Maps and Monsters in Medieval England

Asa Simon Mittman

STUDIES IN MEDIEVAL HISTORY AND CULTURE

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Asa Simon Mittman

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For Michele—

My world has more than enough monsters, but only one angel.

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Introduction

Medieval English Manuscripts, Maps and Monsters: A User's Guide

The first folio of an Anglo-Saxon manuscript of Isidore's popular *De Fide* opens with a penned initial 'S' composed of two figures.¹ (Fig. 1) The top curve of the letter is formed by a tonsured monk holding a cross-staff, who gestures to his eye with the long fingers of his oversized hand, his gaze fixed on the text he helps to form. The momentum of his body, emphasized by a line running along his back from his head to his feet, carries him forward, tumbling, toward his text. The untowered figure below gestures with an

Figure 1. London, British Library, Royal 6. B.viii, f. 1v, Human Initial, Isidore's *De Fide*. (By permission of the British Library.)

open hand toward the script. With a swathe of his robe, he holds a book—likely this manuscript. The lower figure swirls upward, again in the direction of the text block. For the elite, educated Anglo-Saxon viewer, the message would have been clear: “Look closely!” the top figure silently shouts; “at this!” adds his companion.

This image, like many others produced in Anglo-Saxon England, aims to teach the reader how to read both texts and images. These processes, unlike our modern approaches to reading, involved a slow, meditative ingestion and rumination in order to draw out various levels of meaning in the text.² Drawing on the Kosher laws in Leviticus for a metaphor, this process is described by many medieval authors as *ruminatio*, that is rumination, literally chewing over and over as a cow does with her cud.³ The Venerable Bede, an inexhaustible source of observations about early medieval England, uses the same metaphor in his account of the first poet of the English vernacular. The illiterate cowherd Cædmon, having seen a miraculous vision, produced his *Hymn*. He is then presented with “the course of sacred history” in order that he may produce further poetry: “He turned all which he was able to learn by listening and memorizing—just like a clean animal chewing its cud—into the sweetest song.”⁴ This metaphor, more resonant in an agrarian culture than in our own, not only implies careful consideration, but also suggests the inherent indigestibility of the unprocessed text or image. In this climate, works were designed to sustain the inevitable *ruminatio*. Hence, any text or image that yields all its meaning after a cursory first glance would likely have been considered inadequate.

The value of close reading was not only conveyed by images of pious clergymen. The metaphor of *ruminatio* was also enacted through images of monsters, which are found throughout the period gnawing on the texts they help to form. The violent, gnashing beasts of the fabulous Junius Psalter, for example, frequently lash out with sharp fangs at the sacred text before them.⁵ (Fig. 2) Since the Book of Psalms was the very centerpiece of monastic devotion and contemplation, these monsters, these literal embodiments of rumination, are not as out of place as they might first seem.

The present viewer is thus required to associate these monsters, living in the margins of the text, with the pious monks by whom they were painted. If this at first might seem incongruous, or even improper, a brief comparison of the beast from the Junius Psalter and the monastic figure from the manuscript of Isidore’s *De Fide* reveals their close functional and formal affinities. Both lunge forward, swirling toward their texts. Both stare with large eyes at the letters before them. And, beyond these compositional similarities, both are bent and distorted, their bodies twisted to form the first letters of their texts.

Figure 2. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius 27, f. 34v, Monstrous Initial, the Junius Psalter. (By permission of the Bodleian Library, the University of Oxford.)

Whereas the monk may encourage us to pay close attention with a milder air, the fang-toothed, bug-eyed monster nonetheless serves as an exhortation of sorts, driving us with its own furious energy toward the psalm before it.

Why were manuscripts worth such attention to medieval readers and, by implication, why are they now worth such close attention by art historians? The *Liber scintillarum*, a florilegium collected by Defensor which was

translated into Old English and circulated throughout England, contains a passage by Isidore—the same versatile seventh-century encyclopedist and theologian who penned the *De Fide*—that informs us that “he who wishes to be with God eternally ought to pray frequently and to read frequently; for when we pray we speak with God, but when we read God speaks with us.”⁶ In a monastic context, a life focused solely and intently on God, reading manuscripts was a primary means of access to the spiritual world and, at least in this passage, takes precedence over individual prayer. A bilingual Anglo-Saxon manuscript of *The Rule of Saint Benedict*, written in the tenth century, tells its readers:

But for those who would rush to the perfection of the way of life, there are the teachings of the Holy Fathers, the observance of which leads a man to the height of perfection. For what page or what speech of the divinely authored books of the Old and New Testaments is not a most lawful rule for human life? Or what book of the Holy Catholic Fathers does not echo how we may come by a straight path to our Creator?⁷

This passage is provided in the original Latin and followed by an Old English translation, in order that the instructions not be misunderstood.⁸ Although Benedict does not mention images in this passage, elsewhere in his *Rule*, he discusses the virtues of the “labor of the hands,” and makes allowances for craftsmen to practice their trades, as long as they may remain humble while doing so.⁹ These brief yet meaningful comments can enable us to understand the production of innumerable illuminated manuscripts, created within an ascetic monastic context for a hyper-consciously contemplative audience. They were vital sites of connection between an earthbound reader and his heavenly aspirations, and as such could command nearly limitless attention by their creators and readers. They now serve as rewarding sites for the extended contemplation of modern viewers wishing to understand the works that now stand before them.

Who were the Anglo-Saxons who created and consumed the medieval books under discussion? In their writings from Bede onward, the Anglo-Saxons represent themselves as Roman Christians. However, it must be noted that they were living, writing and creating a culture far from Rome and Jerusalem, the sites that would have been considered most sacred and important to their spiritual well-being. This self-imposed exile from all that was central to Christian belief caused an anxiety to arise about their place on the earth, which was in turn viewed as a reflection of their place within God’s divine plan. This may account for the unusually high number of world

maps—indeed, maps of any and all kinds—surviving from medieval England. These maps, like our own modern maps, reveal more about their creators than they do about the regions they cover. They therefore command—and would have received—extended rumination.

Although medieval England may well have been a period “notable more for its discontinuities” than its cohesion, there are a few cultural threads that run throughout the period, binding it together even if only loosely.¹⁰ These ideas appear in both the art and literature of the Anglo-Saxons and Anglo-Normans, and I will treat these forms of cultural expression together, as they were produced and experienced. Several of the images to be discussed appear in manuscripts also containing relevant poetic texts, the most notable being London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A.xv, which contains an illuminated encyclopedia of monstrous races known as the *Marvels of the East* as well as the only surviving medieval copy of *Beowulf*, which pits its eponymous hero against the terrifying, homophagic Grendel and his monstrous mother.¹¹ These works were seen as sufficiently interconnected to bind them together in a single manuscript; both then and now, a reading of one helps to inform a reading of the other.

Of course, much of the art produced in this period was explicitly Christian, with doctrinal and didactic emphases on Gospels and Psalters, on images of Christ and the saints.¹² But what are we to make of the many images that are not overtly or even indirectly devotional? How can we come to terms with the overwhelming array of monsters that lurk at the edges of images and often force their way into the center? These monsters, half-human hybrids and bristling dragons were just as essential as images of God and his heavenly hosts for the medieval viewer, whose universal spectrum was broad enough to contain at one end holy perfection and at the other the most wretched and abject, the vile and the absolutely evil. Medieval English viewers would likely have located themselves somewhere between these two extremes, and the lower end of the scale was no less important than the higher end in this process of identity formation. Many cultural groups have sought to define themselves through “an ongoing process of *dependent* differentiation,” establishing themselves in relation to their Others, but for the Anglo-Saxons, this “definition by means of difference” was particularly crucial.¹³ In this way, as Michael Camille argues, “the centre is . . . dependent upon the margins for its continued existence.”¹⁴

The Anglo-Saxons had many genuine Others with which to compare themselves—the painted Picts to the north, the Celts to the west and of course, the Vikings and Danes, who periodically landed unannounced for plunder or trade. When the Normans arrived, this remained the case.

Nonetheless, living in self-perceived exile from Continental Europe, these groups were compelled to surround themselves with images of even more disparate Others, monsters that, through their extreme outlandishness, cast their creators as paragons of normality. For the sake of this study, I wish to define “monster” broadly. This term seems, often, to be used as a catch-all phrase which stands in for “everything else.” Once proper people, plants, animals, divine and demonic beings have been accounted for, what remains are the oddities of creation, which I would describe as the monsters. They are often the in-between (such as half-human hybrids) or somewhat magical (fire-breathing or dream-controlling), beings somehow, in some way outside of the ordinary. I will expand on these issues and definitions throughout.¹⁵

In the chapters which follow, I examine a number of images appearing in a variety of contexts. Part One deals with medieval maps and geographical texts. These works, and the monsters they contain, not only reflected Anglo-Saxon views; they also helped to shape them. Part Two focuses on the semi-human, composite monstrous races of the *Marvels of the East*. These wondrous beings were called into existence in order to provide a basis of comparison through which their creators might exercise and exorcize their anxieties about their identities as Anglo-Saxons and as human beings. Part Three covers monster-inhabited initials, concentrating on the fluidity of the boundary separating men from beasts.

PROBLEMS OF SOURCES AND HISTORICAL DEFINITION

Vast amounts of material culture have been lost from the medieval period. C. R. Dodwell enumerates art’s many enemies, medieval and modern: grave robbers, fire, reconstruction of churches, reclaiming of precious metals and gems, tithings and Danegelds, raiders, and so on.¹⁶ Anglo-Saxon themselves often wrote about these losses.¹⁷ So much has been lost to the caprices of time and nature that Dodwell rightly raises the possibility that “we have [no works] that the Anglo-Saxons themselves would have considered impressive from the later and longer Christian period.”¹⁸ George Henderson acknowledges that the volume of loss makes the rules of production, consumption and interpretation difficult to define in this period.¹⁹ On account of the great losses, I have cast a wider net than the traditional historical boundaries might allow. Strictly speaking, the Anglo-Saxon period begins with the entrance of the Angles, Saxons and Jutes into England, some time in the fifth century and ends on October Fourteenth, 1066, at the moment Harold is killed. The initial boundary is uncertain, since all accounts were written much later and the endpoint, while extremely precise in its chronology, still

does not provide the sort of closure we might desire. Although the crown had passed hands, it has been widely acknowledged that Insular culture was slow to react. Archeological, stylistic, linguistic, ecclesiastical and political history all show surprising continuity in the century or two following 1066.²⁰

On account of the many continuities, and the great losses, I believe that it is not merely helpful but indeed necessary for a study of this sort, which seeks to understand broad cultural notions, to examine all available evidence at its disposal in order to gain a more complete understanding of the complex works of art and literature under consideration. Certain themes were of enduring importance, relevant in the sixth century when Gildas wrote his *De excidio Britonum* (*The Fall of Britain*) and still relevant seven centuries later when of Richard of Haldingham created the Hereford *Mappa-mundi*.²¹ The discussion which follows will be primarily focused on the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries. This period begins with the era of the Benedictine reform, which was accompanied by an increase in manuscript production, and carries through the years following the Conquest. I will make two chronological exceptions: I will look ahead to the thirteenth century's efflorescence of great world maps—which I will present as the outgrowth of a centuries-old tradition of geographical thought—and I will gaze back to select texts and images created in the early Anglo-Saxon or Insular period, but housed, copied, read and appreciated throughout the centuries under discussion. By reaching across the boundaries traditionally separating Early from High and Anglo-Saxon from Anglo-Norman, we may gain a clearer understanding of the issues of marginality and monstrosity—issues which are themselves frequently characterized by a refusal to obey just such rules and boundaries.