

Swanton, Michael, Anglo-Saxon Rose (London: Dent,
1993)

WONDERS OF THE EAST

The description of legendary marvels in faraway places was a popular early genre, with probable origins in ancient Greek traveller's tales of the fabulous peoples of India. This particular compendium, which colls examples from a whole range of Classical authors, may ultimately derive from some such compilation as the so-called *Epistle of Pharasmanes* to the Emperor Hadrian. Certain references, such as to the phoenix, the devilish horned serpents or the virtuous gold-mining ants, were well known to Church fathers like Augustine or the encyclopaedist Isidore of Seville, who employed them in a figurative sense.

The Old English version possesses little enough literary merit, but is important in that it testifies to the interest of the Anglo-Saxons in the exotic orient. It consists of a series of brief sketches, reporting those monstrous races and animals said by Classical and patristic authorities to inhabit the fringes of the world – especially the faraway east. There is added a paragraph (omitted in Knapp's edition) alluding to the Egyptian sorcerers Jannes and Mambres and their attempts to counteract the miracles of Moses and Aaron.

The Old English text is preserved in two MSS. An abbreviated version, rather crudely illustrated, is included in the late tenth-century *Beowulf* manuscript: British Library MS. Cotton Vitellius A XV ff. 98^v–106^v. A rather better text is found in MS. Cotton Tiberius B V ff. 78^v–87^v, a handsomely illustrated miscellany, including writings by Cicero and Priscian, made probably at Canterbury in the first half of the eleventh century. In this the English is set out in alternate paragraphs with a Latin recension of the same text; its final pages are missing, but a full Latin version occurs in the early twelfth-century Bodleian Library, Oxford, MS. Bodley 614, ff. 36^v–51^r. The names of places or tribes are rarely identifiable. Although it follows no apparent geographical scheme, the language suggests that it may have derived from a world map similar to the well-known Hereford *Mappa Mundi*; such a map is certainly included in the Tiberius MS. See generally J. B. Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, Cambridge, Mass., 1981.

The text was edited by Fritz Knapp, *Das angelsächsische Prosawerk Die Wunder des Ostens*, Berlin, 1926, and a diplomatic transcript of the Vitellius text was printed by Stanley Rypins, *Three Old English Texts*, EETS, OS., CLXI, London, 1924, pp. 51–67. There are facsimile editions of all three manuscripts by M. R. James, *Marvels of the East*, Oxford, 1929; and separately of the *Beowulf* MS. by Kemp Malone, *The Nurell Codex*, EEMF, XII, Copenhagen, 1963, and of the Tiberius MS. by P. McGurk *et al.*, *An Eleventh-Century Anglo-Saxon Illustrated Miscellany*, EEMF, XXI, Copenhagen, 1983.

1. The colony at the start of the country of Antimolima – which country is in number five-hundred of the lesser miles called *stadia*, and three-hundred-and-sixty-eight of the greater called *leagues*. On the island is a great host of sheep. And from there to Babylon it is a hundred-and-sixty-eight of the lesser *stadia* miles, and a hundred-and-fifteen of the greater miles called *leagues*.
2. The colony is much settled by merchants. Rams the size of oxen are born there. They dwell as far as the city of the Medes, the name of which city is Archemedon; it is the next greatest to the city of

Babylon. From Archamedon to there it is three-hundred of the lesser *stadia* miles, and two-hundred of the greater called *leagues*. The great wonders that are the works the great Macedonian, Alexander, ordered to be built are there. That country is in length and breadth two-hundred of the lesser *stadia* miles, and of the greater called *leagues* a hundred-and-thirty-three-and-a-half miles.

- 3 There is a place on the way to the Red Sea called Lentibelsinea, in which there are born hens like those among us, of a red colour. If anyone would catch or touches them, they immediately burn up all his body. Those are unheard-of sorceries.
- 4 Also wild animals are born there, which animals when they hear a man's voice, flee far away. Those animals have eight feet, and valkyrie's eyes and two heads. If anyone would seize them, they set fire to their bodies. Those are unheard-of animals.
- 5 Hascellentia is the name of the country through which men travel on the way to Babylonia; that is in length and breadth nine of the lesser miles called *stadia*. It is subject to the kingdom of the Medes. That country is wholly filled with good things. This place has serpents.
- 6 Those serpents have two heads whose eyes shine by night as bright as a lamp.
- 7 In a certain country are born asses which have horns as big as oxen's, and which are of the greatest fecundity. That is in the south part of Babylonia. They go to the Red Sea because of the many serpents that are in those places, which are called Corsias and which have horns as big as ram's. If they strike or touch anyone, then he expires immediately. In those lands is an abundance of pepper; that pepper the serpents protect in their zeal. One takes the pepper thus: by a man setting fire to the place, so that then the serpents flee from the hills into the earth. Therefore the pepper is black. From Babylonia to the Persian city where the pepper grows it is eight-hundred of the lesser miles called *stadia*, which makes six-hundred-and-twenty-three-and-a-half miles of the greater miles called *leagues*. The place is barren because of the hosts of serpents.
- 8 Also dog-headed men are born there who are called Conopoenas. They have a horse's mane, a boar's tusks and the

heads of dogs; and their breath is like a flame of fire. These lands are near the cities which are filled with all worldly wealth – that is in the south part of Egypt.

- 9 In a certain country men are born who are six feet tall in height. They have beards down to their knees and hair down to their heels. They are called *Homodubii*, that is, 'doubtfully men'; and they live on raw fish – and eat them.
- 10 Capi is the name of the river in the same place, which is called Gorgoneus, that is, 'son of the valkyrie'. Ants are born there as big as dogs. They have feet like grasshoppers. They are red and black in colour. Those ants dig up gold from the earth from before night until five o'clock of the day. Then men who are brave enough to take that gold bring with them camels: females with their foals, and males. The foals they tie up before they go over the river. They load the gold onto the females and themselves mount; and the males they leave. Then the ants find them, and while the ants are busy round the male camels, the men go over the river with the females and the gold. They are so swift that men imagine they are flying.¹
- 11 Between these two rivers, that is, between the Nile and the Bryxontis, is situated a colony called Locotheo. The Nile is the chief of foul rivers and it goes through Egypt. And they call the river 'Archoboleta', which is to say, the Great Water. In these places are born the great hosts of elephants.
- 12 Men are born there who are fifteen feet tall, and they have a white body and two faces on one head, feet and knees very red, and a long nose and dark hair. When they want to reproduce, they travel in ships to India and there bring their kind into being.
- 13 Ciconia-in-Gallia is the name of the country where tricolored men are born. Their heads are maned like lions' heads and they are twenty feet tall and they have a great mouth like a fan. If they notice or see any man in those lands, or if anyone is following them, then they go far off and flee; and they sweat blood. These are thought to be men.
- 14 Beyond the river Bryxontis, east from there, men are born tall and big. They have feet and legs twelve feet long, sides and chest

¹ The Latin version points out that the females are keen to return to their foals.

seven feet long. They are of a black colour. And they are called *Hostes* – certainly whenever they seize anyone they devour him.

15 Then there are wild animals on the Bryxontis which are called *Lerices*. They have ass's ears, sheep's wool and bird's feet.

16 Then there is another island south of the Bryxontis on which men are born without heads, who have their eyes and mouth in their chests. They are eight feet tall and eight feet broad.

17 Dragons are born there which are in length one-hundred-and-fifty-feet long, and are as thick as great stone columns. Because of the size of the dragons, nobody can travel easily in that country.

18 From this place to another kingdom on the south side of the ocean, is measured three-hundred-and-twenty-three of the lesser *stadia* miles, and two-hundred-and-fifty-six of the greater called *leagues*. And *Homodubii*, that is 'doubtfully men', are born there. They have a human form down to the navel, and from there on the form of an ass. They have long legs like birds and a gentle voice. If they notice or see any man in those lands, then they go far off and flee.

19 Then there is another place in which there are foreign men. And they have kings under their power – a hundred-and-ten of them all told. Those are the worst men and the most foreign. Two lakes are there, one the sun's, the other the moon's. That which is the sun's is hot by day and cold by night. And that which is the moon's is hot by night and cold by day. Their width is two-hundred of the lesser miles called *stadia*, and a hundred-and-thirty-three-and-a-half of the greater called *leagues*.

20 In this place are kinds of trees which are similar to the laurel and the olive. From those trees the most precious oil, balsam, is all produced. The place is a hundred-and-fifty-one of the lesser miles called *stadia*, and fifty-one of the greater called *leagues*.

21 Then there is a certain island in the Red Sea where there is a race of men called by us *Donestre*. They are shaped like soothsayers from the head down to the navel, and the other part is similar to a man's body. And they know all human languages. When they see a man of foreign race, they call him and his fellows with the names of known men, and with lying words they deceive him and seize him. And then, after that, they devour all of him, except the head, and then they sit and weep over the head.

22 East from there, there are born men who in size are fifteen feet tall and ten feet in breadth. They have large heads, and ears like a fan. At night they spread one ear beneath them, and cover themselves with the other. Their ears are very light, and their bodies are as white as milk. And if they see or notice any man in those lands, then they take their ears in hand and flee rapidly – so quickly that it seems that they fly.

23 Then there is a certain island on which men are born whose eyes shine as brightly as if one had lit a great lamp on a dark night.

24 Then there is another island, which in length and in breadth is three-hundred-and-sixty of the lesser miles called *stadia*, and a hundred-and-ten of the greater called *leagues*. There was built there, in the days of Bel the king,¹ and Jove, a temple made out of wrought iron and of brass. And in the same place, east from there, is also another temple, sacred to the sun, in which is appointed a pious and gentle priest, and he guards the halls and takes care of them.

25 Then where the sun rises, there is a golden vineyard which has berries a hundred-and-fifty feet long. In those berries are produced something like pearls or gems.

26 Then there is another kingdom in the Babylonian lands where there is the biggest mountain between the Median mountain and Armenia. It is the biggest and highest of all mountains. Gentle men are there. They have for their kingdom and for their dominion the Red Sea. There precious jewels are produced.

27 Around these places are born women who have beards down to their chest; and they put on horses' skins for clothing. They have the name of great huntresses, and instead of dogs they train tigers and leopards, which are the fiercest animals. And they hunt all the kinds of wild animals which are born on the mountain.

28 Then there are other women who have boars' tusks and hair down to their heels and oxen's tails from their loins. These women are thirteen feet tall, and their bodies have the brightness of marble; and they have camel's feet and ass's teeth. Because of their uncleanness they were slain by the great Macedonian,

¹ The god Baal, said to have been the founder of Babylon.

Alexander. When he could not take them alive, he killed them because they are foul in body and contemptible.

29 By the ocean is a race of wild animals called *Catini*. They are nobly beautiful animals. And men are there who live on raw flesh and honey.

30 In the left-hand part of the kingdom in which the *Catini* animals live, there are hospitable men – kings who have under them numerous princes to command. Their boundaries are near the ocean, and thence – from the left-hand part – come many kings.

31 This race of men lives many years, and they are generous men. And if anyone comes to them, then they give him a woman before they let him go away. The Macedonian, Alexander, when he came to them, was doubtful about their human nature. He did not wish to kill them nor to do them any harm.

32 Then there are kinds of trees upon which the most precious stones are produced, and from which they grow.

33 There is another race of men. They are of a black colour in appearance. One calls them Ethiopians.

34 Then there is a certain country in which vineyards grow profusely, where there is a couch made of ivory. It is three-hundred-and-six feet long.

35 Then there is a certain mountain called Adamans. On that mountain is the kind of bird called Griffin. Those birds have four feet, and a cow's tail, and an eagle's head.

36 In the same place is another kind of bird called a Phoenix. Those have crests on their heads like peacocks, and their nest – that they build from the most precious spices, which one calls cinnamon. And after a thousand years, it kindles a fire with its breath, and then rises up young again from the ashes.

37 Then there is another mountain where there are black men, and no other man may travel to those men because the mountain is all burning.

38 Here it tells how Mambres opened the magical books of his brother Jamnis, and to him was revealed the necromancy of his brother's devil-worship. Jamnis's soul answered him with these

words: 'You, brother! I am not unjustly dead, but I am truly and justly dead, and God's judgement goes against me because I in particular was wiser than all other magicians and I went against the two brothers called Moses and Aaron, who wrought those great tokens and portents.¹ Therefore I am dead and therefore I am brought to the midst of the kingdom of hell, where there is the great heat of eternal punishment and where there is a pool of perpetual torment from whence nobody ever ascends. Now, Mambres my brother, see that you do well to your sons and your friends in your life, because in hell there is nothing good, only gloom and darkness. And after you are dead, then you will come to hell, and your dwelling-place will be between dead men, down in the ground, and your pool will be two cubits wide and four long.'

39–50 The contents of the lost continuation of the text might be reconstructed from the Latin Bodley MS., which concludes with descriptions of: the rhinoceros/unicorn; mountains of gold guarded by dragons and griffins; the chameleon; two brothers in Asia, perpetually fighting and perpetually being healed by their sister; the race of Sciapodes, who use their single large foot as a sunshade; the Antipodes, whose feet point backwards; Hippodes, who have horse's feet; Hermaphrodites; a race with large lower lips which they use to shield their face from the sun; satyrs; parrots; and a group of Celtic British women condemned to dance forever.

¹ Cf. Exodus, VII 11f; 2 Timothy, III 8.