

Ideas about nature in the early Middle Ages: Transcript

Nicholas Perkins

We've mentioned already that lots of the riddles are about mysterious or strange encounters with natural objects or objects around the household. Is there anything in particular that the riddles tell us about how people were thinking about nature and natural process in the early Middle Ages?

Harriet Soper

Fascinating! Yes, so there's a critic called Jennifer Neville who talks a lot about nature. And one of the points she makes is there's no distinct word for *nature* in Old English, and I often think about that, and I find that very suggestive as an idea, because I suppose we're so used to nature as something that can be bracketed and separated from the human as something completely other. But if you kind of take that away as a presumption, and there's no word for nature in itself, then it kind of makes the human feel a bit more embedded in those other natural phenomena, you know? So I think it gets us onto ideas of things like macrocosm and microcosm, where certain things that happen in the human body are just a small reflection of something that happens on a grander scale. You can see that in the science of the period and things like the humours. The humours are present in and affect the human body, but they are something that ties the human body to the rest of the cosmos.

Nicholas Perkins

That's a kind of belief that your makeup, as it were, the kind of person that you are, is affected by things like the planets, when you were born... I suppose we still have ideas about that sometimes in, you know, in astrology and sort of reading your stars. But that was a really powerful belief in early medical science, we could say, that there is real relationship between you yourself, your body, and that larger, what we call that macrocosm, the sort of larger scale of how the world works.