CONCLUSION

THE PROCESS BY which Christian learning could be achieved was described by Augustine in *De doctrina christiana* 2.16.23–4:

> As for metaphorical signs, any unfamiliar ones which puzzle the reader must be investigated partly through a knowledge of languages, and partly through a knowledge of things…Ignorance of things makes figurative expressions unclear when we are ignorant of the qualities of animals or stones or plants or other things mentioned in scripture for the sake of some analogy…Just as a knowledge of the habits of the snake clarifies the many analogies involving this animal regularly given in scripture, so too an ignorance of the numerous animals mentioned no less frequently in analogies is a great hindrance to understanding. The same is true of stones, herbs, and anything that has roots. Even a knowledge of the carbuncle, a stone which shines in the dark, explains many obscure passages in scripture where it is used in an analogy; and ignorance of the beryl and of the adamant often closes the door to understanding.[1]

Augustine formulated the notion that language is a system of signs for the Western tradition. His thought about the inherent semiotic richness of the natural world had a deep impact on early medieval ideas—particularly through Isidore of Seville, who cited Augustine more than any other author in his works.[2] Augustine's philosophy of language has been criticized, by Wittgenstein and others, as being simplistic, though he never attempted to put forward a systematic semantic theory in the modern sense.[3] Augustine's idea that things were "learned by signs" was one of the foundations of early medieval ideas about language.[4] As noted in Chapter 1, it was Isidore in the seventh century who recognized the increasing importance of the written word, modifying Augustine's original thought: "Letters are the tokens of things, the signs of words."[5] Writing was not only the record of the spoken word, but also had an intrinsic value or power, which could be obtained by understanding their origin or etymology.[6] The subsequent reception of this idea, up to the tenth century, embedded the concept of intrinsic, hidden meanings into the very idea of text, from the letter to the codex. This

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1 "In translatis vero signis si qua forte ignota cogunt haerere lectorem, partim linguarum notitia, partim rerum investiganda sunt…Rerum autem ignorantia facit obscuras figuratas locutiones, cum ignoramus vel animantium vel lapidum vel herbarum naturas aliarumve rerum, quae plerumque in Scripturis similitudinis alicuius gratia ponuntur…Ut ergo notitia naturae serpentis illustrat multas similitudines quas de hoc animante Scriptura dare consuevit, sic ignorantia nonnullorum animalium, quae non minus per similitudines commemorat, impedit plurimum intellectorem. Sic lapidum, sic herbarum, vel quaeque tenentur radicibus. Nam et carbunculi notitia, quod lucet in tenebris, multa illuminat etiam obscura librorum, ubicumque propter similitudinem ponitur; et ignorantia berylli vel adamantis claudit plerumque intellegentiae fores." PL 34.46–7 and St. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, 43–44.

2 Elfassi, "Presence of Augustine of Hippo in Isidore of Seville."

3 King, "Augustine on Language."

4 "Res per signa discuntur." Augustine, *De doctrina christiana* 1.2.2 (CCSL 32).

5 "Litterae autem sunt indices rerum, signa verborum." *Etymologiae* 1.3.1.

6 Parkes, *Pause and Effect*, 21.

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approach ultimately blurred the line between reality and its interpretation. Just as texts, and indeed language itself, were a tapestry of meaning waiting to be read, so the physical world was a symbolic landscape that could be decoded in much the same way.

This symbolic landscape was developed as part of the compilation and re-compilation of texts that took place within miscellanies. The early medieval concept of the natural world had its roots in the Christian philosophical concepts of *natura* and *physica*, but it did not rely on them. As the manuscripts discussed above have shown, its features were quite different. Firstly, it was an intellectual concept which developed gradually out of both inherited and newly composed texts. In addition, its conceptualization was always very local in nature, dependent as it was on the requirements and the intellectual standards of the miscellaneous compilations which carried texts about the natural world. Moreover, when texts about the natural world, such as the *Physiologus*, were included in miscellanies, they were associated with salvation or morality as the essential religious goal. And finally, readers were taught practical ways to interpret these texts, based on allegory and grammar: texts had a very specific application that was bound up with the cultural role of miscellanies.

Early medieval miscellanies therefore offer a fascinating glimpse into a Church-wide effort to make the natural world intelligible as a part of God, and as a gateway to salvation, undertaken on a broad scale across the Frankish empire. The people who produced these miscellanies were highly educated monks, priests, and scholars, who, as we saw in Chapter 1, understood the realities of the environment but who were largely removed from its practicalities. The majority of the population was focused on "reading" nature in the ways that were necessary to ensure the successful growth of plentiful and various enough foods to provide for immediate needs, to pay tax, and to feed animals. People needed to do this continuously through changing seasons, while contending with both plentiful and scarce yields. In comparison to this life, miscellanies reveal a deeply unrealistic approach to the environment. Yet this approach mattered a great deal, as it taught that there was a more important future existence for humans not on this earth. Miscellanies didn't attempt to offer an alternative "reading" of nature to early medieval farmers and craftspeople, but they did provide training to clergy in co-opting the natural world for promoting a strong ideological message.

Throughout these miscellanies, we have also seen a coherent set of intellectual practices being developed, refined, and changed to meet shifting social and political practices. The preceding chapters have offered a close investigation of how this happened in practice during the early Middle Ages. The ways the compilations were brought together and used reflect many of the aims of the Carolingian project: the idea, rooted in the Bible, of betterment for both society and the self; the centrality of education and language-learning; patronage as well as the fostering of intellectual networks as a way of consolidating power. These miscellaneous compilations also reflect one of the major strengths of the early medieval period: horizontal knowledge exchange, embodied in the many texts, and re-contextualised texts, without a named author, which reflect the flowering of interest in knowledge even among those with modest training or skill. Transformative change could be, and

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was, effected through relatively humble manuscript books, which remain relatively poorly understood.

However, despite the small size of the manuscript corpus investigated in this study, it has been possible to make a number of observations about the organizational structures underpinning early medieval miscellanies. They demonstrate an evolution, from the eighth to the tenth centuries, in practices of compilation, that were closely linked to social and political changes. The precise connections between these changes and the associated compilation practices require further research. Certainly the ideologies of the Carolingian period come through clearly in the miscellanies produced in the late eighth and during the ninth centuries. During this period, as many scholars have already observed, book-making centres cultivated "house" styles that were reflected in books and script. By doing so, they made manuscripts, and writing, into one of the ways it was possible to make statements about institutional identity, as well as faith. Miscellanies fit perfectly within this context. They were well-planned and clearly laid-out books, carefully organized to respond to specific intellectual requirements. As discussed in Chapter 3, this, together with their participation in the conversation about salvation and reform, made them a very precise and powerful tool, and an important category of book in a culture which had raised books to an unprecedented status.

In the tenth century, knowledge about the natural world began to be recorded in different kinds of books. With the fragmentation of the Carolingian empire, the production of manuscript miscellanies declined. Thematic compilations—forerunners of eleventh and twelfth-century encyclopedias—began to emerge. Miscellanies were no longer practical tools, used in the active service of those working on behalf of ecclesiastical rulers, but rather repositories of knowledge. Their makers seem to have aimed to consolidate the learning of previous centuries. This, too, was a gradual process, which has not yet been fully investigated, and which took place at least in part in tenth-century schools. This not only demonstrates a shift in book production practices, but also a shift in how the natural world was understood. It had, by the early Middle Ages, become a fully Christian concept, combining both observation from nature and imagination about nature. Scholars and exegetes had succeeded in conceptualizing the physical world as part of a Christian cosmography. From the tenth century onwards, the natural world became solidified as part of this cosmography. Knowledge about the natural world became its own category of basic knowledge and was now taught in schools as a component of the liberal arts.

Although this was quite a different context from the preceding two centuries, and although the Carolingian promotion of knowledge appears to have been brief, the early medieval period did make a crucial contribution. During this time, inherited knowledge about the natural world was reworked and digested, while new ideas and new textual modes for those ideas were developed. Much of this processing and "retooling" for a new age was done, as the *Physiologus* manuscript corpus suggests, in miscellanies. The implications of this rich body of evidence for eleventh and twelfth-century knowledge building remains to be explored.

The miscellanies within which the *Physiologus* is found shed new light on the text itself as well. As its codicological context shows, it was not just a stand-alone work.

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It can therefore only be comprehended as part of the manuscript collections in which it was copied, which represented deliberate compilations used for promoting an allegorical understanding of nature as God's moral creation. Although the manuscript evidence suggests that it was a relatively popular text, it was not among the most widely read works in circulation at this time. Nevertheless, the *Physiologus* had the important function, within the context of its manuscript miscellanies, of unfolding Christian natural allegory, morality, and eschatology to its readers. Although its format was relatively simple, this meant that it was easily adaptable and flexible: an important characteristic for a successful text during the Carolingian period.

Although the *Physiologus* circulated in miscellanies, it was never broken up into extracts like the other works with which it was collocated: it seems always to have been copied whole from the exemplar. Its "bite-sized" chapters rendered further breakdown of the text unnecessary. It was either a sufficiently large commentary on the natural world, or an excellent locus for further expansion from other sources, such as the *Etymologiae*, within the miscellany tradition. An implication of this is that extracts were more important than whole texts for miscellanies. By prioritizing extracts, compilations continuously reconstituted early medieval Latin Frankish culture along new lines, re-drawing the boundaries of knowledge anew with each codex. At the same time, the compilers and scholars engaged in this activity did not deny the authority of antique and patristic authors, and their works. They simply sought to interpret their texts better through new contexts.

The manuscripts of the *Physiologus* reveal that the early medieval natural world was interpreted as an allegorical, moral, and spiritual work, which could be read and understood as part of the human journey towards salvation. The *Physiologus* manuscripts played an important role in this discourse, by making nature intelligible in literal, allegorical and grammatical terms. They, and the other manuscripts in the multilingual *Physiologus* traditions, remain a rich source of complex and surprising interpretations about the world.

Dulcis amice, gravem scribendi adtende laborem,
Tolle, aperi, recita, ne laedas, claude, repone.[7]

7 "Dear friend, think of the great labour of writing; take up [this book], open, read, take no offense, close, and put it back." From a poem composed by Walahfrid Strabo ca. 846. Berschin, "Vier karolingische Exlibris," 170.

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