

Sea Monsters on Medieval and Renaissance Maps



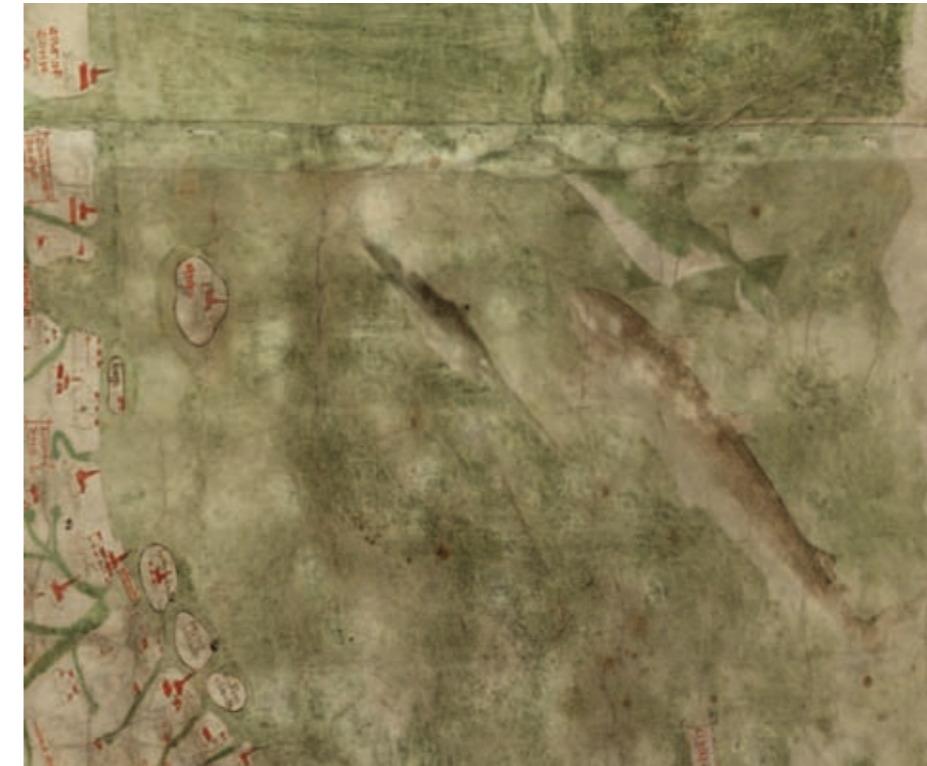
Chet Van Duzer



Fig. 21 A swordfish, Scylla, and Charybdis in the Mediterranean on the Hereford mappamundi of c. 1290-1310 (Hereford Cathedral).



Fig. 22 A swordfish, whale, and perhaps a killer whale on the Gough Map of Britain of c.1400 (Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Gough Gen. Top. 16).



Three Sea Monsters Battling in the Atlantic

The Gough Map of Britain, like the Hereford and Ebstorf maps, is a separate production, and we know little about the circumstances of its creation. The map measures 56 × 115 cm (22 × 45 inches) and was traditionally dated to c. 1360, but recently has been ascribed a date of c. 1400.⁹¹ It is the earliest surviving map to depict the road network of Britain, and also the first to give an accurate rendering of the British coastline. In the ocean to the east there are three large sea creatures that seem to be fighting; they have been identified as a whale, swordfish, and thresher

shark (fig. 22).⁹² The whale and swordfish are both lifelike, particularly the swordfish—much more so than that on the Hereford *mappamundi* discussed above (fig. 21); in fact it is the earliest lifelike depiction of a swordfish in any Western source that I know. I would dispute the identification of the third creature as a thresher shark, as it lacks the very long upper tail fin which is the most distinctive feature of threshers, and generally looks un-sharklike: a killer whale seems like a much more plausible identification. It has been persuasively suggested that the fight of the whale

against the two smaller sea creatures may represent England's struggle against Wales and Scotland.⁹³ If this interpretation is correct, the sea monsters on the Gough Map play a unique role among sea monsters on maps, representing almost heraldically the political relationships of the countries mapped nearby. The image of the swordfish also stands out for its lifelikeness, and it seems probable that the cartographer painted the fish after having seen one firsthand, rather than relying on an illustrated book on natural history.

The Dangers of Sea Monsters



1 A sea monster known as a physetera or spouter, a type of whale, attacking a ship by vomiting water on it, from a map in the 1538 edition of Solinus, who describes just this type of attack by sea monsters (52.42). From C. Julii Solini Polyhistor ... *Huic Pomponii Melæ de situ orbis libros ... adiunximus* (Basel, 1538), between pp. 150 and 151 (British Library, 216.b.1).



2 A whale eating a ship off the coast of Norway, on Olaus Magnus's *Carta marina* of 1539; compare figs. 67 and 71 from the same map (from the copy of 1572, Stockholm, Sveriges nationalbibliotek, shelfmark KoB 1 ab).



5 Two sirens, both of whom hold mirrors and comb their hair to indicate their vanity (compare fig. 84), practise their wiles on a ship which is west of the Strait of Magellan on Diego Gutierrez's 1562 map of the Americas (Library of Congress).



6 Sea monsters attacking a ship off the coast of India, from Abraham Ortelius's *Theatrum orbis terrarum*; the image derives from Olaus Magnus's reproduced on the opposite page, perhaps by way of the similar scene in Diego Gutierrez's 1562 map of the Americas. (British Library, Maps 9.Tab.9, map 94).



3 Whales attacking a ship, on Olaus Magnus's *Carta marina*; the sailors jettison barrels and a man on the ship plays a trumpet in order to scare the monsters away (Stockholm, Sveriges nationalbibliotek, shelfmark KoB 1 ab).



4 A sea monster eating an unfortunate sailor—perhaps Jonah—in the Mediterranean off the northern coast of Africa in Sebastian Münster's *Cosmographia* of 1540 (British Library, Maps.C.1.c.2., No.15).



7 Jonah being cast overboard to the sea monster, from Ortelius's map of the Holy Land in his *Theatrum orbis terrarum*. There is a similar image on John Speed's *Canaan, As it was Possessed Both in Abraham and Israel's Days* (London, 1595). (British Library, Maps 9.Tab.9., map 97).



8 A huge sea monster attacks a galley in the Aegean, while the seamen try to fend it off with spears, on Nikolaos Sophianos's *Totius Graeciae Descriptio* of 1545 (Basel, Öffentliche Universität Bibliothek, AA 89).

Fig. 80 An anonymous manuscript world map by a member of the Dieppe School, made in 1546 (Manchester, John Rylands Library, French MS 1*).

From Sea Dragons to a Sawfish: The Rylands Library Map of 1546

A large manuscript world map (126 × 256 cm, or 49.6 × 100.8 inches) dated 1546 and preserved in the John Rylands Library in Manchester (fig. 80) was in the past attributed to Pierre Desceliers (c.1500 - c.1558), but serious doubts have been raised about that attribution.²³³ These doubts are confirmed by the differences between the sea monsters on the 1546 map and those on Desceliers's two signed maps, those of 1550 and 1553: those on the 1546 map are more varied and their depictions more detailed.²³⁴ The most famous sea monster on the map is the whale in the Atlantic between northern Newfoundland and southern Labrador, which is shown being harpooned by five men in a small boat; we are no doubt to understand that the men came from the sailing ship just to the north (fig. 81). The men in the boat are most likely Basque; the fact that one of them is holding a bow has raised the question of whether a Native American might have joined this whaling crew, but this seems a remote possibility.²³⁵ The whale, which is rather serpentine, has two harpoons sticking up from its back, and quite curiously seems to have wings and also what looks like a large moustache. The moustache is probably the cartographer's attempt to portray baleen, which the Basques commonly referred to as *barbas de ballena* or "beards of the whale."²³⁶ Although there are some fanciful elements in the depictions of both the whale itself and the whaling scene more generally, even the moustache represents an interest in making the depiction of the whale accurate, and the whaling scene is much more realistic than that on Mecia de Viladestes's map of 1413 (see fig. 29). The whale on the 1546 map is arguably more

realistic than those on Olaus Magnus's *Carta marina* (see fig. 67).²³⁷ Incidentally another map by a cartographer of the Dieppe School has a depiction of a hunt for aquatic

mammals: a map in Guillaume Le Testu's manuscript *Cosmographie universelle* of 1555 has a scene of a ship hunting dolphins, one of which has a harpoon in its side.²³⁸

On the 1546 map there are some sea monsters west of the large hypothetical "Java le Grand" continent in southern Asia. West of Java Minor there is a beautiful



Fig. 105 The rich collection of sea monsters on Abraham Ortelius's map of Iceland in the 1598 Antwerp edition of his *Theatrum orbis terrarum* (British Library, Maps c.2.d.7, map 72).

The Sea Monsters Surrounding Iceland in the First Atlas

Gerard Mercator's friend and rival Abraham Ortelius in 1570 published the first edition of his *Theatrum orbis terrarum* (Theater of the World), which is generally considered the first atlas in the modern sense of the word, that is, a book consisting of uniformly sized map sheets with descriptive text for each.²⁶⁸ This work was a great success, and was expanded and translated in a total of thirty-one editions until its final edition in 1612. Ortelius's map of Iceland first appeared in the 1590 edition of his atlas, and was published in subsequent editions as well. On this map the waters around Iceland are populated by many sea monsters (fig. 105), most of which derive from Olaus Magnus's map of 1539.²⁶⁹ Ortelius's map is thus further evidence of the influence of Olaus Magnus's creation.

Each of Ortelius's sea monsters is marked with a letter that indicates where the monster's description may be found on the back of the map. Curiously, though Ortelius used Olaus Magnus as the iconographical source for most of these sea monsters, he did not use Olaus for all of his descriptions of them. Instead, several of his descriptions come from an unexpected source, namely the *Konungs skuggsjá*, also known as the *Speculum regale* or *King's Mirror*, a mid-thirteenth-century Old Norse book written as a dialogue between a son and father and intended for the education of Prince Magnus Lagabøte (reigned 1263-1280).²⁷⁰ This book has a detailed and interesting chapter (12) on "The Marvels of the Icelandic Seas" that describes several sea monsters; the work was not published until the nineteenth century, and in fact Ortelius's use of it



A Haunting Sea Monster Reappears

The Milanese cartographer Urbano Monte (1544-1613) created three surviving multi-sheet manuscript world maps of truly ambitious scale on a north polar projection, one dated 1587,²⁷⁵ and two dated 1590 which are accompanied by a geographical treatise.²⁷⁶ The sixty-four sheets of the map are designed to be joined into a large circular image of the world almost 3 m (10 feet) in diameter, and was no doubt intended for a wall in the *palazzo* of a noble family.²⁷⁷ The maps are richly decorated, particularly in the southern hemisphere, as the northern polar projection stretches out the southern regions, allowing more room for decoration. In the southern hemisphere, that is towards the outer edge of the map, there are many exotic animals on land, a series of portraits of sovereigns, and many ships and monsters in the sea. In a legend on his maps Monte lists his sources, which include Gerard Mercator, Giacomo Gastaldi, and Olaus Magnus, and indeed most of his sea monsters come from Gastaldi. Monte's monsters are beautifully hand-painted, and thus visually very appealing, but as they are mostly derivative, they need not detain us long, except for one. The Seminario manuscript of Monte's work includes two images (in maps 23 and 38—see fig. 108) of the mysterious and haunting humanoid sea monster on Gastaldi's *Cosmographia universalis et exactissima* (compare fig. 90). Monte's geographical treatise contains some text about the monster, which runs (f. 179r):

...nel cui oceano appaiono spesso alcuni pessi in forma humana di tanta stranezza, che ergendosi sopra l'aqua auanzano i piu alti arbori delle nau,

onde per questo spettacolo stridendo orribilmente e lasciando alcune valli sopra l'aqua, mentre se mouono con le bracia ch'hanno a guisa de due gran trani longhe vinticinque palmi, non è ninno si animoso nochiero che non si spauenti dalla loro monstrosità.

...in the ocean here, there often appear some fish in human form of such strangeness, that raising themselves above the water they surpass the highest masts of ships, so that, screaming horribly and making some valleys in the water, they move themselves with their arms which they have in the shape of great tree trunks twenty-five palms long, and there is no boatswain's mate so brave that he would not be terrified by their monstrosity.

I have not been able to determine the source of this description. One wonders whether it is something that Monte copied from a text, now lost, associated with Gastaldi's map, or whether Monte invented the description on the basis of the image. On both Gastaldi's and Monte's maps, the monster inspires fear of the southern ocean, but that on Monte's map is more terrifying, as its eyes glow red and it is reaching menacingly towards a ship.

Whales Fantastic and Realistic at the End of the Sixteenth Century

In 1592 the publisher Cornelis Claesz brought forth a map of what is now Canada and the North Atlantic

Fig. 109 Two old-fashioned whale-like sea monsters and an inset with more lifelike whales on Petrus Plancius or Joannes van Doetecum's *Nova Francia, alio nomine dicta Terranova* of 1592 (British Library, Maps C.2.a.3.(2.)).



titled *Nova Francia, alio nomine dicta Terranova* (New France, Otherwise Called Newfoundland), which was designed by Petrus Plancius (1552-1622) or Joannes van Doetecum (fl. 1592-1630) and engraved by Doetecum and David de Meyn (fl. 1592-1611).²⁷⁸ The map is very finely engraved, and attractive enough that it has been reproduced in facsimile four times.²⁷⁹ From the point of view of sea monsters the map is of interest for a striking contrast it reveals. In the Atlantic it has three sea monsters (fig. 109) that are clearly part of the long

tradition of whale-like monsters that derive from Olaus Magnus; while near the lower edge of the map there is an inset that shows naked and half-naked men, possibly Basque to judge from their helmets and boats, throwing spears into one whale, while others flense a whale further up the beach (compare the whaling scenes in figs. 29, 67, and 81). The two whales in this inset look completely different from, and are much more lifelike than, the Olaus-Magnus-derived whale-like creatures in the Atlantic. In fact the whaling scene is copied from a

Fig. 113 St. Brendan's ship on the back of a whale, and his men praying, in Honorius Philoponus, *Nova typis transacta navigatio* (Linz: s.n., 1621), p. 12 (British Library, G.7237).



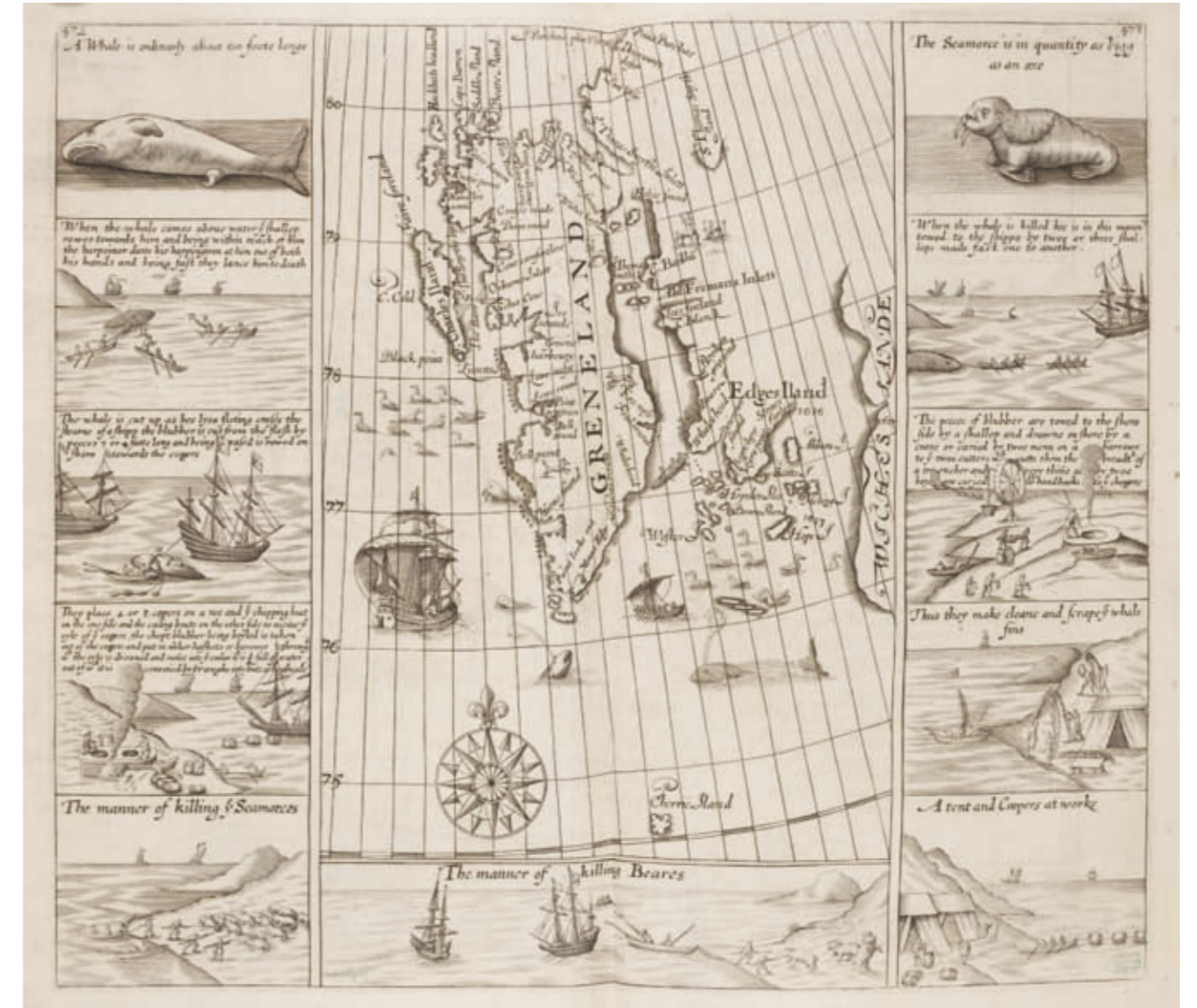
Conclusion

Fanciful sea monsters continued to appear on some maps in the seventeenth century. In 1621 a book by Caspar Plautius titled *Nova typis transacta navigatio* was published under the pen name Honorius Philoponus; it is an account of the evangelization of New World by the Benedictine Bernardo Buil of Catalonia, who accompanied Christopher Columbus on his Second Voyage. Plautius mixes various legends and miracles into his narrative of the efforts to evangelize Native Americans, including an account of St Brendan's

navigation in the Atlantic, and he illustrates this account with a map of the eastern Atlantic which is decorated with a large whale on whose back St Brendan has landed (fig. 113; compare figs. 28, 63, and 67).

But with the close of the sixteenth century, the period of the most florid development and widest use of sea monsters on maps had come to an end. New and more lifelike images of sea creatures were available and were copied onto maps,²⁹¹ and in addition, human beings' technological advances gave them more control over the creatures in the ocean, and depictions that reflected these developments effectively removed the

Fig. 114 Thomas Edge's map of Spitzbergen with vignettes of whaling, from *Purchas his Pilgrimes* (London, 1625), vol. 3, between pp. 472 and 473 (British Library, G.6838-41).



animals portrayed from the category of monster. A particularly clear example of this change can be seen in Thomas Edge's map of "Greneland", by which name he actually means Spitzbergen (this confusion of names

was common in the seventeenth century) (fig. 114). This map was published in 1625 in Samuel Purchas's *Purchas his Pilgrimes*, a collection of voyage narratives intended to surpass in comprehensiveness Richard

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From dragons and serpents to many-armed beasts that preyed on ships and sailors alike, sea monsters have terrified mariners across all ages and cultures and have become the subject of many tall tales from the sea. Accounts of these creatures have also inspired cartographers and mapmakers, many of whom began decorating their maps with them to indicate unexplored areas or areas about which little was known. Whether swimming vigorously, gamboling amid the waves, attacking ships, or simply displaying themselves for our appreciation, the sea monsters that appear on medieval and Renaissance maps are fascinating and visually engaging. Yet despite their appeal, these monsters have never received the scholarly attention that they deserve.

In *Sea Monsters on Medieval and Renaissance Maps*, Chet Van Duzer analyzes the most important examples of sea monsters on medieval and Renaissance maps produced in Europe. Van Duzer begins with the earliest *mappaemundi* on which these monsters appear in the tenth century and continues to the end of the sixteenth century and, along the way, sheds important light on the sources, influences, and methods of the cartographers who drew or painted them.

A beautifully designed visual reference work, *Sea Monsters on Medieval and Renaissance Maps* will be important not only in the history of cartography, art, and zoological illustration, but also in the history of the geography of the “marvelous” and of Western conceptions of the ocean.

Chet Van Duzer is a Kislak Fellow at the Library of Congress.

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