

ANCIENT SEA MONSTERS AND A MEDIEVAL HERO:

The *Nicoras* of *Beowulf*

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ABSTRACT: This article examines the *nicor* (pl. *nicoras*) of *Beowulf*, a type of aquatic monster that appears elsewhere in Old English literature only in the *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* and the *Blickling Homily XVI*. These beasts that attack Beowulf during his swimming contest with Breca and that surround the mere of Grendel and his mother are unfamiliar to modern scholars in terms of their precise nature, being assumed in previous scholarship to be generic water monsters, or hippopotamus-like beasts. Other scholarly suggestions for their underlying influence have been crocodiles and whales. I argue, however, that the *nicoras* can better be understood as having been influenced by the ancient traditions of the *kētōs* (pl. *kētē*), the sea monster *par excellence* of Greco-Roman mythology, which also occupied a prominent place in the Christian imagination. The *nicoras* in these three Old English texts can be understood, like the dragon of *Beowulf*, as fantastical creatures that were primarily the product of discernible ancient traditions, rather than generic beasts or purely monstrous versions of real-world animals.

KEYWORDS: *Old English literature; Beowulf; sea monster; kētōs; Greco-Roman mythology*

Introduction: The *nicoras* of Old English Literature,

The three primary monsters of *Beowulf* are, of course, Grendel, Grendel's mother, and the dragon. These are, however, not the only monsters of the poem. In a few fleeting instances throughout the poem, we read of the existence of a type of aquatic monsters, which Beowulf has previously fought and which are referred to with the Old English term *nicor* (pl. *nicoras*). The poem, however, does not represent these monsters with enough detail for us to immediately discern how the beasts would have been envisioned by a contemporary audience, and the term itself is frustratingly extant only a dozen times in Old English literature, appearing elsewhere only in the *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* and the *Blickling Homily XVI* (Ball, 2017, p.81; Orchard, 2003, p.33). These two texts, as will be further explored below, each notably possess some connection, textual or otherwise, to *Beowulf*. The term *nicor*, then, was evidently not widespread in Old English literature as whole, but rather isolated to the intertwined contexts of these three texts. As I argue, we can understand the general nature of the *nicoras* as likely having been influenced by the ancient traditions of the *kētōs*, the most prevalent sea monster of Greco-Roman antiquity, a prospect made more tenable by the relatively early dating of *Beowulf* by Fulk to between

685 and 725 A.D. (Fulk, 1992, pp. 368-381, 390-391).¹ This article, will set forth the contexts in which the *kētos* and the *nicor* appeared in the ancient and medieval imagination, and demonstrate that the *kētos* as it existed in Christian Late Antiquity as a monster associated with evil is a viable candidate for being the primary influence on the *nicoras* of *Beowulf*.

We should begin by laying out the extent of our knowledge about the *nicoras* and their appearances in these three texts. The standard Old English dictionary lists the term as signifying either a “water-monster,” or a “hippopotamus” (Bosworth and Toller 1898, s.v. *nicor*);² the reasons for the latter entry will be shown below. The etymology of the term, meanwhile, is usually understood to be related to an Indo-European root meaning “to bathe” or “to wash” (Classen, 1915, p. 85; Bullock, 1909, p. 145). This, in turn, gives us the same root of the word *nixie*, a type of shapeshifting water spirit in Germanic folklore, and is also related to the *knucker* of English folklore, a type of aquatic dragon.³ The etymological relationship of the term to these names of later folkloric creatures does not necessarily mean that the *nicoras* were themselves Old English versions of these folkloric creature, but rather testifies only to a feature that they do indeed have in common, namely that they are all aquatic creatures of some sort. The word *nicor* itself, at any rate, reveals little about the nature of these beasts, and so we are left only with the few contexts of Old English literature in which the word appears in order to attempt to identify them.

Out of the dozen extant instances of the word, five are found in *Beowulf* (Table 1). In the narrative, they are first mentioned among the accomplishments that Beowulf lists upon meeting Hrothgar, stating that he has slain some of them (*Beowulf*, 421-422). This event is, then, recalled in Beowulf’s account of his swimming contest with Breca, during which he killed nine creatures that he fought in the water, naming them explicitly as *nicoras* (*Beowulf*, 574-575).⁴ As Biggs has noted, the *nicoras* in this episode have received relatively little scholarly attention (2002, p. 311, n.1.), and, more generally, they are assumed to be just generic aquatic monsters, seemingly hardly worthy of scholarly discussion.⁵ Biggs’ own article on the episode, for instance, declines to investigate the issue of what these beasts could have been imagined to be. Yet, we can glean small details from the preceding lines of the swimming contest episode that refer to these creatures at times by other terms such as *merefixa*, “sea fish” and *meredeor*, “sea beasts” (*Beowulf*, 549, 558) though this supplies little additional information aside from a general piscine nature to be expected of marine monsters.⁶ The text recalls that Beowulf had slain them in the context of saving the Geats from some unspecified terrors that the *nicoras* were inflicting upon them, a feature similar to his present mission to relieve Hrothgar’s kingdom of the terror posed by Grendel (Clark 1997, pp. 280-281; Biggs 2002, pp. 319-320). While a modern reader cannot easily discern the precise form and nature of the *nicoras*, their purpose in the narrative functions all the

¹ For further discussion of the dating of *Beowulf*, see Ogden (2021, pp. 322-323, n.46); Neidorf (2014); Bjork and Obermeier (1993, pp. 18-28); Chase (1981).

² At the time of this writing, *The Dictionary of Old English*, an online resource in development at the University of Toronto, has only published entries up to the letter I in the Old English alphabet, and, therefore, does not yet offer an entry on *nicor*.

³ On the *knuckers* and the abodes they dwell in called *knuckerholes*, see Lestón Mayo, (2014); Simpson (1980, pp. 45-46); Simpson (1978, p. 90); Simpson (1973, pp. 215-216).

⁴ On this passage, Fulk, Bjork, and Niles (2008, p. 154) relate these beasts to wood carvings of sea monsters, potentially intended as figureheads for ships. On similar depictions of draconic figureheads for ships in Norse literature and iconography, see Ogden (2021, pp. 326-330).

⁵ E.g. Chadwick (1959), though focusing on the monsters of the poem, omits any mention of the *nicoras*.

⁶ On these references, see also Ball (2017, p. 95).

same. The poet does not pause to give a digression on the appearance or other details of the *nicoras*, perhaps simply because it is not necessary. The purpose of the *nicoras* here in these first two instances is, after all, only to establish Beowulf's monster-slaying credentials.

The remaining three instances of the word in *Beowulf* function to characterise the mere in which Grendel and his mother dwell as a fantastical environment to be associated with such monsters (Ball, 2017, pp. 98-99). The outset of the poem described Grendel as a man cursed to inhabit a "dwelling of monsters (*fifelcynnes*)" (*Beowulf*, 104).⁷ Appropriately then, when Grendel, suffering from his fatal wound, returns to the mere, it is said that he drags himself back into a "mere of *nicoras*" (*Beowulf*, 845).⁸ Later, when Beowulf and Hrothgar's men journey to the mere, they pass "over steep rocky slopes, narrow ravines, straight passes, an unusual path, steep promontories, many abodes of *nicoras*" (*Beowulf*, 1407-1411).⁹ The description of the creatures in the mere itself, then, includes the *nicoras* on cliff ledges, hinting at an apparently amphibious nature to them as they are clearly not confined solely to the water. They also dwell alongside *saedracan*, "sea dragons" in the water (*Beowulf*, 1425-1430).¹⁰ The *nicoras* attempt to rush away as one is slain, and it is perhaps either the *nicoras* or these sea dragons that are the "many sea beasts" that attack Beowulf once he reaches the bottom of the mere (*Beowulf*, 1510-1511).¹¹ This effectively aesthetic purpose to the *nicoras* in these scenes is not disconnected from the prior uses of the term in the poem as creatures to prove the monster-slaying prowess of Beowulf (Biggs, 2002, pp. 319-320). The earlier slaying of the *nicoras* foreshadows the impending slaying of Grendel's mother within the same mere that they inhabit, while their presence now at the mere serves to clearly denote it as a space that is inimical to Beowulf.

While most of the references to the *nicoras* in *Beowulf* hint only at some generic piscine or aquatic nature to the *nicoras*, it is the fifth and final use of the term that significantly also aligns them with the dragons of the poem.¹² In the description of their appearance alongside the sea dragons at the mere the text uses the phrase "serpents and wild creatures (*wyrmas ond wildeor*)" as an apparent appositive for the *nicoras* (*Beowulf*, 1430).¹³ This term *wyrm* is frequently deployed throughout the text in connection with the dragons fought by Sigmund and Beowulf.¹⁴ Thus, the *nicoras* are themselves apparently draconic in nature as they too fall under the general category of *wyrm*. Both the sea dragons and *nicoras*, then, foreshadow the fight with the dragon later in the narrative (Mann, 1977, p. 83-84), though it is uncertain from the text itself what the precise nature of the *nicoras* is in relation to such sea dragons. They are perhaps not dragons proper, equivalent neither to the sea dragons

⁷ Notably the compound term *fifelcynnes* may even refer specifically to sea monsters (Bosworth and Toller 1898, s.v. *fifel*).

⁸ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

⁹ On these lines as constituting a transition into a world of monsters, see Butts (1987, pp. 114-115).

¹⁰ On these lines in relation to the "Cliff of Death" motif in Old English literature, see Fry (1987, pp. 220-222).

¹¹ The detail in these lines that these attack Beowulf with their "battle-tusks (*hildetuxum*)" has sometimes led to the suspicion that walruses also influenced the conceptualisation of the *nicoras*. On this, see Lawrence (1912, p. 220); Bullock (1909, pp. 144-145).

¹² On the tradition of such sea dragons in later medieval works, see Honegger (2017, pp. 3-6).

¹³ Fry (1987, p. 222) similarly interprets this phrase as an appositive for the *nicoras*.

¹⁴ *Beowulf*, 886, 891, 897, 2287, 2307, 2316, 2343, 2348, 2400, 2519, 2567, 2629, 2669, 2705, 2745, 2759, 2771, 2827, 2902, 3039, 3132. The hilt of the blade that Beowulf uses in the lair of Grendel's mother is, then, also described as "serpent-patterned" (*wyrmfáh*, 1698). For a listing of other compound terms of *wyrm*, see Ogden (2021, p. 323, n.48). On the term *wyrm* itself, see Ball (2017, p. 21-23).

they dwell with nor to the dragon fought by Beowulf later in the narrative, but rather creatures that only contain some draconic features.

The scant details about the *nicoras* that can be gleaned from the text of *Beowulf* can be best summarised in three points: 1) their piscine nature derived from the references to them as *merefixa* and *meredeor*; 2) their draconic nature derived from the reference to them as *wyrmas*; 3) the general alignment with evil as a result of their location in the otherworldly mere of Grendel and his mother, and general antagonism to Beowulf. The *nicoras* are certainly creatures that dwell in an aquatic environment, yet as the reference to them lying on cliff ledges reveals, they are not wholly confined to the watery element. The *nicoras*, moreover, have associations with all three of the central antagonists of the poem. They dwell in and around the same mere that Grendel and his mother inhabit, while their draconic nature aligns them with the dragon as the other great *wyrm* of the poem. Beowulf's ability to slay them functions simultaneously as a means to highlight his own warrior prowess, and as a means to implicitly associate the *nicoras* themselves as being, like Grendel with his descent from Cain and the dragon in the Christian imagination, figures to be aligned with evil.

The other two Old English texts that mention the *nicoras* provide no further descriptive details about these monsters, but do supply additional contexts in which they appear. The Old English *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* (henceforth, *Letter*), a text notably also included in the Nowell Codex and known to have textual parallels to *Beowulf*,¹⁵ contains another account of combat with a group of *nicoras*. The relevant portions of the *Letter* supply another four instances of the word *nicoras* with the first three of these in an episode wherein Alexander's forces come to an unnamed river in India:

Then, there became visible a great number of nicoras, larger and more dreadful than elephants,¹⁶ which carried men into the midst of the watery waves to the bottom of the river, and ripped them apart into bloody gore with their mouths, and consumed [fornamon] them all so that none among us knew where any of them went. Then, I (Alexander) was enraged with my guides, who had conducted us to such hazards. I commanded that fifty of them be thrown into the river. And immediately, once they were in the river, the nicoras were ready and tore them apart like they did with the others. And the nicoras, gushed forth [aweollon] in the river, thick as ants; they were innumerable (Letter, 15).¹⁷

The extant Latin version of the *Letter* has, in place of *nicor*, the terms *hippopotamus* and *belua* ("beast"), a word discussed more fully below. The use of *hippopotamus* in the Latin *Letter* is the sole rationale for the listing of hippopotamus as a possible meaning for *nicor* in the Bosworth and Toller dictionary.¹⁸ In this passage, the *nicoras* function in a similar, though by no means identical manner to their appearance in the text of *Beowulf*. They are utilised as hostile beasts that drag humans to the depths once more, yet the purpose of

¹⁵ For the textual parallels between the *Letter* and *Beowulf*, see Orchard (2003, pp. 25-39).

¹⁶ Notably, comparing the size of sea monsters to elephants was also a common trope in the ancient world as well. See, for instance, Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 9.11; Aelian, *History of Animals*, 16.12.

¹⁷ See also, Ball (2017, pp. 83-84). Orchard (2003, pp. 32-33) compares this motif of the *nicoras* dragging someone down into the water to the instances of this occurring in *Beowulf* in the swimming contest with Breca (549-558), and to when this also occurs with the sea beasts in the mere (1501-1512).

¹⁸ For the Latin text of the relevant episode, see Orchard (1995, p. 209).

their appearance here is not to serve as the monsters to be slain by a heroic protagonist, but rather serve to exemplify the dangerous nature of such exotic rivers in a fantastical environment. India, and, more generally, the lands over the far eastern horizon were widely imagined as being habitats for monsters and other marvels in both the ancient and medieval worlds.¹⁹ Likewise, it is a general feature that characterises the tradition of the *Alexander Romance* and the larger mythos of Alexander's journey to the east to portray him as encountering fantastical beasts and marvels.²⁰ In this manner, the episode broadly resembles their use in *Beowulf* to characterise the mere as an exotic and otherworldly space of monsters. Later in the *Letter of Alexander*, there is a description of a beast also encountered in India that has a serrated back, a rounded head, large teeth, and "a chest like that of a *nicor*" (*Letter*, 27).²¹ Of course, without a clear knowledge of what a *nicor* is, it is uncertain precisely what the author intended to be envisioned by this part-*nicor* *Mischwesen*. The essential purpose of the beast, though, remains the same: to characterise the lands that Alexander ventures into as exotic and full of such monstrosities.

The final three instances of the word *nicor* in Old English literature, then, come in the *Blickling Homily XVI*, dated to the tenth century A.D.²² The relevant description of hell in this text has been widely noted as similar to the description of the mere in *Beowulf*,²³ and the manuscript it resides in has also sometimes been thought to be paleographically similar to portions of the Nowell Codex (Kiernan, 1996, pp. xix-xxii). The relevant passage is as follows:

As Saint Paul was looking toward the northern portion of the world, from where all the waters go down, he saw above that water an aged stone, and north of that stone the woods turned very chilly. And there were darkened mists. And under that stone was the abode of nicoras and evil spirits. And he saw on that cliff of those chilly woods many dark souls hanging by their tied hands. And there fiends resembling nicoras were seizing them, like ravenous wolves. And the water underneath the cliff was darkened. And between the cliff and the water there was span of twelve miles. And once the branches broke off, the souls hanging on those branches fell. And the nicoras seized them. These were souls that had unjustly sinned in the world, and would not cease before the end of their lives (Blickling Homily XVI).²⁴

This passage attests to a more explicitly religious usage of the *nicoras* as demonic monsters. Their associations with evil in *Beowulf* are only conveyed through the fact that they are implicitly aligned with evil as a result of their ties to Grendel and his mother, as well as their draconic nature. Yet, here, they appear in the role often ascribed to demons elsewhere in medieval literature as creatures assigned the lot of tormenting sinners in hell.

¹⁹ See, for instance, Romm (1992, pp. 82-94); Le Goff (1980, pp. 189-204); Wittkower (1942).

²⁰ See, for instance, Romm (1992, pp. 115-120).

²¹ See also, Ball (2017, pp. 84-85). The Latin version has, in place of *nicres breastum*, the phrase *hippopotamo pectore*. On this, see Orchard (1995, p. 214).

²² On the manuscript and language of the *Blickling Homilies*, see Kelly (2003, pp. xxix-xlv).

²³ See, for instance, Orchard (2005, pp. 38-41); Kelly (2003, pp. 191-192); Wright (1993, pp. 116-117); Tristram (1976, pp. 110-11); Malone (1958, pp. 304-306).

²⁴ See also, Ball (2017, pp. 89-91). For the Old English text, see Fulk, Bjork, and Niles (2008, p. 294). As with the mere in *Beowulf*, Fry (1987, pp. 224-225) also interprets this passage as being derived from the Old English "Cliff of Death" motif.

These three texts, *Beowulf*, the *Letter*, and the *Blickling Homily XVI* are all generally sparse in details on these beasts, but, nevertheless, provide three basic functions for them: as monsters to be slain by a heroic protagonist, as exotic beasts in India, and as creatures responsible for punishing sinners in hell. Suggestions for what these creatures were, though, have generally followed the entry in Bosworth and Toller, seeing them as generic (water) monsters, or, owing to the Latin *Letter*, being at least partially influenced by hippopotami. However, two notable theories have also been put forth in recent years. Charlotte Ball's PhD thesis, focusing on serpents in Anglo-Saxon literature, offers the most in depth examination of the *nicoras* to date. Ball's hypothesis focuses on the references in the Latin *Letter* to where the beasts are referred to by the Latin *hippopotamus*. As she theorises, the Latin author may have been imagining a river-dwelling crocodile, pointing to the substantial conceptual overlap between hippopotami and crocodiles in Late Antique and Early Medieval thought (2017, p. 82-88). She goes on to speculate that the author of the Latin *Letter* simply may have not intended to signify the animal we now know as a hippopotamus with the Latin term *hippopotamus*, further stating: "[t]o an Anglo-Saxon with no first-hand knowledge of the animals in question, the Latin terms *hippopotamus* and *crocodillus* would each have signified a large, dangerous, river-dwelling animal" (Ball, 2017, p. 88).²⁵ Thus, Ball considers the *nicoras* of the Old English *Letter* as being crocodile-like in nature, suitable for such river-dwelling monsters, and likely also sufficing for the underlying influence upon the *nicoras* of *Beowulf* and the *Blickling Homily XVI* (2017, pp. 89-91). More recently, Tim Flight has proposed seeing the *nicoras* as being derived from whales (2021, pp. 161-162). This suggestion, which ignores the clearly amphibious aspect of the *nicoras* on cliff ledges in *Beowulf*, is derived from the demonic nature of the *nicoras* in the *Blickling Homily XVI*. These associations of the *nicoras* with evil, according to Flight, can ultimately be tied back to pervasive associations of the Devil with the creature known as the *cetus*, a Latin term he considers to be straightforwardly referring to whales (2021, pp. 162-168).²⁶

These attempts to see the *nicoras* as deriving from specific real-world animals, either hippopotami, crocodiles, or whales, however, make the crucial mistake of historicising the *nicoras*, assuming that these otherwise unknown beasts must necessarily be distortions of some specific real animal. Such an approach, particularly to the world of *Beowulf*, is, however, fundamentally out of step with the portrayal of and scholarly interpretations of the poem's three primary monsters, each of which represent some sort of supernatural and fantastical terror. The best example is the dragon of *Beowulf*; scholars do not generally posit that any singular real-world animal lies behind the poem's term *draca*, simply because we are acutely aware of the pervasive traditions of the dragon as a fantastical creature in the medieval imagination. The fact that our knowledge of the *nicoras* is more uncertain should not mislead us into positing that these can only have been amplified versions of such real-world creatures. The world that *Beowulf* inhabits is, after all, a realm populated by monsters that are an amalgamation of fantastical features, like the dragon. Likewise, the settings of the relevant portions of the Old English *Letter* and the *Blickling Homily XVI*, the exoticised lands of India and hell, are clearly fantastical environments, wherein we should expect to find equally fantastical creatures. Hippopotami, crocodiles and whales, while being dangerous and frightful beasts in their own right, do not precisely match the contexts and nature of the *nicoras* of *Beowulf*. Hippopotami and crocodiles do not seem entirely suitable for the deep sea context of the *nicoras* in the episode of the swimming contest with Breca, while whales certainly do not explain the amphibious nature of the *nicoras* around

²⁵ See also, Davis (1953).

²⁶ Likewise, on the associations of the sea itself with evil, see Flight (2021, pp. 151-156).

the mere nor their location within a river in the *Letter*. Nor do any of these animals match the peculiar blend of piscine and draconic associations that I have demonstrated above for the *nicoras* in *Beowulf*. In attempting to understand the identity of the *nicoras*, we should, therefore, seek a similarly fantastical monster with more equivalent associations.

The Influence of the *Kētē* of Greco-Roman Antiquity

A more viable candidate to meet these criteria is, then, appropriately, a creature, which was derived initially from Greco-Roman mythology, but persisted strongly into the late antique and medieval worlds.²⁷ This is the sea monster known as the *kētos* (pl. *kētē*), the Greek term from which the Latin *cetus* (pl. *ceti*) is transliterated.²⁸ Flight is effectively on the correct path in pointing to the Latin traditions of the *cetus* as one underlying influence for the *nicoras*, yet, it is an oversimplification to think of the *kētē* as being only whales as we imagine them today. While the semantic field of the term in both Greek and Latin could certainly encompass whales, the *kētē* were routinely depicted in art and literature as monstrous creatures instead. The *kētē* in both the Greek tradition as well as the Latin tradition were a type of classical monster that was an amalgamation of various piscine and draconic traits, and, therefore, a suitable match for the similar piscine/draconic blend of the *nicoras*.

For reasons of space, it is impossible to give a comprehensive overview of the *kētē* here, but it will suffice to outline their basic form and associations in antiquity. The *kētē* are most notable for being the type of sea monster in Greco-Roman mythology sent by Poseidon and ultimately slain by Heracles and Perseus in the myths of Hesione and Andromeda respectively.²⁹ In both of these myths and the larger imaginative thought behind them, they were creatures known for their propensity to devour their victims.³⁰ A Caeretan hydria, dated to the sixth century B.C., provides one ideal representation of the monster's physical form (*LIMC Kētos* 26).³¹ Here, it is depicted with an elongated serpentine body and its large mouth agape to reveal its sharp teeth, while recognisably piscine traits, such as gills and fins, are also visible.³² This basic form of the *kētos*, however, evolved over the centuries, beginning to take on a more stout-bodied form from around the fourth century B.C. onward. An ideal example of this form occurs on the Tellus panel of the *Ara Pacis* ("Altar of Peace"), commissioned in 13 B.C. under the Augustan regime, where a *kētos* appears with a more Loch Ness monster style body that features a thicker torso with an

²⁷ Such a comparison of elements of *Beowulf* to classical mythology is nothing new. Mann (1977, p. 98), for instance, broadly compares Grendel's mother and the *nicoras* to Scylla, but does not build on this other than by means of vague associations. Likewise, the description of the mere of *Beowulf* has been noted as having similarities to Avernus in Vergil's *Aeneid*. On this, see Renoir (1974).

²⁸ For studies on the *kētos*, see Irby (forthcoming); Ogden (2021, pp. 87-105); Ogden (2013a, pp. 116-148); Papadopoulos and Ruscillo (2002); Boardman (1987). Unsurprisingly, the semantic fields of the Greek *kētos* and the Latin *cetus* are identical. For the sake of consistency, however, I generally refer to it as *kētos* below, even where it occurs in Latin texts.

²⁹ For the major ancient textual sources on these myths, see Ogden (2013b, pp. 153-178).

³⁰ For instances of the *kētē* devouring (or threatening to devour) humans, see Aristophanes, *Clouds*, 556-557; Palaephatus, *Peri Apiston*, 37; Plutarch, *Phocion*, 28.6; Aelian, *History of Animals*, 15.23.

³¹ On this hydria, see also Ogden (2013a, p. 128); Papadopoulos and Ruscillo (2002, p. 218); Boardman (1987, p. 80).

³² This piscine nature of the *kētē* was also recognised in ancient texts, as we see most clearly in one fifth-century A.D. lexicon that defines the Greek *kētos* as a "giant fish of the sea (θαλάσσιος ἰχθύς παμμεγέθης)" (Hesychius, *Lexicon*, s.v. κῆτος).

elongated neck and prominent fore-flippers (*LIMC* Aurai 4). This evolution of the *kētē* has, in turn, been theorised by Ogden to have influenced the evolution of dragon's own physical form in the medieval world (2021, pp. 104-110).³³ The *kētē* not only possess draconic associations, but are an integral ingredient in the evolution of the classical *drakōn* from a purely serpentine figure, into the dragon of medieval and modern popular culture as a winged quadruped with a similarly stout-bodied form as the *kētōs* of the *Ara Pacis*.

The *kētē*, though associated with Poseidon and other marine divinities in Greco-Roman mythology, were also frequently imagined as wild monsters that roam the distant bodies of water that we would now call the Atlantic and Indian Oceans.³⁴ While there is a plethora of texts locating them in these open waters, both inside and outside of the Mediterranean basin, no ancient author ever imagines that they swam up the Tiber River nor into any rivers of the Greek mainland. There is, however, one crucial exception to this general rule that bars the *kētē* from river ecosystems. Rivers in distant lands, those outside the Mediterranean basin, such as India, are routinely claimed to be exceptionally large, and consequently it is these rivers (and these rivers alone) that ancient texts occasionally claim to be the home for some such sea monsters. The earliest source for this concerning an Indian river comes from the first century A.D. geographer Strabo, who states on the basis of a report that is alleged to have come from Craterus, one of Alexander's generals, that Alexander's forces did in fact see *kētē* around the Ganges River (*Geography*, 15.1.35).³⁵ Similarly, Arrian, in the second century A.D., does mention some such belief in fabulous monsters infesting the Indus river when Alexander comes near it, though he himself declines to elaborate on such notions (*Anabasis of Alexander*, 5.4.3). In the following century, Aelian also speaks of the Ganges as being so vast that it supposedly contains islands larger than the island of Lesbos, and as a body of water that breeds *kētē* (*History of Animals*, 12.41).

With regard to the *nicoras* of the Old English *Letter*, it is this offshoot tradition of the *kētē* infesting rivers in distant lands that likely influences that text. This tradition, after all, finds its way into Latin literature, where, significantly, the *kētōs* also falls within the semantic field of *belua*, the term used alongside *hippopotamus* in the Latin *Letter*. While *belua* can refer to a frustratingly wide range of large animals,³⁶ such as elephants,³⁷ within aquatic contexts, it can signify the *kētē* as serpentine sea monsters.³⁸ In Latin texts, we find this term similarly situated within the mythos of Alexander's encounters with fabulous monsters in India. Quintus Curtius Rufus speaks of a variety of such creatures in an Indian river, using the word *belua* to describe them (*Historia Alexandri Magni*, 8.9.9). Elsewhere,

³³ For the acquisition of the dragon's wings, Ogden derives them from the Christian assimilation of dragons with winged demons. On this, see Ogden (2021, pp. 113-120). On the place of the dragon in medieval literature more generally, see also Cousteix (2009); Honegger (2009, pp. 29-34).

³⁴ See, for instance, Strabo, *Geography*, 3.2.7; Didorus Siculus, *Library*, 4.18.5; Lucian, *True History*, 1.30; Arrian, *Indica*, 30.1-9; Dionysius Periegetes, *Description of the World*, 592-605; Aelian, *History of Animals*, 16.18.

³⁵ Although this is the earliest instance of an Indian river harboring *kētē*, the notion of exceptionally large rivers in distant lands being filled with creatures that could be designated as *kētōs* goes back to Herodotus (*Histories*, 4.53.2-3). See also, Romm (1992, p. 110).

³⁶ Lewis and Short (1879, s.v. *belua*).

³⁷ For instances of *belua* referring to elephants, see Cicero, *De Natura Deorum*, 1.97; Quintus Curtius Rufus, *Historia Alexandri Magni*, 8.13.7, 14.23; Silius Italicus, *Punica*, 11.584; Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, 8.18.

³⁸ See, for instance, the Latin accounts of the Hesione and Andromeda myths at Manilius, *Astronomica*, 5.544; Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica*, 2.535.

he deploys the term *belua* to refer to a sea monster that beached itself during Alexander's siege of Tyre (*Historia Alexandri Magni*, 4.4.3).³⁹ The most direct connection of this Latin tradition to the incident at the river in the *Letter* comes from a reference to *beluae* in the Ganges River from the *Liber Monstrorum* ("Book of Monsters"), a mid-seventh or mid-eighth century A.D. work.⁴⁰ This text is, moreover, notable for its suspected connection to *Beowulf*.⁴¹ One passage of the *Liber Monstrorum* states that *hippopotami* are *beluae*, recounting a story that 200 men were once devoured in an Indian river.⁴² Thus, the river-dwelling *kētē* and *hippopotami* were both devouring creatures that could equally fall within the semantic field of *belua*. The unnamed river in the Old English *Letter* is likely to have also been imagined as an extraordinarily large river. The text, after all, states that the *nicoras* are larger than elephants and seemingly come in innumerable swarms, features that seem to require their dwelling in a substantially large body of water. Ball's theory that the author of the Latin *Letter* may not have intended to signify actual hippopotami with the Latin *hippopotami* still has merit, but crocodiles are not the only such monsters that could meet the criteria for devouring beasts in an Indian river. Admittedly, with the exceptionally wide semantic field of *belua*, it is impossible to definitively say if the *kētē* or crocodiles were what the author of the Latin *Letter* had intended. At any rate, the author of the Old English *Letter* evidently felt it to appropriate to utilise *nicor* as a term acceptable for both *belua* and *hippopotamus*, a feature that seems to hint at the semantic field of *nicor* being, like *belua*, exceptionally wide and generalising.

For the more explicitly Christian context of the *nicoras* in the *Blickling homily XVI*, we must turn to how the classical *kētos* was adopted into the late antique Christian imagination. This tradition begins with the Septuagint's translation for the Old Testament sea monster Leviathan as *kētos*.⁴³ In a similar manner, the Septuagint translators had also rendered the giant fish that swallowed Jonah also as a *kētos* (Job 2:1).⁴⁴ The *kētē*, then, come in the Christian tradition to be associated with evil, through this assimilation with Leviathan. It will suffice here, for reasons of the space constraints, to give three examples out of the many instances of *kētē* being aligned with the Devil among Latin sources in late antique

³⁹ Gratifyingly, the same story concerning a sea monster beaching itself during this siege of Tyre is found in a Greek text using *kētos* to describe it (Diodorus Siculus, *Library*, 17.41.5-6).

⁴⁰ *Liber Monstrorum*, 2.27: "The river Ganges in India, which brings forth gold with precious jewels, produces wonderous kinds of monstrous wildness. Those writing about these beasts (*beluarum*) attest to being silent about them on account of the incredible forms of their figures."

⁴¹ See, for instance, Orchard (2005, pp. 86-87); Rauer (2000, pp. 15-16); Whitbread (1974).

⁴² *Liber Monstrorum*, 2.9: "Hippopotami are beasts (*beluae*) in India, whose bodies are said to be larger than those of elephants, and they say that they dwell in a certain river with unconsumable water. They are said to have once dragged 200 men into the rapacious currents of the depths in a one hour and to have devoured them in a cruel manner."

⁴³ See, for instance, Job 3:8. Notably, Leviathan is also translated as *drakōn* at other points in the Septuagint version of the Old Testament (Psalm 73:13; 103:26; Job 41:1; Isaiah 27:1). On this assimilation, see Ogden (2021, pp. 104-105).

⁴⁴ The Greek of the Gospel of Matthew also renders it as *kētos* (Matthew 12:40). While the creature at the heart of Jonah's story is widely considered to be a whale in the modern Anglophone imagination, this was not the case in the late antique and early medieval periods. Whales were thoroughly bound up in the monstrous conceptualisation of the *kētē*. One need only look to the artistic representations of Jonah to understand that the creature was also imagined as a monstrous creature instead of simply a whale. I provide two examples: the third century A.D. marble statues of Jonah now held at the Cleveland Museum of Art, and the depiction of Jonah on the Chludov psalter of the ninth century. Jonah's "whale" in the late antique and early medieval imagination is, then, more properly a sea monster in the mold of the *kētos*. On the creature of Jonah's story as a sea monster, see also Ogden (2021, pp. 101-103); Boardman (1987, pp 73-74); Narkiss (1979, pp. 64-70).

Christianity. Gregory the Great in the sixth century A.D., for instance, refers to Leviathan as “that *cetus* which is designated as the devourer of humanity” (*Homilia in Evangelia*, 2.25.7 (PL: 76.1194)). Here, Leviathan becomes known by the Latin transliteration of *kētos*. Through that trait of the classical monster’s penchant for devouring its victims, it becomes symbolically recast as a means to express its (along with the Devil’s) enmity for humanity.⁴⁵ The story of Jonah, likewise, indirectly led to Christian associations of the *kētē* with hell as a result of one section of the Book of Jonah comparing the insides of the creature that swallowed him to hell (Jonah 2:2). Thus, Hrabanus Maurus (fl. eighth/ninth century A.D.), an author chronologically closer to the period of Old English literature that concerns us here, quotes a passage from Isidore of Seville (fl. sixth century A.D.),⁴⁶ which likens the inside of the *kētos* that swallowed Jonah to hell.⁴⁷ The final noteworthy example occurs in a hagiographic text, the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani* (“The Voyage of Saint Brendan”), dated to the late eighth century A.D.,⁴⁸ wherein the seafaring monks are attacked by a sea monster, referred to as *belua*. This beast is subsequently slain by another sea monster coming to their aid. This is how the text recounts the end of the episode:

The venerable old man, raising his hands to heaven, said "Lord, save your servants, as you saved David from the hand of the giant Goliath. Lord, save your servants, as you saved Jonah from the belly of the great kētos [cetus]. After these prayers were finished, a huge beast [belua] came from the west against the other beast, immediately attacking that one as it spewed fire from its own mouth. Then the old man spoke to his brothers, saying: "See, young sons, the mighty deeds of Our Redeemer. See the obedience of beasts to their Creator. Await the end of this, for this fight will bring no evil to you, only reflect on the glory of God." After he said these words, the wretched beast [belua] which was pursuing the servants of Christ, was killed and split into three pieces, and, after its victory, the other one returned from where it had come (Navigatio Sancti Brendani, 16).⁴⁹

Notably, elsewhere in the text, Leviathan is stated by Judas, whom Brendan and his crew encounter stranded on a rock in the midst of the sea, to be a creature that devours sinners under a mountain.⁵⁰ Thus, the *kētos* in late antique Christian thought came to be a

⁴⁵ Christian thought also found support for the notion of voracious sea monsters through Jonah’s story as well as a passage in the Book of Jeremiah that disparagingly refers to Nebuchadnezzar, stating, “he has swallowed me up like a *tannin*” (51:34). The *tannin* (pl. *tanninim*) was another type of Old Testament sea monster, not unrelated to Leviathan. On these sea monsters, see Ogden (2021, p. 104); Noegel (2015, pp. 241-243); Vogels (2011).

⁴⁶ Isidore of Seville, *Etymologies*, 12.6.8. This section of Isidore’s text is also quoted at Flight (2021, p. 163).

⁴⁷ Hrabanus Maurus, *De Universo*, 22.5 (PL: 111.237): “For there are huge kinds of beasts [*beluarum*] with bodies even comparable to mountains, such as the *kētos* (*cetus*) that received Jonah, whose stomach was of such great size that it acquired the likeness of hell, with the prophet saying ‘he heard me from the belly of hell.’”

⁴⁸ For this dating of the text, see Dumville (1988, pp. 97-102). Notably, the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, the *Blickling Homily XVI*, and *Beowulf* have all been recognised as seemingly have been influenced by the *Visio sancti Pauli* (“Vision of Saint Paul”), a fourth century A.D. apocryphal apocalypse. On this, see North (2006, pp. 94-96); Wright (1993, pp. 108-110).

⁴⁹ Later in this passage the monks come across the remnants of the sea monster, which they prepare as a meal after Brendan exclaims: “Behold, you will devour that which intended to devour you!”

⁵⁰ *Navigatio Sancti Brendani*, 25: “For I burn like a mass of molten lead all day and night in the middle of that mountain, which you have seen. There dwells Leviathan with his attendants. There I was when

devouring *belua* alternately associated with evil (via the tradition of Leviathan) as well as a beast that could be commanded by God (via the story of Jonah), both strands of thought being evident in the two sea monsters of this episode. Flight's notion of whales as monstrous creatures in Old English literature (2021, pp. 159-162) comes from this tradition of the *kētōs*-as-Leviathan.⁵¹ The author of the *Blickling Homily XVI*, in utilising some devouring sea monster, such as the *nicoras*, to torment sinners in hell, was participating in this long tradition of *kētē* being aligned with the Devil in some form through their equation with Leviathan.

Returning, then, to the *nicoras* of *Beowulf*, we can understand them in the context of the *kētē* as a means to explain the *nicoras* as having both piscine and draconic natures. We see, more generally, that the *kētē* were also bestial opponents to be slain by a heroic protagonist, as in Greco-Roman mythology with their killing by Heracles and Perseus, thereby matching the opposition of the *nicoras* to *Beowulf*. For their indirect associations with evil in *Beowulf*, we need only recall the Christian strand of thought regarding the *kētē* that also underlies the *nicoras* in the *Blickling Homily XVI*. For the perplexing final reference to the *nicoras* in *Beowulf*, wherein they are said to lie on cliff ledges, we can bring forth one final aspect of the classical *kētē* to possibly explain why the *nicoras* dwell on land here. While sea monsters in the modern popular imagination may be generally assumed to be exclusive to the marine element, the *kētē* are sometimes stated explicitly to have an amphibious nature. Strabo, for instance, mentions that there are in fact "amphibious *kētē*" (κήτη δ' ἀμφίβια) in the waters around India (*Geography*, 15.1.15), while there is a similar reference from Aelian (*History of Animals*, 16.18). In the Latin tradition, we have the example of Servius, who, in his fourth century A.D. commentary on the *Aeneid*, mentions that there are "sea monsters (*monstris marinis*)" around the cliffs in the Strait of Messina (*Commentary on the Aeneid*, 3.420). Thus, the amphibious nature of the *nicoras* of *Beowulf* may also be a part of this ancient tradition of amphibious sea monsters.⁵² Aligning the *nicoras* with the traditions of the *kētē* also attests to the marine aspects of the mere. It has been widely discussed, after all, that the mere in *Beowulf*, though an inland body of water, seems to bear some sort of associations with the sea.⁵³ The Old English *nicor* was evidently a term with wide semantic field, containing an agglomeration of different associations and qualities, reflective of the otherworldly mere in which they dwell in *Beowulf*. Among this pastiche of features, the most prominent were the ancient traditions of the classical *kētōs*. Thus, we can better understand this medieval sea monster, by considering it in light of the earlier traditions of the sea monster of the ancient and late ancient world.

he swallowed down your brother and for which hell was delighted and sent forth huge flames as it always does when wicked souls are devoured."

⁵¹ Significantly, an Old English term conventionally rendered as "whale," *hwæl*, is cited in Ælfric of Eynsham's tenth century A.D. *Grammar* as having *cetus* as one possible meaning (Bosworth and Toller 1898, s.v. *hwæl*). Likewise, the Old English poem *The Whale*, is usually considered to be derived from a passage of the Greek *Physiologus*, dated to between the second and fourth centuries A.D. There a creature called the *aspidochelonē*, also explicitly equated to the Devil, is referred to as a *kētōs*. On this, see Flight (2021, pp. 163-165); Bullock (1909, pp. 389-393).

⁵² Lawrence (1912, p. 220) theorises this section of *Beowulf* to be influenced by ideas of "great seals and walruses." It is not implausible that the *kētē*'s own amphibious notions are partially a result of the occasional uses of seals within the semantic field of *kētōs* in antiquity. See, for instance, Homer, *Odyssey*, 4.438-453; Aristotle, *History of Animals*, 521b; Oppian, *Halieutica*, 1.394-408; 5.21-61; Basil of Caesarea, *Letters*, 188.15; Hesychius' Greek lexicon also defines a seal as a "*kētōs* of the sea like a dolphin" (*Lexicon*, s.v. φῶκος).

⁵³ For discussion, see Butts (1987, pp. 116-117); Malone (1958, pp. 301-303); Bonjour (1955); Mackie, (1938, pp. 457-458); Lawrence (1912, pp. 219-220, 226-227).

Conclusion

The semantic fields of the ancient *kētos* and the medieval *nicor* were likely not identical. It cannot be firmly posited, for instance, that *nicor* was simply the Old English word for *kētos*. Yet, the overlapping associations that I have outlined here suggest a profound influence of the *kētos* on these Old English sea monsters, which can account for most, though admittedly not all, features of the *nicoras*.⁵⁴ Much like the origins of the medieval dragon of *Beowulf* being derived from the ancient *drakōn*, so too were the sea monsters of the poem legacies handed down to the poet from the ancient world. In this manner, we can better understand monsters like the *nicoras*, not through the process of historicisation that peels away the fantastical elements and rationalises them as mere distortions of real-animals like crocodile and whales. Rather, they should be considered as refractions of a variety of elements that included other such fantastical monsters in a web of complex and varied associations that spanned centuries.

Table 1: The *nicoras* of *Beowulf*

Lines	Context	Translation
421-422	Beowulf's Introduction	On the waves I killed <i>nicoras</i> by night.
574-575	Swimming Contest	Yet, it happened that I killed nine <i>nicoras</i> with my sword.
845-846	The Fight with Grendel	He, bound to perish and fleeing, dragged his doom into a mere of <i>nicoras</i> (<i>nicera mere</i>).
1407-1411	Approaching the mere of Grendel's Mother	The offspring of royalty crossed over steep rocky slopes, narrow ravines, straight passes, an unusual path, steep promontories, many abodes of <i>nicoras</i> (<i>nicorhusa fela</i>).
1425-1441	At the mere of Grendel's mother	They saw many serpents (<i>wyrmcynnes</i>), marvelous sea dragons (<i>sædracan</i>) exploring the water. Likewise, there were <i>nicoras</i> lying on cliff ledges, those that often on a morning observe a sorrowful voyage on the sail-road, serpents and wild creatures (<i>wyrmas ond wildeor</i>). They rushed away, bitter and irritated. They sensed the tumult, the cry of the war-horn. A leader of the Geats, with an arrow from a bow, put an end to the life of one, striving in the waves, as the harsh arrow struck in its vitals, swimming more slowly in the water. Soon it was destroyed in the waves with hooked boar-spears, fiercely assaulted, and subdued, it was dragged onto the cliff, the wonderous wave-traveller. They inspected the terrible guest.

Abbreviations

LIMC – Kahil et. al. (1981-1989)

PL – Migne (1884 – 1904)

⁵⁴ If the “sea beasts (*saedeor*)” that attack Beowulf with their tusks at the bottom of the mere (*Beowulf*, 1510-1511), are in fact *nicoras*, the traditions of the *kētos* cannot explain this physical feature as nowhere in ancient art or literature are they depicted with tusks.

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