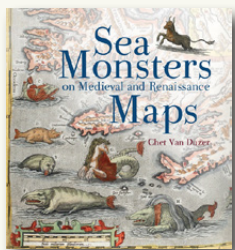


SEA MONSTERS ON MEDIEVAL AND RENAISSANCE MAPS



By Chet Van Duzer.

British Library, 2013. Distributed by University of Chicago Press.

144 pages, 115 color plates. \$35, cloth bound.

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Review by: Mark Denil

Figures of creatures on maps are, these days, a thoroughly suspect phenomenon. The prevailing paradigm for “serious” cartography discounts maps sporting such illustrations: they are commonly accounted as comical, or touristy; as kitschy, or as suitable for juveniles. Certainly, a map displaying anything like a monster on its face, cartouche, or surround is instantly identified as either depicting a fantasy landscape or as attempting to appear antique, or both. Because of this, the use of monsters on maps is extremely difficult to pull off in this day and age without looking cheap-jack and phoney.

Nevertheless, in Medieval and Renaissance times the use of monsters (along with kings, banners, flora, et cetera) on maps was an integral part of the cartographic vocabulary. Including a monster (or a king, a banner, or whatnot) denoted and connoted broadly understood statements about things like the environs of that place, general dangers in the world, or the affluence of the purchaser. So, obviously, while a sea monster on a map means one set of things to us today, it would have meant a rather different set of things to someone in Medieval or Renaissance times.

There are a number of scholarly and popular works which mention the use of monsters on maps, but very few that deal exclusively and comprehensively with sea monsters. The new book published by the British Library, *Sea Monsters on Medieval and Renaissance Maps*, is significant, therefore, both in regard to topic and to quality.

The fabulous and the grotesque have a strong hold on the imagination of humanity, regardless of intellectual constructs such as rationalism, and stake their territory on the fringes of the known, well away from the banality of the familiar. The locus of that fringe has, of course,

wandered hither and yon over the years: Egypt, China, Congo, Virginia, or the Deep Blue Sea, but the catalog of wonders supposed to be found there coalesced, despite the creatures’ occasional forced house-move, into a solid and enduring heritage that has come down to us through the works of traditional authorities. Works by the ancient Greek Ctesias, the Roman Pliny, and the Medieval Europeans Polo, Mandeville, and Nikitin all cataloged the monstrous and marvelous things to be seen in the world, often jumbling what we would consider incomplete reporting with fantastical lies. For the Classical, Medieval, and Renaissance reader, however, the canon of the monstrous, grotesque, and fabulous was a solid and respectable body of work. The obsessive division of written and graphic works into rigid categories of literary vs. non-literary, or imaginative vs. factual, is a modern one, and regardless of how we might view them today, these works were the foundation upon which our current, self-styled scientific, knowledge of the world was erected.

Then as now, in mapping the world, it is natural that cartographers look to include what information is at hand. Data, then as now, are taken from both old-standby, go-to sources and emerging accounts of new discoveries, and on occasion hindsight may show the choice of one or the other to have been less than ideal. In Medieval and Renaissance times, what we see now as the literature of wonders was an integral part of what was known; especially of what was known about places little known. “Like the giraffe and the duckbilled platypus, the creatures of these remoter regions ... are exceedingly improbable. Nevertheless they exist, they are facts of observation; and, as such, they cannot be ignored by anyone honestly trying to understand the world in which he lives” (Huxley 1956, 84). Or, in the words of Walter Shandy: “Would I had seen a white bear (for how can I imagine it?)” (Sterne [1759–67] 1980, 285).

What qualifies something as a monster, and, specifically, what constituted a monster to the Medieval or Renaissance mind? Are monsters abominations against nature (as Mandeville and others wrote), or are they adornments of God’s universe, as Isidore and St. Augustine thought? Clearly they could be both or either, and a lot of what we see as sea *creatures* (whales, walruses, or manatees, for



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example) were considered sea *monsters* in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. For the purposes of this book, the author Van Duzer defines a sea monster as an aquatic creature that was thought astonishing and exotic in Classical, Medieval, or Renaissance times, regardless of whether it was in fact real or mythical.

Mapmakers back then, as has been noted, drew information for their maps from a range of sources; some standard, reliable fallbacks and others new and cutting edge. Their sources for sea monsters were also similarly varied, and Van Duzer explores this pedigree. He painstakingly tracks down antecedents for individual sea monsters in literature, illustrations, and other maps, and traces their descendants through maps drawn later. He makes it clear that sea monsters are normally creatures with lineage, and not just sports of the individual map maker or map illuminator.

This makes sense when we also learn that the inclusion of sea monsters on hand drawn maps was far from common. Evidence points to their presence as more often an indication of the conspicuous affluence of the client than as a locator for specific significant dangers to vessels or seafarers. Someone ordering a map with sea monsters would want recognizable monsters, charismatic monsters with a story to tell, monsters one could look up in whatever they used in those days for Wikipedia. In the age before map printing, when each copy of any map would be either specifically commissioned or deliberately composed on speculation, figurations such as sea monsters were costly additions. In some cases it seems clear that additional artists were brought onto the project to add sea monsters after the geographic elements and other map furniture had been completed, and surviving business records show price differentials for maps with and without monsters. Nowadays, of course, optional extras are usually restricted to more mundane things like lamination.

An informal and non-exhaustive survey which I conducted indicates that monsters do not feature particularly frequently on newer maps. Certainly, most monsters, such as dog-headed men, gryphons, or cyclopes, have generally fared rather badly in the modern imagination, but sea monsters seem to be remembered somewhat more kindly. In the 1920s, Somerset Maugham wrote that “When I set out in the morning the dew was so heavy that I could see it falling, and the sky was grey; but in a little while the sun pierced through and in the sky, blue now, the cumulus clouds were like the white sea-monsters gamboling sedately round the North Pole” (Maugham [1930] 1967,

48). This fond persistence is perhaps due both to the continued status of the abysmal sea as mysterious and remote (yet uncomfortably near at hand), and to the extraordinary insouciance with which the old sea monsters disport and splash about, even while devouring distressed seamen.

Chet Van Duzer’s *Sea Monsters on Medieval and Renaissance Maps* is a slim volume bound in blue cloth with gold foil lettering on the spine. It sports a glossy dust jacket with full bleed, enlarged details of hand-colored maps from the *Theatrum Orbis Terrarum* of Ortelius, showing monsters in the seas off Iceland (on the front) and the Holy Land (on the back). Just inside, the front and back endpapers also boast excellent monochrome enlargements of sea monsters taken from engraved maps by, respectively, Sophianos and Mercator.

The publisher lists the book’s dimensions as 8 × 9 inches, but my copy seems to have grown slightly; my tape measure gives pages of 8½ × 9½ (cover 9 × 9¾). In any event, the pages are nice and broad, with lots of space for two columns of text and fine, uncrowded pictures.

The illustrations are clearly one of the great strengths of this book. The jacket illustrations, already mentioned, are from examples housed in the British Library, as are many, but far from all, of the 115 fine reproductions on the inside pages. The paper used is bright, opaque, and smooth without being too glossy, and is well suited to receiving the images.

The text is divided into thirty-nine chapters, supported by opening matter plus ending notes and indexes, and interspersed with four thematic *Pictorial Excursus* (or, if you prefer, *excursuses*, although that term strikes me as a tad gauche). These are double page spreads, each with eight 3 × 3½ inch map details and captions. Three of the four excursus deal generally with sea monsters (“The Dangers of...,” “Whimsical...,” and “More Whimsical...”), while the other depicts episodes from “The Cartographic Career of the Walrus.” The chapters address various aspects of the sea monster phenomenon, progressing more or less chronologically from their earliest medieval appearances in tenth-century *mappamundi* to their late, anachronistic, employment in the late sixteenth century.

I have mentioned the excellent illustrations from varied sources, but, oddly, there is no comprehensive list of source maps. The supplied list of *manuscripts* cites sixty-four separate documents residing in thirty-seven different

collections (eleven of the 64 from the British Library, seven from the Bibliothèque nationale de France, and the rest from elsewhere), but the book also has a number of illustrations from *printed* maps, and these are not listed. Source information for printed examples must be gleaned from the text and captions.

Only one illustration is obviously badly cropped: the map of the harbor of Brindisi with sea monsters in a late eleventh-century manuscript of Lucan's *Pharsalia* (Figure 12, on page 25). The text describes various figures on either side of a tongue of land, but the upper figures are almost completely beyond the top edge of the picture.

All in all, I find this book to be an excellent discussion and sampler on the topic of sea monsters on maps. It covers, in a broadly accessible manner, the whole of the period of their common use, and establishes a pedigree for the practice of their inclusion. It proposes and discusses the medieval roots of the sea monster as a feature of cartographic furniture, the traditional vocabulary (rooted in classical pictorial practice and in contemporary evolving knowledge), and the grammar for their inclusion on the map face. It shows the birth, flowering, zenith, and decay of the practice, using well-chosen examples from a wide variety of sources, illustrated at appropriate scales with clear, sharp reproductions. Reasonably priced at \$35, it gathers together examples of sea monsters from maps that

it would be onerous for an individual to wander about to see personally (even for someone living only eight blocks from the Library of Congress, where more than a few of the originals reside).

Van Duzer writes in his introduction: "To medieval and Renaissance beholders, the sea monsters on European maps represented real dangers, but to modern eyes they are among the more engaging elements of old maps, whether swimming vigorously, gamboling amid the waves, attacking ships, or simply displaying themselves for our appreciation" (8). Without a doubt, the sea monster is seen today as an iconic, albeit quaint and curious, element of old maps and charts depicting the sea; iconic, that is, regardless of how atypical it may have been even in its heyday.

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MASTERING IRON: THE STRUGGLE TO MODERNIZE AN AMERICAN INDUSTRY, 1800–1868



By Anne Kelly Knowles.

University of Chicago Press, 2013.

336 pages, 66 color plates and 10 halftones (approximately half are maps), 2 line drawings, 8 tables. \$45.00, hardcover.

ISBN: 978-0-226-44859-6

Review by: Joseph Stoll, Syracuse University

It was with great anticipation that I opened *Mastering Iron*, having previously heard highly positive comments and having seen glowing reviews. I found that the contents of the book fully justified what I had heard and seen. This is a most handsome book, and exudes high quality throughout. The cover is nicely designed and encloses

pages of durable weight and finish. The pages are richly illustrated and includes colorful maps along with evocative period artwork.

In the introductory chapter, "Iron in America," Knowles explains the rise of iron's importance in the late 18th and 19th centuries, and its role in fueling the Industrial Revolution. The author further discusses how historical and economic studies have failed to compare development of iron industries across the iron regions of the US. These studies also lacked a comprehensive approach to factors of development. The scope of Knowles' study is described as one that reconstructs and understands the concrete places and regions where iron was made, including the variety of factors that came into play throughout those places—labor, management, transportation, modes of production, and immigration.