Old English and Old High German Bird Names

In the collection of the Abbey Library of St Gall there are two manuscripts that contain Old English and/ or Old High German bird names. The context is the biblical book of Leviticus (the third book of the Old Testament), which contains the dietary laws1 of the Israelites and lists "clean" and "unclean" animals. Many of the animals must have been unknown to people living in North-Western Europe in the early Middle Ages. Translations into Old English or Old High German would have helped them understand this difficult text.

(1) Complete the table below by filling in the corresponding animal name in the missing languages. The Old English and Old High German names are given in the list below. Consult a dictionary if you are unsure about the Modern English names of birds.

fledaremustra – hroc – wituhopfa – meu – hragra – suuan –
reigar – ruoh – grif – swan – hreaðemus

Modern English	Old English	Old High German	German
	mæw		
swan			Schwan
	fealce	falco	
bat			
rook			Krähe
griffin	giw		
	uuf	ula	
	hupupa		
heron			Reiher

(2) For some of these animal names the link between the English and German names is very clear. However, some connections seem to have broken. What could be reasons for those breaks?

(3) Listen to the sound of the rook: https://www.deutsche-vogelstimmen.de/rabenkrahe/. Any thoughts on the origin of the Old English and Old High German name of this bird?

(4) Most of the Old English and Old High German animal names in the two documents could be assigned to an animal or at least a broader group of animals. However, one animal listed in Leviticus 11 is the "Cherogillus" or "Cyrorgillius". This animal has baffled medieval readers of the bible, and it remains unclear what animal it is. One of the manuscripts from St. Gallen describes it as an animal full of spikes. The other text adds that it is slow but violent and beastly and that it directs its anger at everything it sees. Draw an example of what you believe the "Cherogrillus" could look like.

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1 Speisegebote

Model Answers

(1) Old English and Old High German animal names

Modern English	**Old English**	**Old High German**	**German**
Gull/ mew	Mæw	Meu	Möwe
Swan	Swan	Suuan	Schwan
Falcon	Fealce	Falco	Falke
Bat	Hreaðemus	Fledaremustra	Fledermaus
Rook	Hroc	Ruoh	Krähe
Griffin	Giw	Grif	Greif
Owl	Uuf	Ula	Eule
Hoopoe	Hupupa	Wituhopfa	Wiedehopf
Heron	Hragra	Reigar	Reiher

(2) In its history English had contact with many other languages; between Old English and Modern English some words were adopted from other languages. The word *bat*, for instance, was borrowed perhaps from a Swedish dialectal form *natt-batta* ('night-bat'). For many birds and animals, different dialectal names existed (and still exist) side by side (cf. Swiss German *Flättere* for Standard German *Fledermaus*).

(3) Medieval illustrations of the chyrogrillus:

The animal is variously identified with:

- the rock hyrax (a small mammal)
- a hare
- a hedgehog
- a porcupine
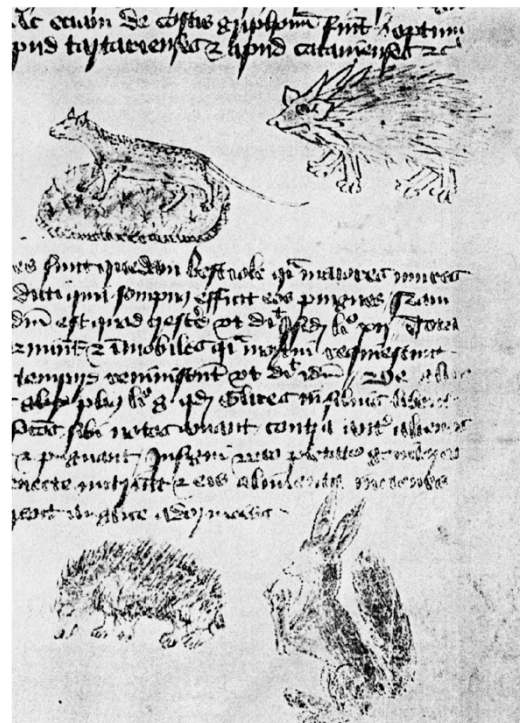- a squirrel
- a dog-like animal
- a wild cat
- a crocodile

Figure 3. Cambridge, University Library MS Gg. VI. 5 f. 10r