Environmental Memory in the Early Middle Ages: The Marginal, Marshy, and Monstrous Elements of Eolh-Secg in the Rune Poem

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INTRODUCTION
How are environmental memories created by cultures and can these impact our responses to the current ecological crisis? Using the latest methodologies and language in environmental humanism and incorporating non-textual records of human-environment interaction, I am reading depictions of the physical environment in Anglo-Saxon literature against the archaeological record and geographic landscape of the East Anglian fens. My research explores how environmental memory is constructed in an historical culture with greater natural resource interdependence and reliance, which will help us better incorporate narratives of the wetlands into our worldview, creating a deanthropocentrized and sustainable model of environmental problem-solving.

POEM TEXT
[*æliz*] secg eard hæþ oftust on fenne,
wexeð on wature, wundaþ grimme,
blode breneð beorna gehwylcne
ðe him ænigne onfeng gedeð. (41-44)
The *eolh-secg* has its home most often in the fen; it grows in the water. It severely wounds, stains with blood, any man who tries to make a grab for it.

RESULTS/MY SOLUTION
The plant described in the *eolh* stanza must be potentially harmful but also potentially helpful, and must be native (or at least assimilated) to Britain. My solution for the monstrous plant is cladium mariscus, the Great Fen Sedge, since its leaves – used in 70% of Anglo-Saxon thatched roofs – are blade shaped with serrated edges and the Great Fen Sedge is found throughout the North Atlantic coastal zones.

PROBLEM
The fifteenth stanza of the Rune Poem depicts a monstrous plant whose identification has challenged scholars for centuries. Is there a way to identify this plant by connecting the poetic description to the physiology of plants known and utilized in the Anglo-Saxon world?

CONCLUSIONS
In the Old English poetic lexicon, *secg* can mean ‘man’ in addition. Thus, the Rune-Poet presents a marsh plant that has agency and defends itself against violence, as well as a man who is supported and sustained by the fens. Man is *secg* is plant, all at once. Knowledge of the East Anglian Fens as a place where the natural, supernatural, and human are indistinguishable, trans-corporeal elements that impact each other necessarily relies upon the medieval audience’s resource-dependent relationship with nature, a perspective which our posthuman intra-action now recognizes as vital to human survival. Wetlands play several critical roles which affect humans: as a major part of the water cycle, a significant portion of the carbon sink system, and vital space for wildlife reproduction and sustenance. Yet efforts to create and sustain community dialogue about the importance of wetland restoration projects to the survival and quality of life of human civilization are often stymied by the divide between science and the popular discourse. Narratives and stories about the environment offer one effective way to bridge that divide and increase community involvement, since people often relate more easily to narratives than data.