Introduction: On Anglo-Saxon things

How many things,
Files, doorsills, atlases, wine glasses, nails,
Serve us like slaves who never say a word,
Blind and so mysteriously reserved.

(Jorge Luis Borges, 'Things')[1]

Næfre hio heofonum hran, ne to helle mot,
ac hio sceal wideferh wuldorcyninges
larum lifgan. Long is to secganne
hu hyre ealdorgesceaft æfter gongeð,
woh wyrda gesceapu; þæt is wrætlic þing
to gesecganne.

[It never reaches heaven, nor to hell, but it must always live within the king of glory's laws. Long it is to say how its life-shape spins on afterwards, the twisted pattern of fate; that is a wondrous thing to speak.]

(Exeter Book Riddle 39)[2]

Anglo-Saxon things and theory

Things could talk in Anglo-Saxon literature and material culture. Many of these Anglo-Saxon things are still with us today and are still talkative. Nonhuman voices leap out from the Exeter Book riddles, telling us where they came from, how they were made, how they do or do not act. In *The Husband's Message*, runic letters are borne and a first-person speech is delivered by some kind of wooden artefact. Readers of *The Dream of the Rood* in the Vercelli Book will come across a tree possessing the voice of a dreaming human in order to talk about its own history as a gallows and a rood. In *Andreas*, in the same manuscript, we read about stone angels, emerging from the wall into which they have been carved, speaking and walking and raising the dead. Beyond the manuscript

page, we have artefacts that use their voices to remind us of their makers and owners. 'Beagnoþ', says the rune-marked *seax* found in the River Thames and now kept in the British Museum. But who was Beagnoþ anyway? A warrior who liked hunting and combat? Someone interested in runic literacy or mysterious magic? A skilled smith? 'Beagnoþ' has become synonymous with the blade itself and so might as well belong to the blade. The *seax* now owns Beagnoþ as much as Beagnoþ ever owned the *seax*. Other Anglo-Saxon artefacts are more outspoken still. They want to speak about themselves instead of the humans who crafted them. The eighth-century Franks Casket is a box of bone that enigmatically alludes to its former fate as a whale that swam aground onto the shingle. Monuments such as that in Ruthwell, Dumfriesshire, can talk and act as other things. This stone column speaks as if it were living wood, or a wounded body.

We may like to believe that we are seeing, hearing, touching the voices of long-lost men and women through these things, but why did these humans so often feel the need to talk with the things around them – giving voice to, and receiving voice from, a sword, a shield, a tree, a bone, a cross, a casket? Their words are not whispered or shouted to us from across the centuries but cut or carved or scratched or inked. These early medieval voices are embodied but the 'bodies' that bear them are not fleshy human ones; they are calfskin, whalebone, sculpted stone, twisted gold.

Can we even begin to imagine the Anglo-Saxon world without things? Lacking carved monuments or inscribed brooches or illuminated manuscripts, that world would seem a lot more muted if not silent altogether. Should we not take the things themselves seriously, then? Instead of looking *through* these things, as if they are windows onto a distant age, we should start to look at and into them, listen to them, touch and feel them, recognise them for what they are, what they once were, what they may yet be. We can increase our understanding of both Anglo-Saxon culture and the objects that bring that culture before us by seeking to grasp how such things mesh meaning with matter and with acts of making and breaking. Things do not merely carry early medieval human voices across time but change them, sometimes reshaping or even subverting the messages intended by their original patrons, makers, possessors.

This book seeks, therefore, to recognise the voice and agency that nonhuman things have across Anglo-Saxon literature and material culture. Drawing on a variety of sources (from riddles and dream

visions to stone sculpture and gospel books), it examines the relationship between inscribed speech, bodies and early medieval artefacts, looking at how nonhumans might be as active and talkative as humans are assumed to be. In arguing for the agency of things, this work is informed by what has become known as 'thing theory' and as such it rethinks conventional divisions between 'animate' human subjects and 'inanimate' nonhuman objects. Throughout the course of the book, the Anglo-Saxon thing will be shown to resist such categorisation. The active role that things have in the early medieval world can also be linked to the Germanic origins of the word, where a *þing* is a kind of assembly, with the ability to gather other elements – material goods, bodies, words, ideas – to it. It is in this way that a thing might be said to speak. By moulding meaning and matter together into a distinct whole, a cross, a casket, a book, a relic, becomes talkative. Such talking things can exist across boundaries of time and space in ways that embodied humans cannot, carrying our voices from the past into the present and future.

Over the past fifteen years an intense interest has arisen in the lives of ostensibly inanimate objects. Some of the foundations for 'thing theory' were laid by Arjun Appaduri, who did much to illuminate the 'social life of things' by focusing on how the commodities exchanged and circulated within communities can shape human subjects, rather than the other way around.[3] But in his essay 'Thing Theory' (2001) and his book *A Sense of Things* (2003), Bill Brown developed a more nuanced definition of 'thingness' as that which is excessive in objects, beyond their mere materialisation or utilisation.[4] Brown seeks at once to problematise and promote the task of connecting 'things' with 'theory'. The form of criticism he sets out moves previous work on materialism forward by drawing on a Heideggerian account of the way in which humans share agency with their tools and by borrowing from Heidegger a distinction between objects and things.[5] Brown claims that we cannot remain content with things, cannot leave them alone and apart from theory, since 'even the most coarse and commonsensical things, mere things, perpetually pose a problem because of the specific unspecificity that "things" denotes'.[6] This characteristic of being specific yet unspecific, present yet elusive, is what differentiates things from objects.[7]

This way of thinking about thingness has much in common with other strains of materialism that have emerged since 2010. In *The Speculative Turn* (2011), editors Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek

and Graham Harman identify a renewed attention to materialist and realist options in philosophy, with thinkers 'speculating once more about the nature of reality independently of thought and of humanity more generally'.[8] Meanwhile, in *New Materialisms* (2010), Diana Coole and Samantha Frost argue that contemporary thinkers should question prevailing presumptions about agency and causation and 'reorient ourselves profoundly in relation to the world, to one another, and to ourselves'.[9] This call has been taken up by political theorists such as Jane Bennett, whose concept of 'thing-power' in *Vibrant Matter* (2010) seeks to 'acknowledge that which refuses to dissolve completely into the milieu of human knowledge' while aiming to 'attend to the it as actant'.[10] Even more recently, Ian Bogost's *Alien Phenomenology* (2012) situates things at the centre of being and advocates the use of metaphor in philosophy as a means of glimpsing things as they exist outside of human consciousness.[11] The work of Levi Bryant (2011) puts entities at all levels of scale on equal ontological footing and Timothy Morton has questioned whether sensory experience allows direct access to reality, employing the term 'hyperobjects' (2013) to describe entities of such vast temporal and spatial dimensions that they defeat traditional ideas about what a thing actually is.[12] In *Entangled* (2012), archaeologist Ian Hodder has questioned the human-centred perspective in studies of material culture, discussing human 'entanglements' with material things and demonstrating how things have always directed us, defined us and driven our supposed progress through history.[13] Anthropologist Tim Ingold, in his essay collection *Being Alive* (2011) and book *Making* (2013), has refined the distinctions we make between 'materials' and 'materiality' and has argued for ways of thinking through making in which sentient craftsmen and active materials continually correspond with one another in the generation of form.[14]

As this short summary indicates, thing theory is a very recent branch of critical theory, surfacing with vigour in the twenty-first century and still developing as we speak.[15] Medievalists have not been slow to take up the challenges presented by this theoretical work and an object-oriented medieval studies has started to take shape. In 2008, Kellie Robertson published an article in *Literature Compass* contending that medieval things were endowed with an autonomy and agency that was largely misrecognised in the wake of Enlightenment empiricism, concluding with a reading of Chaucer's Merchant's hat.[16] Robertson also contributed to a special issue of *Exemplaria*, edited by Patricia Clare Ingham in 2010,

which was devoted to premodern culture and the material object.[17] In *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral* (2012), Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and the contributors treat a range of medieval and early modern texts and artefacts, from Old Norse to the English Renaissance, and argue against ecological anthropocentricity by ceasing to assume that only humans exert agency.[18]

The 'material turn' has started to manifest itself in companions and handbooks to medieval literary studies, too. The 2013 *Handbook of Middle English Studies* features a chapter, by Jessica Brantley, on material culture, which is specifically interested in the ways in which the boundaries between the 'material' and 'immaterial' break down in late medieval dream visions.[19] Martin Foys demonstrates that early medieval media were native, consciously referenced, temporally thick and vitally interrelated to each other in *A Handbook to Anglo-Saxon Studies* (2012).[20] This renewed attention to material 'things' has also addressed the physical and sensory experience of manuscripts. Articles by Bruce Holsinger and Sarah Kay, for example, have explored the impact on readers of the fact that medieval books were produced in a context involving the slaughter and transformation of animals and written on parchment that is made from animal skins.[21] A theoretically informed discussion of specifically Anglo-Saxon 'speaking objects' which intersects with my own work in some illuminating ways may be found in Catherine Karkov's chapter 'Object and Voice' in *The Art of Anglo-Saxon England*.[22] A 2014 article by Benjamin C. Tilghman also shares some strong affinities with the arguments I make in my own work.[23] However, Tilghman limits himself to initial readings only and calls for each of the things discussed to be puzzled out more thoroughly.[24]

Nonhuman voices in Anglo-Saxon literature and material culture builds upon this dynamic body of scholarship that reads premodern culture from a new materialist perspective in order to demonstrate that the culture of early medieval England offers fertile ground for theoretical work of this kind. It will differentiate itself from current scholarship that connects thing theory and medieval studies and take that scholarship forward in three, interrelated ways: first, this book concentrates on the early, rather than late, medieval period in detail and moves across literature and material culture, from manuscript poems to epigraphic artefacts and monuments; second, it recognises the significance and relevance of Old English riddles and riddling culture to the role that things play in this early period; third, it acknowledges and engages with the fact

that the Old English *þing* was an assembly in the etymological, as well as material, sense.

The argument that I draw from these areas of focus is that, although things are endowed with voices in Anglo-Saxon literature and material culture, they also have an agency apart from humans. This agency is linked to: one, their enigmatic resistance, their refusal to submit to human ways of knowing and categorising the world; and, two, their ability to gather, to draw together, other kinds of things, to create assemblages in which human and nonhuman forces combine. Anglo-Saxon things speak yet they can be stubbornly silent. They can communicate with humans but, like riddles, they also elude, defy, withdraw, from us. Things collaborate with humans but they are also entangled with other materials, animals, plants, natural phenomena, images, sounds and words. Therefore, Anglo-Saxon things can teach us to rethink the concept of voice as a quality that is not simply imposed upon or attributed to nonhumans but which inheres in nonhuman ways of existing and being in the world; they can teach us to rethink the concept of agency as arising within heterogeneous groupings of diverse elements, rather than always emerging from human actors alone.

Old English words for things

Both aspects of this argument – enigmatic resistance and assemblage – are rooted in an understanding of the word 'thing' and its etymological predecessor in Old English: the *þing*. Evidently, some important theoretical claims have now accrued around this word in literary and cultural studies. Those of us who engage with such theory can no longer use the word 'thing' without thinking about it, perhaps tripping over it. Throughout his seminal essay, Bill Brown plays with the modern English word, remarking that it designates the concrete yet ambiguous in the everyday, an amorphous characteristic or a frankly irresolvable enigma, a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects). 'Things' is a word that tends, especially at its most banal, to 'hover over the threshold between the nameable and unnameable'.[25] As well as designating the enigmatic in the everyday, the word 'thing' may also allude to a drawing together.[26] Ian Hodder has made use of the word's original meaning of 'assembly' in Old English and Old High German to challenge a human-centred understanding of things as separate, bounded entities. This is how they may naively appear to us as

humans, but an awareness of the thing-as-assembly reveals that all things depend on other things along chains of interdependence in which many other actors are involved.[27] Of course, this approach owes a debt to the philosopher of science Bruno Latour, who imagined a Parliament of Things in which silent objects speak, in which passive matter exerts power; an assembly in which participants rediscover their connectedness to nature by acting out the voices of other beings.[28]

If the word 'thing' carries such weight in contemporary thing theory, then it is worth taking the time to examine the Germanic origins of the word *þing* and its various uses within the Old English lexicon. Very broadly, a number of dictionaries are in agreement that ModE 'thing' developed in the following way: it originates from the Proto-Germanic word **thengan*, meaning 'time', before developing semantically via 'allotted time' to the day or time for an 'assembly'; in the English language, however, the meaning moved on to 'subject for discussion in such an assembly' and then 'subject, affair, matter' and finally 'entity or object'.[29]

But this brief overview does not fully illustrate the fact that the word, or words, for things have always hinted at their ability to both exist and act in a variety of ways. Even if we look back at the (necessarily hypothetical) roots of the word in Indo-European and then Proto-Germanic, we find terms indicating a concept that is at once fixed and flexible. Some philologists suggest that the original Germanic sense of *thing* as a 'day of assembly' is ultimately connected to a base meaning 'stretch or extent of time'; this is derived from the Indo-European root **tenk*-, meaning 'stretch, draw out or draw together'. The *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology* goes on to state that this base meaning is related to the source of Old English *þennan* (or *þenian*) meaning to 'stretch out'.[30] Any assembly needs to be fixed, its time and location settled upon for practical purposes. Yet this early linguistic evidence indicates that, although such assemblies gathered bodies, ideas, arguments, animals and artefacts together on an allotted day in an appointed space and time, these *things* could also draw or stretch time out; they could interrupt the everyday rhythms of human life, extend conventional time frames, stretch out the pattern of events, in order to insert themselves into the world.

Historically, most Germanic languages associated the *thing* with the assembly. The Old English *þing* was originally a meeting or assembly and only later an entity, being, matter, and then also an act, deed or event. This is cognate with Old Frisian and Old

Saxon *thing*, again meaning assembly, as well as action, matter; and Middle Dutch *dinc*, lawsuit, matter, thing; Old High German *ding*, assembly, lawsuit, thing; Old Icelandic *thing*, assembly, meeting, parliament, council. The latter is especially interesting since the Icelandic national parliament is still called the Althing (literally, the 'all-thing'). Founded in 930 at Thingvellir, the Althing is the oldest extant parliamentary institution in the world. Representatives of Iceland's various districts would gather together each midsummer to hear the laws of the land recited, debate legal cases and elect rulers. In a less formal sense, the Althing was the social event of the year: an occasion for exchanging news and gossip, for negotiating marriages and business deals. Since all free men were eligible to attend, the Althing attracted farmers and their families, parties involved in legal disputes, traders, craftsmen and storytellers. This annual meeting therefore amassed a multitude of voices, with a variety of things to say, about a wide range of issues. In the Icelandic sagas, it is predominantly powerful men such as the *goðar* who speak at this outdoor assembly.[31] However, in a general assembly, a gathering of all things, surely a variety of voices should be raised. Who gets to talk and who does not? Who gets heard and who or what does not? What role do 'things' play in mediating or silencing or subverting a cacophony of competing voices? And what about the mysterious voice of the thing itself in all of this? It is noteworthy here that many of these assemblies carry legal connotations, too: etymologically, the early medieval thing was an assembly at which law cases were decided; or, in some Germanic languages, a thing could be the name for the lawsuit itself. This linguistic connection suggests that things have the ability to fix, link or bind human codes of behaviour. Again, the thing shapes the human world.

The Old English word *þing* covered a wide semantic range, encompassing action and inaction, power, passivity and possession, the physical and metaphysical. Alas, the Toronto Dictionary of Old English has not yet reached the letter *þ* (thorn) but for OE *þing* Bosworth-Toller gives us (I) 'a thing': including 'a single object, material or immaterial', 'a thing that is done, an action', 'an event', 'a state of condition', a 'matter' or a 'concern, affair', etc. But Bosworth-Toller also gives us (II) 'a meeting, court'.[32]

There is more than one instance in Old English where a *þing* designates an assembly, gathering or meeting. This sense is attested to in *Beowulf*, when the hero 'nu wið Grendel sceal, / wið þam aglæcan, ana gehegan / ðing wið þyrse' [must now with Grendel, hold a

thing (i.e. meeting) alone with the fighter, with the giant] (424–6).[33] In the same text *þing* is given the prefix *ge-* to indicate that is the outcome or issue of that meeting, where Beowulf 'bad bolgenmod beadwa geþinges' [awaited, bulging-minded, the battle's outcome] (709). *Maxims I* uses the word in this same way when it states, 'þing sceal gehegan / frod wiþ frodne; biþ hyra ferð gelic' [the wise must hold meetings with the wise; their minds are alike] (18–19). Whereas in *Beowulf*, the meeting is a violent physical clash, in the *Maxims* it is what we might nowadays call a meeting of minds. Things, in Old English, can designate material *or* immaterial, embodied *or* spiritual, encounters.

There is some overlap between the usages of the word for things in modern English and Old English, inasmuch as the *þing* could also denote material possessions, in the sense that is most common to speakers of modern English. Yet it is safe to say that in the earlier stages of the language the term *þing* encompassed a wider range of meanings than the inanimate objects to which the modern word usually refers.

Of course, this reminds us that one of the key distinctions made by thing theory is that between the thing and the object. We evidently have things in Old English literature, but where are the objects? Modern English 'object' is borrowed from Old French *object*, and directly from Medieval Latin *objectum*: that which is put before the senses, neuter of Latin *objectus*, past participle of *obicere*: to present, oppose, cast in the way of. For Lorraine Daston, this implies that objects are solid, obvious, sharply outlined and self-evident, that they 'throw themselves in front of us, smite the senses, thrust themselves into our consciousness'.[34] The term 'object' conjures up a history that opposes subject and object, mind and matter, self and other, and can connote 'an objectifying approach in which material matter is analysed, codified and caught in disciplinary discourse'.[35] As much as the subject may move and control and organise the object, the object, that which is *thrown before*, may, in turn, have the ability to humble or even form the subject, that which is *thrown under* to receive an impression. However we conceive of the dynamics, the subject and object remain related to each other. Yet this relation derives ultimately from their Latin word histories. What kinds of 'objects' are there in the Old English lexicon and how do they relate to the human subjects who see, hear, make, own, handle or exchange them?

If an object is that which is put before the eyes or other senses, then we find an interesting parallel in the OE *wiht*. These creatures

or created things are most often associated with the Exeter Book riddles, where they are strange entities to be seen, heard or talked about. The sword of Riddle 20 says 'Ic eom wunderlicu wiht' [I am a wondrous creature] and the same self-description is used by the magpie of Riddle 24 and the onion of Riddle 25, while the speaker of Riddle 29 claims that 'Ic wiht geseah' [I saw a creature] to describe the moon. In the riddles, then, *wiht* is used for a wide variety of things: weapons, animals, food, drink, instruments, celestial bodies. But *wiht* or *wihte* is also used as an adverb, as in Riddle 47, which says: 'Stælgiest ne wæs wihte þy gleawra' [The thieving guest was not in any way the wiser] (5–6). In this adverbial sense, *wihte* usually means 'in any way' or 'at all'. Kevin Crossley-Holland translates the line in Riddle 47 as 'The thievish stranger was not a whit the wiser',[36] attesting to the continued usage of 'whit' in this way in modern English, although the OED describes such usage as now 'archaic or literary'. In addition, the modern use of 'whit' most often expresses or implies the negative, as in the phrases 'never a whit' or 'not a whit'. OE had the related word *nawiht* or *nanwiht* (cf. ModE 'naught') which could function as an adverb ('not' or 'not at all') but also as a noun or indefinite pronoun. Bosworth-Toller defines *nawiht* as (I) 'nothing, naught, a thing of no value, an evil thing' or (II) 'as an adverb, not'. It appears in the accusative singular in Riddle 11, where the speaking cup claims, 'Ic þæs nowiht wat' [I in no way know] (5). From this evidence it is clear that *wiht* and its connected terms not only described a multitude of material things, but could also be used in a more abstract sense to relate a lack of wisdom, for instance, and even carried moral connotations, as in a worthless or evil thing. So, the word *wiht* straddles the bounds between the abstract and tangible, immaterial and material, manmade and natural, living creature and dead artefact. The reoccurring use of *wiht* in the riddles further identifies these things as lively, resistant and elusive.

The related term *awiht*, *awyht*, *awuht* or *aht* is another indefinite pronoun meaning 'aught' or 'anything'. Although this is a somewhat vague usage, the OE term *æht*, which also gives us ModE 'aught', has the more specific sense of 'possession, especially property, goods, wealth, treasure'.[37] In contrast to *wiht*, an entity to be perceived by human senses, *æht* refers to goods of value, things defined by ownership. These objects therefore stand in a different kind of relationship with human subjects. The word is used in this sense in *Beowulf*: 'Heald þu nu, hruse, nu hæleð ne moston, / eorla æhte!' [Now, earth, hold what heroes can no longer keep, the

property of earls] (2247–8). The preterite-present verb *agan* similarly means 'to own, possess, have' and could be used in relation to wealth, treasure, gold, silver, gems or other material items, as well as in relation to land, domestic animals or slaves. The word is found not only in literary texts but inscribed on material artefacts. A ninth-century gold ring discovered in Manchester, inscribed with both Roman and runic characters, claims in a first-person voice that 'æDRED MEC AH EAnRED MEC agROf' [Ædred owns me, Eanred engraved me]. A more complex variant of this formula is found on the eleventh-century, Anglo-Scandinavian, Isle of Ely disc brooch, which displays a verse inscription around its rim that reads:

> +AEDWEN ME AGE HYO DRIHTEN
> DRIHTEN HINE AWERIE ÐE ME HIRE ÆTFERIE
> BUTON HYO ME SELLE HIRE AGENES WILLES
>
> [+Ædwen owns me, may the Lord own her. May the Lord curse him who takes me from her, unless she gives me of her own free will.]

Even though this speaking object has a voice of its own, we may assume that the OE verb *age* puts the brooch into a subservient position as a material possession that has no independence apart from its human owner. It may be significant, though, that the inscription is on the back of the brooch, the part worn against the body, where it would have been seen only by Ædwen herself – or by the potential thief who had taken it from her. While the intimate, owner–property relationship between Ædwen and her disc brooch is undeniable, Karkov has observed that the power of the curse that follows the statement of ownership 'relies to a certain extent on her person not being present (otherwise the curse could not have been seen), and to a degree of agency being transferred to the object' for the brooch 'must be understood as having the power to convey threat if the inscription was to be at all effective'.[38] Thus, the balance of power between human owner and thing possessed was not always as hierarchical in Anglo-Saxon England as one might imagine.

Maðum or *maþm* is another OE word used to denote treasure. What is more, it is often used as a compound noun with the verb *giefan* to evoke the ritual of exchange: a *maþþumgyfa* is a treasure-giver, a king or warlord who deals out goods to his followers in exchange for loyalty, so that the thing given and taken binds two human beings together. But objects did not only accrue value via

ownership or exchange; the skill or craft that went into the creation of an artefact, and the display of that workmanship in the complex beauty of the item itself, also made a thing worth seeing, handling, owning or exchanging. *Searu* is an OE word denoting a device, design or artifice. It is an ambiguous word, and Bosworth-Toller lists a number of glosses where it is uncertain whether the word is used with a good or bad meaning. *Searu-* is used in a variety of compounds to refer to the skill or cunning invested in a crafted object. In *Beowulf*, *searu-* draws our attention to the highly wrought, aesthetic value of artefacts yet often carries dubious connotations. Grendel's glove is described as 'sid ond syllic, searobendum fæst' [roomy and rare, fixed with cunning bonds] but also 'eall gegyrwed / deofles cræftum ond dracan fellum' [all adorned with devil's craft and dragon's skin] (2085–8). *Searu-* did not refer exclusively to handmade, artificial items, for *searowundor* is the term used for Grendel's arm once it has been torn away by Beowulf and hung as a trophy in Heorot (920). OE *wræt* likewise describes a highly ornamented work of art, and *wrætlic* is an adjective applied to something that is artfully made, often used to invoke a sense of awe, as in the opening lines of *The Ruin*: 'Wrætlic is þes wealstan' [Wondrous is this wall-stone] (1). Once again, body parts can also be described as *wrætlic*. Grendel's severed head, this time, is referred to as 'wliteseon wrætlic' [a curious, beautiful sight] (1650) when Beowulf carries it into the mead hall for everyone to gaze upon. The Exeter Book riddles play on this overlap between adorned artefacts and curious or intriguing body parts which attract our attention with their unusual appearance. Riddle 44, for instance, describes something *wrætlic* that hangs beside a man's thigh. Stiff and hard, it enters a hole it has often filled before. The explicit solution is, of course, a key, but the implication is that this 'thing' is a curious sight that we cannot help but stare at in wonderment.

Finally, what about Old English words for signs and symbols? A *beacen* is a sign or portent. The TDOE states that the word can be used to designate a multitude of different 'signs' from the physical to the abstract, natural to manmade: miracles performed by Christ, the sign of the cross (with OE *beacen rodes* glossing Latin *signum crucis*), outward marks or gestures, standards, banners or monuments, idols, natural phenomena like the sun or fire, audible signals such as the sound of a bell. *Tacen* is another word for a sign, as well as a token or evidence of something. In *Daniel*, the writing on the wall to be interpreted by the eponymous prophet is

described as a *tacen*, showing or prefiguring imminent doom (717). Both OE terms – *beacan* and *tacen* – encompass a diversity of material items, but equally actions, events and phenomena that point to some referent beyond themselves, summoning up a metaphysical dimension that exceeds the mundane usefulness or functionality of objects. At the same time, however, many of these symbols retain the fragility and breakability of mere, everyday things; their hard, defining edges can shape the human self and body but those edges still blur and bleed into other things. As we shall see in Chapter 5, the so-called cross in *The Dream of the Rood* is not a fixed sign like a crucifix but a shifting thing, not yet formed or formable, losing its shape before it has the chance to take one.

To summarise this section, one might say that the range of Old English words for things reveals that they could play different roles in Anglo-Saxon culture: material or immaterial, animate or inanimate, elusive or owned, crafted and valuable, gifted or exchanged, but also autonomous, sometimes unknowable. The nuances of these Old English terms suggest that early medieval things resist being fixed in one form, function or ontological category. Words often try to capture certain aspects of a *þing* (or a *wiht* or *maðum* or a *searowundor* or a *beacan* or *tacen*) yet those words are also flexible and polysemous enough to reflect the entities they attach themselves to: words do not only define things; things can define their words.

Riddles, riddling and the enigmatic power of things

I have contended that the very word 'thing' and its Old English origins has played, and can continue to play, a central part in thing theory; but Anglo-Saxon culture has another claim on this ascendant area of study through the genre of the riddle. Literary scholar Daniel Tiffany contributed to the inauguration of thing theory by asking what poetic riddles may be able to tell us about the material substance of things. For Tiffany, when a thing speaks and takes on a verbal identity in riddles, it reveals its true 'substance'.[39] Tim Ingold has built upon some of Tiffany's ideas by arguing that materials are ineffable; they cannot be pinned down in terms of established concepts or categories. Therefore, to 'describe any material is to pose a riddle, whose answer can be discovered only through observation and engagement with what is there'. For Ingold, the riddle 'gives the material a voice and allows it to tell its own story: it is up to us, then, to listen, and from the clues it

offers, to discover what is speaking'.[40] Thus, the power and agency possessed by things has much in common with the way that the riddle works as a genre in Old English literature: riddles engage yet resist those who try to read them; riddles talk to us but also make us speak in response.

How does a riddle speak and how does a riddle make us, as readers, speak? The literary riddles of the Exeter Book use a variety of methods to disguise and defamiliarise things that were common in the Anglo-Saxon world: butter churn, bellows, key, mead, onion, anchor, fish, magpie, swan, cock and hen, sun and moon. An everyday item or phenomenon could be made mysterious by concealing its name, sometimes challenging us to 'say what I am called' or sometimes putting the name in runes to be decoded and rearranged or sometimes stating very obviously what the thing is but revelling in the curious nature of the creature or creation described anyway. Metaphor could also be utilised to take the familiar thing apart and put it back together, a means of temporarily representing things as other than they actually are, whereby each riddle-creature takes on the guise of another: a sword can be a chaste and celibate retainer, while an onion can pose as a penis or vice versa. Paronomasia is a form of word play often arising from the metaphorical language used in the riddles, deploying puns or punning to exploit the multiple meanings of words and cause deliberate ambiguity. Prosopopoeia is another frequently used technique in the Old English riddles, where the riddler communicates with the reader by speaking as another being or thing. In many of the riddles, the device of prosopopoeia is connected to the use of the first-person voice to create an element of surprise or wonder when a thing that one would not normally expect to speak describes its own creation, lifespan and behaviours. Other riddles adopt the more detached, inquisitive viewpoint of an observer who has seen or heard about some strange thing described in the third person. The tension between these third-person and first-person modes raises questions about the relationship between how we make meaning (hermeneutics) and how we define being (ontology): our recognition of nonhuman others that can speak ('I am') and be spoken about ('it is') helps us to 'enlarge both our sense of human perception and our understanding of alternate ways of being in the world'.[41] But riddling speech relies on the skilful deployment of silence for its effect. Silence can conceal key clues which, if spoken, would demystify the riddles and make the thing familiar again. Additionally, silence is as crucial as the incitement to 'say what

I am called' in making the reader talk. Those wordless gaps, those difficult silences, in which we are prompted to speak but fear that we cannot, or cannot speak correctly, problematise the assumption that humans always possess the power of speech and expose the limits of our ability to capture or pin down the nonhuman world by means of language.

These generic 'literary' devices are not exclusive to the manuscript page; they are commonly found on or across or around other material artefacts. For instance, the eighth-century Franks Casket features a riddle on its front panel that alludes to the former life of the whale from whose bone the box is made. The casket may also be using metaphor by describing this whale as *gasric* or the 'king of terror'. Not only does this riddle leave a number of ambiguous silences regarding the fate of *gasric* but the riddle itself (and what might be its answer) is encoded in runes. The Ruthwell monument likewise presents us with riddle-like runic texts on its north and south sides, in which a *galga* and a *rod* seem to speak in both the first and third person alternately. Prosopopoeia is utilised and the 'inert' monument imbued with sight, memory and voice. At the same time, the many silences left unfilled by the monument invite the viewer to bring their own sight, memory and voice into play. But the riddles and riddling devices used by whalebone casket and stone column alike cannot be divorced from their material context and they engage the viewer or handler in a tactile and mobile manner. Riddling was not a matter of purely intellectual gameplaying in Anglo-Saxon culture. On the contrary, there was something very visible, audible, tangible and kinetic about this trickery.

Indeed, reading (OE *rædan*) and riddling (OE *rædels*) are etymologically connected in Old English.[42] Riddling is a form of reading that does not look through or skim over words, or flick through pages, in the way that someone might read a popular modern novel. Rather, riddling asks for a reader who will engage with the words on the page or other surface in a sensuous way, drawing on a combination of sight, sound, speech, even touch. The recurring phrases that run throughout the Exeter Book riddles support this claim: *ic seah*, *ic gefrægn*, *saga hwæt ic hatte* (see, hear, say). The riddles of this collection produce responsiveness in their audience, who must be able to voice solutions orally and decode tricky sets of letters or runes visually.[43] The use of runes in manuscripts and elsewhere may combine the visual element of reading with touch, too; not only are runes incised into or carved out of artefacts in a three-dimensional manner that invites touch, but the shapes of

certain manuscript runes may also have been manipulated by successive writers and readers interacting with the page.[44] Reading riddles in Anglo-Saxon culture is a multisensory and multidimensional endeavour where words combine with images, sounds and materiality to simultaneously yield and defy solutions. It is a perceptual, as well as mental, exercise, and an exercise that discourages us from looking *through* textual objects.

The etymological link between 'riddle' and 'read' suggests that riddling is essentially a form of close reading. In fact, riddling can be seen as the *closest* form of reading. Riddles invite us to attend to the object thrown before us so closely, so carefully, that we glimpse beyond the veil of the material world, promising to reveal the hidden nature of things. Riddles insist on obscurity while revealing underlying links in the fabric of creation. Each descriptive component within a riddle can be applied to more than one animal, artefact, vegetable, weather phenomena or heavenly body; but in attempting to draw these elements together into one solution, the reader tries to make them cohere into a single named thing. In this way, riddles have much in common with 'things that talk' as defined by Lorraine Daston. For Daston, talkative things are often chimeras, 'composites of different species' that threaten to overflow their outlines. At the same time, there is a tension between 'their chimerical composition and their unified gestalt that distinguishes the talkative thing from the speechless sort'. Such things can circumscribe and concretise previously unthinkable combinations and thus become a 'paradox incarnate'.[45]

This description equally applies to the various *wihtu* depicted in the Exeter Book poems. Riddles and things share the ability to gather other things to them, embodying a tension between disparate parts and circumscribed whole. In addition to the agency of assemblage, another way in which the power of things resembles the riddle is in their enigmatic resistance and elusiveness. Brown defines thingness as the ambiguity that coalesces around the other side of the obscured object.[46] Or, as Harman puts it, 'like the moon, one face of the tool is darkened in the silence of its orbit, while another face illuminates and compels us with dazzling surface-effects'.[47] This warrants further comparison with the riddle, especially those of the Exeter Book which seem to lack clear and definitive solutions.[48] Even when we settle on one answer, we can never be sure that it is *the* answer. As a result, these riddles can never be objectified; they, too, are always partially obscured. As we say one name (shield, swan, wine, anchor, plough, moth, oyster,

creation) a myriad of other names hover on the periphery of our vision, dance on the tip of our tongue. Riddles, like things, have the power to resist human knowledge, human mastery. The efforts of the reader to try and fail, try and fail, to solve a riddle are not unlike the processes of making and breaking that things embody and enact. As John D. Niles says of the Old English riddles, many of them can be read perfectly well in several different ways and in any case 'finding the solution to a riddling text is scarcely the end of the experience of reading it'.[49] Similarly, one of the aims of this book is to complicate the notion of a completed artefact and to contend that the 'solid' or 'finished' object is not the be all and end all of our encounter with things. Just as a riddle may thwart our efforts to answer it once and for all, so too do things make, break and remake themselves in an ongoing process of becoming.

These initial observations on the affinities between riddles and things are the starting point for a theme that will run throughout this book. Each chapter will feature a thing that is also a riddle or at least riddle-like: in the first chapter, I look at the giants' sword in *Beowulf*, which shifts its shape and function from cutting blade to sword hilt to runic text to something else; in the second chapter, I focus on Old English and Anglo-Latin riddles and the way that the things they describe reshape conceptions of time; in the third chapter, I ask how the three-dimensional riddles of the Franks Casket have the power to move us; in the fourth chapter, I consider the mystery of the Word as embodied by the enigmatic, labyrinthine design of the Lindisfarne Gospels; and in the fifth and final chapter, I reflect on the unanswerable riddle that is *The Dream of the Rood* and the related silences and paradoxes of the ever-altering Ruthwell monument.

Speaking subjects, speaking objects and other things that talk

New materialists continue to wrestle with the fluid relationship, the back and forth, between the 'human subject' and 'nonhuman objects'. When exploring the intersections between modern thing theory and an early medieval culture, it is important to historicise this relationship and thereby question the apparently immutable boundaries that are drawn between human and nonhuman. What is deemed an object, or a speaking object, and who or what is deemed a speaking subject in Old English literature? How might the shifting boundaries between these two categories reveal shifting ideas about the location of selfhood and subjectivity, objecthood and

objectivity? It certainly appears that the power of speech could be ascribed across the subject–object boundary in Old English texts, as well as material culture. In fact, the OE concept of a *reordberend* (literally translated as 'speech-bearer') features prominently in such poems as *The Dream of the Rood*, *The Husband's Message*, the Exeter Book riddles and the inscriptions on the Ruthwell and Brussels Crosses, where both 'animate' human subjects and 'inanimate' nonhuman objects can talk.

Old English texts display an awareness that voice can be seen as well as heard, deciphered as well as spoken, inscribed as well as chanted; that it can be borne by or within a body as well as performed by one. Extant Anglo-Saxon culture provides ample evidence for an oral tradition in which poems (and laws, maxims and gnomic wisdom) were composed, recited, memorised and passed on. At the same time, Anglo-Saxon readers needed to decode complex combinations of letters, scripts and languages both on the manuscript page and on the surfaces of other artefacts. Most scholars now recognise that a sharp divide between 'oral' and 'literate' modes of communication does not reflect the realities of Anglo-Saxon England, and that oral poetry can involve and interact with writing and reading – encompassing everything from live verbal performance, to texts composed in writing but recited aloud, and texts written for the page but composed in a traditional oral style.[50] The interrelatedness of orality and literacy in this 'transitional' age may be glimpsed in the surviving literature.[51]

Beowulf famously opens with a reference to the courage of the Danes in days of old which 'we' have heard or learnt about through asking – strongly evoking an oral community that shares ancient stories by remembering, speaking and listening (1–3). However, the opening of *Beowulf* does not truly take place in any such environment, for the poem is written down in a manuscript, MS Cotton Vitellius A. xv, very much a literary codex that includes prose works and a number of illustrations, making this an artefact to be viewed as much as heard. Elsewhere, Bede's story of Cædmon summons up a seventh-century world where it was customary for a cowherd to recite poems he had learnt by heart (IV.24).[52] And yet, after being graced with the gift of song by God, memorising, ruminating on and reciting fitting Christian verse in front of an audience throughout his lifetime, Cædmon's poetic voice was preserved on parchment and endured across the Anglo-Saxon period because it was borne by the (transformed) bodies of the beasts he once watched over in the cattle byre when too embarrassed to sing.

In an atmosphere where 'orality' and 'literacy' coexisted and were interdependent, voice could, quite literally, move across the divide between human subject and nonhuman object. Anglo-Saxon poets, composers, compilers, scribes and other craftsmen must have been highly conscious of this, a consciousness reflected in many Old English texts.

Many of these texts feature the voices of what might nowadays be referred to as speaking subjects. A number of Old English elegies express individuality and perhaps even introspection. *The Wanderer* introduces us in its opening lines to an *anhaga*, suggesting both one who is alone and one who thinks intently, before speaking in the first person about hardships endured in a state of loneliness, bemoaning his inability to say what is in his heart even while doing exactly that in a personal speech-poem: 'Oft ic sceolde ana uhtna gehwylce / mine ceare cwiþan; nis nu cwicra nan / þe ic him modsefan minne durre / sweotule asecgan' [Often I must sing about my sorrow, alone each dawn; there is no one left alive to whom I dare speak my heart] (8–11). *The Wanderer* provokes our sympathy for the plight of a fellow human yet also offers wisdom and consolation, its anonymous voice still reaching out to us across the ages. *The Seafarer*, too, explores the nature of suffering in the poetic voice of a speaking subject: 'Mæg ic be me sylfum soðgied wrecan' [I can recite a true song about myself] (1). *The Wife's Lament* shares many features with both *The Wanderer* and *Seafarer*, but has the distinction of being spoken or sung in a female voice: 'Ic þis giedd wrece bi me ful geomorre, / minre sylfre sið' [I speak this poem full of sorrow about my own fate] (1–2).

Yet this kind of personal expression, the ability and desire to relate one's own life experiences, is not, by any means, unique to humans in the corpus of Old English literature. One immediately thinks of the speaking objects of the Exeter Book riddles, which sit alongside *The Wanderer*, *Seafarer* and *Wife's Lament* in the same poetic anthology. John Miles Foley has shown that, because the same alliterative verse form serves as the vehicle for all Anglo-Saxon poetic genres, the phenomenon of 'generic leakage' can be extremely common: that is, the diction and motifs associated with one genre migrate to another.[53] If we can detect generic leakage between the elegiac and riddling verse of the Exeter Book, then this overlap has implications for identity: as genres leak into each other, ontological boundaries become fluid or 'leaky' too. Critics tend to associate elegies such as *The Wanderer* or *Wife's Lament* with human speakers (men and women) and the riddles with

nonhuman speakers (animals and artefacts). However, if diction, motifs and narrative patterns can leak from one genre to the next, then it must be true that the experiences and emotions expressed in these poems can also criss-cross between human subjects and nonhuman objects.[54]

In Riddle 5, for instance, a thing that may be a shield (or a chopping board) also describes itself as an *anhaga*. Speaking in the first person, this solitary and thoughtful artefact goes on to relate the loneliness and suffering it has endured throughout its lifetime in a way that is reminiscent of *The Wanderer*.[55] Riddle 26 has a first-person speaker recounting the process of book-making from its own, personal perspective. Much like the human speakers in the aforementioned poems, the animal-turned-parchment recalls the hardships it underwent as 'Mec feonda sum feore besnyþede' [An enemy ended my life] (1). From the slaughtering of the beast, to the removing of hairs, the folding of the page and the act of marking skin with inky words, this poetic voice expresses the torment and torture it has known but then offers comfort, wisdom and consolation, revealing that 'Gif min bearn wera brucan willað, / hy beoð þy gesundran ond þy sigefæstran' [If the children of men make use of me, they will be the safer and the more sure of victory] (18–19). In both cases, the speaking object shows itself to be as capable of reflecting on its personal experience, arousing pathos and conveying hope to us as the speaking subjects of the previous poems. Even if literary works such as *The Wanderer* present us with 'a single complex persona', the equally complex beings that talk to us in the riddles question the notion that *The Wanderer* and other elegies offer a 'profoundly moving view of the human condition'.[56] For Anglo-Saxon writers, this 'condition' may well have been profoundly moving but it was not always exclusive to humans.

A lot of Old English poetry appears to offer a personal, heartfelt reflection on life, but these poetic words do not necessarily come from 'within' the speaker. It is important not to imbue this poetry with the Romantic aura of a later period. These are not unique expressions summoned up by a private individual; rather, they are often attributed to divine inspiration. Cædmon's poetic skill is depicted by Bede as a gift from God rather than a skill learnt from men and his 'hymn' is not the result of 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings'.[57] It is not individualistic human emotion or sensibility but an angelic visitation in the midst of a dream that catalyses a dramatic transformation in Cædmon, from shy cowherd who would flee at the sight of the harp to a skilled *scop* capable of

captivating an audience. In *The Dream of the Rood*, likewise, it is clear that the dreamer is relating something that comes not from within but outside of him. He says he will tell the best of dreams, 'hwæt me gemætte' [what (it) dreamed to me] (2).[58] The use of the impersonal verb implies that the dreamer did not dream his vision; it dreamed him or it dreamed to him. In both instances, poetic inspiration comes from an external authority instead of being something original to the 'poet'.

When God is not invoked as the inspiration for Old English poetry, a shared tradition is called upon. As Carol Braun Pasternack points out, the 'Hwæt' and then 'I have heard/I have found/we have heard' formula has a mnemonic value, linking memory and tradition to 'suggest that the following text is a commencement and that it has origins in a tradition circulating orally within the community or found in books'.[59] If it has been heard or found, then the poem or song cannot be said to belong to its 'author' in the same way that a modern text does; it is something out there already. If this poetry is inspired by God in a dream, or found in tradition, that is, if it comes from external, shared sources rather than internal, original sources, then objects should be able to talk as well as subjects. In this way, an animal or artefact can receive a poem upon or within its body as easily as a human can. Humans and nonhumans alike may perform as *reordberend*: speech-bearers. Moreover, the staged 'I' in *The Wanderer*, *Seafarer*, *Dream of the Rood*, and other poems, has 'not yet fully become a fictional narrator: the language remains formulaic rather than shaped to imply a particular subjectivity'.[60] This lack of individualised subjectivity allows objects to lay claim to speech and carry a voice across time and space, presenting a challenge to the modern day 'common-sense' view that only human subjects can truly speak whereas speaking objects must always be ventriloquised.

It may be counter-argued that there is no thing 'there' behind those literary texts in which an object talks. But this is not so different to the way that there is no human body there behind texts in which a subject talks. In his study of the Old English enigmatic poems, Niles makes the point that these texts 'put on display certain imagined actors (or voices) who are embroiled in certain imagined circumstances' so that it is 'up to the members of the audience to infer who these people are, what their stories have been, what makes the speakers "sing", what may ensue after the poem stops, and what wisdom one can gain by reading these things'. Niles warns against mistaking these imagined voices for

real human beings, even in those instances where we think we are dealing with a named author. For example, when analysing those poems in which the CYNEWULF runes are embedded, we should not pursue the question of individual identity too far, 'for then we would not so obviously risk mistaking for flesh-and-blood reality what is really no more than a rhetorical effect'.[61] A good deal of Old English poetry involves these (often riddle-like) performances, whereby a rich variety of roles are assumed and a multiplicity of voices are thrown. One might assume that an onion is not 'really' doing the talking in Riddle 25, or that a drinking horn is not actually speaking to us in Riddle 14, but neither can we know for sure that an authentic female voice utters *The Wife's Lament*, or that the speaker of *The Seafarer* ever fared out to sea. When I confront issues of prosopopoeia in this book, I will refute the notion that distinctly human attributes are simply imposed upon nonhuman others; instead, we encounter collaborative performances between human and nonhuman actors in which the nature of things (their materiality, lifespan, tendencies, movements) can shape ideas about the human self and the human world.

The aesthetics of prosopopoeia that we find in the Old English riddle genre, and in poems that draw upon that genre, can be encountered in Anglo-Saxon epigraphic 'speaking objects' as well. For Peter Ramey, these inscriptions demonstrate a vernacular concept of writing as a curiously material form of speech, and it is 'precisely this vernacular notion of writing as a voice that mysteriously inheres within the object, yet also stands apart and comments upon its own materiality, that informs the more concrete prosopopoeia of the Exeter Book Riddles'.[62] As such, the prosopopoeic voice is generated by the interplay of material and text. This interplay means that epigraphic speaking objects present us with a slightly different interpretive challenge to their counterparts in Old English poetic manuscripts. With the exception of riddles like number 26, in which parchment speaks, the formula 'say what I am called' is often uttered by an object that is absent and which must be summoned forth by the imagination and responding voice of the reader. Conversely, with epigraphic speaking objects like Ædwen's brooch (mentioned above) there is no riddle to be solved because the 'solution' is physically present, in the hand or before the eye of the reader. And yet, as we will see, these voices often play on their own materiality in ways that ask their human viewers or handlers to meditate upon the enigmatic relationship between words and the things that carry those words: sometimes

by connecting the inscribed voice to the material or materials into which it has been carved (e.g. the Franks Casket) or sometimes by creating a disconnect between speech and object (e.g. the Ruthwell monument).

Voices from Anglo-Saxon England are therefore shaped and altered by the material things onto which they have been inscribed. These voices are not found in manuscripts alone, but can be borne by weapons, helmets, rings, brooches, caskets, crosses, columns, sundials, even buildings. Nor do these voices always represent poetry in the purest sense; early medieval artefacts may be marked with poetic fragments, riddles, charms, curses, threats, names, claims of ownership and other forms of verbal address. What is more, they communicate across languages (Old English and Latin) and play with different scripts (Roman alphabet and runic fuþorc). Sometimes they speak in the first person and sometimes in the third person, and other times they display a complex interaction of both first- and third-person inscriptions. With a number of artefacts, it can be near impossible to tell what kind of inscribed voice is speaking – or even whether that voice is attempting to communicate with us at all.

The gilded silver fitting discovered in the River Thames near Westminster Bridge displays a prominent runic inscription that has defied interpretation to date. This is a thing that seems as if it *should* be talking but which fails to make straightforward meaning. It features a striking animal head, with blue glass eyes which, whilst fearsome, almost lend an air of intelligence. Its open mouth and sharp fangs hover between feral snarl and playful grimace, while its long tongue implies eloquence even as it loops round and ties itself to the back of the beast's throat. Archaeologists can only speculate that this artefact might have been part of the binding for a *seax* sheath, the rivets along its length probably holding it to the leather or wood of a scabbard. Another possibility is that it is a fragment of the ridge-piece of a gabled shrine. It has been broken, loosened, freed from whatever function it once served and now stands apart – curious, singular. Those remarkable runes promise to reveal more – what was this thing for, who made it, who owned it, why was it discarded? But the runologists are as stumped as the archaeologists. R. I. Page notes, approvingly, that the runes are 'clearly cut, finely shaped and elegantly seriffed' but unfortunately 'they make no obvious sense'.[63] Transliterated, they read:

| | s b e r æ d h t eo b c a i | | e r h a d æ b s | |

Each inscribed object speaks in a unique way, not simply due to the idiosyncrasies of the words, languages or scripts used, but because the voice of each object interacts with its materiality differently. The famous Alfred Jewel, dating from the late ninth century, reveals in a first-person inscription that 'AELFRED MEC HEHT GEWYRCAN' [Alfred ordered me to be made]. This inscription implies obedience and subservience and yet this humble voice cannot be divorced from its material setting: the reused Roman polished crystal from which the Jewel is made imbues this speaking object with both worldly and spiritual power, with rarity and purity, value and faith, opulence and innocence. This materiality is bound up with the purpose of the Jewel, for if this artefact was indeed once an *æstel*, used to skim the manuscript page and follow words when reading a book, then the light-reflecting, light-bearing crystal enhances its power as a pointer towards wisdom. The servile Jewel possesses a voice, but the servant can also turn master, teaching its human makers and owners how to see, hear and speak. The Jewel that was ordered to be made can, in turn, make us into readers.[64] Thomas Bredehoft examined the first-person inscriptions on Anglo-Saxon speaking objects and made a case for them extending knowledge of literacy through textual communities. Bredehoft claims that many inscribed objects were meant to be read aloud within literate circles by interpreters who did not necessarily have to be the owner of the object but who would lend their voice to it.[65] However, Karkov has questioned whether 'communal access to the texts via the spoken word was what gave them their efficacy and power' and whether 'it was actually necessary for the inscription to be read out loud by someone lending his or her voice to the object'. Instead, the power inherent in the inscribed statement or curse might have been increased 'if the object itself was seen as having its own voice, even if the words it "spoke" might not have been comprehensible to all'.[66]

Inscribed Anglo-Saxon artefacts could form and extend literacy within human communities. At the same time, the thingness of these things creates, alters or subverts inscribed voices in surprising ways. The materiality of an artefact can mould or remould linguistic meaning while the enigmatic latency and excess of things often resists human efforts to read, name, know and control. Talking things can even disrupt literate communities by bringing alien, partly incomprehensible, voices from distant times or places into their midst. What a thing refuses to say – the

manner by which it cannot be read – is as significant as what it does have to say.

If indeed many literate Anglo-Saxons were accustomed to seeing epigraphic inscriptions and knowing that they 'said' something and that the texts could be given voice, then it is tempting to speculate about how these speaking objects would have functioned in performance, tempting to reconstruct the moment in which these objects would have been vocalised, enacted upon a listener or group of listeners, as part of a social ritual.[67] Yet this assumes that all speaking objects will yield to interpretation. What about a thing like the Thames silver fitting? How would it have been possible to 'read' and perform an object that speaks nonsense? Lending voice to an object can animate it, enabling it to speak to its human users; but, when that voice speaks incoherently, then the thing once again resists and retreats from us. It is vaguely possible that the obscure and fragmentary inscription borne by the silver fitting represents runic magic.[68] But even this depends upon an extensive knowledge of runes and a belief in their magical powers. What happens when the rune-knower is absent from a social setting?

At some stage in its life history, the Thames silver fitting might have assembled together human beings (whoever owned it, whoever could read its runes), animals (its head evokes the appearance and power of a wolf), other artefacts (whatever it was attached to, whether a leather scabbard or gabled shrine) and maybe even gods or other supernatural beings. Somehow, though, the fitting found its way to the bottom of the River Thames – discarded, torn apart from the context which would have imbued it with meaning. This shift from object to thing alerts us to the difficulties of 'knowing' an entity that has been broken, or spoiled, or dispersed, or abandoned. Yet, as Ian Hodder reminds us, it is only because we take things for granted that they become invisible to us, that we fail to notice their characteristics, forgetting that they are connected to and dependent on other things, that they are not necessarily inert, but may have temporalities different from our own.[69] When humans can no longer use objects as we find them, we are forced to look at, rather than through, *things*, and our relationship with them is changed. We might look more closely and carefully at the blue glass eyes (looking back at us) of the Thames silver fitting or question why it has been tongue-tied. The obscurity of its inscription might encourage us to retrace relationships we had overlooked before, such as that between smith and warrior. Or we may

involve the silver fitting in different social and material contexts, linking it to other extant Anglo-Saxon artefacts and increasing its lifespan by recovering it from a watery grave and housing it in a museum. From the point of view of the Thames silver fitting it has (as Jane Bennett would put it) refused to dissolve completely into the milieu of human knowledge, but has endured across a stretch of time unimagined by its original human makers, breaking free from the social rituals it was intended for and entering into unanticipated relationships, forming new assemblages of humans and nonhumans. It has asserted its thing-power.

Talking with things

This introduction has established some of the key features of early medieval 'thingness' that I will be paying attention to throughout this book. Voice will be a central part of my discussion: how do things talk and how does their talkativeness shape or reshape the human voice? Time is another focal point: how do things resist being frozen in one form or function; how do they change across temporal spans and how do they carry words, ideas, bodies or technological processes from the past into the present and the future? Space is a third important factor: how do books or relics or monuments have the power to move human bodies in space; how do things assemble other things into a solid yet composite, unified yet paradoxical whole?

Chapter 1 starts with a discussion of the different ways in which human bodies and nonhuman things carry and communicate – or fail to communicate – knowledge. It engages with thing theory to demonstrate that both Grendel's mother and the giants' sword found in her underwater hall are riddle-like things that resist the kinds of reading that Æschere, a rune-knower and advice-bearer, was meant to provide for King Hrothgar. By killing and decapitating Hrothgar's reader, Grendel's mother highlights an anxiety within *Beowulf* about 'things' that defy human interpretation and convey monstrous, marginal or unknowable messages instead. Although *Beowulf* acknowledges that a wide range of artefacts can be read, the text also reveals that certain enigmatic things exceed their role as readable objects. Liminal things like the giants' sword carry alien stories and histories into the safety of the mead hall, disrupting a longstanding human reliance upon legibility and altering the way that literate communities interpret that which has come before them.

Those who wish to take the claims of thing theory seriously should slow down and 'try to linger in those moments during which they find themselves fascinated by objects'.[70] Anglo-Saxon culture invites us to cultivate a lingering fascination with the blade that melts like ice at the turning of the seasons, the candle clock that burns too swiftly, the stone monument that crumbles and fades, the bone that endures as a relic, human and animal skin that does or does not display the corruption of death. The second chapter of this book is therefore concerned with the 'thingness' of time. By refusing to remain fixed within one form, the speaking creatures in Old English and Anglo-Latin riddles invite human readers to rethink how our own bodies, as things among other things, may cross categories of age, role and gender over different stretches of time.

As the book reaches is midway point, I place emphasis on space as well as time; in particular, how a three-dimensional object uses its own shape, size and material substance to interact with us kinetically. Chapter 3 considers how the interpretation of the Franks Casket is bound up with movement. It opens with a brief overview of previous criticism on the casket in order to look at how different scholars have read it, but especially how they have moved around the box as they endeavour to solve its riddles. Is there a correct order in which we might read the casket? Can the reader finally solve it? The casket could instead be seen as a 'thing' that itself has the ability to move those who encounter it. In doing so, it actively forms human identities. The second part of this chapter explores the Franks Casket as an assembly. To address this issue, I draw on Daston's definition of things that talk, in which she identifies a tension between their chimerical composition and their unified gestalt. The Franks Casket is a thing that can be seen to circumscribe and concretise previously unthinkable combinations, becoming a 'paradox incarnate'.

Chapter 4 continues to pursue the theme of assemblage. This chapter looks at how the books, relics and other material things associated with the cult of St Cuthbert reshaped 'universal' Christianity within a distinctly Northumbrian environment in the seventh and early eighth centuries. I begin by moving the focus from an animal body (whalebone) to a human (saintly) body, thinking about how the saint – both as text, in the hagiographical evidence, and as relic, in the case of the incorrupt corpse – assembles and performs differing elements of Christianity through his body. But as well as acting as an assembly, the saintly body is also

a thing that crosses the boundaries between life and death, animate and inanimate, organic and artefactual. The second part of the chapter homes in on the Lindisfarne Gospels, dedicated to God and St Cuthbert. Like the Lives of St Cuthbert, the gospel book reshapes a universal sign (the body of Christ as Cross) into a perceptible thing.

The fifth and final chapter turns its attention to the other side of assemblage – that is, the way that things break up and break away. The poem usually referred to as *The Dream of the Rood* is a fragile thing that has been broken apart and pieced back together time and again. It is not a sound or coherent whole, in any of its forms (manuscript poem, runic inscriptions, etc.) but an elusive assortment – at once breakage and assemblage – that invites us to participate in its ongoing process of becoming.

With regards to the ordering of these chapters, I have opted not to treat these Anglo-Saxon texts and artefacts in a strictly chronological sequence. Rather, the main principles informing the chapter organisation are provided by theoretical and thematic concerns. Broadly, I start by restricting my analysis to the role played by nonhuman things within Old English literary texts, and then change tack to examine an extant artefact inscribed with texts and images, before combining these two approaches in the final two chapters to consider how things can be represented within texts while, in return, texts can be altered by the things into or onto which they have been inscribed. In doing so, we confront the limits of textual evidence for grasping materiality, but also the problems presented by actually existing artefacts that may have changed, moved or broken since the early Middle Ages. Another thematic organisational principle is the progression from issues of time, temporalities and change; to space, movement and assemblage; to fragility, breakage and failure. These issues spring from the central concerns of thing theory and inform one another, and, as such, I have selected case studies that best exemplify the points raised and situated them in a sequence that links one point to the next. I have primarily, but not exclusively, chosen Anglo-Saxon texts (*Beowulf*, *The Dream of the Rood*) and artefacts (Franks Casket, Ruthwell monument) that have long and vexed critical histories in order to see how early medieval things, when loosened from overly familiar discourses, can disrupt the disciplinary divisions that have been imposed upon them; I am interested in the before and after, the latency and excess, of the literary and material object of study.

The five chapters outlined here will establish that, in the period of English history we call Anglo-Saxon, humans at once used and relied on things to carry their voices. Early medieval patrons, makers, owners, handlers and viewers did not talk over or about or for things, but talked *with* things. This was a human–nonhuman dialogue, a dialogue that did not end with the Norman Conquest but has continued in the afterlives of Anglo-Saxon texts and artefacts and in the scholarship that has circled those lives. At the same time, this is not a conversation that can be easily contained by human discourse, the present study included. When we talk with things, something always has and always will elude us. This way of thinking is encompassed by the two quotes which opened this introduction. Both the Argentinean poet and the Anglo-Saxon riddler recognised that mere things shape our memories (the memories we hold and the memories others hold of us) in a way we cannot quite comprehend; they may seem like silent slaves while we are alive and animate and active, but as time stretches out we are the ones who are at the service of these entities, these strange beings with the ability to elongate our lives and prolong our voices, these things wrought by us and yet still wondrous to us.

Notes

1 Translation by Stephen Kessler, in Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Poems*, ed. Alexander Coleman (London: Penguin, 1999), p. 277.
2 This text, and all further references to the Exeter Book, taken from Bernard J. Muir (ed.), *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry: An Edition of Exeter Dean and Chapter MS 3501* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1994). Translations are my own.
3 Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986).
4 Bill Brown, 'Thing Theory', *Critical Inquiry*, 28:1 (Autumn 2001), 1–22; Bill Brown, *A Sense of Things: The Object Matter of American Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).
5 See Martin Heidegger, *What is a Thing?*, trans. W. B. Barton Jr. and Vera Deutsch (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1970); Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002).
6 Brown, 'Thing Theory', p. 3.
7 Another big influence on a burgeoning 'thing theory' in the early 2000s was Lorraine Daston (ed.), *Things That Talk: Object Lessons from Art and Science* (New York: Zone Books, 2004). I draw on Daston's ideas in more detail below and in subsequent chapters.

8 Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek and Graham Harman (eds), *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), p. 3.
9 Diana Coole and Samantha Frost (eds), *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 6.
10 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 3.
11 Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or, What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).
12 Levi Bryant, *The Democracy of Objects* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011); Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013).
13 Ian Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012).
14 Tim Ingold, *Being Alive: Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description* (London: Routledge, 2011); Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaelogy, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013).
15 I have touched only on those studies that are most pertinent to my aims; however, the literature on 'thing theory' is ever-expanding: see also Bill Brown (ed.), *Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Daniel Miller (ed.), *Materiality* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008); and the 'Object Bibliography' in Fiona Candlin and Raiford Guins (eds), *The Object Reader* (London: Routledge, 2009). Relevant works by other authors will be cited as needed below.
16 Kellie Robertson, 'Medieval Things: Materiality, Historicism, and the Premodern Object', *Literature Compass*, 5:6 (2008), 1060–80. Cf. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). Latour argues that the dividing line between the human subject and the nonhuman object was more porous prior to the seventeenth century. He states that 'modernity' is based on this false binary, this ontological distinction between inanimate objects and human subjects, whereas in fact the world is full of quasi-objects and quasi-subjects.
17 Kellie Robertson, 'Medieval Materialism: A Manifesto', *Exemplaria*, 22:2 (2010), 99–118.
18 Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (ed.), *Animal, Vegetable, Mineral: Ethics and Objects* (Washington, DC: Oliphaunt Books, 2012). See also Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Julian Yates (eds), *Object Oriented Environs* (Earth: Punctum Books, 2016), which explores the critical confluence between the environmental turn and thing theory.
19 Jessica Brantley, 'Material Culture', in Marion Turner (ed.), *A Handbook of Middle English Studies* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell), pp. 187–206.

20 Martin K. Foys, 'Media', in Jacqueline A. Stodnick and Renée R. Trilling (eds), *A Handbook to Anglo-Saxon Studies* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), pp. 133–48.
21 Bruce Holsinger, 'Of Pigs and Parchment: Medieval Studies and the Coming of the Animal', *PMLA*, 124 (2009), 616–23; Sarah Kay, 'Legible Skins: Animals and the Ethics of Medieval Reading', *Postmedieval: A Journal of Medieval Cultural Studies*, 2:1 (2011), 13–32.
22 Catherine E. Karkov, *The Art of Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2011), pp. 135–78.
23 Benjamin C. Tilghman, 'On the Enigmatic Nature of Things in Anglo-Saxon Art', *Different Visions: A Journal of New Perspectives on Medieval Art*, 4 (January 2014), http://differentvisions.org/on-the-enigmatic-nature-of-things-in-anglo-saxon-art.
24 There is, moreover, an ever-increasing interest in the intersections between Old English literature, thing theory and ecocriticism among postgraduate and postdoctoral scholars. See, for example, Helen Price, 'Human and NonHuman in Anglo-Saxon and British Postwar Poetry: Reshaping Literary Ecology' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Leeds, September 2013); Corinne Dale, 'Suffering, Servitude, Power: Eco-Critical and Eco-Theological Readings of the Exeter Book Riddles' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Royal Holloway, University of London, September 2015).
25 Brown, 'Thing Theory', pp. 4–5.
26 See Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. A. Hofstadter (London: Harper, 1971).
27 Ian Hodder, 'Human–Thing Entanglement: Towards an Integrated Archaeological Perspective', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 17 (2011), 154–77, at 157. See also Hodder, *Entangled*.
28 Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*.
29 See, primarily, the OED entry for 'thing' online at www.oed.com; see also C. T. Onions et al. (eds), *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1966); and Robert K. Barnhart et al. (eds), *The Chambers Dictionary of Etymology* (London: Chambers, 1999).
30 *Chambers Dictionary of Etymology*, p. 1134.
31 See, for instance, *Njal's Saga*, ed. and trans. Robert Cook (London: Penguin Classics, 2001).
32 Thomas Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary: Based on the Manuscript Collections of Joseph Bosworth Supplement, by T. Northcote Toller* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972). Also available online at http://bosworth.ff.cuni.cz/. Henceforth abbreviated as Bosworth-Toller.
33 This and all further references to *Beowulf* are taken from R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles (eds), *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight and Finnsburg* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 4th edn, 2008). Translations are my own.

34 Lorraine Daston, *Biographies of Scientific Objects* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), p. 2.
35 Hodder, *Entangled*, pp. 7–8.
36 Kevin Crossley-Holland (trans.), *The Exeter Book Riddles* (London: Enitharmon, 1978), p. 50.
37 See *The Toronto Dictionary of Old English Corpus in Electronic Form*, ed. Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos, Antonette diPaolo Healey et al. (Toronto: 1981–). Henceforth abbreviated as the TDOE.
38 Karkov, *Art of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 158.
39 Daniel Tiffany, 'Lyric Substance: On Riddles, Materialism, and Poetic Obscurity', *Critical Inquiry*, 28:1 (Autumn 2001), 72–98, at 75. I return to Tiffany's essay in Chapter 2.
40 Ingold, *Making*, p. 31.
41 Craig Williamson (ed. and trans.), *Beowulf and Other Old English Poems* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011), p. 162.
42 For discussion, see Nicholas Howe, 'The Cultural Construction of Reading in Anglo-Saxon England', in Jonathan Boyarin (ed.), *The Ethnography of Reading* (Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 58–79. I examine the connection between reading and riddles in more depth in Chapter 1.
43 Cf. Patricia Dailey, 'Riddles, Wonder and Responsiveness in Anglo-Saxon Literature', in Clare A. Lees (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Early Medieval English Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), pp. 451–72.
44 See, for instance, John D. Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems and the Play of the Texts* (Turnhout: Brepolis, 2006), pp. 96–100.
45 Daston, *Things That Talk*, pp. 9–24.
46 Brown, 'Thing Theory', pp. 4–5.
47 Graham Harman, 'The Theory of Objects in Heidegger and Whitehead', in *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2010), p. 33.
48 Whether this is intentional or due to lost folios is a moot point: for a summary of lost gatherings in the Exeter Book, see Muir, *The Exeter Anthology of Old English Poetry*, pp. 12–13.
49 Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, p. 308.
50 See John Miles Foley, 'How Genres Leak in Traditional Verse', in Mark C. Amodio and Katherine O'Brien O'Keeffe (eds), *Unlocking the Wordhord: Anglo-Saxon Studies in Memory of Edward B. Irving Jr.* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003), pp. 79–80.
51 Katherine O' Brien O' Keeffe, *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990); see also Mark C. Amodio, *Writing the Oral Tradition: Oral Poetics and Literate Culture in Medieval England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004).

52 Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969).
53 Foley, 'How Genres Leak', p. 97.
54 *The Husband's Message* is an example of an Exeter Book poem in which the difficulty of interpreting the identity of the speaker – human or nonhuman? – is intricately linked to the difficulty of defining its genre – elegy or riddle? For discussion, see Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, pp. 225–34.
55 Of course, if this riddle is solved as 'chopping board' rather than 'shield' then it reads more like a parody of heroic values than a tragic treatment of them. The OE word *bord* is polysemous enough to cover both possibilities.
56 Michael Swanton, *English Poetry before Chaucer* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2002), p. 112.
57 William Wordsworth, 'Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*', in *William Wordsworth: The Major Works*, ed. Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 595–615.
58 References to the Vercelli Book are taken from George P. Krapp (ed.), *The Vercelli Book*, ASPR 2 (London: Routledge, 1932). Translations are my own.
59 Carol Braun Pasternack, *The Textuality of Old English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 151.
60 Ibid., p. 14.
61 Niles, *Old English Enigmatic Poems*, pp. 309–10.
62 Peter Ramey, 'Writing Speaks: Oral Poetics and Writing Technology in the Exeter Book Riddles', *Philological Quarterly*, 92:3 (2013), 335–56, at 336, 341.
63 R. I. Page, *An Introduction to English Runes* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2nd edn, 1999), p. 182.
64 For a study of the Alfred Jewel, see Leslie Webster, '*Aedificia Nova*: Treasures of Alfred's Reign', in Timothy Reuter (ed.), *Alfred the Great* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2003), pp. 79–103; see also Karkov, *Art of Anglo-Saxon England*, pp. 212–18.
65 Thomas A. Bredehoft, 'First-Person Inscriptions and Literacy in Anglo-Saxon England', *ASSAH*, 9 (1996), 103–10.
66 Karkov, *Art of Anglo-Saxon England*, p. 153.
67 Ramey, 'Writing Speaks', p. 344. Ramey looks to Exeter Book Riddles 48 and 59 to give us a glimpse of speaking objects in performance.
68 See further R. I. Page, *Runes and Runic Inscriptions* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1995), pp. 120–1.
69 See Hodder, *Entangled*, pp. 6, 101–3.
70 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, p. 17.