



## **The Skin We Stand On: Landscape-Skinscape in the Tiberius B.v *Marvels of the East***

Asa Simon Mittman · Chico State University  
Susan Kim · Illinois State University

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In a 2013 essay that is provocative in the best sense, Lara Farina considers the often-cited Blemmye of the Cotton Tiberius B.v version of the *Marvels of the East*.<sup>[1]</sup> Farina takes as a point of departure that while this being is defined by the text as a creature with its eyes and mouth on its chest, in the visual image *all* of the organs of the senses other than touch are “not missing but are rather centered in the expanse of skin, a tactile organ, covering its ‘compacted’ body.”<sup>[2]</sup> Farina argues that the image thereby invites consideration of the role of touch in the apprehension of this image. Such apprehension might include the skin-to-skin contact of the medieval reader/viewer with the vellum as well as the potential for imagining contact with the creature itself. And that imagining might include imagining ourselves as such creatures of the tactile, in Farina’s formulation, “ourselves made wondrous” in a textual culture that privileges the visual.<sup>[3]</sup> In this essay we wish to take up the invitations that Farina has articulated as we consider less the individual depictions in

the *Marvels* than the grounds these creatures stand on, here both the distant landscapes and the proximate material surfaces that support them, the skin of the vellum.[4] We approach these landscapes as significant backgrounds to the figures of the wonders. But we also consider these landscapes as wonders themselves, in that by arresting our attention, in their foregrounding, they push us to shift modes of reading/viewing/perceiving and to re-perceive modes of apprehension that we may have turned aside in our learned habits of encountering medieval images and texts.



**Figure 1.** Lertices and Blemmye, London, British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius B.v., fol. 82r, ©The British Library Board, All Rights Reserved.

Because Farina's argument is so important to our own here, and because the critique we pose is also a critique of our own practices and modes of reading and viewing, we begin by questioning the extent to which it is the case that "holding the manuscript we touch and are touched by skin that is contiguous with the Blemmye's." [5] The complication is that while such contiguity is possible in the context of current scholarly work on this text and image, it is not literally possible with respect to the actual image as it appears in the manuscript, because although the painting is curious, the skin of the Blemmye in Tiberius B.v is painted. In older reproductions, even those in color, the distinction is indiscernible, and so the figure *appeared* to be unpainted to scholars without access to the manuscript, almost demanding commentary, including by us, about the slippage between the skin of the book and the skin of this figure painted thereon. In his 2006 book, *Maps and Monsters in Medieval England*, for example, written before he was able to examine the manuscript, Asa Mittman writes:

Returning to the blemmyes, we find that their skin, so human in tone, is not a painted color, but simply the real skin of which the page is made. [6]

But it isn't, though even in the current, high-resolution images hosted by The British Library, it takes exceptionally careful examination to see that the skin is painted, though painted a color that very closely matches that of the vellum. [7] Indeed, before this manuscript was damaged in the 1731 Cotton Library fire, the vellum was probably a bit lighter, and therefore even closer in tone to that of the Blemmye's skin. [8]

The persistence of the misperception must arise from a number of sources: the inaccessibility of the physical manuscript; the scholarly context which developed through reliance on facsimiles that could not represent the images in the detail required [9]; and also an investment in the seemingly unmediated transparency between the skin of the othered figures in these images with the skin of the vellum — the error about the depiction of the Blemmye's skin is one that is easily and often reproduced because it is so compelling and helpful in making other arguments. But perhaps most fundamentally, readings of the skin of the Blemmye as the skin of the vellum must begin with the perplexing decision in the first place to paint the image so that it looks so similar to the vellum, so that even with the manuscript in front of one, without unusually close examination it *looks* unpainted.

To approach what might inform and what might be the function of this decision, we shift to an examination of a related perception, the apprehension of what is clearly painted and suggests images of skin but is either read otherwise or wholly unseen.

The figure of the Blemmye itself, like those of many of the marvelous beings, has received considerable attention already (including from us). Wondrous though it undoubtedly is, here we cast our gaze downward to the landscape at its feet. In focusing our attention on the so-called background, rather than the figure it frames and supports, we approach Sara Ahmed's practice of "queer phenomenology" as a way of experiencing and describing experiences of features usually overlooked in analyses, of the backgrounds and material supports for foregrounded texts and figures, such as those that dominate discussions of the *Wonders* and other such image cycles.[10] Ahmed notes, about wonder itself, "To wonder is to remember the forgetting and to see the repetition of form as the 'taking form' of the familiar." Here we attempt to consider what we have "forgotten" in our apprehension of these images, as we have worked to see them cohere as the familiar exotic figures. In order to focus on the wonders themselves — the Blemmye, the Cynocephalus, the unusually large sheep — we have to at least temporarily ignore their "backgrounds." According to Ahmed:

The partiality of perception is not only about what is not in view (say, the front and the back of the object), but also what is "around" it, which we can describe as the background. The figure "figures" insofar as the background both is and is not in view. We single out this object only by pushing other objects to the edges or "fringes" of vision.[11]

We have elsewhere dedicated significant attention to the generally overlooked illusionistic frames that surround the illuminations of the *Wonders*.<sup>[12]</sup> However, we have rarely commented on the illuminations' strange (and perhaps strangely familiar) landscapes.<sup>[13]</sup> The landscapes at the feet of the figures of fabulous peoples and beasts that populate the Tiberius B.v *Wonders*, when they are described at all, have been described as if is transparently evident as simply representational. For example, in the commentary to the Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile volume on Tiberius B.v, McGurk describes the Blemmye image in brief as a "nude man with eyes and mouth in breast and rocky background."<sup>[14]</sup> McGurk uses a variety of seemingly interchangeable terms to describe other landscapes in the images of the *Wonders*, including: "Rocky ground," "Rocky ground and also possibly background," "on rocks," "rocky landscape," "rocky mounds," and "set against a rocky background."<sup>[15]</sup> In his description of the image of the Blemmye, McGurk seems to be referring to the pale landscape at the base of the image rather than the vermillion background, which has no articulation of forms within it. This Blemmye is depicted as standing not *on* the "rocks," but just in front of them, hence McGurk's use of "background."

It is difficult to integrate what one actually sees in this image with McGurk's laconic description: even leaving aside the reductive description of the figure of the Blemmye, it is difficult to see this landscape as simply a "rocky background." It swells and undulates in a most curious fashion, with red outlines defining what seem to be soft, even collapsing extrusions of earth. It is painted in precisely the same color as the skin of the Blemmye who stands in front of it, which may contribute to the error of seeing the Blemmye as unpainted, since the lower legs are only differentiated from their background by the black outlines that define them.[16] The red lines and white highlights that denote the features of the landscape are quite similar to those that denote the features of the Blemmye, as well. Indeed, one line seems to belong to both figure *and* ground: each of the Blemmye's legs has a pair of "U"-shaped lines along its inner edge that give the figure its knock-kneed appearance. If we follow the lower of the two lines on the figure's right leg, we find that it curves upward and flows seamlessly into the arcing line that defines the top edge of the rock mound visible below — and loosely mirroring — the figure's groin. Perhaps this rock mound, with its gently rounded forms divided by a soft vertical more precisely functions as a sort of displacement of the Blemmye's rear, "what is not in view... the back of the object" reasserting itself at "the edges or 'fringes' of vision." [17]

Like this landscape, others throughout the *Marvels* are *strange*. They swoop or squish, hang pendulously or collapse in puffy heaps. Many of the protrusions are highly phallic, like that which rises, albeit limply, between the legs of the Blemmye.[18] Other landscapes feature puckered entrances, looking like human or animal orifices, into and out of which some marvels emerge, as in the image of the Ants as Big as Dogs.

The landscapes fold and crease as if they consist of fluid or flexible matter shifting and flowing beneath a sagging, overtaxed membrane, beneath a layer of skin. Almost all the images of the *Marvels* feature such skinscapes; the singular exception is the image of the hundred-and-fifty-foot-long serpents, who float against a featureless yellow expanse, marked only with visible lines of the ruling of the folio for text.[19]



Figure 2. Ants As Big As Dogs, London, British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius B.v., fol. 80v, ©The British Library Board, All Rights Reserved.

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Such skin-like landscapes do appear in other early manuscripts, most notably in the Carolingian Utrecht Psalter (Utrecht, Utrecht University, MS 32, 820-830)[20] and its two English copies, the Harley and Eadwine Psalters (London, British Library, MS Harley 603, ca. 1000-1050, and Cambridge, Trinity College Library, R.17.1, ca. 1150).[21] In an image from the Harley Psalter illustrating Psalm 5, for example, the landscape seems to surge and plunge, and constantly threatens to overtake the myriad small figures who inhabit it.



**Figure 3.** Illustration for Psalm 5, Harley Psalter, London, British Library, MS Harley 603, fol. 3r, ©The British Library Board, All Rights Reserved.

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On the right, the green mounds of earth push upward in a series of surging protrusions, of extrusions that crash like waves against the stone walls of a series of buildings. Like the skinscapes in Tiberius B.v, the lumps of land here are denoted with agitated lines that suggest folds of skin. Indeed, the whole mass seems to teeter, as if any moment it might all topple into the right margin, spilling the trees and buildings perched on its precarious peak.

The writhing landscapes in Tiberius B.v. range from occupying thin patches at the base of images to constituting the main subjects of their images, perhaps most explicitly in the illumination of the Lakes of the Sun and the Moon.



**Figure 4.** Lakes of Sun and Moon and Balm Trees, London, British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius B.v., fol. 83r, ©The British Library Board, All Rights Reserved.



Unlike all the rest of the marvels, which are living things — mostly peoples and beasts, but also a few wondrous plants — this image focuses on a marvel that is the landscape, itself; that is, what we have not seen, or seen as “merely” background in other images here becomes the focal point of the wonder itself. This image is thus perhaps the most uncomfortable of images in the *Marvels* at least in part because it arrests viewers in a habituated act of non-seeing by making what is necessarily invisible in other images its explicit focus. The text for the Lakes reads:

Ðonne is oðer stow ellreorde men beoð on, 7 þa habbað kynigas under him  
ðæra is geteald . C . þæt syndon ða wyrstan men 7 þa ellreordigestan [.] þær  
syndan . II . seaðas, oðer sunnan 7 oðer monan . Se ðe sunnan is se byð dæg  
hat 7 nihtes ceald, 7 se ðe monan is se bið neahtes hat 7 dæg  
cald [.] heora widenes is . CC . mila ðæs læssan getales þe stadia hatte 7 ðæs maran ðe  
leuuu hatte .CXXXIII. 7 an healf mil.[22]

Then there is another place in which there are barbarous people, and they have kings under them that are counted at one hundred and ten. Those are the worst people and the most barbarous. There are two lakes. One is of the sun, and the other of the moon. The lake of the sun is hot by day and cold by night, and the lake of the moon is hot by night and cold by day. Their width is two hundred of the lesser miles that are called stadia, and one hundred thirty three and a half of the greater, called leagues.

The “lakes” in the Tiberius image in no way resemble lakes. They are, instead, seeming gaps, absences, voids in the puckered, wrinkled landscape, more like empty eye sockets than bodies of water in other representations. They are not, however, unpainted: like the skin of the Blemmye, like the ground at the Blemmye’s feet, they are filled with paint that is nearly the same color as that of the vellum. The orange land that billows around them — a “rocky landscape” according to McGurk[23] — gives a strong impression of being presented in profile-view, from the side, rather than in plan-view, from above, which makes the “lakes” even more illegible *as lakes*. They are like oddly bright caves in a mountainside. The impression of verticality is reinforced by the fact that almost all of the *Marvels* images are presented in profile, with only two other exceptions: the giant sheep, whose island is in plan-view though the landscape within it is in profile; and the People Whose Eyes Shine Brightly, where the figure is still in profile, but the island on which he sits seems to be in plan-view, surrounded by a wavering river.



Figure 5. Giant Sheep, London, British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius B.v., fol. 78v, ©The British Library Board, All Rights Reserved.

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**Figure 6.** People Whose Eyes Shine Brightly and Temple of the Sun, London, British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius B.v., fol. 84r, ©The British Library Board, All Rights Reserved.

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An extended visual exploration of the landscape of the Lakes is worthwhile both for its own sake — this is a fascinating image! — and because it has been largely passed over in studies of the manuscript, thus far. The peak of the landscape is a bit left of center and leans somewhat to the right. It bears deeper folds in its skin-like surface on the right side than on the left, as if it is in the process of folding downward, giving up, flaccidly deflating. Like the land between the Blemmye's legs, it seems phallic, an impression furthered by the two lakes, which seem testicular, and echoed again in the two small bumps to the right, which also seem, contradictorily, like an opening, like the buttocks of a figure leaning over, facing away from us. The fleshy folds are denoted in black lines, and underscored with gray strokes that imply shadows and thereby create a sense of volume. Just beside the protrusion hangs a yellow crescent moon, bowl upward, and on the other side of the image is a green circle, outlined in red, containing a bust-length male figure wearing a diadem — a personification of the sun. The figure stares at the peak with a blank expression. All these features sit against a sort of dusty rose that gives way to a murky mauve in places, and oddly, the frame around the scene is painted in the same color, though there is some highlighting at the edges of the frame and then a darker line on the background sky just within it, along the upper and right frame members, creating an illusion of three dimensions, as if the landscape is contained within an actual, physical frame, though the sun bridges the illusory world of the wonder and the also-illusory world of the three-dimensional frame, reminding us that this is not a Renaissance image where the frame serves to create a window into a self-contained world within.

As we have noted, this is an *uncomfortable* image, even among so many of the others in this manuscript, discussed and celebrated for its figures and for the extravagant displays of difference they seem to represent, but also and in the face of such scrutiny, subject to a disturbing sort of unseeing. The Lakes of the Sun and the Moon rarely appear in discussions of the Tiberius *Marvels*, nor do the landscapes in the other thirty six images (or thirty seven, if we count the full-page miniature of lamnes and Mambres that comes either at the end or just after the *Marvels*).



**Figure 7.** Iamnes and Mambres, London, British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius B.v., fol. 87v, ©The British Library Board, All Rights Reserved.

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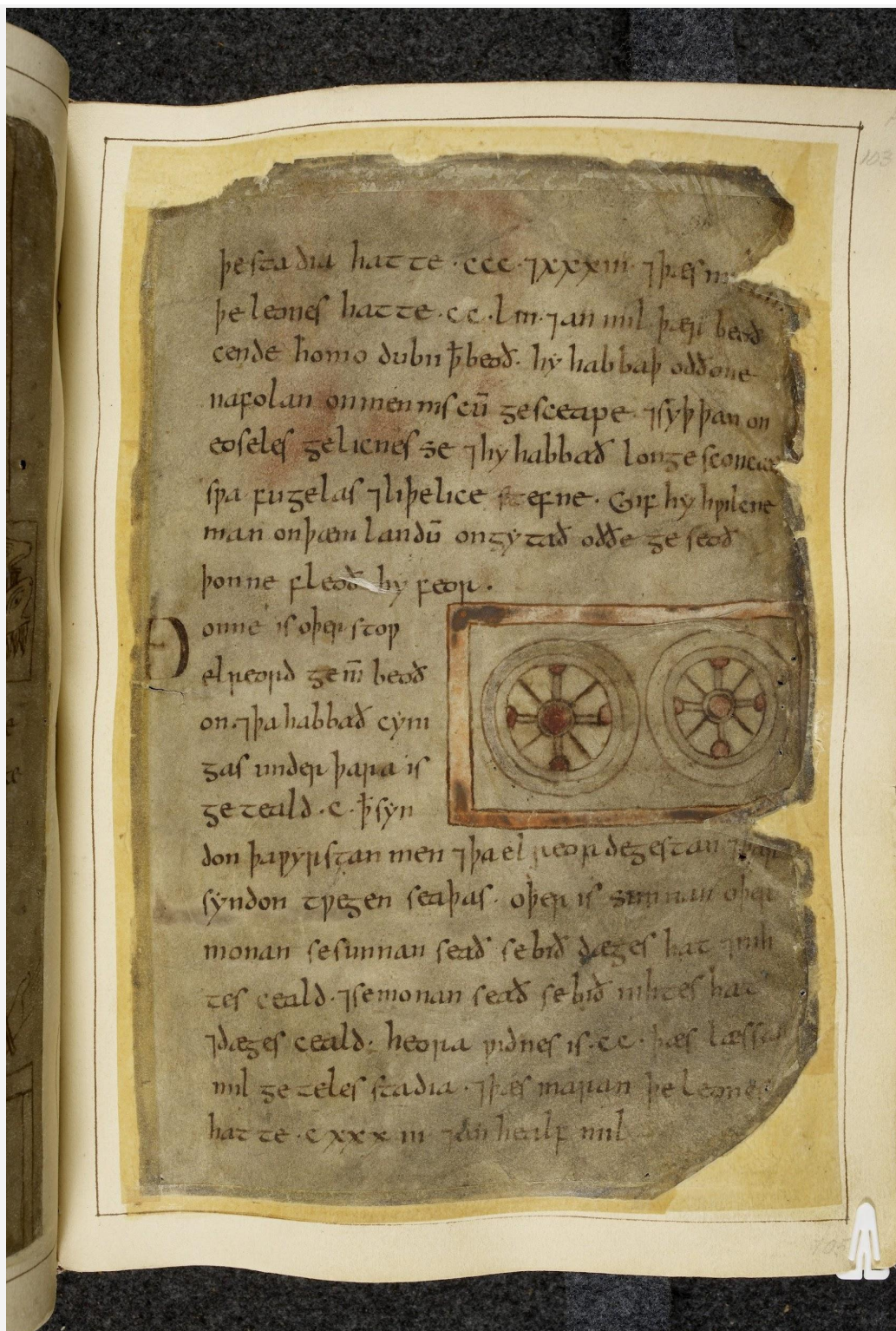


Figure 8. Lakes of Sun and Moon, London, British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv, fol. 6r, ©The British Library Board, All Rights Reserved.

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In our own work with the corresponding image in London, British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv (6r, Figure 8) — the famous *Beowulf* Manuscript, produced around 1000 and containing the earliest extant copy of the *Marvels or Wonders of the East*[24] — , we note that the Tiberius image “clearly depicts two holes, perhaps suggesting lakes, in the skin-like landscape.”[25] In that study, focussing on the textuality of the highly schematic depictions in the Vitellius, we missed an invitation in the juxtaposition of the emphatically diagrammatic, symbolic image in Vitellius and its promise of a remembered whole with the equally emphatically and uneasily recognizable skin of the Tiberius landscape.[26] The Vitellius image, with its pair of wagon-wheel like rotas floating in an empty field, suggests a locus in the sense that word acquires in the context of the study of memory and of textuality as mnemonic, and thus with the idea of travel and the encounter with the Other as a matter of signifying difference down to the level of language. In contrast, the Tiberius image presents us with what is more recognizable as representation, but no more recognizable as landscape, except, perhaps, inasmuch as it suggests that the territory of the Other is a representation of our own skin. As Ahmed suggests, “phenomenology reminds us that spaces are not exterior to bodies; instead, spaces are like a second skin that unfolds in the folds of the body.”[27] But here such identity between the skin of the body and the skin of the landscape it might occupy is less metaphorical than literalized. And further, that the “holes” of the Tiberius “lakes” are completely filled in with pale whitish paint complicates a reading of them as holes, at all.[28]

The text describing the Lakes of the Sun and the Moon, like the Tiberius image, suggests that the encounter involves not the scopic but the tactile: the lakes are described not by color or other visible features but by temperature: they fluctuate between hot and cold, extremes equally unrepresentable in a visual image, and indeed the “lakes” in the images are rendered nearly identically. It is possible, perhaps, that this identity indicates that this is a simultaneous narration, showing in a continuous landscape two separate moments in time, when the temperatures of these “lakes” would be the same — perhaps when the sun and the moon are, respectively, at their highest point and therefore the lakes at their hottest. But we suggest that the lakes’ identity may also reinforce the image’s concern with the representation of alterity or wonder in a landscape that represents our own skin and thus also suggests that it is our skin that supports encounters with others, that we can know others, and that we can know ourselves as others (as Farina puts it, as “wondrous”) through touch rather than (or in addition to) through the visual.[29] If the landscape in which the “lakes” sit might evoke our own skin, these openings also suggest orifices, or even wounds. In this sense, the shared capacity for opening and wounding emphasizes the evocation. For Isidore, skin, “cutis,” is identified by its capacity to be cut, and hence, as Sarah Kay notes, its “essence is to be vulnerable and

to expose to injury the body which it covers.”[30] For Isidore, the earth itself shares that essence, in its capacity to be trod,[31] rubbed, worn away, and bruised, “for the word *terra* is derived from the upper surface that is worn away (*terere*).” This shared defining capacity to be cut, bruised, or worn away, that is, marks possible or even inevitable damage, but also both inevitable contact and the potential for sensitivity, even hypersensitivity to such contact.

The Tiberius *Wonders* images call on us to think about touching alien beings and the alien landscapes they inhabit, and they do so by presenting over and over illuminations painted on skin and filled with images that seem to be made almost exclusively of skin, which is one of the most fundamental ways that we come to know the world. Joep Leerssen, acknowledging the importance of Didier Anzieu’s concept of the *moi-peau*, the “skin-ego” or “skin self,”[32] argues:

An encounter with the Other may consist in the breeze sensed on one’s skin as much as in the sight that meets one’s eye. And unlike close encounters of the visual kind, such tactile or otherwise sensual experiences by definition involve an exploration of the limits of the changing, moving self as much as (or even more than) a registration of the new.[33]

As Leerssen argues, the “breeze sensed on one’s skin” signals both an encounter with alterity and a recognition that such alterity is also already part of a notion of the self as a “changing, moving self.” The strange skinscapes of the *Wonders* press us out of “a terminology and set of concepts whose semantic field is linked to the realm of the visual,” which may produce “‘blinkers’ or ‘tunnel vision’” that elide what might develop from other means of knowing.[34]

What strange breezes blow across the bizarre landscapes of the *Wonders of the East*, caressing the skin of the creatures and the terrains they stand upon, and stirring the waters of the Lakes of the Sun and the Moon? What encounters would they engender? What would we learn from them, if we could feel the winds upon our own skin, if we could stand upon the alien soil that seems to pitch and writhe, if we could dip our toes into the milky waters of the lakes?

We have been translating the Old English “*seaðas*” as “lakes” here. The Latin of Tiberius has “*loci*,” reasonably emmended as it is by Orchard to “*laci*.”[35] “*Seað*,” however, like the Latin “*lacus*” also has the significant meaning of “opening,” but perhaps also more strongly than the Latin, “hole” or “pit,” the meaning it surely has as in the *Iamnes* and *Mambres* episode that concludes (or follows) the Tiberius *Marvels*,



both as “se seað þæs singales susles” [“the pit of eternal torment”] in which lamnes dwells, and as the pit of the grave he describes for Mambres: “þin seað bið tvegea cubita wid 7 feowra lang” [“your pit will be two cubits wide and four long”]. One might well link this final episode in the *Marvels* with the description of the Lakes of the Sun and the Moon through the visual echoes in the depiction of openings in the earth, or in the verbal repetition of “seað.” But the lamnes and Mambres episode also develops what we have only hesitatingly suggested in the description of the Lakes: a concern with a “changing, moving self,” known through the skin, marked on the skin, and contained by that skin.

Indeed, skin and contact with it seem to be everywhere in the image of lamnes and Mambres, Egyptian brother sorcerers who challenged Moses and Aaron on behalf of Pharaoh.[36] According to the *Wonders* text, Mambres looks into his dead brother’s books of magic, and “Andswarode him lamnes saul” [“lamnes’s soul answered him”] with his tale of failure against Moses and subsequent torment in the “helwara rice mid, þær is seo miccle hatnys þæs ecan wites, 7 þær is se seað þæs singales susles þanon ne byð ænig upp adon” [“middle realm of hell, where there is the great heat of endless punishment, and where there is a pit of continual torment from which there will be no rising”]. [37] McGurk in his facsimile of Tiberius describes the image as “an English confection,” implying something rather more palatable than the image actually is.[38]

The image is rife with representations of skin and touch, with “tactile or otherwise sensual experiences,” as Leerson puts it, serving to conduct knowledge of the self and the Other.[39] Mambres stands at the apex of the image, atop another limp mound of fleshy earth that seems on the brink of a collapse that would be more deflation than rockslide. He holds a manuscript in his left hand and points deliberately at its vellum surface with his elongated right index finger, his touch inviting us to imagine ours, as we hold a book and, perhaps, point at the markings on its surface. This manuscript within the manuscript is filled with regularly arranged rows of bright orange dots. These marks, most suggestively, are repeated, if less regularly, on the bare skin of the souls of the damned, seared by the flames of hell. It is not clear what the dots signify. On the surface of lamnes’s book of magic, they might suggest text, while on the flesh of the dead, they might be sores or burns or an indication of the intense heat. Since the marks on the flesh of the book and those on the flesh of the damned are nearly indistinguishable, we might well read them as indicating that this evil book of satanic sorcery is, itself, its letters ablaze, burning in Mambres’s hands; conversely, we could read the bodies of the damned as covered in text, as if tattooed with their sins.

As C. P. Jones, Mark Gustafson, and Charles W. MacQuarrie have argued, the practice of tattooing is continuous from the Classical through the medieval European worlds, in penal tattooing, tattooing in Christian communities, and tattooing to mark social status.[40] McQuarrie notes, about the reports of the practice among Celtic peoples, that tattooing “is fundamentally unlike reports of two-headed men, or men with their faces in their chests,” given the likelihood that tattooing and other markings of the body with paint or dye did occur ubiquitously and with considerable historical depth, as supported for example by “the recent discovery of dye in the skin of the Lindow man III.”[41] An early English example is that of a priest who had his sin tattooed on his forehead (echoing, deliberately or otherwise, the mark of Cain), after he was, found “in nefario concubitu apud alterum virum nupte uxoris” [“in nefarious intercourse with a woman married to another man”] had “suo fronte causa facti acu inpingitur: Hic est profanus adulter” [“his forehead tattooed with a needle: This is a profane adulterer”].[42] While the tattoo most obviously works to make legible and indelible on the skin otherwise invisible relations like those between the subject and the state, or between the individuals and their internal moral state, it also, however, both physically changes with the state of the skin itself and changes in meaning, as, for example, in the voluntary tattooing of early Christians. It proclaims legibility and performs polysemy, and it remains a matter of skin and yet foreign to it. As Jane Caplan argues about the “infixity” of the tattoo, “despite the fact that the tattoo is visible and indelible in a physical sense, the structures of exclusion and inclusion that it appears to support are also undermined by the conceptual instability inherent in a mark which is neither quite inside nor quite outside the skin.”[43] In this episode, which seems to pose “structures of exclusion and inclusion,” a clear contrast between faith and idolatry, and its dire consequences, and between the living and the dead, the depiction of Mambres nonetheless positions him as both inside and outside the pit, standing on the soft ledge of the precipice but also bound to the marked bodies of the damned within by the marks on the book he holds against his chest.

Mary Kate Hurley notes: “The confusion and contortion of the hellmouth, with its serpent-panthers and demons that torture the condemned, contrasts with the placid orange of the otherwise-empty ‘rim of the world’ on which Mambres stands.”[44] We agree that the the scene within hell does contrast with the orange of the surrounding landscape, but find the pungent, pumpkin orange, creased with gray wrinkles and seeming to fold and buckle before our eyes, less placid than turbulent, furunculoid, bilious, *pustular*. It seems to sag beneath Mambres’s weight, to shrink from the pink form in a winding sheet to the lower right, to compress and distort beneath the intertwined figures of a purple Satan and an orange dragon or wyvern. The skin of the earth seems angry, pained, even feverish. While one might argue that it glows as if with throbbing heat because beneath its skin is hell, we note

that the pit itself is not depicted as a bottomless pit underneath the intact surface of the earth, but rather as a pocket, a pore, an orifice in that skin.

Within the pit, there are many more details that invoke the tactile, the skin, and bodily orifices, “folds, pockets or sheaths where the surface of the skin turns inward.”[45] The great, gray hellmouth, with its vibrantly smoldering eyes, reaches out with its giant, grasping hands to ensnare souls and shovel them into its flaming mouth; a viridian serpent snakes its length between limbs of a bearded soul, bites the flesh of his belly, and ties its own tail in a knot; a brown demon spears another soul with a pitchfork, the center tine of which seems to penetrate his anus. On and on, touch is *everywhere* in this tumultuous image, in forms running the gambit from agonizing to tender. Toward the lower right corner, a figure seems to gaze upon the enshrouded corpse beside him, touching his own cheek in a standard gesture of sorrow. Everything is touching everything; everything is touching itself. But, returning to our opening consideration of the figure of the Blemmye, even if touch might be represented in that image as an invitation or even seduction to considering the possibility of recontextualizing other senses and metaphors by which we know ourselves and our worlds, we are reminded throughout the texts of the *Marvels* that touch and the desire to touch are dangerous and destructive. The red hens burn anyone who wants to seize or touches them (“gyf hi hwylc mon niman wile oððe hyra æthrineð ðonne forbærnað hi sona eall his lic”); the two-headed, Valkyrie-eyed, eight-footed beasts set their own bodies on fire if anyone wants to grasp them (“Gyf hi hwylc mann gefon wile, þonne hiera lichoman þæt hy onælað”); anyone whom the horned serpents touch will die on the spot (“Gyf hi hwylcne monn sleað oððe æthrinað þonne swylt he sona”).[46] As Hurley has argued, “knowledge from texts and imaginative encounters are the only safe way to approach and understand these beings. Knowledge about them is too dangerous to seek out.”[47] Here in the final episode of the Tiberius *Marvels*, touch, as in the touch of Mambres’ hand to the book, links him to the marked bodies in hell, and touch of a number of kinds is a dominant feature of existence within hell. Hurley makes a compelling argument that this final episode “amplifies and codifies” the text’s larger concerns with the dangers of inquiry, the insistence that “some things are not supposed to be known.”[48] The emphasis on touch in this episode perhaps underscores the dangers of another kind of knowledge proscribed, our knowledge of ourselves and others by touch.

The image maintains an uneasy relationship to textuality as well as tactility, however, especially given that this image, unlike all (or all other) of the Tiberius *Marvels* images, occurs on a folio without literal text. A series of horizontal lines is scored across the acidic verdigris that forms a sickly sky behind Mambres and has consumed much of the left edge of the image. These lines are also visible across the mounding orange mass, and we can follow them across the vista of hell. These are

the ruling lines, scratched into the surface of the vellum before the image was painted, holding the place of text that was never written. Like the bright dots on Mambres's book, and perhaps like the marks on the skin of the damned, they are part of the image, but evoke textuality. They also, though, remind us of our own physical involvement here, remind us that this is paint on skin that — if we are so fortunate — we hold in our own hands that perhaps grasp the Tiberius manuscript as avidly or as tenderly as the figures within the frame touch one another. Sarah Kay, in *Animal Skins and the Reading Self*, considers:

What it might mean for a medieval writer or reader to fix his attention on a page that faces him like a reflection of his own bodily surface, marked as his might be with pores, veins, scuffs, or scars; how it would feel to become absorbed into the context of a page that can be perceived as an extension of the reader's own skin or as enfolding him like a second skin.[49]

The lamnes and Mambres text underscores the possibility of identity in the direct address from lamnes to his brother, that figure for the reader holding the book, and the promise that this “seað” is not, like the faraway “seað” of the Sun, the locus of the other, but “þin seað,” *your opening/hole/pit*.

We might well be tempted, especially now, as we grind through the lingering Covid-19 pandemic, to opine on the dangers of touch. It would be relatively straightforward to make the case that the *Marvels of the East* is, itself, very much about the dangers of contact, with its burning hens and Valkyrie-eyed beasts that punish not only touch but even the *desire* for touch. This would accord with many studies of the Middle Ages, especially the Early Middle Ages, as fearful of the body and all its messy complexity, of its desires, lusts, and hungers.

But we pose instead the possibility that more dangerous even than touch in what is perhaps the final image of the *Marvels* may be the insistent textuality underlying even the representation of touch. One other way to read the echo of the markings on the book in the markings on the bodies of the damned is to suggest that this episode contains both a warning about the power of the text, and a fear that the text itself might overtake us: we might ourselves become the text. Focussed on the book's power to reanimate the dead, this final episode also offers a terrifying answer to Kay's question of “how it would feel to become absorbed into the context of a page that can be perceived as an extension of the reader's own skin or as enfolding him like a second skin”: being “enfolding” by the dead skin of the page may be like entering into a carefully measured, evenly ruled “seað.” Intensifying such horror, the

Old English text of the *Marvels* begins, “Seo londbuend...” (“That settlement,” literally “land-dwelling”) and ends with a description of future and literal indwelling within the land, its landscape here consistently represented, again, as skin. In this sense, then, the painted surfaces of the Lakes of the Sun and Moon, like the nearly imperceptibly painted skin of the Blemmye, suggest less an opening within visual representation to the potential contact, skin to skin, than an uneasy defense against desire for contact, not because such touch itself is dangerous, but perhaps because acknowledging its impossibility seals us in a representational world “þanon ne byð ænig upp adon” [“from which there will be no rising”].<sup>[50]</sup>

And yet, in the roiling pit of hell that Mambres gazes into, there is a great deal of physical contact, most of which seems agonizing. The souls are bitten, torn, stabbed, gobbled, and burned. Amidst all this pain, there is only one clear point of contact between two of the human souls. The figure that floats just above Satan, that is being speared by a pitchfork, licked by bright flames, and bitten by one of the heads that emerges from the tail of the gray beast nonetheless manages to reach out to place its right hand upon the bare thigh of the soul beside it. This is a brief moment of contact in a scene where figures otherwise seem to suffer in relative isolation. Indeed, no two souls even seem to look at one another, as if averting their gazes from the suffering of their compatriots. The figure being touched swings its whole torso away while touching its own cheek, cradling its chin in the palm of its hand, its eyebrows raised and its forehead furrowed. The figure is performing a stock gesture of grief, but is not *merely* doing so. The symbolic, semiotic reading of the gesture as “grief” is only possible because there is an image for us to look at, in the first place, an image of a person seeking some weak solace even in self-touch. It is a gesture that reminds us that, even in hellish circumstances, even while traversing or trapped within uncomfortable or outright painful landscapes, the human desire for touch endures even *within* representation. In times of plague, when so many of us are cut off from one another, and increasingly driven to “virtual” and textual intimacies, the yearning for human contact can seem all the stronger, reminding us that even when we can only imagine it from within a sometimes hellishly virtual world, in skin touching living skin, there is also the possibility of hope, succor, and relief.

## References

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- 1 Lara Farina, "Wondrous Skins and Tactile Affection: The Blemmye's Touch," in *Reading Skin in Medieval Literature and Culture*, ed. Katie L. Walter (New York: Palgrave, 2013), 11-28. Elżbieta Temple, *A Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles: Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts 900–1066* (London: Harvey Miller, 1976), 104, no. 87, dates London, British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius B.v. to the second quarter of the eleventh century. See also Martin K. Foy, *Virtually Anglo-Saxon: Old Media, New Media, and Early Medieval Studies in the Late Age of Print* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007), 113 (ca. 1050) and A.J. Ford, *Marvel and Artefact: The 'Wonders of the East' in Its Manuscript Contexts* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), chapter 4: "The Wonders and the Computus Manuscript London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius B.v." For a discussion of the relationships between the three extant manuscripts containing this text and image cycle, see Asa Simon Mittman and Susan M. Kim, *Inconceivable Beasts: The Wonders of the East in the Beowulf Manuscript* (Tempe: ACMRS, 2013), Chapter 2: Unworthy Bodies: Editing the Female *Wonders of the East*.

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  - 2 Farina, "Wondrous Skins," 20.

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  - 3 Farina, "Wondrous Skins," 23.

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  - 4 Throughout, we use "vellum" to describe the animal skins out of which the manuscripts were made. While some scholars consider "vellum" and "parchment" to refer to supports made from particular species, or treated in particular ways, as Christopher De Hamel, *Scribes and Illuminators* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995), 8, writes, "In normal usage, the terms... are interchangeable."

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  - 5 Farina, "Wondrous Skins," 24.

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  - 6 Asa Simon Mittman, *Maps and Monsters in Medieval England* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 109. In 2006, Mittman had yet to see the manuscript in person. After doing so, he attempted to convince the press to allow him to correct it, to no avail. Mittman also attempted to publicize this error in a project about academic failures: Asa Simon Mittman, "We really do need to see these things in the flesh..." *Fumblr: The Academic Failblog* (11/17/2012) <<http://academicfailblog.blogspot.com/2012/10/we-really-do-need-to-see-the>
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[se-things.html](#)> (accessed 8/19/2021). This will be addressed in the forthcoming revised second edition.

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- 7** For the full, high-resolution digitization, see “Cotton MS Tiberius B V/1,” *British Library Digitised Manuscripts* (no date) <[https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Cotton\\_MS\\_Tiberius\\_B\\_V/1](https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Cotton_MS_Tiberius_B_V/1)> (accessed December 2022).
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- 8** See Andrew Prescott, “‘Their present and miserable state of cremation’: The Restoration of the Cotton Library,” in *Sir Robert Cotton as a Collector: Essays on an Early Stuart Courtier and his Legacy*, ed. J. Wright (London: British Library, 1997), 391-454. It is possible that the colors of the illuminations have also faded or darkened over time and due to the fire. Mineral pigments tend to resist change, whereas, as Christine Sciacca writes, “[m]any organic colorants are notoriously prone to fading or color change” (Christine Sciacca, “Scientific Investigation of Painting Practices and Materials in the Work of Pacino Di Bonaguida,” in *Florence at the Dawn of the Renaissance: Painting and Illumination, 1300-1350*, ed. Christine Sciacca (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2012), 366). However, to our knowledge scientific analysis has not been undertaken to determine the pigments used in Tiberius B.v. Paul McGurk, “Introduction: Contents of the Manuscript,” *An Eleventh-century Anglo-Saxon Illustrated Miscellany: British Library Cotton Tiberius B.V. Part I. Together with Leaves from British Library Cotton Nero D.II*, ed. P. McGurk, et al, *Early English Manuscripts in Facsimile 21* (Copenhagen: Rosenkilde and Bagger, 1983), 38-39, describes in detail every color used in the manuscript, but makes no suggestions as to their materials. Sciacca, 361, provides an extensive list of the sorts of tests that could be performed on these pigments to determine both their origins and the likelihood that they have changed over time and due to the fire: “X-ray fluorescence (XRF) spectroscopy, (2) multispectral imaging and reflectance spectrophotometry, (3) Raman microspectroscopy, (4) optical microscopy, (5) environmental scanning electron microscopy with energy dispersive spectroscopy (ESEM-EDS), (6) attenuated total reflection Fourier transform infrared spectroscopy (ATR-FTIR), and (7) X-ray diffraction (XRD).”
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- 9** Elaine Treharne has powerfully argued for the importance of in-person examination of manuscripts. Elaine Treharne, *Perceptions of Medieval Manuscripts: The Phenomenal Book* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021).
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- 10** Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 29-31.
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- 11** Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 37.
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- 12** Mittman and Kim, *Inconceivable Beasts*, subsection titled “The picture is only partly framed in,’: Frames and the Wonders,” 138-47.
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- 13** See, for example, Mittman and Kim, *Inconceivable Beasts*, 108: “Some evidence of discomfort perhaps is visible in the image, as below the triangular panel on the Blemmye’s body, in the rocks at the Blemmye’s feet, is a highly suggestive shape. The shape of these rocks clearly mimics the presence of male genitalia, here actively pointing upward.”
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- 14** McGurk, “Introduction,” 101.
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- 15** McGurk, “Introduction,” 99-103.
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- 16** The gray fields that appear on the Blemmye’s body and on the upper half of the landscape are discoloring show-through from the verso.
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- 17** Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 37.
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- 18** See Mittman and Kim, *Inconceivable Beasts*, Chapter 5: “Monstrous Genitals,” for a full discussion of the sex of this Blemmye and the corresponding image in London, British Library, MS Cotton Vitellius A.xv (the *Beowulf* Manuscript).
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- 19** Cotton MS Tiberius B V/1, f. 82v  
<[http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=cotton\\_ms\\_tiberius\\_b\\_v!1\\_f082v](http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/Viewer.aspx?ref=cotton_ms_tiberius_b_v!1_f082v)> (accessed December 2022).
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- 20** Probably commissioned by archbishop Ebbo. Psalter (Utrecht Psalter) and Gospel fragments, Ms. 32 “The Utrecht Psalter,” *Utrecht University Special Collections* (no date).  
<<https://www.uu.nl/en/special-collections/the-treasury/manuscripts/the-utrecht-psalter>> (accessed August 2022)
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- 21** “Harley MS 603,” *British Library Digitised Manuscripts* (no date) <[https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Harley\\_MS\\_603](https://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Harley_MS_603)> (accessed August 2022) and “*Tripartitum Psalterium Eadwini* (The Eadwine Psalter),” *The James Catalogue of Western Manuscripts*, Trinity College Library, Cambridge (June 28, 2013) <<https://mss-cat.trin.cam.ac.uk/Manuscript/R.17.1>> (accessed August 2022).
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- 22** Texts of the Tiberius B.v *Marvels* will be taken from Andy Orchard’s edition: *Andy Orchard, Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the Beowulf-Manuscript* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1995, paperback 2003). Here Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, 194. Translations here and elsewhere are our own.
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- 23** McGurk, “Introduction,” 101.
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- 24** Scholars generally refer to the Old English text as the *Wonders of the East* and the Latin text as the *Marvels of the East*. This system, though, is difficult to employ because, while there is one Old English copy (Vitellius A.xv) and one Latin copy (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Bodley 614, ca. 1120-1104), the Tiberius version is bilingual, with the Latin text for each wonder preceding the Old English text for the same. The dating of Vitellius A.xv has been much debated. Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, 2, follows David Dumville, “Beowulf Come Lately: Some Notes on the Palaeography of the Nowell Codex,” *Archiv* 225 (1988): 49–63, here 63, in suggesting 997–1016. For Bodley 614, C. M. Kauffman, *A Survey of Manuscripts Illuminated in the British Isles: Romanesque Manuscripts, 1066–1190* (London: Harvey Miller, 1975), 77, no. 38, suggests 1120–1140. Alun J. Ford, *Marvel and Artefact: The “Wonders of the East” in its Manuscript Contexts* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2016), 104–111, provides a highly detailed consideration of the dating of Bodley 614, and concludes, 111, that “a date within the range 1125–1175 (s. xiimed) seems probable... the number of Pregothish characteristics in the script suggest a date in the second half of this range. Since the codicology indicates a date before 1170, but perhaps one in which new techniques were being learned, this fifty year period might tentatively be refined to the two decades after 1150.”
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- 25** Mittman and Kim, *Inconceivable Beasts*, 210.
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- 26** Mittman and Kim, *Inconceivable Beasts*, 214.
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- 27** Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 9.
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- 28** Our thanks to Rachel Dressler for this observation.
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- 29** Joep Leerssen, "Between Skin and Horizon," in *Cross-Cultural Travel*, ed. Jane Conroy, *Travel Writing Across the Disciplines 7* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 5.
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- 30** Stephen A. Barney, Jennifer A. Beach, and Oliver Berghof, eds., *Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), XI.i.72, 236; and Sarah Kay, *Animal Skins and the Reading Self in Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 87.
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- 31** Isidore, *Etymologies*, XIV.i.1, 285.
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- 32** For a recent English translation, Naoimi Segal, trans., *The Skin-ego*, by Didier Anzieu, *The History of Psychoanalysis*, ed Brett Kahn and Peter L. Rudnytsky (New York: Routledge, 2016).
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- 33** Joep Leerssen, "Between Skin and Horizon," in *Cross-Cultural Travel*, ed. Jane Conroy, *Travel Writing Across the Disciplines 7* (New York: Peter Lang, 2003), 5.
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- 34** Leerssen, "Between Skin and Horizon," 5. We have initiated research with Ashlie Martini, Department of Mechanical Engineering, University of California, Merced, to quantify differences in vellum surfaces in the absence of visual data. Our hope is to consider that data as part of an examination of the extent to which medieval readers might have navigated the book, like the worlds it represents, by touch as well as by sight and other senses. Samuel Leventini, Brian Martin-Gutierrez, Abhishek Kumar, Asa Simon Mittman, Susan M. Kim, and Ashlie Martini, "Tactile Perception of Vellum Quantified by Friction and Surface Roughness": *Tribology Letters* 70:127 (2022): 1-10.
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- 35** In Isidore's *Etymologies*, "lacus" collocates with "locus," as "it is called lake (lacus) as if the term were 'place' (locus) of water" (XIII.xix.2) but also consistently suggests not the presence of water as its defining characteristic but rather the emptiness, or capacity to contain, as in the sense of "vat" or "basin" (XV.vi.8; XX.xiv.12). Kenneth Sisam notes that among the Latin sources he surveys, only the lost *Epistola Premoniis* contains an equivalent to *seað*, perhaps "laci" (*Studies in the History of Old English Literature* [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953], 79). Sisam includes a summary of Latin sources, 74-79. Many thanks to Ben Tilghman for the provocative suggestion that in the absence of any clear mention of water, these "lakes" may represent not lakes at all but rather something like geothermal vents.
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- 36** The encounter is contained in Exodus 7, where the magicians are not named, and mentioned again in 2 Timothy 3:8, where they are named and associated with "homines corrupti mente reprobri circa fidem" ["men corrupted in mind and reprobate in faith"].
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- 37** Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, 202.
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- 38** McGurk, "Introduction," 99.
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- 39** Leerssen, "Between Skin and Horizon," 5.
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- 40** C.P. Jones, "Stigma and Tattoo," in *Written on the Body: The Tattoo in European and American History*, ed. Jane Caplan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 1-16. In the same collection, Mark Gustafson, "The Tattoo in the Later Roman Empire and Beyond," 17-31; and Charles W. MacQuarrie, "Insular Celtic Tattooing: History, Myth and Metaphor," 32-45.]
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- 41** MacQuarrie, 34, 35. MacQuarrie cites F. B. Pyatt, et al., "Non Isatis Sed Vitrum Or, the Colour of Lindow Man," *Oxford Journal of Archeology*, 10, no. 1 (1991), 61-73.
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- 42** M. Bateson, "A Worcester Cathedral Book of Ecclesiastical Collections, made c. 1000 A.D.," *English Historical Review* 10 (1895): 712-31, 726. Our translation.
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- 43** Jane Caplan, "Introduction," in *Written on the Body*, xi-xxiii, xv.
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- 44** Hurley, "Distant Knowledge," 834.
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- 45** Kay, *Animal Skins*, 68.
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- 46** Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, 186-88.
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- 47** Mary Kate Hurley, "Distant Knowledge in the British Library, Cotton Tiberius BV *Wonders of the East*," *Review of English Studies*, New series 67, no. 282 (2016): 827-43, 834.
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- 48** Hurley, "Distant Knowledge," 842, 843.
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- 49** Kay, *Animal Skins*, 3.
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- 50** Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies*, 203.