Monsters and the Exotic in Early Medieval England

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Abstract
The dominant literate culture of early medieval England – male, European, and Christian – often represented itself through comparison to exotic beings and monsters, in traditions developed from native mythologies, and Classical and Biblical sources. So pervasive was this reflexive identification that the language of the monstrous occurs not only in fictional travel narratives, but at the heart of constructions of the native hero as well as the Christian saint. In these constructions we read the central contradiction in this literature: the monster must be ‘other’ and yet cannot be absolutely so; on the contrary, the monster remains recognizable, familiar, seductive, and possible. In this essay, we discuss textual sources for the early medieval monstrous, sources ranging from Pliny to Augustine and Isidore. As we survey early medieval texts dealing with the monstrous in genres including catalog, epic, and hagiography as well as visual depictions in manuscript illustration and the mappaemundi, we consider historically particular cultural and political motivations for the representation of the monstrous in these texts, among them the early Christian conversions and shifting national boundaries.

Introduction
Societies, medieval as well as modern, define themselves not only through introspection but through an outward gaze toward what they perceive as other cultures, other races, or other species. Through representation of and comparison to these ‘others’, societies and the subjects who comprise them can attempt to establish those qualities by which they wish to be defined.

In the early Middle Ages, the dominant literate culture – male, European, and Christian – often represented itself through its comparison to exotic, fantastic beings, monsters, and monstrous humans. So pervasive was this fascination with and reflexive identification through the literally monstrous other that when experientially real and known cultural and religious others, such as Jews and Muslims, were evoked in early medieval Christian literature, they were often rendered in precisely the language of the monstrous (Strickland 8–9). John Friedman notes, for example, a

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medieval visual depiction of the assembly of nations at Jerusalem which presents one group in Islamic costume and with the heads of dogs (63). Here explicitly representation of an experientially real ‘other’ for the early medieval West merges with representation of the monstrous. The ease with which such merging could occur powerfully voices the fact that representations of the monstrous cannot be dismissed as simply literary, or simply mythological, fabulous, imaginary: on the contrary, the anxieties articulated through these representations reflect both medieval belief in their ‘real’ existence and the danger that those anxieties could and would be played out in violent interaction with the real people represented through them.

The language of the monstrous also lay at the very heart of constructions of both the hero and the Christian saint. In these constructions we can see clearly the contradiction integral to the figure of the monstrous ‘other’ in the early Middle Ages: the monstrous ‘other’ is not absolute, stable, or firmly outside the boundaries of the normative. On the contrary, the ‘other’, like the monsters who so often embody it, remains recognizable, strange yet familiar, a possible version of oneself.

Why a Literature of the Monstrous and Exotic in Early Medieval England?

Before our discussion of backgrounds, sources, texts, and readings, we begin with the question: Why a literature of the monstrous and exotic in the early Middle Ages? That is, we ask why such a literature might have developed, but also how that development is distinctive – how, that is, the literature of the monstrous in early medieval England is different from that of the present day.1

Among possible reasons for the development of what we might call a genre of the monstrous and exotic, we locate first a body of mythological material we can assume is, in broad strokes, shared among Germanic peoples, among them the Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians. This mythological material, articulated, for example, in Snorri Sturlson’s Gylfaginning, contains not only a vast array of giants and hybrid creatures, but also a cosmogony in which the human world is created from the spectacular dismemberment of the body of the giant Ymir. The literature of the monstrous develops in Anglo-Saxon literature thus in part as a reflection of this native body of tradition. This tradition also perhaps gives the Anglo-Saxon literature of the monstrous some aspects of its distinctive character: as the broken body of Ymir makes up the world, the monstrous in this early medieval literature is associated not simply with that which threatens human civilization, but also with that which creates and sustains it.

Because literate culture in Anglo-Saxon England is dominantly Christian, however, and because, especially in the early period, textual production occurs in a monastic context, this body of native tradition can be summoned via allusion, but remains associated with a repudiated paganism.
As Jacques Le Goff has argued for the broader medieval period, ‘[t]he roots of the marvelous are almost always pre-Christian. The traditions in question being continuous, medieval Christianity was obliged to confront them throughout its history’ (28). This confrontation can take the form of repression or erasure, but also can include incorporation. Of course, Christianity has its own monstrous, the beasts and giants we will discuss below. Hence we find in some early medieval explicitly Christian texts at once extension of Christian monstrous figures and striking incorporations of monstrous figures from other traditions.

The dominance of Christianity in the production of texts provides yet another motivation for the development and persistence of an Anglo-Saxon literature of the monstrous and exotic. Anglo-Saxon England is converted to Roman Christianity through the mission of Augustine of Canterbury at the end of the sixth century. In the narrative he provides of Augustine’s journey to convert the Anglo-Saxons, the Venerable Bede explains that Augustine, setting out from cosmopolitan Rome, becomes overwhelmed with fear at the idea of a journey to a barbarous people at the edges of the known world (Bede 68–79). In Augustine’s fear, at that originary moment for Christianity in England, we can see clearly how the position of Anglo-Saxon literate Christians might lend itself to the development of a literature of the monstrous: literate, Christian Anglo-Saxons found themselves at once part of a powerful Christian culture, and also identified as those dwellers at the very fringes, margins, or borderlands of that culture, against whom Christian culture defined itself; that is, literate Christian Anglo-Saxons found themselves, within that culture, in the position of the monstrous.

In addition, from the first migrations, Anglo-Saxon England is a territory of dramatically shifting and contested borders: from the instability of the early kingdoms to the Scandinavian invasions, settlement in the Danelaw, West-Saxon expansion, renewed hostilities, Danish rule, and finally the Norman Conquest, territorial borders, and with them conceptions of what it means to dwell within them as ‘English’ men, are under nearly constant renegotiation. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen has argued,

[b]ecause of its diversity and because of its permeable, perpetually transgressed borders, Anglo-Saxon England was relentlessly pondering what it means to be a warrior, a Christian, a hero, a saint, an outlaw, a king, a sexed and gendered being. (Cohen 4–5)

Hence, Cohen concludes, ‘It is not surprising, then, that the monster became a kind of cultural shorthand for the problems of identity construction, for the irreducible difference that lurks deep within the culture-bound self’ (5).

Why, then, an early medieval English literature of the monstrous and exotic? Because the foundational cultures of early medieval England – Germanic as well as Christian – relied on such figures; because the conditions of literacy made such figures intensely relevant; because,
throughout the period, political and social conditions warranted the representation both of a hybrid ‘body’ of the state and of an externalized embodiment of what that state excluded; and because, in the course of this period, these fabulous narratives acquired the status of truth, truth as least as powerful as empirical observation.

THE MONSTERS AND ‘THE EAST’

While many cultures in the Middle Ages believed that there were monsters of various sorts living in the forests and fens just outside of their towns, medieval texts tend to focus their attention on a semi-mythical region referred to as ‘the East’. In the early Middle Ages, concepts of the East did not extend into East Asia, but rather encompassed the so-called Near East. Although geographically closer to England, this territory was distant enough to ensure that few European travelers would visit it. This uncrossable distance thus protected the reader or viewer from direct contact with the monstrous, and protected accounts of the monstrous from debunking by first-hand observation.

The location in ‘the East’ was not in itself essential to the geography of the monstrous; rather, the monstrous was defined by its location on the periphery, beyond the pale, at the edge of the world. When this edge shifted westward to the New World in the fifteenth century, the wonders shifted with it.

Sources: Biblical Monsters

BIBLICAL GIANTS

In the Middle Ages, the Bible was taken to be literally accurate in its details. Jerusalem, for example, is identified as the center of the world, and so it was literally believed to be, as represented on many medieval maps of the world (Psalm 73, Ezekiel 5:5). This biblical world view is essential to an understanding of monsters in medieval culture. Unlike most modern readings, the Bible as read by its medieval audiences is brimming with monsters, and thereby lent the most powerful authority to medieval beliefs about such beings.

Perhaps the most common of biblical monsters are giants, the most famous of which is Goliath. However, in addition to the Philistine champion, we find a host of antediluvian giants, appearing as early as Genesis 6:4: ‘There were giants on the earth in those days’. We also read of races of giants, such as the Anakim:

And they have slandered the land they had examined before the sons of the house of Israel, saying, ‘The land which we have inspected devours its inhabitants. Its people, whom we have seen, are of great stature. There we have
seen certain monsters who are the sons of Anak, of the race of Giants, by whom we were seen as if we were locusts’. (Numbers 13:33–4)

There are also other named giants, such as Og, King of Bashan, who ‘remained from the stock of the giants. His bed of iron, which is in Rabbath, of the sons of Ammon, is nine cubits long and four wide by the measure of a cubit of a man’s hand’ (Deuteronomy 3:11).

Modern readers might be tempted to interpret these passages as either metaphorical or, if literal, as if referring to humans of moderately large stature. In contrast, Saint Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, one of the leading authorities of the Middle Ages, confirmed the literal veracity of these accounts, noting in The City of God:

Following the canonical scripture, Jewish and Christian, there is no doubt many giants existed before the flood, and were citizens of the earthly society of men, while the sons of God, who are descended from the flesh of Seth, having deserted righteousness, declined into this society. Nor is it to be marveled at, that from those same, giants could to be born. (15:23, 112)

Augustine lent the authority of personal experience to this scriptural argument, describing not only a giant Goth he had heard was recently living in Rome (15:23, 9), but also a relic of a giant. Augustine claimed that he himself had seen

on the beach at Utica, the molar tooth of a man, so huge that, if it were cut up into small pieces, it could be seen to be able to make one hundred of our standard teeth’ and extrapolated, ‘Indeed, I would believe it to have been from a giant’ (15:9, 75).4

In these instances, one of the foremost authorities of the Middle Ages verifies the existence of ante- and, most importantly, postdiluvian giants through scriptural commentary, second hand and first hand accounts. We can also note that the ‘giants’ to which Augustine refers are not moderately larger than ordinary humans, but a hundred times their size.

Contemporary giants come, owing to their outlandish size, to frequently stand for excess in all its forms. Therefore, their unnatural size – which was according to Augustine owing to their ‘having deserted righteousness’ – came to be associated with sinful behavior. As will be common for medieval monsters, a flawed or deviant body was assumed to be the result of a flawed or deviant mind and soul. Indeed, Gerald of Wales, writing around 1200, informs his readers that Ireland contained ‘so many born blind, so many lame, so many with imperfect bodies, deprived of the beneficence of nature’ because the Irish are ‘an adulterous race, an incestuous race, a race of illegitimate birth and conception, a race outside of the law, fouly ravishing nature herself with hateful and hostile craft’ (181). In this case, genuine human beings are blamed and condemned based on the assumption that outer matches inner, a notion that bears ramifications for all of the monstrous beings discussed here.

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OTHER BIBLICAL MONSTERS

In addition to the Bible’s giants, we also find a number of references to other monstrous creatures: dragons, basilisks, unicorns, Behemoth, Leviathan and, of course, the Beasts of the Apocalypse. There was and is considerable debate over the meaning of many of these passages, and of the nature of the creatures they describe, but their very profusion makes an implicit argument about the nature of God’s world: it is, at least in part, monstrous. That such creatures were present not only in the Middle Ages, but also in the days of the prophets, indicated to medieval readers that they were, in fact, part of God’s divine plan.

Some of the most well respected exegetes and scholars of the Middle Ages treated this notion. The two most widely cited are Augustine and Saint Isidore, Bishop of Seville. Both authorities asserted at least the possibility of the reality of monsters. Augustine traced the Latin *monstra*, ‘monster’, to *monstrare*, ‘to show’ declaring that monsters were a demonstration of God’s powers. Isidore also traced it to *monere*, ‘to warn’, suggesting that monsters were a warning from God against deviation from righteousness. While there are differences between these accounts, as Lisa Verner writes, for both Augustine and Isidore monsters served the overarching purpose of allowing ‘the contemplation of the glorious superabundance of God’s creation, in a word, wonder. Blemmyeas and Pygmies and all the other monstrous races signify His power, wisdom and presence in all of creation’ (36). In the Anglo-Saxon worldview, therefore, while monsters and other marvels were exotic, nonetheless they were natural parts of creation.

Sources: Classical Monsters

The presence of so many monsters in the Bible, a text considered to be the word of God, lent veracity to accounts of such creatures found in other texts. Most notable among these were a series of classical texts containing accounts of the wondrous sites, plants, animals, and peoples of India and Ethiopia – two regions often viewed as somewhat analogous in classical and medieval sources and grouped together more generally as ‘the East’. These works would eventually serve as the models for the most noteworthy monster-compilations of the early Middle Ages, the *Wonders* or *Marvels of the East*, discussed below. The classical texts draw heavily on a shared body of source materials, with authors excising and embellishing freely. The earliest of the surviving source passages are found in Herodotus’s *History* of the fifth century BCE (Wittkower 159). Herodotus’s text was a significant source for two works which would, in turn, impact many others: Ktesias’s *Ἱνδιχά* of c.400 BCE, which caused India to be ‘stamped as the land of marvels’ and a now-fragmentary treatise by Megasthenes of c.300 BCE.
which survives in the works of Strabo, Aelian and Pliny, among others (Wittkower 160–2).

This body of classical knowledge would be transmitted to the Patristic period largely though Pliny’s *Natural History*, completed in 77 CE, and Solinius’s *Collectanea rerum memorabilium*, c.200, and then onward into the Middle Ages by Isidore’s encyclopedic *Etymologies*, c.620. These works vary in their style and approach to monsters, but share common features. Most present the monsters and other marvels in the form of a list, in which each entry provides the same stock information: name, location, size, brief physical description and, for some, behavior. For example, we read in Book VII of Pliny’s *Natural History*:

> At the very extremity of India, on the eastern side, near the source of the river Ganges, there is the nation of the Astomi, a people who have no mouths; their bodies are rough and hairy, and they cover themselves with down plucked from the leaves of trees. These people subsist only by breathing and by the odours which they inhale through the nostrils. They support themselves upon neither meat nor drink; when they go upon a long journey they only carry with them various odoriferous roots and flowers, and wild apples, that they may not be without something to smell. But an odour which is a little more powerful than usual easily destroys them. (7:2131–2)

In this highly typical passage we learn the marvel’s name (Astomi, from the Greek for ‘Without Mouth’), their location (eastern India), their appearance (mouthless, hairy), and behavior (sniffing food). This basic pattern is followed throughout, and repeated in most of the sources. Embedded as these passages are amidst more mundane accounts, they were considered as part of the natural world.

**Medieval Incarnations**

**THE WONDERS OF THE EAST**

The *Wonders of the East* is among the most striking of the Anglo-Saxon works with monstrosity as a theme. The earliest copy survives, in the same codex as *Beowulf*, a poem also deeply concerned with monstrosity (London, British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv, the *Beowulf* Manuscript, c.1000). Unlike its distant sources, outlined above, and related texts to be covered below, and unlike its likely continental relatives, the *Wonders* does not contain any narrative or epistolary framework for its discussion of the monsters and marvels of ‘the East’. Instead, it presents a series of texts and images, loosely connected through vague geographic references (‘as you go towards the Red Sea’, ‘between these two rivers’, ‘around those places’, etc [§3, 187; §10, 191; §26, 199]). Each discrete section informs the reader, generally in imprecise terms, of the location, appearance, and habits of the wonders. While these wonders include the oil-producing trees, enormous
berries, and jewels, most of the accounts focus on wondrous animals and peoples, though the line dividing these categories is certainly blurred, and many of the wonders are hybrids, consisting of the parts of disparate creatures. The Cynocephalus, for example, has a horse’s mane, a boar’s tusks and a dog’s head. Likewise, the Lertices are ‘wild animals’ possessing donkey’s ears and sheep’s wool and bird’s feet (§14, 193). While the Lertices is explicitly bestial, the Cynocephalus does not clearly fit into one category or another; indeed, the Old English text, emphasizing their equally divided nature, calls these creatures ‘healfhundingas’ or ‘half-hounds’ (§7, 188, 189).

Other wonders, though, are not cobbled together from the parts of multiple known creatures. Rather, they deviate from the norm through excess, lack, or displacement. The Blemmye, for example, are men without heads, but with their eyes and mouth on their chests. Similarly, the Sciopod (not found in the earliest Wonders manuscript, but common in subsequent versions and related texts) has only one foot. The Homodubii are fifteen feet tall and have two faces on one head, and the Panoti have ears so large that they use them to cover themselves at night. In all of these cases, the wonders are not hybrid beings, but rather, are composed exclusively of human parts, though they deviate from normative standards in their arrangements thereof.

Finally, there are human wonders whose mark of difference is not bodily, at all, but rather, a matter of behavior, such as the ‘generous’ men who give women to passing travelers and the people who live on raw meat and honey (§30, 201–3). These people are, according to the accounts, no different, except in these matters of diet and custom, from ‘normal’ people (in this case, the European readers). As a result, this final category underscores the destabilizing notion that these wonders are possible versions of the viewers and readers of the text. Both the hybrid monsters and the human composites are wonders because they displace, conflate, and strangely juxtapose categories of species, anatomy, and culture; but their very strangeness is comprehensible because they are constructed from familiar elements. We recognize the birds’ feet, the ass’s hind-quarters, the man’s features, even if we do not expect these elements to be so conjoined. This familiarity in strangeness is further emphasized by wonders like the ‘generous’ men: these wonders, even as they seem to mark off a boundary of the normative (the exchange of women between men in Western Europe is subject to aggressive cultural regulation), also represent the permeability of any such boundary. If the monstrous cannot be simply a matter of being elsewhere, or possessing a monstrous body, anyone has the potential to become one of the monsters.

**Liber Monstrorum**

Like the *Wonders of the East* discussed above, the Anglo-Latin *Liber monstrorum* contains a series of accounts describing distant monsters. 10 The
earliest of the four surviving manuscripts of the *Liber monstrorum* can be dated to the early tenth century, but like the somewhat later *Wonders*, the *Liber monstrorum* draws from a range of materials available in Pliny, Augustine, and Isidore. As L. G. Whitbread has observed, twenty one of the sections of the *Wonders*, including the descriptions of the half-hounds, the Donestre, and the giant women with ox tails, clearly overlap with materials in the *Liber* (446–7). The *Liber monstrorum* differs from the *Wonders*, however, in that it contains framing devices indicating authorship and audience. The narrator introduces himself, and the materials he describes, and justifies his project:

> You have asked about the hidden parts of the orb of the earth, and if as many races of monsters ought to be believed in as are shown in the hidden parts of the world, throughout the deserts and the islands of the ocean, and are sustained in the most distant mountains . . . and that I ought to describe the monstrous parts of humans and the most horrible wild animals and innumerable forms of beasts and the most dreadful types of dragons and serpents and vipers. (255)

The author casts doubt on some of the accounts, claiming to organize Book I in descending order of commonness and verifiability, and later writing ‘there are countless things which if anyone could take winged flight to explore, they would prove that . . . where now there is said to lie a golden city and gem-strewn shores, one would see there rocks and a stony city, if anything at all’ (257). This measure of skepticism is not found in the frameless *Wonders* text.

The *Liber monstrorum* also presents more directly the concept that an ‘ordinary’ person might become ‘monstrous’ through actions. The first of the common and verifiable human monsters it describes, for example is a person who looks like a man from the waist up, but ‘loved feminine occupations’. The narrator concludes, ‘but this has happened often among the human race’ (259). By introducing this catalog of monsters with a figure the narrator himself considers not monstrously strange, but proximate and familiar, the *Liber monstrorum*, like the *Wonders*, reminds us that the very categories by which we read these texts and the worlds we inhabit – male/female, self/other – are blurred and crossed even as we employ them.

**Beowulf**

The *Liber monstrorum* intersects not only with the *Wonders of the East*, but also with perhaps the most famous of early English poems, *Beowulf*. Among its descriptions of extraordinary creatures, the *Liber* also contains an explicit reference to a King Hugilaicus, ruler of the Getae (258–9). Although this king is a sort of giant, a man so big that no horse can carry him, he his also recognizable as the Hygelac of the Geats, of the epic poem, uncle to the great hero Beowulf.
Beowulf occupies a central position in the present day canon of early English poetry. The status of the poem in the Anglo-Saxon and broader medieval context was likely nowhere near so elevated. The poem exists in a single, not very lavish manuscript; it refers to mythological and historical events which are documented elsewhere, and has clear analogs, particularly in the later Norse traditions, but there is no evidence that the poem in the form in which it has come down to us was widely read, even in Anglo-Saxon England. It is thus somewhat ironic that the poem’s concern with monsters and the exotic links it to texts, like the Wonders and the Liber monstrorum, which, though less commonly read now, do seem to have circulated among early medieval readers/viewers: modern readers often approach the Wonders, for example, for the light it can shed on the great poem Beowulf, while it is likely that it was the Wonders tradition rather than Beowulf which was the more familiar to an early medieval readership.

Beyond the link through the figure of Hygelac, Beowulf of course in obvious ways shares the Liber’s concern with monsters and the exotic: in the poem, the hero fights first Grendel and then Grendel’s mother, two ambiguously human monsters, and then a dragon. Less obviously, perhaps Beowulf also presents the inextricability of the monstrous from human life. Grendel, the first of the monsters, is described in terms strikingly equivalent to those which describe Beowulf: Grendel kills thirty men in a single stroke; Beowulf has the strength of thirty men in his handgrip; both Beowulf and Grendel are larger than other men; Grendel has no known father; Beowulf is anomalous among Germanic heroes in the fact that his name does not alliterate with his father’s. As several critics have noted, in Beowulf’s physical fight with Grendel, the bodies of hero and monster, joined by their handgrips, become indistinguishable to the readers: during the climactic struggle, the text renders it impossible to tell who is doing what to whom (O’Brien O’Keefe 123; Kroll 126). Similarly, when Beowulf departs to Grendel’s mere to kill Grendel’s mother, he travels to a place ‘not far in miles’ from Hrothgar’s court. As we have noted elsewhere, the possibility of litotes in that description suggests that Grendel’s mere may be understood in some senses as a version of Hrothgar’s court, at no literal distance from the hall (Kim 12). Certainly, both Grendel and his mother are creatures of the mearc, the borderlands, contiguous to but just outside the world of Heorot. Beowulf’s struggle with these monsters is thus also a struggle against the ductility of those borders. Hence the final triumph of the poem, after the slaying of the dragon, is the posthumous erection of the tomb of Beowulf at the headland, the border, a final stand in which Beowulf, as hero, marks off, and reinforces with his body a difference from the monstrous which the poem itself has demonstrated to be an impossibility.

The monsters of Beowulf explicitly evoke those of the Old Testament: Grendel occupies the ‘fifelcynnes geard’, ‘the place of the race of giants’,
who are the ‘kin of Cain’, a place from which ‘all the evil brood arose, giants and elves, and monsters . . . who fought against God’ (104b–14a). Yet as many critics have argued, these monsters also link *Beowulf* to the body of Norse literature and mythology, a link which is unsurprising, given the shared Germanic linguistic and cultural backgrounds, but which also emphasizes the strong pre-Christian traditions and mythologies informing the poem. Andy Orchard, in his chapter, ‘Grettir and Grendel Again’, surveys the structural and thematic similarities between the Norse saga, *Grettis saga Asmundarsonar*, and *Beowulf* (140–68). In both texts, the hero’s fights against a series of monsters end with the hero both victorious against those monsters and identified with them. Orchard concludes: ‘This is the shared tragedy of such essentially heathen heroes whose tales are retold in a Christian world, who must begin with proud hope and bravado, and end haunted with melancholy, defeated but not diminished’ (168).

Seth Lerer has argued that perhaps less obvious connections between *Beowulf* and the Norse literature may bespeak equally powerful commonalities. In ‘Grendel’s Glove’, Lerer reminds us that Beowulf’s reference – in his own account of his fight – to the magical dragon-skin glove that he fears Grendel will put him in is an innovation in the story: we have no mention of the glove at any point in the narrator’s description of the action. This innovation alludes at once to Norse mythological material, presented in Snorri Sturlson’s *Gylfaginning*, in which Thor and Loki themselves become lost in the giant Skýmir’s glove, and to the function of narratives of monstrosity and dismemberment in both *Beowulf* and Norse mythology. Lerer suggests that, ‘[m]ore than a relic of a Northern legend, and more than a piece of narrative exotica, Grendel’s glove comes to symbolize the meaning of the monster and the very resources of literary making that articulate that meaning’ (722). For Leher, thus, in Beowulf’s retelling of his adventures with Grendel, the emphasis on the glove linking the story to the Norse material evokes the violence of the threat which Grendel poses to Hrothgar’s hall, and to Beowulf’s own body; it also makes explicit reference to the process of the story-telling, and thus of the means by which humans transform the horror of real violence through the power of culture, or artifice, into the reassuring performance of a narrative.

**ALEXANDER**

Such self-consciousness in literary performance as Lerer argues for in *Beowulf* is the premise of the fictional Letter of Alexander to Aristotle with which *Beowulf*, as well as the *Wonders of the East*, is bound, in Cotton Vitellius A.xv. The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle is epistolary: it takes the form of a letter written by Alexander the Great to his teacher, Aristotle, detailing Alexander’s journeys through the east, a penetrative exploration, in Alexander’s terms, ‘in case anything in that land had been hidden or
concealed from me’ (§26, 243). Its narrative is given in the first person, and the encounters with the monstrous and exotic, many of the figures of which – jeweled vines, pestilential serpents, water monsters – are familiar from the Liber monstrorum and the Wonders, and are represented directly as phenomena encountered or witnessed by the narrator, and crafted by the narrator for reading by his intended audience, his teacher, Aristotle. Alexander’s description of the exotic east thus becomes inextricable from his epistolary self-presentation. It is for this reason that Orchard, for example, reads Alexander, through this self-presentation of his conquest of the east, as ‘a monstrous figure of pride’ (139). The context of Beowulf and the Wonders of the East, as well as the Liber monstrorum suggests that whatever moral condemnation might accompany the figure of Alexander, the Letter picks up a consistent thread in the early literature of the monstrous: the troublesome relationship between the representation of the self through contact with, movement through, or conquest of monstrous and exotic worlds, but at the same time the recognition of the threat that the monstrous or exotic worlds pose to any self thus represented. If in Beowulf we can read the hero’s transformation of the horror of violence into a socially affirming narrative, in the Letter of Alexander, which ends with the promise of Alexander’s death in Babylon, the heroic narrator closes his text with the promise that he himself, for all his glory, will be absorbed by the east against which he has battled.

MONSTROUS SAINTS

Given that the monstrous embodies the ‘other’, it is to be expected that many of the lives of the saints depict the saint in conflict with, and victorious over a monstrous figure. In the Old English Life of Saint Margaret, for example, the saint battles a dragon in her prison cell, bursting him from within by making the sign of the cross in his belly. Saint George, in later legends, famously battles a similar dragon. As we have been arguing, secular literature of the monstrous often dwells on the problem that the figure which opposes the monstrous again and again becomes identified with it. While one might read Margaret, swallowed into the belly of the dragon, literally incorporated within it, as in that moment congruent with the monstrous, we need not work so hard: in the figure of another saint, Saint Christopher, we find the explicit embodiment at once of the figure of the saint and the representation of the monstrous.14 The Saint Christopher known to the Anglo-Saxons was, after all, a giant with the head of a dog. The literal monstrosity of Saint Christopher emphasizes the resonance between the literature of the monstrous and the lives of the saints: the saints, like the monsters, have extraordinary bodies, and extraordinary relationships to those bodies. The saint, as s/he bridges heaven and earth for humanity, is at once body, material, human, and spirit, an extension of the divine. In this way, the
saint, like the monster, is both a hybrid creature and, as such, a kind of border-dweller. If, as in the case of Margaret or George, the saint evidences sanctity in the possession of miraculous power against a fabulous beast like the dragon, at the same time, the positioning of the saint beside, or within, the body of the beast reminds us of the similarity the saint bears to that creature. Keeping in mind the fact that Anglo-Saxon England undergoes the process of conversion to Christianity unevenly throughout the early medieval period, the figure of the monstrous saint articulates all the more clearly both the incorporative power of medieval Christianity and the residual strangeness it must have retained for its new converts.

**Visual Counterparts**

Monstrosity not only is a prevalent literary theme, but rather, appears frequently in all aspects of medieval culture. Medieval art is overflowing with images of monsters. They appear all throughout the period, in every sort of manuscript and architecture. Among the most significant early images of monstrosity are those which appear in manuscripts of the *Wonders or Marvels of the East*. The three English manuscripts of this monster-cycle are all heavily illustrated, and while the style shifts dramatically from the earliest (London, British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv, the *Beowulf* Manuscript, c.1000) to the latest (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 614, c.1125), nonetheless all three are clearly connected and share many features.

A few features are dominant in these images. First is the collective quality of the images. Individually, each is like an illustration in a biological field guide, presented as if to assist in the identification of the marvel. However, when viewed in series, page after page, the collective effect is of a fearsome sea of monstrosity, a hideous aggregate. Just as the human body came to serve as ‘as a figure for the Christian community united in the body of Christ as the body of the church’ (Blurton 63), as early as Paul’s writings, so too, the monstrous body can be seen as a figure for the monstrous ‘community’, united by their collective exclusion from the body of the church. Monsters do not, of course, form a coherent and unified body politic (and it might be argued that in the early Middle Ages, no group was really such); nonetheless, they function collectively, rather than individually. A reader does not contemplate the features and habits of a single monster (e.g. the dog-headed Cynocephalus, the one-footed sciopod, etc.) and from this single interaction draw conclusions about his own identity as a human. Rather, it is through contemplation of the mass of monstrosity that fills not only the *Wonders* and *Marvels* manuscripts, but which can likewise be found bundled together in the margins of sacred texts such as the Luttrell Psalter, at the edges of world maps, or in the archivolts of Sante-Madeleine, Vézelay, that the reader/viewer is able to establish fundamental elements of his own identity.
Indeed, this is likely the reason that monsters rarely appear singly, in any medieval context.

The second characteristic element of the images of monstrosity is aggressive interaction. This interaction might be with the frames that struggle (often unsuccessfully) to contain them, with the text adjacent to them (which they lick, claw and bite), or with the viewer, directly addressed through eye contact that can be of the most unsettling nature. This aggressivity creates significant tension: the monsters are characteristically located in distant lands, but in these visual representations are self-evidently present in the immediate space of the reader.

MAPPAE MUNDI

Among the most common loci for the appearance of monsters in medieval materials are the mappaemundi, or maps of the world. Few with significant details survive from the early Middle Ages, though increasing numbers appear around 1050, and these numbers grow throughout the rest of the Middle Ages. These complex documents contain information as both text and image, and so in some cases, we find names and narratives for monsters, while in others, we have images; some contain both. The earliest detailed medieval map to survive is bound with the second copy of the Wonders of the East in London, British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius B.v., known as the Cotton or Anglo-Saxon Map. This manuscript, c.1050, is a miscellany of scientific materials including in addition charts for the dating of Easter, astrological materials such as the Aratea, a zonal map and Priscian’s verse translation of Dionysius Periegetes’ geographical poem, Periegesis.

The Cotton Map contains a series of wonders or marvels, some monstrous and all exotic. They reside, in this case, exclusively at the outer edge of the continents of the world, forming a ring in this liminal zone. The wonders included here are: monstrous people (the Cynocephalus, the ‘Barbaric People’, the Ethiopians – often included in accounts of the Wonders of the East, and described alternately as burned black by the hot African sun or having the snouts of pigs – and the Griffon People, as well as the Biblical hordes of Gog and Magog); exotic animals (lions, the only marvel to have an image on this map); geographical features (the Pillars of Hercules, the Mountains of Gold and of Extreme Heat); and wonder-filled regions (Zeugis and Africa, described as ‘wild... full of beasts and plentiful of serpents’).

The location of these wonders is not incidental. Rather, it is intricately tied to their basic definition as figures of the exotic. They are, in their bodies and habits, strange and different from their readers, and so their location is outlandish, in the most literal way. They serve to mark the boundaries of humanity, of human bodies and cultural norms, and so...
they are relegated to the periphery of the world. Since this world was considered to be the reflection of a divine plan and order, their location was not coincidence. Instead, these liminal creatures served to elucidate the meaning of the universe.

Conclusions

As we have surveyed medieval literature of the monstrous, we have emphasized the function of the monstrous and exotic in the definition of the normative. We have also argued that medieval depictions of giants, dog-headed men, and other monstrous creatures explore not only the ways in which these creatures are not men, but also the ways in which the strangeness of the monstrous is inextricably part of the English, the Christian, the human experience as understood in the early Middle Ages.

Short Biographies

Asa Simon Mittman’s research is focused on the intersection of monstrosity and marginality, which is the subject of his Maps and Monsters in Medieval England (Routledge, 2006). His current projects include a book-length study on Inconceivable Beasts: The Wonders of the East in the Beowulf Manuscript (Tempe: The ACMRS, 2008), written in collaboration with Susan Kim, and Digital Mappaemundi: A Resource for the Study of Medieval Maps and Geographic Texts designed in collaboration with Martin K. Foys. He believes in the examination of critically dismissed works, and in the embrace of uncertainly in dealing with medieval imagery. Mittman received his B.A. in Art History from Cornell University, and his M.A. and Ph.D. in Art History from Stanford University, and is now an assistant professor in the Department of Art and Art History at California State University, Chico.

Susan M. Kim’s research focuses on questions of representation and embodiment in Anglo-Saxon England. She has published articles on the representation of monstrosity, and the monstrosity of representation in the Old English Wonders of the East, as well as papers on the Old English Judith (Exemplaria) and Beowulf (Modern Philology). In a transdisciplinary collaboration with Asa Simon Mittman, she is currently writing a book on the Cotton Vitellius A.xv Wonders of the East, an edition and facsimile, but also a close examination of both texts and illustrations; the book considers the aggressive interpenetration of text and image which characterizes this manuscript and suggests that such interpenetration voices heightened anxiety about the very systems of difference by which meaning and identity are created and maintained. With a B.A. in English from Yale University and a Ph.D. in English from the University of Chicago, Kim is now an associate professor in the Department of English at Illinois State University.
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Notes

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1 For discussions of the theme in the later Middle Ages, see among others Daston and Park; Kappler; Higgins.

2 Vulgate, Psalm 73 and Ezekiel 5:5: ‘This the Lord God said: I have placed Jerusalem in the middle of the peoples, and around her the lands’.


4 Translation is our own. Stephens explains Augustine’s reference to times when men were larger: ‘Since Homer and Pliny had both maintained that human stature is steadily declining, it did not require much imagination to see that the Giants of old stood in the same statistical relation to their contemporaries as modern physical deviants’ (91). He refers to books 7:73–74 of Pliny’s *Natural History* and 7.155 and 7.211 of Homer’s *Iliad*.


6 These passages are widely cited. See, for example, Cohen xiv; Verner 2–5.

7 Wittkower provides the earliest serious discussion of this tradition, and includes extensive commentary on the earlier sources and their transmission into the Middle Ages. His text will be relied on, here. Another significant resource for the study of the ‘monstrous races’ remains: although we do not cite him explicitly in this text, we are indebted to Friedman.

8 The *Wonders of the East*, in both Latin and Old English, as well as the *Liber monstrorum*, and the *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*, discussed here below, have been edited and translated by Andy Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*. We will cite these texts from Orchard’s excellent edition, providing both Orchard’s section numbers and page numbers. We use our own translations but are indebted to Orchard’s. References to the *Wonders of the East* are to the Old English text and translation.

9 As Andy Orchard explains in *Pride and Prodigies*, ‘The Anglo-Saxon versions of the Wonders derive ultimately from a text represented in mainly continental manuscripts in many different forms, almost all of which share a basic epistolary framework’ (22–3). Orchard, following Paul Gibb and Ann Knock, provides a summary of the continental sources and their relationship to the contents of the Wonders texts on pages 22–5.

10 On the unknown author and possible Irish but likely Anglo–Latin provenance of the *Liber monstrorum*, see Whitbread especially §3: ‘Date, Provenance, Authorship’. Orchard provides a more recent summary reiterating scholarly consensus on an Anglo–Latin provenance (86–7).

11 In ‘The *Liber monstrorum* and *Beowulf*’, Whitbread acknowledges that ‘the range of guesses’ about the dating of the Liber ‘extends from the sixth through the tenth century’, but notes, ‘Of the four known manuscripts, Leiden Voss. Lat. Oct. 60, in a hand of ca. 900, is the earliest; the others belong to the tenth century’ (448–50).

12 Unless otherwise indicated, we have used Klaeber’s third edition and our own translation. For representative readings of *Beowulf* in this context, see Williams; Kaske; Orchard.

13 Fjalldal argues strongly against any except the most distant of genetic relationships between the two texts. His arguments need not devalue the significance of the allusion in *Beowulf* of traditions like those represented in *Grettis saga* which position the poem clearly in a period of equivalence and transition between Germanic and Christian traditions.

14 It is thus not surprising that, although Christopher’s dog-head is not described in the fragment of the Old English text of the *Passion of St Christopher* which survives, that text is bound with the Old English *Wonders*, the *Letter of Alexander*, and *Beowulf* in Cotton Vitellius A xv.
Works Cited


