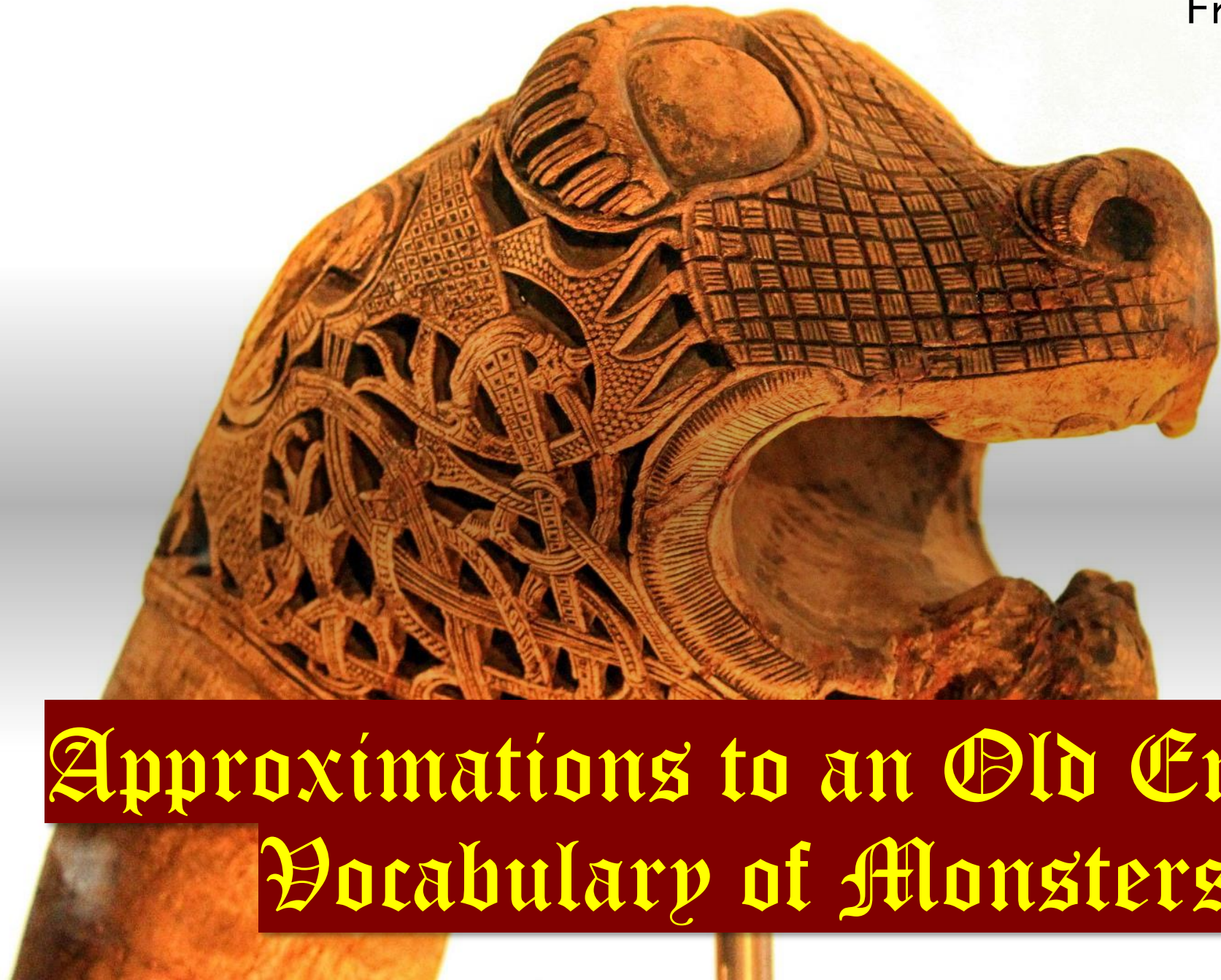


Francesco Tomasello



Approximations to an Old English
Vocabulary of Monsters

Monsters and Old English Literature



Old English Literature showed an attention to monsters, producing relevant paradigms for the medieval and modern reception of the theme and its implications.

In particular, the Beowulf poem is a major work and a unique example, in the history of literature, of construction on the very motif of the fight between man and monster.

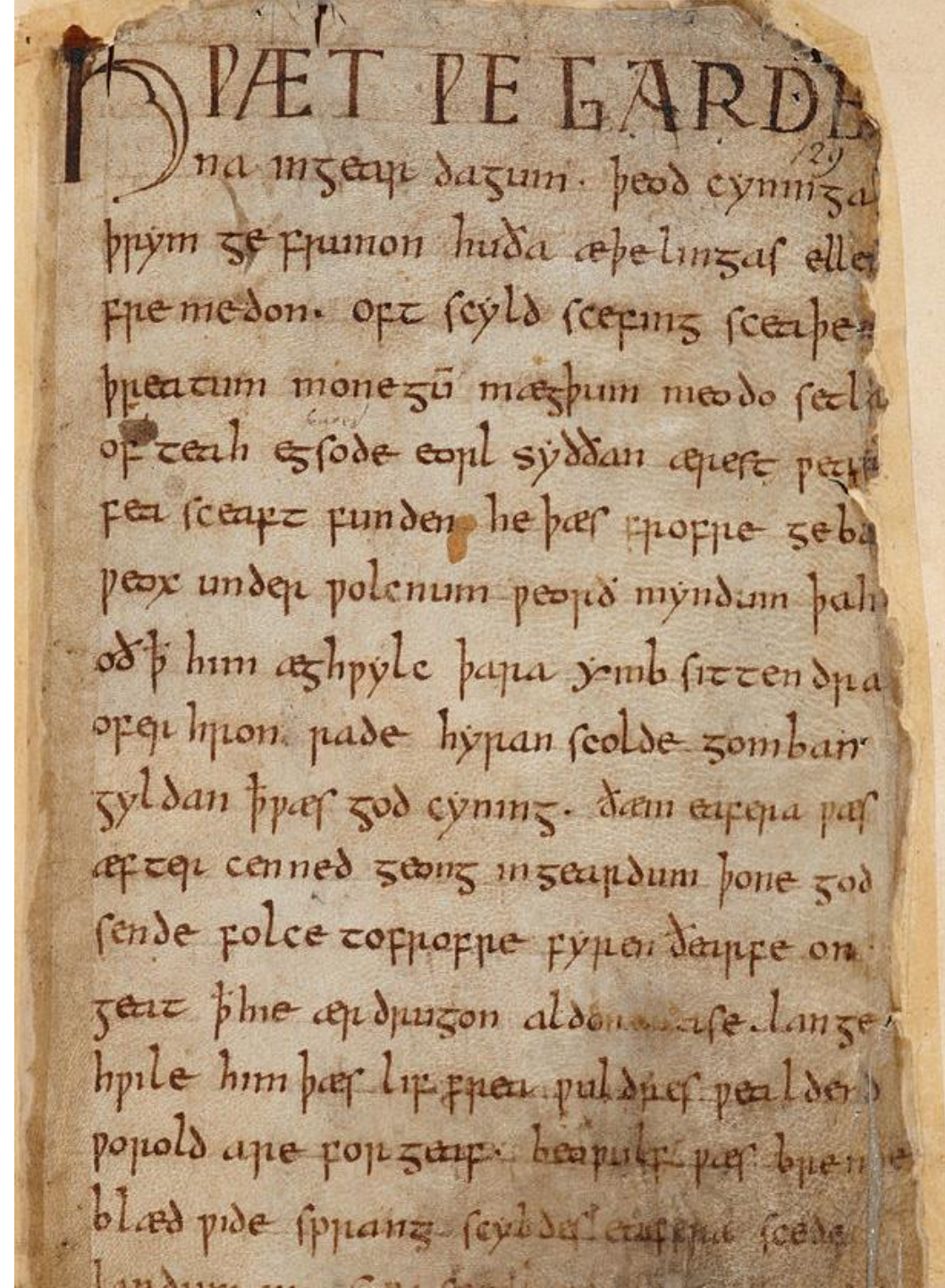
At a deeper level of analysis, there are some hints of the fact this distinction is not so neat, and it is archetypical in a different way from what is usually thought.

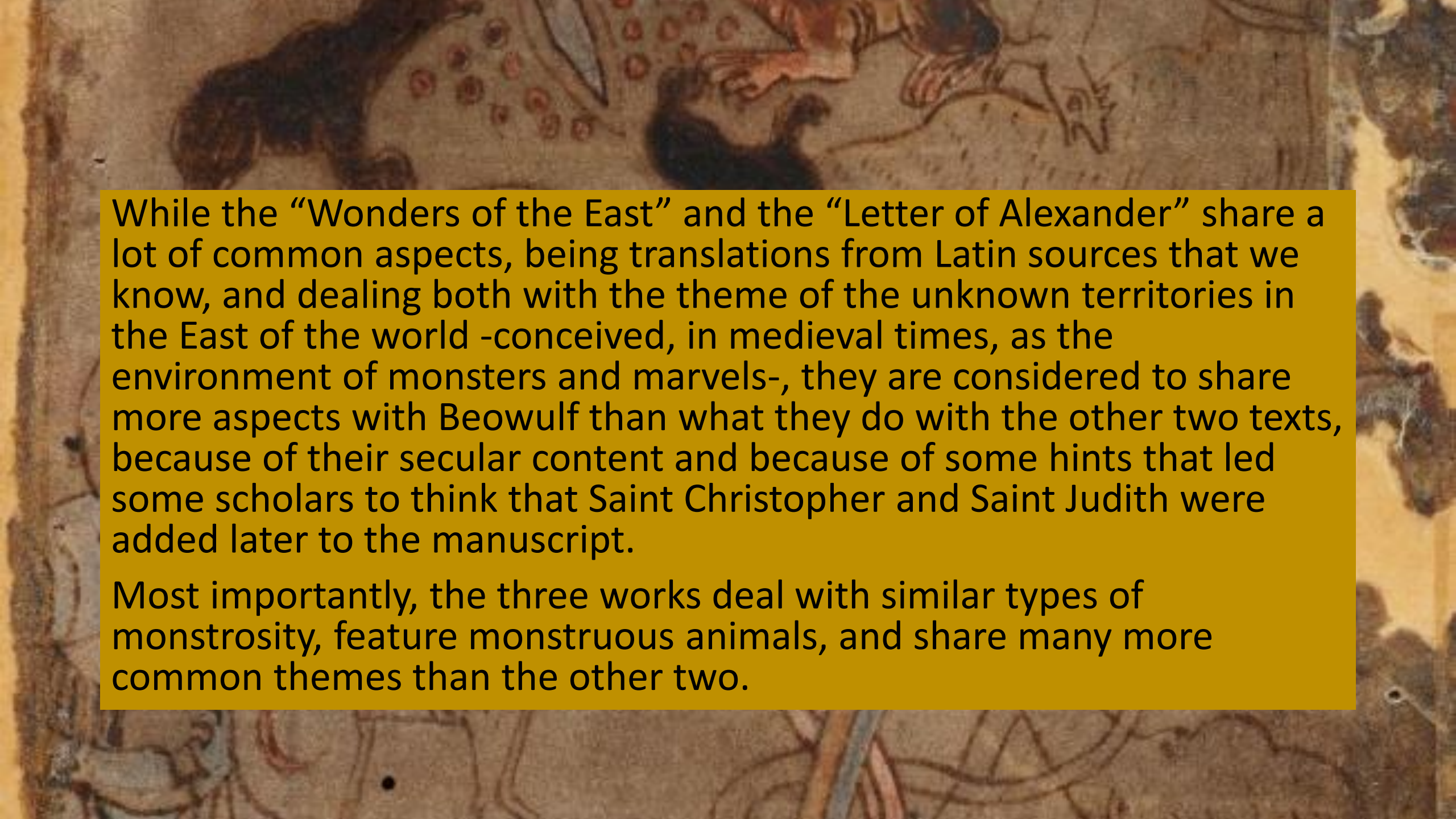
Cotton Vitellius A.xv

It has been observed how the common motif of the famous Cotton Vitellius A.xv manuscript, containing Beowulf, consists in the recurring theme of monstrosity.

The manuscript is composed of two *codices*, the most relevant of whom is the Nowell Codex, XI century, containing five literary pieces:

- The Passion of Saint Christopher
- The Wonders of the East
- Letter of Alexander to Aristotle
- Beowulf
- Saint Judith



The background of the image is a page from a medieval manuscript. It features faint, brownish illustrations of various creatures and scenes. In the upper portion, there are several small, round, reddish-brown objects, possibly representing berries or seeds, arranged in a pattern. Below these, there are larger, more complex drawings that appear to be depictions of animals or mythical creatures. The overall style is characteristic of medieval manuscript illumination, with simple lines and a limited color palette.

While the “Wonders of the East” and the “Letter of Alexander” share a lot of common aspects, being translations from Latin sources that we know, and dealing both with the theme of the unknown territories in the East of the world -conceived, in medieval times, as the environment of monsters and marvels-, they are considered to share more aspects with Beowulf than what they do with the other two texts, because of their secular content and because of some hints that led some scholars to think that Saint Christopher and Saint Judith were added later to the manuscript.

Most importantly, the three works deal with similar types of monstrosity, feature monstrous animals, and share many more common themes than the other two.



Aglæca

The Old English word for monster is “aglæca”. It derives from *agi*, meaning dread.

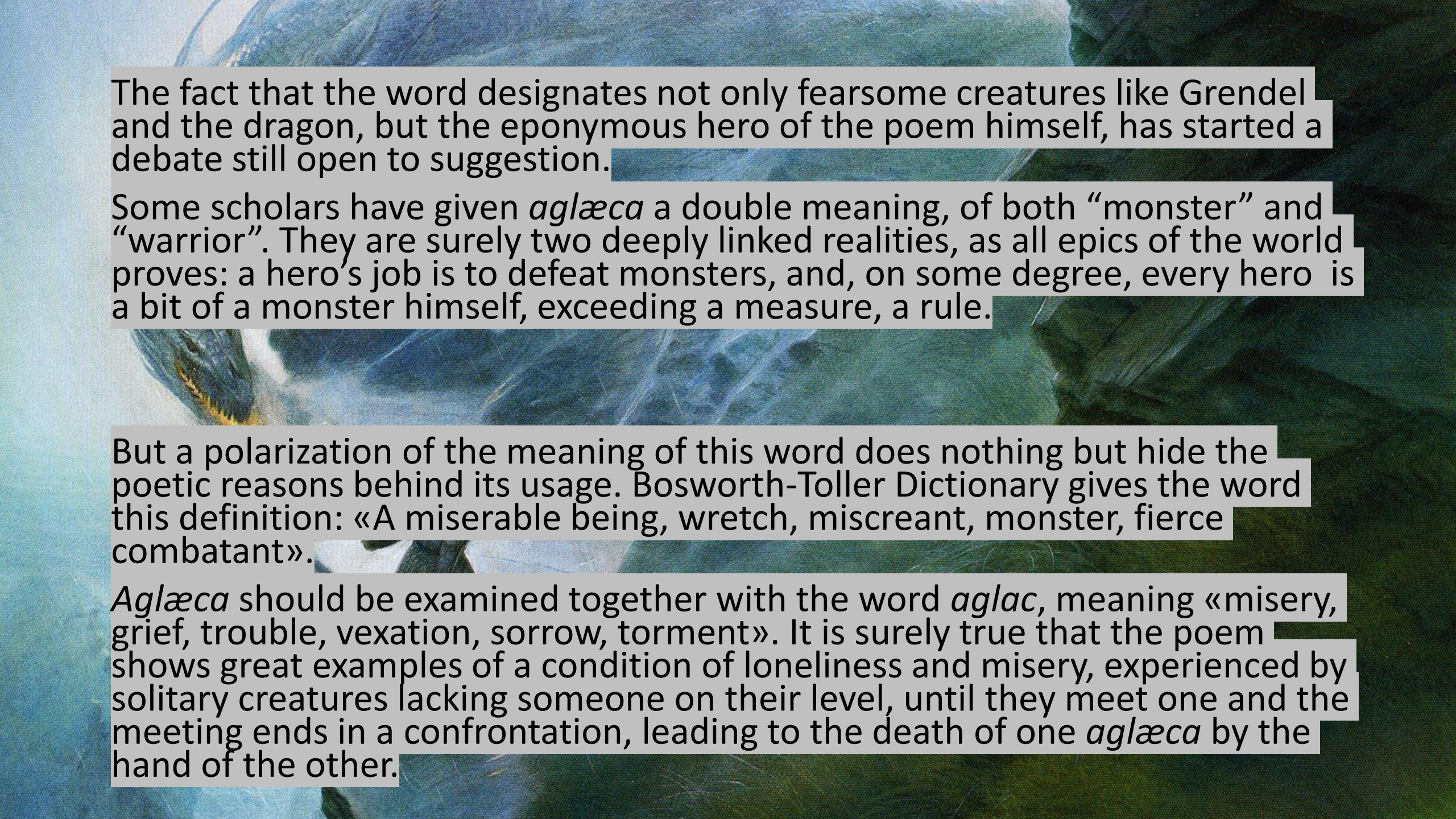
Aglæca has been given many interpretations. It surely is the nearest Old English translation for the Latin word “monstrum”, but it holds unique specificities.

In a poem constantly dealing with prodigies and wonders, like *Beowulf*, we can surely expect a recurrency of the word, and its application to objects belonging to different categories is something worth observing.

Occurrences of the word ((aglæca))

We have 17 occurrences of the word throughout the poem, one of whom in the compound form *aglæcwif*, referring to Grendel's mother. Two are presented in the alternate spelling *ahlæca*. Eight times, the word is referred to Grendel; on one occasion, it denotes sea monsters (*mere-fixa*); in another one, it designates Beowulf from the point of view of other water creatures (*sædeor*); only the form *aglæcwif* is related to Grendel's mother; five times it denotes the dragon, and on one of these occasions it assimilates the creature to Beowulf; on another occasion, it denotes the hero Sigemund.

So, we have monsters in the most common sense, creatures defying boundaries and measures: Grendel, his mother -creatures of the same kin-, the dragon and the sea-monsters. Then, we have Beowulf and Sigemund.



The fact that the word designates not only fearsome creatures like Grendel and the dragon, but the eponymous hero of the poem himself, has started a debate still open to suggestion.

Some scholars have given *aglæca* a double meaning, of both “monster” and “warrior”. They are surely two deeply linked realities, as all epics of the world proves: a hero’s job is to defeat monsters, and, on some degree, every hero is a bit of a monster himself, exceeding a measure, a rule.

But a polarization of the meaning of this word does nothing but hide the poetic reasons behind its usage. Bosworth-Toller Dictionary gives the word this definition: «A miserable being, wretch, miscreant, monster, fierce combatant».

Aglæca should be examined together with the word *aglac*, meaning «misery, grief, trouble, vexation, sorrow, torment». It is surely true that the poem shows great examples of a condition of loneliness and misery, experienced by solitary creatures lacking someone on their level, until they meet one and the meeting ends in a confrontation, leading to the death of one *aglæca* by the hand of the other.



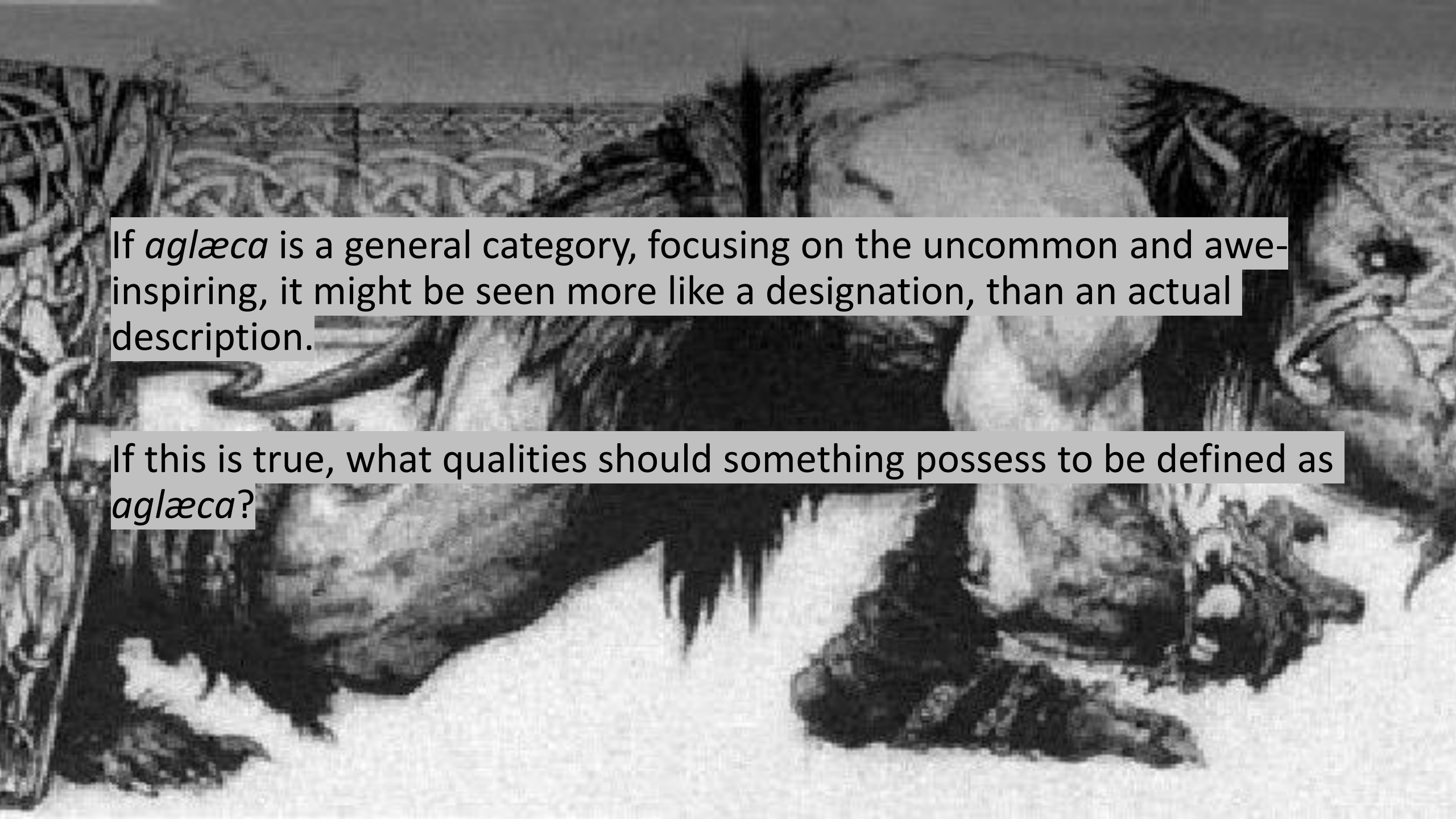
But I think this is not the meaning the poet gives to this word in Beowulf.

King Hroðgar is never defined an *aglæca*, nor are the many unhappy characters of the poem, sustaining the misfortunes of life. It seems that everything the poet defines as *aglæca* is quite active and well-furnished of will.

I would suggest that the beings defined as *aglæca* are part of the elegiac poetics of the Beowulf's poet, objects of admiration inspiring a sense of awe, an aspect of the nostalgia for a long-lost time in the context the poet writes for.

The Beowulf's poet puts monstrosity as the central theme, along the elegiac evocation of ancient times. It can be observed that monsters are an element of the fascination coming from those times.

I shall try to make some observations concerning the *aglæcan* of Beowulf, counting also the informations the other Nowell Codex texts may offer, and confronting them with a related example: the "Liber Monstrorum".



If *aglæca* is a general category, focusing on the uncommon and awe-inspiring, it might be seen more like a designation, than an actual description.

If this is true, what qualities should something possess to be defined as *aglæca*?

The Kin of Cain

We may observe that the dragon and the sea-monsters have their own, proper identifications, belonging to a kind of creatures with specified characteristics. In the same way, Grendel is a *gæst*. This word recurs in several occasions and always defines Grendel or his kin, including his mother.

It appears since the beginning:

«Ða se ellen-gæst
earfoðlice

þrage geþolode, se
þe in þystrum bad,

þæt he dogora
gehwam dream
gehyrde

hludne in healle»
(86a-89a)

«Then the mighty stranger
painfully

endured the waiting, he
who dwelt in darkness,

and every day heard the
happiness

echoing in the hall»

The first time Grendel is mentioned, he is presented as a *gæst*, and as an *ellen*: a noun meaning strength, valour, always with a positive or neuter connotation. The poet condemns Grendel's violence and curse his pagan existence on many occasions, but, at the same time, he is disposed to acknowledge the qualities of the monster, the requirement for a confrontation with another *aglæca*, Beowulf.

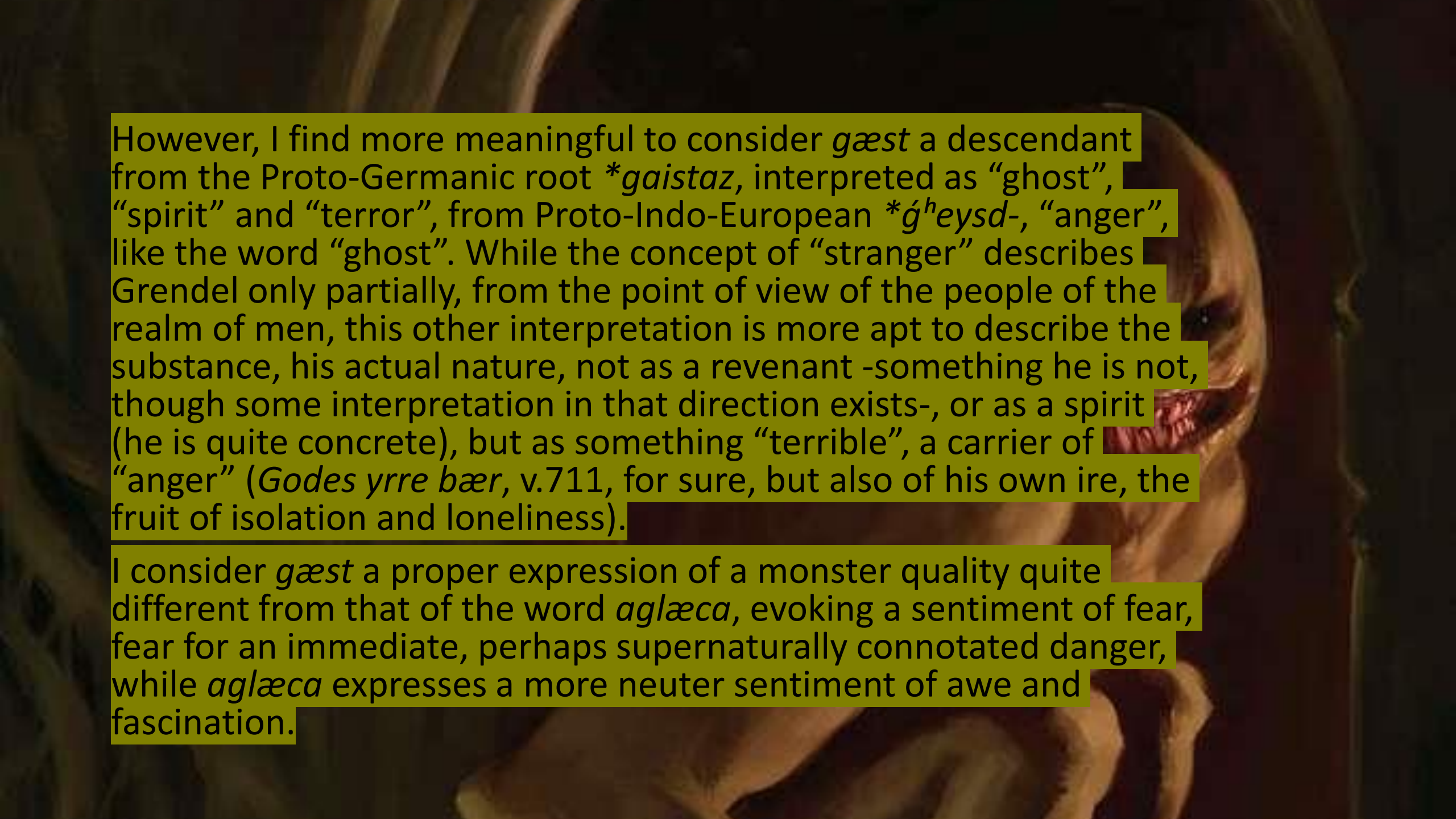


What is a *gæst*?

Descending from the Proto-Indo-European root **g^hóstis*, it can be linked to the etymological tree of the categories of the “host” and of the “hostis” (“the enemy”).

Much has been written concerning how the derivation of words like the Latin “hostis” and the English “guest” comes from different kind of relationship towards the otherness, depending on variables like the nomadic or sedentary habits of a people.

Grendel and his kin are connotated as “strangers” coming from “beyond”, according to a syncretism between the old Germanic cosmology (men live in the “middle-earth” between the realms of gods and monsters) and the medieval one (monsters always live beyond the boundary, in far and unexplored realms).



However, I find more meaningful to consider *gæst* a descendant from the Proto-Germanic root **gaistaz*, interpreted as “ghost”, “spirit” and “terror”, from Proto-Indo-European **ǵʰeysd-*, “anger”, like the word “ghost”. While the concept of “stranger” describes Grendel only partially, from the point of view of the people of the realm of men, this other interpretation is more apt to describe the substance, his actual nature, not as a revenant -something he is not, though some interpretation in that direction exists-, or as a spirit (he is quite concrete), but as something “terrible”, a carrier of “anger” (*Godes yrre bær*, v.711, for sure, but also of his own ire, the fruit of isolation and loneliness).

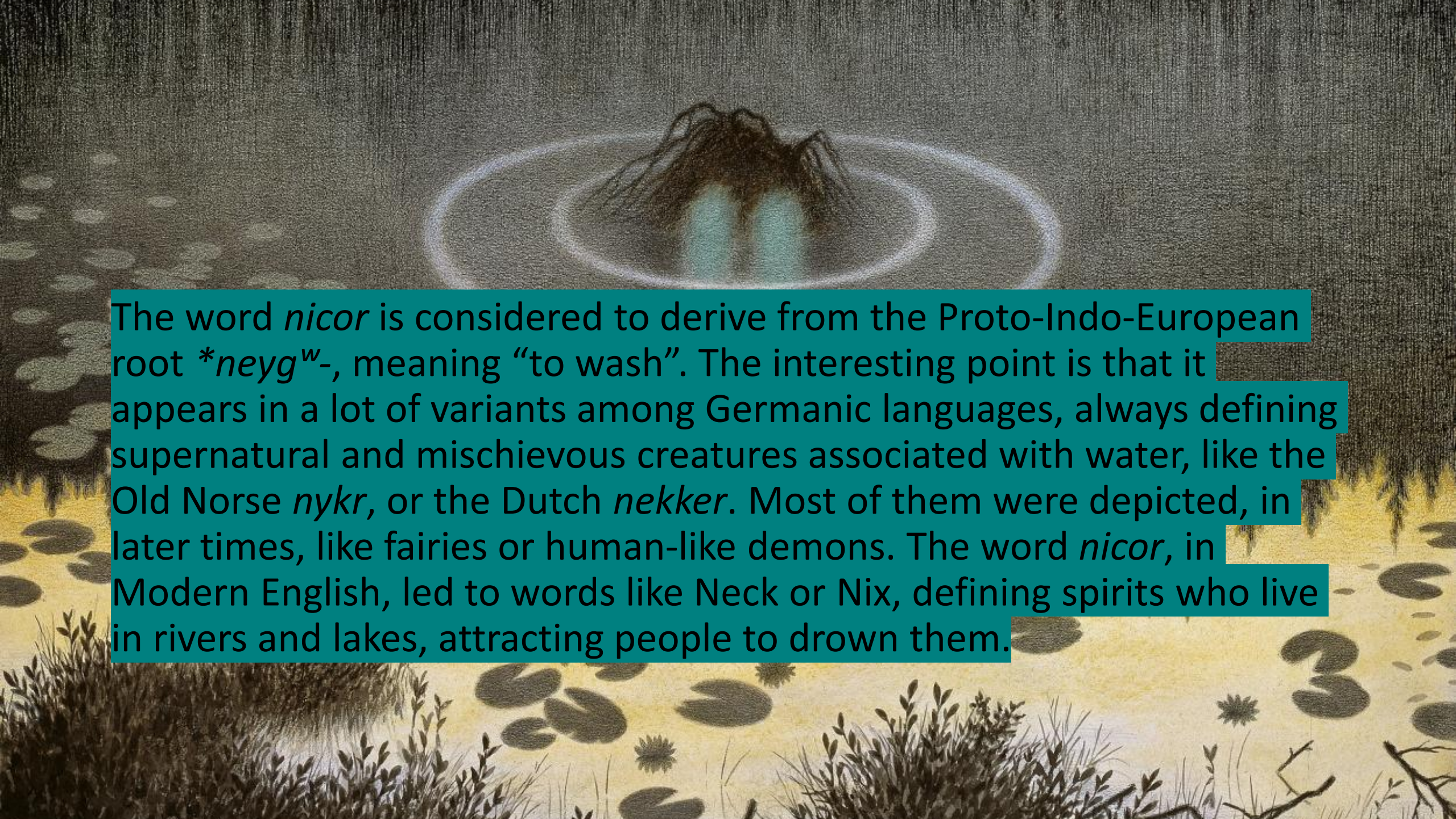
I consider *gæst* a proper expression of a monster quality quite different from that of the word *aglæca*, evoking a sentiment of fear, fear for an immediate, perhaps supernaturally connotated danger, while *aglæca* expresses a more neuter sentiment of awe and fascination.

Niceras: sea serpents

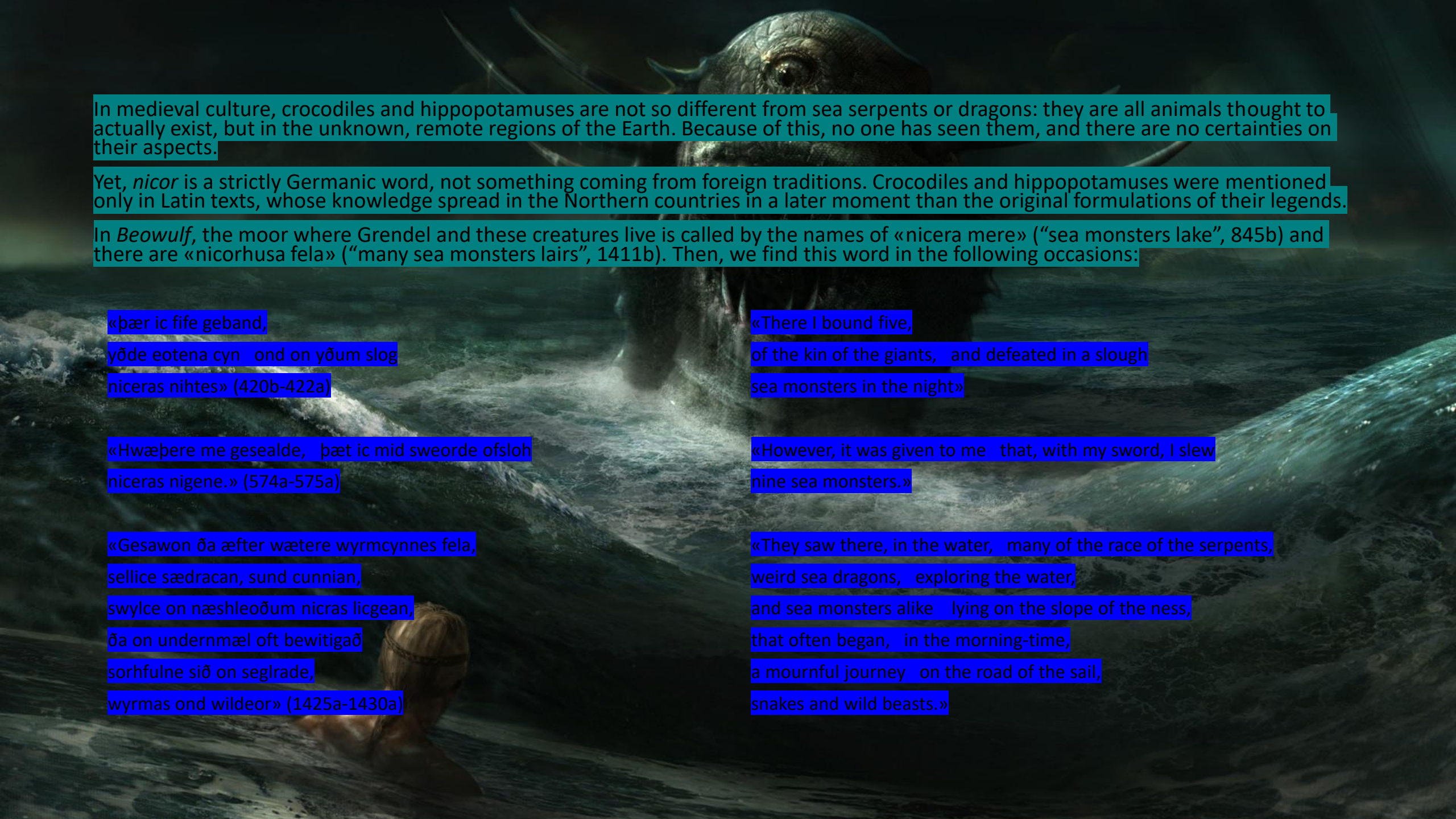
We find a variety of sea-creatures in Beowulf. They are defined by many terms: *hron-fixa* (whales, 540b), *mære-fixa* (sea fish, 549a), *sædracan* (sea dragons, 1426a), *sæ-deor* (sea beasts, 1510b) and *niceras*, the most problematic one.

Nicor presents a polarization of meanings similar to that of *aglæca*: according to dictionaries, it means “sea-monster” in some undefined sense –a designation suitable to virtually any kind of unusual aquatic animal-, or it means “hippopotamus”, an exotic animal for an Anglo-Saxon audience. Other interpreters link the *nicor* to the crocodile, a similarly exotic beast.

Among such varieties of expressions to define this typology of beings, I think that *nicor* should, at least originally, define a more precise kind of creature. My theory is that this supposed “older meaning” referred to something more akin to the monstrous, the sea serpents, and then, by extension, it started being used to define unusual sea animals, like hippopotamuses; these animals, naturally, are quite unlikely to have been the creatures met by Beowulf, or imagined by the poet.



The word *nicor* is considered to derive from the Proto-Indo-European root **neyg^w-*, meaning “to wash”. The interesting point is that it appears in a lot of variants among Germanic languages, always defining supernatural and mischievous creatures associated with water, like the Old Norse *nykr*, or the Dutch *nekker*. Most of them were depicted, in later times, like fairies or human-like demons. The word *nicor*, in Modern English, led to words like Neck or Nix, defining spirits who live in rivers and lakes, attracting people to drown them.



In medieval culture, crocodiles and hippopotamuses are not so different from sea serpents or dragons: they are all animals thought to actually exist, but in the unknown, remote regions of the Earth. Because of this, no one has seen them, and there are no certainties on their aspects.

Yet, *nicor* is a strictly Germanic word, not something coming from foreign traditions. Crocodiles and hippopotamuses were mentioned only in Latin texts, whose knowledge spread in the Northern countries in a later moment than the original formulations of their legends.

In *Beowulf*, the moor where Grendel and these creatures live is called by the names of «nicera mere» (“sea monsters lake”, 845b) and there are «nicorhusa fela» (“many sea monsters lairs”, 1411b). Then, we find this word in the following occasions:

«þær ic fife geband,
yðde eotena cyn ond on yðum slog
niceras nihtes» (420b-422a)

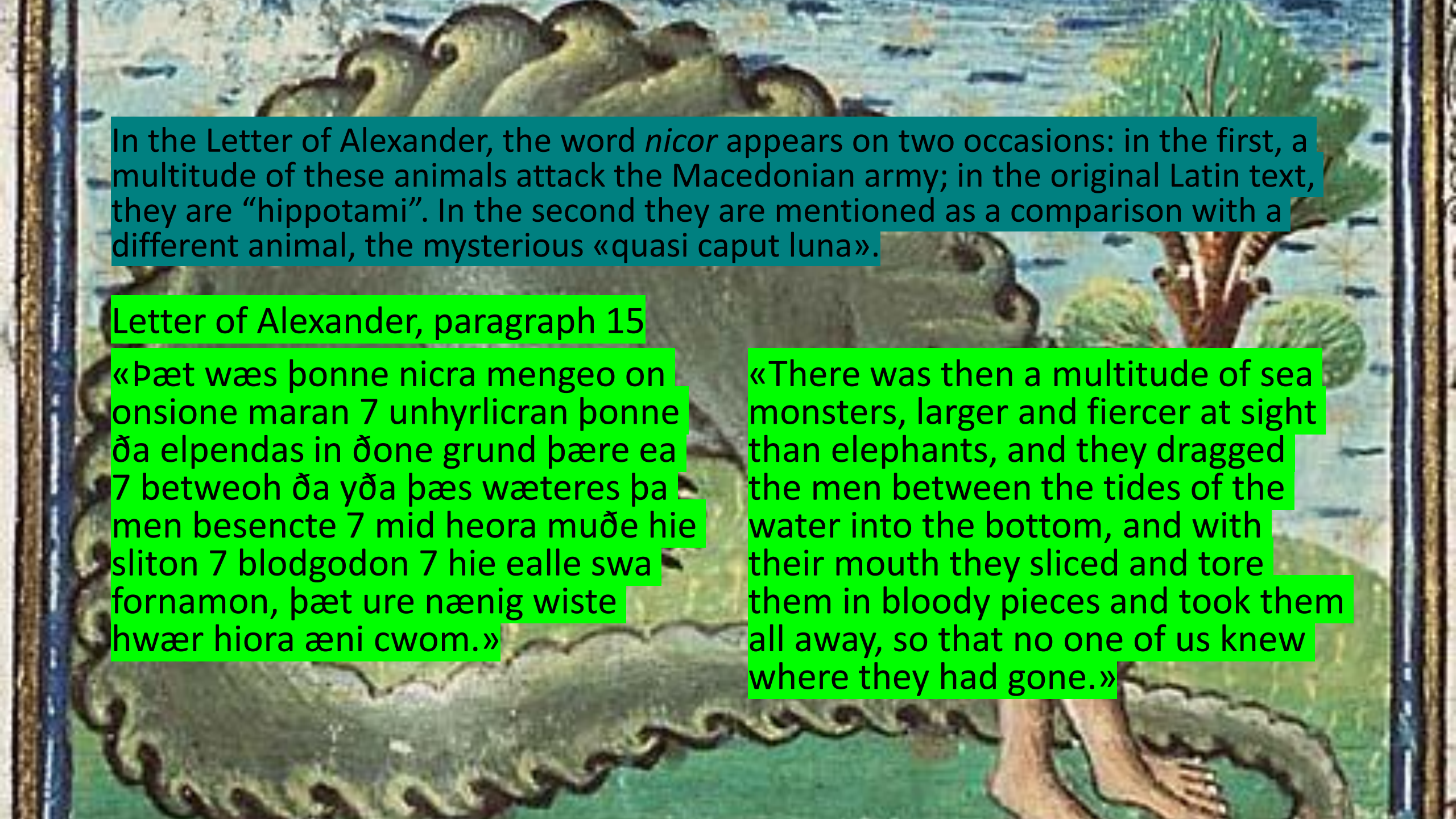
«There I bound five,
of the kin of the giants, and defeated in a slough
sea monsters in the night»

«Hwæþere me gesealde, þæt ic mid sweorde ofsloh
niceras nigene.» (574a-575a)

«However, it was given to me that, with my sword, I slew
nine sea monsters.»

«Gesawon ða æfter wætere wyrmcynnes fela,
sellice sædracan, sund cunnian,
swylce on næshleoðum nicras licgean,
ða on undernmæl oft bewitigað
sorhfulne sið on segrlade,
wyrmas ond wildeor» (1425a-1430a)

«They saw there, in the water, many of the race of the serpents,
weird sea dragons, exploring the water,
and sea monsters alike lying on the slope of the ness,
that often began, in the morning-time,
a mournful journey on the road of the sail,
snakes and wild beasts.»



In the Letter of Alexander, the word *nicor* appears on two occasions: in the first, a multitude of these animals attack the Macedonian army; in the original Latin text, they are “hippotami”. In the second they are mentioned as a comparison with a different animal, the mysterious «quasi caput luna».

Letter of Alexander, paragraph 15

«Þæt wæs þonne nicra mengeo on onsione maran 7 unhyrlicran þonne ða elpendas in ðone grund þære ea 7 betweoh ða yða þæs wæteres þa men besencte 7 mid heora muðe hie sliton 7 blodgodon 7 hie ealle swa fornamon, þæt ure nænig wiste hwær hiora æni cwom.»

«There was then a multitude of sea monsters, larger and fiercer at sight than elephants, and they dragged the men between the tides of the water into the bottom, and with their mouth they sliced and tore them in bloody pieces and took them all away, so that no one of us knew where they had gone.»

Quasi caput luna

This passage presents a lot of questions. Scholars gloss this creature as «crocodile». In the Latin Letter, the animal possesses two heads, one looking like the moon, the other similar to that of a crocodile. The Old English translation leaves the animal only one, round head, taking the Latin expression «lunae simile» as the name of the beast. The depictions of crocodiles in the Middle Ages were many and various, and every possibility was acceptable. The description of the back of the animal, absent in the Latin text, evokes the hardness of crocodile scales. As a matter of comparison, the more similar thing to a water-dwelling animal with a round head, in nature, is to be found among seals and whales.

The chest of the animal, in Latin, is likened to that of an «hippotamo», translated again as *nicor*. It was only with a similar approximation –as the actual shape of hippopotamuses was unknown- that the two animals could be linked. Surely, if *niceras* were truly thought of as sea serpents, their scaly appearance would better match that of a crocodile.

Letters of Alexander, paragraph 27

«Ða wæs þæt lond eall swa we geferdon
adruġad 7 fen 7 cannon 7 hreod weoxan. Ða
cwom þær semninga sum deor of þæm fenne
7 of ðæm fæstene, wæs þæm deore eall se
hrycg acæġlod swelce snoda hæfde þæt deor
seonowealt heafod swelce mona 7 þæt deor
hatte quasi caput luna 7 him wæron þa breost
gelice nicces 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 meahste ne mid nænige
wæpne, ac we hit uneape mid isernum
hamerum 7 slegum gefyldon 7 hit ofbeoton.»

«Then was there a land we travelled through,
it was dried and there were marsh, canes and
reed. Then suddenly some kind of beast came
out from the marsh, and fastened, and that
beast had all its back studded with pegs like a
snood, and that beast had its head round like
the moon, and that beast was called “quasi
caput luna”, and he had the breast like the
breast of a nicor, and it was armed and
toothed with hard and large teeth. And that
beast slayed two of my dignitaries. And then
we might not wound that beast with spears,
nor with any weapon, but we hardly
destroyed him and beat him to death, with
iron hammers and mallets.»

Knucker

A medieval manuscript illustration of a Knucker, a dragon-like creature with a human-like face, breathing fire from its mouth. It is coiled around a wooden well structure with a bucket hanging from it.

In later times, the word «nicor» led to the name «knucker», indicating a fantastic serpent, a dragon-like creature dwelling in underground caves called «knuckerholes» in the region of Sussex. One example is the monster featured in the legend of the Lambton Worm.

I think this is an example proving that (plausibly) the most common idea of the original *niceras* was that of sea-serpents. Surely, more evidence shall be needed in order to prove, of deny, this theory.

Dragon lore

Beowulf features an exemplar codifier of the late-medieval and modern dragon-motif, depicting the creature as a huge snake-like, flying, fire-breathing monster with impenetrable scales. A monster like this does not exist in classical literature, where dragons tend to be huge serpents with a strong symbolic meaning, but few, if any, alterations of their physiology.

It is at some time in the Middle Ages, that the aforementioned attributes appear in dragons' depiction and narratives, but we have still to determine how and when.



We have two types of dragons in the Wonders of the East, and fire-breathing serpents in the Letter. The Liber Monstrorum, even though containing an entire section dedicated to snakes and serpents, has no entry dedicated to dragons, nor creatures corresponding to the description of Beowulf's dragon.

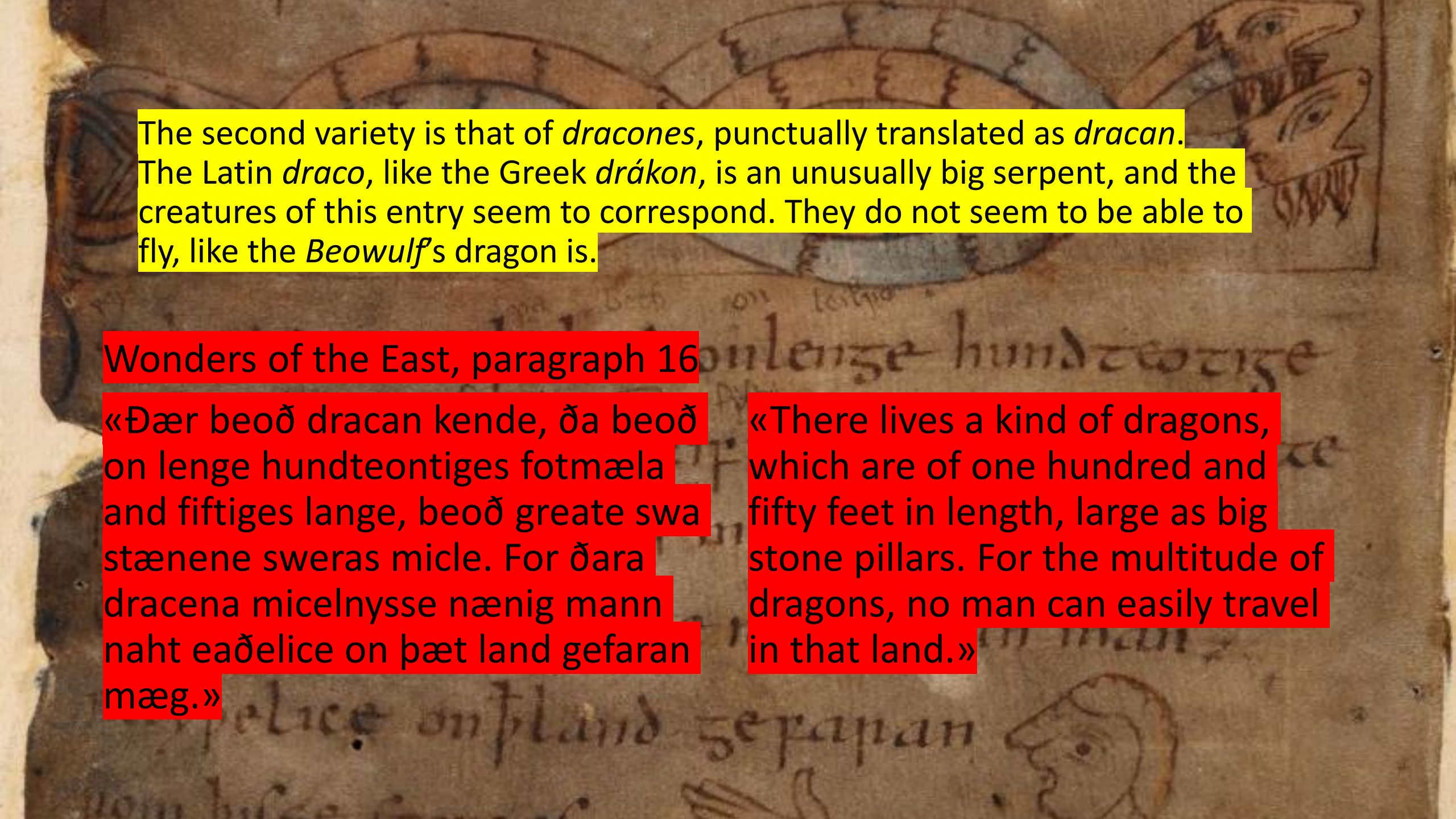
The first type is called *serpentes* in Latin, translated as *næddran*, a word always meaning "snake".

Wonders of the East, paragraph 5

«Þæt land [Hascellentia] is eallum godum gefylled. ðeos steow næddran hafað. Þa næddran habbað twa heafda, ðæra eagan scinað nihtes swa leohte swa blacern.»

«That land is all full of goods. There are serpents there. The serpents have two heads, their eyes at night shine as bright as lanterns.»



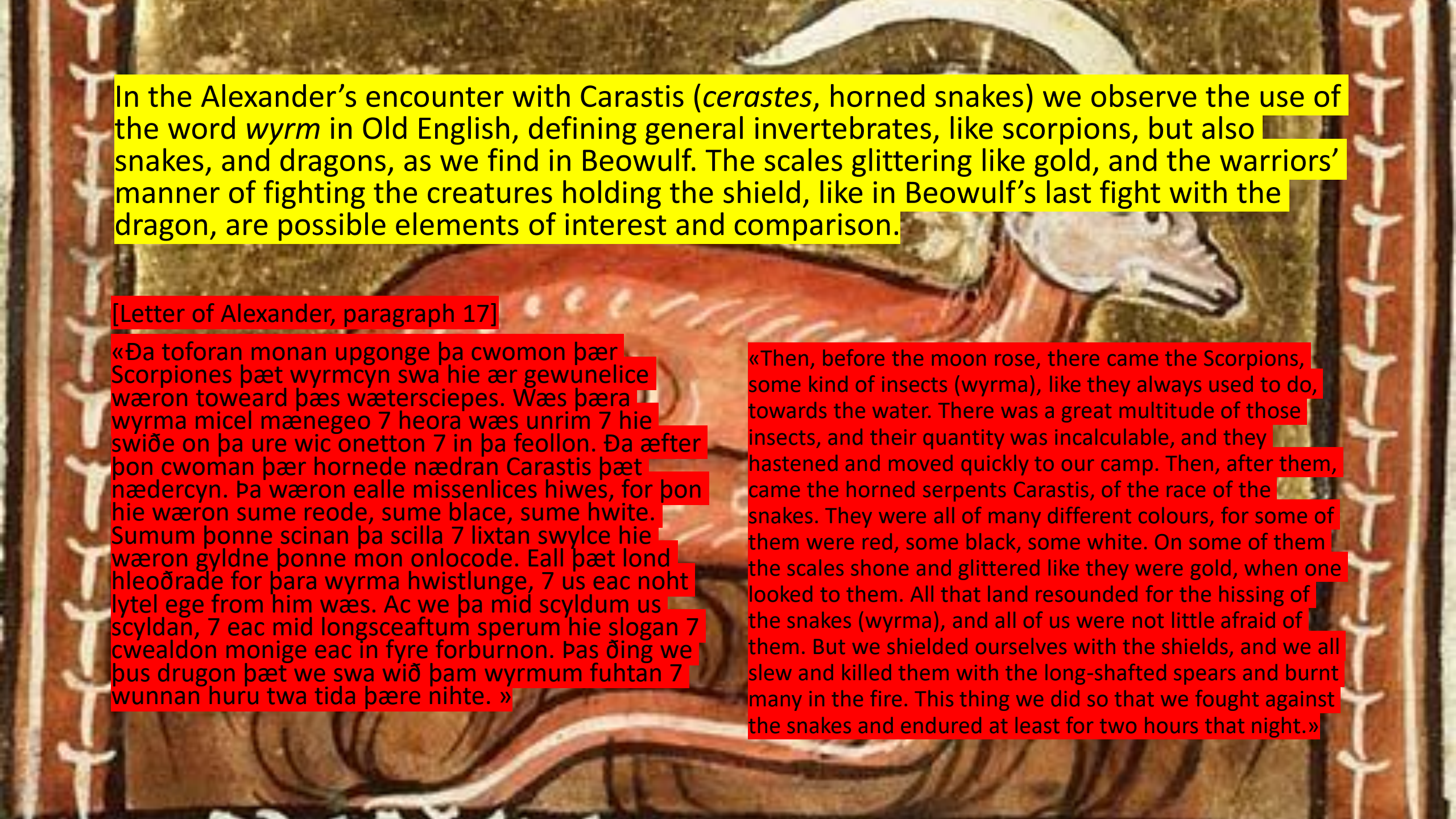


The second variety is that of *dracones*, punctually translated as *dracan*. The Latin *draco*, like the Greek *drákon*, is an unusually big serpent, and the creatures of this entry seem to correspond. They do not seem to be able to fly, like the *Beowulf's* dragon is.

Wonders of the East, paragraph 16

«Ðær beoð dracan kende, ða beoð on lenge hundteontiges fotmæla and fiftiges lange, beoð greate swa stænene sweras micle. For ðara dracena micelnysse nænig mann naht eaðelice on þæt land gefaran mæg.»

«There lives a kind of dragons, which are of one hundred and fifty feet in length, large as big stone pillars. For the multitude of dragons, no man can easily travel in that land.»

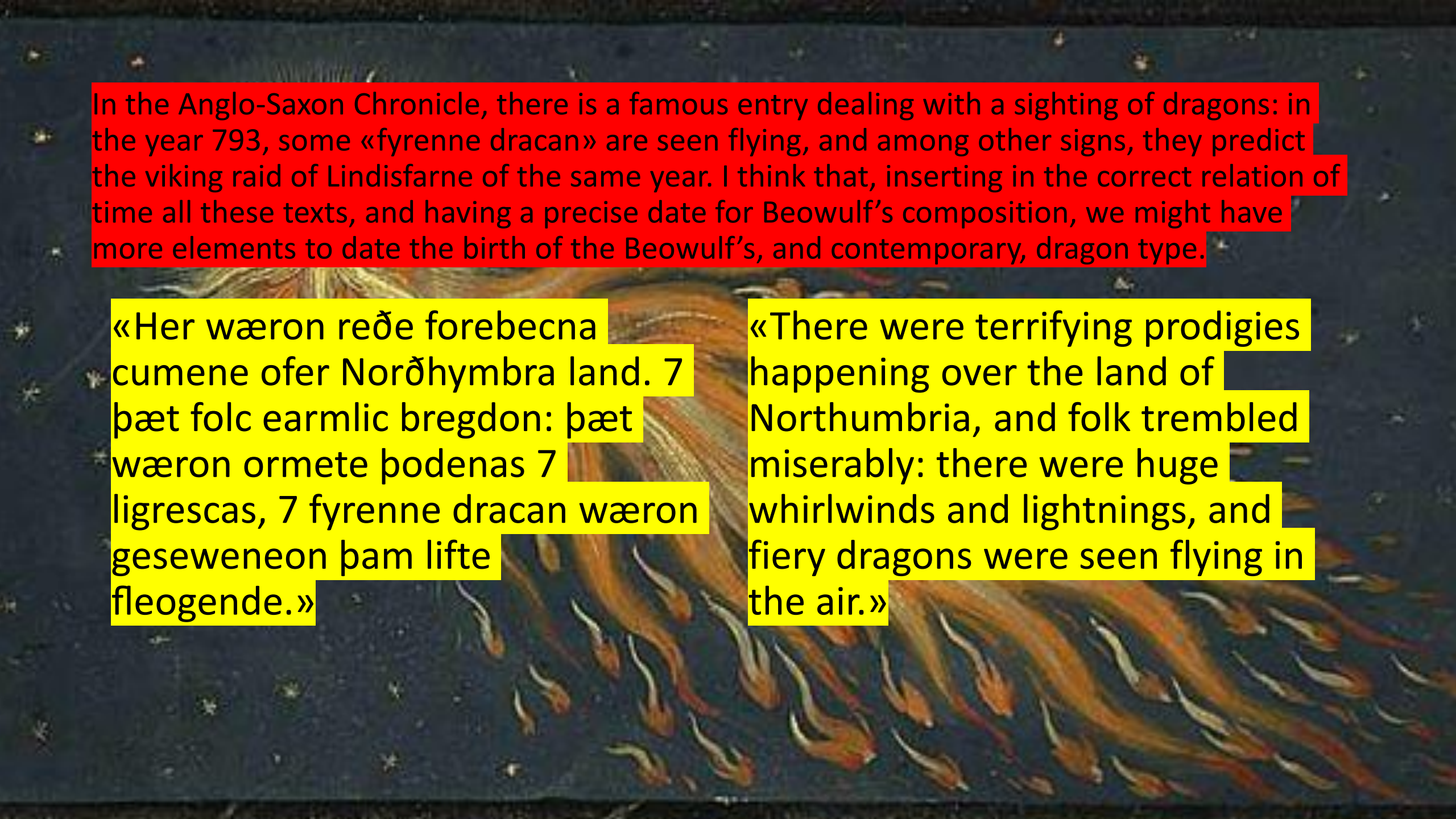


In the Alexander's encounter with Carastis (*cerastes*, horned snakes) we observe the use of the word *wyrm* in Old English, defining general invertebrates, like scorpions, but also snakes, and dragons, as we find in Beowulf. The scales glittering like gold, and the warriors' manner of fighting the creatures holding the shield, like in Beowulf's last fight with the dragon, are possible elements of interest and comparison.

[Letter of Alexander, paragraph 17]

«Ða toforan monan upgonge þa cwomon þær Scorpiones þæt wyrmcyn swa hie ær gewunlice wæron toward þæs wætersciepes. Wæs þæra wyrma micel mænegeo 7 heora wæs unrim 7 hie swiðe on þa ure wic onetton 7 in þa feollon. Ða æfter þon cwoman þær hornede nædran Carastis þæt nædercyn. Þa wæron ealle missenlices hiwes, for þon hie wæron sume reode, sume blace, sume hwite. Sumum þonne scinan þa scilla 7 lixtan swylce hie wæron gyldne þonne mon onlocode. Eall þæt lond hleoðrade for þara wyrma hwistlunge, 7 us eac noht lytel ege from him wæs. Ac we þa mid scyldum us scyldan, 7 eac mid longsceaftum sperum hie slogan 7 cwealdon monige eac in fyre forburnon. Þas ðing we þus drugon þæt we swa wið þam wyrmum fuhtan 7 wunnan huru twa tida þære nihte. »

«Then, before the moon rose, there came the Scorpions, some kind of insects (wyrma), like they always used to do, towards the water. There was a great multitude of those insects, and their quantity was incalculable, and they hastened and moved quickly to our camp. Then, after them, came the horned serpents Carastis, of the race of the snakes. They were all of many different colours, for some of them were red, some black, some white. On some of them the scales shone and glittered like they were gold, when one looked to them. All that land resounded for the hissing of the snakes (wyrma), and all of us were not little afraid of them. But we shielded ourselves with the shields, and we all slew and killed them with the long-shafted spears and burnt many in the fire. This thing we did so that we fought against the snakes and endured at least for two hours that night.»



In the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, there is a famous entry dealing with a sighting of dragons: in the year 793, some «fyrenne dracan» are seen flying, and among other signs, they predict the viking raid of Lindisfarne of the same year. I think that, inserting in the correct relation of time all these texts, and having a precise date for Beowulf's composition, we might have more elements to date the birth of the Beowulf's, and contemporary, dragon type.

«Her wæron reoðe forebecna
cumene ofer Norðhymbra land. 7
þæt folc earmlic bregdon: þæt
wæron ormete þodenas 7
ligrescas, 7 fyrenne dracan wæron
geseweneon þam lifte
fleogende.»

«There were terrifying prodigies
happening over the land of
Northumbria, and folk trembled
miserably: there were huge
whirlwinds and lightnings, and
fiery dragons were seen flying in
the air.»

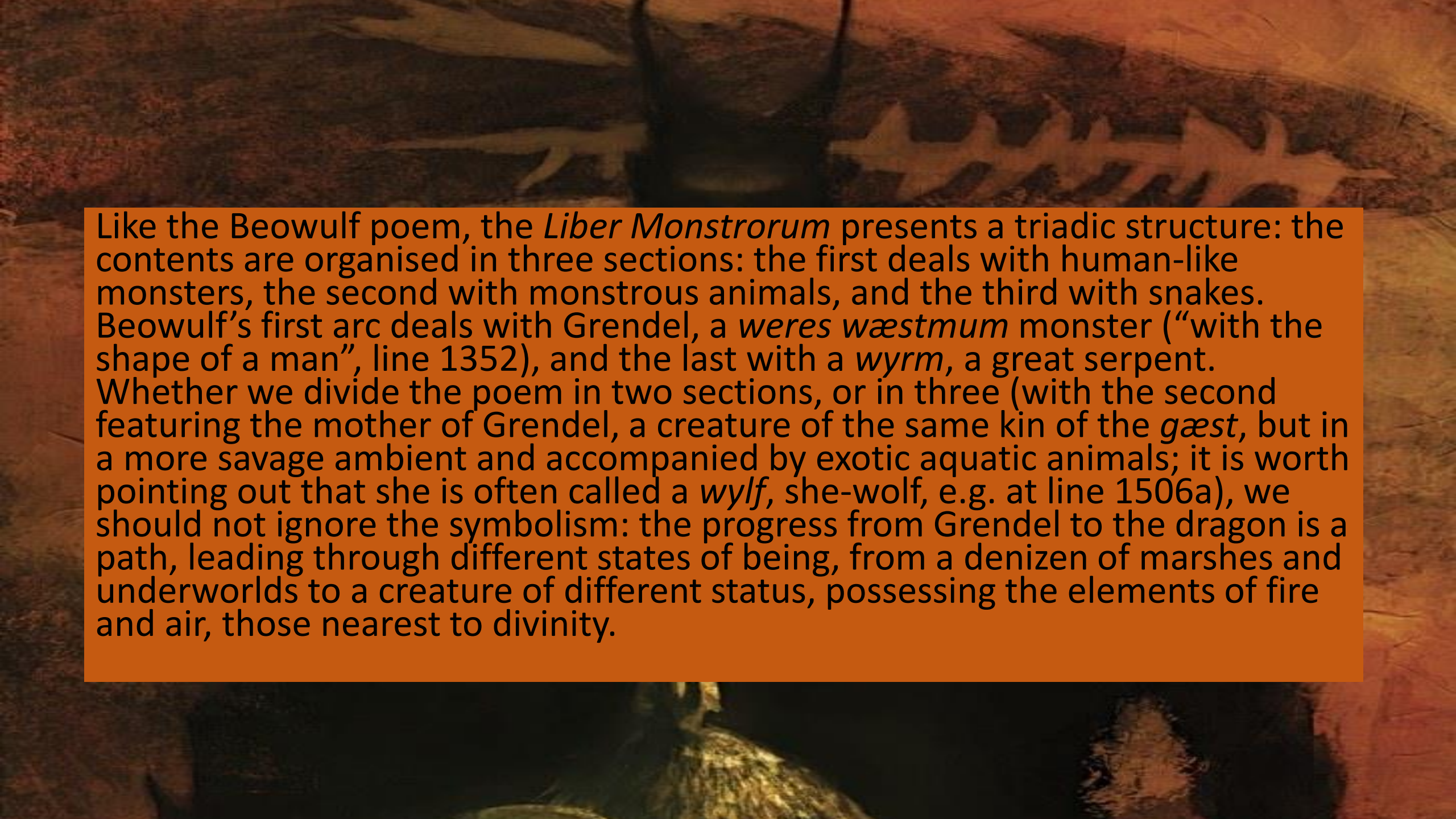
Liber Monstrorum

The “Liber Monstrorum de Diversis Generibus” is a text contained in seven manuscripts of the IX-X century, but originally written between the VII and VIII century. It is an encyclopedic book with entries concerning several monsters, strange folks, animals and marvels of any kind. It has been linked to the Anglo-Saxon cultural context because of the reference to Hygelac, a character from Beowulf.

It is unlikely that the author of the Liber Monstrorum read Beowulf, as there is no trace of its many monsters.

Beowulf’s poet may have known the Liber Monstrorum, but the Hygelac of the poem and that of the Latin book are totally different.





Like the *Beowulf* poem, the *Liber Monstrorum* presents a triadic structure: the contents are organised in three sections: the first deals with human-like monsters, the second with monstrous animals, and the third with snakes. *Beowulf*'s first arc deals with Grendel, a *weres wæstmum* monster ("with the shape of a man", line 1352), and the last with a *wyrm*, a great serpent. Whether we divide the poem in two sections, or in three (with the second featuring the mother of Grendel, a creature of the same kin of the *gæst*, but in a more savage ambient and accompanied by exotic aquatic animals; it is worth pointing out that she is often called a *wylf*, she-wolf, e.g. at line 1506a), we should not ignore the symbolism: the progress from Grendel to the dragon is a path, leading through different states of being, from a denizen of marshes and underworlds to a creature of different status, possessing the elements of fire and air, those nearest to divinity.

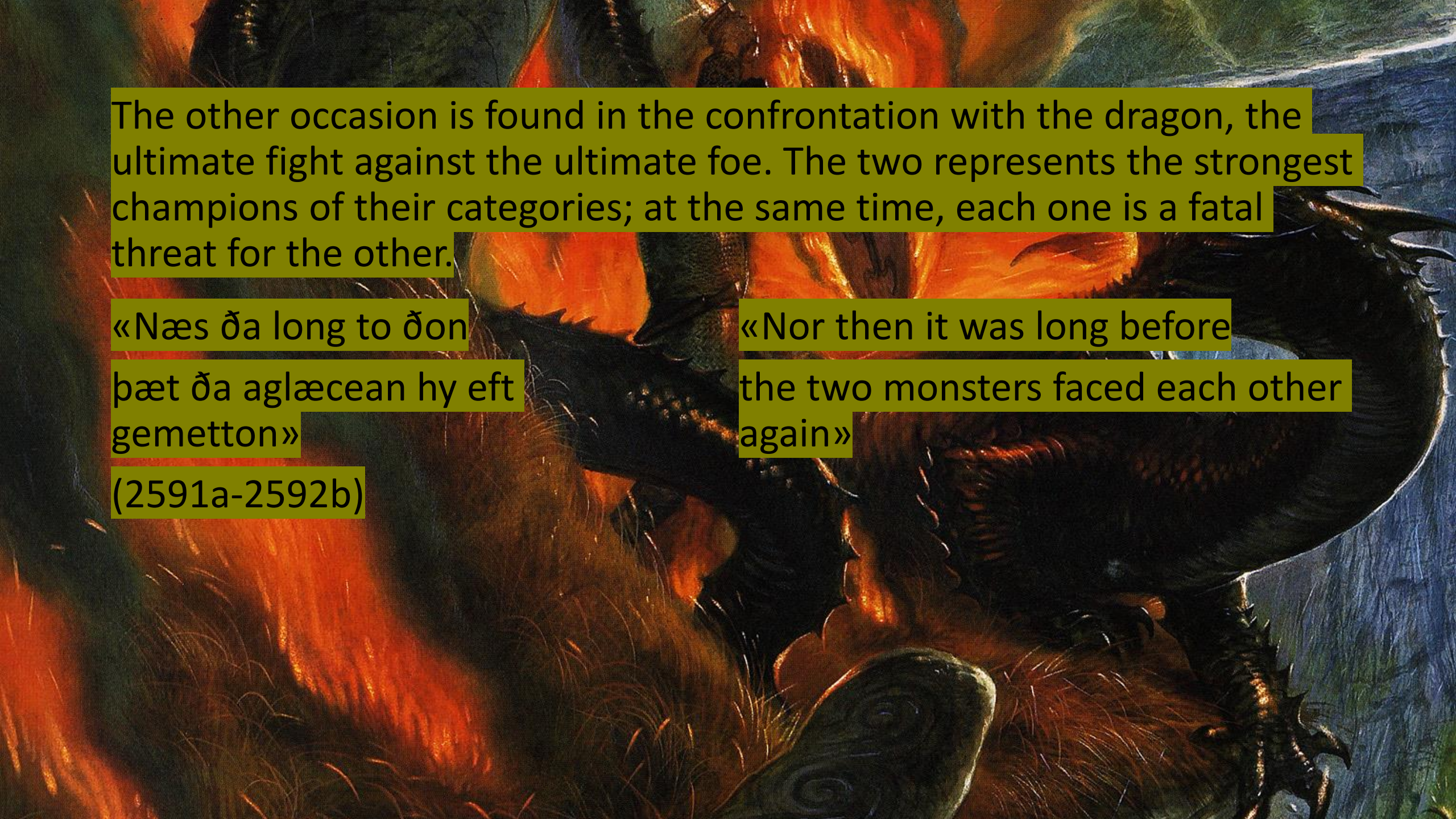
Beowulf

Then, we should focus on why Beowulf, like Sigemund, is defined *aglæca*. This happens on two occasions, when he faces the dragon and when he swims among the *sædeor*.

He appears as an *aglæca* when he confronts them.

«ac hine wundra þæs fela
swencte on sunde, sædeor
monig
hildetuxum heresyrcan bræc,
ehton aglæcan»
(1509b-1512a)

«but many wonders
troubled the water, many sea beasts
tore the chainmail apart with their
warlike tusks,
persecuted the adversary»



The other occasion is found in the confrontation with the dragon, the ultimate fight against the ultimate foe. The two represents the strongest champions of their categories; at the same time, each one is a fatal threat for the other.

«Næs ða long to ðon
þæt ða aglæcean hy eft
gemetton»

(2591a-2592b)

«Nor then it was long before
the two monsters faced each other
again»

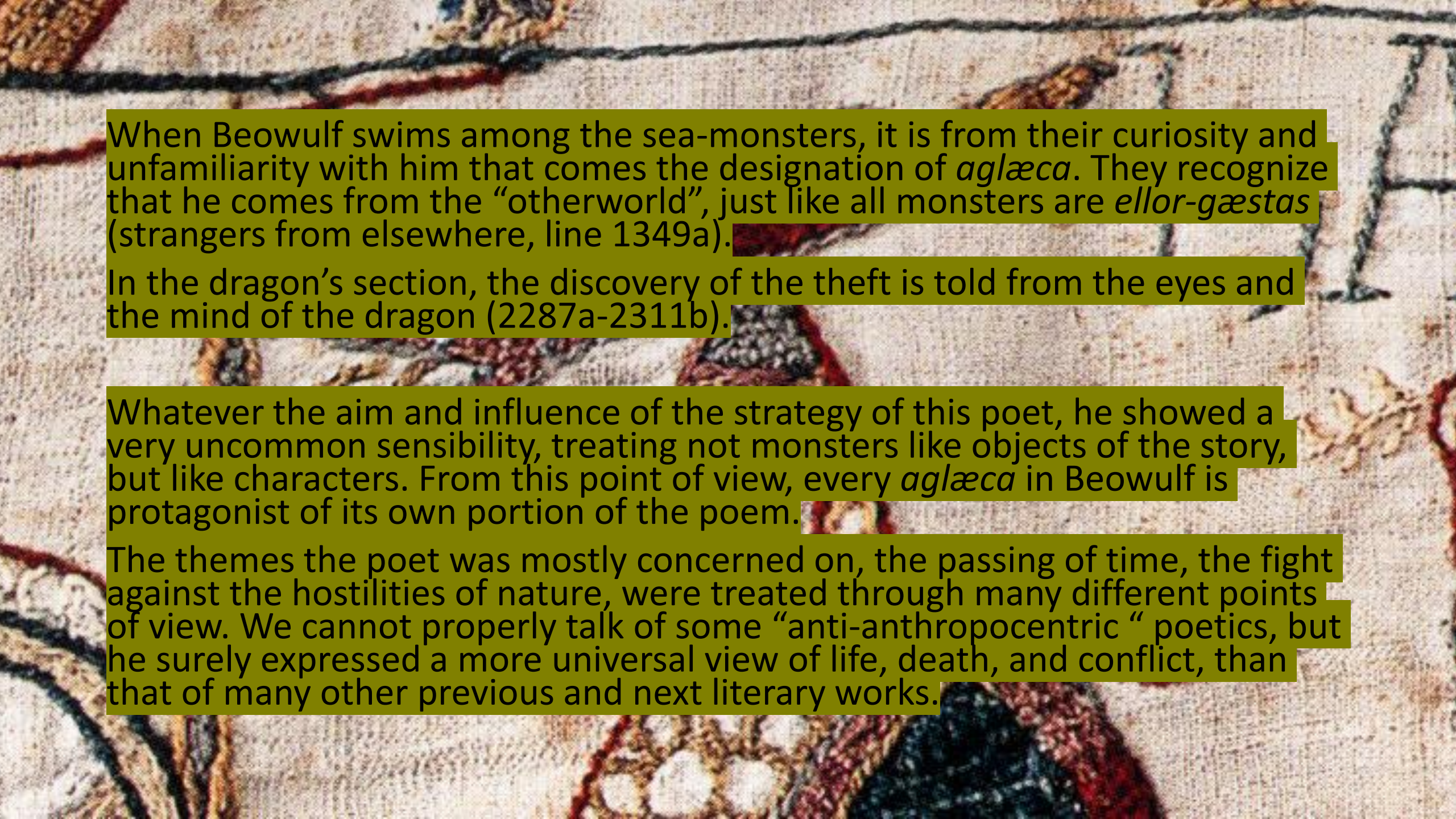


Approximations to a conclusion?

Beowulf's poet's use of the words and concept of the monstrous is meaningful, and it is relative.

The originality and modernity of the poem lies in how it creates a constant mirroring between the world of men and the world of monsters. It depicts monsters as characters, to the extent of telling parts of the story from their point of view.

The arrival of Grendel at Heorot echoes all his resentment and loneliness; the incursion of Grendel's mother is full of grief and desire for vengeance.



When Beowulf swims among the sea-monsters, it is from their curiosity and unfamiliarity with him that comes the designation of *aglæca*. They recognize that he comes from the “otherworld”, just like all monsters are *ellor-gæstas* (strangers from elsewhere, line 1349a).

In the dragon’s section, the discovery of the theft is told from the eyes and the mind of the dragon (2287a-2311b).

Whatever the aim and influence of the strategy of this poet, he showed a very uncommon sensibility, treating not monsters like objects of the story, but like characters. From this point of view, every *aglæca* in Beowulf is protagonist of its own portion of the poem.

The themes the poet was mostly concerned on, the passing of time, the fight against the hostilities of nature, were treated through many different points of view. We cannot properly talk of some “anti-anthropocentric” poetics, but he surely expressed a more universal view of life, death, and conflict, than that of many other previous and next literary works.

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