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Monsters, Sea-Monks, and Mermaids Strange Creatures from the Sea from Antiquity to the Modern Age



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Sophia Hendriks

Throughout the centuries, sea-monsters have featured not only in stories, legend and art, but also in the study of nature. In Antiquity, scholars theorised that water generated more monstrosities than any other environment. Medieval and Early Modern scholars did not exclude the possibility that sea-monsters exist, and collected rather than contradicted reported sightings. As a consequence they helped spread stories about monstrosities from the sea and contributed to a culture in which such monsters were omnipresent. Medieval and Early Modern depictions of strange creatures from the sea can be found as decorative elements on maps and in works recording folklore, man-made monsters were included in Early Modern collections of naturalia (see chapter 3), and sea-monsters were described in scholarly works, even up until the Modern period. Many of these creatures and their characteristics were based on descriptions from Antiquity, while at the same time new monsters were introduced.

The Nature of Monsters — In Antiquity nature in general was seen as flexible and capable of producing any variety of creatures. This was believed to be particularly true for aquatic environments. The Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder stated that monstrosities form most easily in water, due to its liquid nature and the amount of nutrients it contains. Later on, Christian authors presented this plasticity of na-

ture as the consequence of divine omnipotence. As a result, monsters were on the one hand seen as natural phenomena and on the other often interpreted as divine signs. For example, several sixteenth-century scholars describe a 'sea-monk', a creature with a tonsured head and scaly robes (2.1). This was interpreted by the religious author and counter-reformer Aegidius Albertinus (1560–1620) as a divine expression of dissatisfaction with the hypocrisy of the clergy, while the scholar Paracelsus (1493–1541) provided a natural explanation for its existence by stating the creature must be the offspring of a fish and a drowned monk.

Terrestrial Counterparts — Like the sea-monk, many aquatic monsters resembled something or someone we might find on land. Since Antiquity it had been assumed that aquatic creatures often took the form of a, natural or artificial, terrestrial counterpart. As evidence of this principle, classical authors referred to creatures such as the sea-cucumber, the swordfish, and the sawfish. Classical mythology also featured a range of aquatic deities with human upper bodies and the lower body of a fish, such as Nereids, as well as creatures which were part terrestrial animal, such as the hippocampus, with the upper body of a horse and lower body of a fish. Descriptions and depictions of sea-monsters from the Middle Ages and the Early Modern era show us similar mixtures of aquatic and terrestrial features. The popular late fifteenth-century natural history encyclopedia *Hortus Sanitatis* for example, presents to us a range of seacreatures with terrestrial characteristics. The illustration shows a page from a 1536 German edition, *Gart der Gesundheit*, which bears depictions of a sea-cow with the upper body

of a cow and lower body of a fish, a bird with a fishtail, and several Nereids (2.2).

Mermaids — While there was much continuity in the way sea-monsters were portrayed and perceived, new developments also took place. While mermaids were unknown in Antiquity, sightings of these creatures were reported with some regularity by Medieval and Early Modern authors. A page-wide depiction in a work on monstrosities, *Monstrorum historia* (1642) (2.3) by the first professor of natural sciences at the University of Bologna and founder of its botanical garden, Ulysse Aldrovandi (1522–1605), shows us what such creatures were believed to look like. In appearance these much resemble the Nereids from Antiquity, which were believed to be friendly and keen to help sailors in distress. In this, they resemble the benevolent aquatic fairies native to western European folklore. By contrast, mermaids were believed to be dangerous and seductive creatures that shipwreck vessels and lead sailors to their doom. In this, they resemble another creature from classical mythology, the siren. These birdlike creatures with human faces were believed to enchant sailors with their singing in order to cause them harm. During the Middle Ages, elements of sirens, sea nymphs, and aquatic fairies, were combined in popular imagination to form the mermaid.

Monstrous Whales — While monstrous whales had been described since Antiquity, the sixteenth century generated an unprecedented variety of such creatures. Little knowledge on whales had been gathered during Antiquity and the Middle Ages, and often monstrous proportions

and strength were attributed to these animals. For unknown reasons, in the second half of the sixteenth century whales beached more frequently than usual on European shores. Around the same time whaling increased. As a result, knowledge expanded, but up until then accurate depictions and descriptions were scarce and the line between whale and monster remained difficult to draw. The Swedish chronicler Olaus Magnus published depictions of monstrous whales based on folklore on his 1539 map of Scandinavia *Carta marina et descriptio septentrionalium terrarum* and in his 1555 chronic of Scandinavia *Historia de gentibus septentrionalibus*, which became instantly popular. The creatures shown on the map of Iceland from the Antwerp cartographer Abraham Ortelius's atlas *Theatrum orbis terrarum* (1570) (2.4) are based on Magnus's monsters. The map shows ten monstrous whales, with claws that resemble those of terrestrial animals.

Man-Made Monsters — Basilisks were first described in Antiquity as dangerous serpents and acquired new characteristics in later centuries. By the late Middle Ages they had become winged monsters, born as the result of a bizarre sequence of events, which could kill anyone by looking at them. During the Early Modern Period basilisk-like monsters were manufactured out of rays. The scholar Ulysse Aldrovandi describes two such creations as basilisks, while others are described as winged snakes or dragons. In 1558 the Swiss scholar Conrad Gessner (1516–1565) explained, in his encyclopaedia of animals *Historia animalium*, how these were made, by twisting, cutting and drying a ray (2.5). He complains that the man-made monsters were passed off as real to impress the masses and were often exhibited in apothecary shops.

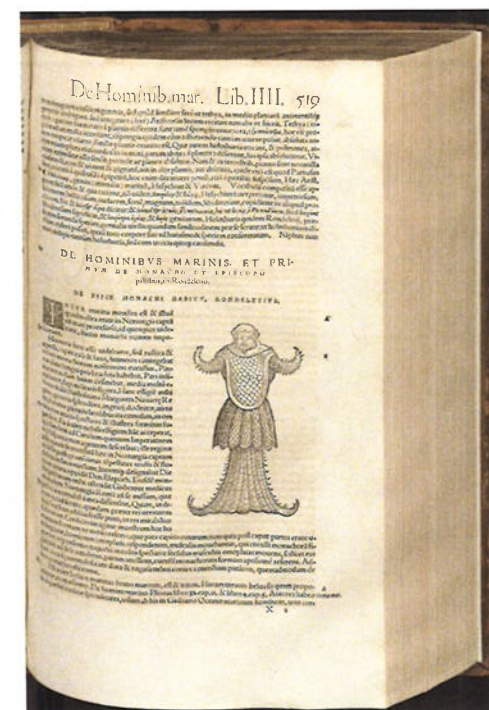
However, they were also part of scholarly naturalia collections. Aldrovandi collected several and described no fewer than five in his *Serpentum et draconum historiae* (1640) and *De piscibus et de cetis* (1623) (2.6). One of these depictions is very similar to a specimen kept at the Naturalis Biodiversity Center (2.7).

The Sea-Unicorn and the Narwhal — First reports of the unicorn date back to the fourth century BC, when the scholar Ctesias described a one-horned horse which he had heard about. The legend subsequently spread through the work of Aristotle and other scholars. In addition, a mistranslation in the Bible gave the impression that the unicorn was mentioned in the Old Testament (3.5). Scholars of the Middle Ages and first half of the Early Modern Period consequently had good reason to believe in unicorns. The assumption that animals on land have aquatic counterparts, meant that the existence of a sea-unicorn was also widely accepted. Believed to neutralise poison, what was sold as unicorn horn fetched exorbitant prices. In the sixteenth century scholars began to suspect that these 'horns' were in fact narwhal teeth. The collector Ole Worm (3.4) published a treaty on this subject in 1638. The discovery quickly became common knowledge and inspired the depiction from Pierre Pomet's *Histoire generale des drogues*, published in 1694 (2.8), of a sea-unicorn and narwhal side by side. However, rather than diminishing belief in the medical properties of the horns, this led many to believe that the narwhal was in fact the sea-unicorn. The last recorded use of unicorn horn in folk medicine took place in the nineteenth century.

Modern Sea-Monsters — Certain sea-monsters have proved

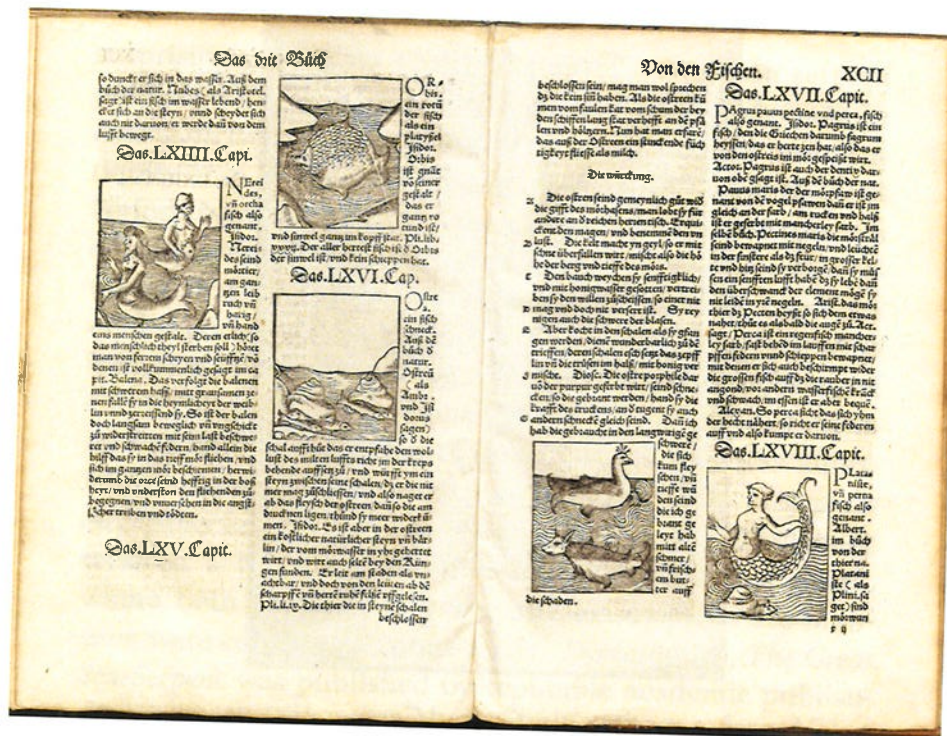
surprisingly durable. The depiction of a giant sea serpent published by the Dutch zoologist Anthonie Oudemans in 1892 (2.9), is not unlike many depicted in mosaics from Antiquity or in books from the Middle Ages and Early Modern Period. Towards the end of the nineteenth century sightings of this mythical creature were still reported with such regularity that Oudemans was able to collect nearly two hundred reports over the course of three years. Applying what is known as a crypto-zoological approach, in the absence of empirical evidence, Oudemans used the quantity of sightings as an argument that the giant sea serpent was an existing species. He proposed the scientific name *Megophias megophias* for the yet to be discovered creature. Oudemans received a lukewarm reaction from the academic world, where both cryptozoology and the existence of sea-monsters were considered controversial. Nonetheless, *The Great Sea Serpent* was published by reputable academic publishers. As Oudemans pointed out, the fact that a sea-monster has not yet been discovered does not prove it does not exist.

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2.1 | 'Monachus marinus'. In: Conrad Gessner, *Historiae animalium liber IIII qui est de piscium et aquatiliu animantium natura*, Zürich, C. Froschauer, 1558, p. 519. [665 A 7]

— The Swiss scholar Conrad Gessner (1516–1565) produced by far the most extensive encyclopaedia of animals up to that time, the *Historia animalium* (1551–1558). It provides information on nearly everything that was known about a particular animal from classical Antiquity and on every animal that the author had read or heard about or had seen. The sea-monk described in the fourth volume, which discusses fish and other aquatic animals, was reported by several sources around 1500. It was discussed by several scholars including, in addition to Gessner, Pierre Belon and Guillaume Rondelet.



2.2 | Various monsters and mythical creatures. In: *Gart der Gesundheit zu latein Hortus Sanitatis: Sagt in vier Büchern von Vierfüszigen vnd Krichenden, Vöglen vnd den Fliegenden, Vischen vnd Schwimmenden thieren, dem Edlen Gesteyn vnd allem so in den Aderen der erden wachsen ist*, Strasbourg, M. Apiarius, 1536, fo. XCII. [1370 B 15]

— The late fifteenth-century *Hortus sanitatis*, first published in 1491, is considered the first natural history encyclopaedia. This German edition is one of many subsequent editions in various languages. The work describes species of plants, animals, birds, fish and stones, and their use as medicine. In addition to existing species a range of monsters and mythical creatures are discussed.



2.3 | 'Monstra Niliaca'. In: *Ulisse Aldrovandi, Opera omnia. XI Monstrorum historia cum paralipomenis historiae omnium animalium*, Bologna, N. Tebaldini, 1642, p. 354. [655 A 13]

— Ulisse Aldrovandi (1522–1605) was professor of natural sciences at the University of Bologna and founder of its botanical garden. First and foremost a collector, he acquired naturalia from all over the world, as well as drawings of plants and animals. A portion of his archive of 8000 sheets of paper is preserved in the Bibliotheca Universitaria di Bologna. Showing a variety of monstrosities, his *Monstrorum historia* is by far Aldrovandi's most famous work.



2.4 | 'Islandia'. In: Abraham Ortelius, *Theatrum orbis terrarum*, Antwerp, s.n., 1570. [COLLBN Atlas 43: 1]

— Ortelius's *Theatrum orbis terrarum* is often considered the first modern atlas. The maps were produced by various cartographers, engraved especially for this publication, and arranged by continent, region, and state. The map of Iceland is decorated with an array of sea monsters, many of which are traceable to Olaus Magnus's *Carta marina* of 1539. The inscription in the lower right corner attributes the map to the Danish chronicler Andreas Sorensen Vedel (1542–1616). However the level of detail suggests it was made by an Icelander, most likely Vedel merely passed it on.



2.5 | Winged snake. In: Conrad Gessner, *Nomenclator aquatilium animantium icones animalium aquatiliu in mari et dulcibus aquis degentium*, Zürich, C. Froschauer, 1560, p. 139. [665 A 9]

— The illustrations of Gessner's *Historiae animalium* were so attractive that they were reissued in separate volumes, titled *Icones*, except for the volume on fishes, which appeared under the title *Nomenclator aquatilium animantium*. The text describing the depicted basilisk or winged snake describes how such things are made: rays are dried and the body is twisted and parts of the wings cut off. Gessner complains how such creations were exhibited to impress gullible people.



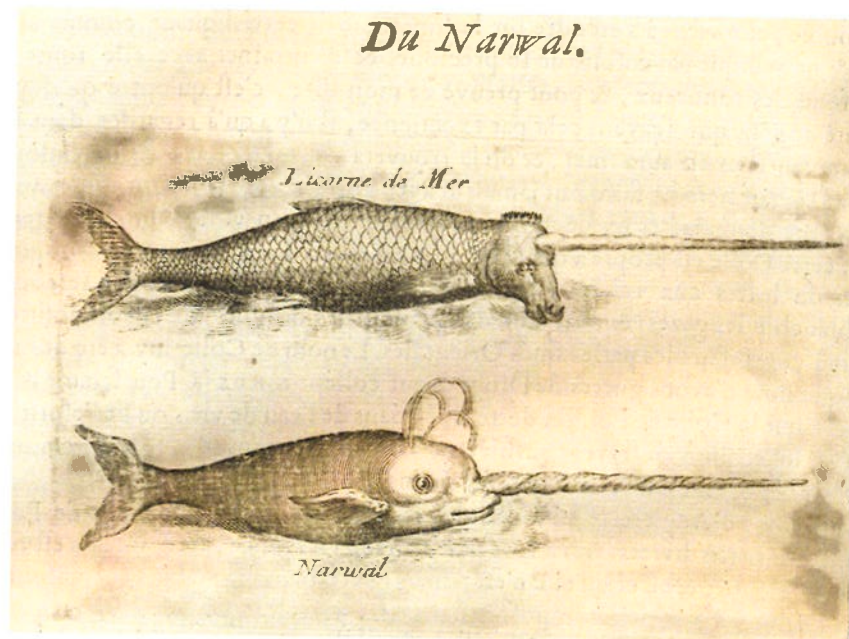
2.6 | 'Draco ex Raia effectus'. In: Ulysse Aldrovandi, *Opera omnia*. X: *Serpentum et draconum historiae libri duo*, Bologna, N. Tebaldini 1640, p. 315. [655 A 12]

— Aldrovandi's collection of naturalia comprised several monsters made out of dried rays. In his *Serpentum et draconum historiae* (1640) and *De piscibus et de cetis* (1623) he described and depicted five such creatures. These specimens shown all look very different, suggesting that a wide range of monsters factored out of rays circulated, perhaps passed off as different species, or some as basilisks and others as dragons.



2.7 | Dried ray made to look like a dragon, 18th century, origin unknown. [Naturalis Biodiversity Center RMNH .PISC. 29215]

— During the Early Modern Period monsters resembling basilisks, winged snakes, and dragons were manufactured out of rays by twisting, cutting and subsequently drying them. While this was common knowledge among naturalists, such creations still ended up in naturalia collections. Ulysse Aldrovandi described and depicted no fewer than five, one of which, described in his *Serpentum et draconum historiae* (1640), bears a remarkable likeness to the Naturalis specimen.



2.8 | 'Licorne de Mer'. In: Pierre Pomet, *Histoire generale des drogues, traitant des plantes, des animaux, et des mineraux*, Paris, J.-B. Loyson, etc., 1694, p. 78. [Museum Boerhaave Library, BOERH e 2459 a]

— In this seventeenth-century manual of popular medicinal ingredients by the Parisian pharmacist Pierre Pomet, unicorn horn is discussed twice. In the section on land animals five species of unicorn are discussed, the *camphur*, the *pirassoipi* and three unidentified breeds. The section on aquatic creatures discusses the narwhal, and notes that what is known as unicorn horn is in most cases narwhal tusk. Pomet states that the horn was used to counteract poisons.



2.9 | 'The sea-monster, as Mr. C. Renard supposed to have seen it'. In: Anthonie Cornelis Oudemans, *The great sea-serpent: An historical and critical treatise: With the reports of 187 appearances*, Leiden, Brill etc. – London, Luzac & Co, 1892, p. 56. [290 B 7]

— This work by the Dutch zoologist Anthonie Cornelis Oudemans is still the most extensive study of the mythical great sea serpent ever produced. Oudemans collected 187 unverified reports of sightings and concluded based on the quantity of these testimonies that these most likely described a real species. The work was not met with enthusiasm in the academic community but was published by reputable academic publishers. In addition to over 600 academic articles, Oudemans produced one further cryptozoological publication, on the Loch Ness monster, in 1934.