Chapter 1

(Re)Introducing the Texts of the Nowell Codex

Some of the five texts of the Nowell Codex are more familiar than others, and by modern estimations they vary considerably in quality. Indeed, not all scholars are certain that all five were elements within a single production. Chapter 2 reviews the codicological evidence to support the prevailing consensus on the collection’s likely original unity. Before that technical discussion, this chapter seeks briefly to introduce each text, and to suggest some readings that could result from their combination in the likely context of their production. The eleventh-century creators and users of the manuscript would also have known some of the texts rather better than the others though for them, unlike modern readers, Beowulf is most likely to have been the stranger at the party. St Christopher’s life circulated widely in both Latin and Old English forms as well as being told in the Old English Martyrology. The Old English translation of Wonders exists in the slightly later London, BL, Cotton MS Tiberius B. v alongside a Latin version which circulated extremely widely on the Continent and was likely also well-known in England; a later copy of the Latin text is in Oxford, Bodleian Library, Bodley MS 614. Alexander is a translation of another widely circulating Latin text: although the only Latin manuscript from this period is London, BL, Royal MS 13 A. i, with the Epistola Alexandri at folios 51v to 78r, Alexander was a popular figure in a wide range of texts; he appears three times in the Nowell Wonders. While the poetic version appears uniquely in this manuscript, the Book of Judith was frequently retold in the Anglo-Saxon period: Aldhelm (d. 709 or 710) included the heroine in both prose and poetic De virginitate; Alcuin of York (d. 804) includes lines from the Vulgate account in De laude Dei; Ælfric of Eynsham composed a homily based on the Vulgate version of her story around 1000. In fact, the only one of the five extant

2 The most recent study is Ford, Marvel and Artefact. For a facsimile of all three texts see McGurk et al., Eleventh-Century Illustrated Miscellany.
3 Orchard, Pride and Prodigies, pp. 116–139.
narratives not known in another form, and not known to have circulated as a Latin text in late Anglo-Saxon England, is *Beowulf*. This is not to say that it was necessarily obscure: there are echoes and analogues in a number of different places. But Leonard Neidorf has argued strongly that the form of heroism the poem engages with was not a “living tradition” within the culture by the tenth and eleventh centuries, and it is a noteworthy irony that the longest text, which is by some distance the most well-known and celebrated of the five now, was probably the most obscure of them when it was reproduced here.

Precisely why these five texts were brought together is still unclear, and probably always will be. In 1953, Kenneth Sisam proposed that a later medieval cataloguer seeking to classify the manuscript might reasonably have described it as “Liber de diversis monstris, anglice” (“A book of various monsters, in English”). This remains the closest both to a suggestion of what the producers of the codex thought they were doing and to an accepted common theme. Orchard modified it, suggesting that the inclusion of the monster-less *Judith* and all of the texts’ interest in remarkable men makes the manuscript less focused on monsters and more about “pride and prodigies”; a modification to his work has in turn been suggested by Kathryn Powell, suggesting a particular focus on rulers and how they function. Nicholas Howe, while accepting a “deep interest in and expert knowledge of monsters” in the codex, has argued that place and an interest in “elsewhere” is more significant as an overriding idea, and in 2003, Leonie Viljoen made some interesting points about intertextual resonances. Despite all of these investigations, Scragg has recently argued that “a credible common theme in the items of the *Beowulf* manuscript

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7 ‘Compilation’, p. 96.
8 *Pride and Prodigies*; Powell, ‘Men and Monsters’.
10 Viljoen, ‘*Beowulf* Manuscript Reconsidered’.