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Donestre

Of all the **monstrous races** of the Middle Ages, the Donestre are, in many ways, the most mysterious and intriguing. Old English sources describe these dangerous, deceitful creatures thus:

Then there is an island in the Red Sea where there is a race of people we call Donestre, who have grown like soothsayers from the head to the navel, and the other part is human. And they know all human speech. When they see someone from a foreign country, they name him and his kinsmen with the names of acquaintances, and with lying words they beguile him and capture him, and after that eat him all up except for the head, and then sit and weep over the head. (Orchard 1995: 179, 196-97/§20)

So many questions are raised by the duplicitous Donestre, and are compounded by difficulties in translation and interpretation, but three in particular have exercised scholars. First, why are they called “Donestre”? What does this appellation denote? The word has no clear meaning in either Old English or Latin. One suggestion has been that the accompanying phrase in Latin accounts, “quasi divini,” refers to this name, and that “Donestre” thus means “divine” in the creatures’ own tongue.

Most commentators, however, have taken “quasi divini” to refer to the inhuman upper half of the Donestre’s body, and this brings us to the second mystery. How, exactly, are the Donestre of “mixed nature”? What does it mean to record that, although human beneath, from head to navel they are “divine” or “prophetic,” or, in the Old English version, that they have “grown like soothsayers” (*swa frihteras*)? Available illustrations provide only limited answers.

In the oldest manuscript, the Donestre has a smooth, bestial head, with extended muzzle and bulging eye, reminiscent of some kind of dog. In the later manuscripts, however, the visage looks, more often than not, much more like a human face, with clearly defined nose and mouth, but now the monster has a long, flowing mane, like that of a lion.

Finally, and perhaps most perplexing of all, why do the Donestre weep? Are these false tears, evidence of further deception, as some writers have suggested? Are they insincere crocodile tears? Or are they real tears, which demonstrate genuine remorse at the monster's terrible act? As he cries over his victim's remains, the Donestre is portrayed with curved hand raised to the side of his cheek, a gesture depicted by Anglo-Saxon illustrators to indicate grief. It is possible, then, that the members of this fearful, monstrous race were taken to experience regret and sorrow at their dreadful deeds.

In all the many tracts and tomes of the period, the Donestre appear just twice, in two wonderfully peculiar compilations. The curious *Liber Monstrorum de Diversis Generibus* (Book of Monsters of Various Kinds) is a remarkable catalogue of nearly 120 creatures, gathered together, as the opening words tell us, from the deserts, islands, mountains and other "hidden parts of the world." The time and place of composition are unclear: scholars have suggested dates as wide-ranging as the sixth and tenth centuries C. E., and a provenance that might be Irish but is more likely Anglo-Latin. Directly and indirectly, the *Liber Monstrorum* draws on a great number of earlier sources, both classical and Christian, including the work of Virgil and Pliny, Augustine of Hippo and Isidore of Seville, and many others. It survives today in just five manuscripts, all dating from the ninth and tenth centuries. The *Liber Monstrorum* is divided into three parts. The first recounts all manner of human monsters and half-human hybrids: giants, six-fingered men, wood-dwelling **Fauns**, fish-tailed Sirens, one-eyed **Cyclops**, dog-headed

Cynocephali, headless Epifugi, a race with turned-back feet, one-legged Sciapods, the three **Gorgons**, insatiable **Harpies**, snake-haired Eumenides, and more. The second part lists wild beasts and terrifying cross-breeds, including lions, elephants, wild asses, tigers, lynxes, leopards, panthers, hippopotami, the **Chimaera**, three-headed **Cerberus**, gold-guarding ants, **shape-shifters**, saw-horned antelope, and ferocious mice the size of foxes. The final part tells of serpents of all kinds, including the Lernaean **Hydra**, the Indian Stares with which Alexander waged war, the pepper producing Corsiae, the fiery salamander, the horned Cerastes, the multi-coloured Ophitae, and the deadly asp. The Donestre are described, but not named, in the first part of the *Liber Monstrorum*, immediately after the many-eyed giant Argus, and just before the innumerable monsters with human faces and animal bodies who live on the borders of the land of the sorceress-goddess Circe. The Donestre are here described simply as polyglots of mixed nature, living on their island in the Red Sea, who astonish and deceive those who come from afar before eating them raw.

No more is said of these devious hybrids until they appear in *The Wonders of the East*. Known also as *The Marvels of the East*, this much shorter compendium of extraordinary sights and beings was written in Latin and Old English. The longest of the three surviving manuscripts--which date from the turn of the millennium, from the eleventh, and from the twelfth centuries C.E.--contains fewer than 50 wonders. Where the *Liber Monstrorum* provides only textual accounts, however, the denizens of the *Wonders* manuscripts are accompanied in each instance by an illuminating illustration. And in among the horned donkeys, the headless men with eyes and mouths in their chests, the bird-legged Homodubii, the bearded huntresses, the gigantic dragons, the people with fan-like ears, the beautiful Catini, the jewel-producing trees, the tusked women, and the eagle-headed **Griffin**, we encounter once more the Donestre. Still insular in

habits and habitat, these mixed, multilingual monsters are now named for the first and last time. It is here that they are described as “quasi divini,” or as having grown partially like soothsayers, and that we find illustrations depicting strange, bestial heads atop human bodies. And it is here we learn that it is not quite the whole traveller that is consumed, but that their severed head remains, over which the Donestre weeps, perhaps with remorse and perhaps not. **Tom Tyler**

Illustration

A Donestre deceives, devours, and then weeps over the remains of an unwary traveller. © The British Library Board (British Library MS Cotton Tiberius B.V, fol. 83v, L col. (detail), c. 1000.)

Works Cited and Suggested Reading

Friedman, John Block, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 2000).

Kim, Susan M. “The Donestre and the Person of Both Sexes,” in Benjamin C. Withers and Jonathan Wilcox (eds), *Naked Before God: Uncovering the Body in Anglo Saxon England* (Morgantown: West Virginia University Press, 2003), pp. 162-80.

Orchard, Andy, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1995).

Tyler, Tom, “Deviants, Donestre and Debauchees: Here Be Monsters,” *Culture, Theory & Critique*, 49/2 (Autumn 2008), pp. 113-131.

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Suggested Index Entries

De Mirabilibus Orientis (see Wonders of the East)

Donestre

Liber Monstrorum

Marvels of the East (see Wonders of the East)

Wonders of the East