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# At the Edge of the World Geographical Location, *Englishness* and Monstrosity

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## *Abstract*

Monstrosity is a constant presence in Old English literature. In particular, *Wonders of the East* depicts everything that was perceived as strange, significantly located in the East, displaying a Mediterranean-centric perspective where Europe works as the ideal centre of the cosmos. Early English Medieval people adopted this notion, which, however, seems to consign the island to the margins of civilization. This paper investigates how the position of Britain at the border of the map impacted the perceived degree of civilization of the Early Medieval English people and how their geographical location might have imbued the idea of Englishness with monstrosity.

**Keywords:** Borders, Boundaries, Early Medieval England, Hybridity, Monstrosity

## *1. Monstrosity in Early Medieval England*

The idea of the monster looms large over Early Medieval English imagery. Giants, freaks, demons, and hybrid beasts recur time and again in the literary and artistic documentation of the Early Medieval period in England. For instance, giants are, more often than not, identified as artisans of past eras, constructing buildings of unexplained magnificence (*The Wanderer*, l. 87a; *The Ruin*, l. 2b; *Andreas*, ll. 1235a and 1495; *Maxims II*, l. 2a; *Elene*, l. 30). Moreover, four out of the five works making up the famous Nowell Codex foreground monstrosity: while the three monstrous opponents of Beowulf have long been seen as the most significant representation in this regard, the Codex deals with various types of monstrosities in different ways, from Christopher's canine nature to the two lists of marvellous

creatures recounted in both the *Letter from Alexander to Aristotle* and the *Wonders of the East*.<sup>1</sup>

This pervasiveness of monstrous images has been explained as constituting a powerful metaphor for a culture imbued with a sense of mutability and hybridity, a complex society marked by the cohabitation of diversified peoples and cultures.<sup>2</sup> It appears not a matter of chance that monstrosity also forms the basis of the Anglo-Saxon identity: the foundational moments of Early English culture are connected in a series of tales and myths in which monstrous figures frequently appear. Thus, Old English poetry places the stone-building giants as the original inhabitants of the island, and, furthermore, the names of the English nation's forefathers, Hengest and Horsa, are reminiscent of animals or hybrid beings.

But why did Early English people see monstrosity as a foundation for their own culture? One answer might lay in the liminal position monstrous figures inhabited, a space similar to the peripheral location occupied by the British Isles in the medieval vision of the universe. This essay aims to analyse how the position of Britain at the border of the known world impacted the Early Medieval English citizens perceived degree of civilization and, therefore, how this peculiar geographical location might have infused the idea of *Englishness* with a continuous interest in hybridity and monstrosity.

## 2. *The Appeal of the Monstrous: The Case of the Wonders of the East*

One example of how Old English literary documentation attests a widespread interest in monstrous figures can be found in the dissemination and rewritings of texts which directly address the need to categorize monstrosities. One such text is *Wonders of the East*.<sup>3</sup>

The editorial title of *Wonders of the East* – or *Marvel of the East* – identifies the Old English version of a Latin text connected to the tradition of the *Letter of Pharasmanes*, a lost fictitious epistle, assigned to Pharasmanes I, a first-century king of Iberia, in the southern part of current Georgia. This letter was presumably addressed to a Roman emperor, Hadrian in some versions, Trajan in others. The original core of the text must have been composed in Greek around the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE<sup>4</sup> and was subsequently translated into Latin at some point between the 4<sup>th</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Notorious are the words used by Sisam when imagining how the manuscript might have been catalogued: “[I]f a cataloguer of those days had to describe it briefly, he might well have called it ‘Liber de diversis monstris, anglice’ ” (1953, 96). More recently, Thomson interpreted the Codex and, in particular, the three prose texts collectively and individually as “fantasies of otherness” (2022, 104). According to Thomson, the main theme of the Codex is the representation of difference and the texts in it depict encounters between the Self and the Other as well as the motions between Here and There. Ultimately, the three prose texts work together in defining distances. For a thorough description of Nowell Codex, see Malone (1963).

<sup>2</sup> Cohen notes: “Anglo-Saxon England was continuously faced with challenges to its integrity and self-definition, the hybrid body of the monster became a communal form of expressing anxieties about the limits and fragility of identity” (1999, xvii). See also, among others, Mittman 2006 and Estes 2010.

<sup>3</sup> There are at least two texts that share some of the subject matter and the encyclopaedism with *Wonders of the East*. The first one is the *Letter from Alexander to Aristotle* which is bound together with the *Wonders* in the Nowell Codex. The second one is the *Liber monstrorum de diversis generibus*, a detailed catalogue of monstrosities composed in Latin, probably in the Anglo-Saxon context, between the 8<sup>th</sup> and the 9<sup>th</sup> centuries. On this, see, among others, Orchard 1995.

<sup>4</sup> Evidence for a Greek origin are numerous. Firstly, the initial of the name for the alleged author corrupted into either F, or P implies a derivation from /ph/ as a transliteration of the Greek /φ/. Secondly, the Greek measurements in stadia are maintained in most versions of the text and, lastly, the names given to the monstrous races are frequently of Greek origin. On this, see Knock 1981, 25-26.

century and the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> Extant versions of the letter have been classified into two main groups, generally designated by the letters F and P, according to the corruption of the sender's name;<sup>6</sup> *Wonders of the East* is derived from the P group.

As already noted, a first rendering of the text appears in Old English, accompanied by illustrations, in the *Beowulf* manuscript (London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius A.XV) and was composed around the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 11<sup>th</sup>; a second copy, dating back to the mid-11<sup>th</sup> century, to which five chapters were added in the concluding part, is kept alongside the Latin version and related illustrations in London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B.V/1; finally, a copy of the Latin text is extant in Oxford (Bodleian Library, 614, ca. 12<sup>th</sup> century). All versions are descended from a common Latin version which arrived in England no earlier than the 7<sup>th</sup> century. The Old English versions are not descendants of each other, but have a common ancestor; they are separated by at least one witness from the first translation in Old English (see Knock 1981, 57-154; Lendinara 2002, 177-81).

*Wonders of the East* aims to describe the unexpected assortment of nature, with the treatise telling of a fluid and destabilizing universe. It depicts a wide range of unusual species and places that are bound together by the fact that they are, simply, extra-ordinary. It can be viewed as travel literature in an implausible universe, or as an encyclopaedic treatise with a pseudo-naturalistic and allegorical underlying structure.<sup>7</sup>

The text is presented in a neutral tone; plain and simple sentences are used to depict locations, animals and people. Usually, each chapter begins with a nonspecific indication of place, before the introduction of the wonder with its name and a brief physical description. In comparison to the established style of the travel-literature genre, it might be noted that *Wonders of the East* tends to overemphasize the size of both the beings and regions mentioned. The narrative rarely pauses to detail habits and rituals; whether it refers to animals or to human-like beings, it includes some allusion to behaviours only when it is felt as unusual. The text reads like a catalogue, a continuous sequence of short illustrative snapshots, which barely state whether the creatures are dangerous or hostile, or not.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>5</sup> The oldest evidence for the existence of the Latin version of text is the mention of two rivers in M. Valerius Probus' 4<sup>th</sup> century *Catholica*, which is otherwise cited only in the *Letter*. The *terminus ad quem* is identified in the elements of the *Letter* that Isidore includes in his *Etymologies* (XII.iv.18 and XVII.viii.8). A more in-depth discussion of the dates of composition can be found in Knock 1981, 31-34 and Lendinara 2002, 186.

<sup>6</sup> The texts known as *Letter of Fermes to Hadrian* (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, nouv. acq. lat. 1065, ff. 92v-95v – 9<sup>th</sup> century) and *Feramen Rex ad Adrianum imperatorem* (Montecassino, Archivio dell'Abbazia 391, ff. 82v – 84v – 11<sup>th</sup> century; Cava dei Tirreni, Archivio dell'Abbazia 3, ff. 393r-394v – 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century; Madrid, Biblioteca Nacional 19, ff. 198v-199r – 12<sup>th</sup> century; Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, anc. fond. lat. 7418, ff. 268-270v – 14<sup>th</sup> century) are part of the F group, as is the third book (ch. 72-81) of *Otia Imperialia* by Gervase of Tilbury (ca. 1211). On the other branch, *Epistola Premonis Regis ad Trajanum imperatorem* (Strasbourg, C IV 15, lost codex, edited by Graff in 1827), *Epistola Parmoenis ad Trajanum imperatorem* (untraceable manuscript belonging to Isaac Vossius, partially transcribed by Pitra in 1884), a translation in Old French known as *Lepistle le roy Perimenis a lempereur* (Bruxelles, Bibliothèque Royale, 14562, ff. 5vb-6vb – 13<sup>th</sup> century) and *Wonders of the East* are all part of the P group.

<sup>7</sup> Austin argues that the treatise is organised according to a soteriological paradigm. The marvels would be introduced with a progressive tone according to the possibility of being part of the final salvation: monstrous beings cannot be part of God's plan and, thus, are placed at the beginning of the text (2002, 26-28). According to Gibb, instead, the first section of the text is full of creatures that evoke evil, represented by monsters and men who perform despicable actions, and is allegorically opposed to the final section populated by symbols of Good, positive exempla, such as honest and hospitable peoples (1977, 62-66).

<sup>8</sup> They either avoid contact with the outside world or they attack any visitors, for self-defence. On this, see Campbell 1988, 71.

In this text, semi-human monster races play a significant role: they dwell in the most remote corners of the globe and have a humanoid shape, but physically differ from humans in many visible ways, such as by having an excessively big or an excessively small size, extra or missing limbs, or, crucially, as possessing bestial features in their body. Still classified in the catalogue as belonging to a *moncynn* “people, human lineage”, they seem to work as the missing link between the purely animal monsters described at the beginning of the treatise and the strange but completely human beings depicted at the end.<sup>9</sup>

One peculiar case, in this sense, is the included description of the cynocephali, a monstrous race which had appeared in the Western world since ancient times. In *Wonders of the East*, the cynocephali (ch. 7) are the only beings not explicitly classified as belonging to a human species, yet nor are they classified as any other animal. In the Old English version, this breed of half-dogs is identified by a double denomination – *healfhundingas* and *conopoenas* –, two names added to the one proposed in the Latin version – *cenocephali*; regardless, they are never affiliated to any *moncynn*.<sup>10</sup>

Furthermore, a clear opposition is evident in the three codices, between the textual description, focused on the animal characteristics of the creature and the illustrations, which represent the figure as a humanoid. The Old English text reveals that the cynocephali possess the mane of a horse, the tusks of a boar and, finally, the head of a dog, “horses manan ⁊ eoferes tucas ⁊ hunda heafda”,<sup>11</sup> while their breath is similar to a flame, “⁊ heora oruð byð swylce fyres lig”.<sup>12</sup> The characteristic features of this creature, therefore, situate it within a liminal space between different categories: they are marked by attributes associated with horses, boars and dogs. According to this depiction, the cynocephalus is, therefore, partly herbivorous, partly carnivorous, partly omnivorous; part hunter, part game, part pet.<sup>13</sup>

They are also partly human: their semi-human aspect is omitted in the text but evident in the illustrations. Pictures, in fact, provide more details on the cynocephalus: full-length portrayals depict it as a humanoid creature. They help to identify the beings described as monstrous yet human and, at the same time, help to represent the species’ liminal condition (see Lionarons 2002, 170-72). The cynocephalus, in the images of the later manuscripts *Tiberius* (f. 80r) and *Bodley* (f. 38v), is represented as completely nude, thus apparently relegated to a position far from humanity.<sup>14</sup> However, in contrast to the textual description, the more animalistic features

<sup>9</sup> Some of the wonderful animals depicted in the treatise include double-headed snakes (ch. 5), gold-digging ants (ch. 9) and the *lertices* with their donkey’s ears and bird’s feet (ch. 14), while the concluding chapters describe, for example, a people whose main characteristic is kindness (ch. 25) and a people who are particularly hospitable (ch. 29). Hereafter, the chapter’s organisation and numbering proposed by Orchard will be followed (1995, 173-203). For a more detailed description of the catalogue’s matter, see, also, Estes, 2010, 353-64.

<sup>10</sup> The compound noun “healfhundingas” is made up by *healf* “half” and *hund* “hound, dog” (see *Dictionary of Old English*, s.v. “healf” and “hund”) with the suffix *-ing* used to form masculine nouns denoting affiliation, lineage or derivation from (see Torre Alonso 2011, 44); it is used to translate the Latin “cenocephali”. Both names are reinforced by the addition of the alternative form “conopoenas” in both versions of the text. This supplementary designation may be related to *cynopeneae*, one of the other names reserved for the cynocephali, a form of dubious etymology first documented in Tertullian’s works (*Apologeticus* VIII, 5; *Ad Nationes*, I.8, 1)

<sup>11</sup> Unless otherwise stated, all translations from Old English are mine. Trans.: horses’ manes and boars’ tusks and dogs’ heads.

<sup>12</sup> Trans.: and their breath is like the flare of a fire.

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly, these numerous physical details belonging to different animals, however, are to be found only on the monster’s head. As in the rest of the tradition, the hybridity of the cynocephalus has its *locus* in the head of the creature, and the textual description does not attend significantly to other parts of the body.

<sup>14</sup> Nakedness is used in figurative representation to indicate what can be perceived as a bestial state. In medieval thought, nudity is both a sign of moral weakness – because it denotes sin – and a sign of lack of self-awareness –

appear deliberately toned down in the images: the boar bristles are only slightly visible and the horse's mane grazes its shoulders with the rest of the body being completely hairless. In *Tiberius* (f. 80r), the creature is represented eating the leaf of a plant emerging from a black rock. The right hand of the figure, which gestures toward the plant with two fingers, seems to be inviting the observer to take part in the banquet (see Barajas 2013, 249).

The illustrator's choice in *Vitellius* (f. 100r) is different. The monster, clearly possessing a dog's head and boar's tusks, is decked out in royal clothes: together with the stole made up of three layers indicated by three different colours, it holds the effigies of royalty, an orb and sceptre. Noticing the completely unthreatening attitude of the creature in the picture, Thomson argues that this particular depiction of the cynocephalus might be influenced by the preceding text in the Nowell Codex, *The Passion of Saint Christopher*, a text that represents the dog-headed Christopher as "ironically, more civilized and much more like 'us' (early medieval English Christians) than the people he confronts" (2022, 107).

Nonetheless, whether this picture is representing somebody akin to Saint Christopher or not, the attention that the illustrator here reserves both for the clothing and for the bestial features of the hybrid would seem to remind the observer that pure otherness is impossible (see Mittman and Kim 2013, 9-11). Through this representation, the artist of *Vitellius* seems to have been hoping to reproduce the concept of a monstrous civilization: the clothes of the cynocephalus evoke a familiar image, while its elongated snout simultaneously disturbs this familiarity. The ambiguous and liminal nature of the hybrid monster is well illustrated, making it both welcoming and disturbing. The man-animal hybrids depicted in the *Wonders of the East*, exemplified by the cynocephalus, force human beings to directly confront those aspects of human identity that are generally relegated to the realm of the irrational: instincts, passions, and everything related to the corporal and sexual. In some ways, the cynocephalus appears to be both reassuring and disturbing. Its hybridity is an excellent example of something both familiar and destructive: such hybrid bodies cannot establish an identity, they constantly challenge the boundaries of the Self (see Kim 2003, 162-80).

In its interest in the representation of creatures that pose a constant threat to conventional categorical distinctions, *Wonders of the East* reveals a concern regarding the possibility of the undermining of these imposed boundaries. The heterogeneous figures represented in the treatise, in addition to presenting an ambiguous vision of a non-human animal, illustrate how the monstrous can represent a distorted self, such as might be recognized by the Anglo-Saxon's during their own efforts to establish a defined cultural identity.

*Wonders of the East* is, indeed, one of those texts adapted from the Latin tradition into Old English, that, according to Estes, help to "demonstrate the importance of Latin Christian texts in constructing [the Anglo-Saxon's] world view, as well as the ways in which they used those texts to define their own identity" (2010, 371).

### 3. *Anglia at the End of the World*

*Wonders of the East* is, as noted above, the insular branch of a much older continental tradition. Some of the *quasi*-human populations described in this tradition, have appeared in Western culture since its dawning: they originally appear in classical Greece and contribute to the Western collective imagination throughout the Late Ancient and Medieval period. Further-

because, additionally, it denotes an inability to use reason (see Friedman 2000, 189). For a general discussion on nudity in the English Middle Ages, see also Wilcox 2003.

more, monstrous peoples' appearances in travel narratives began with Ctesias' and Megasthenes' tales of India (5<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century BCE), and they are also included in the Plinian encyclopaedia and propagated into the Middle Ages via the Solinian compendium of the *Historia Naturalis*.<sup>15</sup>

Monstrous figures are generally considered to be born out of an overlap between the conceptualisations of the marginal aspects of a society, all those figures labelled as inferior, degraded, or deviant – i.e. females, slaves and foreigners (see Volpato 2014, ch.1). For instance, in 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE Greece, the norm was established as Greek, male, and human. As explained by DuBois: “The ‘other’ is seen as bestial, irrational, chaotic, subject to desire, hostile to marriage and exchange, enslaved” (1991, 122-23). Hybrid figures such as Centaurs and Amazons symbolise, in this context, barbarians, animals and females and, thus, signal the boundaries of the self and the city, which is composed of equals.<sup>16</sup>

The ways in which a society deals with its marginalised groups are analysed also by Stallybrass and White (1986, 193): they, similarly, establish a dichotomous relationship between the two opposing categories of “high” and “low”, while contextually referring to the Freudian model of the periphery returning to trouble the individual consciousness. They contend that despite a form of technical exclusion, there are signs of “lower” aspects of society returning in symbolic form, as a result of efforts to establish boundaries. In this theorisation, the two opposing features, the “high” and the “low”, are always in a dynamic relationship with each other.

Similar conclusions may be formed concerning Early Medieval England's social structure, where people were categorized according to their distance from the centres of power. Man, i.e., a free human male, occupied the highest place in the medieval social hierarchy; however, he could not distinguish himself from the lesser classes entirely since the extent to which he differed from them defined his identity. In fact, in order to be defined as this highest expression of humanity, some comparative distinctions were required: the animal, the foreigner, the monster, and the female were used to express contrast (see Yamamoto 2000, 8-9).

Society is, thus, afflicted by these connected internal differences: the Othered figure, like Freud's *Uncanny*, “goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar” (2003, 124). Therefore, in an effort to suppress and conceal the danger posed by domestic difference, the community attempted to project its own lethal otherness onto those who were excluded from it. As Lavezzo explains, the duality of Self and Other is neither symmetrical, nor is it a straightforward dichotomy, *Othering* is not at all a neutral process: the creation of an idealised society which is contrasted with outsiders is one-sided, with the marginal elements connoting a variety of objectionable attributes; the distinction between *Us* and *Them* is built on the social storytelling that “*we* are not [...] evil, savage idolatrous, contentious, etc” (2006, 12).

As simply put by Estes, Early Medieval English society's interest for figures of alterity serves “paradoxically, both to define Anglo-Saxon origins and to depict outsiders of varying types that are made to perform as ‘Other’ to members of the Anglo-Saxon community” (2010, 361).

Monstrous figures, thus, can be seen as emerging from the psychological desire to construct elements in contrast to human traits, in order to establish the boundaries of humanity.

<sup>15</sup> For a more in-depth examination of the diffusion of fantastic travel literature in medieval Europe, see Wittkower 1942, 159-97.

<sup>16</sup> This system is supposedly flexible enough to accommodate various historical moments, but it starts to break down in the 4<sup>th</sup> century BCE, when the Hellenes were forced to face divisions and wars among themselves. Thus, 4<sup>th</sup>-century philosophers did not broaden their notion of the human subject to embrace all. Instead, they developed a new rationalization of social interactions in an attempt to solidify the structure of the city. If the city's elite were comfortable with certain attributes, they were considered natural, and then articulated in terms of a “hierarchy of difference” (DuBois 1991, 133).

Resulting from the fantasy of ejection of impure elements of society, these creatures ultimately encompass both the Other and the Self; they unite, in one entity, all that is familiar and all that is alien. Giants, cynocephali and other monstrous figures are *almost* human, they constitute a necessary antithesis. In contrast to the qualities they signify, Western society may establish its own cultural identity, with the monstrous serving as a repository for Christian culture's repressed fears, anxieties, fantasies, and aspirations. In *Wonders of the East*, the liminal creatures populating the East embody everything that is, rhetorically, distanced but actually arises from within: these extraordinary beings emerge in the imagination and reality of those who created them to provide a point of comparison upon which cultural anxieties about their identity as human beings can be projected.

This might be the reason for the proposed location of such figures. From the classical period through the Middle Ages, Western Europeans developed a complex and ethnocentric understanding of the link between character, shape, and place. The habitations of monstrous races were established in isolated locations, as part of a well-organized structure in medieval cosmography (see Friedman 2000, 37); the specific location of particular races on the map reflects theological and moral systems, more than actual geography.<sup>17</sup> During the Hellenistic period, monstrous people were located just beyond the regions of Asia closest to Ancient Greece, the lands with which the ancient world had come into the closest contact during commercial and cultural activities. During the Middle Ages, monsters were still widely imagined to populate the eastern region of the Earth, mostly due to tradition; nevertheless, the places mentioned in *Wonders of the East*, including Armenia, Persia, and Babylon, are completely unrelated to the actual regions. As noted by Campbell:

To the Greek historian Ctesias (fl. 400 B.C.) the East was India; to the author of *Wonders of the East* it was Egypt and Babylonia. 'The East' is a concept separable from any purely geographical area. It is essentially 'Elsewhere'. All four cardinal points equally imply the word far when used as place names, and at different times and from different vantages, all four have been suspect (the North to imperial Rome, the West to the Chinese, and so on). (1988, 48)

"East" is simply "Elsewhere": the edge of the known world, the space just beyond human jurisdiction, a morally charged region, the only location where the monstrosities depicted in the treatise could be born and thrive.<sup>18</sup>

The medieval Christian vision of the world thus implied a fundamental ethnocentrism, which manifested in the concentric segmentation of the universe as depicted in maps and ethnographic writings. The most common *mappae mundi* were the aptly named "T-O" maps: the ocean, shaped like an "O", was pictured to define the *orbis terrarum*, the spherical Earth

<sup>17</sup> It is significant to remember that, in the Middle Ages, maps did not have the same function as in the modern day. As noted by Friedman, "the map was far more a visual work of art and an expression of contemporary cosmology and theology" (2000, 38). In the last fifty years, scholars in the field of cultural geography – such as, among others David Harvey – have long analysed and emphasised the evolving character of space in the field of humanities, wherein it is no longer regarded as an objective fact but as a social construct. For instance, Harvey argues that we must "challenge the idea of a single and objective sense of time or space, against which we can measure the diversity of human conceptions and perceptions [...] that we recognize multiplicity of the objective qualities which space and time express, and the role of human practices in their construction" (1989, 203).

<sup>18</sup> Seeing in *Wonders of the East* an anticipation of post-medieval "orientalism", Estes argues that the Eastern world, "at once monstrous, marvellous and mysterious" (2010, 372), becomes a place where "the imagination is given free rein in the creation of a realm whose wild characters and characteristics opposed the wished-for stability of roles and functions 'at home' among the English" (*ibidem*).

as referred to by the Romans; this circular world was divided by the three watercourses (the Don, the Nile and the Mediterranean) thought to separate the Earth's three continents (Asia, Africa and Europe), which formed the shape of a "T". These maps, which are frequently eastward-oriented, position Britain at the northern extreme of the known world.<sup>19</sup>

Following an analysis of a significant number of medieval maps, Mittman notices how the two isles of Britain and Ireland are often positioned far away from the rest of Europe, "they seem to be forcefully excluded from the bounds of civilization" (2006, 21), as can be seen in both the two major *mappae mundi* of the Middle Ages, the Hereford and Ebstorf maps.<sup>20</sup> These both show the lands of *Anglia*, *Britannia* and *Hybernia* at the bottom left extremity of the Earth's "O", in an area that medieval viewers would have recognized as the northwest.

Moreover, the *mappae mundi* designated a space for monstrous creatures at the world's extremes, on the ocean's shores, to the north and south, as if the monsters themselves created the border of the world. Alongside the "T-O" representation of the Earth, a more theoretical approach existed in the Middle Ages, one based on Macrobius' *Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis* (II.5). According to Macrobian theory, the globe was divided into five climatic regions: two areas of freezing weather at the poles; two temperate zones, the only ones believed suitable for intelligent life; and an equatorial region with a torrid climate. As it was thought impossible to cross the middle section, it was assumed that the southern hemisphere was unoccupied. Therefore, the only location in which humanity was thought to exist was the European continent, referred to as *oikoumené*, "the inhabited world", which was oriented around the city of Jerusalem, seen as the ideal centre of the world. According to this ethnocentric approach, the Mediterranean region – precisely the places inhabited by the authors and cartographers who advocated this viewpoint – was a natural world that appeared to be more benign, due to the temperate climate and lack of monstrosities. The further one moved away from the ideal centre, the less *human* the men were.

Interestingly, after its widespread conversion to Christianity, the Early Medieval English society adopted this worldview, which appears to relegate their own island to the outskirts of civilization and impacted the Anglo-Saxons' opinion of their own culture. As succinctly articulated by Lavezzo: "if the medieval English were physically remote from world centers, they were not so distant as to be ignorant of their border identity" (2006, 3).

Indeed, intellectuals in British territory had viewed their situation in the world to be isolated and liminal since the early Middle Ages: Britain was the final, solitary outpost before the unsurpassable ocean. While "T-O" maps placed the British Isles, the last European region, in the far north of the globe, Late Antique and Medieval observers perceived the two islands as isolated and far. The most pervasive description of Britannia can be assigned to Orosius' *Historia adversos Paganos* (I.2, 76). He describes Britain's geographical location in relation to the Gauls; Britain constitutes their northern border: "Britannia oceani insula per longum in boream exenditur; a meridie Gallias habet".<sup>21</sup> Later, writers native to British soil would make this vision

<sup>19</sup> For an in-depth discussion and a fairly complete list of all known *mappae mundi*, see Harvey 1991, 359-68.

<sup>20</sup> The Hereford map was created by Richard of Haldingham at the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century and it is kept in the collection of Hereford Cathedral. The Ebstorf map was found in Ebstorf in 1843; it was created around the second quarter of the 13<sup>th</sup> century by somebody called Gervase. It was destroyed in 1943 during the bombing of Hanover; however, it can be reconstructed thanks to a number of black and white photos and a facsimile reproduction made prior to the bombing. Even though both maps are chronologically later than the Early Medieval period, they both seem to be structurally linked to older "T-O" maps, such as, for instance, the one copied in BL, Cotton Caligula B V/1 alongside the *Wonders of the East* (see Mittman 2006, 33).

<sup>21</sup> Trans. by Deferrari in Orosius 1964, 16: "Britain, an island in the Ocean, extends for a long distance northward; to the south, it has the Gauls".



their own. In his *De excidio Britonum*, a homiletic epistle with polemic intent written around 540-50, the Welsh monk Gildas borrows some elements from Orosius' report, elaborating on it:

Britannia insula in extremo ferme orbis limite circium occidentemque versus divina, ut dicitur, statera terrae totius ponderatrice librata ad Africo boreali propensius tensa axi, octigentorum in longo milium, ducentorum in lato spatium, exceptis diversorum prolixioribus promonteriorum tractibus, quae arcuatis oceani sinibus ambiuntur, tenens, cuius diffusiore et, ut ita dicam, intransmeabili undique circulo absque meridiana freto plagae, quo ad Gallia Belgicam navigator.<sup>22</sup>

Gildas' is the first description of the isle as isolated in the extreme north, and, with the exception of the strait to the south which allows communication with the continent and Belgic Gaul, he considers it, as they say (*ut ita dicam*), impenetrable, literally depicting it as cut off from the rest of Europe.

This characterisation is later echoed in the incipit of Bede's historical account of the earliest endeavours of the English church, *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, completed around 731: "Britannia Oceani insula, cui quodam Albion nomen fuit, inter septentrionem ed occidentem locata est, Germaniae Galliae Hispaniae, miximis Europae partibus, multo inveruallo aduersa"<sup>23</sup> (*Historia ecclesiastica* I.1). Moreover, Bede reiterates this idea once again when re-enacting the debates witnessed at the Synod of Whitby (III.25): priest Wilfrid, lamenting the Picts' and Britons' reluctance to accept the Roman dates for Easter, considers the British Isles as the two most remote islands of the Ocean: "Uno ac non diuerso temporis ordine geri conperimus, praeter hos tantum et obstinationis eorum complice, Pictos dico et Brettones, cum quibus de duabus ultimis Oceani insulis, et his non totis, contra totum orbem stulto labore pugnant".<sup>24</sup>

Therefore, it can be claimed that the Mediterranean-centric perception of the world inevitably places both *Britannia* and *Hybernia* in a liminal position. As the two lands occupying the edge of Europe, and completely encompassed by the sea, they were felt to be detached from the centre of the Christian world, as were obscure and mythical regions such as Scythia and Ethiopia. Furthermore, the Early Medieval English were not simply aware of their own marginality, they were actively engaged in developing the characterisation of England as a borderland.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Trans. by Winterbottom in Gildas 1978, 16: "The island of Britain lies virtually at the end of the world, towards the west and north-west. Poised in the divine scales that (we are told) weigh the whole earth, it stretches from the southwest towards the northern pole. It has a length of eight hundred miles, a width of two hundred: leaving out of account the various large headlands that jut out between the curving ocean bays. It is fortified on all sides by a vast and more or less uncrossable ring of sea, apart from the straits on the south where one can cross to Belgic Gaul".

<sup>23</sup> Trans. by Colgrave and Mynors in Bede 1969, 15: "Britain, once called Albion, is an island of the ocean and lies to the north-west, being opposite Germany, Gaul, and Spain, which form the greater part of Europe, though at a considerable distance from them".

<sup>24</sup> Trans. by Colgrave and Mynors in Bede 1969, 301: "The only exceptions are these men and their accomplices in obstinacy, I mean the Picts and the Britons, who in these, the two remotest islands of the Ocean, and only in some parts of them, foolishly attempt to fight against the whole world".

<sup>25</sup> Lavezzo (2006) argues that English writers, from Ælfric to Chaucer, do not bemoan England as an island on the edge of the world, but celebrate it; because it was precisely through its marginality that such writers could resist the religious universalism that supposedly dominated the medieval West. More recently, Ostacchini (2022) contends that, instead, Ælfric was acutely concerned for England's distance from the centre of the Christian world, perceiving their difference not simply in geographical terms but also in cultural matters. Analysing the abbot of Eynsham's depiction of India in his *Life of St Thomas*, Ostacchini demonstrates Ælfric's attempt to reconcile the relationships between centre and peripheral, with India shown as a place with some similarities to England, another Christian land on the periphery of the inhabited world.

Texts and maps in medieval England reveal a conscious attempt to confront the country's own geographic marginality, with such considerations contributing to the creation of the English national identity. For medieval English authors and mapmakers, the degree to which their community was "other to itself" did not ultimately undermine its official, national narrative; rather, its "geographic otherworldliness" (Lavezzo 2006, 14) formed part of the discourse dedicated to community construction and contributed to the establishment of a distinct national identity.

Early Medieval English people strongly embedded their own culture within their liminal geographical location and these peripheral zones, the outskirts of society, the "edges of civilization" (Mittman 2006, 26) are, as noted above, the spaces in which monstrosity thrives.

#### 4. *Anglo-Saxon England: A History of Resistant Hybridity*

The cultural and ethnic composition of England has been fairly diverse since its founding and was so throughout the entire Early Medieval period (5<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> century). It has been argued that the defining characteristics of a particularly *English* nation is to be found in the very coming together of fragments of disparate identities, on the literal common ground of the island. Cohen describes the 8<sup>th</sup> century British archipelago as "a dynamic expanse" characterized by such features as postcolonial theorists might label "creolization, *métissage*, doubleness, *mestizaje* or hybridity" (2006, 45).

As a matter of fact, Early Medieval England is better described as an assortment of different peoples who were continuously encountering and colliding with one other. These societies lived in close proximity, in a context which led them to always reassess their own cultural peculiarities in relation to each other. Since the 4<sup>th</sup> century, during the Roman period, Britain was a region where different people could meet. Its borders had been defended by mercenary troops which were, more often than not, of Germanic origin. These troops were regulated as *foederati*: they had the right to reside in unoccupied lands and farm them as long as they subsequently guarded them. Settling in the northern and eastern part of the island, these soldiers were thus obliged to provide protection against the threat of incursions by Scots and Picts from the north. The beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century saw Rome abandon its strongholds on the island; thus, the leaders of the Britons, who controlled now the region, continued this policy of favouring both the earlier Germanic settlements and the successive migratory movements from southern Scandinavia and the coastal regions on the North Sea.

In the subsequent centuries, the descendants of the Germanic peoples attempted to force the Britons to relocate, mostly toward present-day Wales and Cornwall, the westernmost regions of the island. The relationship between the Anglo-Saxons and Britons<sup>26</sup> cannot be easily explained using the framework of colonizer-colonized. These relations should not be simplified, nor described by characterising the state as in perennial conflict, nor imagined as peaceful co-existence (see Cohen 2006, 45-46). Despite some cultural differences, the peoples inhabiting Britain shared great affinities: shifting between an economy of looting and one of agriculture, they formed kingdoms of mutable durations; they often waged war against each other, but, at the same time, they were willing to forge alliances, by marriage or by military agreements.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Designating one group as Anglo-Saxons or English and another as Britons, Welsh or Celts is a matter of convenience. Presumably, such broad labels conceal a considerable deal of internal heterogeneity among the people they supposedly identify (see Cohen 2006, 43).

<sup>27</sup> For instance, Mercia's kingdom may have been formed from a mix of Anglo-Saxon and Romano-British elements. According to Higham, there is sufficient evidence to support the view that the Midlands region was continuously inhabited by a single political entity from Roman times (1995, 148).

Then, from the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> century onwards, the Roman Church extended its influence over the island and was able to achieve its Christianization without resorting to violence. Ecclesiastical hierarchies enabled theological and cultural syncretism to be grafted onto a society already marked by interactions and struggles between different political and ethnic identities, particularly as the Church opted against destroying sites of worship previously consecrated to pagan divinities.<sup>28</sup>

The political and social equilibrium of the island was then further disturbed in the 9<sup>th</sup> century following violent Viking incursions and the subsequent settlement of Scandinavian populations. Then, Christianized Anglo-Saxons clashed, and yet shared their territory, with pagan peoples, with whom they might have recognized a relation in the distant past.<sup>29</sup> The Viking disruptions laid the foundation for the future unification required in order to oppose the foreigner *Dene*.<sup>30</sup>

The notion of a single kingdom, of a single Anglo-Saxon lineage united in culture and traditions, is a concept developed in the course of many centuries. It spawns, at least, from Bede's interest in tracing a common ancestry between the Angles, Saxons and Jutes, although a more genuine sense of collective identity spread more widely from the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards, as a consequence of the royal house of Wessex's political designs. *Englishness*, an idea of community, was in fact moulded by King Alfred and his successors, who followed the example of Roman imperial power: in the 10<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries, the Wessex kings gradually expanded their territories, expelling the Danes and annexing the remaining kingdoms. The idea of *England*, one large political and cultural entity, served to promote their goal.<sup>31</sup> Thus, the unified kingdom emerged due to political machinations and the historical-legendary accounts of the migration period were a crucial component for imposing this cohesive identity.

As a matter of fact, origin myths have always played an important role in the elaboration of people's cultural identities. The notion of 'community' is not static, as it is often built upon elements that are constantly changing: languages, laws, customs and traditions vary over time, as was the case during the times of Anglo-Saxon domination over the British Isles. The foundation myth is essential for bringing these elements together into a cohesive whole because it establishes a shared history and a narrative framework which allows these disparate elements to be standardised and combined. Indeed, the function of origin myths is to act as repositories for traditions, connecting them to past events and heroes, and thus establish systems of beliefs, ideologies and a sense of belonging (see MacDougall 1982, 2; Cohen 2006, 51).

<sup>28</sup> The epistle by Pope Gregory to abbot Mellitus, recorded even by Bede (*Historia ecclesiastica* I.30), is very explicative in terms of the procedures to adopt for the conversion of the Angles, the Pope's indications toward a gentle adaption of old habits are well known (see Gregorius Magnus, *Registrum epistularum* XI.56).

<sup>29</sup> There may have been some awareness among the English of their own Scandinavian ancestry: the House of Mercia prided itself in having Offa of Angeln as one of its ancestors, and even the House of Wessex claimed their lineage was connected to the Scylding rulers mentioned in the opening lines of *Beowulf* (see Atherton, Karasawa and Leneghan 2022, 29).

<sup>30</sup> In relation to King Alfred's attempt at reconquest, Hastings explains: "The very perilousness of England's condition was Alfred's opportunity. The Danish invasions which nearly swamped his own kingdom of Wessex had completely demolished all the other kingdoms. As the reconquest advanced out of Wessex it could, in consequence, unify the English rather easily" (1997, 39).

<sup>31</sup> The House of Wessex's efforts to associate this new national entity to the greatness of Rome are symbolically testified by King Edgar's coronation in 973, which was celebrated towards the end of the king's reign in the old Roman city of Bath (see Stafford 1989, 56). Another example of this continued association with imperial power can be seen in Edward the Confessor's reign: in the 1050s, coins and seals were issued depicting the king crowned in the style of the Byzantine and German emperors (see Leneghan 2022, 409).

### 5. “The Spawn of a Barbarous Lioness”: The Mythical Progenitors of the English People

The earliest account of the *adventus Saxonum* is provided by Gildas. According to his account, after the departure of the Romans, Germanic mercenaries were called by the corrupted Britons’ leader in order to curb the continuous attacks led by the northern peoples, the Picts and Scots. The monk, in open conflict with the Briton rulers, pointed out their own foolishness while also highlighting the bestiality of their Germanic saviours, who would later betray them. The Saxons, while being allowed onto the island, are characterised as execrable (“nefandi”), extremely ferocious (“ferocissimi”) and hated by God and men (“deo hominibusque invisi”); moreover, they are compared to wolves in an enclosure (“quasi in caulas lupi”). Thus, it can be imagined that these wolves would be eager to devour any sheep that cross their path (*De excidio Britanniae* XXIII.1). Some paragraphs later, the Saxons are, once again, attributed animalistic features, as they burst out of their keels like a pack emerging from the den of a barbarous<sup>32</sup> lioness: “Tum erumpens grex catulorum de cubili leaenae barbarae, tribus, ut lingua eius exprimitur, cyulis, nostra longis navibus” (*De excidio Britanniae* XXIII.3).<sup>33</sup> The general tone of Gildas’ text is polemical; the references to wild animals and bestiality create the apocalyptic atmosphere that the monk hoped to evoke in the minds of his compatriots.

Many of these elements are later taken up in Bede’s account of the Germanic migrations included in his *Historia ecclesiastica*. The Northumbrian monk writes from an Anglian perspective and he lived in a time when the land’s indigenous peoples were still being both absorbed and displaced by the immigrant communities from which he himself descended. Bede’s primary objective was to provide a historical record of the Roman Church in England; however, in the process of achieving this, his *Historia ecclesiastica* also provided the *gens Anglorum* with a narrative framework that would aid those originally heterogeneous groups develop into a unified community (see Cohen 2006, 48). In his account of the land’s migration, he disregards Gildas’ symbolic undertone and shows a more defined historiographic intent, adding names and dates. It was 449, the conceited tyrant, named Vortigern, asked for help to three of the most valiant Germanic peoples – Saxons, Angles and Jutes. The leaders guiding the expedition were two brothers, Hengest and Horsa. They were descendants of Wodan, from whose lineage the reigning dynasties of many regions originated (*Historia ecclesiastica*, I.15).

These progenitors of the Anglo-Saxon lineage, who bore animal names that reference horses, Hengest and Horsa,<sup>34</sup> are both human beings and equine figures; they have a dual nature, evocative of fauns and centaurs, legacies of the pagan past of the now-Christianized society.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> The use of the particular adjective “barbarus” in Gildas’ description has been interpreted as a direct reference to its full etymological value: the language of the invaders to Gildas’ ear would sound like a confused “bar-bar”. The adjective might function as a reinforcing element to highlight the linguistic difference. Thus, the ships used by the Saxons are called *cyulis*, a Latinized rendition of what might have been the Old English *ceoles*, explained by Gildas as being long boats, “longis navibus”. (see Howe 1989, 41).

<sup>33</sup> Trans by Winterbottom in Gildas, 1978, 26: “Then a pack of cubs burst forth from the air of the barbarian lioness, coming in three keels, as they call warships in their language.”

<sup>34</sup> *Horsa* occurs quite often in toponyms; it is clearly connected to the noun *hors* which is equivalent to Latin *equus*, a generic term for a horse. The noun *hengest* in Old English meant “stallion” or “(castrated) horse” and probably derives from the Proto-Germanic *\*xanxistaz*, superlative form of *\*xanxaz* a periphrasis to indicate “the best to spring” (see Orel 2003, sv. *\*xanxistaz* and *\*xanxaz*). It is not a frequently attested element in place names; it has only been recorded in south-east England and only in combination with terms indicating dwelling, streams and hills. For a detailed discussion of the original meanings of these names, see Turville-Petre 1957, 277-78.

<sup>35</sup> I have discussed elsewhere the two brothers’ crucial role in the Anglo-Saxon origin legends (see Bria 2018, 103-08).

It is probably here, from the ambiguously named Hengest and Horsa, that the Early English people developed their interest in animal-like figures, hybrids and monsters.<sup>36</sup>

The narratives of the lives and deeds of the two brothers are later expanded upon in the *Historia Brittonum* – a pseudo-historical treatise compiled in the early 9<sup>th</sup> century, later attributed to a Welsh monk, Nennius<sup>37</sup> – and in the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicles* – a corpus of annalistic material on the history of England, connected to the Alfredian cultural program.<sup>38</sup> These two narratives, once again exhibiting opposing perspectives and intentions, share the heralding of the brothers as the forefathers of the Anglo-Saxon people. In the *Historia Brittonum*, Hengest is identified, for the first time, as the progenitor of the ruling dynasty of Kent, while the *Chronicle* details his contribution to the formation of the Kentish reign: in 449 the two brothers landed in Ebbsfleet, on the Kentic coast; Horsa was killed in battle at Ægælsþrep in 455. Hengest ruled Kent after the death of his brother and fought against the Britons several times alongside his son Æsc, who succeeded him in 488.

These brothers, preserved in the collective memory of the Germanic tribes in Britain as part of their search for a common ancestor, might serve as symbolic personifications of the tribes' own cultural identities; they function as a reminder of a remote connection that brings all the protagonists of the migration closer together. The hybrid nature evoked by Hengest's and Horsa's names could also be read as a symbolically significant synthesis of a sense of a collective hybrid identity, an emblem of a community in constant conflict with itself due to the mixture of conflicting and differentiated entities within it. As outlined by Mittman, "the Anglo-Saxons used these origin stories to explain their existence and to justify their presence in England, but at the same time these myths betray cultural anxieties that revolve around monstrosity and hybridity" (2006, 15).

Moreover, monstrosity might have been, for the Early English people, inscribed in the land itself, once thought to have been inhabited long ago by a since-extinct race of giants. According to the author of the *Historia Brittonum* (III.10), Britons and Britain owe their name to Brutus, son of Ascanius and grandson of Aeneas, who accidentally killed his father with an arrow and was exiled from Italy. Yet, in another passage of the same text (*Historia Brittonum* III.18), Brutus' ancestry is traced back to the biblical Japheth, who also fathered Magog. Magog, often identified as ancestor of the tribes of Europe, is most famously known, alongside Gog, as leader of one of the armies of a nation led by the devil, to be unleashed at the end of time to dismantle civilization (*Revelations* 20.8). As noted by Mittman, "Through this account, the evil children of Gog and Magog [...] are not-too-distant cousins of the British" (2006, 12). A

<sup>36</sup> For a detailed examination on the brothers' association with the Indo-European cult of twins and horses see Joseph 1983, 105-15.

<sup>37</sup> The most recent study on the *Historia Brittonum* does not consider this attribution accurate. The text, extant in thirty-three manuscripts, dates back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century, but the author is first identified as Nennius only in the 11<sup>th</sup>. The work is famous for developing the circumstances surrounding the mythical figures of Arthur and Merlin for the first time in literary history; however, before focusing on the "matter of Britain", it seeks to recount a global history. It can be architecturally divided into seven independent blocks, each of which refers to different events and themes. As the seven sections differ significantly in both structure and theme, they were most likely written by different authors and it is, indeed, possible that no section was written by a single author. See Nennius 2020, 8-13.

<sup>38</sup> The *Chronicles* are extant in nine manuscripts. The most important for textual history are: Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, 173 (MS A), which is the oldest copy compiled continuously up to 892, with additions up to 1070; London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius A.III (MS B); London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B.I (MS C); London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B.IV (MS D); and Oxford, Bodleian Library, Laud Misc., 636 (MS E), known as the *Peterborough Chronicle*, which presents the longest version of the *Chronicles*, with its latest record dating to 1154 (see Bately 1986).

variation of this myth later appears in Geoffrey of Monmouth's twelfth-century *Historia regum Britanniae* (l.21): after a long peregrination on sea and fights on land, Brutus lands on the shores of Albion ("Erat tunc nomen insulae Albion"), a beautiful place ("Amoeno [...] situ") with no inhabitants except for a few giants ("quae a nemine, exceptis paucis gigantibus, inhabitabatur"). In Geoffrey's account, these monstrous figures are the first dwellers of the island, guided by the fierce Goemagog; they are killed by Brutus and his comrades in retaliation for having inflicted terrible carnage upon the Britons ("dirissima caede Britones affecit").

When the Germanic tribes first arrived at the Isles, they discovered ruins and magnificence in the monumental buildings left by both the Romans and pre-Celtic peoples, but by the early 5<sup>th</sup> century, the historical memory of these architects was most likely lost. The new inhabitants of the land had become accustomed to shelters and homes made of wood; the massive monoliths and stone circles such as Stonehenge and the abandoned aqueducts and temples, like those in Bath, might have made them feel small in comparison. They described this imposing and alien architecture as *enta geweorc*, "the work of giants". This formulaic expression – alongside its variants such as *enta argeweorc* and *giganta geweorc* – recurs with some frequency in Old English literature: in *Beowulf* it is used to describe a sword (l. 1679a), the dragon's lair (perhaps an old burial mound) (l. 2717b), and the dragon's hoard (l. 2774a), while it most frequently refers to ancient monumental structures made from stone (*The Wanderer*, line 87a; *The Ruin*, line 2b; *Andreas*, ll. 1235a and 1495; *Maxims II*, l. 2a; *Elene*, l. 30); nonetheless, as noted by Cohen, such phrases are "always something more than stock quotations" (1999, 10).

In *The Wanderer*, the ancient work of giants, abandoned by God's design, provide the setting for a moving description of a lost world:

Ypde swa þisne eardgeard ælda scyppend  
 oþþæt burgwara breahma lease  
 eald enta geweorc idlu stodon. (ll. 85-87)<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, shifting backward from the desolation of the present to the splendour of the past, *The Ruin* begins a description of the devastation of the present with an apostrophe to the time-damaged remains of giants: "Wrætlic is þes wealstan, wyrde gebræcon; / burgstede burston, broснаð enta geweorc".<sup>40</sup> This expression could be interpreted as specifically applied to Roman ruins (see Frankis 1973, 255); yet, *enta geweorc* can also be used in a broader sense, to refer to any impressive ruin, thus implying that the buildings mentioned must be the work of giants because all those stone structures must have been constructed by beings with superhuman abilities. The references to these ancient builders, lost to time, contributes to the piece's elegiac tone, which aligns with the poem's themes of loss and fear of losing one's memory. Giants are, in this context, the distant but unspoiled vestiges of a history that has eluded thorough historical documentation (see Cohen 1999, 9-10).

They are vestiges that, however, belong to the landscape, so much so that the author of *Maxims II* recognizes a place on Earth for them:

Cyning sceal rice healdan. Ceastra beoð feorran gesyne,  
 orðanc enta geweorc, þa þe on þysse eorðan syndon,  
 wrætlic weallstana geweorc. Wind byð on lyfte swiftest. (ll. 1-3)<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> Trans.: Thus, the Shaper of men laid this Earth to waste until, deprived of the sounds of its dwellers, the ancient works of giants stood empty.

<sup>40</sup> Trans.: Wondrous is this stone wall, smashed by Fate, the city broken to pieces, the work of giants has crumbled.

<sup>41</sup> Trans.: The king shall rule the realm. Cities are seen from afar, cunning work of giants, those which remain

Here, the formulaic expression is used in variation with *wrætlic weallstana geweorc* (l. 3a); thus, it conveys the magnificence of a city built in stone that can be seen, even from afar.<sup>42</sup> *Maxims II* is, as is all gnomic poetry, devoted to numerous observations of the world and human experience, which aim to outline and construct “an Anglo-Saxon understanding of reality, quite deliberately focusing on the everyday, the typical, the social, the natural, in order to build up a framework which potentially comprehends all human and natural phenomena” (Cavill 1999, 183). Among these “human and natural” observable events, *Maxims II* also includes the possibility of establishing a rightful location for *þyrs*, a different species of giants or ogre.<sup>43</sup> “Þyrs sceal on fenne gewunian / ana innan lande”:<sup>44</sup> the fens are thus depicted as the only places – once again located just beyond the realm of human control – where these creatures are or should be able to live; evoking the imagined “East”, the only possible homeland for the Plinian races. These two lines do not only highlight the existence of monsters in the marshlands, but also their inevitable exclusion from civilization (see Bodvarsdottir 1976, 42).

The existence of such terrifying monsters may have been more believable when depicted in these liminal zones – indeed, fens and marshlands are liminal zones, being neither land nor water (see Pollington 2000, 459). Arguably the most renowned of these characters in Old English literature is Grendel:

Wæs se grimma gæst Grendel haten,  
 mære mearcstapa, se þe moras heold,  
 fen ond fæsten; fifelcynnes eard  
 wonsæli wer weardode hwile,  
 siþðan him scyppend forscifen hæfde  
 in Caines cynne. (*Beowulf*, ll. 102-107a)<sup>45</sup>

This passage serves to introduce the first fiend Beowulf faces, which is directly identified as *marcstapa* “border-walker” (l. 103a).<sup>46</sup> Thus, Grendel is assigned to a marginal position, which

upon the Earth, wondrous buildings of wall-stones. Wind is the swiftest in the air.

<sup>42</sup> Immediately after this inaugural section, the firmness of the solid stone is then juxtaposed to the swiftness of the wind. The following verse, “Wind byð on lyfte swiftest” (l. 3b), introduces a series of verses depicting the atmospheric events (ll. 3b-7). On this, see Riviello 2019, 125.

<sup>43</sup> In a thorough discussion about the different meanings of the disparate names for giants in Old English – *entas*, *eotenas*, *gigantes* and *þyrsas* – Bishop (2006, 270) argues that the Anglo-Saxons’ perspective on their “giants” is not entirely definite, while he also recognises the singular position of the *þyrsas*: “For some commentators these ‘giants’ were physically large, but for the most part they seem to have been imagined as being gigantic in their strength, in their accomplishments and in their wickedness, rather than in their physique. There would seem to have been a general division between the monstrous *þyrsas* and the mighty *entas*, *eotenas* and *gigantes*”. *Maxims II* does not add much to the general idea of these figures, but the line is coupled with the depiction of women’s “secret skills” (“*dyrne cræfte*”, l. 43b), that is to say “magic skills”. This association with sorcery is also evident in the Brussels glossary on Aldhelm’s *De Virginate* (see Bouterwek 1853, 483, l. 3), where *þyrsa oððe wyrmgalera* “ogres or serpent-charmer” characterises *marsorum*, which were a Latin tribe famous for their sorcery and snake-charming. Moreover, *þyrs* is etymologically related to the Old High German *durs*, a word used to describe demons in general or Dis, god of the underworld (see *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, s.v. *þyrs*; Bishop 2006, 259-60).

<sup>44</sup> Trans.: The giant shall live on the fens, alone in the land.

<sup>45</sup> Trans.: He was a fierce spirit called Grendel, renowned border-walker. He inhabited moors, fens and strongholds. The miserable man resided for a while in the dwelling place of the monstrous races, since the Creator had condemned him among Cain’s lineage”.

<sup>46</sup> Head of the compound here is *mearc*, meaning “limit; boundary, border, confine” (see *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, s.v. *mearc*). It seems that it often has a negative connotation, suggesting the idea that something is “desert; barren; waste” (see Micillo 2008, 58-59).

adds to his characterization as an outcast, a lonely dweller of the border of civilization. Such an introduction can be aligned with the detached existence of the creatures represented in *Wonders of the East*. This association is further suggested by the subsequent reference to Cain's lineage (l. 106a), he is the Christian progenitor of all monsters' races, *fifelcynnnes* (l. 104b), and that is why he is forced to live on the border.

### Conclusions

Constituting the borders of any civilization, frontiers are symbolically charged with conflicting meanings. They are spaces where alterity abounds. It is thus unsurprising that Early Medieval English people felt intimately linked to this strangeness that characterised their community; comparing Early Medieval England to one of the most dangerous monstrous people depicted in *Wonders of the East*,<sup>47</sup> Cohen describes the long and varied five centuries of Anglo-Saxon domination over the British Isles as a time that was "familiar and strange, hybrid rather than homogenous, an amalgamative body that absorbs difference without completely reducing or assimilating it" (1999, 4).

When faced with their own geographical marginality, personifications of difference resonated with the English; thus, their own cultural identity became rooted in alterity: figures such as the cynocephalus depicted in *Wonders of the East*, ambiguous characters straddling the boundaries of animal and man such as Hengest and Horsa, the lone-dwellers of the fens such as Grendel represent a kind of cultural shorthand which medieval English society used to manage their own cultural hybridity.

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<sup>47</sup>The creature envisioned by Cohen is the elusive *donestre* (ch. 20), a hybrid creature able to guess the language of any human visitor, entice them with nice words and, finally, eat them. The curious peculiarity of this monster race is that they cry over the head of their victims. Cohen recognises in the *donestre* a force that both fascinates and terrifies. He sees in this image the alienating power of anthropophagy: the monster absorbs the visitor and the visitor becomes part of the monster, they are one. Thus, recognizing their former self, they cry over their lost body. The *donestre* can, therefore, be seen as a useful analogy for the hybrid and dynamic Early Medieval England (1999, 3-4).



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