Symposium*, ed. by Thomas Schirren and Gert Ueding, *Rhetorik-Forschungen*, 13 (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 2000), pp. 243–56 (p. 253): ‘Bei einer solchen Argumentation werden allein wahrscheinliche Argumente verwandt. Kein Argument ist schlechterdings schlagend, aber die entfaltete Fülle von imaginierten — und allemal aus semantischer Analogie gewonnenen Vorstellungen begründet am Ende einen Entschluß in überzeugender Weise’ (‘in this kind of argumentation only probable arguments are used. No single argument is decisive in itself, but the plethora of imagined concepts — that were obtained indeed by semantic analogy — ultimately provides convincing justification of a decision’; my translation).

<sup>87</sup> According to Green-Pedersen, pp. 87 and 342, Aristotle’s work was introduced in Western Europe shortly before 1150.

<sup>88</sup> He states as his evidence that Gerbert of Aurillac (c. 1000) is reported to have used both works, which he thinks unlikely for *De differentiis topicis* but probable for *In Ciceronis Topica*, and that the three commentaries on *De differentiis topicis* that survive from before 1100 seem to look back on a solid tradition (Green-Pedersen, pp. 123–24). Cicero’s *Topica* seems to have been known throughout, but does not seem to have exerted much influence, or at least only in conjunction with Boethius’s commentary on it (Green-Pedersen, p. 39). Gneuss (p. 106) lists one manuscript containing both Cicero’s *Topica* and Boethius’s *In Ciceronis Topica*, which he dates to the ninth or tenth century (MS Oxford, Merton College, 309, fols 114–201).

<sup>89</sup> According to Stump in *In Ciceronis topica*, p. 6. See also Rosamond McKitterick, *The Carolingians and the Written*

if they were not available as complete works.<sup>90</sup> In fact, the principles of topical arrangement could be learned from existing collections even if the theory behind them was not known.<sup>91</sup> But given that at least one of Boethius's works on the topics seems to have been available by the year 1000, there is some probability that the composition of the Exeter Book, dated conventionally to the last quarter of the tenth century, coincided with an increasing interest in the topical method. If this is correct, then the use of the topical method as a means of organization may be yet another instance of the 'experimentalism and almost pioneering spirit' that Dieter Bitterli detects in the Exeter Book.<sup>92</sup>

Boethius's discussion of topics is based on Cicero's *Topica*. Cicero's concept of a topic, which he translates as *locus*, is very different from Aristotle's, despite the fact that his *Topica* purports to be a book on Aristotelian topics.<sup>93</sup> For Cicero, topics are primarily a method of discovering and assessing arguments. There are two separate steps involved: *inventio* (finding or discovering arguments) and *iudicium* (assessing them). Boethius seems to consider only the *inventio* as topics proper (and it is this part which is also relevant to topical organization), as can be seen in the introductory remarks to *In differentiis topicis*:

The whole science of discourse (*ratio disserendi*), which the ancient Peripatetics called 'λογική', is divided into two parts: one for discovering, the other for judging. The part which purges and instructs judgment, called 'ἀναλυτική' by them, we name 'analytical.' The part which aids competence (*facultatem*) in discovering, called 'τοπική' by the Greeks, is called 'Topical' (*localis*) by us.<sup>94</sup>

The aim of topics, Boethius explains, is to show in a systematic manner a multitude of plausible arguments. This is achieved by referring to the characteristics of the concept in question. For instance, Boethius claims, in a syllogism mentioned in his *In Ciceronis Topica*, that if 'every animal is either rational or irrational' and that if 'Cicero is rational', then it follows that Cicero must be an animal.<sup>95</sup> Rationality here is a characteristic shared by Cicero, human beings in general, and some animals: it is divisive of the genus 'animal' (some animals are rational while others are not) but constitutive of the species 'man' (all men are rational).<sup>96</sup> From the latter

*Word* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 198–200, who mentions the possibility of an insular influence (via Alcuin and insular monastic foundations such as Fulda) on the Carolingian organization of libraries.

<sup>90</sup> As Joyce Hill reminds us, there is no simple correlation between works that have been identified as the sources of surviving texts and Anglo-Saxon libraries: even in cases where a text directly refers to a specific work, this work 'may well have been known via some intermediary, such as a compendium or florilegium' (Joyce Hill, 'Leofric of Exeter and the Practical Politics of Book Collecting', in *Imagining the Book*, ed. by Stephen Kelly and John J. Thompson, *Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe*, 7 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005), pp. 77–98 (p. 77)).

<sup>91</sup> This is suggested by McKitterick, who draws attention to the tantalizing possibility that the *Versus Isidori*, a collection of verses on the Bible, a series of church fathers, Christian poets, historians, law codes and medical books, may have played a role 'in disseminating the accepted arrangement of a library' (p. 205). This implies that some degree of cross-fertilization was possible between the arrangement of libraries and that of literary works.

<sup>92</sup> Bitterli, p. 26.

<sup>93</sup> See, however, *De topicis differentiis*, p. 20. For a discussion of the differences between Aristotelian and Ciceronian topics, see *De topicis differentiis*, p. 205.

<sup>94</sup> Translation from *De topicis differentiis*, p. 29.

<sup>95</sup> *In Ciceronis topica*, p. 113. The example is confusing because the maximal proposition 'every animal is either rational or irrational' does not preclude that there are irrational or rational things that are not animals. Also, Boethius uses this as an example of the division of genus, although Stump argues that it should be an argument of species rather than genus (*In Ciceronis topica*, pp. 218, endnote 31). I use this example to illustrate the way in which structurally similar arguments can be used to reveal various characteristics of one and the same entity (see below).

<sup>96</sup> *De topicis differentiis*, p. 239.

proposition, a different argument could be constructed that if Cicero is a man, he must be rational. However, since 'rational' is not the only characteristic of Cicero, one may construct any number of arguments using the same pattern. In another place, for instance, Boethius claims that 'every man is an animal', so if that is accepted it follows that, since Cicero is a man, he must also be an animal.<sup>97</sup>

The abundance of possible arguments has two implications. First, a variety of good arguments makes a case stronger: even if none of them is able to convince on its own, the sheer number of arguments strengthens the debater's position by making the original claim more probable. Secondly — and this is important in the context of organization — the topical method stresses the multidimensionality and polysemy of a concept by considering its various aspects and associations.<sup>98</sup>

The topic or *locus*, according to Boethius, is the place from which one draws the argument: 'A topic is the seat of an argument, or that from which one draws an argument appropriate to the question under consideration'.<sup>99</sup> The *locus*, Boethius explains, consists of two elements, a maximal proposition or maxim (*maxima propositio*) and its *differentiae*. A maximal proposition is a statement that is generally accepted as true (it is also sometimes referred to as a 'commonplace') and that cannot be proved by something else. Boethius's standard example of a maximal proposition is: 'If you take equals from equals, the remainders are equal'.<sup>100</sup> The *differentiae* distinguish the maximal propositions from each other, for instance definition, genus, effect or parts of a whole. They can be thought of as the characteristics of the concept that forms the subject of the maximal proposition. The name of the *locus* is identical with that of the *differentia*, e.g. 'from definition', 'from genus' and so on. Since the number of maximal propositions is near infinite but that of their *differentiae* limited, the *loci* are divided and classed according to their *differentiae*.<sup>101</sup> These stand in a generic relation to each other, so that they can be arranged in a kind of tree-diagram, the *arbor porphyriana* or Porphyrian Tree, so-called after its appearance in Porphyry's *Isagoge*, a third-century introduction to Aristotle's *Categories* (fourth century BCE) that was translated into Latin by Boethius and which remained the standard textbook on logic throughout the Middle Ages.<sup>102</sup> Incidentally,

<sup>97</sup> *De topicis differentiis*, p. 31.

<sup>98</sup> See Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann and Anja Hallacker, 'Topik: Tradition und Erneuerung', in *Topik und Tradition: Prozesse der Neuordnung von Wissensüberlieferungen des 13. bis 17. Jahrhunderts*, ed. by Thomas Frank, Ursula Kocher and Ulrike Tarnow, Berliner Mittelalter- und Frühneuzeitforschung, 1 (Göttingen: V & R unipress, 2007), pp. 15–27 (p. 16) for the connection between polysemy and probability that is so characteristic of topical argumentation: 'It is because arguments are polysemous and hence ambiguous that they prove flexible enough to be arranged in argument structures without becoming sclerotic.' (My translation) 'Argumente erweisen sich als vielseitig und damit uneindeutig, gerade deshalb sind sie elastisch genug, um sich in Argumentationsstrukturen gliedern zu lassen, ohne dabei sklerotisch zu werden.' See also Helmut Zedelmaier, *Bibliotheca Universalis und Bibliotheca Selecta: Das Problem der Ordnung des gelehrten Wissens in der frühen Neuzeit*, Beihefte zum Archiv für Kulturgeschichte, 33 (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1992), p. 67.

<sup>99</sup> Translation from *De topicis differentiis*, p. 30.

<sup>100</sup> Green-Pedersen, p. 42.

<sup>101</sup> Green-Pedersen, p. 63.

<sup>102</sup> The categories (substance, quantity, relation, quality, doing, undergoing, place where, time when, position, having; see *De topicis differentiis*, p. 237) were also known during the early Middle Ages from the anonymous, fourth-century *Categoriae Decem*, a work incorrectly attributed to St. Augustine, an attribution that enhanced both the work's and the categories' popularity (John Marenbon, *From the Circle of Alcuin to the School of Auxerre: Logic, Theology, and Philosophy in the Early Middle Ages*, Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought, 3rd series, 15 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 16). Boethius's translation of Porphyry's *Isagoge* and the *Categoriae decem* are likewise attested in Anglo-Saxon England since the ninth century (Gneuss, p. 119).

Porphry's *Isagoge* is mentioned in Leofric's donation list, which also refers to the *mycel englisc boc* thought to be the Exeter Book, a point I will return to later on.

The method of constructing arguments from *loci* is thus based on a system of categories that ultimately goes back to Aristotle's *Categories*. The categories are arranged in a web or tree of systematic interrelations that is best visualized spatially, like the mnemonic items above, hence the use of the same term, *locus*. The similarity is obvious: As Eleonore Stump points out, 'A mnemonic Topic is literally a place that can be used over and over again to "store" and "retrieve" what one wants to remember; it is a place from which things to be remembered are recalled. A dialectical or rhetorical Topic is figuratively a place that can be used again to produce a variety of arguments.'<sup>103</sup> The two kinds of *locus* were consequently seen as analogous, but while the former used associative principles, the latter was based on a categorical system.

The systematic division of arguments or properties obviously lends itself to the division of disciplines or subjects. Tables accompanying early modern encyclopaedias, such as the one prefixed to Conrad Gessner's *Partitiones theologicae, pandectarum universalium liber ultimus* (1549) bear a striking resemblance to diagrams depicting the Porphyrian Tree.<sup>104</sup> According to Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, the development of late-humanist systematic classification took shape through a re-interpretation of *iudicium* as *dispositio*, that is, the disposability of knowledge.<sup>105</sup> Rather than assess the information already gathered, as *iudicium* had done, *dispositio* was to ensure that a field of knowledge was comprehensively covered. These two main tasks of topics, the generation of rhetorical abundance and of systematic classification, separated and developed independently from the late sixteenth century onward.

Schmidt-Biggemann is certainly right in arguing that systematic classification with claims to exhaustiveness was a development of humanism and is not to be looked for in medieval encyclopaedias.<sup>106</sup> Yet as Schmidt-Biggemann himself points out, this humanist project has its origin in the practice of categorizing arguments, excerpts or other items according to more general properties or *loci communes* that goes back to antiquity and is based on topical principles. Peter Ramus (1515–72) has often been credited with introducing dialectical analysis to mnemonics and hence with the introduction of the principle of dialectical order to the organization of encyclopaedias. Yet it is obvious that memory is elemental in keeping available the rhetorical abundance generated by the *inventio* and that the issue of memorizing is thus already present in Ciceronian topics.<sup>107</sup> Frances Yates points out that the arrangement of matter 'in an order descending from "generals" to "specials"' is also implicit in Lullism and that the schematic presentation of texts propagated by the Ramists can already be observed in medieval manuscripts.<sup>108</sup> Indeed, the practice of arranging subjects into a system of categories, which characterizes the early modern encyclopaedias with which the theory of topics is now chiefly associated, can already be seen in the classical and medieval encyclopaedias discussed earlier. The distribution of individual subjects necessitates a prior analysis, an analysis which, in a way, operates like a reversal of the *inventio*: instead of using a list of criteria from which one constructs arguments, one deduces common criteria from

<sup>103</sup> *De topicis differentiis*, p. 16.

<sup>104</sup> See the facsimile in Zedelmaier, p. 78.

<sup>105</sup> Schmidt-Biggemann, p. 44.

<sup>106</sup> Schmidt-Biggemann, 'Sinnfülle', pp. 44–45.

<sup>107</sup> Schmidt-Biggemann, 'Sinnfülle', pp. 35, 36–38.

<sup>108</sup> Yates, *The Art of Memory*, pp. 232–238.

the characteristics of the various subjects in order to create a system that holds all of them. Topical analysis can thus be seen as the foundation of systematic order.<sup>109</sup>

One of the defining characteristics of topical order is that it is based on an interrelationship of subjects; that is, the resulting order is based on the material and not on any prefabricated system. Although catalogues of categories were set up in order to facilitate learning and memorizing the method, like the hexameter formula '*quis, quid, ubi, quibus auxiliis, cur, quomodo, quando*',<sup>110</sup> these were never seen as comprehensive or closed: in fact, Aristotle criticizes the Sophists for their method of teaching their pupils sets of examples and compares this practice to that of an artisan who does not teach his apprentice the method of his trade but gives him the finished product. Rather than give the learner a pre-fabricated set of arguments or categories, Aristotle wishes to teach the method itself.<sup>111</sup> Once the method is understood, it is possible to create a system that satisfies the individual needs of each practitioner.<sup>112</sup> What is more, this system can be modified to fit the specific material and the use it is set to — different subject-matter calls for different treatment. As Helmut Zedelmaier observes with regard to Conrad Gesner's mid-sixteenth-century *Bibliotheca universalis*, 'It is the material, or, rather, its treatment, that constitutes the order or system, not the other way round.'<sup>113</sup>

While medieval compilers of encyclopaedic collections did not explicitly theorize their method(s), the division of the material according to categories or *loci communes* that can be observed in many of these works seems likewise to have been determined by material already selected, rather than the choice of material to have been influenced by an already existing grid or system; the more so since medieval collections do not seem to aspire to the same level of completeness as early modern encyclopaedias that usually purport to present the sum total of available knowledge.<sup>114</sup>

Leofric's donation list provides a good example — one that is temporally and spatially close to the production of the Exeter Book — of how the material may shape a document's form. The document, which survives in two copies originally bound into gospel books, lists the lands, ornaments and books that Leofric acquired for the minster at Exeter. These items are divided into categories: alienated lands that Leofric restored, new lands he added, treasures and ornaments he procured for the minster (candlesticks, spoons, cups, chests), and, finally, books. As Richard Gameson observes, the books themselves — a total of fifty-nine volumes in fifty entries — are divided into three separate parts. This division, Gameson suggests, reflects 'the category of the texts' and 'perhaps also [...] differences in their physical location',

<sup>109</sup> Cf. Zedelmaier, pp. 52, 60. Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann and Anja Hallacker define topics as a method of managing 'the abundance of knowledge in a way that makes it employable for argumentative means' (Schmidt-Biggemann and Hallacker, p. 17: 'Topik verwaltet Wissensfülle, um sie argumentativ anwendbar zu machen'; my translation). A concise but very illuminating summary of the connection between the two topical functions of argumentation and management of knowledge can be found on pages 17–18 of their article.

<sup>110</sup> The verse is ascribed to Matthew of Vendôme (Matthaeus Vindocinensis, †1286), see Zedelmaier, p. 6.

<sup>111</sup> Cf. Sorabji, p. 29: 'The *topos* is a general pattern of argument, rather than an argument, because it is supposed to apply not merely to certainty and uncertainty, but to black and white, good and evil, and any pair of contraries.'

<sup>112</sup> Cf. Zedelmaier, p. 69; *De topicis differentiis*, pp. 174–178. This does not apply to the list of *differentiae* or the Aristotelian categories themselves, which were regarded as all-inclusive. Both could, however, be divided into an infinite number of subcategories. Cf. Green-Pedersen, p. 54 and Stump's discussion in *De topicis differentiis*, p. 237.

<sup>113</sup> Zedelmaier, p. 54 (my translation). 'Das Material bzw. die Praxis des Umgangs mit ihm konstituiert die Ordnung, das System, nicht umgekehrt.'

<sup>114</sup> As Irvine points out, 'The main principle of *compilatio* was the selection of materials from the cultural library so that the resulting collection forms an *interpretive* arrangement of texts and discourse' (p. 193).



thereby hinting at the possible use of topical categories in the ordering of libraries, which encyclopaedic collections sometimes seem to reflect.<sup>115</sup> The first group, consisting only of two volumes — *ii mycele Cristesbec gebonede* ‘two large, ornamented gospel books’ — is not actually listed with the other books but rather among the treasures. The second group of books, separated from these first two volumes by further items of treasure, includes massbooks, psalters, and other items ‘essential for the liturgy and the regular life’.<sup>116</sup> According to Gameson, the two groups together ‘comprise the literary *sine qua non* of ecclesiastical life’.<sup>117</sup> However, the second group also includes Alfred’s translation of Boethius’s *De consolazione philosophiae* and the *mycel englisc boc* thought to be the Exeter Book. These two items appear to bear little relation to the others in this group — in fact, the Old English version of the *Consolatio* would seem to fit much better with the more diverse third group of books, which also includes the Latin *Consolatio*, as well as individual biblical books, more general religious works such as Gregory the Great’s *Regula Pastoralis*, Orosius’s *Historiae adversus paganos libri septem*, Asser’s *Vita Alfredi* and Porphyry’s *Isagoge*. An explanation for the inclusion of the Old English *Consolatio* and the *mycel englisc boc* in the second group is provided by Joyce Hill, who has drawn attention to the fact that several items within this group are marked as being written in English, while the third group is introduced as *leden boca he beget inn to þam mynstre* (‘Latin books that he [Leofric] acquired for the minster’).<sup>118</sup> As in the case of the two ornamented gospel books, listed amongst treasures rather than books, the inclusion of these two Old English volumes in the second group suggests that several principles of ordering are at work here: gospel books, especially when lavishly produced and ornamented, can be classed both as ecclesiastical books and as treasures; book lists can be structured both according to contents and according to language.

An awareness of the multiple ways in which one and the same item can be categorized is already inherent in the topical method of systemizing subjects. We have seen above how any number of arguments can be constructed around any one subject, or, to put it differently, that any subject can be characterized in a variety of ways. Green-Pedersen draws attention to a passage in Boethius’s *In Categorias Aristotelis Libri Quattuor* where it is said ‘that we may consider Socrates in various ways: either as the individual person, Socrates; or as a substance; or as a father or a son, i.e. as belonging to the category of relation; and there are further possible comprehensions of him.’<sup>119</sup> As Green-Pedersen points out, this passage is a good illustration of the procedure expounded in *In Ciceronis Topica*. Transferred to the method of topical systematization, this means that it can never be possible to unequivocally assign an item to any one category, because there are always multiple ways of considering the subject. It is thus not only the heterogeneity of the material but also the various options available for

<sup>115</sup> Gameson, p. 143. Evidence for topical methods in the arrangement of Carolingian libraries is provided by McKitterick (pp. 165–210), who observes that the items in library catalogues and book lists from several important Frankish monasteries are divided into a descending hierarchy of categories, from complete Bibles through individual biblical books (arranged in the customary order of the Old and New Testaments) to patristic writings (usually arranged by author in the chronological order of life dates) and other subjects such as history, law, medicine and grammar, the latter often in conjunction with works by classical authors.

<sup>116</sup> Hill, ‘Leofric’, p. 85.

<sup>117</sup> Gameson, p. 143.

<sup>118</sup> Hill, ‘Leofric’, p. 85.

<sup>119</sup> Green-Pedersen, p. 74. *In Categorias Aristotelis* is preserved together with Boethius’s translation of *De interpretatione* in a manuscript from the second half of the tenth-century now in Lichfield Cathedral Library, Gneuss p. 57.

ordering it that may at times have prompted compilers to abandon one principle of order mid-way through, if they felt that the material called for different treatment.

The fact that the third group of books in Leofric's list includes Porphyry's *Isagoge* is all the more telling as most of the other items mentioned in the list, as well as the works known to have been copied at Exeter during or shortly after Leofric's time, suggest that Exeter's was a very basic book collection that only just fulfilled the requirements of a new foundation.<sup>120</sup> The presence of the *Isagoge*, a text that can be seen to expound the very principles according to which the list is structured, thus suggests an interest in principles of structuring and categorizing items that, while it cannot explain the organization of the Exeter Book, which was compiled about three generations earlier, at least provides a hint that its structure may have been appreciated by Leofric and his contemporaries, even if the precise reasons why it was acquired remain elusive.<sup>121</sup>

## Categories and associative linking in the Exeter Book

As noted above, the Exeter Book is no encyclopaedia, but it does share with this text type a preoccupation with the transmission of knowledge as well as some structural principles. As in the works mentioned above, the contents of the Exeter Book are arranged in categories derived from the material's various characteristics. To recapitulate: the collection opens with a sequence of partly biographical poems with strong hortatory undertones that set up a chain of role models for modes of Christian living,<sup>122</sup> arranged in order of descending cosmological importance, starting with Christ and his relationship to men (*Christ I–III*) and moving on to poems about saints and Old Testament righteous (*Guthlac A and B*, *Canticles of the Three Youths*, *The Passion of Saint Juliana*) and, finally, to the homiletic exemplum of the anonymous Christian everyman in *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*. These latter two poems are divided and succeeded by a string of poems more generally concerned with wisdom and the transmission of knowledge, many of them using the catalogue as their primary structural principle. The majority of these, too, address ethical or moral questions by discussing the extent to which man's life is predetermined by external forces or more generally God's involvement with the world (*God's Gifts to Humankind*, *The Fates of Mortals*, *The Order of the World*, *Physiologus*) or by presenting advice in the forms of precepts, maxims or proverbs (*Precepts*, *Vainglory*, *Maxims I*).<sup>123</sup> In a similar fashion, the *Physiologus*-poems purport to transmit knowledge of the natural world, with the allegorical interpretations of animal behaviour serving hortatory interests. The riddles present a more playful engagement with knowledge, with an additional connection to the *Physiologus*-poems being provided by a shared interest in natural phenomena and a concern with hidden wisdom and the hermeneutic principles of unravelling it (the bestiary presenting 'nature decoded'), as well as the binary structure of description and explication that is common to both genres. These

<sup>120</sup> Gameson, pp. 147, 151.

<sup>121</sup> One further item in the list that likewise attests to an interest in structuring knowledge is Isidore's *Etymologiae*, although this is more of a standard text.

<sup>122</sup> See Muir's introduction in *The Exeter Anthology*, 1, p. 23.

<sup>123</sup> The obvious thematic exception is *Widsith* with its more or less unsystematic list of peoples and rulers, yet the poem's form and its instructional potential firmly link it to the other poems in this category.

shared characteristics might also explain the relative vicinity of bestiaries and riddles to be found not only in the Exeter Book.<sup>124</sup>

Yet if the above summary of the Exeter Book poems looks like a neat division into categories, it does so only because it glosses over a number of poems that do not quite fit the scheme, as a glance at the table of poems in the introduction will reveal. For instance, as I have mentioned above, the sequence of unambiguously hagiographical poems (*Guthlac A and B*, *Canticles*, *The Passion of Saint Juliana*) is broken up by *The Phoenix*, a bestiary allegory. And why are the obviously didactic and predominantly moral ‘wisdom’ poems following *The Wanderer* interspersed with so-called ‘elegies’, first-person accounts of suffering usually resolved by the philosophical acceptance of fate and an embracing of the Christian hope of heavenly reward (*The Seafarer*, *The Riming Poem*, *Deor*)? And why, indeed, are these latter poems not transmitted in sequence?

One possible explanation can be found in what appears to be the compiler’s practice of sequencing poems according to associative principles, discussed earlier. Viewed in this light, *God’s Gifts* appears like a direct continuation of *The Wanderer*, elaborating the latter poem’s closing invocation of grace by pointing out how God’s grace can already be observed in the various ‘gifts’ — talents, skills, good fortune — distributed among mankind. Similarly, *Vainglory* takes up *The Seafarer*’s opposition of the ascetic life of the seafarer and the worldly pleasures experienced by the city-dweller. *The Phoenix* not only echoes the trial-by-fire scenes of the preceding *Canticles* and the following *Passion*,<sup>125</sup> but explicitly draws a parallel between its allegorical interpretation of the phoenix and the role-model aspect of Christ, the saints, and the Christian everyman, the respective subjects of the surrounding poems. Conversely, *Soul and Body II* discusses the consequences of not making one’s choice between the ways of God and the ways of the devil, arguably the combined theme of the three preceding *Physiologus*-poems, whose animal-imagery it also shares. The sequence of poems separating the two riddle collections (*The Wife’s Lament* through *The Ruin*), while exhibiting a strong interest in penitential and paschal themes, includes a number of texts that resemble the riddles in their enigmatic quality — most obviously *Riddles* 30b and 60, but also *Pharaoh* with its dialogic question-answer structure, as well as *The Wife’s Lament* and *The Husband’s Message*, both of which poems seem to deliberately veil their speakers’ identities and invite the reader to reconstruct the respective speakers’ situation and story, the latter even including a runic puzzle, an element present also in a number of the Exeter Book riddles.<sup>126</sup>

One might thus argue that the associative links observable between many of the Exeter Book poems at times work against the systematic order of the categories. Indeed, the interaction — and at times tension — between associative and systematic principles results in

<sup>124</sup> Versions of the *Physiologus* and collections of riddles are often transmitted side by side in medieval manuscripts. This is for instance the case in Bern Cod. 611, which also includes the Exeter Book *Physiologus*’s sequence of *panther–cetus–perdix* (panther, sea-monster/whale, partridge).

<sup>125</sup> *The Guthlac Poems*, p. 50.

<sup>126</sup> See *The Exeter Anthology*, pp. 17–18 with regard to *Riddle* 60, *The Husband’s Message* and *The Ruin*. *The Wife’s Lament* and *The Husband’s Message* are discussed by John D. Niles alongside a number of other Old English enigmatic texts that also include several of the Exeter riddles (John D. Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems and the Play of the Texts*, *Studies in the Early Middle Ages*, 13 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2006)). Anderson goes as far as to classify all of the remaining Exeter Book following the three *Physiologus*-poems as riddles by reading the *The Soul’s Adress*, *Deor* and *Wulf and Eadwacer* as a riddlic sequence on the wasted life (*Two Literary Riddles*, p. 3, ‘Riddle 1’) and the poems from *The Wife’s Lament* through *The Ruin* as another riddlic sequence on the Easter Wake (‘the Easter Riddle’). See also *The Old English Elegies: A Critical Edition and Genre Study*, ed. by Anne Lingard Klinck (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1992), pp. 47, 57 and Rafał Borysławski, *The*

a highly original and individual arrangement that characterizes the whole collection. But the problem is partly inherent in the topical method of systemizing subjects itself. Leofric's list has provided an example of how items can be characterized and hence sorted in a variety of ways: decorated gospel books can be classed as 'books' or as 'treasures', an English translation of Boethius's *De Consolatione philosophiae* can be categorized according to content or according to language. In the same way, 'elegies' such as *The Wanderer* or *The Seafarer* can be classed as 'spiritual biographies' — that is, as homiletic exempla demonstrating how to deal with misfortune in a way that is pleasing to God — and hence can be sorted with the hagiographical poems preceding *The Wanderer*, or they can be classed as 'wisdom poems' that pass on ethical knowledge through a wise narrator figure. As Tom Shippey observes, to stress the similarities between certain poems means to disregard their differences and, consequently, the potential similarities individual ones might have to poems not included in this group. 'It is only by a process of elimination that our modern ascriptions to either genre have been made possible.'<sup>127</sup>

In the discussion above I have counted *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* as homiletic exempla participating in the sequence of 'spiritual biographies' preceding *The Wanderer*, but also pointed out their strong formal and thematic links to the following 'wisdom poems'. Scholars have usually decided in favour of either one or the other of these two categories, the vast majority choosing the former, although Dunning and Bliss have argued, perhaps not wholly convincingly, that 'in many respects, *The Wanderer* is more closely related to *Precepts* and *The Gifts of Men* than it is to *The Seafarer*'.<sup>128</sup> Yet Shippey, observing links in both directions, takes an integrative approach, arguing that '[*The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*] occupy as it were a 'hinge' position between the long-accepted set of "elegies" and the more recently seen and larger category of "wisdom poems" or "Ancient Sage" poems.'<sup>129</sup> *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* can thus be read as both: spiritual exempla and wisdom poems. The difficulty of placing the poems in definite categories is thus not primarily because they do not fit a specific category, but because they fit more than one, depending on what feature or characteristic one prefers to stress.<sup>130</sup>

Shippey's suggestion of a "hinge" position between genres or categories is important for the larger structure of the collection, since *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer* are placed at the very nexus between the sequence of poems associated with Christian exempla and the more diverse category of didactic and wisdom poems. Their affinity with both categories makes them ideal for achieving the transition from one category to the next. At this point, we thus witness a different kind of concatenation, not between individual poems but between whole categories. This concatenation is made possible through the polysemy of the texts, a polysemy that the topical method draws attention to, resulting in a potential openness of categories that allows for links in different directions that can be exploited for catenulate linking: it is here that the two 'topical' methods meet.

*Old English Riddles and the Riddlic Elements of Old English Poetry*, Studies in English Medieval Language and Literature, 9 (Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 2004), pp. 202–3.

<sup>127</sup> Shippey, 'The Wanderer', p. 156.

<sup>128</sup> Dunning and Bliss, p. 4.

<sup>129</sup> Shippey, 'The Wanderer', p. 146.

<sup>130</sup> A very good illustration of how many of the Exeter Book poems can be placed in more than one category is Table 5.1 in Drout's discussion of generic features and ambiguities (Drout, *Tradition and Influence*, p. 139). Of course, even these attributions of genre (whether medieval or modern) are only arrived at by ignoring the differences between individual poems within the categories, as are my own in Table 1.

*The Structure of the Exeter Book*

Shippey's argument can be extended to other poems. *Deor* is an obvious case in that it combines, even more obviously than *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, an autobiographical tale of sorrow and hardship with more general pieces of knowledge, in this case historical 'facts' arranged in a catalogue made up of successive stanzas. *Deor* has often been seen, along with the two poems mentioned before, as the archetypal elegy in which personal experience, along with the contemplation of more general truths of life, leads to eventual consolation. (Although in this case, the consolation is somewhat tongue-in-cheek since the poem seems to suggest that one's sorrow cannot last longer than one's life.) But were it not for the last stanza, in which the narrator suddenly steps forward as a character in his own right and tells his story, *Deor* would be nothing but a catalogue of historical exempla illustrating the eventual termination of hardship and sorrow (and thus in many respects not dissimilar to *Widsith* and its list of historical rulers and peoples). *Deor*'s exempla are drawn from Germanic heroic legend and constitute no more than brief allusions which become opaque if the story they refer to is not known. The third stanza is a good example of this technique:

We þæt Mæðhilde monge gefrugnon —  
wurdon grundlease Geates frige,  
þæt him seo sorglufu slæp ealle binom.  
Pæs ofereode, þisses swa mæg. (*Deor*, lines 14–17)<sup>131</sup>

Scholars have found it unusually hard to interpret this stanza, not least because it has not been possible to identify the legend it refers to.<sup>132</sup> A variety of translations have therefore been suggested, most of which, however, rely to a greater or lesser extent on emendations.<sup>133</sup> The following is from S. A. J. Bradley's anthology of Old English poetry:

About Maethild many of us have heard tell that the affections of the Geat grew fathomless  
so that this tragic love reft them of all sleep. That passed away: so may this.<sup>134</sup>

The fact that the stories are not told in full but only alluded to is wholly in keeping with the principles of the historical exemplum; as von Moos notes, allusion to historical events or persons ('like Nero') is sufficient to generate the necessary context in the mind of the

<sup>131</sup> Muir reads the first two lines as 'We þæt Mæðhilde monge frugnon — wurdon grundlease Geatas frige'. I have given the manuscript's forms *gefrugnon* and *Geates* (with added capitalization), as do most other editions of the poem. Muir's emendation *Geatas* suggests a plural form, 'Geats', which is not reflected in the translations given here.

<sup>132</sup> Anderson suggests that this stanza refers to a legend told by Saxo Grammaticus of the Heodenings, in which the Jutish princess Hild each night revives both her father and her lover together with their armies so that they continue to fight over her into all eternity (*Two Literary Riddles*, p. 30). He accordingly translates (*Two Literary Riddles*, p. 69): 'We many have heard of the harvest of Hild. The yeomen of Geat came loose from the ground, so this sorrowful love robbed them all of their sleep. That was moved on; this can be, too.' Anderson interprets the manuscript's *mæð hilde* not as a single personal name, but as two different words, 'harvest' and the personal name 'Hild'.

<sup>133</sup> In fact, the text of Muir's edition, quoted above with the changes mentioned in footnote 129, includes a number of emendations, mostly concerning the spelling of compounds, which in the manuscript frequently appear in two words. In some cases, the manuscript's spelling may give rise to ambiguities that allow for alternative interpretations, as can be observed in Anderson's translation of the stanza in footnote 132. In the case of riddlic texts like *Deor*, I suggest such ambiguities form part of the 'play of the text'.

<sup>134</sup> *Anglo-Saxon Poetry: An Anthology of Old English Poems in Prose Translation with Introduction and Headnotes*, ed. and trans. by S. A. J. Bradley (London: Everyman, 1982), p. 364. Compare this translation with Anderson's in footnote 132 above and with Kevin Crossley-Holland's: 'Many of us have learned that Geat's love for Mæthild grew too great for human frame, his sad passion stopped him from sleeping. That passed away, this also may' (*The Anglo-Saxon World: An Anthology*, ed. by Kevin Crossley-Holland (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 7).

recipient.<sup>135</sup> But the way in which the allusions are presented — the text almost teasingly withholding information (‘þæt him seo sorglufu slæp ealle binom’) — lends *Deor* a riddlic quality. In fact, some of the allusions are so vague that an identification of the specific legend has not been possible. While most scholars have attributed this to the sparsity with which medieval heroic legend has survived into modern times, Andrew James Johnston argues that *Deor* is deliberately vague in the identification of its examples. He cites the fifth stanza, which observes merely that ‘Theodric owned the Mæring castle for thirty winters — that was known to many’ (‘Ðeodric ahte þritig wintra | Mæringa burg — þæt wæs monegum cup’, lines 18–19).<sup>136</sup> The fact that there were, on the one hand, at least three bearers of the name *Theodric* known to the Anglo-Saxons and, on the other, that the best-known of these, Theoderic the Great, was associated with at least two completely different traditions — a ‘historical’ one, in which he featured as the tyrant who put Boethius to death, and a ‘legendary’ one, in which he was exiled by his uncle and rival Ermanaric — shows that unequivocal identification would not have been possible even to a contemporary audience. The question which of at least three different Theodrics known from Germanic legend is meant turns the stanza into a riddle, in keeping with the generally enigmatic tone of the whole poem.<sup>137</sup>

*Deor*, then, has affinities not only with spiritual biographies and ‘wisdom’ poems (even constituting a short catalogue in its own right), but also with the riddles, and it is in fact followed by that most enigmatic of all Anglo-Saxon poems, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, which was regarded by several early editors as the first in the series of riddles that immediately follows it (and is thus another instance of a poem where an unequivocal assignation to a category is impossible).<sup>138</sup> The Exeter Book thus consciously employs multidimensionality as a means of structuring. The texts’ multiple readings participate in the larger arrangement of the collection in that they provide the starting point for digressions or new sequences, thematic or otherwise. The fact that the poems I have just discussed are placed at the intersection of categories, with

<sup>135</sup> Von Moos, p. 61.

<sup>136</sup> Andrew James Johnston, ‘The Riddle of *Deor* and the Performance of Fiction’, in *Language and Text: Current Perspectives on English and Germanic Historical Linguistics and Philology*, ed. by Andrew James Johnston, Ferdinand von Mengden and Stefan Thim, Anglistische Forschungen, 359 (Heidelberg: Winter, 2006), pp. 133–50. Anderson notes that *Mæringa burg* may be a kenning, the literal meaning ‘a castle of basil’ standing for exile in the wilderness (*Two Literary Riddles*, p. 28).

<sup>137</sup> Johnston, p. 141.

<sup>138</sup> There are other poems in this section that exhibit affinities to the riddles. Niles refers to the enigmatic quality of *The Seafarer* and other lyric poems from the Exeter Book (*Wulf and Eadwacer*, *The Wife’s Lament* and *The Husband’s Message*): ‘just as with all fifty Exeter Book riddles that are put into the first person singular voice, there is an implied challenge for the reader to discover who the speaker is and to fill out his or her story’ (Niles, p. 213). The same applies to the *Riming Poem*, whose narrator, like those of the *Wanderer* and *The Seafarer*, explains how a life of misfortunes has taught him Christian humility. However, unlike the other protagonists, the speaker does not offer any further intimation of what his misfortunes actually were or indeed of his own identity. The few hints given in the text seem to suggest a personified natural force rather than a human being (Lehmann, p. 444). Thus the speaker seems to imply that he received life at the world’s creation and also remains after the passing of mankind, for whom he is to dig a grave. Nonetheless, he himself seems to be on the verge of dying. Ruth Lehman has drawn attention to the poem’s riddlic quality and tentatively suggested ‘the will of God’ as a possible solution (Lehmann, p. 444). Against this one might hold that God’s will does not die and that it existed before Creation. A better solution would be ‘nature’ personified or indeed ‘Creation’ itself (not as act but as result) since these, too, must die once the things created cease to exist. The solution ‘Creation’ is a felicitous one, not least because *gesceaft godes*, ‘God’s Creation’ is the main theme of the preceding poem, *The Order of the World*, resulting in another catenulate link. It is worth noting that all of these poems, with the exception of *The Seafarer*, are placed in close vicinity to the Exeter Book riddles, many of which are presented as first-person accounts detailing the often tragic life-stories of personified objects — and thus both formally and emotionally very similar to the elegies.

affinities in both directions, suggests a deliberate arrangement, one that reflects and exploits the ambiguities of topical classification.

It is perhaps no coincidence that the poems occupying such hinge positions belong to the class of so-called 'elegies', a modern and decidedly vague category whose defining characteristics involve personal stories of loss and misfortune, often combined with a more general reflection of worldly transience.<sup>139</sup> The fact that these poems were placed at the intersections of homiletic exempla, catalogues of ethical and worldly wisdom, and riddles suggests that they were not necessarily regarded as strictly belonging to the same textual category; rather, their presentation as instructive first-person accounts whose didactic message is based on personal observation or experience opens up the possibility of linking them to poems from a variety of categories.<sup>140</sup> Through these poems we witness an overlap, a concomitance of various categories that may seem unsettling from a modern perspective but is wholly natural from a pre-modern one. Indeed, as we have seen earlier, resistance to a single, clear-cut system of categories is inherent in topical thinking, which stresses the multidimensionality of its objects. It is also characteristic of medieval exegetical thinking with its different *sententiae* or layers of Scriptural meaning, all at work simultaneously and not restricted to the interpretation of the Bible but also applicable to secular texts and the world in general, due to a pansemiotic interpretation of nature evident, for instance, in the allegorical explanations given in the Exeter Book bestiary poems. From the perspective of classical and medieval hermeneutics, the world is inherently multidimensional and polysemous.<sup>141</sup> The Exeter Book uses this multidimensionality as a structural principle: a principle of concatenation, not only between individual poems, but between whole categories.

## **Ambiguity and multidimensionality**

Arranging subjects according to topical principles affords a much more intuitive order than alphabetical organization,<sup>142</sup> hence even modern compendia sometimes adopt it, at least to some extent. The multi-volume *Handbook of the Mammals of the World*, for instance, organizes the various species systematically, i.e. according to biological order (e.g. *Primates*, *Rodents*, *Insectivores*) and, within the orders, family (e.g. *Lemuridae*, *Lorisidae*, *Hominidae*).<sup>143</sup> This system is supposed to reflect the genetic relationship between the species.<sup>144</sup> Historically, however, this structure is based on a system of shared physical characteristics (analogies) first established by Linnæus in the eighteenth century. Linnæus,

<sup>139</sup> This has not precluded the inclusion of non-personal poems like *The Ruin*, as Klinck's choice of texts shows. Klinck comments, 'calling these nine poems [i.e., *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer*, *The Riming Poem*, *Deor*, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, *The Wife's Lament*, *Resignation*, 'Ic was be sonde'/Riddle 60, *The Husband's Message* and *The Ruin*] elegies is a retrospective classification which relates them to a universal mode' (*The Old English elegies*, p. 223).

<sup>140</sup> This observation resonates with Irvine's point that '[t]he distinguishing feature of the encyclopaedia is its organization by discursive field rather than by work or genre' (Irvine, p. 195).

<sup>141</sup> For the argument that an appreciation of plenitude and diversity as a way of looking at the world is inherent in the encyclopaedic tradition, see Howe, p. 17.

<sup>142</sup> Howe argues that the encyclopaedic tradition began to lose its intellectual seriousness and hence its reputation with the introduction of alphabetization (Howe, p. 11). Cf. also his scathing judgement that, 'while few subjects resist alphabetization, still fewer benefit from it' (Howe, p. 9).

<sup>143</sup> *Handbook of the Mammals of the World*, ed. by Don E. Wilson and Russell A. Mittermeier, 8 vols (Barcelona, 2009–).

<sup>144</sup> Recent research has, however, shown that a clear-cut genealogical tree does not in actuality reflect genetic relationships since there is a much larger amount of cross-breeding, even between supposed species, than has

of course, was using as his framework the principles of topical order still current during his life-time. Another instance of non-alphabetical order in modern compendia would be handbooks of history, which are often arranged chronologically or by geographical area. Electronic encyclopaedias like *Wikipedia* dispense with linear order altogether, using instead a complex network of internal links, which allows them to develop a multi-dimensional system of organization.<sup>145</sup> But while topical organization is certainly not random, it is somewhat unpredictable in a book or manuscript context — which is, by necessity, two-dimensional (that is, linear) — unless it is founded on convention or made explicit, for instance through an introductory note, a table of contents, annotations or cross-references.<sup>146</sup> The same reservation applies, as we have seen, to the assignment of the individual subjects to the various categories. Given the material's multiple characteristics, there are always various ways of categorizing which may lead to conflicting claims of assignment.<sup>147</sup>

In his essay 'The Analytical Language of John Wilkins', Jorge Luis Borges discusses the ambiguities and redundancies inherent in all category-based systems by quoting from *The Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge*, a fictitious Chinese encyclopaedia, which is said to divide all animals into the following fourteen categories:

(a) those that belong to the Emperor, (b) embalmed ones, (c) those that are trained, (d) suckling pigs, (e) mermaids, (f) fabulous ones, (g) stray dogs, (h) those that are included in this classification, (i) those that tremble as if they were mad, (j) innumerable ones, (k) those drawn with a very fine camel's hair brush, (l) others, (m) those that have just broken a flower vase, (n) those that resemble flies from a distance.<sup>148</sup>

While many of the categories are in themselves hilarious, their weakness as a system lies of course in the absence of a stable relation between content and category. As Michel Foucault points out in his famous discussion of the passage:

hitherto been assumed. There is consequently some discussion among evolutionary biologists about replacing the Linnæan system with a multi-dimensional, phylogenetic one, which is supposed to more adequately represent actual genetic relationships. For more information on this issue, see Roger Harris, 'Attacks on Taxonomy', *American Scientist*, 93 (2005), <http://www.americanscientist.org/issues/pub/attacks-on-taxonomy> [accessed 6 August 2014], and Philip D. Cantino and Kevin de Queiroz, 'PhyloCode: International Code of Phylogenetic Nomenclature' (2010), <http://www.ohio.edu/phylocode/PhyloCode4c.pdf> [accessed 6 August 2014].

<sup>145</sup> It is surely no coincidence that Bernard Cerquiglini, whose *Éloge de la variante* is often regarded as the defining moment of the so-called 'new philology', argues that electronic editions with their possibilities of multi-dimensional layering are best suited to present the complex interplay of textual variants in medieval textual transmission (Cerquiglini, pp. 78–82, especially at 79). See also Martin K. Foys, *Virtually Anglo-Saxon: Old Media, New Media, and Early Medieval Studies in the Late Age of Print* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2007), who argues not only that 'the medieval and the digital (or pre- and post-print) have much in common that the print medium does not share' (p. xiv) but also that the limitations of print technology have to some extent pre-determined the way Anglo-Saxon literature has been perceived by scholars, suggesting that the possibilities of electronic media can open up new perspectives on Anglo-Saxon sources, including sculpture, textiles, and other works of art.

<sup>146</sup> With regard to the Exeter Book, whose opening pages are missing, Pope notes that 'separate title-pages were not customary and tables of contents are rare' in this period (Pope, p. 31, footnote 21).

<sup>147</sup> Cf. the discussion above. Howe discusses the extent to which classical encyclopaedias reflected a fixed and thus 'proper' order and notes that catalogues such as the one employed by Isidore to list the various winds teach 'a double lesson: the chief facts and terms of a subject as well as the structural order necessary to contain them' (Howe, p. 26). Cf. Carruthers' observation about stocking one's memory with structural models (Carruthers, p. 221), quoted earlier.

<sup>148</sup> Jorge Luis Borges, 'The Analytical Language of John Wilkins', trans. by Ruth L. C. Simms, in Jorge Luis Borges, *Other Inquisitions 1937–1952* (London: Souvenir Press, 1973), pp. 101–105 (p. 103).



## *The Structure of the Exeter Book*

The central category of animals ‘included in the present classification’, with its explicit reference to paradoxes we are familiar with, is indication enough that we shall never succeed in defining a stable relation of contained to container between each of these categories and that which includes them all: if all the animals divided up here can be placed without exception in one of the divisions of this list, then aren’t all the other divisions to be found in that one division too?<sup>149</sup>

It is not possible to divide the animals in such a way that they fit exactly one category; in fact, most animals would fit equally well into almost any of them: an animal that belongs to the emperor might also be trained or look like a fly from a distance; an animal that has just broken a flower vase might also tremble as if it were mad and so on. The assignation to a specific category becomes arbitrary.

Although he quotes *The Celestial Emporium of Benevolent Knowledge* as an extreme example, Borges shows, by referring to other examples like the Bibliographic Institute of Brussels and various ‘analytical’ or ‘general’ languages, that the vagueness and contradictions involved in the assignation of topics is an inherent feature of all classification: ‘obviously there is no classification of the universe that is not arbitrary and conjectural’.<sup>150</sup> Foucault agrees:

Order is, at one and the same time, that which is given in things as their inner law, the hidden network that determines the way they confront one another, and also that which has no existence except in the grid created by a glance, an examination, a language; and it is only in the blank spaces of this grid that the order manifests itself in depth as though already there, waiting in silence for the moment of its expression.<sup>151</sup>

This arbitrariness can be countered by taking recourse to tradition or convention, like the cosmological hierarchies chosen by Wilkins or, to return to (late) antiquity, the encyclopaedias of Pliny, Varro or Isidore of Seville. But the ambiguity remains. In contrast to said encyclopaedists, who chose a hierarchical order based on convention to counter the ambiguity of categorization, the Exeter Book draws attention to the multidimensionality and polysemy of its contents, and consequently to the ambiguity of all categories. While promoting topical systematization as a principle of organization the collection thus simultaneously exploits and, one is tempted to say, criticizes its inherent ambiguity.

## **Conclusion**

In many ways, one could argue, most if not all poems in the Exeter Book are concerned with the transmission of knowledge, whether ethical knowledge taught through exempla and homiletic exhortation or in the form of proverbs and sayings, natural and cultural knowledge presented in lists and catalogues, or a more playful engagement with knowledge in the riddles.

<sup>149</sup> Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2004 [first publ. London: Tavistock, 1970]), p. xviii [first publ. *Les mots et les choses: une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966)].

<sup>150</sup> Borges, p. 104. Nevertheless, Borges is much more sympathetic towards human attempts at classification than Foucault: ‘the impossibility of penetrating the divine scheme of the universe cannot dissuade us from outlining human schemes, even though we are aware that they are provisional. Wilkins’s analytical language is not the least admirable of those schemes. It is composed of classes and species that are contradictory and vague; its device of using the letters of the words to indicate divisions and subdivisions is, without a doubt, ingenious’ (ibid.). As Howe points out, Borges’s *Emporium* is as much homage as it is a critique (Howe, p. 11).

<sup>151</sup> Foucault, p. xxi.

Indeed, the cursory nature of the material's presentation, especially in some of the shorter poems, and its often mundane nature suggest that these texts are not primarily interested in the material itself but rather in its presentation, in the various different ways knowledge can be transmitted and passed on. From this perspective, the Exeter Book appears as a collection of various text types exploring and engaging in the presentation of wisdom and knowledge, divided into more or less fluid categories, compiled perhaps for personal use as textual models for the composition of texts, or for didactic or devotional contexts as a means of illustrating certain points to a lay audience. This much has been felt and, to some extent, expressed by various scholars working on the Exeter Book.

Where the present contribution has gone further than previous scholarship is in demonstrating the extent to which these categories interact, overlap and intersect. By taking recourse to late-antique and medieval mnemonic and topical methods, the paper has attempted to place the Exeter Book within a theoretical frame of contemporary compilatory methods, methods that were generating renewed interest around the time the Exeter Book was compiled, and that are likely to have shaped at least the Exeter Book's early reception, if Leofric's list can be taken as evidence. At a time when interest in topics and methods of organization was gaining currency, the Exeter Book may have provided a playground for probing and testing ways of sequencing, linking and arranging texts.