



A review of
**Basilisks and Beowulf:
Monsters in the
Anglo-Saxon World**

B.C. Kennedy

This book clearly derives from a doctoral thesis in terms of its academic language and the superb analytic thinking it employs. It remains, however, very accessible to general readers who may not have the specialist knowledge of the Anglo-Saxon world that Tim Flight so capably demonstrates. Before delving into why the Anglo-Saxons were obsessed with monsters, the author familiarises us in the 'Introduction' with who and what the Anglo-Saxons were, important background information for his analysis of *Beowulf* in later chapters.

Post 59 A.D., the converted Christian Anglo-Saxons regarded God's Creation as inherently perfect, but they viewed the natural world as hostile and dangerous to mankind, a fallout from the consequences of punishment for postlapsarian mankind. Unable to defeat nature, the Anglo-Saxon response was to learn, name, define and situate the hostile elements of the natural world. They sought the inherent order in everything and saw the world as divided up into binary places; Christianity was inseparable from civilisation and paganism from nature. This was a world of strict boundaries. However, as the author explains, within this rigidity, the imagination of the Anglo-Saxons – their fears of a chaotic, threatening natural world – found room for the existence of monsters, those bizarre and deadly creatures who lived where wilderness prospered. But what defines a monster? The specifics of Anglo-Saxon monsters become clear: they fit a very strict taxonomy. They have strong associations with paganism and Satan and are overwhelmingly hostile to mankind, killing or fleeing from people who enter their designated territory. They work to maintain the boundary between wilderness and civilisation, man and monster, by killing or fleeing from people who enter their designated territory. Over the course of this book, the author explains how monsters operated in the intellectual and physical realms and explains why creatures such as dragons, giants and incorporeal demons were thought to inhabit the local landscape.

The first chapter considers 'Map Monsters', those creatures that were thought to populate the furthest uncivilised reaches of the earth, marking where the known world ended. Jerusalem was seen as the geographical and spiritual centre of the world, surrounded by uncivilised lands that only worsened, and gave home to more monsters, the further from

the Holy City they were located. Britain is seen as having a peripheral location at the edge of the world and therefore crawling with monsters. The chapter concludes with a discussion on the three books of the *Liber monstrorum* (*Book of Monsters*), a vast and informative catalogue of map monsters, concentrating specifically on the cynocephalus or 'dog-head' beast, and the near-identical creatures called the 'conopnae'.

Chapter Two considers the wolf, defined as a fully fledged monster deemed to pose a threat to livestock, people and even the soul. In the Anglo-Saxon period one of the alleged defining characteristics of the wolf was its unbridled lust for sheep flesh. This was interpreted as a satanic opposition to God since the pastoral image of sheep was an important image adopted by the Christian church. Flight argues that Anglo-Saxons were in no doubt that wolves killed and ate people as a matter of course, citing 'The Fortunes of Men' in the Exeter Book and artefacts found at Sutton Hoo as substantiation while acknowledging that there are no records of wolves eating people in any other source from this period. He explains that outlaws and wolves were closely linked in the Anglo-Saxon mind, citing how the noun *wearg* could denote a criminal, an evil spirit or a wolf, thereby destabilising the boundary between man and wolf.

Sharing the wilderness of Anglo-Saxon England with the wolves was a far more formidable foe: the fire-breathing dragons whom the Anglo-Saxons believed dwelt in the wild places of their island. Chapter Three follows the natural history of dragons as depicted in the source material Flight employs, such as the description of a dragon in *Beowulf*. He explains how Old English texts reveal the belief that dragons used old burial mounds to live in, making them beasts of the pagan wilderness since these sites came to be associated with pagan deities and judicial executions, and were viewed with fear and suspicion. The chapter continues to examine the link between burial mounds, treasure and dragons as depicted in *Beowulf*, outlining not only the dire consequences that befall a plundered hoard but emphasising how this mythology underpins the Anglo-Saxon law code against grave-robbing and the sin of avarice. The dragon represents the far more potent forces that can be unleashed simply by man falling into sin, a much greater threat to civilisation.

Scripture, hagiography and local legend left the Anglo-Saxons in no doubt that their island was also infested by creatures belonging to another world altogether: demons inherited from the Christian tradition are discussed in the Junius manuscript. In Chapter Four Flight suggests that demons were considered far more dangerous to the Anglo-Saxons than perhaps any other monster in this book, for they will move into civilised territories by tempting people and, in particular, hermits, citing the cases of St Guthlac of Crowland and St Cuthbert of Lindisfarne as supporting evidence. In contrast, Chapter Five moves from the monster-infested wastelands to the sea, which was widely feared even though it was a medium of travel and an important part of Anglo-Saxon economy. But while the sea had economic and defensive importance, it was also viewed with sheer horror. It was a place where people drowned and seafarers were lost, and was associated with monsters, in particular the whale with its connection to the biblical monster, the Leviathan in the Old Testament.

The final two chapters concentrate on the Grendelkin – the collective name for Grendel and his mother – in *Beowulf*, examining what makes them monsters, what motivates their rapacious evil and ascertaining what they really are. Following a discussion on the tradition and world of *Beowulf*, Flight uses a close reading of this epic poem to analyse the characters of the Grendelkin as *mearcstapan*, creatures of the wilderness. They are physical beings, perpetrating bodily harm to people and yet have murky associations with the biblical Cain's exile. However evil their deeds or disgusting their appearance, their descent from Adam and capacity for rational thought cannot be eradicated. Flight suggests that both the monster and human natures of the Grendelkin are the most potent threat to the Anglo-Saxons since they confound 'the boundaries between seemingly opposing and mutually exclusive categories'.

The final chapter discusses the Donestre, humanoid monsters that trick strangers into friendship before eating them, showing parallels with the Grendelkin. Like Grendel, the Donestre is human but becomes a monster by merit of committing murder and cannibalism. However, as Flight demonstrates, they are also akin to some of the *Beowulf* characters such as Unferth, who is guilty of fratricide. The rest of the chapter focuses on *Beowulf* himself, portraying his similarities, for example his strength and size, to the Grendelkin. Flight highlights that it is only *Beowulf* and the Grendelkin who can move between the civilised splendour of Heorot and the heathen wilderness. In the end *Beowulf*'s resemblance to the monsters he defeats is revealed as superficial. As Flight highlights, the chief distinction between the monsters and *Beowulf* is his Christianity, which influences his conduct and subsequent favour from God. He concludes that *Beowulf* is not simply a poem about good and evil, but a reminder that acts can turn us into a monster if we do not use our rationality to avoid them.

In his conclusion, Flight writes that the monsters of Anglo-Saxons live on in the worlds of cinema and literature, a testament to their enduring appeal. He suggests the Grendelkin find a modern parallel in various hominids such as Bigfoot or the Yeti, while the closest modern equivalent to Anglo-Saxon monsters in the UK is the big cat. In the 21st century, Flight writes that there are other 'monsters' condemned in a manner familiar to the Anglo-Saxons, based, for example, on religious practices, diet and colour. He argues that the need to create monsters lies deep in the human psyche, and the philosophical mechanisms underlying the Anglo-Saxon worldview still characterise our own. This is a fascinating book, the author's skill in drawing all the narrative strings together, and his profound ability to draw modern parallels to the Anglo-Saxons are striking. I particularly enjoyed Flight's literary and philosophical explanations of Anglo-Saxon words which offer greater insight and understanding.

Author: Tim Flight.

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