

Tonya Kim Dewey  
University of California, Berkeley  
Department of German  
Berkeley, CA 94720-3243  
Phone: (510) 643-3915  
tonyad@uclink.berkeley.edu

### The Parable of the Dragon

The Old Saxon *Heliand*, because of its nature as a paraphrase, shows an interesting interplay between Medieval Christian doctrine and traditional Germanic beliefs and mythology. One example of this is found in Fit 22 (lines 1876b - 1880a).

<i>sô glauuan tegegnas, nâdra thi u fêha, uuitodes uuânit, besûican an themu sîðe.</i>	<i>Hebbead iuuuan môd uuiðar them sô samo sô the gelouuo uurm, thar siu iro nîðskepies, that man iu undar themu uuerode ne mugi</i>
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‘Hold your mind against them  
so wisely in opposition, just as the yellow worm,  
the colorful serpent, where she for herself a certain  
jealousy perceives, so that one among the crowd may not  
seduce you on the journey.’ (translation mine)

This passage occurs in the context of Christ sending the disciples out into the world to preach the Gospel, and warning them about the persecution they will face. However, this particular passage has no corresponding text in any of the Gospels. It is of interest primarily because of the words *uurm* ‘worm’ (neuter) and *nâdra* ‘serpent’ (feminine), whose cognates are found throughout Germanic literature as dragon words. Although *siu* ‘she’ agrees in gender with its antecedent *nâdra*, the use of the feminine pronoun in referring to the dragon is unique in Germanic – both the *Beowulf* dragon and the Old Norse Fafnir are male and always referred to with the masculine pronoun, regardless of the grammatical gender of the actual dragon word used. This Old Saxon dragon is also unique in being held up as a paragon of wisdom, a quality not usually associated with Germanic dragons.

In order to fully understand the nature of the *Heliand* dragon, she must first be examined in the context of early Germanic dragon tradition, and indeed of Indo-European dragon mythology. She must also be investigated in the context of Christianity, against the backdrop of other Christian dragon stories. I will show that the *Heliand* dragon has her origins in Indo-European mythology, as do the other Germanic dragons. Yet in contrast to these, she blends inherited lore and Christian themes in a unique manner. Far from being merely a “baptized” dragon, she is her own creature, a hybrid who is neither wholly Germanic nor prototypically Christian, yet serves as a proper model for the disciples in a Germanic context.