

From Wonder to Questions of Credibility

assembled by Douglas Allchin, 2019
[INFO IN BRACKETS IDENTIFIES IMAGES & SOURCES]

[*rapidly*]

- Let's travel back to the 1400-1500s, and the era of the great voyages of discovery [CARAVEL / MAP BY MAGGIOLO]. The voyagers and merchants brought back many wonders such as...
- ...a living rhinoceros [DRAWING BY ALBRECHT DURER, 1515]
- ...a "monstrous" crocodile, displayed in a chapel [CHAPEL D'OIRON, <1600] (cleverly positioned just above the confessional!), a remarkable large ostrich egg [EARLY 1200s], ...
- ...and a porcupine-like fish (blowfish)! [ALDROVANDI COLLECTION, LATE 1500s].
- Such objects, filled with wonder, were collected and displayed by the wealthy in "curiosity cabinets" [FERRANTE IMPERATO, *DELL HISTORIA NATURELLE* (1599); CABINET OF ULISSE ALDROVANDI, BOLOGNA; BENEDETTO CERUTI, APOTHECARY OF FRANCISCO CALZOLARI, VERONA (1580s)]
- Reports and drawings of fantastic beasts and natural phenomena poured into Europe, some also documented in the Orient [COMPARISON FROM J. NEEDHAM]. People were fascinated with "strange facts" such as: liquid phosphor in the sea near Cadiz, gems emitting light, colored flickering lights in the northern sky (1715), a brainless child born in Montpellier, the birth of a child with a tail of a mammal [DASTON & PARK, *WONDER AND THE ORDER OF NATURE*, 1998]
- Many reports seemed incredible, unbelievable. You might want to dismiss the ancient tales of griffins, but what do you say when someone shows you an actual griffin claw? [BRITISH MUSEUM, LATE 1500s]
- Can you dismiss the unicorn as myth when you can see and touch a unicorn horn? [Conrad Gesner, *Natural History*, 1551; Worm Museum, 1655]

▶ Central question:

Can you believe everything you see or hear? What is credible, what is not? Why?

[*more slowly and reflectively now*]

- Can you believe the rumors of a werewolf man— born in the wilds of Teneriffe, they say, but now a member of the French court? [PORTRAIT OF PETRUS GONZALUS, KUNSTHISTORISCHES MUSEUM, WIEN]
- These stories spread like wildfire through the new medium of communication — printing — with copies, and copies of copies, with ample opportunity for mistakes and disinformation.
▶ *Can you believe everything you read? What is the basis for credibility?*
- Well, don't believe everything! Ulisse Aldrovandi (1613) warns his readers of the fraudulent dragon, made from snipping, reshaping and drying a stingray.

[*encouraging more active engagement now*]

Let's look in detail at a few publications from worthy gentlemen, and you decide what to believe.

- Here is Olaus Magnus's *Carta Marina*, 1539, presented to the Pope to inform him about Scandanavia. The sea is filled with strange creatures.
- Do you believe this ship anchored on a tusked fish, with men setting a campfire on its back? *Who says "yes"? Who says "no"?*
- If not, do you also discount the "Ursi albi" — or white bear — on an ice floe? *Yes or no?*
- Should you dismiss these two sea monsters as mere sailor tales? *Yes or no?* Note that one is labeled Balena and the other Orca — names recognizable today for a baleen whale and a killer whale. Compare the double-spouted whale to one in a royal celebration, spouting red wine, depicted in the Valois tapestry of 1576.
- Do you believe this strange creature? *Yes or no?* It is labeled ziphius. Google that and you will get this photo — a beaked whale.
- Now consider these strange creatures. Which do you believe? A sea unicorn? A fish with wings? A sea serpent? A sea boar with a spiral pattern? A huge fish with a fringed collar? Are these poor but plausible representations of real creatures, or implausibly imagined? *Credible or not credible?*

Consider now cases from Ambroise Paré, a French surgeon, in *Monsters and Prodigies* (1575):

- You may easily recognize today an elephant, a toucan, a walrus (called a sea elephant), or marine boar (a narwhal?). But how would you know in 1575?
- Should you also believe Paré's dog-child, sea devil, or sea horse?
 - ▣ *On what do you base your belief?*
- Paré presents a man with another body issuing from his belly. *Believable, yes or no?* Note a 1516 print by Hans Burgkmaier of a reported birth in Tettwang, Germany
- For comparison, here are photos from the early 1990s of Jean-Jacques Libbera (c.1920) & Lalo Ramparsad (1901), both documented sideshow performers.
- Paré's conjoined twins are more familiar to us today [the Blažek sisters, Rosa & Josefina, 1910].
- But should we believe his two-headed monster? Such images can be found in cathedrals, but are they any more real than the gargoyles one finds there?
- Compare to Abigail & Brittany Hensel, born in Minnesota in 1990.
- So, do you also believe in the "monster of Ravenna" (1506)?
- The "monster of Krakow"? [PIERRE BOAISTUAU, *HISTORIES PRODIGIEUSES* (1559)]
- Or the monk-calf and pope-ass, from a 1523 pamphlet by Martin Luther and Philip Melancthon, presented as portents from God? [ILLUSTRATED BY LUCAS CRANACH]
 - ▣ *Again, what is the basis for credibility?*
- Back to the question of the werewolf-man...
- His name was Petrus Gonsalus, and he had a son and daughter, who inherited his hirsute condition and were also valued members of European courts in the late 1500s. [AGOSTINO CARRACCI, *HAIKY ARRIGO, FOOL PIETRO AND DWARF AMON*, c. 1598; LAVINIA FONTANA, *PORTRAIT OF ANTOINETTA GONZALVUS*, 1583]
- They shared a condition with Stefan Bibrowski (1907), also known as Lionel, the Lion-Faced Man of Barnum's circus

Now consider some modern cases of bizarre, incredible organisms. Decide which are real, which are not. At the same time, reflect on how you decide what is credible, what is not:

- 6 strange mammals
 - ▣ *Which is real, which imaginary? How do you decide? What criteria do you use?*
- 6 cute mammals
 - ▣ *Which is real, which imaginary? How do you decide?*
- 6 strange birds
 - ▣ *Which is real, which imaginary? How do you decide?*
- 9 strange creatures
 - ▣ *Which is real, which imaginary? How do you decide?*
- 9 strange sea creatures
 - ▣ *Which is real, which imaginary? How do you decide?*

General Discussion

▣ *How do you decide what is credible, what is not?*

Name a criterion you might use.

[Rapidfire single responses from each participant or student.]

- Closing teaser: *Giant squids are well known. But sightings are rare. How “giant” are they? Does this beached squid tell the story? **How do you know?** [SNOPEs]*