

Introduction to the Exeter Riddles: Transcript

Nicholas Perkins

Hello everyone, my name is Nicholas Perkins and I'm here today with Dr Harriet Soper from Lincoln College, Oxford. She's an expert on the Old English riddles and I'm going to talk to her a little bit about the riddles that are here in our Ten-Minute Book Club entry, and a bit more generally about their context and a few ideas that come out from reading them. Hi Harriet! Nice to have you with us.

Harriet Soper

Hello! Thanks for having me.

Nicholas Perkins

The first thing I wanted to ask about was really the Exeter Book itself, this big manuscript book, in which we've got a collection of – what, around about a hundred riddles, I think it is? in Old English. It was left to the monastery in Exeter in 1072, but the book was already about a hundred years old by then. So, what do we know? Do we know anything about who might have composed these riddles and how they ended up in a big book in a monastery?

Harriet Soper

Yes, very interesting, because there's a lot that we don't know. In some ways they're quite a mysterious group of texts. It used to be thought that these were very much texts, well poems, that were composed orally, that were circulated orally by everyday people in everyday contexts. Kind of in a folk tradition, so kind of the equivalent of 'down the pub', basically. But now, increasingly, people are wondering if actually maybe the people who wrote these poems might have been writing them in a very learned environment, in a monastery, that kind of context, as well as eventually being written down in that context, and this is because this is where the technology was for writing the poems down, but also because the poems themselves have all these interesting links with learning of different kinds, language-learning, kind of spiritual learning. So increasingly, we're thinking that the monks and monastic contexts gave rise to these poems.