'A CREEPING THING':

THE MOTIF OF THE SERPENT IN

ANGLO-SAXON ENGLAND


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**ABSTRACT**

The image of the serpent is pervasive in the art and literature of Anglo-Saxon England. In Old English medical literature the serpent is by far the most frequently represented animal, often as an adversary of humans and human health. In poetry, too, the serpent appears often; although it is primarily about the exploits of its outlandish hero, *Beowulf* is littered with serpentine adversaries, including the dragon of the poem's conclusive battle. In scriptural poetry, the Anglo-Saxon understanding of the biblical serpent is illuminated and elaborated upon, and in exegesis the serpent plays a key symbolic role as tempter, diabolical agent and heretic. Anglo-Saxon visual art is populated by a multitude of serpentine creatures, ranging from the snake-like zoomorphic interlace to the winged dragons of the Sutton Hoo helmet. It is generally agreed upon that the image of the serpent is symbolically charged, and there has been scholarly speculation on how the image of the serpent operated symbolically in each of these contexts. However, there has been no single study of the image across genres and across media. This thesis aims to survey and interpret the symbolic role of the serpent in a number of different, clearly defined contexts and look for common associations and continuities between them. In finding these continuities, it will propose a underlying, fundamental symbolic meaning for the image of the serpent in Anglo-Saxon England. It will argue that this fundamental meaning is death; the transience of mortal life, physical decay and transition.

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# ABBREVIATIONS

Bede, *HE*                 Bede, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*

Bede, *In Gen*             Bede, *In Genesim*

CCSL                       Corpus Christianorum Series Latina

EETS                       Early English Text Socety

MGH                        Monumenta Germaniae Historica

MOLA                       Museum of London Archaeology

PAS                        Portable Antiquities Scheme

PL                         Patrologiae cursus completus: series latina

# INTRODUCTION

1. The snake and the eagle: gold and the grave

In 2013, two thematically similar yet contextually very different items came to light. The first was an item discovered on 25th August at Dean and Shelton in Bedfordshire and reported to the Portable Antiquities Scheme.[1] It was a tiny gilded silver mount, probably dating to the sixth century (fig. 1).



**Fig1:** Eagle and Snake Mount, discovered at Dean and Shelton, Bedfordshire, sixth century. Portable Antiquities Scheme: WMID-E4F0C5, © Creative Commons CC-BY 2.0

The object depicts a highly stylised bird in profile, the curve of its arched body culminating in a large, hooked beak. In its one visible talon, the raptor grips what

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[1] PAS Unique ID: WMID-E4F0C5; see: PAS, finds.org.uk [accessed 4th September 2015].

appears to be a piece of simple twist interlace, typical of the period, signifying a serpent about to be devoured. The animal imagery exemplifies Bernhard Salin's Style II classification of Anglo-Saxon animal art, the prevalent form of zoomorphic ornamentation in northwestern Europe in the sixth century.[2] The mount's exact function is uncertain; on the one hand, there is a clear parallel between this mount and the eagle mount discovered at Sutton Hoo, found in-situ as decoration for a shield.[3] On the other hand, Dickinson has drawn attention to the possibility of such mounts being used as belt fitting decorations.[4] In either case, like so much surviving Anglo-Saxon metalwork, it is highly probable that this object derives from a masculine, martial context.

The second item was announced by the Museum of London in the same week that the first was entered into the Portable Antiquities Scheme's database. It was an exceptional piece of stonework discovered at Minories, near the Tower of London (fig. 2). The statue, which is thought to date from the first to the second century, depicts an eagle with wings slightly raised, in the act of swallowing a snake. Like the Anglo-Saxon mount, it is hypothesised that the statue was made for a wealthy man; unlike the Anglo-Saxon mount, the object was made as part of the ornamentation of a mausoleum.[5]

The two objects raise several questions about the shared motif. Is the later object, the mount, an unconscious copying of what the maker knew to be a Roman artistic motif? Or is this an example of cultural continuity from Roman to early Anglo-Saxon England? Did such Roman influences come directly from Romano-British culture, or were they later reintroduced to Anglo-Saxon England from the continent? Could the two objects, made from different materials in different times and for different purposes, possibly share a symbolic meaning? If so, what meaning could possibly be appropriate in the context of both war gear and a mausoleum? If common to two such

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[2] Salin, B., *Die altgermanische thierornamentik* (Stockholm, 1904).

[3] Bruce-Mitford, R., *The Sutton Hoo Ship Burial Volume 2: arms, armour and regalia* (London, 1978), pp. 55-63; Fig44 p. 54.

[4] T. M. Dickinson, 'Symbols of Protection: The significance of animal-ornamented shields in Early Anglo-Saxon England', *Medieval Archaeolology* 49 (2005), pp. 109-163; T. M. Dickinson, C. Fern, and A. Richardson, 'Early Anglo-Saxon Eastry: Archaeological evidence for the beginnings of a district centre in the kingdom of Kent', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 17 (2011), pp. 1-86.

[5] MOLA team, *Pristine Roman Sculpture Discovered by MOLA,* MOLA Blogs (29th October 2013), http://www.mola.org.uk/blog/pristine-roman-sculpture-discovered-mola [Accessed 27th October 2016].

diverse objects, could such a meaning be transferable to other serpents in Anglo-Saxon symbolism? In short, what did the mount mean to its maker, owner, and audience?



**Fig2:** Roman Eagle Sculpture, discovered by MOLA archaeologists at Minories, London, first to second century. Museum of London Archaeology: MNR12 [569] <118>, © MOLA.

The study of the motif of the serpent in Anglo-Saxon England engages with these questions. The serpent has a complex existence in Anglo-Saxon animal symbolism; its image carries with it a symbolic meaning that draws on scripture, Romano-British culture and pre-Christian Germanic ideas intertwined. Hawkes has acknowledged Anglo-Saxon culture as being 'transitional' in the sense that Geertz

coined the term.[6] It was a society that made the fundamental shift from a pre-Christian, oral culture to a Christian literate culture.  The study of Anglo-Saxon symbols is the study of an ever-changing synthesis of ideas. The ability of Anglo-Saxon culture to incorporate new ideas into existing cultural practice is attested in Jolly's study of folk belief and popular religion in Anglo-Saxon England.[7] Jolly's focus, is the synthesis of liturgy and folk charms, but the image of the Anglo-Saxon serpent also exemplifies this synthesis of old and new ideas from a range of different origins with a range of different applications, interlaced around an elusive but nonetheless central pattern of meaning. This thesis will unravel the meaning of the serpent as a motif in the complex landscape of multiple cultures and influences that existed in Anglo-Saxon England.

2. The Serpent as a Symbol

The search for meaning in art or literature is a search fraught with difficulty. Meaning, or the signified counterpart to the image or sign, is an elusive and often multivalent concept, and must be approached with extra caution when dealing with cultures such as those of Anglo-Saxon society. The Anglo-Saxon riddling culture extends far beyond the composition of Old English riddles; scripture, history, and the universe itself was understood in terms of typology, symbolism and divine signs with multiple layers of significance for those who had the code to read them.[8] The Anglo-Saxon period spanned centuries and included within it the widespread conversion of the English people to Christianity – a fundamental influence in the way that people thought about life, death and symbolism itself. Searching for a uniform significance for a single motif over this entire span would surely produce a meaning so multivalent as to render it meaningless. On the other hand, too much specificity could be equally distorting; looking at too limited a group of examples denies the existence of the overall context of the period and the evolution of the symbol. There is a balance to be struck. As Hawkes has pointed out, when looking for the meaning of any given motif, 'it is likely that no single explanation can be provided; the likelihood that we are dealing

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[6] J. Hawkes, 'Symbolic Lives: The Visual Evidence', in J. Hines (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective* (Woodbridge, 1997), p. 311; Geertz, C., *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (London, 1973), p. 150.

[7] K. Jolly, *Popular Religion in Anglo-Saxon England: Elf Charms in Context* (Chapel Hill NC, and London, 1996).

[8] L. Webster, *Anglo-Saxon Art* (London, 2012), p.34; Hawkes, *Symbolic Lives*, pp. 314-15.

with a diversity of meanings, each of which may be both specific and multivalent, must be accepted'.[9]

### 2.i. Approaches to the motif of the serpent

Unsurprisingly, art historians have driven the study of motifs and their symbolic meanings in the early medieval period. Zoomorphic art from the Anglo-Saxon period was first comprehensively addressed and categorised by Bernhard Salin in 1904.[10] His categorisation of early medieval zoomorphic style in northwest Europe was seminal, and forms the foundation on which the majority of subsequent studies are based. By cataloguing features of animal ornament in Germanic art such as heads, hips, and feet, Salin was able to distinguish three categories, each following on and evolving from the last. The dating of these styles and the relationship between them has been questioned and refined considerably since he wrote, but Salin's terminology has persisted, particularly the categorisation of Style I and Style II.[11] Salin's Style I was roughly dated by him to the fifth and sixth centuries, and was characterised by zoned or divided bodies, inspired by earlier Saxon Relief styles and the Romano-British Quoit Brooch Style. Style II, he argued, dates to the late sixth and seventh centuries, and is characterised by interlace, showing sinuous bodies with or without limbs in interlocking patterns. The chronology of Styles I and II was and continues to be a subject of enquiry.[12] Most depictions of serpents are found in Style II artwork. This is probably

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[9] Hawkes, *Symbolic Lives,* p. 317.

[10] Salin, *Die altgermanische Thierornamentik.*

[11] In the years following Salin, discussion of Germanic style and ornament continued to be undertaken mainly by Scandinavian academics such as Åberg in the 1920s (N. Åberg, *Die Franken und Westgoten in der Volkerwanderungszeit* (Stockholm, 1922); idem, *Den Nordisk Folk vandringstidens Kronologi* (Stockholm, 1924) and Holmqvist in the 1950s (W. Holmqvist, *Germanic Art During the First Millenium AD* (Stockholm, 1955)). The most notable British contribution was from Kendrick, who attempted to reform both the terminology and chronology of Anglo-Saxon style study (T. D. Kendrick, *Anglo-Saxon Art to A.D. 900* (London, 1938); idem, 'Style in Early Anglo-Saxon Ornament', *Ipek* 9 (1934), pp. 66-76). However, his attempts were largely disregarded. See: G. Speake, *Anglo-Saxon Animal Art and its Germanic Background* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 18-21.

[12] See particularly: K. Høilund Nielsen, 'Style II and the Anglo-Saxon élite', *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History* 10 (1999), pp. 185-202; Ibid, 'Style II and all that: the potential of the hoard for statistical study of Chronology and geographical distributions' in Geake (ed.), *Papers from the Staffordshire Hoard Symposium* (London, 2010), https://finds.org.uk/staffshoardsymposium [Accessed May 24th 2015]; See also Webster's concise summary of the chronology of Anglo-Saxon Style: L. Webster, 'Style: Influences, Chronology and Meaning' in H. Hamerow, D. A. Hinton and S. Crawford (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 460-500.

due to the fact that the shape of the serpent lends itself to zoomorphic interlace, which is the dominant form of decoration in Style II.

Building on the work of Salin, Speake's *Anglo-Saxon Animal Art* approached issues of style as well as iconography.[13] Speake applied an interpretative approach to animal iconography, including a section on the image of the serpent.[14] His methodology seeks to reconcile instances of a symbolic image separated by time and even by location, pulling together a general set of connotations from individual examples. Speake's speculation on the meaning of the serpent is brief, constituting just one section of his final chapter. However, his analysis is dense with examples of the image of the serpent in Anglo-Saxon literature and in analogous cultures from the Germanic world. Speake's conclusion is succinct: 'the snake or serpent, apparently at home both on the earth and underground, affords a link between the world of the living and the underworld'.[15]

The work of scholars like Hicks, Wickham-Crowley, and Stevenson takes a more interdisciplinary approach, seeking to use relevant literary sources to support their interpretations of visual media.[16] It is within this context that Thompson approaches the matter of Anglo-Saxon animal symbolism, and specifically the motif of the serpent.[17] She looks at a specific aspect of the motif of the serpent – the *wyrm* – as it appears on gravestones in both art and literature, using a holistic methodology that draws on examples from a range of visual and literary sources to explain the link between the gravestone and the image of the *wyrm*. Like Speake, Thompson comes to the conclusion that there is an intimate connection between the serpent and Anglo-Saxon concepts of death and the grave. Rauer's purely literary contribution to the study of the symbolic meaning of the Anglo-Saxon serpent also uses a broad range of examples to illuminate one specific relationship; this time between dragon fights in epic poetry and in hagiography. Her examination looks at the formulaic similarities between

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[13] Speake dedicates his book to Salin, and expressed his debt to the latter in his introduction: G. Speake, *Animal Art*, p. 1.

[14] Speake, *Animal Art*, pp. 85-92.

[15] Speake, *Animal Art*, p. 92.

[16] C. Hicks, *Animals in Early Medieval Art* (Edinburgh, 1993); R. B. K Stevenson, 'The Hunterson Brooch and its significance', *Medieval Archaeology* 18 (1973), pp. 16-42; K. Wickham-Crowley, 'The Birds on the Sutton Hoo Instrument', in R. Farrell and C. Neuman de Vegvar (eds), *Sutton Hoo: Fifty Years After* (Oxford, OH, 1992), pp. 43-62.

[17] Thompson, V., *Dying and Death in Later Anglo-Saxon England* (Woodbridge, 2004), pp. 132-169.

the dragon fight in *Beowulf* and a multitude of hagiographical confrontations with dragons or monstrous lizards. Whilst differences in the way that the dragons are defeated are noted, Rauer's overall conclusion is that the dragon represents an enemy of society and all mankind in both epic and hagiographic contexts, and that the hero's virtue is key to his victory.

In her cross-disciplinary study of early medieval Insular art, Hawkes coined the term 'symbolic lives' to refer to 'those views of life and death apparently current among the Anglo-Saxons in England which are revealed symbolically in their visual arts'.[18] Hawkes' methodology reads the visual art of a culture, looking for patterns and points of comparison with other visual and literary sources, cautiously reconstructing a symbolic language of images that are used again and again.[19] With regard to the motif of the serpent, Hawkes makes reference to the probable protective function of its use on personal items and items that were worn, stating that, 'it is hard to imagine what symbolic function other than apotropaism the serpent-motif could have had in these contexts'.[20] She also identifies instances in which the serpent is associated with thresholds and transition, which she acknowledges links the motif to death, rebirth and rites of passage.[21] Finally, Hawkes identifies a biblical connotation for the motif, in which she addresses the symbolic snake trampled beneath the feet of David in the eighth-century Durham Cassiodorus.[22] This, she suggests, exemplifies the image of the serpent as a representative of both evil and death, as well as the ancient apotropaic function of the symbolic serpent being stamped out.[23]

### 2.ii. Approaching meaning

To date, there has been no study dedicated to the motif of the serpent across genres and media. The subject is vast; the Anglo-Saxons were, as Speake noted in

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[18] Hawkes, *Symbolic Lives,* p. 311.

[19] For an example of the application of this approach, see the analysis of the 'symbolic life' of birds in Anglo-Saxon England by J. Ramirez, 'The Symbolic Life of Birds in Anglo-Saxon England' Ph.D thesis (University of York, 2006).

[20] Hawkes, *Symbolic Lives,* p. 323.

[21] Hawkes, *Symbolic Lives,* p. 325

[22] Hawkes, *Symbolic Lives,* p. 326; Durham, Dean and Chapter Library, B. II. 30, f. 172v.

[23] Hawkes, *Symbolic Lives,* p. 326.

1980, a 'snake conscious' culture.[24] Anglo-Saxon art throngs with snakes and serpentine shapes. In literature the *wyrm* appears in poetry and prose, from medical texts to charms, elegies to scriptural poetry, and fables to exegesis. The serpent literally looms large in the form of a dragon in the only Old English epic poem, *Beowulf.* This present study does not claim to be exhaustive. Rather, it aims to look at the image of the serpent in a number of very different contexts: medicine; poetry; exegesis; and metalwork. Unlike the carved stone serpent and the grave, or *Beowulf* and hagiography, these contexts have little or no generic connection to one another. This study approaches the motif of the serpent by testing for correlation and analogues across a range of genres and media. The aim is not so much to fix a single meaning behind every use of serpent imagery rather to look for a common and perhaps underlying factor that may link instances of serpentine symbolism in different contexts. This common factor will not constitute 'the meaning' of the motif of the serpent in Anglo-Saxon England. Instead, it will be the overall theme around which the individual examples of image and meaning, sign and signified, are arranged. In a sense, this thesis envisages the four individual contexts mentioned above as individual threads, each separate but interlaced with the others. Viewing these interlaced genres from a wider field of vision, the overall pattern of the threads, the underlying theme behind them all, can be observed.

An examination of the motif of the serpent across genre and media will do two things. Firstly, by looking at how and where the motif is applied across a range of contexts, a common set of meanings can be observed, and an underlying theme of meaning for the motif of the serpent can be posited. Of course, the specific imagery, application and context of each image will be different, and indeed the precise meaning of each example will also vary accordingly. However, this thesis will argue that behind this is a broad and pervasive association of the serpent with Anglo-Saxon concepts of death and transition, and that this is present in the subtext of the serpent motif across genre and media. Secondly, it will show by example how the Anglo-Saxon motif of the serpent draws on a range of influences and reconciles these within the context of the image, creating meaningful symbols.

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[24] Speake, *Animal Art,* p. 87.

3. The Old English *wyrm*: what makes a serpent?

The Modern English term 'serpent' is usually used to encompass a range of animals, both real and imaginary, which possess certain physical qualities. These qualities include a long, sinuous body with or without limbs, often with scales and usually reptilian.[25] The Anglo-Saxons, too, grouped animals together by appearance and physical qualities, and there certainly is a clear correspondence between the group of animals defined by the Modern English 'serpent' and those found under the umbrella of the broadly applied Old English term *wyrm*. However, there are some subtle differences.

The Old English term *wyrm* is used to describe various animals. The word is extremely general, and refers to a variety of crawling or creeping animals, both real and imaginary, throughout the Old English corpus. Bosworth and Toller's *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* gives the meaning 'serpent, reptile'.[26] This is by far the most common and obvious use of the term, as is evinced by the compilation of instances of the word in the *Dictionary*. However, the range of animals to which the term is applied is more varied than might be imagined. In *Beowulf*, the term *wyrm* is used alongside the term *draca* to refer to the huge, venomous dragon of the poem's final act; it is also applied retrospectively to the dragon that fought with the hero Sigmund.[27] In *Soul and Body*, on the other hand, *wyrm* is used to refer to the various small animals and organisms that consume a corpse in a grave.[28] In one instance, the compound term 'moldwyrmas' is used, bringing together Old English *molde* [mould, dust, sand, earth] and *wyrm*.[29] The

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[25] The Oxford English Dictionary prioritises limbless animals in its definition of 'serpent', definition 1.a being: 'Any of the scaly limbless reptiles regarded as having the properties of hissing and 'stinging''. However, the secondary definition, 1.b, suggests 'A creeping thing or reptile', and references animals with limbs. See: *The Oxford English Dictionary Online* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 'serpent' [accessed September 18th 2017].

[26] Bosworth and Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Online*, 'wyrm'. http://www.bosworthtoller.com [Accessed 5 July 2015] .

[27] Sigmund's dragon is described as both 'wyrm' and 'draca': F. Klaeber ed. *Beowulf and the Fight at Finsburg* (Toronto and London, 4th edition, 2008), l. 891/2, p. 32; *Wyrm* terminology is used to describe Beowulf's dragon in: l. 2287, p. 79; l. 2307, p. 79; l. 2316, p. 80; l. 2343, p. 80; l. 2348, p. 81; l. 2400, p. 82; l. 2519, p. 86; l. 2567, p. 88; l. 2629, p. 90; l. 2669, p. 91; l. 2705, p. 92; l. 2745, p. 93; l. 2759, p. 94; l. 2771, p. 94; l. 2827, p. 96; l. 2902, p. 99; l. 3039, p. 403; l. 3132, p. 106. There is also on oblique reference when the dragon's hoard's quality is described in terms of 'wyrmhorda cræft' [craft of the *wyrm*-hoards]; l. 2221, p. 75.

[28] D. Moffat (ed.), *The Old English Soul and Body* (Woodbridge, 1990), l. 22, pp.50/1; l. 25, pp. 50/1; l. 71, pp 54/5; l. 83, pp. 56/7; l. 111, pp. 60/1; l. 116, pp. 60/1; l. 122, pp. 60/1; l. 124, pp. 60/1.

[29] Bosworth and Toller, *Dictionary,* 'wyrm', 'molde', 'moldwyrm'.

word *molde* is often associated with the grave, being found also in the compound words *moldærn* [an earth-house, a grave] and *moldgræf* [a grave].[30] The 'moldywyrmas' in *Soul and Body* are translated by Moffatt as 'earthworms',[31] but whether the audience is to imagine this animal as a worm, a maggot or even an insect is indeterminable. In the medical text *Medicina de Quadrupedibus* there is a remedy against 'hnite and wyrmas' [nits and *wyrmas*] on children. The remedy could have been co-incidentally efficacious against two, but the fact that the *wyrm* is being treated alongside these insectiform parasites hints again at its own parasitic nature, and perhaps even an association between the two types of animal.[32] In another medical text, the *Herbarium of Pseudo Apuleius,* the word *wyrm* is used to describe creatures called *spalangiones,* a venomous spider.[33] There is also a possibility that the word could refer not to an animal but to an invisible agent of decay. In the medical texts, the *wyrm* appears as an embodiment of disease itself, and is strongly associated with the invisible, 'onflyge' [onfliers, flying venom].[34]

Neville has observed that the meaning of the word *wyrm* is very broad and even 'imprecise', drawing attention to the fact that this imprecision is also reflected in early medieval Latin usage of *vermis* and *serpens*.[35] Rather than being an obstacle to this thesis, the elasticity of the term *wyrm* illuminates the study of the motif of the serpent in Anglo-Saxon England. By looking at the range of animals that share this term, much can be extrapolated about how Old English speakers viewed the serpent. Thompson has reflected on the imprecision of the word *wyrm* noted by Neville, concluding that the *wyrm* may be described as having the qualities of 'poisonousness, an intimate relationship with human flesh, a taste for the same, an uncanny way of moving (*creopende*), the ability to disappear underground, and a closeness to the dead'.[36] This is a

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[30] Bosworth and Toller, *Dictionary,* 'moldærn', 'moldgræf'.

[31] Moffat, *Soul and Body,* l. 71, p. 54.

[32] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol.I, 'Quadrupedibus', Ch. ix.15, p. 364; trans p. 365.

[33] T. O. Cockayne, *Leechdoms, Wortcunning and Starcraft of Early England,* 3 vols (1864-66, repr. London, 1961), I *Herbarium,* Ch. xc.13, pp.196-8; Ch. c.4, pp. 214-15; Ch. cxxxix.4, pp. 258-9; Ch. clxxiv.2, pp. 306-7. See Chapter 1, 5.i.

[34] This is most notable in the *Lay of the Nine Herbs* and *Lay of the Nine Twigs of Woden* (Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* III, *Lacnunga,* 45.(i) p 32; 45.(ii) p. 32; 45.(iv), p. 32; 45.(vi), p. 34; 45.(viii, ix), p. 37; 45.(viii, ix), p. 37.) See: Chapter 1, 5.vii.

[35] Neville draws particular attention to the use of these terms in the works of Isidore of Seville. See: J. Neville, *Representations of the Natural World in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge, 1999), p.108.

[36] V. Thompson, *Dying and Death,* p. 132; '(*creopende*)' ['creeping'] is Thompson's own insertion.

good working definition to start out with. As will be demonstrated in the case studies here, it is primarily this 'uncanny' movement or creeping motion, both in physical reality and in a metaphorical sense, that ties this group of animals together in the Anglo-Saxon mind. The concept of uncanniness is borrowed from psychoanalytical theory: although he by no means invented the term, Freud defined it as the feeling produced by viewing something that is simultaneously familiar and unsettlingly unfamiliar.[37] In this way, the word *wyrm* occupies a semantic space comparable to that which the infantile term 'creepy crawly' occupies in Modern English. With regard to this thesis, it would be obtuse to try to examine only the *wyrm* that fits the modern English view of what is serpentine. Instead, the case studies will include the full range of Old English *wyrm*-like creatures, looking at the features they share and using these features to illuminate what it meant for a creature to be serpentine in Anglo-Saxon England.

4. The *Snaca*: A notable absence

It is worth making note of the rarity of the Old English word *snaca*. Bosworth and Toller translate the term as 'a reptile, a snake'.[38] However, despite the large number of serpentine animals present in the Old English corpus, the word *snaca* is a rarity. A simple search for the element *snac* in the Dictionary of Old English Corpus brings up thirteen results that are pertinent, and of these eleven are direct glosses of Latin *coluber,* also meaning 'snake.'[39]

Of the remaining two, one appears in *The Herbarium of Pseudo Apuleius,* a text also translated and adapted from a Latin original. Here, the remedy describes a herb that is useful if someone steps on 'snacan oððe nædran' [snakes or adders], clarifying the term by using it alongside the far more common *nædre* [adder, snake].[40] Another is from an Old English version of the Gospel of Luke found in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS. 140. Again it is a translation from Latin and again appearing alongside *nædre* in Luke 10:19: '…nu ic sealde eow anweald to tredenne ofer næddran &

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[37] S. Freud, 'Das Unheimliche', in J. Strachey (ed.), *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol 17 (London, 1919, reprinted 2001) pp. 219-252.

[38] Bosworth and Toller, *Dictionary,* 'Snaca'.

[39] A. diPaolo Healy et al (ed.), *Dictionary of Old English Web Corpus,* http://tapor.library.utoronto.ca.ezproxy4.lib.le.ac.uk/doecorpus/simple.html [accessed 9th January 2017].

[40] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1. *Herbarium*, p. 152.

snacan...' [Now I give you the power to tread upon adders and snakes].[41] Interestingly, the wording used in the Vulgate is 'serpentes et scorpiones' [serpents and scorpions] and not 'serpentes et colubri' [serpents and snakes], suggesting that the word *snaca*, like *wyrm*, may have had a broader meaning that could encompass the scorpion. However, it is impossible to know for certain what the wording of the Latin source for the West-Saxon translation was, and there is no further evidence for such a translation in the Old English corpus.

It is likely that the word *snaca* was not in common usage during the Anglo-Saxon period. However, just because the Old English ancestor of Modern English 'snake' is a rarity does not mean that there are scarce references to true snakes in the Old English corpus. In fact, there are hundreds. The word that is used most often to denote a true snake is *nædre*. As demonstrated in Chapter 1, London, British Library, Cotton Vitellus C.iii makes it particularly clear that the word *nædre* refers to a true snake, both by the context of the remedies in the *Herbarium of Pseudo Apuleius* and the illustrations that accompany the text in that manuscript.[42] The word *nædre*, in contrast to *snaca*, appears in the Dictionary of Old English Corpus 532 times when the spelling variants *næd- næddr- nædde-* are searched. It seems that, in extant Old English at least, a snake is most often referred to as a *nædre* and the rare *snaca* is used to translate Latin *coluber*. Perhaps this could indicate that a specific kind exotic or non-native snake is being referenced, one that was not a *nædre*, but that required more specificity than the generic term *wyrm*. Equally possible is that the w§ord was far more common in dialects less well-represented in the extant corpus than West Saxon. However, it is enough to mention here that there is very little evidence of the word *snaca*, and due to that fact it will be absent in the remainder of this thesis.

5. Key influences: some exemplary serpents

Serpents proliferate throughout Anglo-Saxon art, literature and imagination, but there are a few examples of serpents that stand out as being particularly influential. When thinking about the serpent in the early medieval period, ideas of damnation and diabolical influence come to mind; the serpent appears both as the agent of the Fall of Man in the biblical book of Genesis (3:1-24) and as a manifestation of Satan's will in

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[41] Skeat, W. (ed.) *The Gospel according to Saint Luke in Anglo-Saxon and Northumbrian versions* (Cambridge, 1874) p. 108.

[42] Chapter 1, 5.ii.

Revelation (12:1-14).[43] However, there are a few more nuanced general cultural and religious factors that influence the general connotations of serpentine animals in Anglo-Saxon England.

### 5.i. Pre-Christian influences

It is far easier to trace the symbolic life of the serpent in Christian mythology than in pre-Christian. Evidence of pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon belief is scarce; after all, pre-Christian Anglo-Saxon England was a largely illiterate, oral culture. Speake's work touches on the image of the serpent in other pre-Christian art in the early medieval period, but Anglo-Saxon examples of the pre-Christian symbolic serpent are extremely limited.[44] Two possible textual sources for interpreting a pre-Christian, Anglo-Saxon serpent motif (if such a thing can be postulated) are *Beowulf* and the folkloric charms found in London, British Library, Harley 585 known as *The Lay of the Nine Herbs* and *The nine twigs of Woden.*[45] Both texts include serpents in a secular context; however, both texts include Christian elements and survive only in a literate, Christian world. The fact that all of the textual evidence we have for pre-Christian Germanic belief comes from a Christian, Latin-influenced culture of literacy presents a problem for the study of symbols; survivals of pre-Christian symbolism are complicated by both the modern reader's assumptions about religion and belief as well as the medieval writer's. As Hines has pointed out, 'we may only be able to recognise as religion what is substantially similar to religion as we know it'.[46] The search for pre-Christian serpent symbolism in Anglo-Saxon England is not the same as the search for pre-Christian religion. However, symbolism and religion are similarly affected in this respect. Any seemingly pre-Christian serpentine symbolism in literature had probably already been informed by Christian tradition at the time of its codification; without any direct evidence for what these beliefs were, modern readers invariably interpret this symbolism through the lens of Christianity.

### 5.ii. The biblical serpent: positive and negative

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[43] See discussion of Bede's commentary on Revelation, Chapter 4, 6.

[44] Speake, *Animal Art*, pp. 85-92.

[45] Chapter 1, 5.vii.

[46] J. Hines, 'Religion: the limits of knowledge' in J. Hines (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective* (Woodbridge, 1997), p. 377.

By far the most obvious and influential example of Christian serpent symbolism comes from the Bible, perhaps the most fundamental text in shaping the Anglo-Saxon post-conversion world-view. Early in the book of Genesis a serpent appears as an agent of Satan's will and causes the Fall of Man. This serpent represents the first and most explicit association between the serpent and the Devil in the Bible. This story also incorporates the origin of the limbless true snake. As the story defines what the snake is, it also sets the tone and context for what its image will come to mean in Christian symbolism. In a culture such as Anglo-Saxon England, in which the majority of the written corpus derives from a Christian literate elite, the serpent of Genesis surely had great influence on the meaning of the animal's image in other areas too. The serpent of the book of *Genesis* is an influential model for the meaning of the serpent in Anglo-Saxon England. Thompson points to Augustine's analysis of the relationship between God, man and biblical serpent in his commentaries on the psalms, and goes so far as to suggest that 'the struggle between humanity and the serpent is the *Leitmotif* of the fallen universe'.[47] Indeed, the identification between the serpent and death is neatly encapsulated in the Christian tradition; a tradition in which one of the central dramas is the transcendence of death and the achievement of eternal life. The serpent is the agent of the Devil that causes human mortality to become a reality; Man is made from dust and returns to dust (Gen 3:19) and the serpent is condemned to eat dust (Gen 3:14). The symbolic implications of this are made physical in the poem *Soul and Body* in which the *wyrm* actually consumes the mortal remains of a man in his grave (see above, Intro 2). Salvation comes in the form of eternal life in which the soul is saved from the body's fate. The struggle between mortal man and death is epitomised in the enmity between mankind and the serpent, vividly described in Genesis where this conflict is espoused in the voice of the divine (Gen 3:15).

Although the link between the serpent and the Fall of Man is strong, the image of the serpent does not invariably carry negative connotations in scripture. In Matthew 10:16, Jesus advises his disciples to emulate the serpent (see also Chapter 5, III.4):

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[47] Thompson, *Dying and Death*, p. 134; Augustine, *Exposition on Psalm 104*, ed. J. P. Migne, PL 37 (Paris, 1386); see also: Augustine, *Ennarationes in Psalmos CI-CL* eds E. Dekkers and J. Fraipont, CCSL 40 (Turnhout, 1956).

> Ecce ego mitto vos sicut oves in medio luporum estote ergo prudentes
> sicut serpentes et simplices sicut columbae.[48]

> Behold, I send you as sheep in the midst of wolves. Be you therefore as
> prudent as serpents and as simple as doves.

Admittedly, there is a contrast between the two animals that was probably intentional; the serpent and the dove are diametrically opposed animals in terms of Christian iconography, one representing diabolical influence and the other representing the Holy Spirit, one third of the tripartite divinity in Christian cosmology. However, the scripture here indicates that it is not the quality of serpentine prudence or cunning in itself that is negative. The positive aspect of this serpent-like prudence is also acknowledged by Augustine, who repeats Jesus' advice in his *De Doctrina Christiana*. [49] Elsewhere in the same text, Augustine elaborates on the ways in which snakes provides a positive example of wisdom by pointing to their natural behaviour: Snakes, Augustine notes, shed their skin by moving through a narrow gap, thus mirroring Christ in its rebirth and renewal by suffering.[50] They also protect their heads by sacrificing the tail, demonstrating another way that Christ would wish his followers to be 'prudent as serpents'[51]. The reference to Matthew 10:16 appears again in the mid-eighth-century *Regula Canonicorum* of Chrodegang; the advice to be like both the serpent and the dove, here directed to the archdeacon and the *primericus*, appears in the original rule, the enlarged rule and in the Old English translation of the enlarged rule.[52] The *Regula Canonicorum* is by its nature a pragmatic text, providing a rule for the lives of canons in the burgeoning early medieval Church. The appearance of Matthew 10:16 here

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[48] Unless otherwise stated, all biblical quotations are taken from the Vulgate (R. Weber and R. Gryson (eds), *Biblia Sacra Vulgata* (1994), https://www.academic-bible.com/en/home/scholarly-editions/vulgate/[Accessed 9th February 2015]).

[49] Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana,* ed. and transl. R. P. H. Green (Oxford, 1995), book II, 60, pp. 82-4.

[50] Augustine, *Doctrina,* book II, 80, P. 166.

[51] Augustine, *Doctrina,* book II, 80, P. 166.

[52] In the original Rule: Chrodegang, *Regula Canonicorum,* (ed. and trans), J. Bertram, *The Chrodegang Rules: The Rules for the Common Life of the Secular Clergy from the Eighth and Ninth Centuries. Critical Texts with Translations and Commentary* (Aldershot, 2005), p. 42; trans p. 71. For the reference in both the Latin and Old English Enlarged Rule see, B. Langefeld (ed. and transl.), *The Old English Version of the Enlarged Rule of Chrodegang: together with the Latin text and an English Translation* (Munich, 1985), ch. VIII, p. 189 and transl. p. 364.

suggests a real world relevance for the motif of the prudent serpent. The connection between the serpent and prudence is probably informed by the semantic congruence that exists between the word *serpens* [serpent] and *sapiens* [wisdom] in Latin. Augustine uses the two words side by side when he describes the salvation of mankind in his *De Doctrina Christiana*, saying 'serpetis sapienta decepti sumus, dei stultitia liberamur' [we were trapped by the wisdom of the serpent, we are freed by the foolishness of God].[53] In this instance, not only is are the terms *sapiens* and *serpens* adjacent to one another, but the idea of wisdom itself is turned on its head as Augustine presents it negatively in contrast to the humility and self-sacrifice of God. Howen addresses the ambigious attitude that medieval thinkers had towards the cunning serpent, and suggests that it was one of many Christian images that could be both good and bad depending on its context.[54]

In the majority of cases, the image of the serpent as it is found in Anglo-Saxon England is negative; nevertheless it is worth noting that the serpent is a multivalent image in Christian symbolic tradition – both scriptural and patristic. It's relationship to wisdom and prudence makes it a complex symbol capable of being both positive and negative, depending on its context.

6. Serpents in the Anglo-Saxon landscape

The presence of real snakes that lived in the Anglo-Saxon landscape must surely have been another influence on the Anglo-Saxon perception of the serpent. They likely existed in greater numbers than today due to less habitat disturbance. Three species of snake are native to the British Isles. These are the adder (*Vipera berus*), the grass snake (*Natrix natrix*) and the smooth snake (*Coronella austriaca*).[55] Also present is the slow worm (*Anguis fragilis*), which is in fact a limbless lizard, not a true snake.[56] Of these, only the adder is venomous. Despite this, as we will see in Chapter 1, the Old English medical texts mention snakes and snake-bite frequently.[57] Whilst the Anglo-Saxon propensity

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[53] Augustine, *De Doctrina Christiana,* ed. and transl. R. P. H. Green (Oxford, 1995), book I, 27, p. 25.

[54] Howen, L., *Animals and the Symbolic in Medieval Art and Literature* (Gröningen, 1997), p. 11.

[55] See: L. G. Appleby, *British Snakes* (London, 1971).

[56] H. W. Parker and A. G. C. Grandison, *Snakes: a natural history* (London, 2nd edition, 1977), p. 11.

[57] Chapter 1, 5.ii.

for the form and symbolism of the serpent does seem to be disproportionate to the number of actual serpents in their reality, there is evidence that they were aware of serpents in their everyday landscape.

6.i. Written Evidence: The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is a series of annals composed in Old English. It provides a useful textual source to examine the relationship between Anglo-Saxons and serpents in their everyday environment. Whilst the reliability of any historical document may be debated, the Chronicle deals mostly in what were − or were perceived as − real world events, particularly events affecting the elite of society.[58] The annals also include auspices and omens with very little commentary, perhaps the most famous being the sighting of what is now known as Haley's Comet in the year 1066.[59] Serpents also feature amongst these significant events. In the year 774, the Chronicle mentions serpents as it notes a plague of 'wundorlice nædran' [wondrous adders] in Sussex.[60] This reference to many serpents in the area is recorded alongside a battle between the peoples of Mercia and Kent, as well as a 'read criste' [red cross] that appeared in the sky after sunset at an unspecified location. It is possible that this is an example of intentional parataxis, and the large number of adders was meant be read as a sign by virtue of the fact that it occurs alongside the appearance of the red cross. Of course, on the other hand, the event may have been recorded simply for the environmental disruption that it caused. In either case, the Anglo-Saxons of mid-eighth-century Sussex were sharing their landscape with snakes and were aware of a sudden swell in the population when it occurred.

The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle includes another mention of serpentine imagery which is more obviously to be read as an omen in the entry for 793; the entry records 'fyrenne dracan' [fiery dragons] seen in the sky.[61] The reference might be to a number

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[58] Brooks, N., P., 'Why is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle about kings?', *Anglo-Saxon England* 39 (2010), pp. 43−70.

[59] O'Brien O'Keeffe, C. (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a collaborative edition, volume 5, MS. C* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 120; Cubbin, G. P. (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: A Collaborative Edition, volume 6, MS. D* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 79.

[60] O' Brien O' Keeffe, *Chronicle MS.C,* p. 49; Cubbin, *Chronicle MS.D*, p. 15; Irvine, S. (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a collaborative edition, volume 7, MS.E* (Cambridge, 2004), p. 40; Baker, P.S., *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle: a collaborative edition, Volume 8, MS.F* (Cambridge, 2000), p. 52.

[61] Cubbin, *Chronicle MS.D*, p. 17; Irvine, *Chronicle MS.E,* p. 42; Baker, *Chronicle MS F,* p.55.

of astrological phenomena, but Ellis Davidson suggests that the reference actually describes the aurora borealis.[62] The undulating, snake-like patterns that occur in the aurora borealis could certainly call to mind a serpentine form. Although in the second example, the fiery dragons are certainly metaphorical, both of these instances are examples of the motif of the serpent impacting everyday life and the real world environment of Anglo-Saxon England.

6.ii. Archaeological Evidence

Looking for physical evidence of serpents in the Anglo-Saxon landscape is difficult. There have been many studies that examine the distribution of animal remains in Anglo-Saxon England in order to understand habitats, farming and hunting practices, and the animal populations of the period.[63] However, the extent of the presence of true snakes in Anglo-Saxon England is difficult to estimate by this method. Skeletal records are lacking. Unlike some domestic or wild mammals, the British snake has no significant value as a food source, and is therefore not likely to be represented in manmade deposits. It also has an extremely delicate skeletal structure that does not survive well over time. There have been some limited finds; for example, O'Connor notes some serpentine finds from the excavation at Fishergate in his study of the economy and environment of York in the eighth to eleventh centuries.[64] He notes that 'a number of specimens of slow worms (*anguis fragilis*) and of an unidentified small snake were recovered'.[65] However, finds such as this are quite rare and are not sufficient to speculate on snake populations in a broader sense. The eel is different from other serpents in this regard. As a staple food source their remains have been deliberately

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[62] Ellis Davidson, H. R., *Gods and Myths of Northern Europe* (Harmondsworth, 1964), p. 160.

[63] There are a number of essays on environmental archaeology in: J. Rackham (ed.), *Environment and Economy in Anglo-Saxon England* (York, 1994). Notable recent contributions to the zooarchaeology of England in the period include: B. Coles, *Beavers in Britain's Past* (Oxford, 2006); A. Pluskowski, *Wolves and the Wilderness in the Middle Ages* (Woodbridge, 2006); A. Pluskowski, 'The Archaeology of Paganism' in H. Hamerow, D. Hinton and S. Crawford (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 764-78; N. Sykes, 'Deer, Land, Knives and Halls: social change in early medieval England', *The Antiquaries Journal* 90 (2010), pp. 175-93; N. Sykes, 'Woods and the Wilds', in H. Hamerow, D. Hinton and S. Crawford (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Archaeology* (Oxford, 2011), pp. 327-45.

[64] O'Connor, T., '8th-11th century economy and environment in York', in J. Rackham (ed.), *Environment and Economy in Anglo-Saxon England* (York, 1994).

[65] O'Connor, *8th-11th century*, p. 142.

preserved in several cases. For example, eels were discovered coiled in a basket and deposited as grave goods at a seventh-century cemetery in west Cambridge.[66]

6.iii. Place-Name Evidence

Place-names can also yield evidence of how people in the Anglo-Saxon period interacted with and related to the natural world around them. The subject of animals in place-names has been of interest to onomasts such as Aybes, Yalden and Gelling, but so far studies have concentrated mainly on birds and mammal names.[67] In a recent study, Poole has examined place-names as evidence of how much the native fauna of Anglo-Saxon England affected the lives and occupied the minds of its inhabitants.[68] His study focused on badgers and foxes, and takes archaeological as well as place-name evidence into consideration. Poole's conclusions note the increase in the trapping and control of wild mammal populations later in the Anglo-Saxon period and the effect this had on both wild populations and the practices of humans. Of course, these conclusions are centred on mammal populations and are not readily applicable to snakes. However, Poole's method of observing people's awareness of wild animals through the lens of place-name evidence is relevant. Poole concludes that, 'In contrast to the dearth of foxes and badgers in faunal assemblages, place-names are rich with their presence. These data indicate that people living in Anglo-Saxon England had a great deal of knowledge about the habitats of badgers and foxes, and inform us about the ways in which differences in behavior between these species filtered into human perceptions'.[69]

Whilst serpentine remains in archeological deposits are scarce, serpentine elements do appear in English place-names. A majority of these are listed in the English Place-Name Society's county volumes, with the major names searchable via the

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[66] N. Dodwell, S. Lucy and J. Tipper, 'Anglo-Saxons on the Cambridge Backs: the Criminology site settlement and King's Garden Hostel cemetery', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society* 93 (2004), p. 95-124; Chapter 5, 5.iib.

[67] Aybes, C. and Yalden, D. W., 'Place-name evidence for the former distribution and status of wolves and beavers in Britain', *Mammal Review* 25, Vol. 4 (1995), pp. 201-226; Gelling, M. *Place-Names in the Landscape* (London, 1984).

[68] K. Poole, 'Foxes and Badgers in Anglo-Saxon Life and Landscape', *Archaeological Journal* 172 (2015), pp. 389–422.

[69] Poole, 'Foxes' (2015), p. 416.

University of Nottingham's *Key to English Place Names* online resource.[70] Searching the corpus of major place names yields a sampling of results that are determined by the English Place Name Society to derive from the Old English word *wyrm*.

| Name | *Key to English Place Names* Meaning |
|---|---|
| Worminghall, Buckinghamshire[71] | Uncertain. 'Wyrma's nook of land' or 'snake nook of land' |
| Wormhill, Derbyshire[72] | 'wyrma's hill' |
| Wormington, Gloucestershire[73] | farm/settlement connected with Wyrma' |
| Wormsley, Herefordshire[74] | Uncertain, 'Wyrma's wood/clearing' or perhaps 'snake wood/clearing' |
| Wormbridge,[75] Herefordshire | 'worm brook bridge' |
| Wormley, Hertfordshire[76] | 'snake wood/clearing' |
| Wormegay, Norfolk[77] | 'Wyrma's Island', less likely 'island of Wyrma's people'. |

[70] *Key to English Place Names* (University of Nottingham Insitiute for Name Studies, *Key to English Place Names,* http://kepn.nottingham.ac.uk [accessed 2nd July 2015]. The Key draws on the ongoing survey of English place names in the English Place Name Society's county volumes, ed. A. H. Smith (et alia), *English Place Name Society,* vols (Cambridge, 1926-present). The relevant volumes for each place-name is given below in the footnotes.

[71] Mawer, a. and Stenton, F. M., *The Place Names of Buckinghamshire,* Eng. Place-Name Soc., Vol.ii (Cambridge, 1925), pp. 129-30.

[72] Cameron, K., *The Place Names of Derbyshire*, Eng. Place Name Soc., Vol. xxvii (Cambridge, 1959), p. 179.

[73] Smith, A. H., *The Place names of Gloucestershire: Part II, The North and West Cotswolds*, Eng. Place-Name Soc., Vol. xxxix (Cambridge, 1964), p. 40.

[74] Watts, *Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 701.

[75] Watts, *Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names* (Cambridge, 2003) p. 700-1.

[76] A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Hertfordshire,* Eng. Place-Name Soc., Vol. xv (Cambridge, 1938), pp. 233-4.

[77] Watts, *Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names* (Cambridge, 2003) p. 701.

There are two reasons that a place might be named after a *wyrm* evident in this small group of geographically scattered examples: that the place is associated with a serpentine animal or that it is associated with a person named after a serpentine animal. In the majority of cases, it is not clear which of these was the original meaning of the place-name. However, both possibilities are of interest; if indeed the places are so named due to the number of animals in that area, then this evidence could point to an awareness of the habitats and movements of snakes; a conclusion similar to that drawn by Poole.[78] Worminghall (Bucks) and Wormsley (Here) are both determined to be 'uncertain', while Wormbridge (Here) and Wormley (Herts) are determined to relate to the animal in the landscape rather than a person.

Wormhill (Derbs), Wormington (Glos) and Wormegay (Norf) are all determined to be associated with a person with the name Wyrma. The implications for this word as a personal name are manifold. Though there are, as discussed above, some positive aspects of the serpent, the majority of associations with the animal(s) denoted by the word *wyrm* are mostly negative. It may seem surprising at first that the name should be applied to a person. However, the entry for Worminghall in the English Place Name Society's county volumes speculates that 'there must have been OE names *Wurma,* and with mutation of the stem-vowel, *Wyrma,* although the only OE name on record with a *Wurm*-element is *Wurmhere'*.[79] The Old English *wurma* is also a word on its own, and can either be a variant of *wyrm* or a type of shellfish, or the purple dye which can be extracted from that shellfish.[80] It is possible that the Old English name *Wyrma* derives not from Old English *wyrm* but from Old English *wurm,* meaning purple.[81] However, the existence of the analogous Old Norse name *Ormr,* derived from the Old Norse *ormr* also meaning serpent, suggests that serpentine words were indeed used as names.[82] In

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[78] Poole, 'Foxes' (2015), p. 411; 416.

[79] A Mawer and F. M. Stenton, *The Place Names of Buckinghamshire,* Eng. Place-Name Soc., Vol.ii (Cambridge, 1925), pp. 129-30.

[80] Bosworth and Toller, *Dictionary,* 'wurm'.

[81] Bosworth and Toller, *Dictionary,* 'wurm'.

[82] A similar pattern occurs with place-names beginning with 'Orm-'. Ormskirk, Lancashire (Watts, *Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 452.), Ormside, Westmorland (A. H. Smith, *Place-Names of Westmorland: Part II,* Eng. Place-Name Soc., Vol. xliii (Cambridge, 1967), p. 89), Ormesby in Yorkshire (Smith, A. H., *Place-Names of the North Riding of Yorkshire*, Eng. Place-Name Soc., Vol. v (Cambridge, 1928), p. 157.) and Ormesby St. Margaret and St. Michael in Norfolk (Sandred, K. I., and Lindström, B., *The Place-Names of Norfolk: Part II,* Eng. Place-Name Soc., Vol. lxxii (Cambridge, 1996), p. 13) are all judged by the Place-Name Society to derive from the personal name Ormr.

any case, both the place- and personal names are evidence of the presence of the *wyrm* in everyday Anglo-Saxon life across a wide geographical area, whether in the form of real animals inhabiting the landscape or imaginary, symbolic animals that nonetheless come to represent real people. Both are examples of how the serpent was present in the Anglo-Saxon mind beyond explicit references in exegesis, poetry or art.

7. Methodology

The aim of this thesis is not to survey all mentions or depictions of serpents in Anglo-Saxon sources. Such a survey would be well beyond the limits of its capacity. Instead, this thesis looks to examine how the image of the serpent is used in several different genres of literature and visual media. The process of doing this can be likened to archaeological practice. Instead of attempting to excavate and lift out the entirety of serpentine imagery in the Anglo-Saxon mind, this study chooses case studies as test pits. Each case study is based on a particular type of evidence. If there is commonality between the representations of serpents in all five 'test pits', then an overall meaning of the serpent across the entire field of Anglo-Saxon symbolic thought can be proposed. This thesis will not reach the stage of excavating that entire field, but it can suggest a pattern of meaning across media from Anglo-Saxon England.

Chapter One looks at the role of serpentine animals in medical texts; here snakes are particularly prolific, and occur frequently in a small corpus of Anglo-Saxon medical texts. The Old English medical texts will be examined as a case study, with their relationship to Latin traditions acknowledged. The medical texts are particularly pertinent to this study since, of all Old English texts in the extant corpus, they are by far the most dense with references to serpents. Chapter Two analyses the literary role of the serpent in the Old English epic *Beowulf;* this chapter is followed by a second literary case study in Chapter Three, which examines the serpent in the Old English scriptural poetry of a single manuscript, Oxford, Bodleian Library Junius XI (hereafter, *Junius XI*). These case studies were chosen for two reasons: firstly, both *Beowulf* and the poems of *Junius XI* contain an unusually high number of references to serpentine creatures. Secondly, whilst the focus of *Beowulf* is secular poetry and the focus of *Junius XI* is religious poetry, both come from manuscripts compiled with a particular theme in mind, and both demonstrate a development of the image of the serpent in various different contexts, making them highly comparable. Chapter Four deals with serpents in historical and exegetical texts, taking its lead from the scriptural poetry dealt with in

Chapter Three and using three works of Bede as case studies; these are, *Libri quatuor in principum Genesis*, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* and *Explanatio Apocalypseos*. Bede's extensive body of work is well represented in the extant corpus and contains references to serpents in a variety of different contexts, making for another useful case study. Finally, Chapter Five examines the image of the serpent in a visual context, taking the metalwork of the Staffordshire hoard as a case study and looking at how it relates to that most central of Anglo-Saxon social and economic practices – war.

The choice of case studies covers the religious and the secular, poetry and prose, image and text, orthodox and popular, the educated elite and the commonplace. By examining the usage, connotations and symbolic value of the serpent in each of these diverse examples, the thesis examines how the underlying association between the serpent and death pervades the use of this motif.

# CHAPTER 1

## The Serpent in the Old English Medical Texts

1. Introduction

Old English medical literature is preoccupied with serpents. Serpents and serpentine creatures are the focus of many Old English remedies, appearing abundantly as real animals responsible for bites, afflictions and infestations, and ranging in kind from true snakes to intestinal worms. However, central as they are to the genre, these real creatures are only part of the whole picture. Sometimes serpentine creatures appear as scapegoats, blamed for afflictions of the eye, ear, or teeth in cases where the presence of any actual *wyrm* is unlikely. Sometimes serpentine terminology is used to refer to other small creatures, particularly those that are venomous or parasitic in some way. In other cases it seems the invisible serpent is used even more broadly as a metaphor for infection and infected matter, or even the adversary of disease itself. Whilst the identity of some of these serpents is ambiguous, the Old English medical texts reveal much about what the image of the serpent meant in Anglo-Saxon England. In all its various guises, the serpentine presence in the medical texts is insidious by nature; it is unseen, hidden or invisible, and seeks to consume, break down or parasitize the human body.

2. The Texts

There are four Old English medical texts that deal extensively with serpents.[1] These are: *The Herbarium of Pseudo-Apuleius* (hereafter, *Herbarium*); *Medicina de quadrupedibus* (hereafter, *Quadrupedibus*); *Bald's Leechbook* (hereafter, *Leechbook*); *Lacnunga* [Recipes]. These fall into two groups: those texts that are Old English translations of Latin originals, and those that were originally composed or collated in Old English. *Herbarium* and *Quadrupedibus* are of the former group; *Leechbook* and *Lacnunga* are of the latter.

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[1] A fifth text, the *Peri Didaxaeon,* contains one remedy against the ear *wyrm* (Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. III, 'ΠΕΡΙ ΔΙΔΑΕΩΝ', Ch XII, p. 90). However, this remedy is the text's only reference to serpentine animals and the remedy is extremely similar to those ear-*wyrm* remedies found in the *Herbarium.* For these reasons it is not included among the texts in this chapter.

2.i. Translations from Latin: *The Herbarium of Pseudo-Apuleius* and *Medicina De Quadrupedibus*

The most extensive of the two translated texts is the *Herbarium,* which consists of medicinal remedies that utilise plants. It has a close relationship with the shorter *Quadrupedibus;* both are extant in the same three manuscripts (see below) and in all three cases *Quadrupedibus* follows *Herbarium.*[2] *Quadrupedibus* comprises remedies that can be derived from animals rather than from plants. The quadrupeds covered by the text range from animals that would have been commonplace to Anglo-Saxon England, such as the bull or the hart, through to lions and elephants.

As is suggested by the title, *The Herbarium of Pseudo-Apuleius,* the text is erroneously attributed to someone named Apuleius.[3] At first glance, it might be assumed that the name is an attempt to attribute the original work to the Platonic philosopher Lucius Apuleius of Madaura (born c. AD 125). However, as there is no evidence that the text was composed before the fourth century, the possibility of the work ever having had its origins in the second century is now regarded as erroneous by scholars such as Voigts, De Vriend and Van Arsdall.[4] Instead, Voigts has argued that the name *Apuleius* is a derivative of the Latinized Greek name Aesculapius, the Greek God of medicine.[5] In fact, the most complete manuscript version of the text begins with a full-page illustration of three figures, clearly labelled 'Escolapivs' [Aesculapius], 'Plato' and 'Centaurus'.[6]

The vast majority of the remedies found in the *Herbarium* are unlikely to have originated in Anglo-Saxon England. The Latin text from which the Old English version was translated is lost. However, there have been several scholarly speculations on its sources, and all agree that it must have drawn on knowledge from diverse locations across Europe. De Vriend asserts that both *Herbarium* and *Quadrupedibus*

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[2] In the case of *Harley 585, Quadrupedibus* is unfinished.

[3] The attribution appears in a title page in London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius C.iii, f. 19v; see also Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1, p.1.

[4] L. E. Voigts, 'The significance of the name Apuleius to the Herbarium Apulei', *Bulletin of the History of Medicine Baltimore, Md* 52, no. 2 (1978), pp. 217-219; H. J. de Vriend, *The Old English Herbarium an.d Medicina de Quadrupedibus*, Vol. 286 (Oxford, 1984); A. Van Arsdall, *Medieval herbal remedies: the Old English herbarium and Anglo-Saxon medicine* (New York and London, 2002), 259.

[5] Voigts, 'Significance', pp. 217-219.

[6] London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius C.iii, f.19r

probably draw on a variety of Late Antique and early medieval sources.[7] He also suggests that both *Herbarium* and *Quadrupedibus* would have reached a substantial audience during the early medieval period. The existence of vernacular translations is evidence that the text was perceived to be useful, and the three extant copies of the work show that this perception was not limited to just one scribe.[8]  In fact, scholars such as Voigts and Van Arsdall speculate that the texts are part of a pan-European tradition of medical lore, drawing on Late Antique knowledge in Northern Italy.[9]

The Old English *Herbarium* exists in three manuscripts: London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius C.iii (hereafter *Vitellius C.iii*); London, British Library, Harley 585 (hereafter *Harley 585*); and Oxford, Bodleian Library, Hatton 76 (hereafter *Hatton 76*). The manuscripts all date from the late Anglo-Saxon period, the earliest being *Harley 585,* which Ker dates to the turn of the eleventh century or the early half of it; *Vitellius C.iii* is similarly dated to the first half of the eleventh century and *Hatton 76,* the latest according to Ker, dates from the middle two quarters of the eleventh century.[10] Some material from the *Herbarium* appears in a fourth, later manuscript, London, British Library, Harley 6258b. This is a late twelfth-century manuscript in which the *Herbarium* has been re-ordered and merged with other medical texts.[11] *Vitellius C.iii* is particularly notable for the fact that it is illustrated, making it the only Old English medical text to contain drawings alongside the remedies. *Hatton 76* contains spaces for illustrations that correspond with those in *Vitellius C.iii,* but they were never filled in. The three differ 'only slightly, either because of the translator, because of omissions, or because pages were misplaced while the manuscript was being rebound'.[12] De Vriend even asserts in the introduction to his edition that the

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[7] De Vriend, *The Old English Herbarium and Medicina de Quadrupedibus* pp. lv-lxviii.

[8] Ibid., pp. xi-lv.

[9] L. E. Voigts, 'A New Look at a Manuscript Containing the Old English Translation of the Herbarium Apulei', *Manuscripta* 20, no. 1 (1976), pp. 40-60;Van Arsdall, *Medieval herbal remedies: the Old English herbarium and Anglo-Saxon medicine*, pp.259.

[10] Ker, N. R., *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford, 1957), *Harley 585*, no. 231, p. 305; *Cotton Vitellius C.iii,* No. 219, p. 284; *Hatton 76,* no. 328, p. 388.

[11] British Library, 'Harley MS 6258B', *Digitised Manuscripts* http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Harley_MS_6258_b [accessed June 2015]; *Harley 6258B* also contains the only extant copy of the *Peri Didaxaeon* (see Chapter 1, footnote 1).

[12] Van Arsdall, *Herbal Remedies,* p. 259.

agreement indicates a single exemplar for all three.[13] All three texts also share several additional remedies that have, in the past, been attributed to Dioscorides. These additional sections are the reason that the *Herbarium* has elsewhere come to be referred to as the *Enlarged Herbarium*.[14] However, Dioscorides' work, *De Materia Medica,* is not the direct source of these appended remedies in the Old English *Herbarium*.[15] The attribution is probably due to the fact that *De Materia Medica* had a far-reaching impact on herbal medical texts in classical literature. Arber argues that it was widely copied across the continent and would have been 'accepted as the most infallible authority' in early medieval Europe.[16] The attribution of the appended remedies in the Old English *Herbarium* to Dioscorides could, then, have imbued them with a certain authority by association.

Like all of the texts here, *Herbarium* and *Quadrupedibus* are practical reference works. Their remedies often assume prior knowledge of certain plants and actions, no measurements are included and there is no elaboration on how or why the remedies work. As Van Arsdall has noted, the texts seem to be intended for someone already skilled in healing.[17]

### 2.ii. Old English Compositions: *Bald's Leechbook* and *Lacnunga*

The *Leechbook* is an Old English compilation of remedies that exist in only one manuscript, London, British Museum, Royal 12.D. xvii (hereafter *Royal 12.D*). In Ker's estimation it slightly predates those manuscripts containing the Latin texts (see above), probably originating in the middle of the tenth century.[18] The *Leechbook* is organised into three books, each containing mainly plant-based remedies. The first two books are arranged by affliction, moving down the body from head to foot, dealing with remedies for ailments of the head first and so on. Book Three is organised by ailment, and this book in particular contains remedies that are

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[13] Ibid., pp. xi-lv.

[14] Gneuss, H., and Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, *Handlist of Anglo-Saxon manuscripts: a list of manuscripts and manuscript fragments written or owned in England up to 1100*, Vol. 241 (Tempe, AZ., 2001), p. 188.

[15] Gunther, R. T., *The Greek Herbal of Dioscorides* (New York, 1968) p. 323.

[16] Arber, A., *Herbals: their origin and evolution* (Cambridge, 1938). p.16.

[17] Van Arsdall, *Herbal Remedies,* p. 259.

[18] Ker, *Catalogue,* no. 264, p. 332.

accompanied by the recitation of various liturgies and the performance of rituals. These curative rituals combine physical plant remedies with medico-magical elements. This is in contrast to the *Herbarium* and *Medicina de Quadrupedibus* that are restricted exclusively to the application of physical remedies. Like both the *Herbarium* and *Quadrupedibus,* the *Leechbook* contains remedies that are vague in their instruction. For example, the entirety of Remedy xlix in *Leechbook* Book I reads:

> Wiþ þam smalan wyrme. Wiþerwindan twig foreweard and þa fealwan doccan næs þa readan and þis greate sealt gebeaten togædere swiðe smale and lytel buteran.[19]

> For the small *wyrm.* Forepart of a withewind twig and the fallow dock, not the red, and this coarse salt beaten together very small and little butter.

There is a lack of specific instruction, suggesting that like the other two texts, the *Leechbook* is meant primarily to serve as a reference book for someone already skilled in the minutiae of making and applying remedies. The simple brevity of the Old English used also points to the practical purpose of the text. The text's common name, *Bald's Leechbook,* comes from the colophon at the beginning of Book III, that includes the words: 'Bald habet hunc librum cild quem conscribere iussit' [Bald owns this book, which be ordered Cild to write].[20] Although 'conscribere' is best translated as *to write,* it has been noted by both Wright and more recently by Nokes that the *Leechbook,* like *Herbarium* and *Quadrupedibus,* was probably a compilation of existing material rather than an original composition.[21] The extant manuscript, *Royal 12.D,* is not the original book mentioned by the colophon. It is a copy of some, or all, of that book, including the colophon, as well as some other added material. This is evident in the way that the three books of the *Leechbook* have been copied and bound together. It seems that at

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[19] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 2, 'Leechbook I', ch. xlix, p. 122.

[20] London, British Library, Royal Royal 12.D. xvii, f. 109r; transcribed in: R. S. Nokes, R. S. 'The several compilers of Bald's Leechbook', *Anglo-Saxon England* 33, (2004), p. 53

[21] Wright, C. E., *Bald's Leechbook: British Museum Royal Manuscript 12.D.xvii* (Copenhagen, 1955).

some point Books I and II were a single text, and Book III, the book with the colophon, was, as Nokes puts it, 'tacked on by the scribe.[22]

The *Lacnunga* are a selection of miscellaneous remedies also extant in only one manuscript; they follow and are contemporary with the *Herbarium* and incomplete *Quadrupedibus* in *Harley 585*.[23] However, the *Lacnunga* are quite different in tone and content to the translated texts they now accompany. The remedies, composed in Old English, are organised by ailment, and like those in the *Leechbook* contain charms and charm-like elements. In fact, of all the Old English medical texts, the *Lacnunga* uses incantations, singing and ritual elements most often. Amongst the recipes are five metrical *galdra* [songs, charms], two of which are of particular interest to the study of the serpent in Anglo-Saxon medical thought; the *Lay of the Nine Herbs* and the *Nine Twigs of Woden* (see below).[24]

### 3. The 'Dark Age': Knowledge, Superstition and Modern Scholarship

It was in the mid-ninteenth century that the Reverend Thomas Oswald Cockayne initially compiled transcribed and translated the Old English medical texts in one vast edition, *Leechdoms, Wortcunning and Starcraft of Early England*.[25] To this day his edition remains useful in a cross textual study such as this one, since a high degree of editorial consistency is assured across all five texts.[26] However, it should be noted that the archaic mood set by the title of Cockayne's edition is often continued in the tone of his translations, written alongside the text in facing-page format. He also makes some editorial choices that are no longer appropriate, such the translation of some of

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[22] Nokes, *The Several Compilers*, p. 52.

[23] Ker, *Catalogue,* 'Harley 585', no. 231, pp. 305-6.

[24] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 3, 'Recipes' ch. 45, pp. 31-7. The given titles of these two metrical charms are those used in: Jolly, *Popular Religion,* pp. 125-7. However, there is some debate about whether the two charms are in fact separate entities, or whether they are part of the same compliation. Pettit's 2001 edition treats the verses as a single charm. See: E. T. Pettit, *Anglo-Saxon Remedies, Charms and Prayers from British Library MS Harley 585*, II vols (New York, 2001).

[25] Cockayne, *Leechdoms.*

[26] Since Cockayne's edition, there have been a number of other editions that are worthy of note and which have been useful to this thesis. See in particular: De Vriend, H. J., *The Old English Herbarium and Medicina de Quadrupedibus* (Oxford, 1984); E. T. Pettit, *Anglo-Saxon Remedies, Charms and Prayers from British Library MS Harley 585*, II vols (New York, 2001); J. H. G. Grattan, and C. Singer, *Anglo-Saxon magic and medicine: illustrated specially from the semi-pagan text "Lacnunga"'* (1952, repr. Norwood, 1976).

the gynaecological remedies into Latin instead of Modern English.[27] Cockayne also took up the prevailing view of his time that medicine and learning had been in steep decline throughout the Anglo-Saxon period. He wrote, 'It will be difficult for the kindliest temper to give a friendly welcome to the medical philosophy of the Saxon days.'[28] From Cockayne's day onward, medical knowledge from the period then known as the Dark Ages has suffered from a number of prejudices.[29] Two presumptions made by editors and scholars bear mention here: the idea that the translated texts were unintelligible to the Anglo-Saxon healer, and the idea that there are discernible Christian and 'pagan' elements in the texts.

Despite the current shifts in medieval scholarship away from the idea of a Dark Age and towards a more relativist approach to issues of science and philosophy, the legacy of these early editors is evident even today. As late as 1992, organic pharmacology professor John Mann made the statement that '…during the Dark Ages in Europe, pharmacy, superstition and magic became inextricably inter-twined'.[30] Mann's phraseology sums up much of past scholarship on the medical texts. Cameron's 1993 book on Anglo-Saxon medicine, complied from his series in the journal *Anglo-Saxon Medicine,* is more sympathetic, but still maintains that the magical elements of the charms would have been a last resort for people for whom rational medicine had failed or was unavailable.[31] These patterns of interpretation are being overturned in more recent scholarship: Van Arsdall, for example, has done much to counterbalance to this way of thinking.[32] She argues that the Anglo-Saxons would have understood the medical texts fully, contrary to Singer's view that texts such as the *Herbarium* and *Quadrupedibus* would have only ever served the Anglo-Saxons as scribal exercises.[33] Indeed, there is no evidence that the Anglo-Saxons did not

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[27] For example, see: Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1, 'Medicina de Quadrupedibus' ch. V.11, p. 351.

[28] From Cockayne's introduction to Vol. 1 of *Leechdoms;* none of Cockayne's introductory material appears in the 1961 reprint, replaced instead by Charles Singer's introduction to the three volumes. Cockayne's introduction is included in the Kraus reprint: Cockayne, *Leechdoms, Wortcunning and Starcraft of Early England,* (1864-66, rep. New York, 1965) p. i.

[29] Van Arsdal's 2003 edition of the *Herbarium* catalogues a range of unjust treatments of the texts by modern scholarship. See: A. Van Arsdall, *Herbal remedies,* Ch. 2.

[30] Mann, J., *Murder, Magic and Medicine* (Oxford, 1992) p. 35.

[31] Cameron, M. L., *Anglo-Saxon Medicine* (Cambridge, 1993) p. 158.

[32] Van Arsdall, *Herbal Remedies.*

[33] Singer, *Magic to Science,* p. 24; Van Arsdall, *Herbal Medicine,* p. 49.

understand the efficacy of the remedies. She also argues convincingly that the *Herbarium* (and by implication all of the medical texts) is part of a pan-European medical tradition in which medical knowledge was shared over vast distances by way of textual transmission as well as being altered and passed on in local oral traditions.[34] If so, the Old English medical texts need to be viewed not as Anglo-Saxon attempts to appropriate late classical learning, but as scientific (and cultural) productions of their own time.

Until recently, scholarship has taken a similar view of Christian and non-orthodox elements in Anglo-Saxon medicine. Just as the texts integrate Classical and Anglo-Saxon medical sources, they also integrate orthodox Christian practices with non-orthodox or folk-belief practices. In the past, this has been viewed as further evidence that the texts represent a Dark Age of superstition and a lack of learning. Grattan and Singer, in the introduction to their noteworthy edition of *Lacnunga,* state that the modern reader will 'find himself contemplating two utterly different worlds' one based on Christian prayer and one based in folk-belief.[35] This is a view that has been refuted in recent years by Jolly, who argues that the users of the medical texts would have made no such distinction, and that they represent a window into the synthesis of Christian orthodoxy with the lives of ordinary people.[36] Pettit's edition of *Lacnunga* in 2001 takes a more balanced view than that of Grattan and Singer, acknowledging, like Jolly, that the text is a nuanced creation of the time in which it was compiled rather than a patching up of gaps in knowledge with invention and superstition.[37] The attempt to pull apart the Christian from the pagan, and the classical from the Germanic, blinds the modern medievalist to the interwoven nuances of the text. Anglo-Saxon society and 'Anglo-Saxon' people were not divided neatly into these categories and nor are the extant texts which they produced. What must be read here is not a clumsy fitting together of elements but an organised synthesis to produce a new text that is whole in its own right.

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[34] Van Arsdall, *Herbal Remedies,* ch. 3.

[35] Grattan and Singer, *Anglo-Saxon Magic,* p. 15.

[36] Jolly, *Popular Religion.*

[37] Pettit, *Anglo-Saxon Remedies.*

Bartlett's work on medieval attitudes towards nature has shown that natural philosophy in the early Middle Ages was characterised by a sense of wholeness.[38] All of creation, the understood and the mysterious, was part of one divinely created plan.[39] The grand pattern of the universe was present in the macrocosmic structure of the heavens and the microcosmic structure of the body. Everything, therefore, was imbued with power and properties beyond the scope of human learning. It would not have been considered superstition to pray over a herb before applying it, since the qualities which it possesses were created in it by God, and like God might be called upon verbally or by actions. Jolly stresses that this kind of practice, often referred to as magic, is not at odds with or even separate from accepted Christian practice or the physical processes of herbal medicine.[40] Of course, there was tension surrounding the use of magic in late Anglo-Saxon England. In his sermon on the *Octaves and Circumcision of our Lord,* Ælfric decries 'wigelunga' [sorceries] and writes that they are both futile and of the Devil.[41] However, he goes on to qualify this by saying that it is true that trees felled on the full moon are stronger than those felled under a waning moon, and that this is 'æfter gecynde on gesceapenysse' [according to nature in creation].[42] Whether an extra-orthodox ritual was un-Christian or not depended on whether the magic drew on God's created natural world or on an unnatural – and therefore diabolical – source. Ælfric, summarises this point when he asserts that all of the animals and plants were made by God, but:

> Wa þam men þe brycð godes gesceafta buton his bletsunge mid deofelicum wiglungum.[43]

> Woe to the man who uses God's created (creatures) without His blessing with devilish sorceries.

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[38] Bartlett, R., *The Natural and the Supernatural in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2008).

[39] This is the so-called Augustinian worldview discussed by Jolly: Jolly, *Popular religion,* see ch 3.

[40] Jolly, *Popular religion,* see especially ch. 4.

[41] Ælfric, *Homilies,* ed. P. Clemoes, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies*, (Oxford, 1997) pp. 229-230.

[42] Ælfric, *Homilies,* ed. P. Clemoes, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies*, (Oxford, 1997) p. 230.

[43] Ælfric, *Homilies*; ed. P. Clemoes, *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies* (Oxford, 1997), p. 230.

For the Anglo-Saxon healer, the distinction between this kind of sorcery and legitimate healing lay in where the power came from, and whether the ritual had God's blessing. Again, this draws back to the point that it is important to see the medical texts as coherent wholes rather than attempting to dissect the remedies into Christian and magical elements, orthodox and unorthodox, or attempting to discern the pre-Christian separately from the Christian. The presence of rituals and incantations does not necessarily make the charms un-Christian or deviant from the norm of Anglo-Saxon belief.

4. Medicine in Anglo-Saxon England

In Modern English, 'medicine' is an umbrella term. It encompasses the application of healing techniques, the study of the human body and the organisms that affect it, as well as pharmaceutical knowledge. The term is similarly broad when applied to Anglo-Saxon England, but with a few variances. Faith Wallis has identified two distinct branches of 'medicine' in Anglo-Saxon England. She terms these *medicina* and *physica*.[44] According to Wallis, *medicina* refers to the practice of healing or effecting cures, whereas *physica* is a branch of natural philosophy which modern western society refers to as science. Whilst the first applies to accumulated knowledge and application, the second applies to observation and the written word. Wallis then notes that the practice of these two branches divides the medieval period chronologically into two ages. The first of these stretches from the beginning of the medieval period up to the intellectual renaissance of the twelfth century, and is characterised by the dominance of *medicina*. The second spans the period from then until now, and is characterised by the dominance of *physica*.[45]

In no way does Wallis suggest that there is a definite line between the two ages or the two practices, and indeed there is substantial overlap. However, the distinction is useful in defining a medical text. The texts included in this study are extant from the middle of Wallis' 'age of medicina', and are in fact good examples of exactly what she defines *medicina* to be.[46] All of the texts are practical handbooks rather than fully explained treatises. They contain no rationale about why certain herbs work in certain

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[44] Wallis, F. (ed.) *Medieval Medicine: A Reader* (Toronto ONT, 2010) p. xxi.

[45] Wallis, *Medieval Medicine,* pp. xxi-vviv.

[46] Wallis, *Medieval Medicine,* p. xxi.

ways, how charms are effective, or the nature of the animals referred to. Instead, the texts are instructive, stating a desired effect and how to achieve it using the properties of the natural world.

5. Serpents in the texts

Taken together, serpents and serpentine animals constitute the largest group of animals found in any of the Old English medical texts, as well as all of the texts taken together. However, in all of the texts only two words are used to describe all of the serpentine animals: *wyrm* and *nædre.* The applications of the two terms are very different. *Wyrm* is used to refer to a broad range of animals and afflictions, from actual parasites to invisible agents of infection and even symbolic personifications of disease. *Nædre* on the other hand is most often used to describe a true snake. Obviously, there are further nuances in the ways the serpent appears in the texts and the role it plays in each.

5.i. The *Wyrm* in the *Herbarium*: an internal threat

The *Herbarium* contains a large number of remedies that deal with the *wyrm* and *nædran,* with the latter being far more common than the former. The *Herbarium's* 185 chapters contain 18 separate instances of the term *wyrm.*[47] The number of references to *nædran* is much higher, with 68 instances throughout the text.[48]

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[47] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1. 'Herbarium', Ch II.10, p. 82; Ch V.2, p. 94; Ch xxxvi.7 p. 136; Ch xxxvi.8 p. 136; Ch xlvi.3 p. 148; Ch lxv.0 p. 168; Ch xcii.1 p. 200; Ch xcvii.3 p. 210; Ch. c.4 p. 214; Ch cii.3 p. 218; Ch civ.1 p. 218; Ch cxii.2/3 p.226; Ch cxxxvii.3 p. 254; Ch cxxxix.4 p. 258; Ch cxxxix.5 p. 258; Ch cxlvii.4 p. 272; Ch clvi.2 p. 282; Ch clxxiv.2 p. 306.

[48] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol 1., 'Herbarium', Ch i.23 p. 78; Ch i.24 p. 78; Ch ii,8 p. 82; Ch iii.7 p.89; Ch iv.8 p. 92; Ch iv.12 p. 92-94; Ch vi.2 p. 96; Ch xvi.2 p. 108; Ch xvii.2 p. 110; Ch xx.6 p. 116; Ch xxv.3 p. 122; Ch xxxii.4 p. 130; Ch xxxvi.2 p. 134; Ch xxxvii.1 p. 136-8; Ch xlii.4 p. 144; Ch xlvii.2 p.152; Ch lxiii.3 p. 166; Ch lxiii.4 p. 166; Ch lxiv.0 p. 168; Ch lxxi.2 p. 174; Ch lxxii.1 p. 174; Ch lxxxix.5 p. 194; Ch xc.13 p.196-198; Ch xc.14 p. 198; Ch xc.16 p. 198; Ch xC.iii.2 p. 202; Ch xcv.0 p. 208; Ch xcvi.2 p. 208; Ch xcvi.3 p. 208; Ch xcviii.2 p. 211; Ch cix.2 p. 222; Ch cxvii.6 p. 230; Ch cxxix.2 p. 240; Ch cxxxi.1 p. 242; Ch cxxxi.1 p. 142; Ch cxxxv.4 p. 252; Ch cxxxv.5 p.252; Ch cxxxvii 254; Ch cxlii.4 p. 264; Ch cxlii.1 p.264-266; Ch cxlii.1 p. 266; Ch cxlvii.3 p.272; Ch cli.2 p. 276; Ch cli.4 p. 276; Ch cliii.5 p 280; Ch cliii.6 p 280; Ch clv.2 p. 282; Ch clviii.4 p.286; Ch clxi.1 p. 288; Ch cxli.2 p. 288; Ch clxiii.2 p. 292; Ch clxxiii.2 p. 304; Ch clxxiii.5 p 304; Ch clxxiv.2 p. 306; Ch clxxix.0 p. 312; Ch clxxxii.1 p. 318.

Of the 18 references to the *wyrm*, the majority refer to intestinal parasites. In fact, this is the case in 12 of the 18 instances.[49] There is little remarkable about this except that it suggests that such parasites were a common problem, and that one of the primary uses of herbal medicine in the *Herbarium* is purgation. However, the predominance of these internal parasites sets the tone for what is considered a *wyrm* in this text: something internal that damages the body over time.

The theme of the *wyrm* as an internal invader of the body continues in the two remedies that treat the *wyrm* in the ear.[50] Both of the remedies actually begin by saying they are 'wið earena sar' [for sore ears] rather than anything to do with the *wyrm*. However, both prescribe a mixture to be poured into the ears, and both state, perhaps unexpectedly to the modern reader, that if there are any 'wyrmas' in the ears, it 'acwelleð' [kills] them.[51] The language used in both remedies is vague about whether or not the ear-dwelling *wyrm* is believed to be the one and only cause for soreness of the ears, or whether they are a symptom of this, or a different affliction altogether that also benefits from the same remedy. In the first remedy in Chapter v, the *wyrm* appears in the final line, where the remedy states that:

> …eac swa same þeah þær **wyrmas** on beon, hyt hy acwelleð.[52]
>
> …also, likewise, though there are **worms** in it, it kills them.

The second remedy is similarly worded:

> Þeah ðær beon **wyrmas** on acennede hi þurh ðis sceolon beon acwealde.[53]
>
> Though there are **worms** exising inside, they, through this, shall be killed.

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[49] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1, 'Herbarium', Ch ii.10, p. 82; Ch xxxvi.7 p. 136; Ch xlvi.3 p. 148; Ch lxv.0 p. 168; Ch xcvii.3 p. 210; Ch cii.3 p. 218; Ch civ.1 p. 218; Ch cxii.2/3 p.226; Ch cxxxvii.3 p. 254; Ch cxxxix.5 p. 258; Ch cxlvii.4 p. 272; Ch clvi.2 p. 282.

[50] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1, 'Herbarium', Ch v.2, p. 94; Ch xcii.1 p. 200.

[51] Both remedies use very similar wording, and both use the verb 'acwelleð' [killed]: Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1, 'Herbarium', Ch v.2, p. 94; Ch xcii.1 p. 200.

[52] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1, 'Herbarium', Ch v.2, p. 94.

[53] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. I, 'Herbarium', Ch xcii.1 p. 200.

In both cases, the *wyrm* seems to be an afterthought. Although their mention comes as a surprise to the modern reader, it is clear from the succinct language of the remedies that their presence may have been obvious to the learned user of the *Herbarium*. The ear *wyrm*, like the intestinal *wyrm* with which the *Herbarium* is concerned, is characterised by being internal to the human body and by causing affliction from within. What it looks like and how it does this is left unexplained. In fact, these animals may not necessarily have been 'worms' in the Modern English sense at all; later, in the charms of the *Lacnunga*, the *wyrm* is used as a zoomorphic manifestation of disease itself, and physical ailments are attributed to the presence of flying poisons that issue from it. It could be that the *wyrm* of the ear in the remedies of the *Herbarium* is not a real creature at all, but a representation of infection to which the pain of a sore ear might be attributed.

The *Herbarium's* three references to a biting *wyrm* refer to a very different creature. In all three cases, the remedy is for the treatment of this bite. Although it is not explicitly stated, the need for a herbal remedy to combat the bite of this animal implies that it is venomous. In all three cases in the *Herbarium*, the animal is specifically named, and an imbibed concoction is recommended. The first of the three remedies, c.4, begins:

> Wið þæra **wyrma** slite þe man spalangiones nemneð…[54]
>
> For the wound of the ***wyrma*** that man names *spalangiones*

The second of the three remedies, cxxxix.4, is phrased similarly:

> Wyð þæra **wyrma** slite þe man spalangiones hateþ… [55]
>
> For the wound of the ***wyrma*** that man calls *spalangiones*

The *spalangiones* are unique amongst the serpentine creatures of the medical texts in that it is specifically pointed out by name. It is also the only *wyrm* in the *Herbarium* that

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[54] Cockayne, *Leechdoms*, Vol. I, 'Herbarium', Ch. c.4 p. 214.

[55] Cockayne, *Leechdoms*, Vol. I, 'Herbarium', Ch cxxxix.4, p. 258.

is depicted as external to the body and biting the recipient of the remedy. Cockayne's translation is especially cautious here, and his decisions shed light on the kind of creatures that were referred to as *spalangiones*. He translates c.4:

> For the bite of the **worms**, [*or creeping things*], which are named 'spalangiones', [*tarantulas*]…[56]

And cxxxix.4:

> For the bite of the **worms** [*or creeping things*], which are called 'spalangiones'…[57]

What is interesting here is that Cockayne qualifies his direct translation of *wyrm* as 'worm', used consistently elsewhere in the *Herbarium*, by adding '*or creeping things*'. His qualification is due to the fact that he interprets the 'spalangiones' as spiders, more specifically as tarantulas, which he adds to the translation after 'spalangiones'. From the context of the remedies and the gloss, it is almost certain that *spalangiones* is a corruption of the Latin word *phalangiones* (borrowed from Greek φαλάγγιον) meaning 'venomous spiders.'[58] In *Vitellius C.iii,* the first reference to *spalangiones* is accompanied by two eight-legged, winged creatures appearing directly above the first remedy, above (fig. 3).[59] Although the images are fanciful and suggest that the illustrator was not certain what the animals were, they are certainly eight-legged invertebrates. As well as eight legs, the two creatures appear with stripes and two sharp horns protruding from their heads and wings. Their heads are bowed so as to make these horns prominent, almost as though charging. A wound inflicted by these horns would leave two puncture wounds not at all dissimilar to those inflicted by the fangs of a

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[56] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. I, 'Herbarium', Ch. c.4, p. 214; trans p. 215.

[57] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. I, 'Herbarium', Ch cxxxix.4, p. 258; trans p. 259.

[58] In his *Natural History,* Pliny describes the 'phalangium' as a spider in a chapter devoted to remedies for its bite: Pliny, *Natural History,* LOEB edition, transl. and ed. W. H. S. Jones (London,1963), Book XXIX, chapter xxvii, p.238-9.

[59] *Cotton Vittelius C.iii*, f. 50r.

spider. The Old English word for 'spider' is 'attorcoppe', literally meaning 'poison-head'.[60] It is easy to see how these animals might fit the description of 'attorcoppan' [poison-heads], and how, in a time without microscopes, the spiders' two-pronged bite might have been understood as being inflicted by horns rather than mouthparts. Despite their wings and strange faces, the two creatures on folio 50r bolster the argument that the creatures called *spalangiones* are in fact spiders.

Though the spider is not ostensibly serpentine, it does possess key similarities with other Old English *wyrmas* and *nædran* in the Herbarium. Like both it is capable of biting, and like the *nædre* in particular it is venomous. The spider explicitly fits the majority of the criteria for the *wyrm* set out by Thompson in her attempted definition of the term, being venomous, biting human flesh, an 'uncanny' or creeping mode of movement, and the ability to disappear underground.[61] Cockayne's decision to insert *'or creeping things'* into his translation rings true. It draws attention away from the interpretation of the *wyrm* as a limbless, slithering creature (whether serpentine or invertebrate) and expands its meaning to incorporate the spider and perhaps even other animals that share the uncanny mode of movement that *creeping* implies. The spider may not be overtly serpentine to the modern reader, but here at least it seems the two were related in the Anglo-Saxon mind.

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[60] Bosworth and Toller, *Dictionary,* 'attorcope'.

[61] Thompson, *Dying and Death,* p. 132; '(*creopende)*' ['creeping'] is Thompson's own insertion.

**Fig3:** Spalangiones. London, British Library, Cotton Vittellius C.iii, f. 50r (© The British Library Board).

The third remedy for the bite of the spider – or snake – is slightly different to the first two. Rather than being solely for the bite of *spalangiones,* it is:

> Wið **nædrena** slitas & wið <þara> **wyrma** ðe man **spalangiones** hateþ…[62]

> For the wounds of ***nædrena*** and for those ***wyrma*** that man calls ***spalangiones***…

In this case, the bite of the 'wyrma' called *spalangiones* is secondary to the bite of another kind of serpentine creature, 'nædrena' [adders]. The remedy, another potion

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[62] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1, 'herbarium', Ch clxxiv.2, p. 306.

to be drunk, is expected to work for both; in the logic of the *Herbarium*, the two animals, true snake and (probably) spider, are treated together in one remedy, grouped not by physiology, but by the common feature of venom. Venom, like the parasitic *wyrm* mentioned above, is another internal threat to the human body. By being both venomous and perhaps by being one of the 'creeping things' of Thompson's definition, the spider is both a *wyrm* and is considered in close proximity to the *nædre,* which generally denotes a true snake (see below). The *spalangiones* are a perfect example of both how flexible the term *wyrm* can be, and the criteria an Anglo-Saxon audience may have considered when applying it to an animal.

There is one final reference to the *wyrm* in the *Herbarium* that is worthy of note. Chapter xxxvi.8 discusses the use of a herb called Feverfew, and reads:

Wiþ syna togunge þæt ys ðonne þæt ðu genime þar ylcan wyrte seoð on wætere to ðriddan dæle heo ða **wyrmas** ut aweorð.[63]

For the tugging of sinews that is then that you take this same herb, simmer it in water to a third part, it will cast out the ***wyrmas***.

This is an example of the *Herbarium's* tendency not to fully explain or elaborate upon its remedies. It can easily be argued that this remedy was codified to aid the memory of skilled practitioners rather than to teach the unskilled. The brief text does not mention which part of the body might be afflicted, what precisely is meant by the word 'togunge', how the remedy is to be applied or what relationship the 'wyrmas' have to the problematic body part. 'Tugging' sinews might be imagined as fits, cramps, or any number of types of muscular spasm, but that is speculation. There are two important things to derive from the remedy, however. The first is that, again, the *wyrm* is something destructive within the body that must be removed. The second is that the *wyrm* in question may not be an animal at all. It is hard to imagine an affliction in which worms cause 'tugging of sinews'. However, there are examples in other medical texts of the *wyrm* as a metaphor for diseases, infections and other types of ailment where the cause is unseen (see below).

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[63] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1, 'Herbarium', Ch xxxvi.8 p. 136.

5.ii. The *Nædre* in the *Herbarium*: bites and venom

It is fair to say that in the case of the *Herbarium,* the *nædre* is most often a true snake. This is not least because one of the four manuscripts containing the text, *Vitellius C.iii,* is illustrated, and contains twelve depictions of true snakes which are labelled *nædran.*[64] There are a further six instances in which a serpent is depicted and not labelled.[65]

Although this simplifies the interpretation of the word *nædre* in the text, there is still some ambiguity in the identity of the animal. The illustration on folio 40r exemplifies this. The snake is shown with the scorpion, apparently fighting with it. The snake and the scorpion are shown together in two other instances, on folio 21v and 58v, but on 40r, the image is labelled, *nædran* (fig. 4). Two animals are shown, and the label reads not *nædre* but *nædran,* the plural. The term is being applied to both the snake and the scorpion here; what is more, both animals are shown with a barbed tongue. It could be that this feature represents the venomous quality of both animals. As well as making reference to the split or forked tongues of real snakes, the three barbed tongue resembles an arrowhead. Poison and venom, like an arrow, is elsewhere protrayed as something which flies through the air and strikes a victim, for example in the *Lacnunga* (see below) in which 'fleogendan attre' [flying venom] is used as a metaphor for invisible disease.[66] These arrow-shaped tongues hint at the fact that both animals are venomous and aggressive. The real scorpion, of course, has no tongue, but it seems that the illustrator, either here or earlier in the succession of illustrated copies, has used this feature to visually equate it with the *nædre.*

It is clear from the correlation between the term *nædre* and the images in *Vitellius C.iii* that the word most often denotes a true snake. There are a few caveats to this rule but on the whole the references in the text bear this out. Of the 57 remedies dealing with the *nædre,* a vast majority (46) are remedies for bites.[67] The focus on the

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[64] London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius C.iii, f. 21v; 22v; 23r; 24r; 26r; 27r; 28v; 40r; 48v; 49r; 49v; 52r.

[65] London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius C.iii, f. 29v; 31v; 32v; 41r; 56v; 58v.

[66] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 3, 'Lacnunga', Ch. 74, p. 52. Jolly, *Popular religion,* p. 128.

[67] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1, 'herbarium', Ch. i.23 p. 78; Ch. i.24 p. 78; Ch. ii.8 p. 82; Ch. iii.7 p. 89; Ch. iv.8 p. 92; Ch. iv.12 p. 92-4; Ch. vi.2 p. 96; Ch. xvi.2 p. 108; Ch. xvii.2 p. 110; Ch. xx.6 p. 116; Ch. xxv.3 p. 122; Ch. xxxii.4 p. 130; Ch. xxxvi.2 p. 134; Ch. xxxvii.1 p. 136-8; Ch. xlvii.2 p.152; Ch. lxiii.3 p. 166; Ch. lxiii.4 p. 166; Ch. lxiv.0 p. 168; Ch. lxxi.2 p. 174; Ch. lxxii.1 p. 174; Ch. lxxxix.5 p. 194; Ch. xc.13 p.196-8; Ch. xc.14 p. 198; Ch. xc.16 p. 198; Ch. xC.iii.2 p. 202; Ch. xcv.0 p. 208; Ch. xcvi.3 p. 208; Ch. xcviii.2 p. 211; Ch. cix.2 p. 222;

bite of the animal once again suggests venom, and this combined with the evidence of the illustrations suggests a true snake as the culprit.



**Fig4:** Serpent and scorpion illustration from *The Herbarium of Pseudo-Apuleius*. London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius C.iii, f. 40r, © The British Library Board.

Although it can be hypothesised from the illustrations and labelling that the term *nædre* reliably denotes a true snake in most cases, there are at least two instances in the *Herbarium* where it does not. The first is in remedy cxvii.6, which explicitly states that it is: 'Wiþ þære **nædran** slite ðe man scorpius hateþ' [For the wound of the

Ch. cxvii.6 p. 230; Ch. cxxix.2 p. 240; Ch. cxxxv.5 p. 252; Ch. cxxxvii 254; Ch. cxlii.4 p. 264; Ch. cxlii.1 p. 266; Ch. cxlvii.3 p.272; Ch. cli.2 p. 276; Ch. cli.4 p. 276; Ch. cliii.5 p 280; Ch. clv.2 p. 282; Ch. clviii.4 p.286; Ch. cxli.2 p. 288; Ch. clxiii.2 p. 292; Ch. clxxiii.2 p. 304; Ch. clxxiii.5 p 304; Ch. clxxiv.2 p. 306.

***nædran*** that man calls scorpion].[68] Cockayne reconciles his translation with the content of the remedy by choosing 'venomous creature' as a translation for 'nædran'.[69] Later in the text, remedy xc.13 uses the term similarly, when it begins: 'Wiþ þan **nædder** cynne ðe man **spalangiones** hateþ' [Against the ***nædder***-kind that man calls ***spalangiones***].[70] This remedy is unique in that it specifies that the animal is question is 'nædder cynne' [*nædder*-kind], rather than just a *nædre.* In remedy cxxxv.4 the *nædre, spalangiones* and the scorpion appear together: 'Wiþ þæra **nædrena** slite þe man **spalangiones** and scorpiones nemneð' [For wound of the ***nædrena*** that man calls ***spalangiones*** and scorpions…].[71] Cockayne again substitutes the generic 'poisonous creatures' for 'nædrena', again justifiably since the word is being used here to describe a vague category of animals that covers both *spalangiones* and the scorpion. There is one more instance of the term *nædre* being used to describe *spalangiones,* in remedy cxlvii.3: 'Wiþ þære **nædran** slite þe man **spalangionem** nemneþ' [For the wound from of the ***nædran*** man has named ***spalangionem***…].[72] The obvious common link between the scorpion, spider and snake is venom. Incidentally, Cockayne substitutes the 'poisonous insects' for anything remotely serpentine in his translation of *nædran*, perhaps because of his conviction that *spalangiones* are tarantulas. By using the term *nædre* to describe what were perhaps other venomous animals, the *Herbarium* implies that the primary feature of a *nædre* is the quality of being venomous. This is a theme that runs throughout the medical texts, and also more broadly throughout uses of the motif of the serpent in Anglo-Saxon England.

A further six of the remedies mentioning the *nædre* describe a herb which may be burnt, scattered or ingested as a protection against that animal.[73] The first of these, 'cammoc' [cammock], needs no preparation and the remedy simply notes that the smell of the herb can put snakes to flight.[74] The second is 'næder wyrt,' [adderwort],

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[68] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1, 'herbarium', Ch. cxvii.6 p. 230.

[69] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1, 'herbarium', Ch. cxvii.6 p. 231.

[70] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1, 'herbarium', Ch. xc.13 p.196-198.

[71] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1, 'herbarium', Ch. cxxxv.4 p. 252.

[72] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1, 'herbarium', Ch. cxlvii.3 p.272.

[73] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1, 'herbarium', Ch xcvi.2 p. 208; Ch cxxxi.1 p.242-4; Ch cxxxv.4 p. 252; Ch cxlii.1 p.264-266; Ch cli.4 p. 276; Ch cliii.6 p 280.

[74] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1, 'herbarium', Ch xcvi.2 p. 208.

also known as the 'basilisca' [basilisk].[75] It is reported to be able to kill snakes if brought within their vicinity. The *Herbarium* attests that the herb exists in three different types, and that these types destroy snakes in different ways: setting them on fire, causing them to shrink up and die and causing their flesh to disintegrate. The herb is shown with three serpents coiled around its base (Fig. 5). The description of the herb concludes by stating that he will be safe against all '**nædder** cyn' [***nædder-***kind.].[76] The third snake-repellent herb is the 'suþerne wuda' [southernwood], whose seeds puts the *nædre* to flight.[77] 'Coniz/Twegea' [Fleabane] strewn about or burned similarly causes the *nædre* to flee.[78] Precisely the same property is described in the herb known as 'omnimorbia'.[79] A final herb known only as 'acanta leuce' is described as putting the *nædre* to flight when worn about the neck.[80] There is one more seemingly preventative remedy against frogs and snakes that involves drinking an infusion of the root of the herb 'hundes tunge' [hound's tongue].[81] Whether the infusion is supposed to repel these animals or be an antidote for their venom is not made clear, but since the venom is not mentioned and it is the animals themselves that the remedy acts upon, it seems that it is a preventative measure rather than a treatment. The remedy is an example of another connection between the *nædre* and another small, crawling, potentially poisonous or venomous animal. It is unclear whether the penultimate reference to periwinkle is preventative or curative, but like the above, it purports to be against both snakes and venoms.[82]

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[75] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1, 'herbarium', Ch cxxxi.1 p.242-4.

[76] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1, 'herbarium', Ch. cxxxi.1, p. 244.

[77] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1, 'herbarium', Ch. cxxxv.4, p. 252.

[78] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1, 'herbarium', Ch. cxlii.1, pp.264-6.

[79] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1, 'herbarium', Ch. cli.4, p. 276.

[80] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1, 'herbarium', Ch. cliii.6, p 280.

[81] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1, 'herbarium', Ch. xlii.4, p. 144.

[82] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1, 'herbarium', Ch. clxxix.0, p. 312.

**Fig5:** *Næderwyrt* and *basiliska* illustration from *The Herbarium of Pseudo-Apuleius*. London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius C.iii, f. 57r, © The British Library Board.

Whereas the *wyrm* was used in some of the *Herbarium's* remedies and could be neutral, there is no occasion on which the *nædre* is included as part of a cure. There are only two mentions of the term in which the animal is not biting or threatening a human, and these are where the *nædre* mentioned in order to describe a plant. The

first is the plant known as *æcios*, which has seeds like an adder's head, and secondly to describe the plant gorgonion, which has roots that resemble snakes.[83]

Whatever the true nature of the animal, it is clear from the *Herbarium's* treatment of it that the *nædre* is first and foremost a venomous animal. In most cases this would seem to be a true snake; however, the quality of being a *nædre* is, like the quality of being a *wyrm*, transferable among species that share this central quality, in this case the scorpion, the frog, and possibly also the spider. The *Herbarium's* remedies do not specify species or type of venom within the category of *nædre* bites. Precisely which remedy to use for which kind of snake bite may be uncodified knowledge that the educated user of the text would have known. On the other hand, the remedies may have lost their usefulness in the text's transmission to areas where venomous snakes were more scarce, and may have become formulaic and nonspecific as a result.

### 5.iii The *wyrm* in *Medicina de Quadrupedibus*

The remedies of the *Quadrupedibus* address the *wyrm* six times.[84] Of all five texts, it is in *Quadrupedibus* that the *wyrm* is least like a true snake or even a reptile of any kind. The first remedy refers once again to an internal *wyrm* and prescribes a drink made with the ashes of a hart's horn, or perhaps the plant hartshorn.[85] That this *wyrm* is internal to the body is implied only by the final line of the remedy, which reads: '**wyrmas** he acwelleð and ut aweorpeþ' [It kills and casts out ***wyrmas***].[86] The second and third remedies are similarly against the internal *wyrm,* but in this case the part of the body is specified; the ear. Once again, as in the *Herbarium,* it is the soreness of the ear which is given precedence in the remedy, not the presence of the *wyrm*:

> Wið earena sare gate micgan do on þæt eare þæt sar geliðigað. Gif þær **wyrms** inne bið hyt þæt ut awyrþð.
>
> For sore ears, use goats mie on the ear; it relieves the sore. If there are

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[83] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 1, 'herbarium', Ch. clxi.1, p. 288; Ch. clxxxii.1, p. 318.

[84] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. I, 'Quadrupedibus', Ch. ii.5, p. 334; Ch. vi.17, p. 354; Ch.. viii.7, p. 358; Ch. ix.11, p. 362; Ch. ix.15, p. 364; Ch. xi.4, p. 366.

[85] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol.I, 'Quadrupedibus', Ch. ii.5, p. 334.

[86] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol.I, 'Quadrupedibus', Ch. ii.5, p. 334.

**wyrms** inside, it casts that out.[87]

> Gif earan syn innan sare and þær **wyrms** sy on do þa ylcan sealfe heo
> ys swyþe god to þam. [88]

> If ears are sore inside and **wyrms** are there, use the same salve; it is
> very good for that.

The *wyrm* is mentioned second, as something that my or may not be there. As well as being a parasite and a creeping venomous animal, it is again possible that this *wyrm* is not a real animal, but the substance of infection itself. Seeping pus from an abscess, for example, could resemble a maggot, and could also be understood to be poisonous like a *wyrm* in so far as it is infectious. Ear infections would certainly have been more common in Anglo-Saxon England than infestations or worms or maggots in the ear. In fact, the word 'wyrms', as used in this remedy, has a second meaning in Bosworth and Toller's *Dictionary*: 'corrupt matter'.[89] These three aspects of the *wyrm* have two things in common; they all constitute an internal threat to the body and the slow insidious consumption or corrosion of tissues. Taken together, the parasite, venom and infection portray an image of the *wyrm* that is small, often unseen, creeping and insidiously attacking or consuming the body from within.

The fourth reference in *Qudrupedibus* is extremely unusual, and describes a process which is once again difficult to imagine given the text alone. The remedy is for a dog-bite, and describes cutting away and taking the 'wyrmas þe beoð under wede hundes tungan' [worms that are under a mad hound's tongue].[90] These are then to be wrapped round a Figtree and given to the patient. This may be an example of the term *wyrm* being used to describe something that appears sinuous in some way, and the remedy may in fact require tendons or sinews from the lingual frenulum of a dog. Using a term like *wyrm* descriptively to denote something else is not uncommon in Old

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[87] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol.I, 'Quadrupedibus', Ch. vi.17, p. 354.

[88] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. I, 'Quadrupedibus', Ch. viii.7, p. 358; transl. p. 359.

[89] Bosworth and Toller, *Dictionary,* 'wyrms'.

[90] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. I, 'Quadrupedibus', Ch. ix.11, p. 362.

English; the word can be used to describe the sinuous, intertwining patterns on a pattern-welded blade, for example.[91]

The penultimate remedy dealing with the *wyrm* in *Quadrupedibus* is important in that it is explicit about the association between the *wyrm* and parasitic insects:

> **Hnite** and **wyrmas** onweg to donne ðe on cildum beoð bærn hundes ðost and gnid smale, mengc wið hunige and smyre mid. Seo self adeþ ða **wyrmas** onweg. [92]

> To do away with **nits** and *wyrmas* that are on children, burn a hound's throat and knead it small, mix with honey and smear with. The salve does away with the *wyrmas*.

The remedy clearly and explicitly associates the *wyrm* with another parasitic animal, the 'hnite', a term analogous in meaning to Modern English 'nit'.[93] The use of the word *wyrm* after 'hnite' suggests that the phrase intends to describe a specific creature, the 'hnite', and other various creatures of the same type, the 'wyrmas'. Cockayne chooses to translate *wyrm* as 'insects', perhaps in an attempt to equate these creatures with modern lice and their eggs.[94] However, the animals in the remedy could just as well be threadworms, which also afflict children and, although they are primarily an intestinal parasite, can also afflict the scalp. The composer or compiler of the remedy could have viewed nits and threadworms as analogous.

The final reference to the *wyrm* in *Quadrupedibus* is rather more expected; it is a purgative remedy against intestinal worms. The *wyrm*, however, is the last afterthought of the remedy, the primary reason for it being given as: 'wambe to astyrigennne' [to move the bowels].[95] Since the cure is purgative it is most likely a reference to another reference to an intestinal parasite.

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[91] In *Beowulf,* a sword is described as being 'wreoþenhilt ond wyrmfah' [twisted hilt and *wyrm*-patterned]. See: Klaeber, *Beowulf,* l. 1698, p. 57.

[92] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. I, 'Quadrupedibus', Ch. ix.15, p. 364.

[93] Bosworth and Toller, *Dictionary,* 'hnitu'.

[94] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. I, 'Quadrupedibus', Ch. ix.15, p. 365.

[95] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. I, 'Quadrupedibus', Ch. xi.4, p. 366; transl. p. 367 (interpolation in parentheses is mine).

5.iv. The *nædre* in the *Medicina de Quadrupedibus*

*Quadrupedibus* contains ten instances in which a *nædre* is referenced, although none are surprising given the precedent set by the *Herbarium*.[96]  In all but three instances, the remedies are, once again, against bites from the animal; the remaining three are repellents made with hart's horn, hart's marrow and bull's horn respectively.[97] In one of the instances, the remedy is once again 'Wiþ scorpiones bite and **nædran** slite…' [For wound of scorpions and bite of **nædran**].[98] In *Quadrupedibus* as in the *Herbarium,* the *nædre* is a biting animal defined primarily by its venom, and is associated with the scorpion.

5.v. The *wyrm* in the *Leechbook*

In total, there are 29 remedies that pertain to the *wyrm* in the *Leechbook*.[99] Again, it is by far the most common animal that appears in the text. The range of *wyrm*-related conditions implied by the remedies is far broader than in either of the translated texts. Book I contains the most, with a total of 19 remedies.

The *wyrm* infesting parts of the body are a major concern of the *Leechbook*. Book I contains one remedy for 'wyrmum on eagum' [**wyrmum** in the eye] and two for 'wyrmas on earan' [**wyrmas** in the ear].[100] Similarly, Book III contains one remedy for the eye and one for the ear.[101] Section vi in Book I of the *Leechbook* contains a

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[96] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. I, 'Quadrupedibus', Ch. ii.1, p. 334; Ch. ii.6, p. 334; Ch. ii.15, p. 336; Ch. ii.19, p. 338; Ch. iv.15, p. 346; Ch. vi.8, p. 352; Ch. vi.14, p. 354; Ch. viii.3, p. 358; Ch. xi.1, p. 366.

[97] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. I, 'Quadrupedibus', Ch. ii.6, p. 334; Ch. ii.19, p. 338; Ch. xi.1, p. 366.

[98] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. I, 'Quadrupedibus', Ch. iv.15, p. 346.

[99] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. II, 'Leechbook', Book I, Ch. ii.23, p. 38; Ch. ii.1, p. 38; Ch. ii.11, p. 42; Ch. iv.1, p 50; Ch. vi.3, p. 50; Ch. xxxii.4, p. 78; Ch. xlv.6; Ch. xlvi. 1, p.114; Ch. xlvi. 2, p. 114; Ch. xlvii.2, p. 118; Ch. xlviii.1, pp. 120-2; Ch. xlix.0, p. 122; Ch. l.1,2, p 122-4; Ch. li.0, p. 124; Ch. liii.0, p. 126; Ch. liv.0, p. 126; Ch. lix.0, p. 130; Ch. lxi.3, p. 134; Ch. lxxxvi.0, p. 150; Book II, Ch. i.1, p. 176; Ch xxxiv.0. pp. 238-40; Ch xxxiv.0, p. 240; Book III, Ch. ii.5, p. 308; Ch. iii.1, p 310; Ch. xxiii.1, p. 320; Ch. xxxiv.0, p 328; Ch. xxxix.1, p. 332; Ch. xxxix.2, p 332; Ch. xlviii.0, p. 340.

[100] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. II, 'Leechbook', Book I: (eye) Ch. ii.23, p. 38; (ear) Ch. ii.1 p. 38; Ch ii.11 p 42.

[101] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. II, 'Leechbook', Book III: (eye) Ch. ii.5, p. 308; (ear) Ch. iii.1 p. 310.

number of methods to combat tooth pain and a *wyrm* eating a tooth.[102] Once again, there is no clear distinction between the two. The section is headed: 'Læcdomas wiþ toð wærce and wiþ **wyrmum**' [Leechdoms for sharp pain in the teeth and for ***wyrmum***].[103] In the remedies the methods described are said to treat both tooth ache and 'gif wyrme ete' [if a ***wyrme*** eat (the tooth)].[104] Once treated, the 'wyrme' will 'feallaþ' [fall] out. These animals may be real animals, for example maggots. On the other hand, there is a possibility, similar to that in remedy viii.7 of *Quadrupedius* (see above), that they refer not to rea animals but to infection, pain or pus.[105]

The idea of the *wyrm* eating away at the body is made explicit in several other remedies. Various conditions, rendered mysterious by the succinct style of the *Leechbook*, are attributed to the gnawing or consuming action of the *wyrm.* Section l of Book I deals with two types of *wyrm,* the 'hond wyrmas' [hand ***wyrmas***] and the 'deaw wyrmas' [dew ***wyrmas***].[106] Both remedies given involve topical treatments, and the first mentions putting a salve on the 'saran stowa' [sore places], suggesting that the *wyrm* could represent a skin condition.[107] The 'deaw wyrmas' are treated also by the patient treading on hot coals, perhaps indicating that these affect the feet, which would make sense of the fact that they are grouped together with the 'hand *wyrmas*.[108] The second remedy brings in the idea of the *wyrm* actually consuming the body when it begins: 'Gif **wyrm** hand ete…' [If a ***wyrm*** eats the hand…].[109] Once again, the information that can be gleaned from the text does not indicate how the *wyrm* relates to the condition, and indeed it may be that once again no actual animal is present. Rather, it seems that the quality of having the skin damaged by something unseen suggests the presence of a *wyrm* to the author(s) of the remedy. In the *Leechbook,* the *wyrm* is as much characterised by the consumption of the body as it is by being internal to it. Here a skin condition, which may have appeared as though the flesh was

[102] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. II, 'Leechbook', Book I, Ch. vi.1, 3 p. 50.

[103] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. II, 'Leechbook', Book I, Ch. vi.1, 3 p. 50.

[104] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. II, 'Leechbook', Book I, Ch. vi.1, 3 p. 50.

[105] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. I, 'Quadrupedibus', Ch. viii.7, p. 358.

[106] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. II, 'Leechbook', Book I, Ch. l.1, pp. 122-4; Ch. l.2. p. 124.

[107] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. II, 'Leechbook', Book I, Ch. l.1, pp. 122.

[108] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. II, 'Leechbook', Book I, Ch. l.2. p. 124.

[109] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. II, 'Leechbook', Book I, Ch. l.2. p. 124.

eaten away or corroded, is attributed to a *wyrm* in name at least, much like modern ringworm.

Internal parasites also account for a number of the references to the *wyrm* in the *Leechbook*. Book I remedy xlvi.1, is against a creature called an 'anawyrm,' translated by Cockayne as a so-called 'King Ons worm' (meaning unclear) and by Bosworth and Toller as an 'intestinal worm'. It advises: 'if he ut þurh ete & þyrel gewyrce genim huniges dropan drype on þæt þyrel [if he eats through outside and makes a hole, take a honey drop and drip on the hole].[110] There are other instances in which the remedy appears to be addressing a real intestinal parasite. For example, Remedy xxiii.1 in Book III is simply described as being employed 'Gif **wyrmas** beoþ on mannes innoðe' [If *wyrmas* are in a man's innards].[111] This could easily be construed as a real intestinal parasite, but given the plethora of other kinds of *wyrm* infesting the body that are not intestinal parasites it is difficult to be certain.

Perhaps the most telling of the references to the *wyrm* in the *Leechbook* occurs not in a remedy, but in an apparent discrepancy between one of the remedies in Book II and its entry in the contents. Section xx of Book II concerns abscesses of the liver, and describes a remedy to be applied when these abscesses burst:

> Læcdomas wiþ þære lifre wunde þonne se swile gewyrsmed tobyrst. [112]
> Leechdoms for wound of the liver and when the swelling bursts out.

Though attributed to the liver, it is clear from the remedy that these apparent abscesses manifest themselves externally; the advice given is both to ingest a remedy and to wash and apply herbs to the wound left behind. The remedy itself makes no mention of the word *wyrm,* but strangely the entry for Remedy xx in the contents does:

> wiþ þære lifre wunde þonne se swyle se **wyrmas** tobyrste [113]
> for the liver-wound, when the swelling, the *wyrmas* burst out

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[110] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. II, 'Leechbook', Book I, Ch. xlvi.1, p. 114; Bosworth and Toller, *Dictionary,* 'anawyrm'.

[111] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. II, 'Leechbook', Book III, Ch. xxiii.1, p. 320.

[112] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. II, 'Leechbook', Book II, Ch. xx, p. 203.

[113] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. II, 'Leechbook', p.160.

However in the remedy itself, no mention of an animal of any kind is mentioned, and it is the swelling and presumably purulent matter, not worms, which are bursting from the afflicted person's body. The word 'wyrmas' here is almost certainly meant to indicate Bosworth and Toller's definition of the word *wyrms,* 'corrupt matter', rather than the plural of *wyrm*. [114] In fact, the phrase 'se wyrmas' is grammaticaly impossible if the plural of *wyrm* is intended. In this case, the word 'wyrms' describes pus and the very matter of the infection or abscess.

With this meaning in mind, it is clearer to see why Cockayne, when translating Remedy xxxix in Book III of *Leechdoms,* translates *wyrm* as 'wound.'[115] In fact, Remedy xxxix is 'wið smeawyrm', [for a penetrating worm]. Cockayne seems to acknowledge the affliction as being caused by an animal in the first instance, translating the modern English 'worm'. However, later in the same remedy, he translates 'þæt lim þe se **wyrm** on sie', as 'the limb on which the **wound** is', using Modern English 'wound' for Old English *wyrm.* It seems that Cockayne is, as most modern readers of the text surely are, unsure whether this remedy refers to actual worms burrowing into the limbs of the afflicted person, or some other infection that is perhaps 'eating' into the flesh. This could indicate a real animal, perhaps another maggot or other such creature, burrowing into the skin, or it could be an example of the term *wyrm* standing not for an animal itself, but for the insidious, poisonous corrosiveness of infection with which the animal is so readily associated elsewhere.

Not all of the remedies mentioning the *wyrm* are against it. Some in fact use them as part of their recipes. Book I contains four remedies that use the ground up body of a *wyrm* as part of the remedy.[116] In all cases the *wyrm* is incorporated in a salve and applied to relieve leprosy, palsy, loss of synovial fluid and itching. Rather than true snakes, these are probably all worms in the Modern English sense; in two of the four cases the animals are referred to as 'renwyrmas' [earthworms].[117] Book II also contains one instance of a *wyrm* being ground into meal and drunk with ale to aid

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[114] Bosworth and Toller, *Dictionary,* 'wyrms'.

[115] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. II, 'Herbarium', pp. 332-333.

[116] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. II, 'Leechbook', Book I, Ch. xxxii.4 p. 78; Ch. lix.0 p. 130; Ch. lxi.3 p. 134; Ch. lxxxvi.0 p. 150.

[117] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. II, 'Leechbook', Book I, Ch. lix.0 p. 130; Ch. lxi.3 p. 134; Bosworth and Toller, *Dictionary,* 'regn-wyrm'.

digestion.[118] Finally, Book III contains a remedy in which earthworms (again referred to as 'renwyrmas' [earthworms]) are laid on cut sinews to make them whole again.[119] This last remedy may follow a like-for-like logic in that the earthworms appear like sinews in shape.

### 5.vi. The *nædre* in the *Leechbook*

The *nædre* is mentioned less in the *Leechbook* than in either the *Herbarium* or *Quadrupedibus.* In fact, only Books I and II contain any references to the animal, with no uses of the term at all in Book III. Although the *Leechbook* deals with poisons and venom extensively and mentions the *nædre* eight times, only one remedy deals with the animal in Book I.[120] Once again, the remedy is exclusively for bites from the animal.

Book II contains three remedies that include the *nædre,* but in contrast to Remedy xlv in Book I, none deal directly with the bite. Two of the remedies mention parts of the *nædre's* body as components of remedies.[121] The first of these, Remedy xx, does not specify which part of the animal is to be used or how it is to be rendered into a cure for abscesses of the liver. The second of these, Remedy xxxii, prescribes the use of the animal's skin in a cure for constipation.

The final mention of the *nædre* in *Leechbook* Book II is another preventative remedy, this time a drink in which agate has been placed.[122] It is not clear whether the drinker is expected to repel the animal or simply be immune to the venom.

The *Leechbook's* use of the term *nædre* is consistent with its use in both the *Herbarium* and *Quadrupedibus.* In all three texts, the animal is venomous and bites and is probably a true snake. However, in the *Leechbook,* the animal is mentioned far less. It could be that this is because the *Leechbook,* unlike the *Herbarium* and *Quadrupedibus,* is a native text. This is not to say that its sources come exclusively from an unadulterated Anglo-Saxon or even Germanic context.[123] It is, however, possible that geography has

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[118] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. II, 'Leechbook', Book II, Ch. xxxiv.0 p 240.

[119] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. II, 'Leechbook', Book III, Ch. xxxiv.0 p 328.

[120] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 2, 'Leechbook', Book II, Ch.. xlv, pp. 111-12.

[121] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 2, 'Leechbook', Book II, Ch.. xx, p. 202; Book II, Ch.. xxxii, p. 236.

[122] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 2, 'Leechbook', Book II, Ch. lxvi, p. 298.

[123] For further discussion of the sources of Anglo-Saxon medical knowledge, including *Leechbook,* see: Bonser, W., *The Medical Background of Anglo-Saxon England* (London, 1963), Chapter III; see also Cameron, *Anglo-Saxon Medicine*, Chapter 10.

a role to play here. The *Herbarium* and *Quadrupedibus* come from a much broader European tradition, which itself has a place in the even broader context of late classical medicine. The preoccupation with the bite of the true snake may reflect the fact that the text's sources once came from areas where snakes were both greater in number and more dangerous than in Anglo-Saxon England. The *Leechbook,* on the other hand, while still set within the context of early medieval European medicine, is a Germanic text at its core, originally composed in Old English. The fact that the text is not preoccupied with the snake-bites could reflect the fact that the issue was less pertinent to north-west European medicine due to a cooler climate and thus fewer snakes in the environment.

<u>5.vii. *Lacnunga:* 'Lay of the Nine Herbs' and 'Lay of the Nine Twigs of Woden'</u>

The argument that the Germanic texts are less preoccupied with snake-bites than the Latin is supported by *Lacnunga.* It is unique among the texts in this chapter for having no mention of the biting *nædre* at all.[124] In fact, it does not mention any serpents in the context of overtly biting. There are, however nine remedies involving the *wyrm* in the *Lacnunga.*[125] Six of these are by now familiar, particularly from the *Leechbook.* The first mention of the *wyrm* in the *Lacnunga,* for example, is in reference to the *wyrm* as part of a slew of eye problems that can be cured by a single salve.[126] The second refers to a *wyrm* swallowed by drinking.[127] Cockayne translates 'wyrm gedrince' [drink a *wyrm*] as 'drink an insect', but the creature in question might just as easily be the larva of an intestinal parasite or once again an invisible agent of disease such as a bacterium or virus. In the case of both the eye and the *wyrm* that has been swallowed by drinking, the theme of internal or parasitic threat is clear again. The same is true of the third example, that of a 'smeogan wyrme' [penetrating worm] to be cured by singing the same charm that treats the drunk *wyrm*.[128] The charm is described as being sung over the 'dolh' [wound], suggesting that this penetrating *wyrm*

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[124] The only place that the *nædre* appears in the text is twice in the poem 'Lay of the Nine Twigs of Woden.' Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 3, 'Lacnunga', Ch. 45.vi, p. 34; Ch. 45. ix, p. 36.

[125] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 3, 'Lacnunga', Ch.. 2, p. 4; Ch. 10, p. 10; Ch. 19, p. 24; Ch. 45.iv, p. 52; Ch. 45.vii, p. 34; Ch. 45.ix, p. 36; Ch. 47, p. 38; Ch. 77, p. 54; Ch. 84, p. 58.

[126] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 3, 'Lacnunga', Ch. 2, p. 4.

[127] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 3, 'Lacnunga', Ch. 10, p. 11.

[128] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 3, 'Lacnunga', Ch. 10, p. 11.

is imagined to be the cause of a lesion or abscess of some kind. Later in the text, there is a remedy against 'se wyrm' [the worm] or 'se bledenda fic' [the bleeding fig].[129] The 'fic' probably refers to the same issue as it did in the *Leechbook;* haemorrhoids, hernias or other apparent swellings on the body.[130] Finally, there is another example of the word *wyrm* being used to refer to insects and other small animals as well as just serpentine creatures; Remedy lxxvii is a salve against 'lys and oðre lytle wyrmas' [lice and other little worms].[131] The lice themselves are 'wyrmas' by implication, and although they are not serpentine animals in shape, they do exhibit parasitic behaviour and connote infestation, feeding slowly off the human body. The final reference to the *wyrm* in the text is also familiar from the *Leechbook*, and is another briefly described topical treatment against 'hondwyrmmum' [hand worms].[132]

None of these roles are new to the *wyrm* in the Old English medical texts. However, what is new is the role of the *wyrm* as part of a charm. Sung or spoken charms are used as all or part of many of the remedies in *Lacnunga.* There are three instances in which the figure of the *wyrm* plays a central role in these charms. Remedy xxix is a lengthy description of how to make a 'haligne sealfe' [holy salve].[133] The remedy, like many in the *Lacnunga,* includes both a physical preparation and a ritual incantation, or charm. In fact, it advises a number of charms to be spoken over the salve, one of which is described simply as 'þæt wyrm galdor' [the worm chant]. No further information is given, other than that the 'wyrm galdor' is to be sung nine times over the salve. This is in contrast to Psalm 118, referenced in the remedy as 'beati immaculati', which is to be sung three times over the salve. The significance of the number three is clear; in Christian mystical belief, the number three is tremendously important in signifying the Holy Trinity. The number nine is also associated with the trinity by virtue of being three times three. However, the number nine is also associated with serpents in *Beowulf.*[134]

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[129] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 3, 'Lacnunga', Ch. 47, p. 38.

[130] See Pratt's discussion of King Alfred's illnesses, including 'ficus' [the fig] in: Pratt, D., 'The Illnesses of King Alfred the Great', *Anglo-Saxon England* 30 (2001), p. 58.

[131] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 3, 'Lacnunga', Ch. 77, p. 54.

[132] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 3, 'Lacnunga', Ch. 84, p. 58.

[133] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 3, 'Lacnunga', Ch. 29, p. 22-6.

[134] Chapter 2, 5.ii.

This is evident in the second and third examples of the *wyrm* playing a central role in a charm. These occur together in the 'Lay of the Nine Herbs' and 'Lay of the Nine Twigs of Woden'. The two poems are found consecutively in *Harley 585*, on folios 160r-163r.[135] The first consists of a list of herbs, each with its own verse addressing it and describing how each triumph over various poisons. Despite having the editorial title of the 'Lay of the Nine Herbs', the first poem describes only seven herbs. The final two, chervil and fennel, are mentioned as being 'missing' by Jolly, since they do not appear in the list but are included instead as part of the second poem, the 'Lay of the Nine Twigs of Woden'.[136] However, despite Jolly's treatment of this second part as a separate poem, both Cockayne's edition and Pettit's treat the verses on folios 160v-162v as one cohesive charm.[137] This second poem, or perhaps second section, is based around an event in which Woden, the pre-Christian god, strikes a serpent into nine pieces with nine twigs, simultaneously creating nine poisons and nine herbs to fight them. The poem then picks out chervil and fennel, addressing them as particularly powerful. The second half consists of fast-paced, repetitive verse listing all of the poisons and ailments the herbs can overcome. The poems are followed by practical instructions for saying the charm and working a salve from the herbs. [138]

The serpent appears only once in the first poem, 'Lay of the Nine Herbs', when the third herb, 'stune', is introduced:

> þis is seo wyrt
> Seo þið **wyrm** gefeaht
> Þeos mæg wið attre
> Heo mæg wið onflyge …[139]

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[135] The two texts appear in *Harley 585* without titles and without a break between the two. The titles used here are given to the poems by Jolly, *Popular Religion* pp. 125. See also British Library Board, 'London, British Library, MS Harley 585' in *Digitised Manuscripts*, http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Harley_MS_585

[Accessed 04/03/2014] ff. 160r-163r4.

[136] Jolly, *Popular Religion*, p. 126.

[137] Cockayne, *Leechdoms* Vol 3, *Lacnunga*; Pettit, *Anglo-Saxon Remedies* Vol I.

[138] Jolly, *Popular Religion*, p. 126.

[139] Cockayne, *Leechdoms*, Vol. 3, 'Lacnunga', Ch. 45.iv, p. 32.

This is the wort that fought against the **wyrm**, that can against venom,

it can against on-fliers.

In this verse, the *wyrm* is one of three specific things that the herb can 'fight' with, along with 'poison' or 'venom' and the 'on-fliers'. Jolly makes a convincing case about this last element, identifying it with an ailment mentioned in *Lacnunga* Remedy lxxiv, referred to there as 'fleogendan attre' [flying venom].[140] It would certainly make sense in the context of the verse if the 'on-fliers' represented some kind of airborne poison, since the efficacy of the herb 'stune' against both a venomous animal (the *wyrm*) and poisons in general has already been established. These three things together – the *wyrm*, poison and airborne venoms – form a picture of the Anglo-Saxon understanding of disease. Disease is understood to be airborne. It is insidious, pervasive and infests the body like the *wyrm*. It is corrosive and poisonous to the body, seemingly from the inside out, like venom. The fact that the *wyrm* is counted here among these elements is telling about its role in personifying disease in the medical texts.

It is in the following poem, the 'Lay of the Nine Twigs of Woden', that the serpent is portrayed as a direct embodiment of all poisons:

**Wyrm** cwom snican,

To slat he nan

Ða genam woden

VIIII wuldor tanas

Sloh ða þa **nædran**

Þæt heo on VIIII tofleah…[141]

A **wyrm** came sneaking,

He slew none,

Then Woden took up

Nine wondrous twigs,

He struck the **nædran**

So that it flew into nine pieces.

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[140] Cockayne, *Leechdoms*, Vol. 3, 'Lacnunga', Ch. 74, p. 52. Jolly, *Popular religion*, p. 128.

[141] Cockayne, *Leechdoms*, Vol. 3, 'Lacnunga', Ch. 45.vii, p. 34.

Here, the totality of poisons is personified in the form of a *wyrm,* which Woden breaks into nine pieces with his nine wondrous sticks. This is followed an acknowledgement of the power of the remaining two herbs, chervil and fennel, after which the poem goes on to attest that God sent the seven aforementioned herbs as a cure against all venoms, the implication being that the nine twigs represent the herbs and the nine pieces of the broken *wyrm* represent all poisons. Rather like the *wyrm* itself, these poisons should not be read literally by the definition of poison that exists today. Like the *wyrm,* they represent a range of ailments and infections, and are used to account for airborne diseases as in the case of the 'on-fliers'. This is supported when the poem goes on to list the kinds of poisons and injuries that the herbs are effective against, mentioning a range of burns, blisters and wounds under the common term 'geblæd' [blister]:

> wið **wyrmgeblæd**, wið wætergeblæd,
>
> wið þorngeblæd, wið þystelgeblæd,
>
> wið ysgeblæd, wið attorgeblæd…[142]

> Against **wyrm blister**, against water blister,
>
> Against thorn blister, against thistle blister
>
> Against ice blister, against poison blister…

Once again the *wyrm* is associated with a swelling, perhaps infected injury. It is unclear whether the *wyrm* is imagined as a living agent in the wound or as the biting animal that caused it, but either way the effect is insidious, internal and corrosive, consuming the body from within.

The final reference to serpents in the charm comes when Christ is introduced as the saviour of the human race and the provider of these herbs for the use of mankind. Christ is described as standing protectively over creation while 'þa nygon næddran behealdað' [the nine adders behold him].[143] The reference to Christ standing over something in such close proximity to the mention of serpents recalls Psalms 90:13, in which Christ's faithful are described standing 'super aspidum et

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[142] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 3, 'Lacnunga', Ch. 4.ix, p. 36.

[143] Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. 3, 'Lacnunga', Ch. 4.ix, p. 36.

basiliscum' [over the asp and the basilisk]. It also recalls the nine pieces of the serpent broken apart by Woden, now representing the totality of earthly poisons countered by an equal number of curative herbs. The poem hints at a view of medicine in which all disease stems from nine principle poisons, the pieces of the *wyrm*, and in which God has provided the means to counter all of them with the vegetation of the world.

7. Conclusion

The serpents in the medical texts are both real and imaginary. As imaginary animals, they are metaphors for infection and even, in the Lays of the *Lacnunga*, for disease itself.

In the case of the *wyrm* the behaviour of the real intestinal parasite prefigures how the invisible or imagined *wyrm* behaves. The *wyrm* is something mostly unseen and internal. It transgresses the boundary between the body and the external world, and it attacks the host from within. These qualities apply to all kinds of *wyrm* that appear in the texts, both real and imaginary, from the intestinal parasite to the maggot to the invisible ear, eye, tooth, hand or abscess-dwelling *wyrm*. Equally they apply to the mythological *wyrm* of the Lays in the *Lacnunga;* here the *wyrm* is the unseen agent of sickness, the personification of disease itself, sometimes airborne, sometimes venomous, but always invading the body in some invisible, insidious manner.

There is some overlap between the *wyrm* and the *nædre*, as is exemplified by the examples of *spalangiones*, scorpions and insects. All these animals are small and move in, what Thompson describes as, an 'uncanny' manner.[144] However, unlike the *wyrm*, the *nædre* is exclusively a venomous animal, and in the majority of cases the animal can be assumed to be a true snake – an assumption supported by the illustrations found in *Vitellius C.iii*. The *nædre* shares with the *wyrm* more than a similarity in shape or mode of movement. Both are hostile to human health and the body, and their methods of attack share some common ground. Like the *wyrm*, the *nædre* transgresses the boundary of the body, injecting venom into the victim. Like the *wyrm*, this venom acts internally, corroding and damaging the body from the inside. Once injected it is an insidious and unseen force of destruction, much like the infecting, consuming *wyrm*. This venom shares with the *wyrm* a further association with the consuming and breaking down of the body.

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[144] Thompson, *Dying and Death*, p. 132.

# CHAPTER 2

## The Serpent in Old English Literature I: Hero versus serpent
## in *Beowulf*

### 1.Introduction

Consumption, infestation and the breaking down of the body from within are all themes associated with the *wyrm* and the *nædre* in the Old English medical texts. However, the connection between the serpent and these insidious traits is not limited to medical literature. The Old English poem *Beowulf* is a very different kind of text with very different kinds of serpents. *Beowulf* is the only example of an epic poem in Old English, following the eponymous protagonist as he engages in battle with various monstrous foes, the main three being Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon who ends the hero's life.

By virtue of being the only example of its epic genre in Old English, *Beowulf* is an anomaly in the Old English corpus. However, it is important that is is addressed here as a case study. *Beowulf's* final act recount a climactic conflict between the hero and a dragon, and throughout the rest of the poem monstrosity is often portrayed in an explicitly serpentine form. In fact, Beowulf faces a range of monstrous and serpentine creatures throughout the poem. His battle against these creatures is framed within the poem's thematic oppositions of light versus darkness, the peripheral versus the central, exile versus society and order versus chaos.

Despite the stark difference in genre between *Beowulf* and the medical texts, there are fundamental similarities in their perception and treatment of serpents. Ultimately, the final struggle between Beowulf and the dragon is another example of a struggle between the mortal, physical body and the serpent, a struggle that Thompson posits as the 'leitmotif of the fallen universe' in the post-conversion Anglo-Saxon world-view.[1]

### 2. The *Beowulf* manuscript or 'Nowell Codex': London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius Axv

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[1] Thompson, *Dying and Death*, p. 134

*Beowulf* is extant in only one manuscript, London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A.xv (hereafter *Vitellius A.xv*). The current volume was bound together in the collection of Robert Cotton (d. 1641), and is made up of leaves from what were originally two separate manuscripts.[2] The first of these two halves of *Vitellius A.xv* is a miscellaneous collection of texts including Augustine of Hippo's *Soliloqua,* the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, *Solomon and Saturn*, and a homily on St Quentin. The script of these texts ranges in date from the twelfth to the fifteenth century.[3] The second element of the manuscript contains five other texts: an incomplete copy of the *Passion of Saint Christopher*; *The Wonders of the East*; *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle; Beowulf; Judith.* This section of *Vitellius A.xv* is known by scholars as the 'Nowell Codex' after a previous owner, the antiquarian Laurence Nowell, whose name is written alongside the date 1653 at the top of the first page of this section on folio 94r, which begins in the middle of *The Passion of St Christopher*.

The Nowell Codex was copied by at least two scribes, the first of whom was responsible for the *Passion of St. Christopher, The Wonders of the East, Alexander's Letter* and the first 1939 lines of *Beowulf*.[4] The hand of this first scribe – Scribe I – is an English vernacular minuscule, which Lapidge has identified as being 'an early-ish looking specimen of the script', and which he dates to the early eleventh century, corresponding roughly with Ker's estimate of a late tenth or very early eleventh-century date.[5] The scribe's work ends very abruptly in the middle of a half-line in *Beowulf* (l. 1939, p. 66.).[6] Boyle has even argued that the hand changed in the middle of one of the words of the line, 'moste'.[7] The second scribe – Scribe II – completed *Beowulf* up to the close of the poem at line 3182 (f. 201v). Scribe II also appears to have been responsible for *Judith.* Scribe II wrote in square minuscule, a hand ostensibly older than Scribe I's, and yet Scribe I must have completed his work before

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[2] British Library Board, 'Cotton MS Vitellius A.xv' in Digitised Manuscripts http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=cotton_ms_vitellius_a_xv [Accessed 19/12/2013].

[3] Ker, *Catalogue,* p. 281.

[4] Lapidge, M., 'The Archetype of *Beowulf*', *Anglo-Saxon England* 29 (2000), p. 7.

[5] Lapidge, 'Archetype', p. 8; Ker, *Catalogue*, p. 281.

[6] All quotations from the text of *Beowulf* will be referenced in brackets as above; line numbers and pages refer to: Klaeber, *Beowulf*.

[7] Boyle, L. E., 'The Nowell Codex and the Dating of *Beowulf*', in C. Chase (ed.), *The Dating of Beowulf,* (Toronto, 1981), p. 32.

Scribe II in order for the latter to take up the text of *Beowulf* mid-sentence. Lapidge resolves this by suggesting that the two scribes were roughly contemporary, but that Scribe II was a considerably older man than Scribe I, one of the last generation of users of square minuscule in Anglo-Saxon England.[8] There is evidence that Scribe II had an interest in the codex beyond simply finishing *Beowulf;* he corrected Scribe I's work throughout that and the preceding three texts.[9]

3. *Beowulf* in Context: the monstrous theme of the Nowell Codex

      In 1953, Kenneth Sisam suggested that the Nowell Codex was originally compiled by or for someone with an interest in monsters and the monstrous.[10] Certainly monsters are the central theme of both *Wonders* and *Alexander's Letter,* both of which describe the strange and often fantastical animals and people of the Near and Middle East. *Beowulf* is structured around the hero's struggles with three monsters, Grendel, Grendel's mother, and finally with a dragon.  There is no mention of St. Christopher being of a monstrous race in the incomplete version in *Vitellius A.xv*, but another pre-Conquest Old English prose account of St Christopher's life asserts that he was 'healf hundisces manncynnes' ['of the race of the dog-headed people'].[11] In the Nowell Codex account, the opening section that would have introduced and described the main character is missing. It is possible that it too once contained this monstrous description of the saint. Even if it did not, the association between St. Christopher and the monstrous races of the East is enough to count him as part of Sisam's theme. It cannot be coincidence that the subject of dog-headed people is picked up again in *The*

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[8] Lapidge, 'Archetype', p. 8.

[9] Newton notes that both scribes must have been invested in the text of *Beowulf* beyond the first copying, since both go back through the work and make between them a total of at least 180 corrections. See, Newton, S., *The Origins of Beowulf and the Pre-Viking Kingdom of East Anglia* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 7.

[10] Sisam, K., 'The Compilation of the Beowulf Manuscript', in K. Sisam *Studies in the History of Old English Literature* (Oxford, 1953), pp. 65-96.

[11] The text of this prose Life was originally found in *London, British Library, Cotton Otho Bx.* The manuscript was badly damaged and the text was mostly lost in the Ashburnam House fire in 1731. Orchard transcribes the opening lines in which the phrase 'healf-hundisces mancynnes' is found. See: Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf Manuscript* (Toronto, Buffalo and London 1995), p. 12; See also: P. B. Taylor, and P. H. Salus, 'The Compilation of Cotton Vitellius A.xv', *Neuphilologische Mitteilungen* 69 (1968) p. 201; J. D. Pickles, 'Studies in the Prose Texts of the *Beowulf* Manuscript', Doctoral Thesis (University of Cambridge, 1971) pp. 19 and 22-5.

*Wonders of the East*, where they are described inhabiting the area between Babylon and Persia.[12]

The marked exception to the theme of monstrosity is the text of the fragmentary *Judith.* There is no overt reference to monsters in the narrative, in which the protagonist Judith, a noble and virtuous Jew, kills her captor, the pagan king Holofernes, by decapitation. Sisam himself saw *Judith* as divergent from the rest of the Nowell Codex, and excluded it from his study of monsters in the Nowell Codex; 'Somebody decided that it (Judith) should be joined to the collection, whether because there was no more convenient place for it or because *Judith* was felt to be, like *Beowulf,* a saviour of her country …'.[13] However, since Sisam, several scholars have taken this idea further and even argued that Judith is, in fact, in keeping with the monstrous theme.[14] Orchard's book *Pride and Prodigies* argues that while Holofernes, *Judith*'s antagonist, is not explicitly monstrous, he exhibits the monstrous and diabolical characteristics of other monsters in the Nowell Codex, which is reflected in the language used by the *Judith* poet.[15] Rather than focusing on physical monstrosity alone, Orchard defines the unifying characteristic of the Nowell Codex texts as: 'a twin interest in the outlandish and in the activities of overweening pagan warriors from a distant and heroic past…'.[16] This sense of outlandishness, wondrousness and the marginal frames both the monsters and the heroes of the Nowell Codex in a way that encompasses all its texts. It is in this monstrous, outlandish context that the serpents of *Beowulf* are framed.

## 4. The Origin of *Beowulf* and its serpents

*Beowulf* is unique as an Old English epic. There is a thread of Christianity woven throughout the poem but the poem is, for the most part, secular in its focus. With regard to the image of the serpent in the poem, any overt reference to the paradigm of the scriptural serpent is absent. Because of this, it is tempting to suggest that the serpents of *Beowulf* – like the serpents of the *Lays* in Chapter One – represent a pre-Christian interpretation of the serpent still latent in popular tradition at the time

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[12] A. Orchard (ed.), 'The Wonders of the East' in *Pride,* p. 189.

[13] Sisam, *Studies,* p 67.

[14] Orchard, *Pride* pp.3-12; Taylor and Salus, *Compilation,* p. 199-204.

[15] Orchard, *Pride,* p. 8.

[16] Orchard, *Pride,* p. 27.

of its codification. However, the origin of *Beowulf* and the *Beowulf* story is, like most popular traditions from the Anglo-Saxon period, complex in this regard.

There are two dates that are of importance to the origin of the poem; the date of the text in the Nowell Codex, and the date of the poem's composition. The palaeography of the Nowell Codex places it in the decades around the year 1000, a view supported by the great majority of modern scholarship.[17] The date of the poem's original composition is more complex. The pre-literary, pre-Christian origin of the poem's components will never be known, and indeed it is more than probable that no such single date exists. However, what date this specific version of the poem was composed – and whether it was the first or only version – is a more realistic question. In 1981, Chase edited *The Dating of Beowulf,* a series of essays devoted to discussing this point, looking for evidence about contemporary material culture, politics and myth.[18] This approach of taking one scholarly angle – palaeographic, linguistic, historical or otherwise – and using it to postulate a date, has defined the historiography on this subject. In 2014, another volume edited by Neidorf, titled *The Dating of Beowulf: A reassessment* has updated Chase's approach, including essays on metrical evidence, cultural change and semantics.[19] Neidorf's collection disapproves of some previous scholarship, implying that much of it had been based on 'divination' rather than reason and 'probabilistic' rigor.[20] However, across both volumes, the general consensus remains that the poem's origin was somewhere in the mid eighth century.[21] Whilst there is not room in this chapter to explore every point of view, there are some marked deviations from this consensus that bear some consideration.

At the very late end of the spectrum, Kiernan uses historical evidence to suggest that the Nowell Codex is in fact the poem's archetype. He argues that the poet produced the manuscript that is still extant as part of *Vitellius A.xv,* and that it

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[17] For example, see: Lapidge, 'Archetype', p. 7; Ker *Catalogue* p. 281; Newton, *Origins of Beowulf,* p. 2; K. Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* (Michigan, revised edition, 1996), p. 14.

[18] These issues were discussed in Chase, C., (ed.), *The Dating of Beowulf* (Toronto, 1981).

[19] Neidorf, L (ed.) *The dating of Beowulf: A reassessment* (Cambridge, 2014).

[20] Neidorf, *The Dating,* pp. 16-17.

[21] For a reasonably comprehensive survey of the historiography of the eighth-century date, see: Liuzza, 'On the Dating of *Beowulf',* in Peter S. Baker (ed.) *Beowulf: Basic Readings* (New York and London, 1995), pp. 292-3

represents the poem's first and original codification.[22] He bases this judgement on the idea that *Beowulf* was commissioned in the court of Cnut (1016–35). This is at the upper limit of the range accepted for the Nowell Codex by palaeographers, but Kiernan asserts that the poem's exaggerated celebration of Danish kingship is enough to tie it in with the reign of the Danish King Cnut, noting that such themes would have been popular in royal circles in the early eleventh century.[23] Kiernan counters another historically based argument championed by Dumville, that the poem had been commissioned instead in the court of Æþelræd Unræd.[24] Dumville's argument is that the poem aims to synthesise the conflicting cultures in England at the time, namely those of the Danish incomers and the native Anglo-Saxons. The poem is written in English, set in Denmark and most importantly about a neutrally Geatish hero to whom both ethnic groups could lay claim.[25] Kiernan rejects this idea and cites the bad relations between the two groups as evidence for making the commission of the poem unlikely.

At the other end of the spectrum, Lapidge uses palaeographic evidence to argue for a very early date for the poem. He suggests that the poem in the Nowell Codex descended from an archetype written in the early part of the eighth century.[26] He concludes this from the examination of scribal errors in the letter-forms of both scribes of the poem in *Vitellius A.xv*, which he argues suggest an archetype that was written in Anglo-Saxon set minuscule.[27] This idea supports an argument he made in 1982 that used historical and textual evidence to argue an early eighth-century date for the poem.[28] To demonstrate his argument, Lapidge presents palaeographical

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[22] K. Kiernan, 'The Eleventh Century Origin of *Beowulf* and the Beowulf Manuscript', in A. P. Richards (ed.) *Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts: Basic Readings* (London, 1994), pp. 277-99.

[23] K. Kiernan, *Beowulf and the Beowulf Manuscript* (Michigan, revised edition, 1996), p. 18.

[24] D. N. Dumville, 'Beowulf Come Lately: Some notes on the palaeography of the Nowell Codex', *Archiv für das Studium der neueren Sprachen und Literaturen* 225 (1988), pp. 49-63.

[25] Craig R. Davis uses this same evidence to construct an entirely different argument on ethnographic grounds; namely that the poem was commissioned in the court of King Alfred the Great at a time when stable relations with the Danish incomers were being galvanised. See C. R. Davis, 'An Ethnic Dating of *Beowulf*', *Anglo-Saxon England* 35 (2006), pp. 111-29.

[26] Lapidge, 'Archetype', pp. 5-41.

[27] 'In sum, the very substantial number of literal errors in the transmitted text of *Beowulf* can most economically be explained, and at a stroke, by the supposition of an early-eighth-century exemplar in set minuscule'. Lapidge, 'Archetype', p. 35.

[28] M. Lapidge, '*Beowulf*, Aldhelm, the *Liber Monstrorum* and Wessex', *Studi Medievali* 23 (1982), 151-92.

evidence that the Nowell Codex *Beowulf* may have been copied from an original written in a set minuscule. He points out idiosyncrasies of the Nowell Codex hand that seem to resemble set minuscule, and predicates his argument on the idea that set minuscule is roughly dateable to the early eighth century.

Newton uses a third body of evidence – that of the poem's syntax – to argue a similarly early date for *Beowulf*. He notes the use of early disyllabic diphthongs in the language of the poem. Despite the possibility of some deliberately archaic word use in the epic, Newton concludes tentatively that, 'we might have a hint of evidence pointing to an early composition, perhaps even within a generation or two of the end of the seventh century.'[29] However, the study of the poem's syntax is not without its complications. Liuzza's study of scribal interference in Old English poetry demonstrates that 21.6 per cent of lines in his case studies showed evidence of words and even whole phrases being substituted.[30] If this is the case in *Beowulf,* then evidence of early syntax is not so convincing; formulae could be borrowed from other dialects or even much earlier compositions to fit the poem. O'Brien O'Keefe argues that, when dealing with literature in their own vernacular tongue, Anglo-Saxon scribes were able to substitute metrically correct formulae drawn from a 'field of possibilities generated within a context of expectation'.[31] With this in mind, it is difficult to see how any syntactical study could lead to a firm conclusion about *Beowulf's* time or place of composition. Fulk has even concluded that, 'it is probably useless to set about restoring the original text, since the degree of rewriting involved in both scribes' work suggests that the surviving poetry represents layered compositions in which the seams cannot be detected with assurance'.[32] What this evidence does show without reasonable doubt is that Kiernan's conclusion that the Nowell Codex is the poem's archetype is wrong, and that the poem almost certainly predates its codification in *Vitellius A.xv.*

It is likely that the depictions of serpents in *Beowulf* draw on sources from different times and places. This is not to say there is nothing meaningful in proposing

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[29] Newton, *Origins of Beowulf,* p. 13.

[30] R. M. Liuzza, *Dating,* pp. 292-3.

[31] K. O'Brien O' Keeffe, 'Orality and the Developing Text of Caedmon's Hymn', *Speculum,* (1987), pp. 1-20, at pp. 15-16; reprinted in *Visible Song: Transitional Literacy in Old English Verse* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 23-46.

[32] R. D. Fulk, 'Inductive Methods in the Textual Criticism of Old English Verse', *Medievalia et Humanistica* 23 (1996), p. 7.

a historical context for the poem, or in examining the palaeographic or syntactical evidence for clues about the poem's origin. It is to say that for the purpose of this study, *Beowulf* is most usefully treated in the same way as the medical literature in Chapter 1: as a momentary distillation of a broad range of sources, themes and formulae. In 1993, Fred Robinson sensibly proposed that the poem as we know it probably has its origins some time between 750 and 950.[33] This is a useful guideline for the purposes of this study. Dating from somewhere in the mid-to-late Anglo-Saxon period, it is likely that the original *Beowulf* just about predates the heyday of the codified Old English medical texts from Chapter 1. It is certainly not later. Although scholars such as O'Donoghue have argued convincingly that elements of the poem may have their origins in pre-Christian legend, the poem itself was probably not composed in a pre-Christian context; in fact, the poem's structure is based on an explicitly Christian world-view.[34] At the poem's beginning, after the construction of the Danish hall of Heorot and before the first attack of Grendel, the poem describes how a *scop* [poet] in the hall sang about the Christian creation story. The poem then gives a short, eight-line summary of that song. Whilst succinct, this section of the poem, sometimes known as the Creation Song, also summarises a symbolic framework around which the rest of the narrative is woven. The key oppositions of land and water, centre and margins, and light and darkness are all set up in this early episode:

> sægde se þe cuþe
> frumsceaft fira     feorran reccan
> cwæð þæt se ælmihtiga     eorðan worhte
> wlitebeorhtne wang     swa wæter bebugeð
> gesette sigehreþig     sunnan ond monan
> leoman to leohte     land-buendum
> ond gefrætwade     foldan sceatas
> leomum ond leafum     lif eac gesceop
> cynna gehwylcum     þara ðe cwice hwyrfaþ.

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[33] Robinson, F. C., 'History, Religion and Culture: The Background Necessary for Teaching *Beowulf*', *The Tomb of Beowulf and Other Essays on Old English* (Oxford, 1993), p. 41.

[34] See: O'Donoghue, H., 'What has baldr to do with Lamech? The lethal shot of a blind man in Old Norse Myth and Jewish exegetical traditions', *Medium Ævum* 72.1 (2003), pp. 82-107.

(ll. 90-98, p. 6)

> The one who knew how spoke,
> The creation of mankind     to tell fom afar,
> He said that the almighty     made the earth
> Splendidly beautiful plain     boundaried by water,
> Set up in triumph     the sun and moon
> Lights as lamps     for the land-dwellers,
> And adorned     the corners of the earth
> With beams and leaves.     He shaped life
> For each kind     that lives and moves.

The Creation Song explains to the reader how the symbolic universe of the poem works, and how it is underpinned by a distinctly Christian understanding of creation. Acknowledgement of this Christian underpinning as well as the cautious dating of the poem to the period 750-950 contextualises the serpents in the poem without being so specific as to restrict any meaningful discussion of them as images with symbolic value.

5. The two types of Serpent in Beowulf

       The narrative of *Beowulf* can be divided into two distinct sections. The first two thirds of the poem (Part 1) deal with Beowulf's heroism on behalf of the Danes at Heorot. In Denmark he encounters Grendel and later Grendel's mother, overcoming both in combat. At the end of this episode, Beowulf leaves Denmark and returns to his native Geatland, which is when the narrative breaks and skips over fifty years of his life and his ascent to the throne. The final third of the poem (Part 2) deals with Beowulf in his old age and his conflict with a dragon that threatens his people. Just as there are two main sections of narrative in the poem, there are two distinct kinds of serpent that appear: the *nicor* and the *draca*. The selective use of these two words reflects the narrative shift that exists between the first two thirds of the poem and the dragon section. References to the *nicor* occur exclusively in the Part 1, appearing on

three separate occasions.[35] The word *draca* appears only three times in Part 1 of *Beowulf*, and in all instances the references are oblique. [36] They do not take any direct part in the action of the poem. Instead they are recalled, or the word is used to describe something else that is dragon-like. In the last third, however, the narrative hinges entirely on the presence and threat of a single *draca,* the final antagonist of Beowulf's story. Unsurprisingly, then, the final third of the poem contains several references to the *draca* and serpentine imagery surrounding it. The word *draca* itself occurs a total of eleven times in this section of the poem.[37] *Nicor* does not appear in the second section at all. Throughout the poem, both the *nicor* and the *draca* are referred to by the label of *wyrm.* Unlike the other two terms, the word *wyrm* is never used as the primary term to describe an animal; it is always used in conjunction with the more specific *nicor* or *draca*, in accordance with its status as a generic word for a creeping thing.

### 5.i. What is a *Nicor*?

Although *Beowulf* contains plenty of evidence that the *nicor* is a serpentine adversary, it does not define precisely what a *nicor* is. In terms of the broader Old English corpus, the word is rare. With just 12 extant instances of the word, *Beowulf*'s five references accounts for almost half (41.6%) of the total number of uses. [38] However, the *Beowulf* poet gives us very little physical description of these animals. They share with the rest of the monsters in *Beowulf* an indefinite form; their bodies, appearance and size are left implicit. For example, Grendel himself is described as being in the shape of a man (l. 1352, p.47, f. 162v) but clearly he is not; he is described in his first attack as being large enough to seize thirty men in his hands (l. 123, p. 7, f.134v) and yet he is small enough for Beowulf to seize him by the arm in their fight (l. 749, p. 27, f.149r). In the medical texts, this kind of vagueness suggests that the author expected the reader (or in this case, listener) to have a preconceived knowledge of the subject matter. This may also be true for *Beowulf,* which, by its very nature as a

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[35] See Klaeber, *Beowulf*, l. 422, p. 16; l. 575, p. 22; l. 845, p. 30; l. 1411, p. 49; l. 1427. p. 49.

[36] See Klaeber, *Beowulf*, l. 892, p. 32; l. 1426, p. 49; l. 2088, p. 71.

[37] See Klaeber, *Beowulf,* l.2211, p. 75; l. 2273, p. 78; l. 2290, p. 79; l. 2333, p 80; l. 2402, p. 82; l. 2549, p. 87; l. 2689, p. 92; l. 2745, p 93; l. 2825, p. 96; l. 3040, p. 103; l. 3131, p. 106.

[38] The other references appear in *Beowulf, Alexander's Letter* and the homily for St Michael the Archangel in *The Blickling Homilies.* See Chapter 2, 5.i.

metrical poem was intended to be recited and repeated. However, the fluid vagueness with which the poet describes the physical world and its inhabitants serves another purpose. In his study of horror and the physical landscape in *Beowulf,* Richard Butts notes that the ambiguity of the physical world within the poem allows for a dream-like experience in which things shift, alter, and flow with the narrative.[39]  It is not intended to be a real physical environment, but a reflection of the poem's mood and meaning. Butt's focus is on Grendel's mother's mere, but the idea rings true throughout the poem. When there is narrative tension, the paths are narrow and hazardous (p. 49, l.1409), when the central emotion is horror, water boils with blood (p.49, l. 1422) and where there is hostility, there is barren rock (p. 75, l. 2212).[40] As will be demonstrated, the *nicor* is an integral part of this ever shifting, poetically expressive landscape. It is not surprising that they, like the landscape, are described in highly emotive yet physically nonspecific terms.

Even if this physical ambiguity is accepted, however, *Beowulf* presents a question; what is a *nicor*? Bosworth and Toller give two definitions of *nicor*: the principle meaning is listed as 'hippopotamus', and after that as 'water monster'.[41] The primary definition of 'hippopotamus' may appear surprising at first; a hippopotamus seems as unlikely to appear in *Beowulf* as in Anglo-Saxon England. The reason for this definition is in fact found in the Nowell Codex itself, within *Alexander's Letter,* a vernacular prose text which chronicles Alexander's adventures in strange and exotic locations in the east by means of a fictitious epistle from the emperor to his tutor.[42] It consists of short, chapter-like sections that describe the strange people, plants and animals Alexander finds on his journeys. It immediately precedes *Beowulf* and is the third text in the Nowell Codex (fols. 107r–131v). It is not a direct translation of any extant Latin text. However, somewhere in its ancestry, the Old English text is probably based on a version of the Latin *Epistola Alexandri ad Aristotelem,* a popular text

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[39] Butts, R. 'The Analogical Mere: Landscape and Terror in *Beowulf*', *English Studies* 68, issue 2 (1987) pp. 113-121.

[40] The psychoanalytical implications of this symbolic landscape and it's have been explored with regard to Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection by Paul Acker (Acker, P., 'The horror ans the maternal in *Beowulf,*' Publications of the Modern Language Association of America 121.3 (2006) pp. 702-716.).

[41] Bosworth and Toller, *Dictionary,* 'nicor'.

[42] Orchard (ed.) 'Letter of Alexander to Aristotle: Old English Text' in *Pride*, pp.224-253.

that was part of a broader corpus of Alexander legends.[43] There is a later Latin version that closely mirrors the Old English version in the Nowell Codex, found in London, British Library Royal 13.Ai.[44] This manuscript is dated to the latter part of the eleventh century.[45] The Old English version of *Alexander's Letter* is one of only three texts to use the word *nicor*, the other two being *Beowulf* and *The Blickling Homilies.[46]* *Alexander's Letter* uses the word four times, in Sections 15 and 27;

> Þæt wæs þonne **nicra** mengeo on onsione maran 7 unhyrlicran þonne
> ða elpendas  ðone grund þær ea 7 betweoh ða yða þæs wæteres þa men
> besencte 7 mid heora muðe hie sliton 7 bludgodon 7 hie ealle swa
> fornamon, þæt ure nænig wiste hwær hiora æni cwom. Ða wæs ic swiðe
> yrre þæm minum ladþeowum, þa us on swylce frecennissa gelæddon.
> Het hiera ða bescufan in þa ea .L. 7 .C. 7 sona þæs ðe hie inne wæron,
> swa wæron þa **nicoras** gearwe tobrudon hie swa hie þa oðre ær dydon,
> 7 swa þicce hie in þære ea aweollon swa æmettan ða **nicras**, 7 swilc
> unrim heora wæs. Þa het icblawan mine byman 7 þa fyrd faran.

> Then there appeared a multitude of **water monsters**, larger and more
> terrible in appearance than the elephants, who dragged men through
> the watery waves down to the river bottom, and tore them to bloody
> pieces with their mouth, and snatched them all away so that none of us
> knew where any of them had gone. Then I was very angry with my
> guides, who had led us into such danger.  I ordered that one hundred
> and fifty of them be shoved into the river, and as soon as they were in
> the **water-monsters** were ready, and dragged them away just as they
> had done with the others, and the **water-monsters** seethed up in the

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[43] For an overview of the Alexander legend in Europe, see: Orchard, *Pride,* Ch 5.

[44] London, British Library, Royal 13 Ai (hereafter Royal 13 Ai), ff. 51v-78r; A. Orchard (ed.) 'Letter of Alexander to Aristotle: Latin Text' in *Pride*, pp. 204-223.

[45] The British Library Board, 'Detailed Record for Royal 13 Ai', in *Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts* http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=8847&CollID=16 &NStart=130101 [Accessed 15/03/1041].

[46] Chapter 2, 5.i.

river as thick as ants, they were so innumerable. Then I ordered the trumpets to be sounded, and the army to head off.[47]

… wæs þæm deore eall se hrycg acæglod swelce snode hæfde þæt deor seonowealt heafod swelce mona 7 þæt deor hatte *quasi caput luna* 7 him wæron þa breost gelice **niccres** breastum 7 heardum toðum  7 miclum hit wæs gegyred 7 geteþed. Ond hit þa þæt deor ofsloh mine þegnas twegen. Ond we þa þæt deor nowþer ne mid spere gewundigan ne meahte ne mid nænig wæpne, ac we hit uneaþe mid isernum hamerum 7 slecgum gefyldon 7 hit ofbeoton.

…the beast's back was all studded with pegs like a snood, and the beast had a round head like the moon, and the beast was called *quasi caput luna*, and it had a breast like a **sea-monster's** breast, and it was armed with hard and large teeth. And that beast slew two of my thegns. And we were unable to wound that beast with spears in any way, nor with any kind of weapon, but with difficulty we beat it and subdued it with iron mallets and sledge-hammers.[48]

In both cases, the corresponding section in the Latin text has used a form of the word *hippopotamus*;

Maiores elefantorum corporibus **hipotami** inter profundos aquarum emersi apparuerunt gurgites raptosque in uorticem crudeli poena uiros flentibus nobis adsumpserunt. Iratus tum ego ducibus qui nos in insidias deducebant, iubeo ex his .CL. in flumen mitti. Quibus propulsis natantibusque inuicti **hipotami** rursum dignos iusta poena affecere; sed maiorum decuplato numero **beluarum** quam prius affuit. Ad spem inde contingentis cibi ubi cum apparerent, ueluti formicae per flumen

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[47] Orchard, *Pride*, p. 234; trans p. 235.

[48] Orchard, *Pride,* p. 242; trans p. 243.

efferuere. Et nequati octu cum **aquarum prodigiis belua** gereremus, iussi dato signo bucino ad iter militem aptari. [49]

Larger in their bodies than elephants, *hippotami* that had been in the depths of the waters grabbed the men in their mouths in a cruel punishment and took them away while we were weeping. Then, angry with those guides who had led us into the ambush, I ordered 150 of them to be thrown into the river. On these men who were swimming, driven forward, the unconquerable **hippopotami** enacted a just punishment in keeping with the crime;[50] but there were ten times the number of **monsters** than there had been before. Therefore, hoping to find food wherever they appeared, they swarmed forth through the river like ants.  And lest we did battle in some way with these **wondrous water monsters** at night, I ordered the army to get ready to go on their way on a trumpet signal.


…belua noui generis prosiliuit serrato tergo, duo capita habens, alterum lunae simile, **hippopotamo** pectore, corcodrilli gerens alterum simillimum duris munitum dentibus, quod caput duos milites repentino occidit ictu. Quam ferreis uix umquam comminuimus malleis, quam hostis non ualebamus transfigere. Ammirati diu nouitatem eius.[51]

A new beast came out with a serrated back, having two heads, one of them like the moon, (with) the underside of a **hippopotamus**, the other wearing hard, strong teeth like a crocodile, it slew two men by a sudden blow to the head. Iron hammers could scarcely cut it to pieces, were not able to pierce the enemy. We wondered long at this novelty.

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[49] Orchard, *Pride,* p. 209.

[50] *Affecere*, literally translated, means 'injury.' In this case, the injury refers to the damage done to Alexander and his men by the guides who led them into an ambush. To make this clear, I chose to preserve the structure of the sentence and substitute 'crime' for 'injury'. An alternative might have been to clarify the meaning in parentheses: 'the unconquerable **hippopotami** effected a just punishment in keeping with the injury (they had done to us).'

[51] Orchard, *Pride,* 214.

When compared, it is clear that the Old English version is using *nicor* in place of the Latin *hippopotamus.* Although different, both the Old English and the Latin texts are clearly telling the same story. In Chapter 15, both versions compare the size of the animals in question with that of an elephant, and then relate the same story of the animals dragging men into the water with their mouths before seething up in great numbers to attack a second time. In the second example also, both versions describe an animal with serrated or studded back, a head that has some likeness to the moon and a chest like a *nicor/hippopotamus.* The Old English text uses *nicor* in direct opposition to the Latin *hippopotamus* three times, and uses *nicor* in place of Latin *aquarum prodigiis belua* [wondrous water monster] once. The total of four uses of the word accounts for a third (33.3%) of the total examples of the word in the extant Old English corpus, and is the reason that Bosworth and Toller have listed *hippopotamus* as the primary definition of *nicor.*

At first glance, the Modern English speaker is inclined to agree with this conclusion; that the term *nicor* refers generally to a water monster, and more specifically to a hippopotamus. However, this is based upon the assumption that the Latin version of *Alexander's Letter* was using the Latin term *Hippopotamus* correctly in the first place. Although the hippopotamus is certainly a dangerous, aggressive animal that lives in water and attacks with its bite, there are hints in the *Letter* that the text may be trying to conjure something else in the imagination of the reader. In the first example, Chapter 15, both the Latin and the Old English versions mention the fact that the animals were hidden in the river and attacked by means of an ambush. Hippopotami can certainly be concealed in water, but their primary motive for attack is territoriality, and they do not hunt humans for food, which is what the Latin text in particular suggests. The word used to describe the attack is 'insidias' [into an ambush/a trap], suggesting that the creatures hid in a conscious effort to ensnare the men. The creatures are also described as being in hopes of 'contingentis cibi' [finding/touching food]. In both cases, the animals are described as dragging their prey into the water, another feature that does not fit with a hippopotamus, which will charge and attack a threat on land as well as in the water. What is more, both texts describe the animals as seething up in great numbers in a way reminiscent of ants. This is certainly not descriptive of the behaviour of hippopotami, but it could easily describe the large feeding frenzies of another large river-dwelling danger: a crocodile.

Because of their dangerousness and shared environment – that of slow-moving African rivers – the hippopotamus and the crocodile are conjoined in late-classical and early-medieval thought. Pliny the Elder treats the two animals together as animals of the Nile in book VIII of his *Historia Naturalis,* a large encyclopaedia of natural history completed in the late first century.[52] The *Historia Naturalis* had a vast scope, recording late antique knowledge on a variety of subjects from astronomy to mineralogy over the course of its 37 books. The work was known in Anglo-Saxon England, but only in fragments. There is definite evidence of the work's presence in the intellectual landscape of Anglo-Saxon England, and there are several extant manuscripts from the period that contain parts of the *Historia Naturalis.*[53] However, there is no evidence that the relevant Books viii-xi which contain the descriptions of the crocodile and the hippopotamus were ever known in Anglo-Saxon England. Of course, there is a possibility that it was known and is simply not represented, either as a text or as a reference in another work, in the extant corpus that survives today. Additionally, the original composer(s) of *Alexander's Letter* may have come into contact with the text in a place where it was well known, or the text itself may have originated in such a place.

However, it seems most likely that *Alexander's Letter* has been influenced by Pliny through the medium of Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae.* The *Etymologiae* is a similarly encyclopaedic work composed by Isidore, Archbishop of Seville, in the latter part of his life before his death in 636. Its dissemination across Europe was, as Reynolds puts it, 'swift and extensive'.[54] The work compiles and collates vast amounts of information and echoes much of Pliny's Classical work in both its aims and its content. Book xii, *De Animalibus*, owes significant debt to Pliny, and similarly treats the

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[52] For the description of the crocodile, see: Pliny, *Natural History*, LOEB edition, Vol. VIII, transl. and ed. W. H. S. Jones (London, 1963), Book VIII, Ch. xxxvii, p. 64. For the description of the hippopotamus, see: Ibid., Book VIII, ch. xxxix, p. 68. The animal that appears in the intermediate chapter, xxxviii, is the 'ichneumon', a lizard which is, according to Pliny, 'similis crocodilo' [similar to the crocodile], p. 66.

[53] See: Reynolds, L. D., *Texts and Transmission A Survey of the Latin Classics* (Oxford 1983), p. 309; Fontes Anglo-Saxonici Project (ed.), *Fontes Anglo Saxonici* (Oxford), http://fontes.english.ox.ac.uk[Accessed 9th September 2017].

[54] Reynolds, *Texts,* p.194.

hippopotamus and the crocodile in the same section due to their shared habitat of the Nile.[55]

The idea that the Latin term *hippopotamus* could be intended to mean a crocodile is supported by the description in the second example, Chapter 27 of both texts. This animal is also in the water and is also dangerous; this time dragging two men into the water and killing them. In both the Latin and the Old English examples, reference is made to the texture of the creature's back, which is described as 'serrato' [serrated/studded] and 'acæglod' [studded with pegs]. This is more reminiscent of the ridged scales on the back of a crocodilian animal than the back of a mammal. The Latin text goes on to say that the creature also has a 'hippopotamo pectore' [underside of a hippopotamus]. The Old English version once again uses *nicor* in the same place. If this is taken to mean a modern hippopotamus, this is an odd detail. There is nothing outstanding about the underside of a hippopotamus that would warrant its mention. However, if the word *hippopotamo* is taken to read 'of a crocodile,' then the inclusion of the detail makes more sense. Both Pliny and Isidore mention the soft underbelly of the crocodile as its chief weakness, vulnerable to attack by birds (Pliny) and by creatures with sharp fins that may swim underneath it (Pliny and Isidore).[56] Both also mention the imperviousness of the rest of the crocodile's hide to attack, a feature that is mentioned in both the Latin and the Old English versions of Chapter 27 of the *Letter*.[57]

To an Anglo-Saxon with no first-hand knowledge of the animals in question, the Latin terms *hippopotamus* and *crocodillus* would each have signified a large, dangerous, river-dwelling animal. It is plausible that by the time of the composition of *Alexander's Letter,* the terms had become confused to those writers and adapters of north-west Europe who had never seen either creature. In terms of the readership of the *Letter*, the *hippopotami* of the Latin text and the *nicor* of the Old English are monsters of the imagination and not real animals at all. In terms of a modern reading, none of this evidence is enough to suggest that Chapters 15 and 27 of either text are

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[55] See: Isidore, *Etymologies,* transl. and ed. Stephen A. Barney et al. (Cambridge, 2006), Book XII, ch. 20, p. 260-261 and ch. 21, p. 261 for descriptions of the crocodile and hippopotamus respectively.

[56] Pliny, *Natural History,* LOEB edition, transl. and ed. W. H. S. Jones (London, 1963), VIII, ch. xxxvii, p. 64; Isidore, *Etymologies,* Book XII, ch. 20, p. 260-261.

[57] Pliny, *Natural History,* LOEB edition, transl. and ed. W. H. S. Jones (London, 1963), VIII, ch. xxxvii, p. 64; Isidore, *Etymologies,* Book XII, ch. 20, p. 260-261.

describing a real animal identifiable in natural history. It is possible, however, to suggest that the composer of the Latin *Alexander's Letter* used the term *hippopotamus* to describe an imagined animal that is closely associated – and possibly conflated – with the crocodile. Similarly, the composer or translator of the Old English text could have been referring to a reptilian, serpentine monster when he made the semantic choice to use *nicor*. In fact, in their entry for *nicor*, Bosworth and Toller acknowledge the Old High German cognate *nichus*, and give that word a primary meaning of 'crocodile' or 'water serpent'.[58]

Reading the *nicor* as a crocodile-like creature instead of a modern hippopotamus brings them immediately into context alongside the predatory *nicor* of the *Blickling Homilies* and the more obviously serpentine *nicor* in *Beowulf* (see below). The homily for the feast of St. Michael the Archangel in *The Blickling Homilies*, is the only other text to use the word *nicor* apart from *Beowulf* and the *Letter*. The homily is entitled, 'To Sancte Michaheles Mæssan' in the manuscript, and relates the events of the founding of the Sanctuary of St. Michael the Archangel at Monte Gargano in Southern Italy, with various miraculous interventions from the Archangel himself.[59] No mention is made in the homily of St. Michael's iconographic association with dragons and dragon-slaying. However, perhaps there is some relation between this and the decision to include a short digression at the end of the homily in which souls are threatened by the *nicor*. It is in the very last few lines that the homilist reaffirms the precariousness of human souls and the need to appeal to 'Sanctus Micahel ond ða nigen endebyrdnessa ðara haligra engla þæt hie us syn on fultume wið helsceaðum' [Saint Michael and the nine orders of the holy angels so that they may be our aid against the enemies of Hell].[60] The homilist demonstrates this need by referring to the *Visio Pauli*, an apocryphal New Testament text detailing St. Paul's visions of Heaven and Hell:

> Swa Sanctus Paulus waes geseonde on norðanweardne þisne
> middangeard, þær ealle wætero niðergewitað, ond he þær geseah ofer

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[58] Bosworth and Toller, *Dictionary*, 'Nicor'.

[59] Kelly, R. J. (ed.), 'To Sancte Michaheles Mæssan', in *The Blickling Homilies Edition and Translation* (London, 2003) p. 44; See also Princeton University Library, Princeton, W.H. Scheide Collection MS 71, f.119r-27r.

[60] Kelly, *The Blickling Homilies*, p.144.

ðæm wætere sumne harne stan, ond wæron norð of ðæm stane awexene swiðe hrimige bearwas. Ond ðær wæron þystrogenipo, ond under þæm stane waes **niccra** eardung ond wearga. Ond he geseah þæt on ðæm clife hangodan on ðæm isigean bearwum manige swearte saula be heora handum gebundne. Ond þa fynd þara on **nicra** onlicnesse heora gripende wæron, swa swa grædig wulf. Ond þæt wæter wæs sweart under þæm clife neoðan. Ond betuh þæm clife ond ðæm wætre wæron swylce twelf mila, ond ðonne ða twigo forburston þonne gewitan þa saula niðer þa þe on ðæm twigum hangodan, ond him onfengon ða **nicras**. Ðis ðonne wæron ða saula þa ðe her on worlde mid unrihte gefyrenode wæron, ond ðæs noldan geswican ær heora lifes ende.[61]

As Saint Paul was looking to the northward (part) of this middle-earth (world), from whence all waters come down, he saw there above that water a hoary stone, and north of that stone the woods had become very rimy. And there were dark mists there, and under that stone was the habitation **of *niccra*** and monsters. And he saw hanging on the cliff of those icy woods many dark souls hanging by their bound hands. And the fiends in the likeness **of *nicra*** were grasping them like greedy wolves. And the water beneath that cliff was dark. And between the cliff and the water was a distance of around twelve miles, and when the twigs broke then the souls that hung on those twigs fell down, and the ***nicras*** seized them. These were the souls that in this world wrongly sinned, and would not stop before their life's end.

Once again the *nicor* is obviously a large, aquatic animal and is hostile to the souls that hang from the twigs. However, unlike in the *Letter,* the *nicor* is a spiritual monster, a metaphor for destruction and the elimination of bad souls. The second way in which they differ from the *nicor* of *Alexander's Letter* is in their method of attack. The *nicor* of *Alexander's Letter* is explicitly described as attacking with the mouth and teeth, an action consistent with both hippopotami and crocodiles. However the *nicor* of the *Blickling* text is simply described as grasping. Like the swarming ant-like *nicor* in Chapter 15 of the *Letter,* these creatures are motivated entirely by hunger, compared by the homilist

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[61] Kelly, *The Blickling Homilies,* p.144.

to wolves in their ravenousness. The desire of the *Blickling nicor* is to consume rather than to destroy for destruction's sake. These are more fitting to the secondary definition given by Bosworth and Toller, 'water monster'.[62]

The *nicor* of the *Letter* and the *Blickling Homilies* can be used as a frame of reference to understand what the *nicor* of *Beowulf* is like, in terms of both physical shape and what it represents. So far, the *nicor* is large in size, at least large enough to be a danger to the life of a human being. It is hostile in its interactions with the human world. It appears in or around some kind of water, sometimes hidden. Although the *Letter* and the *Blickling Homilies* address the *nicor* in very different contexts, in both cases the animal occupies that realm of Anglo Saxon imagination that spans the natural and the monstrous. The *nicor* is not a real animal in the modern sense, but neither would it have been perceived as a totally fictional one by an Anglo-Saxon audience. In short, the *nicor* is 'outlandish' in the sense that Orchard used the phrase, something of another place, imagined in the sense that it is unseen, yet real in the sense that, whether in the metaphorical context of Paul's vision or in an exotic land, it may exist.[63]

### 5.ii. The *nicor* in *Beowulf*

The *nicor* of *Beowulf* shares these features. These animals are always associated with water, always hostile, and often hungry for human flesh. Like the *nicor* of the *Letter,* they do not inhabit the same space as human beings, but appear on the edges of civilisation. Their association with their watery, marginal habitat is key to understanding their role in the narrative.

The *nicor* is introduced into the poem by Beowulf, when he introduces himself and his deeds to the Danish king Hroðgar. Beowulf has come to the hall of Heorot having heard of 'Grendles þing' [the matter of Grendel] (l. 409, p. 16.). Having wished the Danish king well, he launches into an exposition of his past heroic deeds.

'…ic of searwum cwom

Fah from feondum,     þær ic fife geband

Yðde **eotena cyn**     ond on yðum slog

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[62] Bosworth and Toller, *Dictionary,* 'nicor'.

[63] Orchard, *Pride*, p. 27.

> **Niceras** nihtes…'
>
> I returned from battle, (blood)stained from my enemies; there I bound
> five, destroyed **giant-kind**, and in the waves slew ***niceras*** by night…
>
> (ll. 419-422, p. 16)

This reference sets the precedent for the role of the *nicor* in the poem. Though the audience is given no indication of the size or shape of the animals, the fact that Beowulf is boasting about having slain some of them is telling. Sisam observes that, '. . . a reputation for heroism is not made by killing creatures that are believed to be harmless or beneficent – sheep for instance'.[64] The *nicor* is counted among those enemies worth mentioning, and this means two things: firstly that the animal is large and dangerous, and that to kill one is a feat; secondly that the animal is hostile (or at least perceived to be hostile) in its interactions with humans – an assumption which is supported by further references to the *nicor* in *Beowulf* (see below). By mentioning them adjacent to one another in the same sentence, the *Beowulf* poet also makes a connection between the *nicor* and the 'eotena cyn.' This places the *nicor* firmly in a mythological context rather than a natural one. Even if the audience believed in giants, be they biblical or folkloric, they almost certainly did not think of them as creatures whose paths regularly crossed with human beings. The *nicor* shares with the giant a separation from reality in either space or time, and is counted with them as a fantastical and physically powerful creature that would be boast-worthy to kill.

The second reference to the *nicor* comes in a similar context, as Beowulf recounts killing nine of them in his swimming match with Breca. The swimming match is clearly legendary in the world of the poem, since Beowulf's boast is in response to a question from one of the Danes, the doubtful Unferð, who asks whether he is the same Beowulf who partook in the famous race and lost (Klaeber, *Beowulf,* ll. 506-528.). Beowulf responds immediately that he did not lose, and goes on to describe the events of the contest. These do not, however, revolve around the race with Breca. Instead, the hero's story focuses on the creatures that attacked him in the ocean. These appear on the fifth night of the swim, after conditions take a turn for the worse:

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[64] Sisam, K., *The Structure of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1965), p.25.

… oþ þæt unc flod todraf,

wado weallende,      wedera cealdost,

nipende niht,      ond norþanwind

heaðogrim ondhwearf; hreo wæron yþa.

Wæs merefixa mod onhrered …'

Until flood drove us apart, the waves welled, coldest of weathers,

darkening night, and the north wind deadly fierce turned on (us); the

waves were wild. The spirit of the sea-fish was stirred…

(ll. 545-549, p. 21.)

Here, the environment in which the sea creatures appear is as hostile as they are. It is explicitly dark, cold and chaotic. The poet is making use of the symbolic register set up very early in the poem, when, just after the completion of Heorot, an unnamed *scop* [bard] sings the story of creation. The poet paraphrases his subject matter in just eight lines;

Sægde  se þe cuþe,

frumsceaft fira          feorran reccan,

cwæð þæt se ælmihtiga          eorðan worh(te),

wlitebeorhtne wang,          swa wæter bebugeð,

gesette sigehreþig      sunnan ond monan,

leoman to leohte      landbuendum,

ond gefrætwade      foldan sceatas

leomum ond leafum,          life ac gesceop

cynna gehwylcum      þara ðe cwice hwyrfaþ.

He said, the one that knew how to relate from long ago (literally 'from afar') the creation of men, told that the almighty wrought the earth, gloriously bright plain, as the water encircles, set in triumph the sun and moon, lights as lamps for the land-dwellers, and adorned the regions of the earth with limbs and leaves, and also created life for each of those kinds that move about with life.

(ll. 90-8, p. 6.)

This compact description of the creation of the world is perhaps one of the most important sections of *Beowulf*. It sets up two central oppositions in creation, both of which dictate the symbolic language of the poem. These are land and water and light and dark. In the context of the creation story, land and light represent that which God has created, not just alongside but explicitly for mankind. Implicit in this is that before the land and light were created, the world was dark and covered in water. These elements characterised the emptiness before the birth of mankind, before God the Father imposed order on the chaos of the waters and created a structured landmass for his chosen creations. The *nicor* appears in the midst of a similar dark watery chaos outside of human society, deliberately recalling the abyss in the creation story. What is more, the motivation for the sea-creatures' attack is directly linked to the tumult. The waking of their spirits directly follows the descriptions of the bad weather. The lexical choices of the poet continue to suggest the same churning, swelling movement in the minds of the creatures as in the ocean; the word 'onhrered' describes a physical motion of agitation or stirring up.[65] Phonically it echoes both the 'on' beginning of the word 'ondhwearf' in the previous line, describing the turning motion of the wind, and the 'hr-' of 'hreo,' a word which is specifically used to describe roughness of weather.[66] The actions of these creatures are inextricably linked to the movement of their environment, and in turn the malevolence of the environment is personified in the 'mod' of the 'merefixa.' Beowulf is battling with the sea creatures just as he is battling with the elements, enacting the struggle already set up in the Creation Song between man and wilderness, light and dark, the chaotic water and the ordered land.

The exact physiological nature of the creatures that attack Beowulf is, as in most examples of serpentine creatures within the poem, left implicit. The assailants are referred to in line 574 as 'niceras';

> Hwæþere me gesælde      þæt ic mid sweorde ofsloh
> **Niceras nigene**.

> However, it was my success that I slew nine ***niceras*** with my sword.

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[65] Bosworth and Toller, *Dictionary,* 'onhreran'.

[66] Bosworth and Toller, *Dictionary,* 'hreoh'.

(ll. 574-5, p. 22.)

However, this is just one of nine words which are used to describe the nine assailants. Demonstrating the Old English propensity for poetic variation, the poem provides the audience with a further eight epithets in the following order:

'merefixa' [sea-fish] (l. 549, p. 21.);
'laðum' [hateful loathesome ones] (l. 458, p. 21.);
'fah feondscaða' [hostile enemy-scather] (l. 554, p. 21.);
'aglæcan' [warriors/monsters] (l. 556, p. 21.)[67]
'mihtig meredeor' [mighty sea-beast] (l. 558, p. 21.);
'laðgeteonan' [hateful attacker] (l. 559, p. 21.);
'manfordædlan' [those who wickedly destroy] (l. 563, p. 21.);
'Fara' (foes) (l. 578, p. 22.).

Six of these, 'laðum,' 'fah feondscaða,' 'aglæcan,' 'laðgeteonan,' 'manfordædlan' and 'fara' are all descriptors which suggest hostility and the potential to do damage in their physical clash with Beowulf.  The remaining two, 'merefixa' and 'mihtig meredeor' suggest the animal's strong association with its environment, which in this case is the sea. Overall, the only true animal names attributed to the creatures are *-fixa* [fish], *-deor* [beast/large animal] and *nicor*. The creatures have teeth or claws, since in line 555 Beowulf describes them as 'grim on grape' [grim in grip] (l. 555, p. 21.).

The *nicor* is clearly monstrous; that is, it exists in a place outside usual human experience, in the water far from the centre of human society created by God. So far,

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[67] The term 'aglæca' is notoriously ambivalent, and is applied to the characters of Beowulf (l.2592), Sigemund (l. 892), Grendel (l. 159, l. 425, l.556, l. 732, l. 789, l. 1000.), Grendel's mother (l.1259, l. 1269, l. 2520, l. 2534.) and the dragon (l. 2557, l. 2592, l. 2905.). Klaeber's glossary gives the definition 'warrior, hero' when referring to Sigemund and Beowulf, but 'monster, demon, fiend' when referring to Grendel and his mother. A number of scholars have explored the use of the word in the context of the poem, including Gilliam, Stanley, Alfano and Menzer (Gilliam, G. M., 'The use of the term "æglæca" in *Beowulf* at lines 893 and 2592', *Studia Germanica Gandensia* 3 (1961) pp. 145-169; Stanley, E. G., 'Two Old English poetic phrases insufficiently understood for literary criticism: Þing geheagan and senoþ geheagan', in D. Calder (ed.), *Old English Poetry: Essays on style* (London, 1979), pp. 75-6; Alfano, C., 'The issue of feminine monstrosity: A re-evaluation of Grendel's Mother, *Comitatus* 23 (1992), pp. 1-16; Menzer, M., 'Aglæcwif (*Beowulf* 1259a): Implications for wif- compounds, Grendel's Mother, and other aglæcan', *English Language Notes* 34, Vol. 1 (1996), pp. 1-6.

however, there seems to be little connection between the *nicor* and the *wyrm* of the medical texts in Chapter One. On the other hand, there is one key motivation that links the sea-dwelling *nicor* and the internal disease, pestilence and death embodied by the *wyrm* described in Chapter 1. The *nicor,* like the *wyrm,* has hunger and hostility directed at the human body. Although they attack dynamically rather than with venom, the intent of the *nicor* is still to consume Beowulf, as in lines 563-4;

> …hie me þegon,
> symbel ymbsæton      sægrunde neah…
>
> …They partook of me, sitting around the feast near the sea-bed…
> (ll. 563-4, p. 21.)

Also like the *wyrm,* the *nicor* is an animal that inhabits the very edges of the created world as it is set up in the Creation Song of the poem (ll. 90-98, p 6). In fact, it is inextricable from this landscape. In the swimming-match episode, the *nicor* represents the hostility of the ocean during a storm, giving an agency and a zoomorphic shape to the dangers of the natural world. This is not a dissimilar analogy to the *wyrm* of the medical texts that personifies disease. Both are outsiders seeking to encroach and feed upon the human body. The *nicor* is marginalised by the creation of the land. Beowulf's reckless yet heroic trespass into the marginal world of the sea takes him beyond the bounds of the social secular life celebrated in Heorot. It is once again a battle between man's physical body and the invisible forces of nature personified by the *wyrm.*

Beowulf is victorious, of course, but the poet is careful not to present the hero as invincible or impervious to the type of threat that these creatures pose. Beowulf himself rationalises his survival by explaining first that morning came, and second that he was not fated to die at that point;

> … Leoht eastan com,
> beorht beacen Godes,           brimu swaþredon,
> þæt ic sænessas          geseon mihte,
> windige weallas.      Wyrd oft nereð
> unfægne eorl,        þonne his ellen deah!

> …Light came from the east, God's bright beacon, the sea became still,
>
> that I might see the headlands, windy walls. Fate often spares the earl
>
> who is not fated to die, when his courage avails!
>
> (ll. 569-73, p. 21.)

Light is the element which symbolises God's benevolence towards mankind and human society in the poem, again set up in the Creation Song where the poet explains that the creation of light was intended for the use and comfort of mankind: 'leoman to leohte landbuendum' [lights as lamps for the land-dwellers] (l. 95, p. 6.). Now it this light that allows Beowulf to see and to return to the land. God intervenes, albeit passively, to dispel the dark and stormy conditions in which the *nicor* appeared, calming the environment. However, death is no less inevitable, as Beowulf himself hints by mentioning fatality at the end of his speech.

      The *nicor* does not appear in the poem again until after the fight with Grendel. Their reappearance coincides with the movement of the action away from Heorot and away from human habitation, moving once again towards the edges of the land and the element of water that encircles it. Although the mere is not the sea, it is nonetheless both marginal and associated with the sea. It is far from Heorot, and is the home of Grendel, described previously as the master of marginal landscapes:

maére mearcstapa      sé þe móras héold'
Infamous march-stepper, he that held the moors
(l. 104, p.6).

It is also implied in line 1429 that the mere is close to the sea, since the poem describes the water monsters on the banks journeying out onto the 'seglrade' [sail-road, i.e. sea] in the morning (l.1429, p. 49). The inherent marginality of the mere and its connection to the sea in *Beowulf* has been explored by Frank in her analysis of the language used to describe both environments in the poem.[68] This is the place that Grendel retreats to, mortally wounded after the loss of his arm in the fight with Beowulf.

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[68] Frank, R. 'Mere and sund: two sea-changes in *Beowulf* in P. Rugg Brown, G. Ronan Crampton and F. C. Robinson (eds), *Modes of Interpretation in Old English Literature: Essays in Honour of Stanley B. Greenfield* (Toronto, 1986) pp. 153-166.

> … hu he werigmod     on weg þanon
>
> Niða ofercumen      on **nicera** mere
>
> Faege ond geflymed    feorhlastas bær.
>
> …how he, weary of mind, on his way there to the ***nicera*** mere,
>
> doomed and put to flight, bore (left behind) life trails (blood)
>
> (ll. 844-6, p. 30.)

In keeping with the creatures in *Alexander's Letter,* the *Blickling Homilies* and earlier in *Beowulf,* the *nicor* of the mere is intrinsically linked to its environment. In fact, the poet ascribes ownership of the mere to them. This is contrasted, by the relationship of Grendel and his mother to the mere.  Later in the poem, Grendel's mother is referred to as:

> …se þe wæteregesan      wunian scolde
>
> cealde streamas…
>
> …the one who had to inhabit the terrible waters, cold streams…
>
> (ll. 1260-1, p. 44.)

Grendel's mother's relationship to her home is not one of ownership, but one of exile. She is compelled to live there as Grendel was compelled, due to their status in the eyes of God as members of 'Caines cynne' (l. 107, p. 6.), Cain being the archetypal exile of scripture. The *nicor* is not in exile, but are part of the landscape just as the sea monsters in the first example are part of the ocean and the aggression of the storm. These same *nicor* is mentioned as owning their landscape again when Beowulf makes his way to the mere to confront Grendel's mother:

> Ofereode þa          æþelinga bearn
>
> Steap stanhliðo,      stige nearwe,
>
> Enge anpaðas,        uncuð gelad,
>
> Neowle næssas,      **nicorhusa fela** …
>
> He passed over, then, the son of nobles, steep stone cliffs, narrow routes, confined lonely paths, an unknown track, high headlands, **many *nicor*-homes**...

(ll. 1408-11, p. 49.)

The landscape is not only entirely hostile, but it is also the complete opposite of the seat of human habitation at Heorot. The ways are 'nearwe' [narrow], they are anpaðas [lonely paths], while Heorot is given a sense of space and freedom of movement both in terms of its size, 'heah ond horngeap,' [high and horn-gabled] (l. 82, p. 6.) and in terms of its purpose as a place for social interaction and economic flow, evinced in the poet's description of how generously Hroðgar 'beagas dælde, sinc æt simle' [dealt out rings, riches at the feast] (ll. 80-1, p. 6.). The home of the *nicor,* however, is the opposite of this not only in its constricting paths but in the way it isolates. Although Hroðgar has heard about this place, the poet refers to the tracks as 'uncuð' [unknown]. Much as in the ocean during his swimming race with Breca, Beowulf has stepped beyond the bounds of human experience and knowledge. Just as in the swimming-match episode, the hostility of this landscape is figured in terms of water, coldness and remoteness. The *nicor* is literally in its element.

When they come upon the mere itself, the description is at once analogous to the description of the vision of Saint Paul in the *Blickling Homilies,* one of the other two texts to use the word *nicor* in the Old English corpus. The *Beowulf* poet describes:

> … fyrgenbéamas
> ofer harne stan    hleonian funde,
> wynleasne wudu;    wæter under stod
> dreorig ond gedrefed…

> …mountain trees over a hoary stone (they) found hanging, joyless wood,
> water stood under it, dreary/bloody and stirred up…
> (ll. 1414-17, p. 49.)

There are several similarities in the landscape; the presence of hanging trees, a stone or stones, frost, and dark water underneath. The water in the *Blickling* text is simply described as 'sweart' [dark].[69] However in the *Beowulf* text, the water is 'dreorig,' a word that can simply mean 'miserable' or 'dreary' in the modern sense, or indeed

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[69] Kelly, *Blickling Homilies*, p. 44.

'bloody' or 'gory.'[70] It is possible that the *Beowulf* poet is playing on this duality of meaning as the water is described just five lines later as 'blod weol' [welling with blood] (l.1422, p. 48.) after both the decapitation of the Danish thane Æschere by Grendel's mother and the return of the mortally wounded Grendel.

Here the *Beowulf* poet paints a more vivid picture of the *nicor* itself. This is the only instance of the total twelve uses of the word *nicor* in the Old English corpus in which the animal is undoubtedly serpentine in nature:

> Gesawon ða æfter wætere       **wyrmcynnes** fela,
>
> Sellice **sædracan**       sund cunnian,
>
> Swylce on næshleoðum                **nicras** licgean,
>
> Ða on undernmæl       oft bewitigað
>
> Sorhfulne sið   on seglrade,
>
> **Wyrmas** ond wildeor.

> (They) saw then in the water many ***wyrm*-like creatures**, strange **sea-*dracan*** exploring the sand, also on the ledges of the headland ***nicras*** were lying; then in the morning (they) often carried out a sorrowful journey on the sail-road, ***wyrmas*** and wild beasts.
> (ll. 1425-1430, p. 49.)

Whilst the precise nature of the *nicor* is unknown, its company at the mere is definitively serpentine, including animals that are described as both 'sædracan' [sea-*dracan*]  and 'wyrmcynnes' [*wyrm*-like creatures]. The *Beowulf* poet imagines both the creatures in his own composition and also those in the *Blickling* text to be something akin to these animals.  It is not out of the question to speculate that the sea-dwelling *nicor* mentioned previously in the swimming match episode is of similar type or design. The poet also uses the term *wyrm* to refer to the creatures, which further supports their inclusion as examples of serpentine animals. However there is a greater significance in the phrase 'wyrmas ond wildeor'. This is a formula used to describe exotic fauna five times in *Alexander's Letter*.[71] In those cases, the phrase is being used to describe a

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[70] Bosworth and Toller, *Dictionary,* 'dreorig'.

[71] Orchard, 'Alexander's Letter: Old English Text', in *Pride,* ch 9, p. 228; ch. 10, p. 230, ch 14, p. 232; ch 26, p. 242; and ch 33, p. 246.

plethora of strange animals, imaginary in the sense that the audience has no experiential reference for them. The *nicor* of *Beowulf,* then, is being classed among the creatures of wonder. This is supported by the fact that, despite their habitation of Danish shores, the men who have travelled to the mere with *Beowulf* seem not to have seen anything like them before. They shoot one and drag it to the bank (ll. 1432-41, pp. 49-50.) where they 'sceawedon' [stared] at the 'wundorlic wægbora' [wondrous wave-bearer] (l. 1440). Once again this re-enforces the fact that this, like the inhospitable landscapes of the east, is a place outside of human habitation and experience. The mere is literally outside of the light, existing on the God-given border between land and sea, and it is inhabited by these creatures whose nature is to destroy and devour.

The hunger of the *nicor* in the *Blickling* text is for the black souls that hang above the water on fragile 'twigo' [twigs].[72] Their insatiable greed for these is conveyed by the homilist by comparing them to 'grædig wulf' [a greedy wolf].[73] The *nicor* in the vision embodied the voracious essence of the serpent not in a physical context, but a spiritual one, seeking not to devour, destroy and decompose the bodies of men but their immortal souls, condemning them to, presumably, non-existence. The *nicor* of *Beowulf,* however, is very much in the physical realm, and rather than emphasising its greed and hunger, the *Beowulf* poet endeavours to emphasise the fact that it is at home in the mere. It is to and from their home that they make their 'sorhfulne sið' [sorrowful journey] (l. 1429, p. 49.). The audience can infer from the fact that the journey is sorrowful that the intentions of the animals are destructive, and this added to the earlier narrative about Beowulf being attacked on the open sea by *nicor* hints at their hunger for and hostility towards humans who venture into their element. As the men first see them, however, they lie on the sand, unaware of the presence of the company until immediately before one is shot when:

> Hie on weg hruron,
>
> Bitere on gebolgne;    bearhtm ongeaton,
>
> Guðhorn galan.

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[72] Kelly, *Blickling Homilies*, p. 44.

[73] Kelly, *Blickling Homilies,* p. 44.

> They hurried away, bitter and swollen with rage; they heard the sound,
>
> the war-horn wailing.
>
> (ll. 430-2, pp. 49-50.)

The evidence of Beowulf's earlier *nicor* attacks, the implied sorrow resulting from their journeys out from the mere and the immediate rage that the creatures feel as they hear the horn are clear indicators that these creatures are no less hostile and aggressive than those in the *Blickling* text. The *Beowulf* poet's emphasis, however, is not on their hunger at this point but on their complete ownership of their environment. The fear of this episode comes not from the open aggression of the creatures, but from the alien landscape, the strangeness of the animals that call it home and the distance that the characters feel from human society. Again, the element of water is the central feature of a landscape that signifies distance from God and His intended habitation for humans on land. In approaching the *nicor,* the characters approach that element which is chaotic and ultimately reductive, re-enforced by the goriness of the waves that suggests the breaking down of the body. This is where human life literally breaks down.

### 5.iii. The *Draca*

Broadly speaking, the *nicor* inhabits Part 1 of the poem, while the *draca* inhabits Part 2. Unlike the *nicor*, which appears in a group, a single *draca* is the central antagonist of the poem's final act, and is eventually the death of the main character of Beowulf.

Before the antagonist of the poem's final episode appears, there are three other instances of the word *draca* in *Beowulf.* The first of these comes in an aside to the main action, in which the poet briefly recounts the encounter between the hero Sigemund and a dragon (l. 893, p. 32.). He uses the same device as in the Creation story; the poet paraphrases the words of a *scop* [singer] who narrates the story of Sigemund. The Creation story took place in Heorot's first happy period before Grendel's attack, and the Sigemund interlude takes place in the second period of celebration, after his defeat and dismemberment by Beowulf:

> Sigemunde gesprong
>
> Æfter deaðdæg                dom unlytel

> Syþðan wiges heard **wyrm** acwealde,
> Hordes hyrde. He under harne stan,
> Æþlinges bearn, ana geneðde
> Frecne dæde, ne wæs him Fitela mid;
> Hwæþre him gesælde ðæt þæt swurd þurhwod
> Wrætlicne **wyrm**, þæt hit on wealle ætstod,
> Dryhtlic iren; **draca** morðre swealt.

> Sigemund, after his death, gave rise to no little judgement (acclaim),
> since brave in battle he quelled the ***wyrm***, the guardian of the hoard.
> He, the noble's son, under hoary stone alone undertook a fierce deed –
> Fitela was not with him – however it was his success that that sword
> went through the wondrous ***wyrm***, so that it was fixed to the wall,
> lordly iron (sword); the ***draca*** died by slaughter.
> (ll. 884-92, pp. 31-2.)

Whether *Beowulf* was conceived as one continuous poem or whether the dragon episode was at one time a separate entity, it is clear that this is an indicator of events to come. This *draca* is unmistakably the same type as the one Beowulf himself will have to face, guarding its hoard in a stony location. Rather than begin with Sigemund's approach to the dragon, the poet begins by restating that Sigemund is dead. The value here is placed, not on what Sigemund has done for others in killing the dragon, nor on his virtue as a man, but on his bravery and the acclaim that he has achieved, which in turn has brought him immortality in the words of others. This is an instance in which the serpent most transparently represents death, decay and the transience of human life. In defeating the dragon, Sigemund literally defeats the principle of mortality. He is immortal; not in the form of his soul, which is not mentioned here in a Christian context or any other, but in the form of Sigemund the self-identifying human being, whose physical actions are remembered by both the character of the *scop* and by the *Beowulf* poet.

Once again, the hoary stone is a feature, bringing in an element of the hostile environment familiar in all of the references to serpents in *Beowulf*. Also present here is the idea of isolation within that hostile environment; Sigemund faces the dragon alone, much as the paths leading to the mere, a body of water also found beneath a

'harne stan' [hoary stone] (l. 1415, p. 49.) which isolated the travellers by their narrowness (ll.1409-10, p. 49.).

The second reference to the *draca* in Part 1 is when the poet describes the animals around the mere as 'sædracan' in line 1426 (p. 49.). Here the word is being used descriptively of another kind of creature, and is qualified by the suffix 'sæ-'. Rather than describing a true *draca*, the epithet re-enforces the serpentine nature of the *nicor*. The third and final reference in Part 1 comes during Beowulf's own recounting of his fight with Grendel, when he describes Grendel as having a container made of 'dracan felum' [dragons' skins] (l. 2088, p. 71.).

The image of the *draca* does not appear again until Part 2 of the poem. At this point, the action moves forward a substantial fifty years, a period summarised in just ten lines, which describe the death of Hygelac and Beowulf's ascent to the throne of Geatland (ll. 2200-10, pp. 74-5.). His wise, peaceful and uneventful rule is passed over and the *draca*, which will dominate the final act of the poem, is introduced just 11 lines distant from Beowulf's departure from Denmark as a young man.

> He geheold tela
> Fiftig wintr(a)   - wæs ða frod cyning,
> Eald eþel(w)eard -       oððæt (a)n ongan
> Deorcum nihtum       draca rics(i)an,
> Se ðe on hea(um) h(of)e       hors beweotode,
> Stanbeorh stear(c)ne;       stig under læg
> Eldum uncuð.
>
> He held it well for fifty winters – was during that time a wise king, old land-guardian – until one began in the dark nights, a dragon, to rule, that which in a battle-barrow watched over a hoard, a stark stone barrow; a path ran beneath unknown to men.
> (ll. 2208-13, p. 75.)

In introducing the *draca*, the *Beowulf* poet mirrors exactly the elements present in the earlier Sigemund recollection. The animal is called a *draca*, watches over a hoard and is associated with stone, this time 'stearcne' [stark] instead of hoary, but none the less harsh and uninhabitable. There are three further details; first, the

dragon is established as venturing out in 'deorcum nihtum' [dark nights]. The association between darkness and monstrosity is well established within the poem; the same phrase, 'deorcum nihtum' is used at line 275 in reference to the time at which Grendel is active, drawing a parallel between the two monsters, and thus between their homes; Grendel's serpent-infested mere and the barrow of the *draca* (p. 11). Secondly, the word used to describe the path under the stone, 'uncuð,' is the same word used to describe the strikingly similar path under a stone that leads to the mere in line 1410 (p. 49.). There is an immediate parallel drawn between the two locations and the two types of animal that inhabit them. In the case of the mere, the primary inhabitants was the *nicor* but the focus of the location was on Grendel's mother who is forced to live in that marginal place because of the transgression of her kinsman, the biblical Cain. The mere is therefore a location of exile, of forced exclusion from the centre of social life, interaction and God's approval, all of which are tied together in the image of the land, light and human habitation. The *nicor* is present in the poem to characterise that landscape as a liminal place, existing on the border between land and sea as well as between human life and the death or non-existence that the serpents represent. The *draca's* home has a completely different function in its capacity as a barrow, but it shares with the mere a distance relative to human life and divine sanction, being unknown to men. The stone is stark, suggestive of a barren surface incapable of supporting life, much as the frosty and narrow stone landscape around the mere was hostile to the company of men who followed Grendel's mother there. Thirdly, the dragon's hoard is not simply in a cave. It is explicitly a stone barrow, a grave.

The association between *wyrm* and grave has examples in other Old English texts. The interplay between the transient, the inevitable and the eternal is the subject of *The Wanderer,* an elegy preserved only in the tenth-century manuscript known as the Exeter Book.[74] The elegy is the lament of a solitary speaker, a male who has been left alone to contemplate the transience of life after the loss of his lord and company. The image of the *wyrm* is invoked in that elegy in a complex series of images immediately following the pivotal emotionally climactic passage known to critics as the *ubi Sunt* [where are…?] passage or in Old English 'hwær cwom' [where went…?] passage, in which he asks rhetorically:

[74] Klink, A. (ed.), *Old English Elegies: A critical edition and genre study* (Montreal, 1992), p. 75-80; Exeter, Exeter Cathedral Library, MS 3501, ff. 76v-78r.

> Hwær cwom mearg? Hwær cwom mago?      Hwær cwom maþþumgyfa?
>
> Hwær cwom symbla gesetu?      Hwær sindon seledreamas?
>
> Eala beorht bune!      Eala byrnwiga!
>
> Eala þeodnes þrym!      Hu seo þrag gewat,
>
> Genap under nihthelm      swa heo no wære!"
>
> 'Stondeð nu on laste      leofre duguþe
>
> weal wundrum heah,      **wyrmlicum** fah.[75]

Where went the horse? Where went the rider? Where went the treasure-giver? Where went the seats at the feast? Where are the hall-joys? Alas for the bright cup! Alas for the chain-mailed man! Alas for the lord's splendour! How that time has passed away, dark under the helm of night as if it never were!" Now in place of the beloved band of warriors stands a wall wondrously high, patterned with ***wyrm*-bodies/*wyrm*-like** (things).

The word *wyrmlic* appears only twice in the entire extant Old English corpus – here and in a confessional prayer.[76] Thompson speculates on the wordplay between 'bodies' and, since the poem is operating in metonymics by having the wall stand in place of the warriors, literally replacing their bodies with upright stones. The wall is now the representation of the warriors' current state. The affiliation between serpents and graves has been noted in the past; Thompson's 2004 study of these motifs where they appear together in the Anglo-Saxon world builds on the work of Ellis-Davidson, who also acknowledged the link between serpentine imagery and the grave.[77] With this in mind, it becomes plausible to read this wall as representing a grave, or line of graves, re-enforcing the association of the *wyrm* with death and transience. The *wyrm*, the stone from which it is carved and the figure of death which the gravestone represents are constant, inevitable, and enduring. The transience of human life is

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[75] Klink, *Elegies,* ll. 92-8, p. 78.

[76] See, London, British Library, Royal 2Bv, fol 190 verso; Hallander, L. G., 'Two Old English Confessional Prayers', *Stockholm Studies in Modern Philology* 3 (1968), pp. 100-102.

[77] Thompson, *Dying and Death,* Chapter 5; Ellis-Davidson, *Gods and Myths,* pp. 159-162.

contrasted with this stark, lithic statement about the eventual destination of all living things and of the body. However, whilst *The Wanderer* never makes the speaker's connection to the Christian God explicit, it is still an intrinsically Christian poem in its worldview. The wall and the *wyrm* patterns are only as enduring and constant as anything in the physical world can be. In the end, the attention of the speaker turns to the world beyond this one, to contemplation of an eternal form of existence beyond the physical, beyond the body and the grave. The serpent is not a malign presence in the story. Here, death and the *wyrm* are passive. The *wyrm* patterned gravestones of the *duguð* [band of warriors] literally stand where men once stood, representing their transition from one state to another. The gravestone is both an inevitable destination and a physically constant object in relation to the body. Here, the transformative process of death is subordinate to the narrative of contemplation and transcendence that the speaker undergoes.

In *Beowulf*, however, the *wyrm* is anything but passive. It appears similarly associated with the grave, literally living inside a barrow as an animate and sentient creature with its own motivation. This motivation is inarguably the gold and treasure which it guards inside the barrow. Without further explanation, the *draca / wyrm's* obsessive relationship with the hoard could be read ostensibly as being one of greed. However, the *Beowulf* poet makes it clear that the importance of the hoard is not the physical gold, but its representation of secular life on earth in a Christian context. He does this by narrating the origin of the gold in the following lines, often known as the Lay of the Last Survivor:

> Þær wæs swylcra fela
> In ðam eorðsele      ærgestreona,
> Swa hy on geardagum      gumena nathwylc,
> Eormenlafe      æþelan cynnes,
> Þanchycgende      þær gehydde,
> Deore maðmas.      Ealle hie deað fornam
> Ærran mælum,      ond se an ða gen
> Leoda duguðe,      se ðær longest hwearf
> Weard winegeomore…

There were many such ancient things in that earth-hall, as in former

days he, I know not who of men, this large legacy of noble kin

thoughtfully hid there, the dear riches. Death deprived all of them in

earlier ages, and there is still one of that host of people, who lived there

longest, a guard grieving friends…

(ll. 2231-9, p. 76-7.)

The story begins in retrospect, recalling that a lone and unidentified man, the last of

his people, put the treasure into the barrow long ago. As the narrative moves to the

present tense in line 2236, the audience learns that the man is the last of an old

people, and infers that this is how he came by the treasure. The poet then goes on to

quote this man's lament directly in a passage which alone might join *The Wanderer* and

*The Seafarer* as an Old English elegy. He addresses the earth itself, telling it to hold

onto the items that 'nu hæleð ne mostan' [now warriors cannot] (l. 2247, p. 77.). He

describes how his kinsmen died in battle and violence, and laments that 'Nah hwa

sweord wege//oððe forð berefæted wæge…' [(I) have (nobody) to wear a sword or

offer a decorated cup…] (ll. 2252-3, p. 77.). He then goes on to detail the physical

things and aspects of life in the hall which have disappeared with the death of his

people:

> Næs hearpan wyn,
>
> Gomen gleobeames, ne god hafoc
>
> Geond sæl swingeð, ne se swifta mearh
>
> Burhstede beateð. Bealocwealm hafað
>
> Fela feorhcynna forð onsended.

Was no harp joy, game of glee-beam, nor good hawk swinging through

the hall, nor does the swift horse beat (its hooves) in the town. Baleful

death has sent forth many of the race of men.

(ll. 2262-6, p. 78.)

This passage evokes a trope that exists at least in the corpus of Old English

poetry that is extant. Though there is no *ubi sunt* passage expressed in exactly those

terms, there is a familiar list of secular things which have passed away and the subject

matter is strikingly similar to that of both *The Wanderer* and *The Seafarer;* a lone warrior

deprived of companionship and the trappings of a secular life. In this section, the poet points explicitly to the genre of elegiac poetry and its focus on the transience of life just as the *draca*, barrow and gold are introduced to the poem's audience, informing the way that the hoard is to be read. In this instance, the gold had more importance as the legacy, the 'eormenlafe', of this disappeared and nameless people than as an economic or social facilitator. Here, the gold is representative of the secular, homosocial, patriarchal life of the hall. After the demise of the long-standing people who owned it is expressed dramatically and philosophically through the voice of the last survivor, the *draca* settles on it. The accoutrements of human society and secular life are literally stifled by the *wyrm* in a symbolic representation of inevitable death and the passing away of worldly valuables and values.

Unlike the *wyrm* that appears similarly as an emblem of physical passing in *The Wanderer,* the *draca* of *Beowulf* is active in its fulfilment of the metaphor. It is explicitly described as wishing to possess the hoard to control it. The holding of gold and treasure is counter to the values of ideal hall life expressed earlier in the poem when Heorot was newly built and Hroðgar 'beages dælde, // sinc æt symle' [dealt out rings, treasures at the feast] (l. 80-1, p.6; f. 133v). Thus the *draca* is set up as a metaphor for death, the passing away of the physical world and the stagnation of secular social life. Its desire to control the gold is made explicit in the next phase of the narrative, which deals with the theft of a single cup from the hoard and the rage of the *draca* upon finding it missing.

The cup was stolen by a slave who is driven to the vicinity of the barrow because he is in 'þreanedlan' [dire distress] (l. 2223, p. 76; f. 182r), a fugitive from human society trying to escape 'heteswengeas' [hateful floggings] (l. 2224, p. 76; f. 182r). His status is apt given that earlier in the poem the mere, a similar landscape of rocks and unknown ways, was characterised as a place of exile. This nameless character finds the *draca* asleep and steals the cup with the intention of taking it as a peace offering to his Lord (ll. 2281-3, p. 78; f. 183v). It is the theft of this cup that incites the *draca,* whose rightful possession of the treasure is not questioned by the poet. The treasure is even described as belonging to the *draca* in line 2221 when the poet refers to it as 'wyrmhorda cræft' [the craft of the wyrm-hoards] (p. 75, f. 182r). The discovery is met with immediate rage:

'Hordwynne fond

Eald uhtsceaða                opene standan,

Se ðe byrnende                biorgas seceð,

Nacod niðdraca…

It found the hoard-joy standing open, the old dawn-scather, the one
who, burning, seeks barrows, the naked hateful *draca*…
(ll. 2270-3, p. 78.)

Here the *draca* is once again described as being of the night; although the word
*uht* is translated here as 'dawn' for brevity as part of the compound 'uhtsceaða,' it in
fact refers to the period of time just before dawn, and thus a time of semi-darkness or
twilight.[78] The *draca,* like the other serpents in *Beowulf,* is on the margins, this time at
the point of transition between day and night. The language used to refer to the *draca*
is fear-inspiring and unambiguously aggressive. The word 'nacod' is significant. The
term connotes vulnerability in the sleeping *draca* and his hoard which the thief has
discovered. However it is also a consciously foreboding lexical choice, and one that fits
in with the other descriptors in the lines. As well as echoing the starkness of the *draca's*
rocky environment in this instance, the term is used two further times in the poem,
and in both instances it refers to a sword (l.539, p. 20; f.144r and l. 2585, p. 88.). This
draws a parallel with the *draca* as a destructive, death-dealing object, unsheathed and
potentially dangerous.

The *draca's* association with starkness is further emphasised when it wakes:

'Þa se **wyrm** onwoc,        wroht wæs geniwad;

Stonc ða æfter stane,        stearcheort onfand

Feondes fotlast;                he to forð gestop

Dyrnan cræfte            **dracan** heafde neah.'

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[78] See Bosworth and Toller, *Dictionary,* 'uht'; The *Dictionary* translates the word as 'the time just
before daybreak' based on its use in the Old English *Letter of Alexander,* where it is used in the
corresponding place to the word 'antelucanum' [before daylight] in the Latin version. See
Orchard, *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle: Old English Version*, Ch. 21, p. 238; Orchard, *Alexander's
Letter to Aristotle: Latin Text* Ch. 21, p. 212.

> Then the *wyrm* awoke, woe was renewed; he sniffed by the stone, the
> stark-hearted one found the footprint of the enemy; he had stepped
> forward with hidden craft near the dragon's head.
> (ll. 2287-90, p. 79.)

As in the case of the *nicor* earlier in the poem, there is a strong association between the serpent and its landscape. Here, the *draca* not only detects the culprit's origin by sniffing the stark stones of its barrow, but is described itself as being 'stearcheort.' The imagery of hostility and starkness is carried through from the landscape the *draca* inhabits to its heart, its internal condition. Added together with the aspect of covetousness and stifling greed, the *draca* becomes a creature entirely in opposition to the values of the idealised secular life set up in the poem at Heorot, as well as the physical life of the hero.

As well as using epithets such as 'uhtsceaða' to describe the *draca*, the poet makes it clear that the creature cannot go out in the light of day, but must wait until night:

> 'Þa wæs dæg sceacen
>
> **Wyrme** on willan…'
>
> Then the day was departed, as the ***wyrm*** wished…
> (ll. 2306-7, p. 79.)

It seems that the *draca*, much like Grendel and his Mother, does not venture out in the light – a light that God set up specifically for mankind.

The *draca* is, from the moment it is introduced, set up in opposition to human society, the people of Geatland and consequently their king. However, the poet is emphatic in drawing comparisons between Beowulf and the *draca*. The age of both Beowulf and the *draca* is one important point of comparison; Beowulf's age, his closeness to his own mortality and the achievements of his long life define the entire episode. Similarly, the *draca* is described in line 227 as 'wintrum frod' [old in winters](p. 78.) and in line 2760 as 'ealdes uhtflogan' [old night-flier] (p. 94.). Like Beowulf, who has ruled over Geatland peacefully for fifty winters (l. 2209, p. 75.), the *draca* has spent a similarly lengthy period guarding the hoard:

> 'Sceolde (li)þend daga,
> Æþeling ærgod               ende gebidan,
> Worulde lifes,          ond se **wyrm** somod,
> Þeah ðe hordwelan     heolde lange.'
>
> [The nobleman, good before in his seafaring days, had to endure the
> end of his life on earth, and the ***wyrm*** also, though it had held the
> hoard for a long time.]
> (ll. 2341-4, pp. 80-1.)

The serpent's ownership of the hoard is characterised as rule and dominion, its relationship to the gold parallel to Beowulf's with Geatland. In line 2211, the *draca* is described as coming to 'ricsian' [to rule] (p. 75.) over the hoard at the beginning of the episode, and at the end, its ultimate death is described as a loss of ability to 'wealdan' [wield, control] (l. 2827, p. 96.) the hoard.

The most important parallel between Beowulf and the *draca* is that of their shared fate. Whilst Beowulf's own motives for going to face the dragon are, as Rauer has noted, often unclear, the poet leaves the audience in no doubt about the inevitability of the meeting:[79]

> Swa he niða gehwane       genesen hæfde,
> Sliðra geslyhta,          sunu Ecgðiowes,
> Ellenweorca,           oð ðone anne dæg
> Þe he wið þam **wyrme**     gewegan sceolde.
>
> So he had survived each hatefulness, dangerous onslaughts, the son of
> Ecgðeow, courageous in deeds until that one day that he must do battle
> with the ***wyrm***.
> (ll. 2397-40, p. 82.)

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[79] See Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon*, p. 37-38: Rauer discusses the conflict between Beowulf's need to save his people from annihilation on the one hand, and his seeming personal desire to win treasure and honour on the other. Certainly, the poem alludes to both, but never makes either prevalent. Rauer speculates that this may be due to the fact that the *Beowulf* poet is synthesising two different types of dragon story in his construction of the final episode of the Beowulf epic.

The poem's timeline emphasises the point. The narrative arc has taken the audience directly from the beginning of Beowulf's heroic career to its end. The poet tells the audience that there have been many dangerous and hateful situations and many courageous deeds in between, but the focus is given to the two confrontations which frame Beowulf's life as a heroic figure. In both the first and the last, he confronts a monster which is threatening a people; first human monsters in the form of Grendel and his mother, and then the *draca*. It is significant that the *draca* is the adversary that will end Beowulf's life, and more so that his confrontation with it is portrayed by the poet as being inevitable and fated. This is more than a hero's fight with a *draca*; it is the confrontation between a man and his death. The point is re-enforced by Beowulf's own reasoning as he compares the fight he is about to undertake with his struggle with Grendel:

> Nolde ic sweord beran,
>
> Wæpen to **wyrme**,    gif ic wiste hu
>
> Wið ðam aglæcean    elles meahte
>
> Gylpe wiðgripan,    swa ic gio wið Grendle dyde;
>
> Ac ic ðær heaðufyres  hates wene,
>
> [o]reðes ond attres;   forðon ic me on hafu
>
> Bord ond byrnan.    Nelle ic beorges weard
>
> Oferfleon fotes trem,        ac unc [feohte] sceal
>
> Weorðan æt wealle,    swa unc wyrd geteoð
>
> Metod manna gehwæs.

> I would not carry a sword, weapon against ***wyrm***, if I knew how else I might grapple with my boast, as I formerly did with Grendel; but I expect hot hostile fires there, cruelty and venom, therefore I have a shield and coat of mail on. I do not wish the guard of the barrow to flee a foot's step, but for us the fight must happen at the cliff as fate allots us, the judge of each man.
> (ll. 2518-27, p. 86.)

The fact that Beowulf is choosing to carry armour and weaponry against the *draca*, something he did not do during his confrontation with Grendel, is significant for

two reasons. First, the *draca* is clearly a more dangerous foe, and Beowulf expects that extra martial capacity will be required. Secondly and perhaps most importantly, Beowulf states that he does not want the *draca* to flee. The lines could equally be translated 'I do not wish to flee a foot's step from the guardian of the barrow'. It is quite possible that both meanings are intended here; Beowulf knows that he and the *draca* 'sceal' [must] fight to the death at the cliff – perhaps here referring to the rocky exterior of the barrow or lair. The implication is that Beowulf is carrying the weapons and armour in order to have the staying power to see the fight through to the end in the place and at the time that 'wyrd' [fate] has allotted them.

The parallel between the two antagonists is followed through after the fight, when both are dead:

> Nu is wilgeofa Wedra leoda,
> Dryhten Geata                    deaðbedde fæst,
> Wunað wælreste        **wyrmes** dædum;
> Him on efn ligeð        ealdorgewinna
> Sexbennum seoc…
> Now the wish giver of the people of the *Weders*, lord of the Geats, is fixed
> on his deathbed, placed on his slaughter-couch by the deeds of the
> ***wyrm***. Equally, by him lies his mortal enemy, dead by dagger-
> wounds…
> (ll. 2900-4 p. 99.)

The poet draws the two into comparison once again as they both share the state of death after their fight. The relationship between the *draca* and the hero is fully encapsulated in these lines. The *draca* does not represent death at large within the poem. Rather, it represents Beowulf's personal mortality; it is inevitable, allotted to him by fate and meets him in his old age. However, when they do meet and the man faces his bodily mortality in *draca* form, the *draca* too is destroyed in the process. In dying, Beowulf has overcome his death.

The body of the hero and the treasure are interred on a coastal headland which, within the world of the poem, would come to be known as 'Biowulfes Biorh' [Beowulf's Barrow] (l. 2807, p. 96.). This is also presumably the location at which

Beowulf fought with the *draca*, since the Geats are described pushing the serpent's corpse off a cliff and into the sea:

> …dracan ec scufun,
> Wyrm ofer weallclif,   leton weg niman,
> Flod fæðmian          frætwa hyrde.

> The *draca* they also shoved, *wyrm* over the wall-cliff, let the wave take,
> flood embrace, the treasures' guardian.
> (ll. 3131-3, p. 106.)

The narrative of Beowulf's struggle with the monstrous and ultimately with his own mortality ends with the body of a vanquished *wyrm* on the shore, echoing the reported tale of his fight with the nine 'niceras' in the first episode of the poem. The poem leaves the *draca* dead on the boundary between the land and the divinely ordained dominion of mankind on earth and the chaotic abyss of the sea beyond. The *draca* has been the agent of Beowulf's transition from bodily life into death, and the poem ends with its body literally on the border between land and sea, life and death, human society and wilderness, order and chaos.  The eventual re-absorption of the body into the sea strengthens the idea of the *draca* as an agent of death, as representative of Beowulf's own personal mortality. Although he has overcome it, the literal and figurative abyss represented by the sea is ever present.

6. Conclusion

In *Beowulf,* the image of the serpent represents physical death. The monstrous sea dwelling 'niceras nigene' that Beowulf recalls in his swimming match with Breca are motivated by a desire to devour the hero. The theme of bodily destruction and the undoing of the physical worldly form is bolstered by the fact that these monsters appear in the sea; the place that existed before God created land and designated it for human society on earth, and consequently the place that exists in opposition to and outside of secular worldly life. The *nicor* at the mere is similarly found in a landscape of exile; Grendel's mother's mere is explicitly a place where the kin of Cain live in misery. This places the *nicor* literally outside God's divine order; the isolated, hostile setting of the mere is set up in stark contrast to the high, spacious and – by definition –

social space of Heorot. They are literally the danger that lies beyond the edge of life on Earth as God ordained it in the Creation Song; present at the edge of the land that was made for mankind. This reading is supported by the close parallel between the mere and *Visio Pauli*, in which the souls of the sinful fall into the grasp of the *nicor* in a metaphor for Hell, the ultimate place of exile from God and the human society He has ordained. The *nicor* is a physical manifestation of death within the poem, the threat of exile from secular joys and ultimately of bodily destruction and mortality. Finally Beowulf loses his life in battle with the *draca*, a serpent whose fire and venom together connote the decomposition and corrosion of the body. In going to his death with the *draca*, Beowulf also defeats death in a Christ-like paradigm, shown by the continual attention the poet draws to the hero and the monster sharing the same fate at the poem's close. This theme of death and bodily destruction falls under the more general meaning that can be applied to the serpent in Anglo-Saxon art and literature – that of transition.

# CHAPTER 3

## The Serpent in Old English Literature II: Life, Death and Beyond in the poems of *Junius XI*

1. Introduction

So far this thesis has examined the image of the serpent in the Old English medical texts and *Beowulf*, two texts of very different genres that deal with the serpent in very different ways. Nonetheless, certain themes have emerged in both. These surround the idea of the serpent and death; in the medical texts, the focus is on bodily decay, whilst in *Beowulf* it is greed, devouring and the chaos of un-creation. In both, the serpent disintegrates and destroys the human body, whether by devouring, by venom or by fire.

2. Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius XI: 'The Junius Manuscript'

Like the Nowell Codex, Oxford, Bodleian Library Junius XI (hereafter *Junius XI*) contains Old English poetry, but of a very different kind to *Beowulf*. Whilst the *Nowell Codex* deals primarily with secular life and the prodigious or outlandish, the poetry of *Junius XI* focuses on biblical themes. The manuscript contains four poems in Old English: *Genesis, Exodus, Daniel* and *Christ and Satan*. These scripturally inspired compositions employ and deal with the image of the serpent in two main contexts; as a tempter in disguise, and as an inhabitant of Hell.

The poems provide another useful case study for this examination because they, like the poems of the Nowell Codex, are arranged around a central theme or concern; the former being arranged around the theme of monsters and the latter being arranged around the theme of biblical events. They also share a strong focus on serpentine imagery: the texts of both manuscripts are particularly densely populated with serpents. However, the context of this imagery is very different in Junius XI, and provides a useful comparison to the image of the serpent in the Nowell Codex.

### 2.i. Date, codicology and cohesion

Ker's 1957 *Catalogue* dates *Junius XI* as a whole to the turn of the eleventh century based on palaeographic and codicological data.[1] However, as in the case of the *Nowell Codex*, the issue is complex. *Junius XI* offers more than palaeographic data; it

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[1] Ker, *Catalogue,* p. 408.

is illustrated, and there is no consensus between Ker's date and the evidence that Francis Wormald set forth in 1945, when he identified Scandinavian influences in the illustrations, dating the drawings to the second quarter of the eleventh century.[2] In 2002, Leslie Locket attempted to resolve this issue and integrate palaeographic, artistic and codicological evidence to propose a date that is 'narrow enough to be useful and wide enough to account for all the evidence.'[3] Lockett reviews the historiography on the subject of the manuscript's date, and proposes a new date of 960-990, in broad agreement with Ker.

The dating of the manuscript is further complicated by its division into two parts, known as *Liber I* and *Liber II*. Together, both books are made up of 116 parchment folios, which are paginated. *Liber I* is the larger part of the codex, running from page 1 to page 212. It includes the poems *Genesis, Exodus* and *Daniel*. It is written by the first of *Junius XI*'s three scribes, whose hand is described by Ker as, 'a distinctive, upright hand'.[4] *Liber II* runs from page 213 to page 229, and contains the three-part poem known as *Christ and Satan*. It is written by two more scribes, whom Ker refers to as Scribes 2 and 3. Scribe 2 wrote pages 213–15, completing his stint at the bottom of the page and at the end of a line. Scribe 3 continues from the top of page 215 to the end of the manuscript on page 229.[5] Ker dates the hand of *Liber I* to the turn of the eleventh century, and both of the subsequent hands in *Liber II* as being from the period between 1000 and 1050. However, whilst *Liber II* is certainly written in a later hand, this is not necessarily significant, since (just as in the Nowell codex) the difference may reflect a generational change between the work of an older scribe and that of two younger men.[6] Several scholars have argued as to whether *Liber II* was ever integral to the creation of *Liber I,* or whether it was added as an afterthought, joined with *Liber I* at a later date. Some scholars, such as Hall, have argued for the cohesion

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[2] See: F. Wormald, 'Decorated initials in English MSS from AD 900 to 1100', *Archaeologia* 91 (1945), pp. 107- 35, repr. in J. J. G. Alexander, T. J. Brown and J. Gibbs (eds), *Studies in Medieval Art from the Sixth to the Twelfth Centuries* (Oxford, 1984), p. 59. The tendency to date *Junius XI* to the second quarter of the eleventh century diminished with the growth of doubts about the extent of Scandinavian influence on the manuscript's artwork and the significance of such an influence if indeed it does exist.

[3] Lockett, L., 'An Integrated Re-Examination of the Dating of Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius XI' *Anglo-Saxon England* 31 (2002) p. 172.

[4] Ker, *Catalogue,* Item 334, p. 408.

[5] Ibid. p. 408.

[6] Chapter 2, 2.

of the two halves of manuscript based on their complementary themes.[7] Hall's article suggests that the text of *Liber II, Christ and Satan,* is integral to the theological structure of the whole manuscript, and cites Anglo-Saxon catechetical methods to support the point. On the one hand, the physicality of the manuscript seems to support this view, with some scholars such as Raw arguing that *Liber I* and *Liber II* are of similar date. [8] Raw makes reference to the probable gatherings of the pages and evidence of the original stitching to suggest that the two books were roughly contemporary in their construction. Nevertheless, Raw cleaves to the idea that *Liber II* was probably added separately as an afterthought; a conclusion supported by previous scholarship.[9] Although there seems to be little argument that *Liber II* postdates *Liber I* to any great extent, the idea that *Liber II* was an afterthought is supported by the fact *Christ and Satan* is fundamentally different to the texts of *Liber I. Genesis, Exodus* and *Daniel* are all Old English poetic retellings of events found in the biblical books from which they derive their modern titles. *Christ and Satan,* however, is not based on any scriptural book. Instead, it takes the theme of Christ's conflicts with Satan, drawing upon both the Old and New Testaments to tell three stories; that of the fall of Satan, Christ's harrowing of Hell and Christ's temptation by Satan in the desert.

Just as in the case of *Beowulf,* the date of the actual conception of the poems of *Junius XI* has been the subject of debate. In fact, speculation over when and in what context the poems of *Junius XI* were composed has actually altered the manuscript's nomenclature. *Junius XI* is sometimes known as 'The Cædmon Manuscript' due to the fact that Franciscus Junius, who owned the manuscript and had its works put into print in 1655, surmised that the poems had been written by the Old English poet, Cædmon.[10] According to Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica,* Cædmon was a monk at Whitby

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[7] Hall, J. R., 'The Old English Epic of Redemption: The Theological Unity of MS Junius XI', *Traditio* 32 (1976), pp. 185-208. Finally, for an argument which suggests that *Liber II* was conceived of independently from *Liber II,* see P. J. Lucas, 'On the incomplete ending of *Daniel* and the Addition of *Christ and Satan* to MS Junius XI', *Anglia* 97 (1979), pp. 46-59. Lucas again uses codicological evidence to support a theory that the two books were created separately and joined at a later date.

[8] Raw, B. C., 'The Construction of Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius XI', *Anglo-Saxon England* 13 (1984), pp 187-205.

[9] For example, see: Lucas, P. J., 'On the incomplete ending of *Daniel* and the Addition of *Christ and Satan* to MS Junius XI', *Anglia* 97 (1979), pp. 46-59.

[10] Cædmon's name is included in the title of Junius' 1655 edition; *Caedmonis monachi Paraphrasis Genesios ac praecipuarum Sacrae pagina Historiarum, abhinc annos MLXX* (Amsterdam, 1655). The name persisted until as late as 1926 when Israel Gollancz's edition was titled similarly; I.

in the late seventh century. Bede relates a story about Cædmon that suggests he was an innovator of Christian oral poetry, divinely inspired to compose.[11] Bede's account says that Cædmon composed on a variety of devotional subjects, including but not limited to the events of the biblical books of *Genesis* and *Exodus,* the day of judgment, Hell and Christ's ascent to Heaven. Bede's description of Cædmon's poetry does indeed bear a striking resemblance to the contents of *Junius XI*, and this is the reason that some early readers considered the poems of *Junius XI* to be very early in date, most likely composed by Cædmon in seventh-century Whitby. This evidence has long been thought of as circumstantial, and modern scholarship no longer attributes the *Junius XI* poems to Caedmon.[12]

### 2.ii. Content and Composition

Rather than having been spontaneously composed by a single poet, it is far more likely that, like *Beowulf,* the poems of *Junius XI* fit into the Old English poetic tradition of reuse and synthesis, and are composites of original and borrowed elements.[13] This is most obvious in the case of *Genesis*, where a fragment of another poem, now known as *Genesis B*, has been interpolated into the text of the poem now distinguished as *Genesis A.* The text known as *Genesis A* includes lines 1–235 (pp. 1–13), at which point *Genesis B* is inserted. *Genesis B* runs from line 235–851 (pp. 13-39), where *Genesis A* picks up again until the poem ends at line 2936 (p. 142). It was in the 1870s that philologist Eduard Sievers first noticed that the section now known as *Genesis B* showed evidence of being translated from Old Saxon.[14] His hypothesis proved correct when, in 1894, a fragmentary Old Saxon version of the poem was discovered in Vatican Library, Palatinus Latinus 1447. Though it is made up of several parts, Doane has suggested that the manuscript's probable date is somewhere

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Gollancz (ed.), *The Cædmon manuscript* (Oxford, 1926). Ker also acknowledges the title in his *Catalogue,* listing 'Caedmon manuscript' as the secondary title; See Ker, *Catalogue,* Item 334, p. 406-8.

[11] Bede, *HE,* IV, Ch. xxiv, pp. 415-421.

[12] In the mid-ninteen forties, Michel Laurence wrote that the link between the figure of Caedmon and the poems of *Junius XI* was based on circumstantial evidence. See: Laurence, M. "*Genesis A* and the *Praefatio*" *Modern Language Notes* 62 (1947). The fact that modern scholarship agrees with this sentiment is well-represented by a collection of essays on the materiality of the Caedmon story, edited by Hines and Franzen: Hines, J. and Franzen, A. (eds) *Caedmon's Hymn and Material Culture in the World of Bede* (Morgantown, WV, 2007).

[13] Chapter 2, 2.

[14] Sievers, E., *er Heliand und die angelsächsische Genesis* (Halle, 1975)

in the last quarter of the ninth century, predating *Junius XI*.[15] On a much smaller scale, the borrowing of poetic formulae can be seen in *Daniel*, which shares several lines with the *Exeter Book* poem *Azarias*.[16] The patchwork nature of the *Junius XI* poems indicates a process of creation that Shepherd has termed 'successive recomposition'.[17]

Before examining the image of the serpent in each of these poems, it is important to note that *Beowulf* and *Junius XI* share not only a concordance of certain themes, but also certain poetic formulae. This appears most obviously in *Exodus*, which actually shares an exact line with *Beowulf*. In describing the journey of exile which Moses and his people must make, the poet of *Exodus* uses in line 58 the precise formula found in line 1410 of *Beowulf*:

> enge anpaðas, uncuð gelad . . .
>
> joyless lonely paths, an unknown track.[18]

There are other lexical and stylistic correspondances between these two poems in particular.[19] Whilst it is not the purpose of this discussion to catalogue these or to draw any new conclusions from doing so, it is useful to understand that these poems share a common poetic style and approach to certain themes; in this case, the theme of exile.

3. The image of the serpent in Junius XI

Of the four poems in *Junius XI,* three contain reference to serpents. The one that does not is *Daniel*. Of the three that do, *Genesis* – naturally – contains several, with

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[15] Doane bases his estimation on paleographic evidence. See: Doane, *The Saxon Genesis: An edition of the West Saxon Genesis B and Old Saxon Vatican Genesis* (Madison WI, 1991), pp 12-13.

[16] *Azarias* appears in: Exeter Cathedral Library MS 3501, also known as *The Exeter Book* or *Codex Exoniensis*. Lines 279, 280 and 281 in *Daniel* correspond with lines 1, 2 and 3 in *Azarias*.

[17] Shepherd, G., 'Scriptural Poetry', in E. G. Stanley (ed.) *Continuations and Beginnings: Studies in Old English Literature* (London, 1966), p. 10.

[18] For the reference in *Beowulf,* see: Klaeber, *Beowulf,* l. 1410, p. 49; For the reference in *Exodus,* see: Tolkien, *Exodus,* l. 58, p. 2.

[19] This and several other less conspicuous verbal correspondences between *Exodus* and *Beowulf* are the subject of Klaeber's 1918 article: F. Klaeber, 'Concerning the Relation Between Exodus and Beowulf', *Modern Language Notes*, Vol. 33, No. 4 (1918), pp. 218–224.

four references to the *wyrm* and two to the *nædre*.[20] Two of the references to the *wyrm* appear in the B text, and the remaining two appear alongside the two *nædre* references in *Genesis A.* All six references to snakes in *Genesis A/B* describe the tempter in serpent form as he visits Eden. *Exodus* contains only one reference, and that is to the *wyrm* as part of an allusion to Hell.[21] Finally, *Christ and Satan* contains three references to the *wyrm,* three to the *nædre* and two to the *draca*.[22]

Although this chapter focuses on the textual image of the serpent within the manuscript, it does so only because of limitations of space. It should be noted that *Junius XI* is illustrated with forty-eight drawings between pages 1 and 88 of the manuscript, covering the events from creation up to Abraham and Sarah's approach to Egypt. Blank spaces are left, presumably for further illustrations, left in both *Exodus* and *Daniel. Christ and Satan,* already different from the other poems in that it is not based on a single book of the Bible, has no such spaces, but it may nevertheless have been illustrated by full-page drawings that were never inserted.[23] The visual narrative runs alongside the textual narrative of *Genesis A/B,* providing a different aspect on some of the events. The relationship between the text and illustrations has been examined masterfully by Karkov, whose work puts forward the idea that the images are 'a narrative in their own right.'[24] Indeed, the images were conceived of as part of the text. A full analysis is not possible within the restrictions of this thesis, but reference has been made where the images are particularly pertinent (see below, Chapter 3.ic).

Given the consistent biblical theme of the poems, it is unsurprising that the image of the serpent has consistent connotations throughout the three texts in which it appears. These are exclusively negative. The first is an association with dark

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[20] Doane, ed. *Genesis A*, l. 897 p. 121, l. 899 p. 121, l. 903 p. 121, and l. 904 p. 121; Doane, ed. *Genesis B*, l. 491 p 218 and l. 590 p. 221.

[21] Tolkien, J. R. R. (ed. and transl.), *The Old English Exodus* (Oxford, 1981), ll. 531-7, p.17.

[22] Finnegan, R. E. (ed.), *Christ and Satan: A critical Edition* (Waterloo, Canada, 1978); for references to the *wyrm* see: l. 102, p. 71; l. 135, p. 73; 335, p. 79; For references to the *nædre* see: l.101, p. 71; l. 336, p. 79; l. 410, p. 81; For references to the *draca* see: l. 97, p. 71; l. 336, p. 79.

[23] This is the consensus set forth by Gollancz in his facsimile of the manuscript (Gollancz, *The Caedmon Manuscript*, p. cv.) and agreed upon by Karkov (Karkov, C.,*Text and Picture in Anglo Saxon England: Narrative strategies in the Junius 11 manuscript* (Cambridge, 2001), p. 3), Clubb (Clubb, M. D. (ed.) *Christ and Satan: An Old English poem* (New Haven, CT, 1925), p. ix-x) Raw(Raw, B., 'The Construction of Oxford, Bodleian Library, Junius 11', *Anglo-Saxon History* 13 (1984) p. 191 and 203.).

[24] Karkov, *Text and Picture,* p. 4.

environments; an association familiar from *Beowulf*. As in *Beowulf,* this darkness is an absence of the light of God, representing exile from Heaven and damnation. The second connotation of the serpent in *Junius XI* is an association with fire and venom, sometimes conflated, which once again represents the corrosion, decomposition and dispersal of the human body. These themes of exile from God, damnation and the breaking down of the body surround the third and final theme, which is mortality. There is proximity between the image of the serpent and explicit mentions of death in the poems of *Junius XI*. Both the Tree of Death and Hell are inextricably linked to the serpentine form, as well as a proximity to elegiac passages lamenting the transience of worldly things. Ultimately, the serpents in *Junius XI* once again display an inextricable connection with human mortality and death, echoing themes present in both of *Beowulf* and the medical texts.

### 3.i. *Genesis*

The Old English *Genesis* covers Biblical history from the creation of the world up to the voyage of Noah, but all of the references to serpentine creatures occur in connection to the events in the Garden of Eden; the temptation of Eve and the subsequent fall of Man. The antagonist of this part of the Old English poetic narrative is Satan, but his active representative in the story is another figure, a messenger who comes to Eve in the form of a serpent. In the world of the poem this tempter is not the Devil, and neither is he a *wyrm,* only appearing in this form to interact with Eve. He is, by his very nature, ambiguous.

### 3.ia The tempter and the tree of death: darkness, mortality and loss

The first reference to serpents in the poem occurs in the *Genesis B* interpolation, at line 491. This initial appearance of the serpent sets up many of the themes that intertwine around the image of the serpent through the rest of the poem. Here, the Devil's messenger, the tempter, transforms into a *wyrm* and winds himself around the Tree of Death in readiness to tempt first Adam and then Eve to eat the fruit. The taking of *wyrm* form is preceded by a description of the Tree of Death:

> Þonne wæs se oðer  eallenga sweart,
> Dim and þystre.  Þæt wæs deaðes beam.
> Se bær bitres fela.  Sceolde bu witan

Ylda æghwilc        yfles and godes,

Gewand on þisse worulde, sceolde on wite a

Mid swate and mid sorgum      siððan libban

Swa hwa swa gebyrgde     þæs on þam beame geweox.

Sceolde hine yldo beniman      ellendæda,

Dreamas and drihtscipes   and him beon deað scyred.

Lytle hwile sceolde he his lifes niotan,

Secan þonne landa sweartost on fyre.

Sceolde feondum þeowian þær is ealra frecna mæste

Leodum to langre hwile.        þæt wiste se laða georne,

Dyrne deofles boda     þe wið drihten wann.

Wearp hine þa on **wyrmes lic**   and wand him þa ymbutan

Þone deaðes beam þurh deofles cræft. [25]

Then was the other altogether dark, dim and dark. That was the tree of death. It bears many bitter things. One must know the habitation, each person, of evil and good, wound together in this world, must live afterwards with sweat and with sorrow in his mind, he who (ate) the fruit that grew on that tree. Age must take away his brave deeds, joys and lordship, and he is deprived by death. He must enjoy his life for a little while, then he seeks that land, darkest in fire, must serve the fiends, there is the greatest horribleness for a much longer time. That the hateful one well knew, dark devil's messenger who strove against the Lord. He changed into the body of a *wyrm* and wound himself about the tree of death through devil's craft.

In a confluence of imagery that is by now familiar, the *wyrm* appears in an environment that is dark and connotes death. After the Tree of Death is introduced as this dark, hostile environment, the poem moves into a lament for what is about to happen in the narrative; the fall of mankind. Lines 480-489 have a pseudo-elegaic quality to them, in that they lament the transience of mortal life and warn the reader to distinguish between that which is good and that which is evil. The poet laments the

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[25] Doane, *Genesis B*, ll. 477-92, p. 218.

loss of secular things and muses on the transience and shortness of human life in comparison to the eternity of the afterlife. Once again the loss of traditionally masculine, noble and secular pursuits and possessions is the focus. The subject matter in these few lines recalls the Old English tradition of elegiac poetry, found in *The Wanderer, The Seafarer* and, most significantly, in *Beowulf* in the 'Lay of the Last Survivor' section. Just like in *Beowulf,* lamentation over the loss of these things immediately precedes the appearance of a serpent. Also just like in *Beowulf,* the audience know that this serpent will ultimately cause death to occur in the narrative. In *Beowulf,* this is the death of the hero. In *Genesis,* however, it is the eventual death of all mankind. The brief meditation on mortality in these lines is not simply about death, but about the decay of time. Death is acknowledged as the final point in a series of losses caused by age (l. 484). This is significant in that it is not just death and the transition into an afterlife of suffering which is being lamented here; it is also the slow inevitable threat of mortality, decay and ageing. Where *The Seafarer* contemplates an eternity in Heaven, the poet of *Genesis* contemplates an eternity in Hell. Hell, like the environment of the Tree itself, is dark, but it is also fiery; both of these elements are closely associated with hostile serpents in *Beowulf.* In the case of both the Tree of Death and Hell, this darkness is symptomatic of distance from God. Later in the texts of *Junius XI,* the link between darkness and the theme of exile is more explicitly explored.[26] Fire, although it is only mentioned briefly here, is conflated with venom in both *Exodus* and *Christ and Satan*, echoing the ideas of physical consumption and disintegration that were present in the *draca* episode of *Beowulf.*[27] These lines, although brief, set up the context for the serpent in *Genesis.* This is a moment of dramatic irony in which the poet and his audience contemplate the consequences of what is about to happen. Darkness, fire, mortality and the transience of worldly things are all themes brought into play as the poet builds tension, anticipating the appearance of the serpent.

Of course, the Tree of Death itself is a representation of mortality in biblical mythology. It is the opposite to the Tree of Life or Holy Rood, the cross on which Christ overcomes death itself. It is around this tree that the messenger, in the form of a *wyrm,* 'wand him þa ymbutan // Þone deaðes beam' [wound himself about the Tree

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[26] Chapter 3, 3.ia.

[27] Chapter 3, 3.iia; Chapter 3, 3.iiic; Chapter 2, 5.iii.

of Death] in lines 491-2. This image operates on three levels. Firstly, it is descriptive of serpentine movements, evoking sinuousness. It also describes a physical closeness between the *wyrm* and the tree or even an integration of the two. Previously in line 481, the poet describes the way that good and evil are wound together and then stresses the necessity of being able to distinguish the two. The inextricability of good and evil in the fallen world is recalled here by the serpent and the tree; like the *nicor* and its environment in *Beowulf* and the *Visio Pauli*, the serpent is inextricable from its physical environment and its symbolic context. The Tree of Death and the *wyrm* are presented intertwined as one image of impending mortality.

### 3.ib. Temptation and poison

Before he turns his attention to Eve, the tempter first tries to tempt Adam in lines 496-547. He is unsuccessful, and interestingly, throughout this episode, his serpentine form is not mentioned. Nor is it referenced when he lies to Eve in lines 551-587. The attention is only brought back to his serpentine form after his speech to Eve, when Eve, who is of 'wacran hige' [weaker spirit] than Adam, is affected by the lie, and is tempted.[28] This occurs as the serpent's idea takes hold in her mind, not quickly and aggressively, but slowly and insidiously from within.

> Lædde hie swa mid ligenum   and mid listum speon
> Idese on þæt unriht     oð þæt hire on innan ongan
> Weallan **wyrmes** geþeaht. [29]

> So he led her with lying and with cunning enticed the lady to that un-
> right, until within her began to well up the ***wyrm's*** thought.

The idea of eating the fruit has been implanted in Eve's mind by the serpent, and it is only after the fact that this idea begins to grow, almost as though the it is poison, or an infection. The poet uses the word 'wellan' [well up] in line 590 to describe the way in which it grows. This same word is used in *Beowulf* to describe the action of the *draca's* poison on the hero's body, continuing to destroy him even after the *draca* has been defeated:

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[28] Doane, *Genesis B*, l. 590, p. 221.

[29] Doane, *Genesis B*, ll. 588-90, p. 221.

'Ða sio wund ongon,

Þe him se **eorðdraca** ær geworhte,

Swelan ond swellan;   he þæt sona onfand,

Þæt him on breostum  bealonið(e) weoll

Attor on innan.' [30]

[Then the wound which the **earth-*draca*** wrought in him earlier began, to swell and swelter; he soon found that in his chest a violent rage boiled, a poison within.].

Though the poet of *Genesis* never makes the analogy explicit, there is a definite likeness between the 'wyrmes geþeaht' [worm's thought] in line 590 and poison, venom or infection. The association between the *wyrm* and this type of internal, insidious threat has also been established in the venomous *nædre* and invisible, putrifying *wyrm* of the medical texts.[31] In *Genesis,* this threat is in the form of an idea. Like literal venom or infection, however, the idea will ultimately lead to death and the destruction of Eve's physical body. It is not chance that the poet draws attention back to the *wyrm*-form of the messenger alongside this image of the welling idea inside Eve.

### 3.ic. The confession of Eve: the genesis of the snake

The final four references to the tempter as a serpent appear in a cluster between lines 897 and 904, which occur in *Genesis A* after the interpolation of *Genesis B.* This is during Eve's speech in which she reports how the tempter convinced her with lies to eat the fruit, causing God to pass judgement on the serpent, taking away its limbs. It is significant that Eve's recollection and God's response contain more references to the tempter's serpentine form than elsewhere; it is for Eve and Adam that the illusion is intended, and while the audience is aware of the tempter's true nature Eve simply remembers what she saw. It is also significant that she refers to the tempter as both *wyrm* and *nædre.* Whilst *wyrm* is a generic term, *nædre* primarily describes a true snake, as observed in the medical texts of Chapter One.[32] The term is

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[30] See: Klaeber, *Beowulf,* ll. 2712-15, pp. 92-3.

[31] Chapter 1, 6.

[32] Chapter 1, 5.ii.

probably used deliberately here, since the audience of the poem is witnessing the creation of the true, limbless snake at this point in the narrative.

> him þa freolecu mæg,
> Ides æwiscmod,       andswarode:
> "Me **nædre** beswac   and me neodlice
> To forsceape scyhte   and to scyldfrece,
> Fah **wyrm** þurh fægir word   oð þæt ic fracoðlice
> Feondræs gefremede,  fæhðe geworhte
> And þa reafode       swa hit riht ne wæs
> Beam on bearwe       and þa blæda æt."
> Þa **nædran** sceop     nergend usser,
> Frea ælmihtig,        fagum **wyrme**
> Wide siðas       and þa worde cwæð:
> "Þu scealt wideferhð,  werg, þinum breostum
> Bearme, / tredan     brade eorðan,
> Faran feðeleas       þenden þe feorh wunað,
> Gast on innan.       Þu scealt greot etan
> Þine lifdagas    swa þu laðlice
> Wrohte onstealdest    þe þæt wif feoð,
> Hatað under heofnum      and þin heafod tredeð
> Fah mid fotum sinum.       Þu scealt fiersna sætan
> Tohtan niwre.        Tuddor bið gemæne
> Incrum orlegnið         a þenden standeð
> Woruld under wolcnum.      Nu þu wast and canst,
> Lað leodsceaða,      hu þu lifian scealt.[33]

[The goodly woman, the lady disgraced in mind, answered him: "The *nædran* deceived me and eagerly prompted me to crime and guilty greed, through fair words the criminal *wyrm* so that I wickedly undertook the assault, deadly wrongdoing and then robbed the tree in the grove – as it was never right to do – and then ate the fruit." Then our saviour, Lord Almighty, commanded wide wanderings for the *nædran,* the patterned

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[33] Doane, *Genesis A,* ll. 895-917, p. 123.

*wyrm*, "To far distant times you, an outcast, will crawl over the broad
earth on your breast, your belly, without feet you will move about, so
long as life remains in you. You will eat dust all the days of your life,
since you have accomplished such an evil deed here. The woman will
war with you, and hate you under heaven, and shall tread on your
cursed head with her feet; you will lie in wait at her heels, in ever-new
conflict, for there shall be war between your offspring and her offspring
always, as long as the earth exists under the skies. Now do you
understand and know, baleful destroyer of mankind, how you will live.

The deceptive cunning of the tempter is the focus of Eve's testimony. The cunning,
deceptive quality of the serpent goes hand-in-hand with the type of insidious, unseen
threat it poses. In the biblical *Genesis,* the serpent is explicitly mentioned as being
'callidior' [more cunning/wiser] than any other animal (Genesis 3:1), a theme which
is carried through to the New Testament and Jesus' positive reflection on the
prudence of serpents in Matthew 10:16.[34] In the biblical *Genesis,* Eve says nothing
about the cunning nature of the serpent, but simply that it deceived her (Genesis
3:13). The Old English poet has chosen to focus on this natural cunning here. In line
904, Eve refers to the tempter as 'fagum wyrme'[patterned *wyrm*], placing emphasis on
its appearance: she perceives the disguise rather than the true nature of the deceiver.
In the illustrations that accompany this episode, the idea of sensory deception is
played upon even more. In fact, the tempter is not shown appearing to Eve as a
serpent, but an angel. This disguise progressively slips as the story progresses (figs. 6a,
6b and 6c)

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[34] See Introduction, 5.ii.

**Fig.6a:** The tempter giving Adam and Eve the fruit in *Genesis*. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius XI, p. 28, © Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.



**Fig.6b:** The tempter watches as Adam and Eve repent in *Genesis*. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius XI, p. 31, © Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

**Fig.6c:** The punishment of the serpent in *Genesis.* Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Junius XI, p. 41, © Bodleian Library, University of Oxford.

When he hands the fruit to Adam and Eve on page 28, he seems to be an angel. It is only when the fruit is eaten that he begins to change, and on page 38 the 'angel' is seen half naked with a sneering expression, his hair now black and wild with three projections issuing from his mouth. This could be a triple forked tongue, hinting at his serpentine nature, but is also representative of poison, here in the form of the lies with which he caused the fall of Adam and Eve. It is only on page 41, when the serpent is

punished, that it appears fully and starkly in its snake-like form before God, who cannot be duped by the senses like Adam and Eve.

The punishment of the *wyrm* is twofold. Firstly, it is exiled in lines 501-2. Then it is given a physical, bodily punishment in the removal of its legs and the command to crawl on its belly in lines 504-5. The importance of the serpent's limblessness subsequent to this episode in the Vulgate is explored by Bede, and addressed in Chapter four.[35] This is an example of where the figure of the messenger, the Devil and the animal become conflated. The exile of the *wyrm* is reminiscent of the punishment of the Devil, explored further in the poem *Christ and Satan.* It also recalls the *nicor* of *Beowulf,* whose home was also a place of exile.[36] The enmity between the serpent and mankind is reiterated by God's explicit naming of the serpent as 'leodsceaða' [harmer of mankind] in line 515. This cements the role of the serpent in *Genesis* as it has been set out from the beginning. The connotations of darkness and distance from God, mortality, the loss of the worldly and the insidious, hidden threat of the serpent set up earlier in the poem are summarised by that statement. The serpent is explicitly set up in opposition to Mankind. In the poem, the serpent is literally the destroyer of Mankind in that it has introduced mortality to them. In a symbolic sense, the serpent itself is mortality. It is wound around and has become the living agent of the Tree of Death. Its words are as insidiously destructive to Eve's mind as the venom of the *draca* in Beowulf's veins. It is associated with places of darkness and fire, the former being a feature of exile from God's light and the latter being a destructive, decomposing element to the body.

3.ii. *Exodus*

Exodus is the second poem in *Junius XI.* Its 590 lines are written between folios 143 and 171. Like *Genesis,* the poem is a retelling of the events of the book of the Vulgate Bible by the same name. *Exodus* tells the story of the journey of the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, their betrayal and pursuit by Pharaoh, and their miraculous crossing of the Red Sea. There are no serpents that play a direct role in the events of the narrative. In the Vulgate *Exodus,* Moses is directly linked with the image of the serpent through his staff, which can be thrown down and transformed into a serpent. The biblical Moses uses this to persuade Pharaoh of the power and potential wrath of

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[35] Chapter 4.iia

[36] Chapter 2, 5.ii.

the Hebrew God.[37] However, this episode is not the focus of the Old English poet, and the sequence of events from God's revelation to Moses and his attempts to persuade Pharaoh are not described. Instead, the poet focuses on the journey of the Israelites and in particular the crossing of the Red Sea. There is one reference near the end of the poem, however, to serpents in the context of a subterranean Hell.

### 3.iia. The subterranean serpent: Hell and death

The reference to serpents in *Exodus* occurs near the end of the poem after the climactic event of the narrative, namely, the safe crossing of the Red Sea by the Jews and the swallowing up of the Egyptian host as they attempt to follow. After this, Moses makes a speech to the Jewish people, celebrating God's intervention and expressing belief in His promise of a future home in Canaan. Before the poem reports his direct speech, there is a section summarising the wisdom of men like Moses who look to God, Heaven and the eternal rather than the transient and the worldly. Lines 531–7 express the precariousness of earthly existence and the threat of collapse into the pit of mortality below. It is in this pit that the *wyrm* appears in an unambiguously Hellish context.

> Þis is læne dream,
> Wommum awyrded, wreccum alyfed,
> Earma anbid: eðellease
> Þysne gystsele gihðum healdað,
> Murnað on mode, manhus witon
> Fæste under foldan, þær bið **fyr and wyrm**,
> Open ece scræf yfela gehwylces. [38]

> This is a loaned joy, wounded with woes, weakened by exile, a wretched awaiting; The homeless hold this guest-hall in misery, mournful in mind, aware of the house of wickedness fast under the earth, there is the fire and the *wyrm*, the perpetually open pit of all evils.

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[37] See: *Vulgate,* Exodus 4:3; 7:9-12; 7:15.

[38] Tolkien, *Exodus*, ll. 531-7, p. 17.

There is an obvious structural congruence with the Old English *Genesis* here. Again, the appearance of the serpent is preceded by a declaration of earthly transience and mortality. Mortal life is the 'læne dream' [transient joy] of line 531. It is marred by suffering, is at a distance from God and is short. These three things sum up the aspects of human existence that God did not intend when he created Mankind in the Garden of Eden, but that came after the fall of man. The shortness of life is given the most focus in the rest of the lines, creating an image of Mankind as guests in the 'guest-hall' of the world, aware of their mortality and the waiting pit of Hell. Here, Hell is presented as inevitable in the same way that death is. Just like in *Genesis* and in *Beowulf,* the image of the serpent is closely tied to the theme of age, mortality and the transience of the human world.[39]

The actual image of the serpent is invoked next as an inhabitant of Hell. Hell is not named in these lines, but it is suggested by the descriptor, 'mahus' [house of wickedness], and contextually by the fact that it is described as being below the earth and filled with 'fyr and wyrm'. The serpent is one of three contextual features that allow the audience of the poem to infer the name of this 'pit of all evils.' That ties the image of the serpent very closely with its environment, something seen previously in the serpents of *Beowulf*.[40] The presence of serpents is as fundamental to the environment of Hell as its evil nature, location below the earth and association with fire.

The single mention of serpents in *Exodus* associates them with a subterranean, hidden environment, a feature of the 'creeping things' of the medical texts.[41] It pairs them with fire, a disintegrating, decomposing element, conflated with venom and paired with serpents and death simultaneously in *Beowulf*.[42] Fundamentally, it associates them closely with Hell and with mortality, once again re-enforcing the link between the image of the serpent and death in the Old English literary tradition.

3.iii. *Christ and Satan*

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[39] Chapter 2, 5.iii; Chapter 3, 3.ia.

[40] Chapter 2, 5.ii.

[41] Chapter 1, 6.

[42] Chapter 2, 5.iii.

The final text in *Junius XI* is *Christ and Satan*. The poem is 729 lines long. It spans pages 213–230, ending the manuscript. It comprises the section of the manuscript referred to as *Liber II,* a possible later addition to the manuscript. *Christ and Satan* is certainly different to the other texts of the manuscript. Firstly, it differs from them in that it is not a retelling of a sole book of the Vulgate Bible.[43] Instead, it is an imagined poetic narrative dealing with the relationship between Satan and Christ, with a focus on the experiences of the former. The structure is tripartite: the first section deals with the fall of Satan and runs from lines 1–365, the second part deals with the Harrowing of Hell and runs from lines 366–662, and the final section deals with the Temptation of Christ (lines 663 to the poem's close at line 729). Despite these neat divisions on the part of modern editors, the poem is far from cohesive. The narrative is interrupted by direct speeches from Satan and his fallen angels, as well as warnings and homiletic urgings to the reader to prepare for their own judgement. Often themes and facts of the narrative are repeated. The placement of the Temptation episode at the end of the poem has been rationalised by modern scholars as providing a practical moral for mankind at the poem's close. However, this does not detract from the fact that this along with all the poems of Junius XI was probably conceived by the process of 'successive recompositon' described by Shepherd.[44]

### 3.iiia. Inhabitants of Hell: the serpent as part of the landscape

Given the previously established association between serpents and the diabolical in the other *Junius XI* texts, it is unsurprising that this poem contains a comparatively large number of references. Of the total eight instances where serpents are mentioned by name, all but one are in reference to them as inhabitants of Hell. The terms *draca, nædran* and *wyrm* all seem to be used in a similar way here, and in one instance even appear together in one list in order to emphasise a multitude of serpentine creatures.[45] The single reference that depicts a serpent as anything other than a feature of the environment of Hell is to the character of the tempter.[46]

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[43] There is not a single book of the *Vulgate Bible* that addresses all of the events in *Christ and Satan,* nor are the events around which *Christ and Satan* is composed central to the poem's experiential focus.

[44] Shepherd, 'Scriptural Poetry', p. 10.

[45] See: Finnegan, *Christ and Satan,* ll. 335-6, p. 79.

[46] Finnegan, *Christ and Satan,* ll. 410, p. 81.

Serpents first appear in the poem in line 97, as part of a speech in which Satan describes his fallen state in Hell.[47] This first section of the poem deals with the fall of Satan; the poem's focus is on the experience of the event from the perspective of Satan rather than a narrative retelling. Sections of the poem are written as direct speech, in which Satan and the other angels lament their fall and their current state of exile and punishment in Hell.[48] It is during one of these speeches that Satan himself describes the environment of Hell, and does so with three distinct references to serpents over thirteen lines. The speech is similar to that found in *Exodus* in that it focuses on the loss of secular joys – not temporal this time, but those of Heaven.

<div align="center">Nis her eadiges tir,</div>

| | |
|---|---|
| Wloncra winsele, | ne worulde dream, |
| Ne ængla ðreat, | ne we upheofon |
| Agan moten.   Is ðes atola ham | |
| Fyr onæled; | ic eom fah wið God. |
| Æce æt helle duru | **dracan** eardigað |
| Hate on reðre; | heo us helpan ne magon. |
| Is ðæs walica ham | wites afylled; |
| Nagan we ðæs heolstres | þæt we us gehydan mægon |
| In ðissum neowlan genipe.   Hær | is **nedran swæg**, |
| **Wyrmas gewunade**; | is ðis wites clom |
| Feste gebunden; | feond seondon reðe, |
| Dimme and deorce, | ne her dæg lyhteð |
| For scedes sciman, | sceppendes leoht. [49] |

There is no blessed glory here, (nor) magnificent wine-hall, nor worldly joy, nor throng of angels, nor might we possess high heaven. This terrible place burns on fire; I am an enemy with God. ***Dracan*** dwell eternally at Hell's door, hot with savageness; they may not help us. This woeful place is filled with torment; there is no place to shelter us, that we might hide ourselves in this deep darkness. Here is the noise of **nedran,**

[47] Finnegan (ed), *Christ and Satan*, l. 97, p. 71.

[48] Finnegan, *Christ and Satan*, ll. 20-21, p. 68.

[49] Finnegan, *Christ and Satan*, ll. 92-105, pp. 71-72.

> **wyrmas dwell**; these bonds of torment are fastened firmly; the fiends
> are savage, dim and dark, here day, the light of God, never shines for
> the gloom of shadows.

For a third time in the poems of *Junius XI,* the references to serpentine creatures are preceded by a lamentation over a lost secular life. In the previous two poems, Earth had been the location of secular happiness, and the loss lamented has been that of death. Instead, the poem conceives of Heaven as an eternal and ideal human society that can only ever be transient in life, a Heaven that is imagined in Anglo-Saxon secular terms. Rather than dismissing secular life as being purely worldly and Heaven as being a markedly different state to that on Earth, it is imagined as an ideal version of that which God created for man and which was marred by the temptation. God has a 'winsele' [wine hall] in Heaven, and the happiness to be found within is actually described explicitly as 'worulde dream' [worldly joy]. Heaven is a seemingly secular environment. Rather than being paradoxical, however, this supports the worldview beneath the surface of *Beowulf's* commentary on society and creation; Anglo-Saxon secular society is ordained by God in the image of Heaven.[50] In an Anglo-Saxon culture that imagines Heaven in familiar terms, Satan's fall is the paradigm for the fall of Man. His loss of Heavenly joys is the paradigm for the loss of worldly joys lamented in *Genesis* and *Exodus*.

The recalled joys of Heaven are set up in sharp contrast to the landscape of Hell in lines 95–6, when the subject of Satan's speech abruptly changes. As in *Exodus,* he does not name Hell immediately. Rather, his statement that ' Is ðes atola ham // Fyr onæled' [this terrible place burns on fire] is so strongly indicative of Hell that the name need not be mentioned. The presence of fire in Hell, linked with serpents earlier in *Exodus,* is once again integral to the landscape. The first appearance of serpents in *Christ and Satan* occurs in the following line, 97, in which Satan describes the doorway to Hell as a place where 'dracan eardigað ' [*dracan* dwell]. The appearance of serpents at the doorway to Hell is not peculiar to *Christ and Satan*. The link between serpents and doorways is also present in material culture. There are two carved stone

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[50] Chapter 2, 5.ii.

doorjambs from the last quarter of the seventh century, still *in situ* in the west porch entrance of St. Peter's church at Monkwearmouth, Sunderland.[51]

The jambs sit either side of the doorway (figs 7a and 7b). Both facing surfaces consist of two blocks, the upper smaller than the lower, with two intertwining serpentine creatures carved continuously across them, forming the shape of a tau cross. They face inwards towards the door and one another. The creatures have the almond shaped eyes and closed loop-like jaws of Salin's Style II zoomorphic art. The design, carved identically on both faces, is 53cm tall and 24.7cm wide and would have been easily visible to those passing between them. The bodies of the serpents intertwine from the bottom of the stone and their jaws interlock where their heads meet at the top. Like those at Hell's door in *Christ and Satan*, the serpentine creatures at Monkwearmouth appear at the gateway between the secular world and the spiritual. In the case of Monkwearmouth, the serpents represent the transition from the worldly landscape outside into the spiritual House of God, and through that the entrance into and out of eternal life. The tau cross In the case of *Christ and Satan*, they again mark a transition, this time from a place of God to exile in Hell. In the case of both doorways, the person who passes through moves into a space designed for the accommodation of the soul. The Church represents the house of God and is thus a reflection of Heaven on Earth, whereas Hell is a place of punishment and exile for the fallen angels. The symbol of the serpents at the door, however, is common to both, lending the idea that the image of the serpent – and the concept of transition in and of itself – is a neutral one. This association between serpents and doorways is in synchrony with the general association between the serpent and death; in both cases, the serpent is an image of transition from one state of existence to another.

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[51] Cramp, R. J. (ed.), *Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture Volume I: County Durham and Northumberland* (Oxford, 1984), items 8 a-b, pp. 125-6; images 616-617.

**Fig7a:** Doorjamb from the west porch of St Peter's Church, Monkwearmouth, Sunderland, last quarter of the seventh century. © Copyright Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture, photographer T. Middlemass.

**Fig7b:** Doorjamb from the west porch of St Peter's Church, Monkwearmouth, Sunderland, last quarter of the seventh century. © Copyright Corpus of Anglo-Saxon Stone Sculpture, photographer T. Middlemass.

Unlike the serpents at Monkwearmouth, however, in the context of *Christ and Satan* the 'dracan' at the door are a fear-inspiring image. They are described as 'hate on reðre' [hot with rage], once again invoking the element of fire while at the same time bringing in the hostility of the animals. Similar to the 'dracan' in *Christ and Satan*, the *draca* of Beowulf's final conflict is a 'wyrm yrre' [angry *wyrm*]. [52] Like them it is also associated with heat and fire. The *draca* of *Beowulf* also meets the hero at the entrance to the barrow, placing it at the point of transition this time between the world and the grave. [53] This association between the *draca* and transition strengthens the emerging link between the image of the serpent and death in Anglo-Saxon England.

[52] Klaeber, *Beowulf,* l. 2662, p. 91.

[53] Beowulf is described as calling out at the entrance of the *draca's* lair, his voice travelling into the barrow. The *draca* responds by breathing hot breath out of the entrance, and the poem

After this, Satan's monologue moves into Hell itself. He describes three main torments. The first of these is lack of shelter in line 100. The second of these is darkness, mentioned once in line 101, and then elaborated upon in lines 104-5 when Satan describes the environment as a place that is 'dimme and deorce' [dim and dark], where the light of God never shines. Darkness is a familiar environmental factor now, occurring alongside images of serpents in *Beowulf* and *Genesis*.[54] The association between light and God as the creator is also made explicit in line 105, echoing this same association in the Creation Song in *Beowulf*.[55] Darkness, by contrast, is associated with exile and distance from the divine, in this case in Hell. The lack of shelter has some parallel in the sense of barrenness and exposure created by the *Beowulf* poet when he described the *draca's* lair as 'stanbeorh stear(c)ne' [stark stone barrow].[56]. The third torment that Satan mentions is the presence of serpents in lines 101–2, in which he states that 'hær is **nedran** swæg, // **Wyrmas** gewunade . . . ' [here is the noise of **nedran**, **wyrmas** dwell . . . ]. The very fact that the serpents are mentioned here as one of the chief torments of Hell is significant. As in *Exodus*, their presence is integral to the landscape of Hell along with darkness and hostility. The reference to noise in line 101 suggests both aggression and multitude. It can be argued that the *wyrm* and the *nædre* mentioned here are the same as or included in the savage 'feond' [fiends] mentioned in line 103. It is significant that the *Christ and Satan* poet imagines both fiends and serpents already in Hell, separate from the fallen angels and those in league with Satan. He imagines them already there as part of that landscape of punishment and exile, tormenting Satan as well as the souls of the damned. This strengthens the idea that the serpents are imagined here as aspects of Hell itself rather than actual sentient beings, and are as integral to the landscape as any other physical feature of that place. If this is the case, they stand for all that Hell itself stands for: death, exile and physical torment.

### 3.iiib. The serpent and the body at war

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moves directly into the battle scene, leaving the fact that the *draca* has now come out implicit. See: Klaeber, *Beowulf,* ll. 2550-8, p. 87.

[54] Chapter 2, 5.ii, 5.iii; Chapter 3, 3.i, 3.ic.

[55] Chapter 2, 5.ii.

[56] Klaeber, *Beowulf,* l. 2212, p. 75.

The association between the serpent and hostility towards the physical body is explored in particular at the second appearance of serpents in the poem, just a few lines later. Satan is once again describing the physical environment of Hell. He describes a place of extremes below the earth where men and 'wyrmas' fight.

> Hwæt! Her hat and ceald    hwilum mencað;
> Hwilum ic gehere    hellescealcas,
> Gnornende cynne,    grundas mænan
> niðer under næssum;  hwilum nacode men
> Winnað ymb **wyrmas**. [57]

> Listen! Here hot and cold are at times intermingled, at times I hear the servants of Hell, lamenting ones, mourning people,  deep under the earth at times naked men struggle with ***wyrmas***.

The most significant aspect of this reference is the focus the poet gives to the physical body in Hell. Though Hell is a spiritual and not a physical place, it is closely linked with bodily sensation, and (unsurprisingly) particularly with pain. This is first brought to the attention of the audience with the mention of extremes of temperature directly before the mention of the serpents. Heat and cold are also present together at the 'nicera mere' [*nicor's mere*] in *Beowulf,* where the Geats observe mountain trees 'ofer harne stan' [over a hoary stone], yet find the mere to be 'hatan heolfre' [hot with gore].[58] The coldness represents barrenness and the uninhabitable hostility of the landscape while heat represents fire, physical pain and the ultimate reduction of the body. The focus on physical themes continues as Satan describes the cries of the servants of Hell, and naked people fighting with 'wyrmas'. The theme of the naked human body versus the *wyrm* is not unique. The Old English poem *Soul and Body* details the way that the body is devoured by worms in the grave, portraying this relationship as one of hostility. The worms do not simply eat the corpse, but attack it. In a particularly visceral passage, the *Soul and Body* poet describes 'rib reafiað reðe wyrmas' [savage *wyrmas* ravage the ribs].[59] In *Christ and Satan,* the naked human form

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57 Finnegan, *Christ and Satan*, ll. 134-5, p. 73.

58 Klaeber, *Beowulf,* l. 1414, p. 49; l. 1423, p. 49.

59 Moffat, *Soul and Body,* l. 111, p. 60.

is similarly opposed to the *wyrm*. Whether the *wyrm* in question here is a monster, a snake or even, as in *Soul and Body*, an earthworm, the symbolism is the same. The serpent is the enemy of the body. This theme is supported by the conceptualisation of serpents as devouring, internal threats in the medical texts, where they symbolise disease itself.[60] This strengthens further still the idea that the serpent represents death in a physical sense.

### 3.iiic. The serpent and the body again: fire

A further three references to serpents come at the end of the first section dealing with the fall of Satan, in lines 335 and 336. All three serpentine terms, *wyrm*, *nædre* and *draca* are used, echoing lines 97 and 102 in which all three are introduced to the audience as part of the landscape of Hell. In this instance, the references come at the close of this section, as part of a moralising ending in which the poet reminds the audience of the choice Mankind now faces in the light of the choice the miserable Satan made. The poet entreats the audience to cleave to God's will, reminding them again of the miseries that await in Hell. It is in this context that the poet briefly summarises the landscape of hot, cold and serpents that has been described by Satan throughout the section.

> Nabbað we to hyhte        nymþe cyle and fyr,
> Wean and witu        and **wyrma þreat**,
> **Dracan and nædran**        and þone dimman ham. [61]

> We have no hope, only frost and fire, pain and torment and **throngs of *wyrma, dracan* and *nædran*** and that dim place.

Again, extremes of temperature are referenced in close proximity to the image of the serpent, bringing the physical element into play. Where serpents are mentioned, the reference is intended to portray multitude, with all three terms, *wyrm, draca* and *nædran* being used in the short space of two lines (ll. 335-6). This use of poetic variation suggests great numbers and emphasises the inextricable link between the serpentine

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[60] Chapter 1, 6.

[61] Finnegan, *Christ and Satan,* ll. 334-6, p. 79.

form and the landscape of Hell, reiterating the image of a place filled with noise and serpents mentioned earlier in lines 101-2.

The element of fire is mentioned explicitly in connection with the serpents here, including the two together as aspects of the torments of Hell. The decomposing element of fire is a familiar theme in connection with the serpent, echoed strongly in *Beowulf*.[62] Beowulf speculates before his fight with the *draca* that '...ic ðær heaðufyres

hates wene, // [o]reðes ond attres...' [I expect hostile fires there, cruelty and venom...]. [63] Similarly in *Christ and Satan,* the very ground of Hell is described as welling with hot poison:

> Flor attre weol,
>
> Hat under hæftum . . . [64]
>
> The floor welled with poison, hot under the captives…

It is unclear throughout *Beowulf* where the heat and danger comes from, the fire or the venom, or even whether the two are in fact one and the same.[65] In *Christ and Satan,* heat and venom are certainly linked in these lines.

### 3.iii.d Recalling *Genesis:* the confession of Eve part II

The final reference to serpents in *Christ and Satan* is also the only reference that makes mention of serpents outside the landscape of Hell. It occurs at the beginning of the second section dealing with the Harrowing of Hell. God is described as bursting open the doors of Hell and leading the race of Adam up to Heaven. Eve, however,

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[62] Chapter 2, p. 5.iii.

[63] Klaeber, *Beowulf*, ll. 2522-3, p. 86.

[64] Finnegan, *Christ and Satan,* ll. 318-19, p. 78.

[65] Having been poisoned by the serpent, the venom in Beowulf's heart is described in terms of heat and burning:

'Ða sio wund ongon,

 him se eorðdraca      ær geworhte,

Swelan ond swellan;      he þæt sona onfand,

Þæt him on breostum      bealonið(e) weoll

Attor on innan.'

[Then the wound which the earth- *draca* wrought in him earlier began, to swell and swelter; he soon found that in his chest a violent rage boiled, a poison within.].

cannot join them until she has acknowledged her sin and repented for it once more. It is in her speech to God, recalling her temptation, that she makes mention of the *nædre* that tempted her to eat the fruit.

> Ic þe æne abealh,    ece drihten,
> Þa wit Adam twa    eaples þigdon
> Þurh **næddrean nið**,        swa wit na ne sceoldon. [66]

> I alone angered you, the eternal Lord, when together with Adam ate the apple through the ***nædran's* spite**, as we should not have done.

This section is naturally comparable to *Genesis* lines 495–500, since both report the direct speech of Eve as she recalls the event of the fall of Man. Here as in *Genesis,* Eve specifically refers to a *nædre* in the Garden of Eden. This is significant in that the word *nædre* is very often used to denote a true snake, and often a venomous one. This is the limbless animal created in the *Genesis* narrative. As in *Genesis,* Eve remembers the tempter's serpentine form, not his true nature, when she recalls his 'nið' [spite]. Here as in *Genesis,* Eve is answering for her crime with the qualification that it was through the serpent's initial transgression, not hers, that mankind fell. Ultimately, the serpent is blamed, and once Eve acknowledges her crime she too can proceed to heaven. In this case, rather than being emblematic of mortality itself, the serpent is an agent of Satan, who in turn wishes to inflict mortality on Mankind. It is symbolically fitting, then, that the tempter should be in the form of a serpent rather than an actual serpent. The tempter is Satan's will in the guise of that very thing he wishes to bring about – mortality

## 4. Conclusion

The serpents of *Junius XI* all appear in a biblical context, and all are associated with Satan and Hell. However, there are two distinct types across the three texts; these are the character of the tempter, and the serpents who are agents of torment in Hell. There are some themes which are particular to each of these, and some which are common to both. Themes particular to the tempter are guile and agency; the tempter appears in *Genesis* and briefly in *Christ and Satan,* and is by his very nature an agent of

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[66] Finnegan, *Christ and Satan,* ll. 408-10, p. 81.

Satan's will and the cause of human mortality. The guile the tempter uses to achieve this is referenced in both poems, but it is in *Genesis* that the poison-like nature of his persuasion is highlighted, drawing the false form of the venomous serpent and the tempter's true intent together. The serpents that appear in Hell in *Exodus* and *Christ and Satan*, on the other hand, do not have any agency in their actions. Instead they are so closely tied to the landscape of Hell that they are inseparable from it and do not have an independent identity. This inextricability from their environment is something not shared by the figure of the tempter, and is far more similar to the *nicor* in *Beowulf* and *Visio Pauli*.

Despite this difference, however, there are several common factors which bind the two types of serpent in *Junius XI* together. The first of these is the familiar association with darkness. As in *Beowulf,* the darkness of the poems in *Junius XI* is set up in opposition to the light of Heaven. Darkness therefore represents exile, the unknown, and that which falls outside of God's creation or intention. It is not surprising that both Hell and the Tree of Death are described as dark places, just as it is not surprising that the image of the serpent is linked with both. The serpents of Hell are not exiles themselves, rather they are a part of the landscape and therefore share in the symbolic value of its darkness; the tempter, whilst not integrally a part of the Tree of Death, winds himself around it and becomes both physically and symbolically intertwined with it and with its meaning in the poem. The second common factor is linked to that of darkness; it is an explicit association with death and mortality. Both Hell and the Tree of Death are synonymous with death and mortality in all three poems. The former was the destination for all souls after death before the Salvation, and the latter is the origin of human mortality in the first place. Death, in turn is synonymous with exile in all three poems; it is both the exile of Satan to Hell and the exile of a human soul to the same place upon death because of Adam and Eve's transgression. The image of the serpent, both in Hell and in the form of the tempter, is intrinsically connected with these ideas. The proximity of their appearances in all three poems to elegiac passages lamenting the loss of the secular world of those living on earth or in Heaven cements the point. The third factor which ties the tempter and the serpents in Hell together is an association with fire and with venom. This is not unfamiliar. As in *Beowulf,* the serpent's power to decompose, reduce and destroy the human body is figured in an association with the reductive element of fire and the corrosive action of venom. Once again this comes down to the issue of mortality; the

serpent, which struggles with the naked human body in *Christ and Satan* and which poisons the mind of Eve to engender the very first instance of mortality in *Genesis,* is both the agent and the zoomorphic representation of death throughout *Junius XI.*

# CHAPTER 4

## Serpents in the Anglo-Saxon past, present and future:
## Bede's exegesis and the image of the serpent

1. Introduction

The image of the serpent has been applied in various contexts so far, and has exhibited a similar set of connotations throughout. In the Old English medical texts, the serpent was a zoological embodiment of disease and infection, a gnawing internal threat and a venomous adversary. In Old English poetry both epic and scriptural, the serpent has been seen as a herald of mortality, an inhabitant of Hell and has been associated with exile and darkness, fire and the consumption of the physical body. In all cases, the overarching theme is death.

A third kind of text that treats the image of the serpent is the historical text. This extremely broad genre includes loric, oral and patristic history as well as exegesis; that is, any texts dealing with facts that relate to the history of the world as the Anglo-Saxons perceived it. These texts include not only real serpents as the modern reader would define them, but also biblical serpents, those described in patristic texts, and semi-mythical serpents such as those deriving from anecdotal or natural historical sources such as Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*.

In order to distil some useful information from the Anglo-Saxon historical corpus, this chapter will focus on the works of Bede as a case study. It will address specifically three of his works; *Libri quatuor in principum Genesis* (hereafter *In Genesim*), *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (hereafter *Historia Ecclesiastica*) and *Explanatio Apocalypseos*. These three are appropriate case studies because they encompass a variety of historical serpents in a variety of historical contexts. *In Genesim* addresses serpents as they appear in the earliest part of biblical history. It is a commentary on the early parts of the biblical book of Genesis, dealing with the events from Genesis 1.1 to 21.10, that is, from Creation to the casting out of Hagar by Sarah and Abraham. The serpent plays a central role in the fall of Man in the early chapters, and Bede's commentary on it can be usefully analysed in the light of the Old English poetic *Genesis,* analysed in Chapter 3.[1]

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[1] Chapter 3, 3.i.

*Historia Ecclesiastica,* by contrast, contains examples of real serpents as they were present in Bede's England. It is a self-consicous work of history rather than biblical commentary, but it is not out of place in the context of Bede's exegesis. The wider corpus of Bede's work demonstrates that over the course of his life he had developed a model for understanding linear time and his own place within it as well as that of major events in history. He wrote two major treatises dealing with Creation and time: *De Temporibus*, completed in 703, and *De Temporum Ratione,* completed in 725.[2]  Through his exegesis, he developed an eschatological model; a 'master narrative of the end-times, a coherent "history of the future"' as Peter Darby writes.[3] To Bede, history and exegesis fell under the overarching comprehensive study of creation and time. The merit of studying Bede's historical and exegetical writings alongside one another was acknowledged by Ray in 1976 when he argued for the inseparability of *Historia Ecclesiastica* from Bede's exegetical work.[4] More recently, Máirín Mac Carron and Paul Hilliard have both addressed aspects of *Historia Ecclesiastica,* ostensibly a backward-looking text, with reference to Bede's exegetical understanding of the future.[5]

*Explanatio Apocalypseos* returns to the exegetical theme of *In Genesim,* this time addressing the image of the serpent as it appears at the end of Creation. However, whilst it is logical to include it as the final case study in this chapter, it should be noted that *Explanatio Apocalypseos* was Bede's first exegetical work, completed between 702 and 709.[6] In the commentary, Bede draws heavily on previous commentaries on Revelation as well as on a broader range of patristic literature (see below).

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[2] Bede, *De Temporibus*, ed. C. W. Jones, *Bedae Venerabilis Opera Didascalica,* CCSL 123C, (Turnhout, 1977), pp. 585-611; transl. Kendal, C. B. and Wallis, F., *Bede: On the Nature of Things and On Times* (Liverpool, 2010); Bede, *De Temporum Ratione,* ed. C. W. Jones, *Bedae Venerabilis Opera Didascalica,* CCSL 123B, (Turnhout, 1977), pp. 263-544; transl. F. Wallis, *Bede: The Reckoning of Time* (Liverpool, 1999).

[3] Darby, P., *Bede and the End of Time* (Farnham, 2012) p. 218.

[4] Ray, R. D., 'Bede, the Exegete as Historian' in G. Bonner (ed.) *Famulus Christi: Essays in commemoration of the Thirteenth Centenary of the Birth of the Venerable Bede* (London, 1976), pp. 125-40.

[5] Mac Carron, M., 'Christology and the Future in Bede's Annus Domini', in P. Darby and F. Wallis (eds) *Bede and the Future* (Farnham, 2014) pp. 161-181; Hilliard, P. C., 'Quae res Quem sit Habitura Finem, Posterior Aetas Videbit: Prosperity, Adversity and Bede's Hope for the Future of Northumbria', in F. Wallis, F and P. Darby (eds) *Bede and the Future* (Farnham, 2014) pp. 181-207.

[6] Laistner M. L. W., and King, H. H. (eds), *A Hand-List of Bede Manuscripts* (Ithaca, NY, 1943), p. 25; This is also the chronology acknowledged in: Darby, P. Darby, P., *Bede and the End of*

2. Symbolism, scripture and reality

The serpents in these case studies range from animals of Bede's present day to the tempter of *Genesis* and the great red *draco* of Revelation. As a modern reader, it is natural to want to divide these serpents into those that are real and those that are symbolic, mythological, or imaginary. This division, however, would be entirely artificial. Though it is impossible to speculate upon what individuals thought, believed, or felt about animals which seem to the modern eye to be imaginary, it is possible to say without doubt that intellectually at least, Bede accepted the reality of the events of both *Genesis* and Revelation. Bede was writing in a climate of orthodox adherence to biblical history. This can be seen in the events surrounding the completion of his early work *De Temporibus* in 703. After its dissemination, an anonymous charge of heresy was levelled at Bede, and in particular at the way that he framed time and the ages of the world.[7] Bede immediately wrote a letter in his defense, *Epistola ad Pleguinam*, and altered his model to better explain his understanding of biblical time. To Bede and to the orthodox Church, the spiritual events of scripture were fundamental to contemporary history and constituted the reality in which they lived. To Bede, the *serpens* of Eden and the *draco* of Revelation were as real as the animals he saw in his own environment. Both are accepted by Bede as real. This is not to suggest that Bede does not engage with the image of the serpent symbolically. Bede believed that symbolic meaning has been written into the fabric of reality. This is part of God's intended plan for creation. In *In Genesim,* Bede explains how the *serpens* in Eden was the only possible conduit for the Devil's intention precisely because its form served to act as a sign for all that the Devil is, namely a subtle, creeping creature.[8] Equally in reverse, he argues that the physical form of man was created as a sign of God's intention that man should be sapient and should, of all the animals, look upwards to the Heavens.[9] In this world-view, the serpent, like all

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*Time* (Farnham, 2012) p. 215. Over the course of this latter book, Darby demonstrates that Bede's opinion on the precise sequence of events during the end of days changed over the course of his intellectual career. However, his core understanding of the imagery, particularly of the serpent, remained largely unchanged, as will be demonstrated here.

[7] Darby discusses this event and its effect on Bede's subsequent work in part I of his book: Darby, *Bede and the End of Time,* pp. 17-95.

[8] See: Bede, *In Gen*, I, 3.1, ll. 1904-5, p. 60; Chapter 4.ii.

[9] See: Bede, *In Gen*, I, 1:25-6, ll. 791-801, p. 26-7; Chapter 4.ii.

creatures, can be acknowledged both as a real, physical animal and as a spiritual symbol simultaneously.

3. The image of the serpent for Bede: heresiology

Bede's writings are different from the texts examined in previous chapters in that they address the meaning and significance of imagery in a conscious and often explicit manner. For Bede, the image of the serpent signified a specific concept – that of heresy. As well as exegesis, Bede's work shows a keen interest in heresiology. In his introduction to *Venerabilis Baedae opera historica,* Charles Plummer lists twenty-nine specific heresies condemned by Bede across his writings.[10] Most of these would have been archaic by Bede's time, and whether this interest in decrying heresies was a scholastic exercise, an attempt to echo patristic literature or a real concern for Bede is uncertain. However, Holder argues that Bede was preoccupied with heresy because he connected it with his personal concerns about clerical education and the calculation of time, particularly the date of Easter, which was a contemporary debate.[11] Regardless, Bede subscribed to a conventional view in which the most common image associated with heresy was that of the snake. Patristic authors such as Augustine of Hippo and Ambrose had made the association between the serpent and these archaic heresies commonplace; Ambrose cautions his readers against the 'coluber perfidiae' [snake of perfidy], whilst Augustine ascribes sharp serpentine tongues to the enemies of the Church.[12] In his preface to *Historia Ecclesiastica,* Bede references Pelagian heresy and quotes a section of poetry that he attributes to Prosper, a disciple of Augustine of Hippo. In this, Prosper too uses the image of the creeping serpent to symbolise heresy.[13] This kind of imagery takes the paradigm of the deceptive serpent of the scriptural Genesis and uses it to signify false teaching, cunning and the insidiousness of heretical ideas.

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[10] Plummer, C. (ed.), *Venerabilis Baedae opera historica* (Oxford, 1896), Vol I, p. lxii-lxiii.

[11] Holder, A., 'Hunting Snakes in the Grass: Bede as heresiologist' in E. Mullins and D. Scully (eds) *Listen, O Isles, unto Me: Studies in Medieval Word and Image in Honour of Jennifer O'Reilly* (Cork, 2011) pp. 105-114.

[12] See: Ambrose, *Expositio evangelii secundum Lucam* 2, ed. M. Adriaen, CCSL 14 (Turnhout, 1957), p. 58, ll. 843-844; Augustine of Hippo, *Ennarationes in Psalmos 139.6*, ed. E. Dekkers and J. Fraipont, CCSL 38-40 (Turnhout 1956) vol. 40, p. 2015, ll.1-7.

[13] Bede, *HE* I, 10, p. 38-9.

Although this perspective on the image of the serpent is new to this thesis, much of the imagery that Bede associates with the serpent is familiar. The first and most common association he makes is between the serpent and the Devil or diabolical agency. This is once again guided by the paradigm of the tempter in *In Genesim* and the *draco* of *Explanatio Apocalypseos,* both of which are highly represented in their respective texts. The second association is with wilderness, wild or hostile environments, and marginality. Whilst rarely the focus of Bede's writing, these serpents appear scattered through all three texts, and involve the image of the serpent as an indicator of an uninhabited environment on the fringe of religious and societal order. This link between serpent and wilderness is familiar in *Beowulf* and the *Visio Sancte Pauli*.[14] A third association is between the serpent and human unbelievers, heretics, non-Christians and people considered to be morally corrupt by Bede and his society. None of these types of serpent are totally distinct, and the serpent of the wilderness is also evocative of heathen unbelievers, as well as of Hell, the ultimate wilderness and place of exile. The fourth and final association is between the serpent and venom, poison, and insidiousness, themes now familiar from the medical texts.[15]

It is already possible to see a common thread woven between these five uses of the image of the serpent in Bede's exegetical and historical writing. In all cases, the underlying implication of the image is damnation, exile and death. The tempter, the Devil and the *draco* in *Explanatio Apocalypseos* are the cause and the means of human mortality as it is understood by the Christian worldview. The faithless, the morally corrupt and heretics are the damned who will not receive everlasting life and will perpetuate the dominance of mortality over human existence. As previously discussed, the wilderness and the margins of society are strongly associated with exile, a central theme in the Anglo-Saxon understanding of both damnation and death.[16] The physicality of the serpent, its venom and its perceived role in the destruction and decomposition of bodies both living and dead persists throughout Bede's work.

## 4. *In Genesim*

Bede's *In Genesim* is a commentary on the Vulgate *Genesis,* written in Latin.

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[14] Chapter 2, 5.i, 5.ii.

[15] Chapter 1, 6.

[16] Chapter 2, 5.ii.

The date of the work's completion is debateable, since it was written in several stages over the course of Bede's career.[17] However, based on historical considerations surrounding the elevation of Bishop Acca (to whom the work is addressed), Kendal has suggested a *terminus post quem* of 709 for the first recension of Book I.[18] Darby agrees with this date based on his analysis of Bede's model for understanding the world ages, which developed over Bede's lifetime.[19] The most complete version of the text takes the form of a verse-by-verse analysis of the Vulgate *Genesis* from the beginning to chapter 21 verse 10. It is organised into four books. Book I covers chapters one through to three, and the events from the initial creation from nothing through to the casting of Adam and Eve out of paradise. Book II covers chapters 4 through to 10, and the events from the birth of Cain to the death of Noah. Book III deals with chapters 10 through to 14, from the listing of Noah's descendants through to Abraham's rejection of reward from the King of Sodom. Book IV covers the events from God's revelation about the descendants of Abraham to the casting out of Hagar.

*In Genesim,* survives in at least 22 manuscripts.[20] This makes it a very well represented text in the manuscript record.[21] The intention of the work, as set forth by the author himself in his *praefatio*, is to bring together and summarise the core learning he has been able to glean from various scholarly and rare texts, making that knowledge readily available to less educated readers.[22] The text is indeed a work of

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[17] Kendal, *Bede: Commentary on Genesis,* p. 40-45.

[18] Kendal, *Bede: Commentary on Genesis* p. 41.

[19] Darby, *Bede and the End of Time,* p. 191.

[20] For a list manuscripts containing all or part of *In Genesim*, see Calvin B. Kendall, (ed. and trans), Bede, *On Genesis,* (Liverpool, 2008), pp. 57-9.

[21] Whitelock has argued that *In Genesim* was in low demand as an intellectual work relative to the rest of Bede's writings. (See Whitelock, D., 'After Bede' Jarrow Lecture, (1960) in Lapidge (ed.) *Bede and His World: The Jarrow Lectures 1958-1993* vol. 1 (Aldershot, Hampshire and Brookfield VT, 1994), especially pp. 4 and 10). This view has been more recently acknowledged by Kendal (See Kendal (ed. and trans.) Bede, *On Genesis,* p. 1-2). The reason for this seems to be precisely as Bede states in his *praefatio*; there were other more authoritative works commenting on Genesis in circulation at the time. (Bede, *In Gen,* Praefatio, C. W., CCSL CVIII (Turnhout, 1967), p. 1). Joshua Westgard finds a similar pattern in Frankia, where *In Genesim,* while present in some libraries, was not in particularly high demand (Westgard, J, 'Bede and the Continent in the Carolingian Age and Beyond' in S. De Gregorio (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Bede* (Cambridge, 2010) pp. 207-208).

[22] Bede, *In Gen,* Praefatio, ed. Charles W. Jones, *Libri quatuor in principum Genesis usque ad navtivitatem Isaac et eiectionem Ismahelis adnotationum* CCSL CVIII (Turnhout, 1967), pp. 1-2. Bede especially cites the works of Basil of Caesarea, Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo as sources.

synthesis; a fact which has been recognised by historians and has even given rise to some debate about whether or not Bede's stated intention implies ignorance or lack of scholarship on the part of the English audience.[23] The work is certainly simple and condensed, but whether it is simplified or not does not affect this study as much as the fact that it is a distillation of what Bede thought was most important of all the biblical commentaries on Genesis that he knew. Even if only in its selectivity, Bede's *In Genesim* provides an educated Anglo-Saxon perspective on the image of the serpent in scripture. What is more, Bede's work is not simply a compilation of the works of others, but a deliberate synthesis of that body of learning; Kendal has detected in the work a pastoral aspect, and even suggests that some passages have been written deliberately to be included in the sermons of Bede's audience, whom Kendal surmises were, in part, pastoral clergy.[24]

Since it is a commentary, where and in what context the image of the serpent appears in *In Genesim* is most often dictated by the mention of serpents in the scriptural text. Similarly, his choice of terminology derives from the terminology used in the Vulgate. Nevertheless the terminology used in *In Genesim* is important in understanding how Bede and other Anglo-Saxons interpreted and understood the terms, how they imagined the physical animals that they applied to and how they applied the terms elsewhere. Overall, the text contains fifty-five references to serpentine creatures. The majority of these are to the word *serpens,* with a total 33 instances of that word.[25] With the exception of just two, all of these are in reference to

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[23] Brown subscribes to the view that Bede correctly considered the English as a simple people when he wrote *In Genesim* (See Brown, G. H., *Bede the Venerable* (Boston, 1987), pp. 42-3). See also Carroll, *The Venerable Bede* (Washington, DC, 1946) p. 250; and McClure, 'Bede's *Notes on Genesis* and the training of the Anglo-Saxon clergy' in Walsh and Woods (eds.) *The Bible in the Medieval World* (Oxford, 1986), pp. 17–19. However, DeGregorio (see: De Gregorio, 'Bede's *In Ezram et Neemiam* and the Reform of the Northumbrian Church', *Speculum* 79 (2004), pp. 1–2) and Kendall (See: Kendall, *On Genesis,* p. 2) argue that Bede's self-deprecating tone in his *praefatio* does not reflect the sophistication of the text, which is a work of scholarly complexity not aimed at a simplistic audience.

[24] Kendall, *On Genesis,* pp. 3-4. In his examination of Bedan works in the Carolingian world, Westgard has also noted that Bede's scriptural commentaries in particular were ofted 'excerpted for homiletic use' Westgard, 'Bede and the Continent' (2010) p. 207.

[25] Bede, *In Gen,* I, 1.24, l. 684, p. 23; I, 1.24, l. 685, p. 23; I, 1.28, l. 892, p. 29; I, 1.29-30, l. 905, p. 30; I, 2.3, l. 1179, p. 38; I, 2.9, l. 1473, p. 47; I, 3.1, l. 1874, p. 59; I, 3.1, l. 1875, p 59; I, 3.1, l. 1881-2, p. 59; I, 3.1, l. 1904, p. 60; I, 3.1, l. 1908, p. 60; I, 3.1, l. 1913, p. 60; I, 3.1, l. 1927, p. 60; I, 3.1, l. 1930, p. 60; I, 3.1, l. 1950-1, p. 61; I, 3.13, l. 2067, p. 65; I, 3.13, l. 2069, p. 65; I, 3.13, l. 2072, p. 65; I, 3.13, l. 2073, p. 65; I, 3.13, l. 2075, p. 65; I, 3.13, l. 2079, p. 65; I, 3.13, l. 2079, p. 65; I, 3.13, l. 2085, p. 65; I, 3.14, l. 2101, p. 66; I, 3.15, l. 2112, p. 66; I, 3.15, l. 2116, p. 66; I, 3.15, l. 2121, p. 66; I, 3.15, l. 2124, p. 66; I, 3.15, l. 2126, p. 66; I, 3.15,

the figure of the tempter in the early part of *Genesis*.[26] The second most common term used is *reptile,* with 19 instances. [27] In all of these cases, Bede uses the word to refer not to a specific animal, but to the group of animals listed amongst God's creations in the *Vulgate*. In addition to these, there is a single use of the word *draco* [dragon], used when Bede quotes Psalm 148:7.[28] There is also one instance of the term *viper* [viper, adder] in a quote from Luke 3:7.[29] Finally Bede mentions the word *vermis* once in reference not to serpents proper, but to the destructive invertebrates that devour wooden beams.[30]

### 4.i. The serpent as one of God's creatures

Where the Latin word *reptile* is used, it signifies a class of animal rather than a particular species. Bede explicitly discusses this in his early commentary, when he mentions that the *serpens* is to be classed among the *reptilia* rather than the 'bestias terrae' [beasts of the earth].[31] Bede makes it clear that although serpents are *reptilia, reptilia* are not necessarily serpents:

> Iubet ergo producere deus terram iumenta et **reptilia** et bestias terrae.Quia uero nomine bestiarum omne quicquid ore uel unguibus saeuit, exceptis **serpentibus**, constat esse comprehensum; nomine autem **reptilium** terrae etiam **serpentes** continentur; nomine uero iumentorum ea quae in usu sunt hominum animalia designantur.
>
> Therefore, God commands the earth to bring forth cattle and **creeping**

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l. 2132, p. 66; I, 3.16, l. 2163, p. 67; I, 3.22, l. 2250, p. 70; II, 5.24, l. 859, p. 97; IV, 18.14, l. 877, p. 218.

[26] The two exceptions are when Bede specifies that the serpent is included under the broader category 'reptilia' (See: Bede, *In Gen*, Book 1 Chapter 1:24, ll. 681-96, p.23, transl. Kendall, *On Genesis,* (Liverpool 2008), p. 88) and when he compares sinners to figurative serpents (See: Bede, *In Gen*, Book 1 Chapter 2:3, ll. 1176-81, p. 38, transl. Kendall, p. 103).

[27] Bede, *In Gen,* I, 1.20, l. 583, p. 20; I, 1.20, l. 605, p. 21; I, 1.21, l. 617, p. 21; I, 1.24, l. 669 p. 23; I, 1.24, l. 682, p. 23; I, 1.24, l. 685, p. 23; I, 1.24, l. 693, p. 23; I, 1.24, l. 695, p. 23; I, 1.24, l. 698, p. 23; I, 1.24, l. 700, p. 23; I, 1.24, l. 702, p. 24; I, 1.26, l. 799, p. 27; I, 2.3, l. 1158, p. 37; I, 2.3, l. 1175, p. 38; I, 2.19, l. 1731, p. 54; II, 4.6-7, l. 1024, p. 101; II, 6.21, l 1414, p. 113; II, 8.16-18, l. 1903, p. 126; II, 8.22, l. 2122, p. 132.

[28] Bede, *In Gen*, I. 2.19, ll. 1728-33, p. 54; *Vulgate,* Ps.148 v.7.

[29] Bede, *In Gen*, IV, 17.3-4, ll. 322-4, p.203.

[30] Bede, *In Gen*, II, 6.14-15, ll. 1167-72, p.106.

[31] Bede, *In Gen*, I, 1:24, ll. 682-5, p.23, transl. Kendall, p. 88.

**things**, and beasts of the earth, because we know that the word 'beasts' in fact comprehends all those that rage with mouth or claws, with the exception of **serpents,** and under the name of '**creeping things** of the earth' **serpents** are also included.[32]

This is Bede's first mention of serpentine animals in the commentary, and comes in the midst of several similar discussions in Book I in which Bede deals with different types of animals and the way that they fit into the groups mentioned in the Vulgate. It is significant that he gives attention to the *serpens* [serpent].  In this section, Bede seeks to distinguish between the *reptilia* [creeping things] and the *bestias terrae* [beasts of the earth]. The serpent, it seems is the cause of confusion in this instance since he picks it out specifically as one of the *reptilia* and explicitly states that it is excepted from the *bestias terrae*. One of the chief characteristics Bede attributes to the *bestias terrae* are their 'unguibus' [claws]. Bede's need to remind the reader that the serpent is not one of these suggests he is thinking already of the serpent that will tempt Adam and Eve, which has limbs at that point in the narrative but is still different to the clawed beasts of the earth. This is another example of a serpent being physically on a border, in this case between one of nature's groupings and another. Bede recognizes the ambiguity of the physical form of the serpent in *Genesis.*

All uses of the word *reptile* refer to this same broad group of animals, either as they were created in the early part of *Genesis* or as animals aboard Noah's ark. Bede's discussion does not go into detail about the nature of this group of animals. He does not expand on the features they share in common and all of the references to *reptilia* refer to them in the context of the multitude of animal types created by God and later saved in Noah's Ark.[33] Kendal's translation of the word as 'creeping thing' echoes the decision made by Cockayne to selectively translate the Old English *wyrm* as 'creeping thing' in the Old English medical texts.[34] However, Bede never uses the word *reptile* by itself to describe an animal. Nor does he ever apply it to an individual rather than

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[32] Bede, *In Gen*, I, 1:24, ll. 681-96, p.23, transl. Kendall, p. 88.

[33] Bede, *In Gen*, I, 1:20, ll. 583-5, p.20; I, 1:20, ll. 604-6, p. 21; I, 1:21, ll. 615-18, p. 21; I, 1:24, ll. 668-70, p. 23; I, 1:24, l., 682, p. 23; I, 1:24, l., 685, p. 23; I, 1:24, l. 693, p. 23; I, 1:24, l., 695, p. 23; I, 1:25, l. 698, p. 23; I, 1:25, l. 700, p. 231; I, 1:25, l. 703, p. 23; I, 1:25-6, ll. 799, p. 27;

[34] Chapter 1, 5.i.

a group. For this reason, *reptilia* are not strictly relevant to this study, but some of the animals that fall under its terminological umbrella are.

### 4.ii. The serpent as tempter: animal and symbol

In Bede's interpretation of *Genesis,* there are two aspects to the *serpens*. The first of these is the animal *serpens*; this is one of God's creatures, part of the group known as *reptilia,* created along with the other land animals on the sixth day. The second is the figurative serpent, a symbol of deceit in the form of the tempter. As the narrative of *Genesis* and Bede's interpretation progress together, the interplay between these two aspects of the *serpens* create a complex role for the image of the serpent within *In Genesim.*

Bede makes sure to clearly define the *serpens* as an animal, markedly different in nature from Man. Throughout *In Genesim,* Bede is explicit in his distinction of man as different from the rest of the animate inhabitants of Eden. This distinction is based on the possession of a rational soul, something which Bede explains is exclusive – among earthly beings – to Man. He rationalizes this by referring specifically to the orientation of the human body in relation to Earth and Heaven:

> Congruit ergo et corpus eius animae rationabili, non secundum
> liniamenta figuras que membrorum, sed potius secundum id quod in
> caelum erectum est ad intuenda…[35]

> Therefore his body is suited to a rational soul, not in accordance with
> the features and shapes of his limbs, but rather in accordance with that
> which was lifted up into the sky for the sake of contemplating the
> celestial objects.

Bede's logic is based upon the premise that creation as a whole, physical and metaphysical, was designed by God to be reflective of the ordained order of Creation. His belief that the physical world reflects and represents spiritual reality is a central assumption running through not only *In Genesim* but all of Bede's works. The theory that rationality and closeness to God is reflected in the orientation of Man's body becomes important to the narrative of the serpent in *Genesis* later, when God's

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[35] Bede, *In Gen*, I, 1:25-6, ll. 791-801, p. 26-7, transl. Kendall, p. 91;

judgment sets it in both physical and spiritual opposition to Man. For now, it is enough to note that Bede considered Man unique in the possession of a rational soul.

When Bede comes to describe the serpent, however, a literal reading of the scripture would challenge his perception of man as separate from the animals by virtue of a rational soul. Bede deals with *Genesis* 3 v.1, 'Sed et **serpens** erat callidior cunctis animantibus terrae quae fecerat dominus deus' [Now the serpent was more subtle than any of the beasts of the earth which the Lord God had made]:

> Potest iste **serpens** non irrationabili anima sua, sed alieno iam spiritu, id est diabolico, "callidior" dici "cunctis animantibus". [36]
>
> This **serpent** can be said to be 'more subtle than any of the beasts' not by reason of its own irrational mind, but from a spirit up to then foreign to it, that is, a diabolic spirit.

It is vitally important that Bede does not read the serpent as the perpetrator of the temptation of Adam and Eve. He does not even credit the animal with a rational mind, but ascribes any subtlety it has to the spirit of the tempter that Bede imagined inhabits the body of the animal. Bede imagines this as a traditional possession, describing the Devil, 'iam implens **serpentem**, ei que suum spiritum miscens, eo more quo uates demoniorum impleri solent' [*filling the **serpent** at that moment, and mingling his own spirit in him, in the way in which the soothsayers of the demons are accustomed to be filled*].[37] Later, he even describes this state as 'passione cui exorcista requiritur' [that malady for which an exorcist is required].[38] The serpent neither understands language, nor does he share the will of the Devil who has possessed him.[39] Whenever Bede ascribes cunning or thought to the figure of the tempter, he is careful to credit the Devil and not the serpent in Book I, when he notes 'quanta arte nequitiae diabolus hominem ab initio temptauerit' [with what villainous cunning **the devil** tempted man from the beginning]. [40]

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[36] Bede, *In Gen*, I, 3.1, ll. 1875-7, p.59, transl. Kendall, p. 125.

[37] Bede, *In Gen*, I, 3.1, ll. 1881-3, p.59, transl. Kendall, p. 125.

[38] Bede, *In Gen,* I, 3.1, ll. 1916-17, p. 60, transl. Kendall, p. 126.

[39] See Bede, *In Gen*, I, 3.1, ll. 1912-14, p.60 transl. Kendall, p. 126.

[40] Bede, *In Gen,* I, 3.4-5, ll. 1939, p. 61, trans Kendall, p. 127.

This in turn presents Bede with a second interpretative problem; if the serpent's will and agency is not involved in the temptation, then how is it that the Devil is able to possess it, and why did he think to possess the serpent in the first place? Bede attributes this to providence, under which he says that the Devil was permitted to inhabit the serpent 'significandi gratia factum est' [for the sake of giving a sign]. [41] It is Bede's understanding that the Devil could inhabit the serpent because the serpent's physical form reflects the evil intentions of the Devil, just as Man's physical form reflects the rational, spiritual mind. Due to divine 'prouidentiae' [providence], under which Bede believed the universe was created, the serpent is a symbol of those intentions, written into the divine – and readable – plan of the natural world.[42] Thus the serpent as a symbol enters into the text. Bede does not expand upon why the serpent signifies diabolical intent and serves as a good vessel for the Devil at this point. However, it is here that he first acknowledges the dual nature of the image of the serpent in *Genesis*. It is both a physical animal and a figurative one, and the two natures are intertwined.

### 4.iia. God's judgment of the serpent: the limbless snake as spiritual sign

During his commentary on the temptation itself, Bede, like the Vulgate, refers to the words of the tempter as being the serpent's words. He does this on four separate occasions. [43] However, the interaction between the serpent and Eve in *In Genesim* is understood by Bede to really be an interaction between the Devil and Eve. The body and nature of the serpent are brought to the fore again in Bede's commentary on its judgment and punishment. It is during this section that Bede further develops the dual nature of the serpent as both a physical animal and a spiritual symbol.

In the Vulgate, Eve attributes her temptation not to the Devil but to the serpent itself when she is questioned (Gen. 3 v.13). This is also reflected in the Eve of the Old English poetic rendering of the book of *Genesis,* and also the Old English

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[41] Bede, *In Gen*, I, 3.1, ll. 1904-5, p. 60, transl. Kendall, p. 126.

[42] Bede, *In Gen*, I, 3.1, ll. 1909, p. 60, transl. Kendall, p. 126.

[43] Bede refers to the serpent as speaking in: Bede, *In Gen*, I, 3.3-5, ll. 1923, p.60, transl. Kendall, p. 126-7; I, 3.3-5, ll. 1930, p.60, transl. Kendall, p. 126-7; I, 3.3-5-3.6a, ll. 1951-2, p.61, transl. Kendall, p. 127; I, 3.22, ll. 2250, p.70 transl. Kendall, p. 137.

poem *Christ and Satan*.[44] However, Bede is careful to refute what she says. Whilst he does not explicitly say that she is mistaken, he points out that if Eve were correct, God would be blameworthy for having created the serpent in paradise:

> Nec ista confitetur peccatum, sed in alterum refert - impari sexu, pari fastu. "**Serpens**," inquit, "decepit me et comedi," quasi cuiusquam suasio praecepto dei debuerit anteponi. Et ipsa autem culpae causam in creatorem refert, qui serpentem in paradiso per quem deciperetur creauerit. [45]

> And she – opposite in sex, but equal in pride – does not confess her sin, but blames it on another… 'The **serpent**', she says, 'deceived me, and I did eat', as if anyone's urging ought to be preferred to the command of God. And she also blames the cause of the sin on the Creator, who created the serpent in paradise, by whom she was deceived.

The idea that God was at fault is inconceivable, of course, both to Bede and his audience. The fact that Eve is mistaken does not even bear explicit comment in his writing. Bede has already explained the true nature of the deceiver in the Garden of Eden, and it is not the serpent himself whom God created there, but the Devil.

It is surprising to an audience who subscribes to Bede's interpretation, then, when in *Genesis* 13 v.14 God punishes the serpent. Bede's explanation is that God does not punish the animal, which Bede is careful from this point on to emphasise is irrational, but the Devil. Bede takes time to reiterate the fact that the serpent cannot respond to God's accusation of the crime as Eve could in the previous paragraph because he is not responsible in lines 2073-2078.[46] He then explains that the contemporary snake present in Bede's world is a figurative representation of the

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[44] Chapter 3, 3.ic and 3.iiid.

[45] Bede, *In Gen*, I, 3.13, ll 2068-72. p 65. transl. Kendall, p. 131.

[46] Quia **serpens** cur hoc fecerit non est interrogatus, potest uideri quod non ipse utique id sua natura et uoluntate fecerat, sed diabolus de illo et per illum fuerat operatus, qui iam ex peccato impietatis ac superbiae suae igni destinatus fuerat [Because the serpent is not asked why he did this, it can be seen that he had certainly not done it, of his own nature and will, but that the devil, who had already been destined to the fire on account of the sin of disobedience and pride, had worked with him and through him.] (Bede, *In Gen*, I, 3.14, ll. 2073-2078 p 652, transl. Kendall, p. 131.)

punishment inflicted on the tempter:

> Super pectus quippe graditur **serpens**, quia omnes gressus diaboli
> nequitiae sunt et fraudes; nam in "pectore" calliditatem et uersutias
> cogitationum eius indicat, quibus ad eos quos uult decipere serpit, pro
> quo antiqua translatio habet, pectore et uentre repes.

> Indeed, the **serpent** goes upon his breast, because all the courses of the
> devil are villainies and deceits; for 'on his breast' indicates his craft and
> the stratagems of his thoughts, with which he creeps to those whom he
> wishes to deceive, for which the old translation has, you will creep on
> your breast and belly. [47]

The punishment, Bede argues, applies to the Devil. It is this punishment that is
represented in the physical body of the serpent. He goes on to list some of the aspects
of the ongoing battle between the Devil and man that are represented in the limbless
crawling body of the serpent in an important section that alludes to heresy:

> Repit autem pectore cum terrenas hominibus, quos sua membra facere
> desiderat, cogitationes suggerit. Repit et uentre cum eos ingluuie
> superatos in aestum libidinis exitat. Omnia namque quae repunt corpus
> per terram trahunt. Corpus autem diaboli sunt omnes reprobi, et ipse
> pectore et uentre suo repit, cum eos per iniquas cogitations uel
> inlecebras comessationes ac luxuriae ad infima deprimit. Deuorat autem
> terram cum errore pecantium pascitur ac delectatur, eosque seducens
> ad interitum rapit.

> But he creeps on his breast when he suggests earthy thoughts to men,
> whom he desires to make his members. And he creeps on his belly when
> he arouses them, overcome by gluttony, to the heat of passion. For all
> things that creep drag their body along the ground. Moreover all
> reprobates are the body of the devil, and he creeps on his breast and
> belly, when he presses them down to hell with perverse thoughts and the
> enticements of riotous feasting. And he devours the earth when he feeds

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[47] Bede, *In Gen*, I, 3.14, ll. 2084-88 p 652. transl. Kendall, p. 133.

upon and takes delight in the error of sinners and, leading them astray, snatches them to destruction.[48]

This is Bede's understanding of the image of the serpent in *Genesis,* in other works and in his reality. The physical body of the serpent represents the spiritual bodies of those who are sinful – lowly, creeping and suggestive. These serpentine spiritual bodies in turn make up the body of the Devil. The serpent, therefore, represents the Devil as he interacts with mankind – subversive, insidious and hidden in his crawling motion as he moves amongst mankind and leads them astray. The crawling body literally presses the souls of sinners down to Hell with his belly.

Although he does not explore this further in *In Genesim,* the image of bodies of people making up a larger spiritual 'body' is central to Bede's exegetical model. In Bede's intellectual environment, the Church is thought of as a spiritual body, made up of the souls of its faithful with Christ at the head. Jennifer O'Reilly has expanded on Bede's interaction with this concept in a thorough and eloquent distillation of Bede's writing on the theme in his *On the Temple*; in this she explains that Bede adhered to a fourfold 'interpretation of the Temple as a figure of the incarnate body of Christ, the community of the church on earth, the individual soul and the heavenly sanctuary or city of the new Jerusalem'.[49] This is an Augustinian model; Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* imagines the Heavenly city as being made up of the souls of the faithful and is the pretext to Bede's conception of the Church.[50] In Bede's analysis of the serpent's physical form, he sees an unholy mirror to this Church of faithful bodies. Like the bodies of the faithful making up the figurative Church, the unfaithful, perfidious and heretical make up the body of a figurative serpent, implicitly opposed the Church. In turn, these sinners are individually comparable to serpents, as Bede states explicitly in lines 1178-81 of *In Genesim.*[51] This figurative serpent is portrayed

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[48] Bede, *In Gen,* I, 3.14, ll. 2088-97, p.65, transl. Kendall, p. 132.

[49] O'Reilly, J., 'Introduction' in S. Connolly ed. and transl., *Bede: On the Temple,* (Liverpool, 1995), p. xxiii.

[50] Augustine, *De Civitate Dei,* ed. B. Dombart and A. Kalb, CCSL 47 and 48 (Turnhout, 1955)

[51] qui merito **serpentibus** comparari poterant ac bestiis, propter saeuitiam scilicet et quia toto animo terrestribus inherere curis uel inlecebris [who could rightly be compared to serpents and beasts on account of their cruelty and because they clung with their whole mind to earthly cares and allurements]; Bede, *In Gen*, I.2:3, ll. 1178-81, p. 38, transl. Kendall, p. 103.

not only as pressing souls down to Hell with its belly, but as deliberately leading them astray and devouring them.

Again, the link between the serpent and damnation is re-enforced, as the animal that caused Man to fall and become mortal in the first place is pictured literally pushing them into the ground, strongly figurative of both the grave and of Hell. Earth is also the element from which Man was created and to which, thanks to the serpent, he will return, as stated in Genesis 3:19. Bede describes the serpent as 'delectatur' [devouring] this earth, and later describes the literal, irrational serpent's habit of eating dust as symbolic of the 'deuorationis spiritalis' [spiritual devouring] of mankind by the figurative serpent.[52] Although Bede is referring to a spiritual sign and alluding to heresy, the familiar associations of exile, damnation and the devouring of the physical human body are present.

### 4.iii. The Enemy of Mankind in Bede's day

In addition to explaining this figurative interpretation of the serpent, Bede's *In Genesim* gives several clues to what Bede believed the threat and enmity of the serpent looked like in his contemporary environment. In response to Genesis 3:16 of the Vulgate in which God announces eternal enmity between Eve's children and those of the serpent, Bede explains:

> Semen illius est peruersa suggestio; semen mulieris fructus boni operis,
> quo peruersae suggestioni resistitur.[53]
> His seed is perverse suggestion; the seed of the woman is the fruit of
> good work, by which perverse suggestion is resisted.

In these lines there is another allusion to heresy; the perverse suggestion mentioned here is both the lies of the serpent in the garden of Eden and false teachings in the contemporary world. Bede's meaning is clarified when this is cross-referenced with a direct mention of heresy in his earlier work, *Explanatio Apocalypseos.* In this text, Bede interprets an image of monstrous, leonine-headed serpent-tailed creatures who will destroy a great proportion of the population of the world according to the Vulgate

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[52] Bede, *In Gen*, I, 3.14, ll. 2101, p.65 transl. Kendall, p. 132.

[53] Bede, *In Gen*, I, 3.15, ll. 2109-34, p.66 transl. Kendall, p. 133.

Revelation 9:19. These creatures, Bede writes, represent 'Falsi doctores antiqui serpentis, qui hominem decepit' [false teachers of the old serpent who deceived man].[54] In the Vulgate, these creatures destroy one third of the population, demonstrating the power that Bede perceived heresy had to damn and destroy. The point that Bede believed the enemy-serpent was present in his own time in the form of unbelievers is re-enforced by a single reference in Book VI of *In Genesim*, in which Bede quotes from Luke 3:7 and calls the Jews 'genimina…viperarum' [the offspring of vipers]. [55] As well as being present in the false teachings of unbelievers, Bede also points out that the dangerous serpent of Eden is also present in the contemporary animal kingdom. The irrational serpent, Bede writes is the indiscriminate 'inimicus' [enemy] of all of the animals, on account of its 'ueneni' [poison]. [56] This poison, he asserts, was implanted into the serpent at the time of the fall of man, since previous to this, as he states elsewhere, no poison existed. [57]

Finally, there is evidence that Bede recognized that death itself is a symptom of this serpent. In fact, he explicitly states that both the serpent and the heel that crushes his head in Genesis 3:15 are figurative of death:

Insidiatur calcaneo, cum in fine uitae praesentis nos rapere satagit, "calcaneo" namque, qui finis est corporis, non inmerito finis uitae nostrae designatur, quod utrumque ipsa quoque **serpentis** conditio figurate denuntiat, qui conteri solet ab omnibus qui possunt, et ipse feriendis hominum uestigiis insidiari non desinit.[58]

He lies in wait for the heel, when at the end of our present life he bustles about to seize us. For the end of our life is rightly dignified by the 'heel', which is the end of the body, because that condition of the **serpent**, who is crushed by all who can, and himself does not cease to lie in wait to strike at the feet of men, also figuratively signifies both.

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[54] Bede, *Explanatio Apocalypseos,* ed. R. Gryson, *Bedae presbyteri Exposition Apocalypseos,* CCSL CXXI (Turnhout, 2001); trans F. Wallis, *Bede: Commentary on Revelation* (Liverpool, 2013) II, 9.19, p. 359; transl. Wallis, p. 174.

[55] Bede, *In Gen*, IV, 17.3-4, l. 324, p.203 transl. Kendall, p. 281.

[56] Bede, *In Gen*, I, 3.15, ll. 2109-34, p.66 transl. Kendall, p. 133.

[57] See: Bede, *In Gen*, I, 1:29-30, ll. 893-907, p. 29-30, transl. Kendall, p. 94.

[58] Bede, *In Gen*, I, 3.15, ll. 2109-34, p.66 transl. Kendall, p. 133.

 Bede makes a clear link between death and the serpent, and in doing so encapsulates the meaning of the image of the serpent in *In Genesim.* The diabolical agency that caused the fall of man and human heretics share an association with the venom of the real serpent, in that they pose the same threat to mankind. Whether by means of deceptive words or actual venom, they infiltrate the spiritual or physical body and destroy it from within. Here as in the previous three chapters, the serpent is hidden, insidious and figurative of death.

5. Historia Ecclesiastica

   *In Genesim* contained several implicit references to the way that Bede viewed the serpent and its image in his contemporary world. *Historia Ecclesiastica* relates directly to this contemporary world, and unlike *In Genesim,* its focus is not explicitly exegetical. The text contains five references to the word *serpens*.[59] In four instances they refer to real serpents Bede believed existed in his contemporary world; only one instance pertains to the biblical serpent of *Genesis*. There is one use of the word *draco* where Bede quotes Isaiah 35:7.[60] Finally, there is one use of the word *reptile* in the context of an anecdote about the inability of any serpentine creature to survive in Ireland.[61]

   5.i. Driving out Serpents in *Historia Ecclesiastica*
  The first mention Bede makes of the *serpens* occurs in the first book and chapter of the *Historia Ecclesiastica,* in an aside about the uses of the mineral jet:

> Quae etiam uenis metallorum, aeris ferri plumbi et argenti, fecunda
> gignit et lapidem gagatem plurimum optimumque; est autem
> nigrogemmeus, et ardens igni admotus, incensus **serpentes** fugat…

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[59] Bede, *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* Book I. Ch, 1; ed. and transl. Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (Oxford, 1969, repr. 1998), p. 16; I. 1, p. 18; I. 1, p. 18; I. 1, p. 20; Bede, *HE*, I. 27, p. 100.

[60] Bede, *HE,* III. 23, p. 286.

[61] Bede, *HE,* I. 1, p. 18.

The land also has rich veins of metal, copper, iron, lead and silver. It produces a great deal of excellent jet, which is glossy black and burns when put into fire and, when kindled, it drives away **serpents**...[62]

Bede would have known of this usage for jet through the *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville, who himself derives the anecdote from chapter 36 of Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*. Pliny states that burning jet:[63]

fugat **serpentes** ita recreatque volvae strangulationes. deprendit sonticum morbum et virginitatem suffutus. [64]

drives off **snakes** and relieves suffocation of the uterus. Its fumes detect attempts to simulate a disabling illness or a state of virginity.

Jet is overwhelmingly found in female graves from the Roman period, further exemplifying the connection between jet and uterine issues.[65] The serpent is associated with medicine in general in the sign of Asclepius, and the serpent is also a potently phallic symbol that might be associated with the womb by virtue of its connection to fertility. There is also a connection, for Bede at least, between the serpent and deception. To a Christian Anglo-Saxon audience there would have been an obvious link via *Genesis* between the driving away of the serpent and the unmasking of a feigned sinless state. The serpent, also referred to as *serpens* in *Genesis,* is the physical form of the tempter during Adam and Eve's first experience of temptation and ultimately of sin. The deception inherent in a pretended state of virginity is thematically linked to those events, although Bede does not explicitly mention it. Isidore's corresponding section differs slightly from Pliny's:

[62] Bede, *HE,* Book I. 1, p. 15-17.

[63] For Isidore, see below. It is not known whether or not Bede knew book 36 of Pliny's *Natural History* first hand (see Ogilvy, *Books Known to the English,* (Cambridge Mass., 1967), p. 223). Isidore's *Etymologies,* however would certainly have been available to Bede (See ibid., p.166).

[64] Pliny, *Natural History*, Book xxxvi, Ch. xxxvii, ed. and transl. D. E. Eichhholz, LOEB edition, (London, 1963) vol. X, p. 114-5.

[65] Allason-Jones, L., *Roman Jet in the Yorkshire Museum* (York, 1996).

incensus **serpentes** fugat, daemoniacos prodit, virginitatem

deprehendit…[66]

It drives away **snakes** when it is burned. It reveals those who are

possessed by demons, and it signals the presence of virginity…

Isidore's replacement of the person feigning a disease to the person possessed by a

demon is a profound change, and one in line both with Isidore's Christianity and the

image of the serpent. The serpent is a diabolical symbol and agent, and it is logical to

imagine that what drives away serpents might also uncover demonic entities as well as

deception. As Bede himself explains in *In Genesim,* the serpent in the Garden of Eden

was in a sense the first example of possession.[67] The theme of deception and

concealment is still present, but the emphasis in Isidore is on the Devil rather than on

a deceptive person.

Of all of jet's uses, Bede chooses (or perhaps remembers) the driving away of

serpents to include as an aside in his *Historia Ecclesiastica.* Perhaps this is because just a

few lines later he alludes to the driving out of serpents again, this time in the context

of Ireland:

nullum ibi **reptile** uideri soleat, nullus uiuere **serpens** ualeat. Nam

saepe illo de Brittania adlati **serpentes,** mox ut proximante terris

nauigio odore aeris illius adtacti fuerint, intereunt; quin potius omnia

pene quae de eadem insula / sunt contra **uenenum** ualent. Denique

uidimus, quibusdam a **serpente** percussis, rasa folia codicum qui de

Hibernia fuerant, et ipsam rasuram aquae immissam ac potui datam

talibus protinus totam uim ueneni grassantis, totum inflati corporis

absumsisse ac sedasse tumorem.

No **reptile** is found there nor could a **serpent** survive; for although

**serpents** have often been brought from Britain, as soon as the ship

approaches land they are affected by the scent of the air and they perish.

In fact almost everything the island produces is efficacious against

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[66] Isidore, *Etymologiarum siue Originum libri XX*, ed. W. M. Lindsay (Oxford, 1911), Book XVI, chapter iv, p. 624. Translated in: Barney, S. A. et al (eds), *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville,* (Cambridge, 2006), p. 319.

[67] See: Bede, *In Gen,* I, 3.1, ll. 1916-17, p. 60, transl. Kendall, p. 126.

**poison**. For instance we have seen how, in the case of people suffering from **snake-bite**, the leaves of manuscripts from Ireland were scraped, and the scrapings put in water and given to the sufferer to drink. These scrapings at once absorbed the whole violence of the spreading poison and assuaged the swelling.[68]

That there are no snakes native to Ireland remains a fact of natural history, and is probably the root of Bede's assumptions about Ireland and poisons. It is significant that Bede makes the transition between discussing 'serpentes' and discussing 'uenenum' seamlessly in this section. Here, the serpent and venom are nearly synonymous. What is more, it is intuitive to him that a substance (or in this case the air of a place) that repels the serpent would also be efficacious against its venom. This holistic logic is remarked upon by Thompson, who observes that the Anglo-Saxons utilised opposing or agreeing principles with or against each other to affect the physical world.[69] It is perhaps unsurprising to see this evident here, since Bede is touching upon that most ubiquitious of Anglo-Saxon medical topics, the snake bite. The curative properties of the manuscript scrapings are described as absorptive, whilst the damaging action of the dissemination and spread of venom around the body is once again acknowledged as Bede uses the general term *reptile* [creeping thing] to describe the animals which are unable to survive in Ireland; however, it is likely that when he makes mention of the *serpens*, specifically, Bede is referring to true snakes, since this is the word he chiefly uses to describe a venomous, limbless reptile in *In Genesim*.

### 5.ii. The serpent and sin: Genesis again

Bede's third mention of the *serpens,* by contrast, returns to the theme of the animal in a spiritual and scriptural context. Bede describes the tripartite process of sin, using the paradigm of the first sin in the Garden of Eden:

Tribus enim modis impletur omne peccatum, uidelicet suggestione delectatione consensu. Suggestio quippe fit per diabolum, delectatio per

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[68] Bede, *HE* I. 1, pp.18-21.

[69] Thompson, *Dying and Death,* p.135.

carnem, consensus per spiritum; quia et primam culpam **serpens** suggessit, Eua uelut caro delectata est, Adam uero uelut spiritus consensit. [70]

For all sin is committed in three ways, namely by suggestion, pleasure and consent. The devil makes the suggestion, the flesh delights in it and the spirit consents. It was the **serpent** who suggested the first sin, Eve representing the flesh was delighted by it, and Adam representing the spirit consented to it.

The suggestion of sin, its first stage and its origin, is represented by the serpent of *Genesis.* As previously seen, in Bede's understanding of the events of Eden the serpent was acting as an irrational agent of the Devil and not as an autonomous creature. When used symbolically as in this scenario it has become metonymic, not for the Devil himself, but for his role in the suggestion of sin. The second two 'modis' [ways] in which sin is committed, desire and consent, originate within the sinner. Suggestion, however, is by its nature external to the sinner that threatens to infiltrate the body and spirit in a serpentine, insidious way. Bede's concept of sin acknowledges the malign intent of an outside force – the Devil – and it is in his capacity as tempter that he is represented once again by the serpent.

### 5.iii. The *draco* in *Historia Ecclesiastica*: the spiritual wilderness

In contrast to his use of the term *serpens,* which can refer to both a scriptural character and a real world animal, Bede uses the term *draco* exclusively to refer to a symbolic creature. In Bede's understanding, the *draco* also represents diabolical agency, but of a different kind to the temptation towards personal sin represented by the *serpens.* In the *Historia Ecclesiastica,* Bede recalls a passage of scripture containing the term in order to relate it to the actions of St. Cedd and the foundation of a monastery at Lastingham:

Fauens ergo uotis regis antistes elegit sibi locum monasterii construendi in montibus arduis ac remotis, in quibus latronum magis latibula ac lustra ferarum quam habitacula fuisse uidebantur hominum; ut, iuxta

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[70] Bede, *HE* I. 27, p.100-101.

prophetiam Isaiae, "In cubilibus, in quibus prius **dracones** habitabant, oriretur uiror calami et iunci", id est fructus bonorum operum ibi nascerentur, ubi prius uel bestiae commorari uel homines bestialiter uiuere consuerant.

So, in accordance with the King's desire, Cedd chose himself a site for the monastery amid some steep and remote hills which seemed better fitted for the haunts of robbers and the dens of wild beasts than for human habitation; so that, as Isaiah says, 'In the habitations where once **dragons** lay, shall be grass with reeds and rushes', that is, the fruit of good works shall spring up where once beasts dwelt or where men lived after the manner of beasts.[71]

Bede's description of the remote and hostile landscape Cedd chooses has much in common with the landscapes described in *Beowulf* and the *Visio Pauli*.[72] In both of these latter cases, the steep, barren and uninhabitable landscapes are associated with serpents; in the case of *Beowulf,* with a creature referred to as a 'draca' [dragon].[73] Bede's use of Isaiah 35:7 as a scriptural precedent for Cedd's choice is probably informed by Gregory the Great's *Moralia in Job,* which also used the verse in describing holy places springing up in remote and hostile locations.[74] This gives Bede a patristic precendent for his imagination of a monastery as 'an island in the wilderness,' as Pickles has noticed.[75] Bede not only links the wasteland from the life of Cedd with serpents by referencing Isaiah, he also acknowledges the presence of serpents as a primary identifier for that type of spiritual landscape. As Bede uses them, the *dracones* of *Isaiah* are emblematic of uninhabited, hostile landscapes.

It is easy to recognise that Bede uses the quote to highlight the scriptural solidity of Cedd's decision, and ultimately its righteousness. In this instance, Cedd bears more than a passing resemblance to Beowulf; like Beowulf, he is intrepid, leading the way

[71] Bede, *HE* Book III. 23, p. 286-7.

[72] Chapter 2, 5.i and 5.ii.

[73] Chapter 2, 5.iii.

[74] Gregory the Great, *Moralia in Job,* ed. M. Adriaen, CCSL 143b (Turnhout, 1985), Book XXIX, 26.52, p. 1470.

[75] Pickles, T., 'Anglo-Saxon Monasteries as Sacred Places: Topography, exegesis and vocation' in P. Thomas and J. Sterett (eds), *Sacred Text – Sacred Space* (Boston, MA and Leiden, 2011) p. 49-50.

into an unknown and hostile landscape.[76] Also as in Beowulf, that landscape will serve as the backdrop for righteous victory; in Beowulf's case against a real *draca,* and in Cedd's against the ignorance of the wild landscape as yet untouched by the word of God.

## 6. Explanatio Apocalypseos

The *draco* is a major player in the last text of this case study, *Explanatio Apocalypseos.* Although it was one of Bede's earliest exegetical works, it deals with the end of time and is a fitting case study to bring the examination of serpents in Bede's cosmology to a close.

The text contains one reference to the *asp,* [snake, asp] and another single reference to the *basilisk,* both in a direct quote from Psalm 90:13. [77] The word *viper* [snake, viper] appears once, again representing a multiplicity of unfaithful beings.[78] There are also single instances of the words *colubus* [snake] and *cerastes* [snake, adder] in reference to the tribe of Dan from which the antichrist will be born.[79] The main two kinds of serpent in *Explanatio Apocalypseos* are the *serpens* and the *draco*. There are a slightly more significant number of references to *serpens,* with six instances in the text.[80] In every case, these animals are included as representations of diabolical agencies at work in the unfolding apocalypse. The majority of references to serpentine animals in *Apocalypse* use the term *draco* [dragon], which is mentioned twenty-one times.[81] The *draco* is the antagonist of the central drama of Revelation, and is a multifaceted symbolic animal.

### 6.i. Serpents in *Explanatio Apocalypseos*: heretics and Hell

In *In Genesim,* the *serpens* was the chief antagonist of mankind, both in the

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[76] Chapter 2, 5.ii.

[77] Bede, *Explanatio Apocalypseos,* II, 12,9, p. 393; *Vulgate,* Psalm 90 v. 13.

[78] Bede, *Explanatio Apocalypseos,* II, 9.5, p. 349.

[79] Bede, *Explanatio Apocalypseos,* I, 7.8, p. 313.

[80] Bede, *Explanatio Apocalypseos,* II, 9.19, p. 359; Bede, *Apocalypseos,* II, 12.6, p. 391; , II, 12.6, p. 391; , II, 12.6, p. 391; , II, 12.15, p. 397; , III, 20.2, p. 503.

[81] Bede, *Explanatio Apocalypseos,* praefatio, p.223; , II, 9.3 p. 347; , II, 12.3 p. 389; , II, 12.4, p. 389; , II, 12.5 p. 389; , II, 12.6 p. 391; , II, 12.7, p. 391; , II, 12.7, p. 393; , II, 12.9, p. 393; , II, 12.13, p. 395; , II, 12.17, p. 399; , II, 12.17, p. 399; , II, 12.17, p. 399; , II, 13.1 p. 399; , II, 13.1 p. 401; , II, 13.2, ed. p. 401; , II, 13.4 p. 403; , II, 13.11, p. 409; , II, 14,1, p. 419; , II, 14.6 p. 425; , III, 16.13 p. 455; , III, 20.2, ; p. 503.

Garden of Eden and from that time forward. This is something that is reflected in Bede's interpretation of the image of the serpent in *Explanatio Apoclypseos*. The interconnected themes of heresy and Hell are demonstrated in Bede's treatment of the serpent, when he discusses Revelation 9:19. The verse in question describes the horses of an army of 200,000 who will be loosed on mankind and will destroy a third of the population by means of breathing 'igne et fumo et sulphure [fire and smoke and brimstone] from the mouths of their leonine heads.[82] The text then describes their tails, and Bede comments:

> Falsi doctores antiqui serpentis, qui hominem decepit, similes principum patrocinio fulti amplius nocent quam si solo sermone suaderent. [83]
>
> False teachers of the old **serpent** who deceived man, like those supported by the patronage of princes, do more harm than if they persuaded by word alone.

The scriptural association of the serpent with fire, death and satanic influences is well rehearsed by now. Bede's comment, however, is more nuanced – rather than reading the monstrous army as a literal plague upon mankind, as the scripture ostensibly suggests, he immediately equates the serpentine tails of the horses with heresy.[84] There is little in the scripture's militaristic, overtly violent imagery to support his reading, and in the Vulgate the infernal army are described as killing the people in a very physical manner. The word used is 'occisa' [slain] (Revelation 9:19) and there is no mention of false teaching, deception, or the dissemination of heretical ideas. The first reason for this is openly given by Bede himself; the serpentine tails are mirrored in the Old Testament figure of the tempter, and the tempter's deception is reflected by the perceived falsehood of early Christian heretics who might similarly lead souls astray. He refers to this serpent as 'antiqui serpentis' [the old serpent] and casts the tails as his false teachers. As is frequently the case, this brings the serpent very close to representing Satan himself, although Bede does not actually make the idea explicit. The chief attribute of both the tails and the 'antiqui serpentis' is deceit, and they

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[82] *Vulgata*, Revelation 9:18; transl. *Douay-Rheims Bible*.

[83] Bede, *Explanatio Apocalypseos,* II, 9.19, p. 359; transl. Wallis, p. 174.

[84] The scripture refers to the army of 200,000 as a plague explicitly: Revelation 9:20.

certainly represent the deceitful aspect of Satan as well as false teachers on earth.

The fact that the serpent-tailed horses also have 'capita leonum' [heads of lions] also points Bede to this interpretation of Revelation 9.[85] The scriptural association between the lion and the serpent comes primarily from *Psalms* 90:13, 'super aspidem et basiliscum calcabis conculcabis leonem et draconem'. [Thou shalt walk upon the asp and the basilisk: and thou shalt trample under foot the lion and the dragon].[86] Before Bede applied his heresiological interpretation to Revelation 9:19, both Augustine and Cassiodorus had already applied such a reading to the same animals in Psalm 90.[87] It is not surprising given this precedent that Bede should interpret the serpent in this verse as representing false teachers.

### 6.ii. The members of the *draco's* flesh: locusts, scorpions and vipers

In *Explanatio Apocalypseos,* Bede comments in great detail on the enmity between a woman, symbolizing the Church, and a great red *draco* in Revelation 12. It is in and around this section of the text that most of the references to serpents appear, and it is here that Bede fully expresses the range of meanings he ascribes to the image of the serpent in scripture. He further explores the idea, alluded to in *In Genesim,* that the unfaithful make up the body of the figurative serpent just as the bodies of the faithful make up the figurative Church. Unlike in *In Genesim,* he is explicit in his expression of the concept. Three chapters before the confrontation between woman and dragon, in his commentary on Revelation 9:3, Bede deals with the image of locusts flooding out of a great smoking pit and spreading over the earth.

> Sicut sancti corpus sunt Christi et membra de membro, sic et membra carnium **draconis** cohaerentia sibi alia nascuntur ex aliis, fumus que hereticae caecitatis ore ledentem prauorum generat superbiam…
>
> Just as the saints are the body of Christ, and members of one another, so the members of the flesh of the **dragon** bind themselves to one another, and are born from one another, and the smoke of heretical

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[85] *Vulgata,* Revelation 9:17; transl. *Douay-Rheims Bible.*

[86] *Vulgata,* Psalms 90:13; transl. *Douay-Rheims Bible.*

[87] See: Augustine of Hippo, *Enarrationes in Psalmos,* 90, eds D. E. Dekkers and J. Fraipoint, CCSL 39 (Turnhout, 1956), p. 1276, ll. 8-9; Cassiodorus, *Expositiones in Psalmos,* 90, ed. M. Adrien, CCSL 98 (Turnhout, 1958), p. 834, l. 219.

blindness generates from his mouth the harmful pride of the
depraved…[88]

Bede explicitly interprets the locusts as signifying heretics, who will swarm over the earth, and identifies them as making up the body of the *draco* in the same way that the bodies of the faithful make up the Church. They come out of the smoke rising from the abyss mentioned in the preceding verses (Revelation 9:1–2). The association between the serpent – or in this case, the locusts that constitute its body – and the subterranean abyss is well-represented elsewhere, particularly in the Old English *Exodus*.[89] As demonstrated by the Old English medical texts, there is an intuitive link between the serpent and other creeping invertebrates.[90] Bede's link between the locusts and the image of the serpent as he understands it is also intuitive; the action of locusts on plants is similar to the destructive, insidious, gnawing action of the serpent and its venom, or the heretic and their poisonous ideas. The following chapter of Revelation details the damage that these scriptural locusts do, not to plants, but to people, describing the pain of their assaults as comparable to the stings of scorpions. Bede once again compares the venom of these scorpions to the figurative venom of the unfaithful, and bolsters his interpretation with more serpentine imagery:

> Sicut scorpius a posterioribus uenena diffundit, sic impietas malorum a posterioribus nocet, cum anterioribus, id est aeternis bonis, temporalia, quae retro sunt, praeferri minis blandimentisue compellit. Hunc scorpionem contra euangelii parabolam generatio **uiperarum** suae suboli tradit. [91]

> As the scorpion pours out venom from its tail, so the impiety of the wicked wounds from the hind parts when it drives people by threats and allurements to prefer temporal goods, which are behind, to what is ahead, namely eternal goods. The brood of **vipers** hands this scorpion to its offspring, in defiance of the Gospel parable.

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[88] Bede, *Explanatio Apocalypseos,* II, 9.3, p. 347; transl. Wallis, p. 168.

[89] Chapter 3, 3.iia.

[90] Chapter 1, 5.i.

[91] Bede, *Explanatio Apocalypseos,* II, 9.5, p. 349; transl. Wallis, p. 170.

The scriptural comparison of locusts with scorpions compounds Bede's identification of the scorpions with heretics; like heretics, these locusts are linked with venom. Venom and locusts both disintegrate and devour, and this is how Bede envisages the allurements of temporal goods destroying the souls of people. The fact that Bede mentions temporal goods amongst the temptations embodied by this scorpion is also significant; here we have another example of a consideration of the worldly and temporary directly before the mention of a serpent. In both *Beowulf* and in several places in the scriptural poetry of *Junius XI,* this association between the perishable trappings of the world and the serpent has been indicative of the serpent's association with death.[92] Here in Bede's *Explanatio Apocalypseos,* Bede follows the image of the locusts and scorpions disseminating a love for these worldly things with the mention of a 'generatio uiperarum' [brood of vipers]. This is the same phrase that Bede would later use to describe the unseeing and unfaithful Jews in *In Genesim*.[93] The phrase occurs twice in scripture, once in the Gospel of Matthew (Matthew 23:33) and once in the Gospel of Luke (Luke 3:7). In both cases, St John the Baptist uses the phrase to refer to the fickle people who have come to be baptized and saved despite their impious behavior. Here as in scripture and *In Genesim,* Bede uses the image of a brood of vipers to refer to faithless people who are poisoned by the persuasive venom of the scorpion, spread by the heretical locusts, and even pass it on to their children to disseminate even further. All three animals, the locust, the scorpion and the viper, symbolize for Bede the insidious spreading of impious and heretical ideas and the dissolving, devouring destruction of human souls. Together, these heretics make up the body of a larger adversary for the Church; the 'draco magnus rufus' [great red dragon]. [94]

6.iii. The *draco* and the woman: Heresy versus the Church

Having established the image of the serpent as indicative of heresy in Revelation, Bede moves on to tackle the monstrous drama of the great red dragon. The identity of the *draco* is made clear in the scripture, which three times identifies it

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[92] See Chapter 2, 5.iii; Chapter 3, 3.ia.

[93] Chapter 4, 4.iii.

[94] *Vulgata,* Revelation 12:9; 20:2; 20:7.

as representative of Satan himself.[95]  Bede, too, identifies the *draco* as Satan.[96] The character of the *draco* is the central antagonist of the latter half of Revelation. He is the first and most powerful of a diabolical trinity comprising the *draco*, a beast on earth to whom he gives power, and a false prophet. Throughout the following chapters of Revelation, the *draco* persecutes a woman and child; Bede identifies the former as the Church and the latter as Christ, to whom the Church is perpetually giving birth.[97] The *draco* is foiled when Christ is taken up to Heaven and the Church flees under the protection of God, becoming a pilgrim on the earthly plain. He then fights with the Angels and is himself thrown down to earth, where he persecutes the Church in his rage and gives power to a great beast who speaks with his voice and delivers false prophecy. Finally, he is bound for one thousand years in Revelation 20:2.

Like the rest of his commentary on Revelation, Bede's interpretation of these passages in scripture draws heavily on a patristic understanding of the image of the serpent and the idea of heresy as the chief evil of the contemporary world. [98]  The link between the serpent and the Christian concept of evil is explicit, but Bede's analysis is nuanced in several interesting ways. There are a four salient points to make about the way that he interprets and contextualizes the image of the *draco* within his wider understanding of both scripture and the history of creation. These are; exegetical links with other serpents in scripture; the *draco*'s deceptive nature; its connection to earth and the earthly or the physical; and its connection to the element of water.

Firstly, Bede makes two important exegetical links between the *draco* of Revelation and serpents elsewhere in scripture as he comments on Revelation 12:6 when the woman, who he perceives as symbolizing the Church, flees from the *draco* into the wilderness.

> Ecclesia sub spe uiuens aeternorum peregrinatione praesentis heremi
> gaudet, accepta potestate calcandi super **serpentes** et scorpiones et

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[95] Twice the scripture overtly tells the reader that this character is to be identified with Satan:*Vulgata*, Revelation 12:9; 20:2; Once, it simply calls the character by this name: *Vulgata*, Revelation, 20:7.

[96] Bede, *Explanatio Apocalypseos*, III, 20.2, p. 503; transl. Wallis, p. 252.

[97] Bede, *Explanatio Apocalypseos*, II, 12.5, p. 389;transl. Wallis, p. 191.

[98] For a line-by-line breakdown of Bede's patristic influences in *Explanatio Apocalypseos*, see Wallis' annotated translation: F. Wallis, *Bede: Commentary on Revelation* (Liverpool, 2013).

super omnem uirtutem **draconis** rufi instar israheliticae plebis, quae pane caelesti pasta in heremo uisu aenei **serpentis serpentes** uicit ignitos.

The Church, living in hope of eternal things, rejoices in her pilgrimage through this present desert, having received the power of treading on **serpents** and scorpions and over every power of the red **dragon**, like the Israelite people who, fed with heavenly bread in the wilderness, overcame the fiery **serpents** at the sight of the brazen **serpent**.[99]

In using the phrase 'praesentis heremi,' [present desert] Bede alludes to the idea that the wilderness in question is earth. In this context, the fleeing Church can be understood to represent the body of the faithful in Bede's eyes, exiled from God on earth but protected by him, virtuously rejoicing in the favour He has shown them and the test of the pilgrimage. The scriptural links that Bede makes that are of particular significance to the image of the serpent. Bede first alludes to Luke 10:19 when he mentions the treading down of the serpent.[100] In this, Christ attests that mankind has been given the power to tread on serpents and scorpions. Clearly, this treading down of venomous animals has its precedent in Genesis 3:15, when God sets up the paradigm for the ongoing battle between man and serpent by declaring that the serpent will always lie in wait for man, and man will always crush the serpent underfoot. The scorpion is included alongside the serpent again as another venomous, creeping animal. Bede draws a link between the serpents of Genesis, the Gospels and Revelation, demonstrating his holistic exegetical view of scripture, Satan and the serpent. He then goes on to draw a link between these serpents and the brazen serpent of *Numbers* 21:9, an apotropaic bronze representation of a serpent that cured those afflicted by venom and prefigured the image of the crucified Christ in Christian exegesis. In this image the inextricability of the serpent from its venom is emphasized, as is the idea of curing like with like observed by Thompson.[101]  Despite its size and strength in Revelation, Bede still understands the draco's chief weapon against

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[99] Bede, *Explanatio Apocalypseos,* II, 12.6, p. 391; transl. Wallis, p. 192.

[100] 'Ecce dedi vobis potestatem calcandi supra serpentes et scorpiones et supra omnem virtutem inimici et nihil vobis nocebit' [Behold, I have given you power to tread upon serpents and scorpions and upon all the power of the enemy: and nothing shall hurt you]; *Vulgata,* Luke 10:19; transl. *The Douay-Rheims Bible.*

[101] Thompson, *Dying and Death,* p.135.

mankind to be its venom. The significance of both of these allusions is that Bede does not separate the great *draco,* which in this case represents Satan himself, from lesser serpents elsewhere in scripture. For all its greatness as the embodiment of all evil in the Christian worldview, the *draco* of Revelation is still a serpent, and still shares in all the associations of its scriptural predecessors; in this case venom and the enmity of the faithful, represented here, as in Genesis, by a woman.

It is not surprising, then, that the *draco* also shares with the other serpents of the Bible an insidious, deceptive nature. Where Revelation describes the *draco* waiting for the woman-Church to give birth so that he can eat the child, Bede gives an interpretation which is not predicated in the scripture itself:

> Insidiatur ecclesiae diabolus fidem Christi contendens in cordibus extinguere credentium, ut quem illa docendo genuit, ipse quasi occidat dominum.

> The Devil lies in ambush for the Church, striving to snuff out the faith of Christ in the hearts of believers, so that the one whom she engenders by her instruction, he can as lord (so to speak) kill.[102]

There is no mention in Revelation itself of an ambush, and the neutral use of the word 'stetit' [stood] could just as well describe the serpent standing over the woman in full sight as lying in wait. Bede, however, is in no doubt that this verse alludes to the Devil as a hidden enemy lying in wait to ambush the body of the faithful. This reading is undoubtedly informed by the broader connotations of the image of the serpent, which is insidious, low-lying and malevolent. This, of course, plays strongly into Bede's interpretation of the *draco*'s threat being figurative of heresy. The theme of deception and masked malevolence is continued by Bede when he comments on Revelation 13:11, this time coupled with the recurring motif of venom. The verse in the scripture describes a two-horned beast that comes out of the waters of the earth; a false teacher who speaks the words of a dragon despite resembling a lamb. It is given power by the *draco* to deceive and destroy mankind:

> Agni cornua praefert, quo **draconis uenena** latenter inserat, quia per

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[102] Bede, *Explanatio Apocalypseos,* II. 12.4, p. 389; transl. Wallis, p. 191.

> hypocrisin sanctitatis eam quam in se ueraciter dominus habuit
> singularem, sibi inesse et sapientiam mentitur et uitam.

> He displays the horns of a lamb where he secretly implants the **venom**
> of a **dragon.** For in his hypocritical sanctity – sanctity which the Lord
> truly possessed – he pretends to possess a special wisdom and life.[103]

There are multiple layers here. The scriptural verse is not describing the *draco* at this point, but his agent. The scripture brings the image of the serpent into play by describing the beast as speaking as a dragon, which is tremendously important from an exegetical standpoint since it recalls *Genesis* and the temptation of Eve by means of verbal persuasion. It is Bede who then brings into play the image of venom in conjunction with this, once again associating deceit with the insidious, pervasive action of venom. False words and venom are interlinked in this instance and later when the *draco* forms part of an unholy trinity with the false prophet and the beast, all three figures are described as disgorging unclean frogs from their mouths.[104]

Throughout Revelation, Bede associates the *draco* with the earth and with the earthly. This is first hinted at when the *draco* first appears and Bede identifies its multiple heads and horns with diabolical agencies on earth, the heads representing the Devil's kings and the horns unholy kingdoms.[105] The association between the *draco* and the worldly is continued in Bede's analysis of Revelation 12:7, in which the *draco* and his angels fight with God's angels in the heavens and are cast down. Bede addresses the nature of the angels of the *draco.*

> Angeli satanae non illi tantum qui ei natura sunt et uoluntate similes,
> sed et homines eorum laqueis inretiti sunt intellegendi.

> The angels of Satan are to be understood not only as beings similar to
> him in nature and will, but also as men netted in his snares.[106]

It is first important to note that Bede refers to the *draco* as Satan, demonstrating the

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[103] Bede, *Explanatio Apocalypseos,* II, 13.11, p. 409; transl. Wallis, p. 202.

[104] *Vulgata,* Revelation 16:13.

[105] Bede, *Explanatio Apocalypseos,* II, 12.3, p. 389; transl. Wallis, p. 190.

[106] Bede, *Explanatio Apocalypseos,* II, 12.7, p. 393; transl. Wallis, p. 193.

interchangeability between Satan and the image of the *draco* in Revelation. Secondly, he identifies the angels of Satan not as exclusively celestial beings, but also as 'homines' [men] whom he has trapped. It is unsurprising that Bede imagines the *draco* trapping human beings in 'laqueis' [snares]; it fits in with his association of the serpent with deceit, insidiousness and heresy. What is more surprising is the role of men in the battle; whereas the faithful among men are represented in the Church as a refuge, those who have been entrapped by Satan fight with him against the heavenly army comprised entirely of angels. This suggests something fundamental about the *draco* and his sphere of influence; the *draco's* power is an earthly power, and even his followers are earthly by their nature rather than 'illi tantum qui ei natura sunt et uoluntate similes' [beings similar to him in nature and will]. Bede's interpretation of the serpent as an earthly being continues in his examination of Revelation 12:9, when the dragon is thrown down to earth:

> Antiquus hostis de spiritalibus expulsus artius terrenos includit; hoc est
> de caelo praecipitari et in terram mitti, cui dicitur: Terram comedes
> cunctis diebus, in qua terra pedibus sanctorum conteritur, sicut scriptum
> est: Super **aspidem** et **basiliscum** ambulabis.

> Having been expelled from the spiritual [realms], the old enemy is
> bound more tightly to the earthly. This is what it is to be hurled out of
> heaven, and cast down to earth. To him it is said, Earth shall you eat all
> the days of your life. On this earth, he is crushed by the feet of the
> saints, as it is written: You shall tread upon the **asp** and the
> **basilisk**.[107]

The commentary here still draws heavily upon other patristic commentaries, but its construction is more original here than elsewhere.[108] Bede explicitly says that the *draco* is tied to all things earthly, as is signified by his being thrown down to earth in the battle. Bede then cites both *Genesis* 3:14 and *Psalms* 90, recalling how the serpent in Eden was commanded to live low to the ground and to eat dust, and how in Psalm 90 the 'aspidem et basiliscum' are trodden on by the faithful. Once again Bede relates

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[107] Bede, *Explanatio Apocalypseos,* II, 12.9, p. 393; transl. Wallis, p. 193-4.

[108] See Wallis, F., *Bede: Commentary on Revelation* (Liverpool, 2013), pp. 193-4.

the *draco* of Revelation to other scriptural serpents, thereby identifying Satan himself with all those connotations common to the biblical serpent. The earthly nature of the *draco* ties in with the association between the serpent and physical, worldly existence in other texts such as *Beowulf*, in which the dragon is literally in possession of worldly treasures.[109] In identifying the *draco* as Satan as an earthly being, Bede points obliquely to the idea of the serpent as representing physical death. Just as the serpent in *Genesis* initiates mortality by tempting Eve, the *draco* in Revelation is tied to the earthly and physical plain, is malevolent, and poses the twofold threat of venom and consumption, both of which are corrosive forces highly figurative of bodily decomposition. This reading of the *draco* is further supported by the way that Bede summarises its intention to devour the child of the Church in his analysis of Revelation 12:17, which attests to the protection from the *draco* which will be afforded to those who keep the commandments of God and the faith of Jesus Christ.[110] Bede writes of the *draco*:

> Ecce enim dominum in carne natum extinguere molitus eius resurrectione frustratur.

> For lo! He who exerted every effort to destroy the Lord born in the flesh, is frustrated by the resurrection.[111]

The attempt to destroy the 'dominum in carne' [Lord in the flesh] is figured for Bede in the previous vision of the *draco* waiting to devour the woman-Church's unborn child. The act of devouring is linked with fire, corrosion and decay, all three of which are associated with serpents in Bede's exegesis and all three of which are connotative of bodily death. It is the incarnate body of Christ that the serpent seeks to destroy, and it is Christ's conquering of death by means of dying that ultimately frustrates Satan's malevolent intentions against mankind.

The final important point about Bede's understanding of the serpent in Revelation is his treatment of the *draco* and its association with water. In Revelation 12:15, the *draco* is described as persecuting the woman-Church with the element of

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[109] Chapter 2, p. 5.iii.

[110] *Vulgata,* Revelation 12:17.

[111] Bede, *Explanatio Apocalypseos,* II, 12.17, p. 399; transl. Wallis, p. 196.

water, issuing from his mouth like a river to carry her away. Bede writes:

> Impetum persecutorum aqua significat, unde dicitur: Forsitan uelut
> aqua obsorbuissent nos. [112]

> The water stands for the violence of the persecutors. Hence it is said,
> perhaps the waters had swallowed us up.

Bede's explanation of this aspect of the vision is succinct. He paraphrases Psalm 123:4, which reads: 'forsitan aquae circumdedissent nos ' [perhaps the waters had swallowed us up].[113] The psalm speculates on what evils might have befallen the faithful without God's intercession, of which being swallowed by the waters is one. Bede does not expand further, but a short time later he comments on Revelation 13:1, in which a beast, one of the *draco's* agents, is described coming up out of the sea. The significance of the sea is explained:

> Hoc etenim mare, quod supra abyssus intellegitur. Vnde et **draco** rex
> dicitur omnium quae in aquis sunt, et cuius secundum Dauid in mari
> confringuntur capita. [114]
> For indeed, this is the sea which above is understood as the abyss.
> Hence the dragon is called the king of all that is in the waters, and his
> heads, according to David, are crushed in the sea.

Bede explicitly associates the *draco* with the abyss, figured in scripture as the ocean. This is clearly in harmony with the same association of serpent and sea/sea and abyss in *Beowulf,* where the ocean represents both the un-created chaos before creation and the present wilderness at the edge of God's sanctioned society.[115] The threat of the abyss is the threat of death and the un-creation of body and soul; an interpretation supported by Bede's previous use of *Psalms* 123 in which the seas might have swallowed up and consumed the faithful were it not for God's intercession. The

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[112] Bede, *Explanatio Apocalypseos,* II, 12.15, p. 397; transl. Wallis, p. 196.

[113] *Vulgata,* Psalms 123:4; transl. *The Douay-Rheims Bible.*

[114] Bede, *Explanatio Apocalypseos,* II, 13.1, p. 399; transl. Wallis, p.197.

[115] Chapter 2, 5.ii.

reference to David refers to Psalm 74:13-14, in which the *draco* is once again found in the sea; God Himself, not the seed of Eve, is envisaged crushing the head of the *draco* in the waters.[116] The *draco* is not only associated with the abyss, but he is described in Bede's commentary as its king, re-enforcing the role of the serpent as an agent of mortality and a symbol of death in Bede's thought.

7. Conclusion

In *In Genesim, Historia Ecclesiastica* and *Explanatio Apocalypseos,* Bede addresses the image of the serpent as it exists in his past, present and future. The three texts address very different serpents in very different ways. *In Genesim* does so in the drama of the fall of man, in which the serpent is a tempter and an agent of the will of Satan. In *Historia Ecclesiastica,* Bede approaches the serpent from the perspective of a natural historian, mentioning it only where it contributes to a feature of Bede's landscape or where his history overlaps with scripture and hagiography. *Explanatio Apocalypseos* deals with vivid serpentine imagery in the form of the great red dragon and other diabolical agents.

Despite this disparity, a familiar range of connotations ties all of these serpents together. Venom and the sinuous creeping of the serpent signify its insidious, lingering threat. Fire and venom together bring in the theme of the disintegration of the human body. Darkness and water once again signify the abyss. These factors point to the fact that the serpent here, as elsewhere, ultimately signifies death.

However, Bede's conscious and explicit interpretation of the image of the serpent gives a new perspective on these connotations. For Bede, the serpent, along with all of its associated imagery, was a divinely written sign. That sign signified three things that were central to history as Bede understood it. The first and most clearly defined in all three texts is heresy. Whether Bede believed archaic heresies like Pelagianism were a real threat or not, he followed in the footsteps of patristic writers in warning against the dangers of false teaching. That false teaching is symbolised by the serpent in all three texts. In *In Genesim,* the serpent of the temptation fulfils this role, deceiving Eve and causing the downfall of mankind by the poisonous dissemination of his idea. Although he does not go into exegetical detail, Bede reiterates this image in *Historia Ecclesiastica* when he invokes the image of the serpent to show that all sin begins with a deception by the Devil. In *Explanatio Apocalypseos* he is

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[116] *Vulgata,* Psalms 74:13-14; transl. *The Douay-Rheims Bible.*

most explicit, interpreting the swarms of locusts, serpents and scorpions as swarms of equally venomous heretics that will overrun the world in the days before the final judgment. Their ideas are venom, and once implanted they destroy the spiritual body insidiously from within.

As well as understanding the serpent as emblematic of heresy, Bede also sees the serpent as an aspect of Satan himself, a fact that he explicitly states in *Explanatio Apocalypseos.* This is something that is implicit in the scriptural Genesis as well as Bede's interpretation of it. The serpent is Satan's agent in causing the fall of man and the fact of mortality. Then, the serpent becomes God's sign, written into the natural world, of the punishment that He inflicted on the Devil after that deception. This reading is also alluded to in *Historia Ecclesiastica* when Bede credits the words of the serpent as the origin of all sin. In *Explanatio Apocalypseos,* Bede states that the great red dragon is Satan, and that the serpents, locusts and scorpions that make up his monstrous body are human unbelievers and heretics.

Reading the image of the serpent as symbolic of heresy or the Devil does not negate the idea that the serpent signifies death in Anglo-Saxon England. In fact, it strengthens that idea. For Bede, Satan is the progenitor of death, the force through which man fell and became mortal. Heretics, like the serpent in the Garden of Eden, are the mouthpieces of the great red dragon who disseminate his venom and cause individual souls to fall too. In Bede's world history, the serpent and Satan both seek to destroy human beings; one seeks to destroy, poison and consume the physical body, and the other seeks to do the same to the spiritual body.

# CHAPTER 5

## Warfare, metalwork and the Serpent:
## The Staffordshire Hoard

1. Introduction

Serpents are a strikingly common feature of Anglo-Saxon animal art. In his 1980
study of Anglo-Saxon animal art, George Speake described Anglo-Saxon culture as
being 'snake conscious', referring to the sheer ubiquity and variety of these animals in
both visual and textual representation.[1] The serpent is certainly a pervasive image in
the corpus of surviving visual evidence.

The textual connotations of the serpent discussed above have been mostly
negative and surround Anglo-Saxon ideas of death; as a counterpoint, the
Staffordshire Hoard presents an interesting perspective on serpents in Anglo-Saxon
warfare and metalwork. Within the Hoard, a multitude of serpents adorn military
gear and religious objects. The Hoard is by no means unique in this respect; serpents
and serpentine creatures in the form of zoomorphic interlace adorn items from other
find sites, the most famous of which is Sutton Hoo (see 4.iii and Figs 14a, 14b and 14c
below). However the size and relatively recent discovery of the Hoard has given rise to
a plethora of studies that seek to revise earlier work and recalibrate assumptions made
previously about style, dating and the relationship of metalwork to the economy or
other artistic media.[2]  This makes the Hoard a good candidate for a case study about
the serpent and metalwork, not only because of the freshness of the scholarship
surrounding it but because it has already revolutionised the context of comparative
material, which can be looked back on with fresh perspective. The Staffordshire
Hoard also presents apparent interpretative problems for the image of the serpent as it

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[1] G. Speake, *Animal Art*), p. 87.

[2] At the first symposium on the Staffordshire Hoard in March of 2010, several revisionist
topics were introduced. For example, George and Isabel Henderson deal with the
implications for style ('the implications of the Staffordshire Hoard for the understanding of the
origins and development of the Insular art style as it appears in manuscripts and sculpture'),
Karen Høilund Nielsen discussed Style II and chronology in the light of the find ('Style II and
all that: the potential of the hoard for statistical study of chronology and geographical
distributions'), and Guy Halsall reflected on previous work on the economics of warfare in
Anglo-Saxon England ('Warfare, aggression and the use of trophies'). For all three and others,
see: H. Geake (ed.), *Papers from the Staffordshire Hoard Symposium*,
https://finds.org.uk/staffshoardsymposium [accessed 25th May 2015].

has been defined so far. If the serpent is operating with a similar symbolic register here in the visual medium to that which we have seen in the texts, its relationship to the warrior who chooses to carry it into battle is a complex one, emblematic of the relationship between the warrior and mortality. The complexity of this relationship (to modern eyes) also makes the Hoard, which has a clear military component with no apparent funerary context, an interesting comparison to the textual evidence. A close examination of some of the objects in the hoard will demonstrate that although the motif operates in a slightly different way here, there are once again continuities between the serpents of the Staffordshire Hoard and those found in textual sources.

## 2. The Staffordshire Hoard: the find and its impact

The Staffordshire Hoard is the name given to an exceptionally large precious metal hoard, discovered in the parish of Ogley Hay, near Hammerwich, Staffordshire, in the summer of 2009. The hoard is comprised of around 3600 gold objects and fragments.[3] The vast majority of these are overtly martial in nature, but there are also religious objects including four gold crosses.[4] It is mostly made up of gold or gilt objects.[5] In every case these are removed from their original fittings and collected together, sometimes bent or damaged in the process. The Hoard was initially catalogued in 2010 by Kevin Leahy; it is Leahy's handlist that gives each of the items a unique catalogue number, which will be cross referenced in the catalogue raisonné which is expected to be published in late 2018.[6]

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[3] K. Leahy and R. Bland, *The Staffordshire Hoard* (London, 2009) p. 16; K. Leahy, R. Bland, D. Hooke, A. Jones and E. Okasha, 'The Staffordshire (Ogley Hay) Hoard: recovery of a treasure', *Antiquity* 85, (2011), pp. 201-220, at p. 204.

[4] There is a tabulated summary of the contents of the Hoard in K. Leahy and R. Bland, *The Staffordshire Hoard* (London, 2009), p. 17.

[5] Leahy and Bland, *The Staffordshire Hoard* p. 16; Leahy, Bland, Hooke, et al, 'The Staffordshire (Ogley Hay) Hoard', p. 204.

[6] Kevin Leahy's draft handlist, available through the staffordshire Hoard website, lists the pieces along with short descriptions and no images (K. Leahy, *Staffordshire Hoard Handlist*, http://www.staffordshirehoard.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/HC-Staffordshire-Hoard-Handlist.pdf (2010) [Accessed 15th June 2015]). The *Handlist* was created during Stage 1 of a collaborative research project doing post excavation work on the Hoard. The Barbican Research Associates website details this project (Barbican Research Associates, *The Staffordshire Hoard* http://www.barbicanra.co.uk/staffordshire-hoard.html [accessed 20 June 2015]). 'Stage 1' includes the recovery, analysis and conservation of the Hoard as well as the methods of fundraising that were employed in order to purchase the find for Birmingham and Stoke on Trent City Councils. 'Stage 2' of the collaborative research project is underway and will produce a fully illustrated catalogue of the pieces of the Hoard, culminating in 'a book and an extensive digital resource' due in 2018.

The Hoard contains a large amount of material wealth, and the quality of workmanship is consistently high. This alone has thrown new light onto modern estimates of the value of these objects in Anglo-Saxon England, as well as the size of the average retinue and the circulation of martial objects.[7] For the purposes of this study, just a few considerations must be acknowledged. Firstly, no matter the proportion of the population considered elite during this period, these items are elite and would have been considered as such by the people who made, commissioned them, traded with them, wore them or saw them. They are also part of a martial, masculine context. This context is important for the interpretation of any aspect of the Hoard, and the image of 'the serpent is being applied not only to the objects but to this group of people and their concerns. Similarly, the type of the object on which the serpent appears is obviously of great importance; an animal appearing on a shield may have a very different symbolic function to one appearing on a sword. Important also is the relationship of the image and the object to the rest of the Hoard. The Staffordshire Hoard was probably deposited as a whole cache, and therefore all of the objects together represent a particular moment in Anglo-Saxon history. It is also a composite find made up of disparate pieces made and used at different times and in different places; nonetheless any case study must relate not only to the interplay between image and object, but between image, object and the rest of the Hoard.

Following the discovery of the Staffordshire Hoard came a series of publications detailing the nature of the find, its discovery, and subsequent conservation. In the immediate aftermath of the find, Leahy and Slarke published an article in *Current Archaeology*, summarising the find and discussing its martial nature; the article was updated in 2010 by Wescott.[8] Almost immediately following the initial processing of the pieces of the Hoard, a symposium was held in March of 2010 at the British Museum. Transcripts of the papers are published online, edited by Helen

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[7] See: Geake, *Staffordshire Hoard Symposium*.

[8] Leahy, K and Slarke D., 'Trophies of Kings', *Current Archaeology* 236 (2009), pp. 12-21; Wescott, L., 'Trophies of Kings: One year later', *Current Archaeology* 248 (2010) pp. 31-5. In addition, A collaborative paper on the fieldwork involved in the discovery was published in *Antiquaries Journal* in 2010 (Dean, S., Hooke, D. and Jones, A., 'The "Staffordshire Hoard": the fieldwork', *Antiquaries Journal* 90 (2009), pp. 139-152), and a further update, 'News from the field,' was published in *Current Archaeology* in 2013(Hilts, C., Leahy, K. and Dean, S., 'News from the field: rethinking the Staffordshire Hoard', *Curren Archaeology* (2013), pp. 24-27.).

Geake and cover a variety of topics from archaeological, linguistic, palaeographic and historical perspectives.[9].

The magnitude of the find is reflected in the impact it has made on modern scholarship. As Halsall has reflected, the sheer size of the Hoard has given scholars pause to recalibrate not only how much metalwork was estimated to be circulating in Anglo-Saxon England, but the size of seventh-century armies.[10] Similarly, the Hoard's discovery has given rise to new ways of dating insular art.[11] Modern ideas about smithing and the production of material culture in Anglo-Saxon England have also been revolutionised.[12]

3. Serpents and the zoomorphic art of the Staffordshire Hoard

The Staffordshire Hoard contains a vast amount of seventh-century zoomorphic art, most of it falling into the stylistic category of Salin's Style II.[13] Looking for symbolic meaning in objects that are intended to be decorative is difficult. As Carola Hicks has pointed out, 'it is seldom possible to tell when something is intended as a symbol'.[14] In fact, the precise conscious or unconscious intent of the person who made or commissioned any object in the Staffordshire Hoard is impossible to discern. When it comes to the image of the serpent, this problem is particularly relevant. The malleable form of the serpent lends itself to a variety of shapes and designs, and in many cases it could be argued that this, not its symbolic value, was the reason the artist made the decision to use it. George Speake observed this kind of decision-making in his survey of Anglo-Saxon zoomorphic art in 1980, noting that 'The very shape of the type object being decorated seems to have determined the "species" of animal portrayed'.[15] In the case of the serpent, it might be

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[9] H. Geake, *Staffordshire Hoard Symposium*.

[10] Halsall, 'Warfare'.

[11] Nees, L., 'Recent trends in dating works of Insular art', in C. Hourihane (ed.), *Insular and Anglo-Saxon Art and Thought in the Early Medieval Period* (Princeton, NJ, 2011), pp. 14-30.

[12] Hilts, C., 'Secrets of the Staffordshire Hoard: skills of the Saxon smiths revealed', *Current Archaeology* 297 (2014), pp. 12-15; Blakelock, E. S., 'Never judge a gold object by its surface analysis: a study of surface phenomena in a selection of gold objects from the Staffordshire Hoard', *Archaeometry* 58 (2015), pp. 912-929.

[13] Salin, *Altgermanische*; See also Introduction, 1.

[14] Hicks, *Animals in Early Medieval Art*, p. 8.

[15] Speake, *Animal Art*, p. 77.

the case that, as Hawkes has conjectured, 'the decorative potential of the motif is thus probably primary in most instances'.[16]

On the other hand, whilst it is prudent to be cautious about applying meaning to every image of every serpent in Anglo-Saxon art, there are numerous instances in which there does seem to be symbolic intent behind the use of the image.[17] Hawkes points to a number of notable examples where serpents are a prominent and deliberate feature, including the doorjambs at Saint Peter's Church in Monkwearmouth, and the dragons on the Sutton Hoo helmet.[18] In both cases, the serpents are deliberately ambiguous; the dragons of the Sutton Hoo helmet also form the facial features of the mask, and the wings of the foremost dragon become the bodies of other beasts (figs 14a and 14b). The doorjambs similarly make up the shape of the tau cross, itself a symbol of Christ crucified and everlasting life. The clear symbolic value of the serpent elsewhere along with its frequent use in metalwork rules out the idea that it holds no symbolic value. In fact, there are a number of items in the Staffordshire Hoard where the image of the serpent is used deliberately and meaningfully. Some of these objects shed an interesting light on the serpent and its role as a symbol on martial objects in the Anglo-Saxon period. The first of these is the inscribed silver gilt strip (Item K550, Figs 8a and 8b). The serpent appears alongside a biblical inscription.[19] As Hawkes has observed, it is possible and likely that the serpent's symbolic role on worn objects is in some sense apotropaic.[20] This use of the image of the serpent challenges the reading of that symbol so far; if the serpent's image is evocative of death, then how does it operate when worn as a protective symbol? The second deliberate use of the image of the serpent in the Staffordshire Hoard challenges what we know about serpents in art in another way. Items K128, K700, K816, K883, K943 and K1014 (Figs. 17, 18a, 18b, 19a, 19b, 20, 21 and 22) are small gold three-dimensional snake-like creatures that seem to have been riveted to something. The realistic style and design of these objects is striking and unique in Anglo-Saxon metalwork. In both instances, the items in question shed light on the

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[16] Hawkes, *Symbolic Lives*, p. 323.

[17] For a summary of possible symbolic uses of the serpent in Anglo-Saxon art see: Speake, *Animal Art*, pp. 85-92; See also: Hawkes, *Symbolic Lives*, pp. 323-326.

[18] For discussion of the doorjambs at Monkwearmouth, Jarrow, see: Chapter 3, 3.iiib; For discussion of the Sutton Hoo helmet, see Chapter 5, 4.iii.).

[19] See Chapter 5, 4.

[20] Hawkes, *Symbolic Lives*, p. 323.

way that the image of the serpent retains its textual connotations with death, exile and transition whilst being worn in a martial context

## 4. The inscribed strip (Item K550)

So far, the image of the serpent has exhibited consistent connotations across a number of texts and textual genres. In all cases, the fundamental association of the serpent with death underpins its portrayal and its use as a symbol. In the case of the Staffordshire Hoard inscribed silver gilt strip, these themes are discernible once again. However, the image operates in a slightly different way; rather than an enemy, the serpent is an ally to its wearer.



**Fig8a:** Silver Gilt Strip discovered at Ogley Hay, Staffordshire, c. seventh century. Staffordshire Hoard K550. © Birmingham Museums Trust.
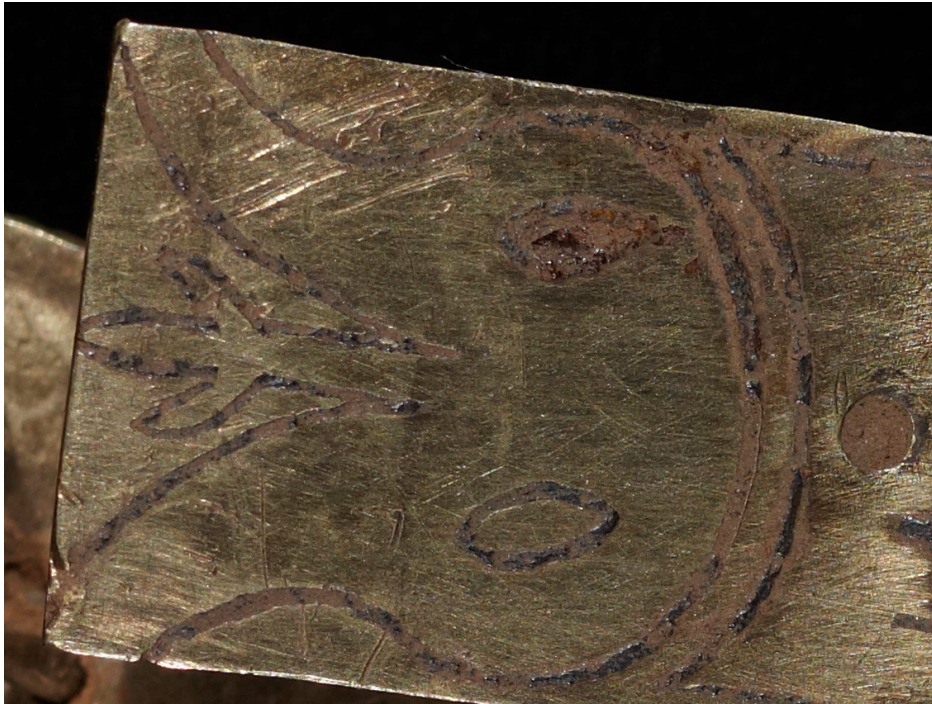
**Fig8b:** Silver Gilt Strip discovered at Ogley Hay, Staffordshire, c. seventh century. Staffordshire Hoard K550. © Birmingham Museums Trust.

Item K550 spans the gap between the textual and the visual, incorporating both a visual image of a serpent's face and a biblical inscription. The strip's production has been dated to before the year 700 on palaeographical grounds.[21] The strip is 89.5mm long, 15.8mm wide and 2.1mm thick, and is made of gilt silver. It was folded in half before being buried with the rest of the Hoard. It is inscribed on both sides; on the upper side is the text, taken from Numbers 10:35, flanked at one end by settings which may have contained garnets or other gems, and at the other by an animal head which is plausibly that of a serpent. The same inscription and animal head appear in much rougher form on the inner side of the strip, along with differences in spelling and several extra letters after the main text.[22] Okasha has suggested that the goldsmith

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[21] Ganz puts the script of the inscription 'before 700 AD'; See: D. Ganz, 'The Text of the Inscription', in H. Geake (ed.), *Staffordshire Hoard Symposium*. Klein's analysis of the script agrees with this: T. Klein, 'The Inscribed Gold Strip in the Staffordshire Hoard: The text and script of an early Anglo-Saxon biblical inscription' in S. Crawford and H. Hamerow (eds), *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology* 18 (2013). Okasha takes a notably different view, also basing her estimation of the date on the script and suggesting 'a date in the 8th century' and asserting that 'it is hard to argue that the strip dates from much before AD700'. See: E. Okasha, 'The Staffordshire Hoard Inscription', Geake (ed.), *Staffordshire Hoard Symposium*.

[22] The inner side, reads: *surge domine disepintur [...mic]i tui et fugiu[nt] qui ode[r]unt te a facie tu[a] [a]diuie nos[.r.];* text with abbreviations expanded, words divided and likely letters assumed taken from: Okasha, E., 'The Staffordshire Hoard Inscription', in Geake (ed.), *Staffordshire Hoard Symposium*.

did this in order to practice before inscribing the outer side, knowing that the inner side of the strip would not be seen.[23] The upper side inscription is finished with niello inlay, and the inner side is left simply engraved.

The object's function is unknown, although the remaining rivets and holes (directly behind the head, and at the opposite end, see fig. 8a) indicate that it would have been fastened to another object before it was removed and collected together with the other gold and silver objects in the Hoard. There is no evidence of the object that the strip was attached to, but given the military context of the other objects in the hoard Okasha has suggested it may have been part of a shrine, reliquary or cross carried into battle.[24] This might well be the case, but there is another possibility. There is a parallel between the inscribed silver gilt strip and the Coppergate Helmet, which has two inscribed strips running over the crown; one from the nasal at the front to the back and one from the left ear to the right, forming a cross.[25] At the nasal, one of these inscribed strips terminates in an animal head, similar to the Staffordshire Hoard strip. It too has upward-facing eyes and seems to form the head of the 'body' suggested by the strip (Figs. 13a and 13b below). The Staffordshire Hoard inscribed strip is 89.5mm long folded, which means that it would have been somewhere in the region of 180mm long unfolded; perhaps just long enough to extend from the bridge of the nose to the crown of the head on a helmet that would certainly have been more modest than the example from Coppergate.[26] Whatever it was attached to, the theme of protection in battle is certainly present in this item as in the Coppergate Helmet. The connection between the object and warfare can be derived both by its context within the Hoard, which has a strong connection to martial activity, and by the fact that the strip is inscribed with a war-like biblical verse taken from Numbers 10:35.

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[23] Okasha, 'Staffordshire Hoard'.

[24] Okasha, Staffordshire Hoard'. There is precedent for portable objects of this type being inscribed with biblical verses. Two portable objects from Anglo-Saxon England which bear similar biblical inscriptions are a wooden cross and a gold ring, both of which are inscribed with versions of John 1:29. See: Okasha, E., *Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions* (Cambridge, 1971), nos. 17 pp. 57-8 and 33, p. 67.

[25] Okasha examines this inscription in Tweddle's exhaustive work on the Coppergate helmet, where she concludes that the inscription on both bands 'is probably meant to be translated: 'In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Holy Spirit (and) God; and to (*or* with) all we say Amen. Oshere'. See: E. Okasha, 'The inscriptions: transliteration, translation and epigraphy' in D. Tweddle, *The Anglian Helmet from 16-22 Coppergate* (London, 1992), p. 1013.

[26] Birmingham Museums et al., *Staffordshire Hoard*, Star Items: Biblical inscription, http://www.staffordshirehoard.org.uk/staritems/the-biblical-inscription [accessed 2nd January 2017].

4.1. The inscription

The inscription places the object at the intersection between secular warfare and Christianity. It is taken from Numbers 10:35, though it is misspelled in two places.[27] The text on the outer side (with variations highlighted in bold) reads:

surge domine di**se**pentur inimici tui et fug**e**nt qui oderunt te a facie tua[28]

The source text, Numbers 10:35, in fact reads:

surge Domine et di**ssi**pentur inimici tui et fug**ia**nt qui oderunt te a facie tua

[Rise up, Lord, may your enemies be dispersed and may those you hate fly from your face]

The inscription is certainly warlike and aligns the object, whatever its function, to the martial context of the rest of the Hoard. The quote from Numbers is direct speech from Moses, raising up the Ark of the Covenant before the marching troops of the children of Israel. This allusion to carrying of a vessel containing the power of God into battle certainly fits well with the possibility of the strip having been fitted to a reliquary or perhaps even a holy book. Hawk has contextualised the inscription in Anglo-Saxon hagiography, reinforcing its use as a protective incantation.[29] Hawk notes the use of the phrase to repel demons by both St. Anthony in Athanasius' *Vita S. Antonii* and St. Guthlac in both Felix's Latin *Vita S. Guthlaci* and the Old English prose version.[30] In both, Hawk suggests, the passage from Numbers 10:35/Psalm 67:2 is

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[27] A similar phrase also occurs in Psalms 67:2, which reads: Exsurgat Deus et dissipentur inimici eius et fugiant qui oderunt eum a facie eius [Let God arise and his enemies be dispersed and those who hate him flee from his face].

[28] Text with abbreviations expanded, words divided and likely letters assumed taken from: E. Okasha, 'The Staffordshire Hoard Inscription', in Geake (ed.), *Staffordshire Hoard Symposium*.

[29] Hawk, B. W., 'Staffordshire Hoard item K550, a ward against evil' *Notes and Queries* vol. 59 (2011) pp. 1-3.

[30] For the reference in *Vita S. Antonii* see: Athanasius, *Vita Beati Antonii Abbatis,* ed. J. P. Migne *Vitae Patrum*, Patrologia Latina 73, Vol. 1. (Paris, 1949), pp. 134; For the Latin *Vita S. Guthlaci* see: Felix, *Vita S. Guthlaci*, ed. B. Colgrave, *Felix's Life of Saint Guthlac* (Cambridge, 1956) p. 110;

presented 'as a charm for warding off evil and achieving victory over the saints' enemies'.[31] Hawk's interpretation suggests an apotropaic function for Item K550. However, his brief exposition does not take the image and its relationship to the text into consideration; how this image works alongside the protective text is the next interpretative issue here.

### 4.ii. Text and image: identifying the serpent

The relationship between the animal head and the text is not explicit, but the reproduction of the face on both the outer and inner sides shows some meaning beyond a simple space-filler or afterthought and suggests some iconographic intent behind the engraving. It is also not a sophisticated or aesthetically striking depiction; its simple lines and lack of embellishment also point to the idea that the image itself is important rather than decorative appearance alone. The animal is not obviously a serpent to the modern eye. However, there are three factors about its appearance that point to it being a snake or snake-like animal. Firstly, the head displays the same Style II open jaws, which are echoed strongly in the inarguably serpentine faces of Items K128 and K943, both small gold snake-like creatures (Figs 17 and 21 below). The eyes are presented as though the viewer is looking down on the top of the animal's head, whereas the jaws, in order to be depicted as open, are presented in profile. The face is not unique to serpentine depictions, but the fact that it appears so similarly in the two small gold snakes means that this kind of face could represent a serpent. Secondly, the two lines extending from the base of the animal's head suggest a neck, and quickly disappear as though inviting the eye to read the strip itself as an elongated limbless body. Thirdly, the tongue of the animal protrudes and is forked into three. The three forks seem at first to be a confusing issue, since the number three recalls the Trinity and the 'dispertite lingue' [tongue separated into parts] of the Holy Spirit as described in Acts 2:3. However, a tripartite tongue is also an image closely associated with serpents in an aggressive, threatening context. Although tripartite tongues are infrequent in Anglo-Saxon metalwork, they appear frequently in later Anglo-Saxon manuscript illumination. London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius C.iii is an

For the Old English prose *Vita S. Guthlaci* see: P. Gonser (ed.), *Das angelsächsische Prosa-Leben des hl. Guthlac*, Angilstische Forschungen 27 (Heidelberg, 1909), pp. 136-7.

[31] Hawk contrasts this charm-like use of the verse(s) to patristic and exegetical commentaries, which take a traditional typological approach. See: B. W. Hawk, 'Staffordshire Hoard item K550, a ward against evil', *Notes and Queries* vol. 59 (2011), pp. 2-3.

eleventh-century Old English version of the *Enlarged Herbarium of Pseudo Apuleius* and *Medicina de Quadrupedibus*, discussed previously in Chapter One.[32] The manuscript is the only one of all the Old English medical manuscripts that contains illustrations. Like the text, these illustrations are also densely populated with serpents, labelled 'naedre'.[33]

Unlike the animal on the Staffordshire Hoard's inscribed strip, these animals are unambiguously snakes.[34] In every case that a tongue is visible, it is shown with a similar tripartite structure (see figs 9, 10 and 11), and in some cases the tongue splits into three parts halfway along as well as at the end (see fig. 11). Many of the serpent tongues in the manuscript are barbed rather than forked, pointing back towards the head rather than out from it, but all have three distinct parts. The painted medium of the manuscript means that the style of these snake images is, admittedly, different to the style of the animal head on the inscribed strip. However, the strip is a textual item as well as a visual one, and perhaps the three forked tongue is not so out of place here; George and Isabel Henderson make the point that artistic styles and tastes cannot be 'fossilised,' and motifs that exist in manuscript art have echoes and relationships with metalwork and vice versa.[35] The existence of animals that are explicitly serpents with tripartite tongues in *Vitellius C.iii* lends weight to the identification of the animal on the Staffordshire Hoard inscribed strip as a serpentine animal.



**Fig9:** Serpent with a barbed tongue illustration from *The Herbarium of Pseudo-Apuleius*. London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius C.iii, 48v, © The British Library Board.

[32] Chapter 1, 2.i.

[33] Serpents appear on: London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius C.iii, f. 19 r; f. 21v; f. 24v; f. 26v; f. 27v; f. 28 v; 29 v; f. 31v; f. 32v; f. 40r; f. 41r; f. 48v; f. 49v; f. 52r; f. 56v; f. 57r; f. 58r; f. 73v; f. 76v; f. 78r; f. 79r; f. 80r.

[34] Chapter 1, 5.ii.

[35] Henderson, and Henderson,*Implications*.

**Fig10:** Serpent with a barbed tongue illustration from *The Herbarium of Pseudo-Apuleius*. London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius C.iii, f. 56v, © The British Library Board.



**Fig11:** Serpent with a forked and barbed tongue illustration from *The Herbarium of Pseudo-Apuleius*. London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius C.iii, f. 57r, © The British Library Board.

The idea of the serpent having a tripartite tongue is present in textual evidence too. Aldhelm (Abbot of Malmsbury c.675-709) described a serpent with a tongue of three parts in a letter to Heahfrith, dated to some time before 690.[36] In a later twelfth-century context, Saxo, in his *Gesta Danorum,* describes a dragon guarding treasure, not

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[36] Aldhelm, 'Letter V to Heahfrith', ed. and transl. M. Lapidge and M. Herren, *Aldhelm: The Prose Works* (Ipswich, 1979), pp. 160-4 at p.1; See also Lapidge, *Anglo-Latin Literature 900-1066*, Vol. 2 (London, 1993), p. 420.

at all dissimilar to that in *Beowulf,* as having 'lingua trisulca' [triple-tongue].[37] The open-mouthed, aggressive animal face on Item K550 combined with with the 'pugilistic phrases of the inscription' as George and Isabel Henderson have described it, seem to suggest that the tripartite tongue does not represent the voice of the Trinity.[38] Instead, it is far more likely that the tripartite tongue is meant to be that of a serpent, as in these examples.

### 4.iii. The protective value of the serpent

If the face on Item K550 can be viewed as a serpent, the question remains; how is the image protective, and why would someone going into battle wish have it with them on a worn or carried object? Even if the serpent is not always a negative image, death and transition surely equate to defeat and displacement in the context of war. Still, the image appears so often on martial objects that its apotropaic function is implicitly obvious. Thompson addresses this issue when she examines the proliferation of serpentine forms on jewellery, and suggests that there may be an element of 'fighting like with like' here.[39] The concept of repelling, destroying or curing one thing with its own symbolic image is common to the Anglo-Saxon rationale. In the *Herbarium* herbs like *næddre wyrt* [adderwort], which grows in places where adders are found, can be used as a protective measure against snakes.[40] Similarly the herb *dracentse* which both resembles a serpent and reportedly grows from spilled dragon blood is effective against all snake bites.[41] The serpent on the inscribed strip could, therefore, be one of the *inimici* [enemies] of the inscription. The object could be deliberately made to resemble the thing that it explicitly wishes to turn away from itself – much like the herbs. In this scenario, the idea that the serpent symbolises death, physical undoing and the eventual disintegration of the body makes perfect sense to a warrior about to engage in lethal violence under the protection of a shrine, reliquary, or cross. Such a reading also brings to the fore another layer of meaning of the word *inimici* [enemies] in the text. The enemies are on one level the physical human opponents of the object's bearer, and on another they are the threat those

[37] Olrik, J., and Raeder, H. (eds.), *Saxonis Gesta Danorum* (Copenhagen, 1931), p. 36.

[38] Henderson and Henderson, *Implications*.

[39] Thompson, *Dying and Death,* p.135

[40] T. O. Cockayne, *Leechdoms,* Vol. I, p. 242.

[41] Ibid. Vol. I, p. 108.

opponents pose; death and the destruction of the physical body. This reading of serpent imagery not only suggests a logic for the inscribed strip, but it helps to explain the proliferation of serpents and interlace on the military and religious objects in the Staffordshire Hoard in its entirety.

The serpent appears on other protective objects from the period, such as the forward facing edge of the helmet cheek piece from the Staffordshire Hoard helmet, Item K453 (Fig. 12). The helmet, which is fragmentary, is one of only six Anglo-Saxon helmets discovered to date.[42] Two symmetrical intertwining serpents are wound together, their tails beginning at the tapered end and their faces, with open jaws, facing upward. Once again the heads are separated from the bodies by a simple incised line, just as on the inscribed strip.



**Fig12:** Cheek Plate showing two serpents on the forward-facing edge, discovered at Ogley Hay, Staffordshire, c. seventh century. Staffordshire Hoard K453. © Birmingham Museums Trust.

The appearance of the serpents on the helmet is not unique. These animals are reflected in style at least by the two intertwining beasts forming a tau cross on the nasal of the helmet, found in Coppergate in York (Figs. 13a and 13b).

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[42] The remaining five are; the Coppergate Helmet (see Figs 13a and 13b below); the Sutton Hoo helmet (see Figs 14a, 14b and 14c below); the Benty Grange Helmet (mid-seventh century, discovered at Monyash, Derbyshire); the Pioneer helmet (seventh century, discovered at Woolaston, Northamptonshire) and the Shorwell helmet (sixth century, discovered at Shorwell, Isle of Wight).

**Fig13a:** The Coppergate Helmet, discovered at Coppergate, York, c750-775. York Museums
Trust: YORCM:CA665, © Image courtesy of York Museums
Trust :: http://yorkmuseumstrust.org.uk/ :: CC BY-SA 4.0

**Fig13b:** Nasal detail of The Coppergate Helmet, discovered at Coppergate, York, c750-775. York Museums Trust: YORCM:CA665, © Image courtesy of York Museums Trust :: http://yorkmuseumstrust.org.uk/ :: CC BY-SA 4.0

The Coppergate Helmet was dated c.750-75 using archaeological, typological and art historical evidence as well as the specifics of the find site and its regional implications.[43] On the lower part of the brass nasal decoration are two intertwining animals, interlocking in a way that is similar to the serpents on the Staffordshire Hoard cheek piece and forming a tau cross, a symbol of Christ's sacrifice and eternal life, like the serpents on the Monkwearmouth doorjamb (7a and 7b). Here the design is much more sophisticated, but these animals, though serpentine in shape, are not limbless. On the upper part of the body of each is a spiral representing a joint, from which extends a long thin forelimb that embraces the other creature. The crest terminates in a fierce animal head with upward facing eyes and – similar to the Staffordshire Hoard inscribed strip – it is inscribed with a protective prayer that appeals to the names of Christ, the Holy Spirit and God on behalf of someone named Oshere.[44] The face of the terminal is viewed from above much like that on the Staffordshire Hoard inscribed strip. It has a flattened snout that, in positioning and

[43] Tweddle, D., *The Anglian Helmet from 16-22 Coppergate* (London, 1992) p. 1082.

[44] Okasha, E., 'The inscriptions: transliteration, translation and epigraphy' in D. Tweddle, *The Anglian Helmet from 16-22 Coppergate* (London, 1992), p. 1013.

shape at least, recalls the iconic dragon from the Sutton Hoo helmet. The Sutton Hoo helmet is probably earlier than both Coppergate and Staffordshire, and is an example of the association between serpents and helmets from the sixth or earlier seventh century.[45] The helmet was unearthed as part of the ship burial in Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo, Suffolk (figs 14a, 14b and14c).

Just as on the Coppergate Helmet, the crest of the Sutton Hoo helmet terminates in a fierce downward-facing animal face. Here, however, it is met by the face of another animal, smaller and wingless but facially similar, facing upward. The nasal is formed by the body and head of this bronze gilded creature modelled in relief. The creature has a long face with a broad snout, and has inset garnets for eyes. The most important thing about the animal on the Sutton Hoo helmet are the two copper alloy striated wings that are spread from the animal's body and form the eyebrows of the mask. In turn, each of these wings terminates in the faces of two boars in profile. The nose and moustache of the mask are the fanned tail of the creature. The long, flat reptilian looking face and the wings suggest a dragon, and this is the terminology used by scholars of Anglo-Saxon zoomorphic art such as Rupert Bruce-Mitford, and Leslie Webster.[46] However, the animal is deliberately ambiguous in its design, and a definition of its type or species is superfluous to an understanding of its meaning.

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[45] Although the Sutton Hoo helmet was probably buried along with the rest of the Sutton Hoo deposit some time in the first half of the seventh century, it is clearly of an earlier Swedish Vendel style, and was considered by Bruce-Mitford to have been 'of some age' when buried. Bruce-Mitford estimates a broad sixth-century date for the construction of the Sutton Hoo helmet (Bruce-Mitford, *Sutton Hoo Volume 2*, pp. 224-5).

[46] Bruce-Mitford, *Sutton Hoo Volume 2*, pp. 152-163; Webster, *Anglo-Saxon Art*, p. 34; George Speake is more cautious in naming the animal, and refers to it only as a 'predatory-jawed creature in flight with outspread wings'; G. Speake, *Animal Art*, p. 83.

**Fig14a:** The Sutton Hoo Helmet, discovered at Mound 1, Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, sixth to early seventh century. British Museum 1939,1010.93.C.1, © Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

**Fig14b:** Nasal detail of the Sutton Hoo Helmet, discovered at Mound 1, Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, sixth to early seventh century. British Museum 1939,1010.93.C.1, © Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)



**Fig14c:** Crest detail of the Sutton Hoo helmet, discovered at Mound 1, Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, sixth to early seventh century. British Museum 1939,1010.93.C.1, © Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0)

It is with this precedent in mind that Kevin Leahy and Roger Bland have postulated that a silver gilt zoomorphic fitting also from the Staffordshire Hoard (Item K678, Figs. 15a and 15b) had a similar function as a terminal for an arched crest from a helmet.[47]



**Fig15a:** Gilt silver zoomorphic fitting, discovered at Ogley Hay, Staffordshire, c. seventh century. Staffordshire Hoard K678 © Birmingham Museums Trust.



**Fig15b:** Gilt silver zoomorphic fitting, discovered at Ogley Hay, Staffordshire, c. seventh century. Staffordshire Hoard K678 © Birmingham Museums Trust.

The zoomorphic fitting certainly bears a slight resemblance to the face of the Sutton Hoo helmet dragon; the head shape and proportions are roughly the same. However, the Staffordshire Hoard fitting has a more tapered snout and distinctive almond shaped eyes. Item K678, like so many serpentine animals in both metalwork and manuscript art, displays the distinctive textured ridge along the back, running from the nose back across the head (see Fig.15b). The dragon on the Sutton Hoo helmet shares this feature too, as does the uppermost animal that forms the crest of the Sutton Hoo helmet. Although in that case the ridge does not continue over the neck section of the animal where it attaches to the crest holder, it is picked up again

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[47] Leahy, K. and Bland, R., *The Staffordshire Hoard* (London, 2009), p. 28.

on the rest of the body that forms the arch of the crest (see Fig. 14c). Unlike the Staffordshire Hoard fitting, Item K678, the Sutton Hoo helmet's nasal is clearly dragon-like. What is more, the dragon has actually become part of the face, forming part of the nose and the brows. Webster recognises the Sutton Hoo helmet as a prime example of the Anglo-Saxon affection for riddles, double meaning, and ambiguity in their artwork; the helmet is both a dragon and a face simultaneously.[48]

This merging of face and serpent encapsulates the way that the serpent works in the context of Anglo-Saxon war gear. As well as battling like with like and repelling death by wearing a symbol of death, the warrior figuratively becomes death to his enemies by becoming the serpent. This idea is further compounded by the juxtaposition of the serpentine face and the inscription on Item K550.

### 4.iv. *Facie tua:* the face of the serpent

On Item K550, the animal head appears next to the words 'inimici tue et' [your enemies and..] *facie tua* [your face] in the text (see Fig. 8a). The words invoking both the enemy and the face of God are flanked by the animal face. It is easy for the literate viewer to relate these two images, one textual, one visual. The face of the animal is aggressive, monstrous with open jaws and prominent eyes. The animal could be read as an expression of the monstrous enemy of the wearer, or the fearsome Divine face invoked in the text. Just as the idea of fighting like with like can be seen elsewhere, the idea of becoming that which is threatening in order to overcome it is evident in Anglo-Saxon Christian cosmology. The role of Christ in the history of human salvation exemplifies this. Christ overcomes death by dying, and in doing so gains eternal life for the souls of mankind. In order to combat the challenge of death, He becomes and inhabits it. He must transition from one state to another through the medium of that very thing which he is trying to defeat. In Matthew 10:16, Christ mentions the serpent explicitly as having a quality his disciples should emulate:

> ecce ego mitto vos sicut oves in medio luporum estote ergo prudentes
> sicut **serpentes** et simplices sicut columbae

> Behold, I send you as sheep in the midst of wolves. Be you therefore as prudent as **serpents** and as simple as doves.

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[48] Webster, *Anglo-Saxon Art*, p.34.

Jesus' exhortation comes immediately after 'dedit illis potestatem spirituum inmundorum ut eicerent eos et curarent omnem languorem et omnem infirmitatem' [he gave them power over unclean spirits, to drive them out, and to heal all disease and all infirmities] (Matthew 10:1). Again a few verses later, he specifically commands the disciples 'infirmos curate mortuos suscitate leprosos mundate daemones eicite…' [heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons…] (Matthew 10:8). This vocation is given to the apostles as Jesus also warns them about the dangers of the unbelieving world, depicted as wolves in Matthew 10:16. Given the overwhelming connotations of the serpent with disease, infestation and the Devil explored in the previous chapters of this thesis, the fact that Christ then urges his apostles to be prudent like the serpent in this way is interesting. The negative associations of the serpent are acknowledged implicitly in the verse by its juxtaposition with the dove, an animal that traditionally represents purity and the Holy Spirit. The verse suggests, albeit implicitly, that the apostles must take on this advantageous aspect of the serpent, an animal associated strongly elsewhere with the disease and diabolical influences the apostles intend to defeat. In the context of war and the Staffordshire Hoard, by wearing or carrying the image of the serpent, the warrior becomes death to his enemy.

This reading of the object is supported by the many examples of the serpent utilised in this aggressive way throughout the rest of the Hoard. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the case of serpents and swords. Filigree ornamented sword pommels are the most common type objects in the Staffordshire Hoard.[49] It is difficult at this stage to determine how many of the interlacing filigree patterns are zoomorphic, but there are a several examples of pommels and hilt fittings on which Style II serpentine interlace is evident.[50] One of the clearest examples of this is Item K457 (Figs 16a and 16b).

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[49] Fern, C. and Speake G., *Beasts, Birds and Gods: Interpreting the Staffordshire Hoard* (London, 2014) p. 16.

[50] Fern and Speake discuss items K475 K6, K854, K152, K398 AND K725, presenting them as a 'set' in their section on sword-fittings with serpents. See: Fern and Speake, *Beasts,* pp. 16-17.

**Fig16a:** Gold Pommel side a, discovered at Ogley Hay, Staffordshire, c. seventh century. Staffordshire Hoard K457. © Birmingham Museums Trust.



**Fig16b:** Gold Pommel side b, discovered at Ogley Hay, Staffordshire, c. seventh century. Staffordshire Hoard K457. © Birmingham Museums Trust.
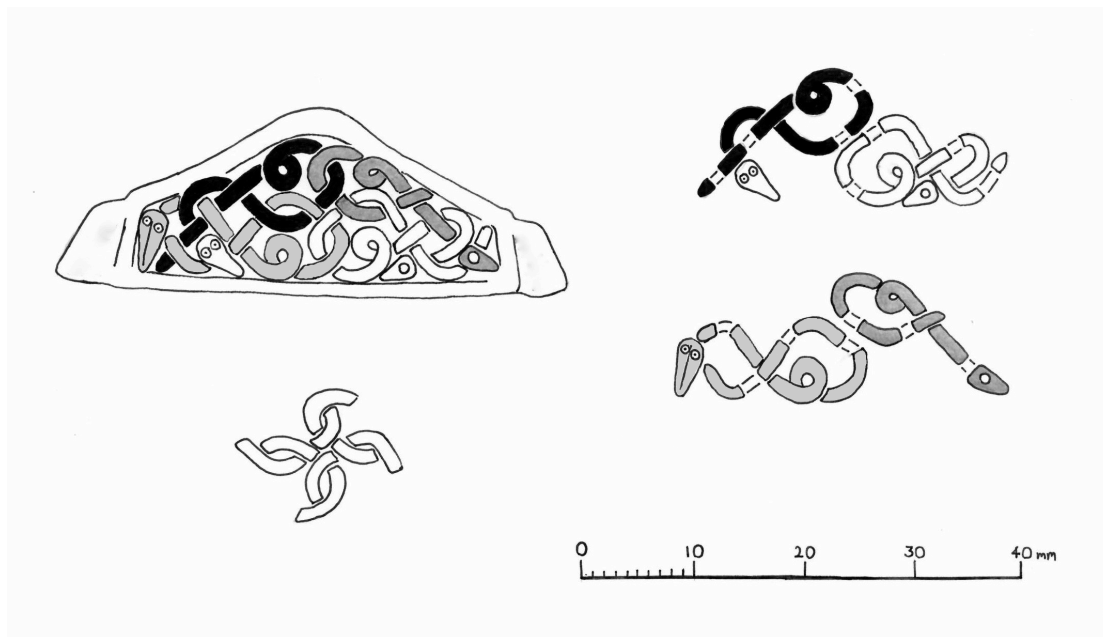
**Fig16c:** Gold pommel side a, zoomorphic elements. Staffordshire Hoard K457 © Birmingham Museums Trust.
Drawing after G. Speak and G. Fern, *Beasts, Birds and Gods: Interpreting the Staffordshire Hoard* (London, 2014), p.17. Staffordshire Hoard K457 © Birmingham Museums Trust.
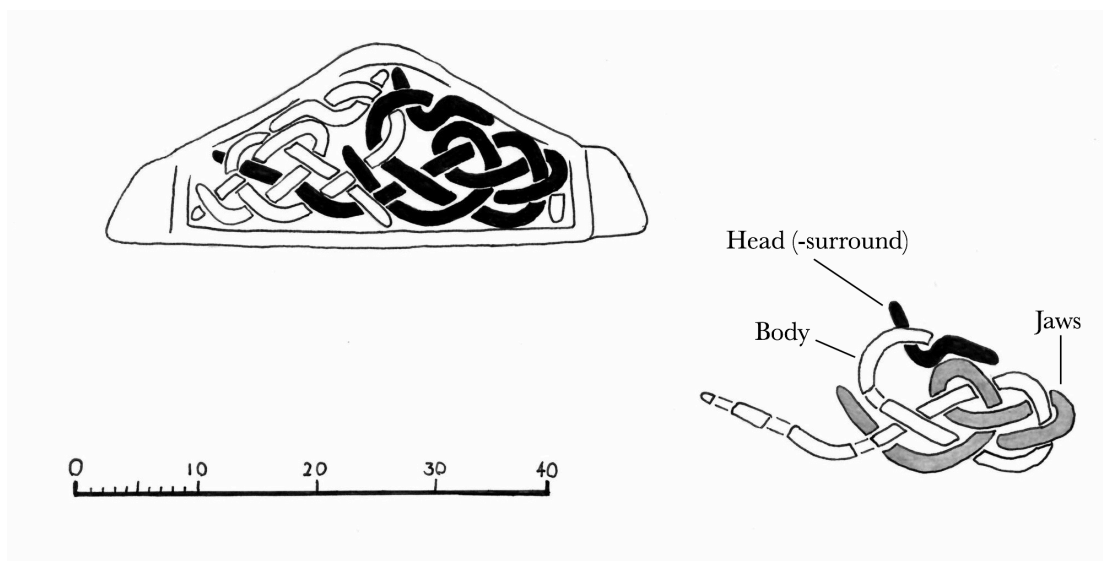


**Fig16d:** Gold pommel side b, zoomorphic elements. Staffordshire Hoard K457 © Birmingham Museums Trust.
Drawing after Speak and Fern, *Beasts,* p.17. Staffordshire Hoard K457 © Birmingham Museums Trust.

On side b in particular, the interlace is not obviously zoomorphic to the modern eye. However the S-shaped head surrounds identify this as an extremely stylised depiction of one serpent. It is intertwined with plain, non-zoomorphic interlace. Side a is more clearly zoomorphic. Here, four serpents intertwine in an asymmetric interlace pattern. All have roughly triangular, pointed faces; two are

viewed from above with two eyes visible, two are viewed in profile with one eye. In the centre, their bodies form a cross, echoing the cross-shaped serpents of the Coppergate helmet nasal and the Monkwearmouth doorjamb.[51]

These serpents, like the open-jawed serpent on Item K550, are acting both aggressively and protectively. On both sides of the pommel the serpents are seen intertwined, and in the case of side b, biting one another, suggesting conflict and aggression. Brunning has examined the link between swords and serpents in Viking thought, citing the fact that sinuous markings on pattern-welded blades may have first suggested the link to early medieval Scandinavian people. [52] However, as she goes on to explain, the symbolic relationship between martial objects, the animals depicted on them and their wearer or carrier is complex, their individual identities becoming enmeshed. Here on Item K457 the image of the serpent is being used in a way similar to on Item K550; the aggressive power of the serpent is being harnessed by the weapon's carrier, and, in becoming the bringer of death in the symbolic form of the serpent, he also defends himself against the same.

5. Six model gold serpents: Items K128, K700, K816, K883, K943 and K1014

Although the way that the image of the serpent operates on Items K550 and K457 is complex, their use is largely conventional. There are plenty of analogues for zoomorphic serpentine interlace on a variety of objects, and even the inscribed strip has a parallel in the Coppergate Helmet. In contrast to this is a collection of small objects within the Staffordshire Hoard that are unique amongst Anglo-Saxon finds. These are the six small gold snakes (Items K128, K700, K816, K883, K943 and K1014).

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[51] Although the link between the serpent and the cross is certainly explicit in some Anglo-Saxon art, Speake and Fern think that it is unlikely the cross on K457 has any intended Christian meaning. See: Fern and Speake, *Beasts,* p. 16.

[52] Brunning, S., '(Swinger of) the Serpent of Wounds', in M. D. J. Bintley and T. J. T. Williams (ed.), *Representing Beasts in Early Medieval England and Scandinavia* (Woodbridge, 2015) pp. 53-4, at p. 53.

**Fig17:** Small gold snake, discovered at Ogley Hay, Staffordshire, c. seventh century. Staffordshire Hoard, K128. © Birmingham Museums Trust.



**Fig18a:** Small gold snake, discovered at Ogley Hay, Staffordshire, c. seventh century. Staffordshire Hoard, K700. © Birmingham Museums Trust.



**Fig18b:** Small gold snake underside detail discovered at Ogley Hay, Staffordshire, c. seventh century. Staffordshire Hoard, K700. © Birmingham Museums Trust.

**Fig19a:** Small gold snake, discovered at Ogley Hay, Staffordshire, c. seventh century. Staffordshire Hoard, K816. © Birmingham Museums Trust.



**Fig19b:** Small gold snake, discovered at Ogley Hay, Staffordshire, c. seventh century. Staffordshire Hoard, K816. © Birmingham Museums Trust.

**Fig20:** Small gold snake and head, discovered at Ogley Hay, Staffordshire c. seventh century. Staffordshire Hoard, K883 and K1365. © Birmingham Museums Trust.



**Fig21:** Small gold snake, discovered at Ogley Hay, Staffordshire, c. seventh century. Staffordshire Hoard, K943. © Birmingham Museums Trust.

**Fig22:** Small gold snake, discovered at Ogley Hay, Staffordshire, c. seventh century. Staffordshire Hoard K1014. © Birmingham Museums Trust.

The six small objects have no typological precedent from Anglo-Saxon England, and are unique to the Staffordshire Hoard. All six are gold, three-dimensional renderings of serpentine creatures with long, sinuous bodies and no limbs. They have slightly flattened undersides, perhaps both for attachment to another object and to imitate the shape of a real animal. Though they are bent out of shape, rivets can be seen protruding from the underside of four of them (Items K128, K816, K943 and K1014: Figs 17, 19a, 19b, 21 and 22). This suggests that whatever the object they may have been attached to, the snakes were made as appliqué decoration. Items K700 and K883 lack a head, although, subsequent to the initial cataloguing of the objects, Item 833 has been speculatively paired with Item K1365, a small gold animal head (see fig. 20). The necks of both Items K700 and 833 terminate instead in sheer, flat, cross-sections, suggesting that the pieces have been damaged and the head has been broken off. Item K883 seems also to have lost the tail end in a similar manner. Item K700, on the other hand, matches the other five in that it displays a tapering, pointed tail. Item K700 also has two engraved lines forming a band around the 'neck', just before the point where the piece is broken. Whilst this is not a feature of any of the other five snakes, such a division between head and body is common to Style II zoomorphic art of this type; an engraved division between head and body can be seen on the foremost tiny serpent on the front edge of the Staffordshire Hoard cheek plate (Item K453, Fig. 12) and also on the zoomorphic fitting (Item K678, Figs. 15a and 15b) discussed previously. The presence of this feature is highly suggestive of a missing head.

The remaining four with heads still attached can be grouped into pairs by style. Items K816 and K1014 both share a relatively naturalistic three-dimensional modelled head, with engraved circular eyes and a tapering snout. Items K128 and K943, however, share a very different Style II head very similar in appearance to that of the engraved animal on the inscribed strip, Item K550 (see Figs. 9a and 9b). Though they are three-dimensional, both heads are flat on the under and upper sides, making them more like reliefs of two-dimensional faces rather than true three-dimensional models. They both have upward facing eyes and open jaws in profile, much like the animal on the inscribed strip. The eyes of K128 are hollow, suggesting that they may have functioned as rivet holes. The eyes of K943 are brought out in relief, forming dome-like protrusions on the top of the head, which could be the remains of rivets.

### 5.i. The gold snakes in context

It is true that the serpents have no analogues from Anglo-Saxon England. Three-dimensional, naturalistically rendered animals, however, are not completely absent in Anglo-Saxon metalwork. The silver partially gilded quoit brooch found at Sarre, Kent, is an early example of three-dimensional animal imagery (Figs. 23a and 23b).

The Sarre quoit brooch dates from the fifth century, and as such predates the Staffordshire Hoard significantly. The artistic milieu that produced the quoit brooch style was very different, taking inspiration from late Roman provincial styles of metalwork. It sprang up during the early years of the fifth century, but within a century it disappeared and continued to exist only in derivative form.[53] The important aspect of the quoit brooch from Sarre are the two three-dimensional modelled birds next to the notch. The diameter of the brooch is just 77.1mm making the birds themselves, which are modelled in gilded silver and engraved with detailed textures, patterns and features, tiny. Each bird is fastened to the brooch by a pin that allows it to swivel. Another three-dimensional animal from a later period more contemporary with the Staffordshire Hoard is the fish escutcheon from the centre of the hanging bowl from Mound 1 in Sutton Hoo, Kent (fig. 24).

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[53] See: Webster, *Anglo-Saxon Art*, pp. 52-5.

**Fig23a:** Quoit Brooch, discovered at Sarre, Kent c. fifth century. © Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).



**Fig23b:** Profile of quoit brooch, discovered at Sarre, Kent c. fifth century. © Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

**Fig24:** Fish escutcheon from hanging bowl, discovered at Mound 1, Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, c. late sixth-early seventh century. British Museum: 1939,1010.110.a. © Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Despite being found at a seventh-century site, the hanging bowl is once again from a very different artistic context than the Staffordshire Hoard. It is 'Celtic' in style, placing its creation slightly earlier at the end of the sixth or beginning of the seventh century.[54] The fish was situated inside the bowl, and, like the birds on the quoit brooch, is attached on a fixture that allows it to swivel. Bruce-Mitford describes the fish as 'unparelelled' in terms of contemporary hanging bowls and celtic metalwork from the late sixth and early seventh centuries.[55] The fish is similarly naturalistic in shape and is also finely detailed, the effect of scales having been created with indentations which were once filled with enamel.[56] Although it seems obvious to apply a Christian reading to the object, there seems to be no reason to think that the fish

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[54] British Museum Collection Online, 'Hanging Bowl', http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/search.aspx [Accessed 12 December 2016].

[55] Bruce-Mitford, *Sutton Hoo Volume 3*, Part I, (London, 1983) pp. 222-223.

[56] Bruce-Mitford, *Sutton Hoo Volume 3*, Part I, (London, 1983) pp. 224-228.

represents the Christian icthus.[57] Rather like the gold serpents of the Staffordshire Hoard, the significance of the fish and its artistic context are obscure.[58]

Despite these examples, the Staffordshire Hoard gold serpents differ from the Sarre and Sutton Hoo examples in two important ways; firstly, there is no evidence that they were intended to move. The remaining rivets indicate that the Staffordshire Hoard gold serpents would have been stationary appliqué decoration, not stand-alone moveable objects. Secondly, there is nothing about their style, other than their quality of being three-dimensional, that identifies them as being anything other than broadly Style II depictions; both styles of animal head have analogues within the rest of the Hoard; the naturalistic style heads have examples like the zoomorphic fitting (Item K678, Figs. 15a and 15b), and the more stylised open-jawed heads are obviously mirrored by the engraved face on the silver gilt strip (Item K550, fig. 8b).

There is another much more strikingly similar analogue for the Staffordshire Hoard gold snakes, and it comes once again from a much earlier, Romano-British context. Little is known about these two copper alloy objects found at Icklingham, Suffolk (Figs. 25a, 25b, 25c, 25a, 26b, 26c, 26d, and 26e).



**Fig25a:** Copper alloy snake, discovered at Icklingham, Suffolk, c. 43-410 (Romano-British). Bury St. Edmunds Museum Service: 1981.89.1. © St. Edmundsbury Heritage Service (reproduced with permission).

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[57] Bruce-Mitford, *Sutton Hoo Volume 3*, Part I, (London, 1983) pp. 239.

[58] Bruce-Mitford, *Sutton Hoo Volume 3*, Part I, (London, 1983) pp. 239-244.

**Fig25b:** Copper alloy snake, discovered at Icklingham, Suffolk, c. 43-410 (Romano-British). Bury St. Edmunds Museum Service: 1981.89.1. © St. Edmundsbury Heritage Service (reproduced with permission).



**Fig25c:** Copper alloy snake, discovered at Icklingham, Suffolk, c. 43-410 (Romano-British). Bury St. Edmunds Museum Service: 1981.89.1. © St. Edmundsbury Heritage Service (reproduced with permission).

**Fig26a:** Copper alloy snake, discovered at Icklingham, Suffolk, c. 43-410 (Romano-British). Bury St. Edmunds Museum Service: 1981.89.2. © St. Edmundsbury Heritage Service (reproduced with permission).



**Fig26b:** Copper alloy snake, discovered at Icklingham, Suffolk, c. 43-410 (Romano-British). Bury St. Edmunds Museum Service: 1981.89.2. © St. Edmundsbury Heritage Service (reproduced with permission).



**Fig26c:** Copper alloy snake, discovered at Icklingham, Suffolk, c. 43-410 (Romano-British). Bury St. Edmunds Museum Service: 1981.89.2. © St. Edmundsbury Heritage Service (reproduced with permission).

**Fig26d:** Copper alloy snake, discovered at Icklingham, Suffolk, c. 43-410 (Romano-British). Bury St. Edmunds Museum Service: 1981.89.2. © St. Edmundsbury Heritage Service (reproduced with permission).



**Fig26e:** Copper alloy snake, discovered at Icklingham, Suffolk, c. 43-410 (Romano-British). Bury St. Edmunds Museum Service: 1981.89.2. © St. Edmundsbury Heritage Service (reproduced with permission).

Both of these copper alloy objects bear similarities to the Staffordshire Hoard gold snakes. The Icklingham snakes are considered Romano-British by BSEMS, which dates them any time from the mid first to the early fifth century AD.[59] Item 1981.89.1 (Figs. 25a, 25b and 25c.) is 4.8cm in length, and terminates in a wedge-shaped fin that probably slotted into another object. There has been no speculation on what that object may have been. The eyes are concave and very large, appearing on the sides of the head rather than the top as in the Staffordshire Hoard examples. The mouth is

[59] The items are catalogued as such by K. Cunliffe for Bury St. Edmunds Museum Service; information courtesy of St. Edmundsbury Heritage Service.

slightly open, and the body is textured with incised interlocking lines while the head is textured with dots. The style of the piece is very different to the Staffordshire Hoard gold snakes, but the size and proportions of the depicted animals are similar. Much more alike to the Staffordshire Hoard gold snakes is item 1981.89.2 (Figs. 26a, 26b, 26c, 26d and 26e.). The item is 6cm long, and whilst it is stockier than any of the Staffordshire Hoard examples, it shares with them an open mouth and tapering, slightly flattened tail. The eyes are on the sides of the head and the animal lacks any kind of incised markings or rivets to suggest it might have been attached to something; nonetheless, the type of object is undeniably similar. The point here is not to say that the Staffordshire Hoard snakes were based directly on any Romano-British type object, or that there is a traceable relationship between the items at Icklingham and those in the Staffordshire Hoard. However, the finds at Icklingham are evidence that the otherwise unique Staffordshire Hoard gold snakes were not produced from a contextual vacuum. These analogous items come once again from a British artistic context. In fact, there is a tradition of items from the Romano-British period being acquired and curated by Anglo-Saxons. Instances of these objects interred as Anglo-Saxon grave goods have been collected and interpreted by White in 1988.[60] White observes that in the seventh and eighth centuries in particular amuletic use of Roman age items seems to be a female practice.[61] However, there is strong evidence of the Anglo-Saxon attribution of Roman objects in a martial context at the grave deposits at Sutton Hoo, where a deliberate incorporation of Roman objects, motifs and styles is evident.[62]

An additional analogous serpentiform Roman bracelet was discovered in 2000 in the grave of a 25-35 year old female at the seventh-century Anglo-Saxon cemetery

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[60] White, R. *Roman and Celtic Objects from Anglo-Saxon Graves: A Catalogue and interpretation of their use* (Oxford, 1988).

[61] White, R. *Roman and Celtic,* p. 165.

[62] Webster, L., *Anglo-Saxon Art*, Chapter 3; Webster, L., 'Death's Diplomacy: Sutton Hoo in the light of other male princely burials' in Farrel, R. T. and Neuman de Vegvar, C. L. (eds), *Sutton Hoo: fifty years after* (Miami, OH, 1992), pp. 75-82. Carver's detailed analysis of the Mound 1 burial site and his reconstruction of the ritual nature of the interment supports Webster's view: Carver, M. *Sutton Hoo: A seventh-century burial ground and its context* (London, 2005), p. 312 ff. Most recently, Filmer-Sankey's 2013 paper even suggests that the whole aim of the burial deposit and layout was to portray the deceased as a Roman Emperor: Filmer-Sankey, W., 'The 'Roman Emperor' in the Sutton Hoo Ship Burial', Journal of the British Archaeological Association 149 (1996), pp. 1-9.

in west Cambridge (see also VI.2 below).[63] The item was not worn, but by the orientation of the find near the pelvis of the skeleton it is probable that the item was carried in a purse or bag attached to the waist.[64] This positioning is once again in line with an amuletic use of the object rather than use as jewellery. Serpentiform jewellery was introduced to Britain by the Roman Empire in the first century AD, and was most common during the period of the early and middle Empire.[65] This and the two examples of such pieces being interred in Anglo-Saxon graves surely points to the fact that Roman and Romano-British items were known in Anglo-Saxon England. Roman and Romano-British depictions of serpents, such as those discovered at Icklingham (Figs. 25a, 25b, 25c, 26a, 26b, 26c, 26d and 26e), could have had a stylistic influence on the Staffordshire Hoard gold snakes.

There are also analogues for the items from a more firmly Anglo-Saxon context, although they are two-dimensional. Among the finds from Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo were discovered several 'gold mounts'.

These are distinctive, long strips of gold, patterned with filigree that would have attached to another object in much the same way as both the gold snakes and the inscribed strip would have done. The first of these (1939, 1010.30, Fig. 27), is 96mm long, the strip is 3mm wide and the ring at the top has a diameter of 18mm, making it comparable to the gold snakes in size.[66] One face of the strip is decorated with a combination of dotted ridges and herringbone pattern in filigree along its length. Four small cabochon garnets are still in place surrounded by beaded wire settings; two are on the patterned face of the strip, and there are two on opposite sides of the ring at the top. The ring must have fitted around the object to which it was attached. The object has no obvious zoomorphic element, but its partner, the next object in the museum catalogue (1939,1010.31, fig. 28) clearly does.[67]

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[63] N. Dodwell, S. Lucy and J. Tipper, 'Anglo-Saxons on the Cambridge Backs: the Criminology site settlement and King's Garden Hostel cemetery', *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society* 9 93 (2004), pp. 98-9 and 109-10.

[64] Dodwell and Tipper, 'Anglo-Saxons', p. 99.

[65] Johns, C., *The Jewellery of Roman Britain* (London, 1997), p. 44.

[66] See: The British museum, 'mount' (museum number 1939,1010.30), *The British Museum Collection Online* https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/search.aspx [accessed 1st June 2015].

[67] See: The British museum, 'mount' (museum number 1939,1010.31), *The British Museum Collection Online* https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/search.aspx [accessed 1st June 2015].

This second mount is slightly smaller, 76mm long and 2mm wide, is more simply patterned with two flutings running the length of the strip and terminates in a small zoomorphic head. The head is not engraved or textured, but the two eyes are punched into the surface. There is a hole for a rivet or nail just behind the head, and the other end is rounded and bent, suggesting damage. The face of the animal is strikingly similar to Items K816 and K1014 (Figs. 19a, 19b and 22) from the Hoard with a long, tapering snout and upward facing eyes. This second item not only to provides a visual analogue for the animal heads of the gold snake items K816 and K1014, it also bridges the contextual gap between the Staffordshire Hoard inscribed strip and the gold snakes. Like the inscribed strip, the positioning of the mount's face suggests that the rest of the strip is the body. This is more obvious in the case of the mount than in the case of the inscribed strip, but the existence of the mount adds weight to the argument that the inscribed strip's design was meant to be perceived similarly as a head and body.

Having pointed out these similarities with other serpentine objects, the fact remains that the Staffordshire Hoard gold snakes are still markedly different from anything else. Their closest visual parallel, the enigmatic gold mount from Mound 1 at Sutton Hoo, is two-dimensional appliqué. Examples of three-dimensional metalwork from Anglo-Saxon England differ greatly in style, form and choice of animal to the Staffordshire Hoard examples. It could be that the roundedness of the bodies is indicative of innovation, with the artist choosing to bring a two dimensional appliqué design into three dimensions. This is particularly possible in the case of Items K128 and K943, whose faces are derived from a distinctively two-dimensional style, which shows the eyes from above and the open jaws in profile.

Having established the uniqueness of these objects and examined some of their early precedents, the issue of interpreting their symbolic meaning still remains. Their unconventional style and simple, realistic rendering suggests that the animal imagery was being used deliberately instead of just decoratively. Although they may be deliberately ambiguous, the first issue is to decide whether or not these small depictions are serpentine at all, and how they fit into the broader context of serpentine imagery in Anglo-Saxon England.
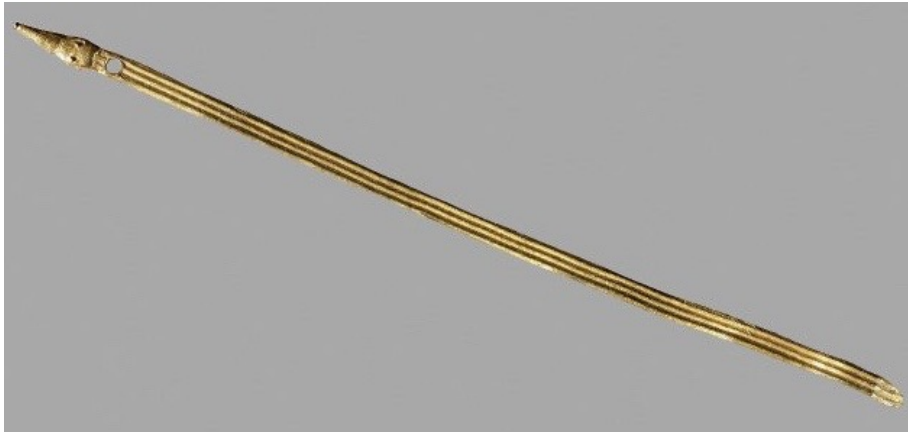
**Fig27:** Zoomorphic gold mount b, discovered at Mound 1, Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, c. early seventh century. British Museum: 1939, 1010.31. © Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).



**Fig28:** Zoomorphic gold mount, a discovered at Mound 1, Sutton Hoo, Suffolk, c. early seventh century. British Museum: 1939, 1010.30. © Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

5.ii. The snake, eel, *wyrm* and *nicor*: the identification of the small gold objects

The six items discussed here (no. K128, K700, K816, K883, K943 and K1014) are each labelled as 'snake' in the provisional Staffordshire Hoard Handlist.[68]

[68] Leahy, K., *Staffordshire Hoard Handlist,* http://www.staffordshirehoard.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2011/03/HC-Staffordshire-Hoard-Handlist.pdf (2010) [Accessed 15th June 2015].

This interpretation is reasonable. The animals look much like snakes in their body type and proportions. As has been demonstrated above, the snake is an appropriate animal to be found in among the zoomorphic art of the warlike Staffordshire Hoard. It could well be that these animals are snakes, and share with those of the inscribed strip and the sword pommels the same symbolic value of protection and aggression by means of becoming the dealer of the mortality that also threatens the wearer. However, as has been discussed previously in relation to Old English terminology, the boundaries between species were very fluid in the Anglo-Saxon period.[69] If the small gold animals could be interpreted as a different kind of serpentine creature, the symbolic value of the objects may be more nuanced. There is a striking similarity between the 'gold snake' items and another animal that may have been much more commonly encountered by the average Anglo-Saxon than any kind of snake. That is the elver or glassfish; the young of the European Eel that appears in British rivers and streams in early spring each year (Figs. 29a and 29b).
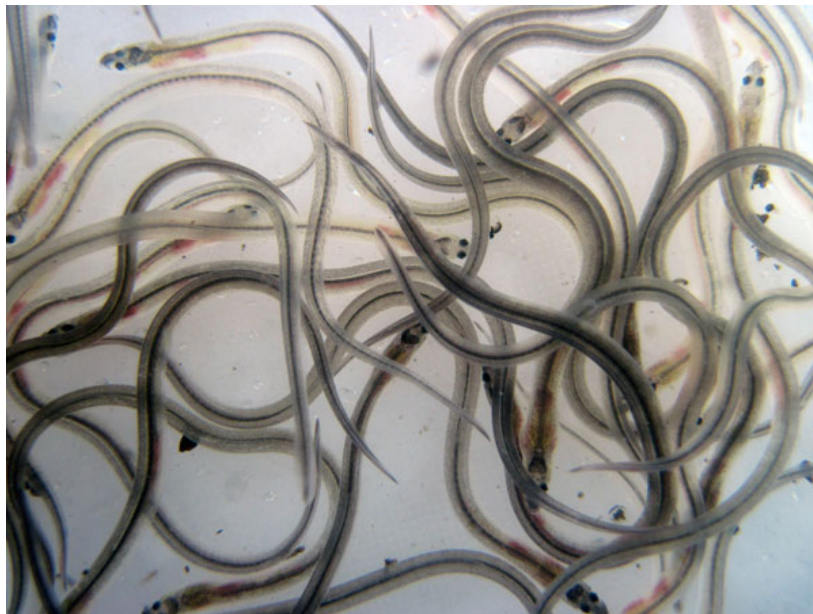


**Fig29a:** European elvers. Photograph from: O' Connor, W., 'Are inland fisheries Ireland's elver trapping indices accurate?' *Old River Shannon* (May 14th, 2013) https://oldrivershannon.com/2013/05/14/eel-monitoring-programme/ [accessed 20th February 2017] (reproduced with permission of the author).

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[69] See Introduction, 3.

**Fig29b:** European elver. European Eel Consultancy, https://europeaneel.com/gallery/ [accessed 20th February 2017] (reproduced with permission).

### 5.iia. Visual similarities

Four of the small gold models have heads still attached (Items K128, K816, K943 and K1014, Figs. 17, 19a, 19b, 21 and 22). All four display upturned round eyes also evident in the elver (see Fig. 29a). Items K816 and K1014 also display very triangular, tapering faces, and look startlingly like the European elver. All four of the Staffordshire Hoard 'snakes' and the elver share similar proportions. The elvers also display a tapering, and more distinctively flattened tail that is wider in profile than from above. This flattened tail is also strikingly evident in Items K816 and K1014 in particular (Figs. 19a, 19b and 22).

In addition to the fact that the Staffordshire Hoard items look like elvers, the elvers also bear resemblance to other depictions of serpentine animals in Anglo-Saxon art. When it appears in British rivers each spring, the immature elver is transparent and the endoskeleton and digestive tract appear as a dark dotted line running through its body (Fig. 29b). This is very visually similar to the way that serpentine animals of many different kinds are portrayed in Anglo-Saxon art. On Item K457 (Figs. 16a and 16b above) on which each serpent is outlined with plain gold wire with a thread of beaded or twisted gold wire running through the centre of each body, giving a dotted effect. A variation on this style can be seen much more clearly on Staffordshire Hoard Item K271, a gold hilt collar. Here, the central band undulates within the two edges to create a moving, slithering effect along with the texture.



**Fig30:** Gold hilt collar, discovered at Ogley Hay, Staffordshire, c. seventh century. Staffordshire Hoard, K271. © Birmingham Museums Trust.

This same style of depiction can be seen most strikingly on the Sutton Hoo Mound 1 belt buckle,  (Figs. 31a and 31b), dated and localised by its style to early seventh-century East Anglia.[70]

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[70] Bruce-Mitford, *Sutton Hoo Volume 2,* pp. 536-564; see especially 563-4.

**Fig31a:** Sutton Hoo Belt buckle, discovered at Mound 1, Sutton Hoo, c. early seventh century. British Museum, 1939,1010.1. © Trustees of the British Museum (<u>CC BY-NC-SA 4.0</u>).



**Fig31b:** Detail of the Sutton Hoo belt buckle, discovered at Mound 1, Sutton Hoo, c. early seventh century. British Museum, 1939,1010.1. © Trustees of the British Museum (<u>CC BY-NC-SA 4.0</u>).

The technique for producing the dots is different on the belt buckle from that on the Staffordshire Hoard items, but the effect is similar. On the belt buckle, the bodies of the serpents are defined by two parallel lines. In the middle, along the trunk of the serpents, the stylised effect of a textured body is formed by a single row of engraved dots, filled with niello. On the circular tongue plate this pattern is reversed, with gold dots appearing on a niello ground.

Though it is not ubiquitous throughout the manuscript, the same effect of texture created with a dotted ridge along the back is also common to the snake illustrations in *Vitellius C.iii,* fols 48v, 56v, and 57r (Figs 9, 10 and 11). Each of these examples shows a ridge of dots along the back of the serpent which, if looked directly

down on, might form a central line of dots running the length of the back of the animal like those in the Staffordshire Hoard and Sutton Hoo examples.

Clearly, not all of these examples are eels; in fact, as has been discussed, the animals depicted in *Vitellius C.iii* are unambiguously snakes.[71] However, there is no reason that the eel could not be included in the repertoire of serpentine animals in Anglo-Saxon art. Its visual similarity to the small gold animals of the Staffordshire Hoard, as well as to these other examples, would surely have been as apparent to the Anglo-Saxon eye as it is to the modern. As will be demonstrated, the eel was a common feature of the Anglo-Saxon landscape, and its natural habits reflect the theme of transition that is so ubiquitous in the symbolism of the serpent.

5.ii.b. Eels in Anglo-Saxon England

Eels were a staple dietary resource in the Anglo-Saxon period. In a 2012 study, Mays and Beavan used stable isotope analysis on human bone collagen from human remains from between the fifth- and seventh-centuries to examine differences in dietary protein sources across different geographical locations. They concluded that:

> The IsoSource estimations suggest that fish (combined eel/freshwater
> fish plus salmonids/marine fish) is of similar importance to terrestrial
> animal products as a source of dietary protein at riverine and coastal
> sites, and contribute only about 10% less than terrestrial animals at
> inland sites.[72]

This is reflected in Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica*, which mentions eels three times.[73] Whilst three mentions does not seem much in comparison to the plurality of other serpents in Bede's work, when looked at in the wider context of animals mentioned by Bede, the eel is reasonably well represented in the text. In all three instances, Bede mentions the eel by its Latin name, *anguilla*, and in all three cases he mentions them in relation to fishing. In the first instance, he finds the plurality of eels

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[71] Chapter 1, 5.ii.

[72] Mays, S. and Beavan N., *An investigation of diet in early Anglo-Saxon England using carbon and nitrogen stable isotope analysis of human bone collagen*, Journal of Archaeological Science 39 (2012) p. 873.

[73] Bede, *HE* I. 1, p. 14-15; IV. 13, p. 374-5; IV, 19, p. 396-79.

in the rivers of Ireland worthy of comment:

> … fluuiis quoque multum piscosis ac fontibus praeclara copiosis; et
> quidem praecipue issicio abundat et **anguilla.** [74]

> [It is remarkable too for its rivers, which abound in fish, particularly
> salmon and eels.]

In the second instance, he mentions them as the only freshwater fish that the uneducated and pagan South Saxons were able to catch:

> Nam et antistes, cum uenisset in prouinciam tantam que ibi famis
> poenam uideret, docuit eos piscando uictum quaerere. Namque mare et
> flumina eorum piscibus abundabant, sed piscandi peritia genti nulla nisi
> ad **anguillas** tantum inerat. Collectis ergo undecumque retibus
> **anguillaribus,** homines antistitis miserunt in mare, et diuina se
> iuuante gratia mox cepere pisces diuersi generis trecentos. [75]

> [When the bishop first came into the kingdom and saw the suffering and
> famine there, he taught them how to get their food by fishing: for both
> the sea and the rivers abounded in fish but the people had no knowledge
> of fishing except for eels alone. So the bishop's men collected eel-nets
> from every quarter and cast them into the sea so that, with the help of
> divine grace, they quickly captured 300 fish of all kinds.]

This demonstrates two things in support of the findings of Mays and Beavan; firstly, that eels are easier or at least more intuitively obvious to catch than other fish, and secondly that there was a plurality of eel nets available to the bishop when he resolved to reassign them as marine fishing nets. This again suggests a common culture of eel trapping and consumption in the south of England. Bede's final mention of eels comes when he explains the origin of the name *Elge* [Ely]:

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[74] Bede, *HE* I. 1, p. 14-15.

[75] Bede, *HE* IV. 13, p. 374-5.

> Est autem Elge in prouincia Orientalium Anglorum regio familiarum
> circiter sexcentarum, in similitudinem insulae uel paludibus, ut diximus,
> circumdata uel aquis, unde et a copia **anguillarum,** quae in eisdem
> paludibus capiuntur, nomen accepit…[76]

> [Ely is a district of about 600 hides in the kingdom of the East Angles
> and, as has already been said, resembles an island in that it is
> surrounded by marshes or by water. It derives its name from the large
> number of **eels** which are caught in the marshes.]

Here Bede mentions an example of a place so notable for its eel population
and consumption that it is named after the animals. He also makes reference to a
certain kind of freshwater landscape associated with the eel; the *paludes* [marshes].
Bede does not attribute any symbolic meaning to the eel, and he does not relate any
anecdotal information that may point to any such meaning. However, this is not
unusual given that the references come from *Historia Ecclesiastica,* which was never
intended to be an exegetical or interpretative work. Even where the work refers to the
highly symbolically charged *serpens,* there is little interpretative or symbolic
commentary.[77]

There is further evidence from archaeological sources that the eel was of
tremendous importance as a resource. In 2000 the Cambridge Archaeological unit
uncovered both an inhumation site and a settlement within a short distance of one
another in west Cambridge.[78] The site has been roughly dated to the seventh
century.[79] One of the graves belonged to a woman aged around twenty-five years
when she died, and contained amongst other grave goods a Frankish copper alloy
bowl, inside which were the vertebrae of an estimated three European eels.[80] The
bowl was found near the woman's left foot and was broken at the time of excavation.

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[76] Bede, *HE* IV, 19, p. 396-79.

[77] Chapter 4, 5.

[78] N. Dodwell, S. Lucy and J. Tipper, 'Anglo-Saxons on the Cambridge Backs: the
Criminology site settlement and King's Garden Hostel cemetery', *Proceedings of the Cambridge
Antiquarian Society* 9 93 (2004), pp. 95-124.

[79] Dodwell, Lucy and Tipper, *Anglo-Saxons*, p. 107.

[80] Grave 1, Skeleton 012, Associated Find 1; The bowl contained 322 whole vertebrae and 16
fragmented vertebrae. See: Dodwell, Lucy and Tipper, *Anglo-Saxons*, p. 98.

The only other grave goods are an iron knife and a spindle whorl. Though several of the graves from the site have associated grave goods, the eel find represents the only inclusion of an animal as part of an internment at the location.

Initial interpretation of the finds by Dodwell, Lucy and Tipper suggests tentatively that the eels were interred as food.[81] There is a tradition of foodstuffs being interred in Anglo-Saxon graves, including onions, apples, nuts and oysters.[82] It is probable that the eels in the Cambridge grave were intended as food. It is not surprising to find eels occupying this role in Cambridge; the grave site lies 'on second terrace river gravels, *c.* 1.5-2m above the Cam floodplain which lies 150m to the east'.[83] However, this does not mean that there is no further meaning to be drawn from their interment. Whether intended as food or not, the ritual context of the find means that some symbolic function underpinned the inclusion of the eels. The fact that it is a serpentine animal discovered in a funerary context cannot be ignored.

<u>5.ii.c. Eels and serpents: the symbolic connections</u>

There is no explicit link between the eel and the serpent in Anglo-Saxon literature. On the other hand, there is also no explicit differentiation between the eel and other kinds of limbless, sinuous animals. There is some evidence that the term *wyrm* could, in fact, have applied to eels. In *Beowulf*, the marine 'niceras nigene' that attack the eponymous hero are referred to as 'meredeor' [sea-beasts], and, perhaps most significantly, 'merefixa' [sea-fish]. [84] This description bridges an important gap between serpent and fish that was almost certainly not as defined for the Anglo-Saxons as for modern taxonomists.

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[81] Dodwell, Lucy and Tipper, *Anglo-Saxons*, p. 109.

[82] Onions and crab apples were found inside a hanging bowl at Ford, Laverstock in Wiltshire (Musty, J., 'The excavation of two barrows, one of Saxon date, at Ford, Laverstock, near Salisbury, Wiltshire', *Antiquaries Journal* 49 (1969) pp. 98-117); a grave at Banstead Down in Surrey similarly contained crab apples (Barfoot, J. F. and Price Williams, D., 'The Saxton barrow cemetery at Gally Hills, Banstead Down, Surrey', *Surrey Archaeological Collections Research* 3 (1976) pp. 59-76); bronze bowls containing nuts and fruit have been found to be present at Faversham (Roach Smith, C., *Collectanea Antiqua: Etchings and Notcies of Ancient remains* vol. vi (reprinted for subscribers, 1868) p. 114) and St. Peter's Broadstairs (Webster, L. E. and Cherry, J., 'Medieval Britain in 1974', *Medieval Archaeology* 19 (1975) p. 223); unopened oysters were discovered in a grave in Sarre, Kent (Smith, R. A., 'Anglo-Saxon Remains' in Page, W. (ed.), *The Victoria History of the County of Kent* vol. 1 (London, 1908) p. 357-61).

[83] Dodwell, Lucy and Tipper, *Anglo-Saxons*, p. 95.

[84] Klaeber, *Beowulf,* l. 558, p. 21; l. 549, p. 21.

In addition to this, there are several features of the eel which surface in serpentine imagery in Anglo-Saxon literature. Certain aspects of the eel's behaviour and life-cycle relate to the theme of transgression, marginality and even exile. The European eel is catadromous; it lives and feeds in freshwater rivers, but spawns in the ocean. In fact, the European eel migrates exclusively to the Sargasso Sea to spawn. The larval young, or leptocephalus, are then carried by ocean currents to the shores of western Europe, including the British Isles. There, they undergo a physiological transformation as they enter brackish and estuarine waters. They transform to be able to thrive in fresh water, and their transparent bodies begin to take on colour. It is in this life-stage that they are referred to as elvers. The elvers are nocturnal, and rely on both a high spring tide and a full moon to make their mass migration upriver, at which point some waterways teem with them. These elvers can even slither out of the water and over rocks or obstacles to some extent. Once established in fresh water, the eel will feed and grow to maturity before beginning its migration back to the Sargasso Sea. It is this transformational quality that sets the eel apart from other aquatic animals in Anglo-Saxon England and aligns it with the concepts of transition and marginality that are characteristic of the serpent. In its transformation from a marine larvae to a freshwater eel it is by its nature marginal, on the border between one state and the next. The appearance of the multitude of elvers at full moon each spring must have seemed particularly mysterious to the Anglo-Saxons that depended upon their arrival as a food resource. The disappearance of the adult eels must also have seemed inexplicable; the availability of food and even the water temperature affect how long an adult eel waits before making its journey back to the ocean.[85]

Once again there is a parallel between the eel and the *nicor* of *Beowulf;* at the mere, creatures similarly introduced as *nicor* are described as both sea monsters and explicitly as serpents:

> Gesawon ða æfter wætere **wyrmcynnes** fela,
> Sellice **sædracan** sund cunnian,
> Swylce on næshleoðum **nicras** licgean,
> Ða on undernmæl oft bewitigað
> Sorhfulne sið on seglrade,

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[85] European Eel Consultancy, https://europeaneel.com/european-eel/ [accessed 1st February 2017].

> **Wyrmas** ond wildeor.[86]

> [(They) saw then in the water many ***wyrm*-like creatures**, strange
> **sea-*dracan*** exploring the sand, likewise on the ledges of the headland
> ***nicras*** were lying; then in the morning (they) often carried out a
> sorrowful journey on the sail-road, ***wyrmas*** and wild beasts.]

The *nicor* is also a creature of the water. More than this, they are explicitly described as being between the sea and the inland water of the mere, living on the margins much like the eel. The creatures are also described embarking on a 'sorhfulne sið' [sorrowful journey] out to sea; whilst it would be too much to a stretch to suggest that these animals are eels or were even influenced by the behaviour of eels, these journeys of sea monsters are echoed in the migration of eels to the Sargasso Sea, a destination that was obviously unknown to the Anglo-Saxons, never to return. This conflation of serpentine and eel-like behaviour suggests that the eel fit the mold of the serpent in Anglo-Saxon thought, and could have been recognised as being related or tangential to the serpent. It could certainly explain the likeness between the elver and the small gold animals of the Staffordshire Hoard, where serpents are so common.

Much like the *nicor,* the gold serpents of the Staffordshire Hoard cannot be said to be one species or another. However, there is a clear case that their production has been influenced by the behaviour and imagery of eels rather than true snakes. This does not place them outside of the boundaries of serpentine animals; *Beowulf* still refers to the water-dwelling monsters as 'wyrmcynnes' [*wyrm*-like creatures]. Instead of altering the symbolic meaning of the small gold items or taking away their power as examples of protective and defensive serpents, the association with the eel adds new layers of complexity and new analogues to their image. The marginal, mysterious, transitional nature of the eel complements the symbolic life of the serpent in Anglo-Saxon England perfectly. Whatever the Items K128, K700, K816, K883, K943 and K1014 were attached to, they probably shared a parallel meaning with the serpent on the inscribed strip; transition, death and exile.

6. Conclusion

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[86] Klaeber, *Beowulf,* ll. 1425-1430, p. 49.

The Staffordshire Hoard represents a wealth of new examples of the image of the serpent operating in a martial context. The inscribed silver gilt strip, Item K550, is a neat encapsulation of its twofold role as both a protective and an aggressive symbol. The text and the image work together in this nuanced piece of symbolic art. Fundamentally, the serpent has the same symbolic connotations that it has had in other genres and contexts. Ultimately, it represents death, the disintegration of the body and transition. This meaning persists even here in a protective context; in manifesting the image of the serpent on religious or protective gear the wearer or carrier becomes and harnesses the element that they wish to repel. The connotation of death inherent in the image of the serpent is controlled by its assimilation into the warrior's protective armoury. The idea of fighting like with like is evinced in the medical texts where plants associated with serpents are said to also repel them. The idea of becoming that which must be overcome is prefigured in the Christian salvation narrative, in which Christ must die in order to overcome death. Equally, the image of the serpent is aggressive, turning the threat of death and physical destruction on the enemy of the wearer or carrier. This explains the profusion of serpentine imagery on a variety of types of war gear, including helmets, swords and even shrines or reliquaries carried into battle.

The mysterious nature of the Staffordshire Hoard gold snakes also bring into focus the uncertain relationship between different animals of serpentine shape. The eel is not recognised explicitly as being a serpent in Anglo-Saxon texts. However, the lines betweenrpents and sea creatures is certainly a mutable boundary, as is evinced by the language of *Beowulf*. Visual representation of animals in Anglo-Saxon art is also often ambiguous and mutable, and the classification of an object by species is unnecessary to understanding the multiple layers of meaning. The eel also shares with the serpent an association with funerary rites, as archaeology has revealed evidence of eels in a Cambridgeshire grave. The image of the serpent continues to carry with it the same set of symbolic connotations in the medium of metalwork and the context of warfare.

# CONCLUSION

## 1. Revisiting the problem

This thesis began with an example; two very different objects depicting serpents in the same way. One was a small sixth-century gold mount from Dean and Shelton in Bedfordshire (Fig. 1). The other was a stone carving from a Roman mausoleum at the Minories site in the City of London (Fig. 2). Both depicted eagles devouring serpents, but in different styles, contexts and media, as well as being made at different times. The example raised a number of questions about the image of the serpent and its symbolic life in early Anglo-Saxon England; were the Anglo-Saxons copying and assimilating pre-existing images into their zoomorphic repertoire unconsciously, or did they intend cultural meaning through self-conscious borrowing? What did the image of the serpent mean, and how did the Anglo-Saxon understanding of it manifest in medicine, art and religion? Lastly and most crucially, if there is some meaning common to both objects, what meaning could be appropriate to both a Roman funerary statue and a fitting that probably came from a martial context? How could the contextual meaning of the former have fed through into the latter? What did the image of the serpent mean in Anglo-Saxon England?

## 2. The meaning of the image of the serpent

The serpent is a ubiquitous image in the art and literature of Anglo-Saxon England. It is also broad and difficult to define, with overlaps in terminology representing overlaps in the ways that animals were classified and thought of in Anglo-Saxon England. The serpent has proven to be both a real creature and an imagined one, and has ranged in type from a dragon to what we would now call a microbe. Perhaps because of this breadth, studies looking at symbolic representations of serpents have limited themselves to one genre or medium; for example, Rauer's examination of dragons focuses on dragon fights in hagiography and epic contexts, and Thompson's examination of the *wyrm* is purely in the context of gravestones.[1] These studies provide real insights for their respective subject areas, and reveal ways forward. This thesis too, has chosen to focus on specific areas, but it has chosen case studies that are deliberately disparate. Looking at a single image as it exists

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[1] Rauer, *Beowulf and the Dragon*; Thompson, *Dying and Death*.

throughout a variety of texts and media has revealed a central, interlaced thread, a common meaning that ties Rauer's hagiographical dragons together with serpents in medical literature, and Thompson's gravestones with the Staffordshire Hoard. On a fundamental, underlying level, this meaning is death. However, as the case studies have demonstrated, this meaning is nuanced. Ideas about transgression, transition, the body, disease and damnation are all intertwined in the relationship between the image of the serpent and death in Anglo-Saxon England.

The Old English medical texts dealt with serpents on a mostly practical, physical level. Two distinct kinds of serpents emerged from these sources; the *wyrm* and the *nædre.* The first of these seemed to cover the broadest range of animals. The *wyrm* exhibited a number of features consistently across all of the texts, both those that were direct translations from Latin and those that were composed and collated in Old English. In all but a few cases in which the *wyrm* was used as part of a remedy, the *wyrm* was shown to be an assailant of the human body. The way that the *wyrm* attacked was also consistent; it was a transgressive creature that invaded the body. Most often, the *wyrm* manifested itself as a parasite, gnawing at various parts of the body. The behaviour of the real, parasitic intestinal *wyrm* prefigured how the Anglo-Saxon leech understood infections, abscesses and even hemorrhoids. Often, the *wyrm* was also blamed for these issues because the symptoms – swelling, necrosis and pain – may have suggested the presence of a tiny or invisible creature, slowly devouring the body from within. Anglo-Saxon medicine grappled with the reality of microbial pathogens in terms of the invisible *wyrm*. The *wyrm* also came to represent disease itself in the poetic *Lay of the Nine Twigs of Woden,* found in the *Lacnunga,* where the genesis of disease is hinted at through a story of Woden striking a *wyrm* into nine parts, each corresponding to the nine herbs that contend with them. It is here that a further understanding of airborne disease is hinted at, as the poem makes mention of flying venom. The examination of the *wyrm* in the medical texts also demonstrated the breadth of the term; as well as referring to paratites and agents of infection, the word *wyrm* was used to describe a venomous spider. Venom was demonstrated to be the chief feature of the second kind of serpent in the medical texts, the *nædre.* This animal was always a true snake, and the remedies focused entirely on treating its bite. Venom, like infection and infestation, is another transgressor of the boundaries of the body. Like an infection or a parasite, it destroys from within, often with the same seemingly consuming, corroding and rotting symptoms.

Although they are treated separately, this is the commonality that all of the serpents of the medical texts share. They are enemies of the human body, that transgress the boundaries of that body and they destroy from within. They are an insidious, often invisible threat. In characterising them as the personification of disease itself the medical texts show that the serpent represents the breaking down of the human body and its disintegration by consumption or corrosion. In the medical texts, the serpent and the physical body are opposed. This representation of the serpent prefigures the opposition between man and serpent throughout all the case studies. In this way, the serpent represents a specific kind of physical death in the medical texts.

In *Beowulf*, the opposition between human being and serpent was shown in a very different context. Again, there were two kinds of serpent in the poem, *nicor* and *draca*, but in this case both shared the additional epithet of *wyrm*. In the poem, *nicor* was an ambiguous creature, and this was reflected by the use of this rare term elsewhere. The word is demonstrated to have links with various large, dangerous water-dwelling animals such as the hippopotamus and the crocodile, the two of which seem to have become conflated in the Anglo-Saxon imagination, which would have known neither as real creatures. In Beowulf, the unifying features of the *nicor* were that they are hostile, that they want to predate and consume humans and that they live in dark, watery environments. This last feature was shown to be significant in the universe of the poem, in which darkness and water are aligned with the margins of God's creation and the idea of exile and damnation. The *nicor* is inextricably bound to this environment and represent dangers encroaching on the borders of the world that God created for mankind. Like the *wyrm* of the medical texts they threaten this earthly boundary, and like them they seek to consume the body. However, it is in the *draca* episode at the end of the poem that the association between the serpent and death is most clearly expressed. When Beowulf goes to fight with the *draca* he does so as an old man, with an explicit sense of his own inevitable death. The appearance of the *draca* is preceded by an elegiac consideration of the transience of secular life. The *draca* is first seen in the funerary context of the barrow, and is also associated with the element of water as a boiling hot stream flows from its lair. It is aligned with darkness, too, waiting until twilight to venture out. It attacks with fire and venom, and Beowulf and the *draca* mutually kill each other. The fire and venom show that once again the threat is corrosive and consumptive. Most importantly, the hero overcomes the *draca*, and in

doing so overcomes death by facing his own mortality, a mainstay of Christian theology.

Fire, venom and mortality are heavily represented in the Old English poetry of *Junius XI*. As creative poetic re-imaginings of the events of biblical books, the poems allow some insight into how the Anglo-Saxon imagination understood the role of the serpent in Christian scripture. Serpentine animals appear in three of the manuscript's four texts; *Genesis, Exodus* and *Christ and Satan.* Across all three, some by now familiar features are exhibited. In all three poems there are two main kinds of serpent; the tempter of the Garden of Eden and inhabitants of Hell. Both represent mortality in their own way; the tempter character is characterised by guile and insidiousness. The idea of rebellion that it plants in Eve's mind is imagined as poison, once again transgressing the boundaries of the body and consuming her slowly from within. The appearance of the tempter, rather like the appearance of the *draca* in *Beowulf,* comes directly after the poet draws the audience's attention to the transience of secular, worldly life. As the tempter, the serpent becomes the reason for and the embodiment of mortality; before his influence, human mortality and death and damnation did not exist. The second kind of serpent, that which lives in Hell, is bound to its environment in a similar way to the *nicor* of *Beowulf* and *Visio Pauli.* In fact, they typify Hell, an environment that represents both death and the ultimate exile from God. In several cases they are mentioned as features that identify that place. In *Exodus* in particular, Hell is described as a pit in which there is 'fyr and wyrm' [fire and the *wyrm*], once again associating the serpent with the corrosive, consumptive action of fire on the body.[2] Both the tempter and the inhabitants of Hell share common, familiar associations with darkness, and the corrosiveness of poison and damnation. They represent death in a profoundly Christian and Anglo-Saxon way, as the destruction of the body and the exile of the soul.

Having dealt with serpents in the context of medical lore, secular poetry and scriptural poetry, Chapter 4 turned to the serpent as it appeared in the Anglo-Saxon historical world-view. In order to do this, three texts from the exegetical and historical works of Bede were selected to give a cross-section of the way that serpents are portrayed in these kinds of texts. Bede's analysis of the serpent in *In Genesim, Historia Ecclesiastica* and *Explanatio Apocalypseos* demonstrates that, once again, the serpent is an overwhelmingly adversarial creature. In Bede's analysis of the Fall of Man in *In*

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[2] Tolkien, *Exodus*, ll. 537, p. 17

*Genesim,* the theme of mortality is at the fore, and Bede makes explicit links between the physical serpent of his contemporary environment and the way that the tempter insidiously poisoned the mind of Eve to bring about the fact of human mortality, linking back to the analysis of the serpent in the vernacular verse treatment of this Biblical episode. It is this insidiousness and suggestion that leads Bede, like several patristic writers before him, to align the serpent with heresy. Bede suggests that the serpent's natural form and behaviour was written into Creation by God as a sign; the heretic creeps, deceives, poisons and presses the faithful down to Hell with its belly. For Bede, heretics are contemporary counterparts to the serpent of *Genesis*; as agents of the Devil, they bring about the death and damnation of faithful bodies and souls. In the *Historia Ecclesiastica* Bede's focus is neither on the serpent nor on an exegetical interpretation of history, but nevertheless he observes the connection between all sin and the Devil's poisonous suggestion, emblematised by the serpent. In *Explanatio Apocalypseos,* Bede envisages the great red *draco* of Revelation as a direct opponent of the Church, the latter represented as a woman giving birth. Bede's understanding of the Church is that it is made up of the bodies of the faithful, and the serpent is similarly made up of the individual heretics and unbelievers who attack the Church. The opposition between the physical body and the serpent is shown once again in the battle between the two. In *In Genesim* and *Explanatio Apocalypseos* in particular, the familiar associations between the serpent and darkness, extreme hostile environments, fire, venom and a watery abyss are evident in Bede's thinking. Ultimately, even in its role as a heretic and diabolical agent, the serpent's ultimate association with death and exile remains the same.

Chapter 5 focuses on a visual and material case study. The Staffordshire Hoard contains a plethora of serpentine depictions, all functioning in the exclusively martial context of the find. Even here, in a vastly different creative medium, the serpent's association with death is clear. The inscribed silver gilt strip (Item K550), encapsulates the relationship between the serpent, the object, and the wearer or carrier going into battle. As a symbol of death, the image of the serpent allows the owner of the object to become death to his enemies, simultaneously protecting himself from that same threat. Just as Christ conquers death by dying and just as Beowulf achieves immortality in song by defeating his own death */draca*, the serpent on war-gear allows the wearer to fight like-with-like and assume the power of death. This interpretation is re-enforced by the use of serpentine imagery on Anglo-Saxon helmets, particularly on

the face. In fact, the silver gilt strip itself has a much higher-quality precedent in the Coppergate Helmet's crest, which is similarly inscribed. Whether in form, function or both, the strip and the helmet crest are parallels. The original challenge of reconciling such a negative image with something a warrior would want to wear is surmounted by this reading of the imagery.

The small gold serpentine objects, Items K128, K700, K816, K883, K943 and K1014, challenge the viewer in a different way. Whatever their original function, they are unique, realistically modelled objects that stand out from the rest of the zoomorphic imagery in the Hoard, which is characterised by Salin's very abstract Style II interlace. Their likeness to an animal that would have been common in the Anglo-Saxon landscape, the elver, does not so much suggest a new possibility as confirm what has been learned from the textual references to serpents: that the Anglo-Saxon concept of what made a serpent is ambiguous, sometimes deliberately so, and does not benefit from the imposition of post-Linnaean classifications. The eel shares with the symbolic serpent an association with exile, transgression of the boundaries between water and land, and marginality that cannot be ignored. Whatever the case, these small gold creatures are undoubtedly serpentine, and probably function alongside the rest of the serpents of the hoard as simultaneously protective and aggressive symbols of death and dying.

This fundamental meaning of death and transition, along with all of the nuances that come along with it, explains how the gold mount from Dean and Shelton in Bedfordshire is neither an unconscious copying of objects like the Roman mausoleum statue from Minories in London, nor a symbolic contradiction. Death, as represented by the serpent, is as applicable to Anglo-Saxon war-gear as it is to the grave. The serpent is not defined as any specific animal or species. Rather, it is a collection of qualities, manifested in a creeping, serpentine, 'uncanny' form. Throughout every case study in this thesis the same associations have shown through, and in every case the fundamental underpinning of every symbolic use of the serpent has been death. Not a violent, active death, but the slow, insidious and inevitable destruction of the mortal body. It is conceptual death and the fact of mortality that the serpent represents in all its forms; as a disease, a diabolical agent, the armoured aspect of a warrior or even an inevitable fight with a dragon.

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