"God created, according to their kinds, the sea monsters and every living creature that moves in the waters": the centrality of the monstrous in medieval maritime imagination

PAULO CATARINO LOPES

NOVA FCSH - Instituto de Estudos Medievais
http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8543-1111
paulo.lopes@fcsh.unl.pt

Abstract: The reflection we propose to carry out here is guided by a fundamental issue: the centrality of the figure of the monster in medieval maritime imagination and the important role of the monstrous in structuring that imagination. In medieval man's worldview, fantasy and reality, truth and the implausible had no boundaries. Everything was interconnected in a mental process resulting in the entire receiving public avidly "drinking in" information about strange and exotic things originating from places beyond the boundaries of what was known, i.e., beyond the Order and safety ensured by Christian authority. Because it is immense, unstable and above all unknown, the ocean is par excellence one of these places. And for this reason, it is also perceived as being widely inhabited by monstrous beings. Although in the late medieval period, metamorphosed by increasingly frequent experiences of the high seas and especially by a number of religious solutions which, by sacralising the ocean, enabled people to face it as well as the risk of contact with the excessive and portentous beings that inhabited it, the mental state of apprehension and fear caused by sea monsters remained until at least the last decades of modernity.

Keywords: Monster, Middle Ages, Religious imagination, Fear, Ocean.

"Deus criou, de acordo com suas espécies, os monstros marinhos e todas as criaturas vivas que se movem nas águas": a centralidade do monstruoso no imaginário marítimo medieval

Resumo: A reflexão que aqui propomos desenvolver é orientada por uma problemática fundamental: a centralidade da figura do monstro no imaginário marítimo medieval e o importante papel desempenhado pelo monstruoso na estruturação do mesmo. Na mundividência do homem medievo, fantasia e realidade, verdadeiro e inverosímil, não conhecem fronteiras. Tudo se interliga num processo mental, que tem por consequência o público receptor, todo ele, "beber" avidamente as informações respeitantes ao estranho e exótico proveniente dos espaços situados para lá das fronteiras conhecidas, isto é, para lá da Ordem e segurança garantidas pela autoridade cristã. Porque imenso, instável e sobretudo desconhecido, o oceano é por excelência um destes espaços. E também por essa razão é percepcionado como largamente habitado por seres monstruosos. Ainda que, nos derradeiros séculos medievais, metamorfoseado pela experiência cada vez mais frequente do mar alto e, especialmente, por todo um conjunto de soluções de carácter religioso que, sacralizando o oceano, permitem enfrentá-lo bem como ao risco de contacto com

---

os seres excessivos e portentosos que nele habitam, o estado mental de receio e medo provocado pelo monstruoso marinho mantém-se até, pelo menos, aos decénios finais da modernidade.

Palavras-chave: Monstro, Idade Média, Imaginário religioso, Medo, Oceano.

The water of the oceans is the mother of all monsters.
Pliny the Elder

A fundamental problem guides the reflection developed in the pages that follow: the centrality of the figure of the monster in medieval maritime imagination and the important role played by the monstrous in structuring that imagination. From here, two founding questions arise. First, in what way does the monster assume this central position, that is, what mental mechanisms and consequent emotional states operate to make this happen, and how do they position themselves in a time frame (it is a slow, progressive process, or a cyclical phenomenon; does it reveal itself as a constant or does it assume variations)? On the other hand, what is the nature and specificity of this character of monstrosity which guarantees it a functionality in structuring the imaginary in question?

Right away, at the methodological level, it should be noted that the analysis to be carried out falls mainly within the scope of the History of mentalities and not of other ways of approaching the past. To that extent, the documentation to which we resort falls particularly within the framework of antique and medieval cultural production.

Still in terms of methodological options, it is important to keep in mind the following framework, which acts as a starting platform for the aforementioned analysis. The Iberian voyages of the 15th and 16th centuries pioneered a movement of European expansion whose main consequence was proto-globalisation. Within this framework, Portugal played a leading role in the forefront of objectively describing the world and transforming the *art* of navigation into a *technique* of navigation – both of which were founded on the primacy of observation and experimentation. However, there is a whole dimension of imagination associated with late-medieval Iberian and European ocean voyages that does not disappear. One might say that this is the dark side of the process of the Discoveries, of the unmeasurable and ultimately the *purely* subjective of what is scientifically considered *error* and which is based on the least heroic of human passions: fear. Analysing these fickle masses, which are impossible to define or to materialise rigorously, implies diving into the domain of the religious and the spiritual, trying to grasp how a navigator of the late Middle Ages faced the unknown and related to it. One topic where this state of

affairs is revealed as archetypal is that of oceanic fauna at the limit of its dimension: sea monsters.

1. Antecedents and fundamentals

a. The biblical and Greco-Roman legacy

Like everything related to imagination about the sea, the notion of marine monsters – in the sense that St. Augustine (354-430) assigned it: "This multitude of miracles called monsters *(monstra),* ostensors or wonders (*ostenta)*, portents (*portenta)*, prodigies *(prodigia)*"[1] – which predominated in late medieval centuries and extended into the first years of modernity, was heir to Classical Antiquity and the early centuries of the medieval period.

The ocean has had an ambiguous character since the Greeks. There we find the *Islands of the Blessed,* mentioned by Hesiod (8th century BC) and Pindar (c. 518 BC-c. 438 BC), or the *Elysian Fields,* which appear since Homer (9th century BC). And that is the location, in Plato's words (c. 427 BC-347 BC), of the paradisiacal archipelago of *Atlantis.* On the other hand, the classic graphic representations of marine beings reveal colour and life, and are even reassuring. However, in parallel but contrary to these, the imagination resulting from the voyages and deeds of Greek heroes in the Atlantic – namely Jason, Theseus, Hercules and Ulysses – brought with it a whole dimension of danger and hostility related to the passage through the Strait of Gibraltar, which became symbolically connoted with the "pillars of Hercules". Pindar even pointed out the impossibility of sailing beyond the Pillars of Hercules because they were inhabited by monstrous beasts[2]. This influence went so far that at the dawn of the Renaissance, in Canto XXVI of his *Inferno*, Dante Alighieri (1265-1321) immortalised the vision of the Pillars of Hercules in the desperate voice of Ulysses.

Aristotle (384 BC-322 BC), in his work *On the Generation of Animals,* argued that monstrosity is a phenomenon that goes against natural cases in general – "both deficiency and excess are monstrous"[3] – but not against "eternal and necessary" Nature, i.e., Nature considered as a whole.

But the medieval West got to know Greek traditions essentially through Roman writers. What these writers imported into the Latin world regarding the Greek view of monsters, and the monstrous character associated with their own

---

1   Santo Agostinho – *A Cidade de Deus.* Vol. III. Lisboa: Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, 1995, livro XXI, cap. VIII, 2157.
2   Guillermo Céspedes del Castillo – *La exploración del Atlântico.* Madrid: Mapfre, 1991.
3   Aristotle – *Generation of Animals.* London: Loeb Classical Library, 1979, p. 125.

reflections, constituted the foundations that shaped medieval thought on this subject.

Although more reticent and sceptical, Roman representations of the ocean were still imbued with wonder and fantasy. We need only examine, in *Naturalis Historia* (77) by Pliny *the Elder* (23-79), the representations of the Atlantic Ocean and the descriptions of monsters associated with the sea. It should be noted that a great many of the monsters, particularly sea monsters, that populated the imagination of the Middle Ages[4] originated with this author. Other Roman authors whose representations of the ocean and descriptions of monsters associated with the sea were influential in the medieval world were, for instance, Marcus Terentius Varro (116-27 BC), *De gente populi Romani* (43 BC); Lucretius (c. 99 BC–c. 55 BC), *De rerum natura*; Pomponius Mela (?-45), *De Situ Orbis* or *De Chorographia* (37-41); Marcus Cornelius Fronto (100-c. 160); Solinus (c. 210-?)[5], *De mirabilibus mundi* (a text which circulated under a further two alternative names, *Collectanea rerum memombilium* and *Polyhistor)*; Aulus Gellius (c. 115-180), *Noctes Atticae* (c. 146).

An important contributor, at the end of the Roman Empire, to the negative medieval view of the sea that lay beyond the Pillars of Hercules was Rufus Festus Avienus (4th century AD), with his poem *Ora Marítima* (c. 350)[6]: "At the point in the Ocean where the deep sea penetrates so far that the abyss of our sea stretches wide, the Atlantic Gulf opens".[7] Avienus speaks of the "abyss of the ocean populated by monsters"[8], emphasising that "A great number of monsters swim throughout the depths and a great terror of beasts inhabits the seas. Himilco, the Carthaginian, mentions that in other times he observed and proved for himself these [creatures] in the Ocean"[9].

The philosopher and encyclopaedist Varro, although he argued that monsters are those we see as being born against nature – being therefore in opposition to Aristotle – laid the foundations for a definition of the monstrous that would prevail until the Middle Ages by using three words to designate these unique beings: *monstrum*, *portentum*, and *prodigium*[10]. Later, St. Augustine would revive this notion.

---

4   In a global sense, about the imagination and the imaginary in the Middle Ages see Jean-Claude Schmitt – Le immagini, l'immaginario e il tempo della storia. In *Immaginario e immaginazione nel Medioevo*. Eds. Maria Bettetini; Francesco Paparella. Louvain-la-Neuve, Turnhout: Fédération internationale des Instituts d'études médiévales (FIDEM), Brepols, 2009, p. 11-44.

5   It should be noted that Solinus was above all a compiler who retrieved texts by important authors such as Suetonius (69-c.141) and Apuleius (c.125-c.180).

6   A poem which combines diverse sources and news or memoirs of several voyages. It is based on a journey taken in the 6th century BC, with later additions by various authors from different periods.

7   Avieno – *Orla Marítima*. Coimbra: Instituto Nacional de Investigação Científica, 1992, p. 19.

8   Avieno – *Orla Marítima…*, p. 20.

9   Avieno – *Orla Marítima…*, p. 28.

10 Claude Lecouteux – *Les monstres dans la pensée médiévale européenne*. Paris: Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1993, p. 9.

Fronto, in his turn, declared in the second century AD that with monsters the regular order of nature was reversed. Such a definition has an implicit interpretation: a monster is disorder and somehow *contra naturam*, i.e., "against nature"[11]. Later, already in the Christian period but still within the context of the Roman Empire, some figures stand out – Lactantius (240-320), St. Jerome (c. 346-420), Ambrose of Milan (c. 339-397) with his *Hexameron*, Martianus Capella (360-428) and his *De nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii*, and Gregory of Tours (c. 538-594)[12].

b. Early Middle Ages

The Romans inherited the Greek traditions, and medieval scholars copied and adapted them to a new reality: Christianity.

Pliny, of all the classical authors, was the most influential in shaping the medieval imagination regarding sea monsters. What predominated from his writings in the works of medieval *auctoritates* was a nefarious and disquieting view of the aquatic element, especially the ocean. So much so that the Atlantic specifically became known as *Mare Tenebrosum* (dark sea). From his text, one retains that it is in the ocean that the most extreme hybrid and monstrous beings can be found, and in the largest number of species. One also gathers that the immensity of some of the animals that inhabit the sea is a consequence of its extreme size. Thanks to all of this, animal life in the ocean is not subject to order, but to confusion and chaos. Therefore, the sea is *par excellence* the realm of wonders.

From this perspective, it is the very nature of the aquatic medium that defines the presence and the concentration of this *mirabilia* of monsters. There is thus a harmonious and coherent relationship of interdependence between a monster and the space surrounding it. As the Franciscan friar Roger Bacon (c. 1210-1294) emphasised in *Opus Majus* (c. 1260), the place of birth is the principle that presides over the generation of things[13].

A monster does not follow the customary laws of being; it is something complex and hard to define. It is outside the norm because it is extreme, and this nature of disproportion and immoderation originates precisely from the place it inhabits and where it proliferates.

Importantly, in the first chapter of Genesis there is a reference to aquatic beings of an extreme nature, so that in an organised world conceived entirely from a

---

11   Chet Van Duzer – Hic sunt dracones: The Geography and Cartography of Monsters. In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Monsters and the Monstrous*. Eds. Asa Simon Mittman; Peter J. Dendle, Farnham: Ashgate, 2013, p. 387-435; John Block Friedman – *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*. Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2000, p. 111-116; Lisa Verner – *The Epistemology of the Monstrous in the Middle Ages*. New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 5-7.

12   Claude Lecouteux – *Les monstres dans la pensée médiévale européénne...*, p. 9.

13   John Henry Bridges – Introduction. In BACON, Roger – *Opus Majus*. Vol. I. Oxford: Clarendon Press, xxi-xcii.

theological point of view, as in the medieval period, they are part of the natural order of things, i.e., they are an integral part of creation – from the medieval perspective, the universe was ordered into a symbolic geography and according to a scale of values that gives a place to each element, be it material or spiritual: "God said, 'Let the waters teem with countless living beings […]. God created, according to their kinds, the sea monsters and every living creature that moves in the waters […]. And God saw that it was good. God blessed them, saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply and fill the waters of the sea' […]".[14]

St. Augustine[15] and Isidore of Seville (570-636), the great *auctoritas* of the Middle Ages, would defend and legitimise this premise, which is in line with what Aristotle had stated and which formed the basis of the way medieval man conceived the monstrous: monsters, especially marine ones, are mysterious evidence of divine imagination and creation. And as such they are necessary. This was the predominant conception during the medieval period and the dawn of the modern era, and underpinning this, the Bible and Christian religiosity played leading roles as structuring elements.

By means of the Holy Scripture the shadow of Jonah, who was swallowed by an epic monster, and the dreadful Leviathan[16] are always present in the marine environment. Both are extreme beings, as is the environment around them. And anything extreme, as Pliny emphasised, is monstrous and unnatural – but, as we have already said, it is not against nature. According to the Roman author, this is because everything that exists on earth has something that corresponds to it in the sea[17]. Hence, monsters are an inescapable presence in existence, and particularly in the ocean, which the Roman author considers to be the space *par excellence* of these beings.

A sea monster is a manifestation of disorder and also, like all existing creatures, a manifestation of God – it appears by divine will. Leviathan's strength, for example, reveals the strength of God, its Lord. It is proof that God has dominion not only over the positive forces of life, but also the negative and destructive forces. To control them is, after all, a demonstration of the power and wisdom of God. This is the ambiguity that was always present in the Middle Ages, which came from Aristotle and was consolidated by St. Augustine and Isidore of Seville: within a natural order superior to the one we perceive, the sea monster is part of the divine plan and contributes to the composition of the universe as an element of diversity.

---

14 *BÍBLIA Sagrada.* Lisboa: Difusora Bíblica (Missionários Capuchinhos), 1992, p. 17-18.

15 Santo Agostinho – *A Cidade de Deus…*, 2157.

16 Sometimes a huge sea serpent, sometimes an amphibian quadruped with long horns and a boar's tusks.

17 Pliny – *Natural History,* book VIII, vol. III. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1958-1962, p. 57.

The Middle Ages thus recognises the place of the sea monster in the norm of nature and spirit.

In *City of God,* St. Augustine included a reflection on monstrosity that would be decisive for the future of the figure of the monster in the Middle Ages. He was the author who, on the one hand, first raised the question of whether God created monsters, and, on the other, was the source of the interest shown by the Church in monsters and their place in Creation.

The bishop of Hippo contests Varro's view of monsters as something *contra naturam*: "How is that against nature which comes from the will of God, since the will of such a great Creator is what makes the nature of every created thing? A prodigy is therefore not against nature, but against what we know of nature. […]. Hence this multitude of miracles emerged like a forest of so-called monsters *(monstra),* ostensors or marvels (*ostenta*), portents (*portenta*), prodigies (*prodigia*) […]. Monsters (*monstera*) justifiably called this way, derive from showing (*monstrare*) because they show something, and take on its meaning […]."[18]

A monster is therefore, like all existing creatures, a manifestation of God's action. A different manifestation, of course, different in its ambiguity and uniqueness. But, after all, if it were not ambiguous, it would simply be an animal, and as such it would lose its monstrous character, i.e., the fact that it is a different, rare, unwonted, unusual, strange, admirable phenomenon: "But to us, however, these facts which are produced as if against nature, or which are said to be produced against nature […] we call them *monsters, ostensors, portents, prodigies,* because these facts must mean, show, predict and announce beforehand that God will accomplish all that He predicted for the future with regard to the bodies of men, with no difficulty standing in His way, with no law of nature opposing Him."[19]

From this we can deduce that the fact that man does not know the reasons for monstrosity cannot lead to the claim that the Creator made a mistake. In fact, ignorance results from the fact that man only has a partial perspective. It follows that monstrosity can only be thought of in terms of "relationship", so it must therefore be understood within the whole of Creation, where nothing results from chance, be it similarity or difference[20]. This reflection was crucial because, due to its integrative consequences, it turned out to decisively influence medieval thought regarding the place of monsters in the world. Although not being the central figure, the monster is nevertheless omnipresent – in narratives, for instance, monsters are rarely the protagonists, but the truth is that they are always there, and are determinant.

---

18   Santo Agostinho – *A Cidade de Deus...*, 2154-2157.
19   Santo Agostinho – *A Cidade de Deus...*, 2158.
20   Luís Adão da Fonseca (ed.) – *O Atlântico: a memória de um Oceano.* Vol. 1: *Do Imaginário do Atlântico ao Atlântico Imaginado*. Porto: Banco Português do Atlântico, 1993, p. 15.

In the action of Church authorities there is thus an effort to adapt old mental elements – such as the symbolic universe of monstrous races, largely owing to pre-classical and classical pagan mythological backgrounds – to the new religious point of reference: Christianity. This is why, when dealing with monstrous races, St. Augustine argued that monstrosity exists as a sort of didactic divine programme, as a manifestation of divine wisdom. In this way "pagan *mirabilia*" were Christianised, relegating all intrinsic references to the domain of myth and allegory.

From here on, wonders (*mirabilia*) and miracles (*miracula*) of nature, for example monsters[21], were now set to work in justifying and legitimating religious and spiritual conceptions where the idea of miracle, divine intervention, fear and the unknown, reigned. This is evidenced by the massive transposition of the fabulous, the demonic and the wonderful – psychological elements of medieval daily life – onto the walls and columns of cathedrals.

Regarding prodigious beings and revealing Pliny's clear influence, Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies* – a compendium of ancient, profane and religious knowledge – performs a true synthesis on the notion of the monstrous. There are two main ideas to retain: monsters do not occur against nature, since they happen by divine will; and the Creator's will is the nature of all that is created. It follows that, instead, monsters occur contrary to *known nature*. The failure is therefore in man, who can only grasp part of nature, the part that he knows and through which he *assesses* monsters.

We see, then, that Isidore also contests Varro, stating that a portent does not exist against nature, but *against known nature*: "Varro said that portents are things that seem to be born against the law of nature. In reality, they do not happen against nature, for they happen by divine will, and the will of the Creator is the nature of all that is created. Hence, even Gentiles sometimes call God Nature, and at other times simply God. Consequently, portents do not happen against nature, but against known nature[22]".

The first medieval definition of monstrosity emerged in this way from the voice of the great medieval compiler, whose *magnum opus* largely influenced all intellectual production in the centuries that followed. More specifically, in the chapter entitled *De monstris*, where the author takes up classical definitions and extends them, renewing their scope. By contesting Varro, Isidore attributes a theological dimension to the problem of human monstrosities: if a monster exists,

---

21 Portent, ostent, or prodigy, i.e., all phenomena or beings that had in common the fact of being rare and unusual, thus causing awe, fascination and enchantment.

22 Isidoro de Sevilha – *Etimologias*, II (livros XI-XX), Ed. José Oroz Reta e Manuel A. Marcos Casquero. Madrid: Editorial Católica, 1983, p. 47.

it is by divine permission. Nature is in fact the result of God's creative action, so monsters are part of the natural order of things. Work of the divine art, nature brings order from chaos and gives everything and everyone a place in creation.

To the archbishop of ancient Hyspalis, the word *monstra* derives from *monitus* because something is "shown". In this sense, a monster is "revealing". It is the manifestation of something, which means that what is important is not the monster itself, but rather its *monstrosity*, which attests to the order of Creation[23]. Moreover, in the same way that within a people there are various monstrous beings, in the whole of humanity there are various monstrous races[24]. There is a definite parallelism with St. Augustine.

Here, it is worth noting that while the monstrous beings of the ancient world possessed a component where wonder was intensely felt, medieval monsters, while retaining this component, were more connoted with fear, sin and death because of the theological conceptions transmitted by Christianity[25].

In essence, Isidore followed the interpretations of classical authors, presenting the ocean as a place of dissimilarity, the opposite of life[26]. Therefore, man should only venture into inland seas like the Mediterranean. To go far from the coast represented a tragic end for seafarers, because in that totally unknown space they could face the inhuman and the greatest of terrors. This is the structure of the mythical imagination that underlies Isidore's thesis on the sea – a structure that has a well-demarcated place for marine monsters and which is irreconcilable with a calm and positive view of the aquatic element, especially the ocean.

c. Advancing through the medieval centuries

Other works and other authors were important for the construction of the medieval imagination regarding monsters and the monstrous[27]. In addition to *Arabian Nights* – the main text in the Islamic world regarding monsters– and the riches of Scandinavian mythology, we highlight Paul the Deacon's (c. 720-c. 799), *Historia Langobardorum*; Rabanus Mauru's (780-856), *De Universo* (840); Konrad von Megenberg's (1309-1374), *Das Buch der Natur*; Lambert of Saint-Omer's

---

23 Luís Adão da Fonseca (ed.) – *O Atlântico: a memória de um Oceano.* Vol. 1...

24 Isidoro de Sevilha – *Etimologias*..., p. 49.

25 Cecília Roque Granja – *As representações do fantástico na pintura portuguesa do século XVI: demónios, monstros e dragões.* Vol. I. Lisboa: Universidade de Lisboa, 1992. Tese de Mestrado.

26 José Mattoso – O imaginário marítimo medieval. In *Obras Completas José Mattoso – Naquele Tempo – Ensaios de História Medieval.* Vol. I. Lisboa: Círculo de Leitores, 2000, p. 233.

27 Leonardo Cappelletti – *Mirabilia Naturae*: il caso del *Monstrum* nella Scolastica. In *Immaginario e immaginazione nel medioevo.* Eds. Maria Bettetini; Francesco Paparella. Louvain-la-Neuve, Turnhout: Fédération internationale des Instituts d'études médiévales (FIDEM), Brepols, 2009, p. 61-76.

(c. 1061-1250), *Liber floridus* (c. 1120); and Honoré d'Augsburg's (XII century), *Imago mundi* (1123). Thanks to the latter work, the teratological traditions compiled by Solinus were made known. Pedro d'Ailly's *De Imago Mundi* is itself indebted to it.

In the 12th century, there occurred an event of great importance for medieval culture: the translation schools of Toledo, Salerno and Montpellier sought new information about the world in the countries of Islam, as well as in regions under Greek influence. This resulted in works that were crucial for the notion of the wonderful in medieval imagination.

Then, in the 13th century, works of an encyclopaedic nature returned – namely *De naturis rerum* (1213) by Alexander Neckam (1157-1217); *Opus de natura rerum* (1240) by Thomas of Cantimpré (1201-1272); *Speculum Naturale* (the first part of the vast compendium of knowledge of the Middle Ages, *Speculum Maius* [1235-1264]) by Vincent of Beuvais (c.1184/1194-c. 1264); *Liber de mirabilibus mundi* (1209-1214) by Gervase of Tilbury (c. 1155-1234); and *De proprietatibus rerum* (1240) by the Franciscan friar Bartholomew the Englishman (c. 1203-1272), among other texts.

Naturally, in parallel with these works, bestiaries occupy a special place in the erudite production of the Middle Ages. Disseminators of a large body of information regarding real and imaginary/mythical fauna, bestiaries find their best expression in *Physiologus,* which dates back to a Byzantine compilation of the 2nd century. It should be noted that, in these works, fables are accompanied by moral considerations where each animal becomes a symbol to be interpreted.

But monstrous beasts also occupy an important place in independent zoological treatises such as *Physica* (1150) by Hildegard of Bingen (1098-1179) and *Livre des Bêtes* by Pseudo-Hugh of Fouilloy (c. 1100-1172). The Dominican bishop Albert the Great (1193/1206-1280) summarised these writings in his treatise *De animalibus* (1258/1262).

By conferring unquestionable credibility to the figure of the monster, these works encouraged its firm integration in contemporary imagination. Simultaneously, they contributed to the wide dissemination and consequent knowledge about the notion of the monstrous and of monstrosity. Due to all this, they constitute the backbone of the teratological heritage of the Middle Ages.

Apart from the great encyclopaedias and the great treatises, a whole set of important secondary productions should be emphasised. The most famous records are *De rebus in Oriente mirabilibus* (or *Lettre de Farasmanes*) and *Livre de Monstres,* both from the 9th century. Further there is literature prized principally for its entertainment value, including the legends surrounding the travels and adventures of Alexander the Great.

Also worth mentioning, still within the scope of entertainment literature and due to its projection and wide circulation[28], are the supposed *Travels* of Sir John Mandeville (c. 1356), which describes the Eastern world and its wonders, islands and monsters. This is a compilation taken from many of the texts and authors mentioned above, namely Solinus and Isidore. Mandeville's claim that monstrosity results from unbalanced, disordered and immoderate reason had the particularity of projecting monstrosity into the realm of the imagination.

2. Processes and systems

a. The importance of travel books

In addition to encyclopaedias, *Imago Mundi* and bestiaries, among other works, the multiform genre of travel books has contributed significantly to the affirmation of the monster's, and particularly the sea monster's, place in the medieval imagination. They are testimonies of diverse characters that are derived from equally differentiated circumstances.

Acting as an expression of activities performed in different sectors of coeval life and the mobility that characterised them – from pilgrimage to diplomacy and including, among others, mercantile and missionary pursuits – these texts, in a variety of ways and with no established pattern, commonly relied on a number of narrative procedures to ensure their autonomy in the panorama of medieval prose. Three of these narrative procedures are of particular significance in what concerns monsters: the presence of wonders or *mirabilia*; the absence of a clear separation between geography, history, legend and myth; and the purpose of making the world known.

In the first case, travellers often interrupt the description of their itinerary in order to narrate the *miracles* they encounter on the way or that they heard about. These are fabulous narratives intrinsically associated with the places they travel through, and which arouse great expectation in their readers. They tell of an unusual and unknown world that is nevertheless absolutely real, since it was seen and experienced, or heard of, by the authors/narrators. It is a world of wonders because it is related to what is unseen and unobserved in daily and familiar life. Monsters are paradigmatic examples of this framework.

In the second case, it should be noted that in these accounts – unlike the *Imago Mundi,* for instance, which present these clearly independent fields – the mention

---

28   It is an impressive number of handwritten copies and printed versions. See Christiane Deluz – *Le livre de Jean de Mandeville, une «géographie» au XIVe siècle.* Louvain-la-Neuve: Université Catholique de Louvain, 1988.

of a certain place can serve to evoke a political event, give a name to its fantastic inhabitants or remember a hero connected to its foundation. Legend and History, fable and reality thus work hand in hand, especially in the accounts of fictitious journeys – texts whose fundamental purpose was to synthesise geographical knowledge at a given moment, and where reading the *auctoritas,* studying more or less contemporary maps and using oral legends and testimonies of coeval travellers, largely replaced the real events experienced by the authors themselves.

Regarding the third and last procedure, it should be noted that the intention of disseminating news about a certain reality, the world as it appears in the eyes of the traveller, is the main thread of the travel narrative. The important thing, therefore, is the information that is passed on, regardless of the criteria of veracity. On the other hand, these accounts also present themselves as an initiation into the enigmas that the world contains within its borders. After all, to travel round the globe is also to travel through its mysteries, its questions, its past and its future. Hence, travel is *par excellence* a mechanism for reflecting on Creation, time, space, diversity, unity.

A practical example concerning sea monsters, encompassing the three abovementioned procedures is provided by the letter of the crusader (Raol / Randulfus) relating the conquest of Lisbon from the Moors in 1147. As the name itself indicates, this is an epistolary record which in essence narrates a warlike act. However, the background and what structures the whole narrative is the pursuit of an itinerary: the crusaders' journey to the Holy Land. It therefore also functions, with all legitimacy, as a travel account. This is in addition to making use of most of the narrative procedures that define the "genre" of a medieval travel text, particularly the three mentioned above, and very specifically suspending the telling of the journey in question to narrate the *miracles* the author and his comrades encounter on the way – in this case the Sirens that are heard by the travellers: "on the Friday before the ascension of the Lord, we set sail. (…); at dusk, however, a storm arose and we were all scattered to every side. The extreme darkness of the night and the unrestrained current of the sea forced even the most fearless sailors to despair; in the meantime, the Sirens were heard, a horrifying sound, first accompanied by laments, then laughter and mirth like the shouts of troops making provocations".[29]

Due to all this, the diverse contents of travel books enjoyed rare popularity among readers, irrespective of how fanciful they were. Consequently, less truthful accounts purported to be credible, like the case of Mandeville's text which combines the account of a pilgrimage to the Holy Land with a book on the wonders of Asia; as well as the almost simultaneous *Libro del Conosçimiento,* by an anonymous

---

29   *A Conquista de Lisboa aos Mouros. Relato de um Cruzado*. Ed. Aires A. Nascimento. Lisboa: Vega, 2001, 57; *The Conquest of Lisbon, De Exupgnatione Lyxbonensi*. Ed. Charles Wendell David. New York: Columbia University Press, 1936-2001, p. 60-61.

author. Both of these texts, containing various references to monsters and cases of monstrosity, were widely disseminated.

b. What is real and what is fictional?

When applied to the Middle Ages, a water tight distinction or separation between "real" and "fictitious" proves to be an unworkable exercise,[30] since travel records, regardless of their format, alternate between observations drawn from reality and descriptions of Asian myths. Regarding marine monsters, for instance, the representation and description of fabulous beings result from the fusion of data extracted from the (mostly distorted) observation of real animals – such as cetaceans – with preconceived notions and imaginary representations from tradition. On the other hand, to the incorrect interpretation of the reality of the animals observed we need to add the intentional inclusions aimed at developing the notion of monstrosity[31]. Mermaids are cases in point in this phenomenon. After all, what is sought is the *known* that has never been seen – this is an essential mark of medieval journeys. Hence, to a certain extent, the unexpected in the ocean environment is expected, because in the souls of travellers it is preceded by tradition.

Travellers seek difference, not similarity or sameness. They record the extraordinary, what surprises them in the *Other* that they encounter far from home. However, this phenomenon is complex because it is essentially the difference that they already "know". In other words, there is an eagerness on the part of travellers to find in their journeys what they have always heard to be "different", but which in reality corresponds to what they already know through the patterns of their culture and their cultural and civilizational references (as with Jonas' sea episode). In this case, the "different" that they seek is none other than that which is (indirectly[32]) already known but which they have never seen. In both scenarios, the path to achieving knowledge is comparison.

Medieval man generally believed because he *wanted to* believe. Christopher Columbus himself (c. 1437/1448-1506) gives us one of the best examples of this when he stated unequivocally that on 9 January 1493 three mermaids appeared from the sea, with the particularity that they were not as kind as people said[33]. He had already seen them in Guinea and mentioned that they commonly appeared to

---

30 Maria Jesús Lacarra – La imaginación en los primeros libros de viajes. In *Actas del III Congreso de la Asociación Hispánica de Literatura Medieval*. Salamanca: Universidad de Salamanca, 1989, p. 501.

31 Cristina Brito – Seres estranhos e desconhecidos nas viagens portuguesas de expansão e descoberta pelo oceano Atlântico. Lisboa: CHAM-NOVA FCSH, 2006.

32 By reading or listening, for example in the context of oral tradition.

33 Cristóvão Colombo – *A descoberta da América*. Ed. Luís de Albuquerque. Vol. I. Mem Martins: Europa América, 1990, p. 47.

Portuguese sailors[34]. Or also when, in 1492, he arrived in "his" India, thinking he had found the old myths of Classical Antiquity in the islands of the New World, definitive proof of having reached his destination. As emotional as it is revealing is, lastly, his expression of discouragement in a letter to Luis de Santangel on of 15 February 1493, where he states he was disappointed because he had found no monstrous beings.

Thus, in addition to the characteristics of monsters, particularly sea monsters given their weight in collective imagination, what really mattered was the unshakeable belief that they existed[35]. This is what kept the sea serpent present in peoples' minds during ocean voyages, regardless of what it was or whether it was personally observed by the traveller or seafarer. This is what we can infer from the letter of Prester John of the Indies (1160/1190): "As confirmation: all the things told above, incredible as they may seem, are true"[36].

The so-called "real" accounts of the Middle Ages are full of fantasy, while accounts classified as "fictitious" contain vast passages filled with truthful information resulting from the author's experiences or received from someone who had travelled and recorded, or orally transmitted, their voyage[37]. From Jean de Léry (1536-c. 1613) to Pero de Magalhães Gândavo (c. 1540-c. 1580), as well as Gaspar Correia (1492-c. 1561), Fernão Lopes de Castanheda (c. 1500-1559), Friar Gaspar de S. Bernardino (16th and 17th centuries), Damião de Góis (1502-1574) and Dimas Bosque (16th century), among many others, there are countless references to sea monsters in the narratives of the Portuguese discoveries[38]. Duarte Pacheco Pereira (1460-1533), for instance, did not hesitate to say that "this route was of such quantity that, due to its length, it could not be navigated, and there were many mermaids and other great fish and dangerous animals, so that which this navigation could not be done"[39]. On the other hand, it is important to emphasise that knowledge of a place does not dissipate the legendary and mythological element largely originating from antiquity and biblical tradition; they juxtapose and complement each other in a discursive whole, regardless of the resulting contradictions.

Another argument that reveals the poor functionality of the divide between real and fictitious accounts, as well as the simplistic character of these classifications, lies in the intense interaction between works of geography and of travel. The texts merge, inspire each other and are conceived from each other. The same work may have several origins, some of them very different from one another.

---

34   Juan Gil – *Mitos y utopias del Descubrimiento* – 1. Colón y su tiempo. Madrid: Alianza Editorial, 1989, p. 42.

35   Luís Adão da Fonseca (ed.) – *O Atlântico: a memória de um Oceano.* Vol. 1…, p. 27.

36   *CARTA do Preste João das Índias*. Lisboa: Assírio & Alvim, 1998, p. 123.

37   Paul Zumthor– *La Medida Del Mundo…*, p. 291.

38   Cristina Brito – *New Science From Old News*. Lisboa: Escola de Mar, 2016.

39   Duarte Pacheco Pereira – *Esmeraldo de Situ Orbis*. Lisboa: Academia Portuguesa da História, 1988, p. 196.

The *Libro del Conosçimiento,* for example, contains passages that reproduce legends from the famous *Catalan Atlas of 1375.* The author of this monumental work, Cresques Abraham (1325-1387), probably in collaboration with his son, Jafuda Cresques, clearly used Marco Polo's *Book of Wonders* (1298) to form the body of his legends at various points in times. Therefore, while the authors offered some original ideas, they also compiled ancient knowledge and transmitted ancestral traditions, sometimes remaining faithful to the originals and at other times altering them at will. Mandeville's work is a prime example of this phenomenon, as its author made use of countless other authors and sources, both ancient and coeval[40].

On another level, imaginary travels helped to satisfy readers' appetite for news, which was quickly assimilated into well-known and truthful reports from missionaries and merchants, thus operating a complex connection between real and imaginary data, between actuality and tradition. For us, today, such narratives are different from each other, but at the time they were not. The use of the aforementioned *Libro del Conosçimiento* as a source for real voyages is evidence of this.

Regarding accounts of travel experiences in conjunction with the theme of the monster, it is also essential to note that these texts reached a wider audience than the knightly and aristocratic circles they were intended for, particularly in the late 14th and throughout the 15th century[41] – an audience eager for information about the territories beyond the limits they knew. So, it is not surprising that in Christian countries such literature greatly influenced its readers, both due to the facts it mentioned, especially "extraordinary" ones, and because of the significance they held in the collective mentality.

It is also essential to remember that travel books were not only informative but also had a pragmatic function: to fill a void and to provide a break from routine, projecting the reader into the time and space of the text. Readers did not just read a text; they internalised it, making the author's references their own[42]. As the researchers Paul Zumthor and Maria Jesús Lacarra point out, the principle of credibility did not function for the authors and readers of those books in the same way it does today. The criteria on which it was all based were unequivocally different. The readers of that time read the work according to a plurality of perspectives and

---

40 Maria Adelina Amorim – Viagem e *mirabilia*: monstros, espantos e prodígios. In *Condicionantes Culturais da Literatura de Viagens – Estudos e Bibliografias.* Coord. Fernando Cristóvão. Coimbra: Almedina, 2002, p. 127-181.

41 These works, rather than a clerical and literate ideology or a mercantile activity, corresponded to the chivalric mentality and ways of life that marked European society in the 15th century. See Miguel Ángel Pérez Priego – Estudio Literario de los libros de viajes medievales. *Epos* I (1984), p. 217-239.

42 Pedro Cátedra – La dimensión interior en la lectura de los libros de viajes medievales. In *Actas del primer congreso anglo-hispano.* Ed. Alan Deyermond; Ralph Penny. Madrid: Castalia, 1993, 41-58; Paul Zumthor – *La Medida Del Mundo...,* p. 285-303.

were, like the authors, indifferent to the criterion of credibility[43]. Just as it mattered little whether the authors were the protagonists of the quests they reported or simply compiled accounts they had heard about or read somewhere. What really mattered was the effect – to dazzle with a multitude of wonders. After all, it was very difficult for medieval man "to draw the line between material reality and imaginary reality. This was the Middle Ages that, it seems to us, easily slipped into dreams, madness or mystique"[44].

c. A centre-to-periphery logic

Medieval man, particularly the traveller, was tired of the triviality and monotony of everyday life and the nature around him. He therefore sought to escape his world and find one that filled the emptiness he felt. As Lecouteux points out, "Man cannot live in a dry, arid and pitiful world; he is obliged to create for himself an ideal universe that makes him happy. The wonderful is therefore an escape route, and if ancient wonders were so successful in the Middle Ages, this is undoubtedly because past memories are the antidote to present evils"[45]. The imagination thus becomes constitutive of its existence as much as immediate experience of what is real. But where can medieval man find the *means* of escape from the monotony of reality? The answer points to distant and unknown places far from the ordering centre that he knows so well, i.e., in the periphery of the world. It is in faraway, isolated and different places that *mirabilia* are revealed to the eyes of the medieval Christian[46]: "All *a priori* wonderful, paranormal and strange phenomena have one thing in common. They take place in a small number of places, regions or frontiers located on the fringes of the known world, and some sites – mountain, forest, moor, sea – are undeniably straddling the here and the beyond, forming a dividing line between civilization and wilderness, a no man's land between the universe of men and of spirits"[47].

This is where monsters reveal themselves in all their plenitude. Northern Europe, Africa, Asia and the oceans are places of wonder where anything is possible, but to get there you have to travel. To that extent, wonder, space and travel

---

43 Maria Jesús Lacarra – El *Libro del Conosçimiento*: un viaje alrededor de un mapa. In *Libro del Conosçimiento de todos los rregnos et tierras et señorios que son por el mundo, et de las señales et armas que han.* Ed. María Jesús Lacarra; María del Carmen Lacarra Ducay ; Alberto Montaner. Zaragoza: Diputación de Zaragoza, 1999, p. 78; Paul Zumthor – *La Medida Del Mundo...,* p. 290.

44 Jacques Le Goff – *O Imaginário Medieval.* Lisboa: Editorial Estampa, 1994, p. 17.

45 Claude Lecouteux – *Les monstres dans la pensée médiévale européenne...,* p. 37.

46 According to Le Goff, exercising evident seduction over the spirit is precisely one of the functions of the wonderful in culture and society. Another function is, therefore, that of compensation. Jacques Le Goff – *O Imaginário Medieval...,* p. 48.

47 Claude Lecouteux – *Les monstres dans la pensée médiévale européenne...,* p. 121.

necessarily go hand in hand. As Le Goff points out, "there is no space-time richer in imagination than that of [real or imaginary] travel"[48]. On the other hand, "The marvellous is a counterbalance to everyday ordinariness and regularity"[49].

In fact, monsters and monstrous manifestations take place, above all, on the frontiers of the world, namely in ocean areas, which means that we are faced with a phenomenon subject to a centre-to-periphery logic in which the notions of "extremity" or "limit" are synonymous with otherness: as we move further away from the ordering centre – Christianity – and from immediately surrounding non-Catholic but well-known regions, the cases of monstrous races increase in number and excessiveness.

Because it is part of the exterior, of the frontier, and extremely vast (generally perceived as "endless" in the sense of not knowing where it ends), the ocean element is by definition assumed to be the anti-world – a status legitimated by the monstrous beings that inhabit it, which are thus presented as cause and effect of a phenomenon that is totalling/divine in character in that it points to the very origins of the world.

Evoking chaos and insecurity, portentous marine beings always arouse in seafarers the fear of the ocean, that unquiet space that is forever strange and unexpected and, therefore, a prime place for manifestations of *mirabilia*[50]. This is why, much more than land-monsters, the disturbing monsters of the sea cause a state of deep apprehension and anxiety at the prospect of the possibility/proximity of encountering them. Because they are part of the space *par excellence* of disorder – the ocean – fear becomes absolute[51].

It is the very nature of the aquatic environment that defines the presence and intensity of the monster's *mirabilia*. Therefore, there is a perfect relationship of interdependence between the subject (the sea monster) and the space that surrounds and determines it[52]. Ocean tempests are a prime example: like monsters, they are pure disorder.

---

48   Jacques Le Goff – *O Imaginário Medieval...*, p. 26.

49   Jacques Le Goff – *O Imaginário Medieval...*, p. 51.

50   As Jacques Le Goff mentions, "an essential feature of the wonderful is unpredictability". Jacques Le Goff – *O Imaginário Medieval...*, p. 50. After all, this is the case even today: monsters are still associated with unknown space; we need only think of the awe-inspiring forms of monsters associated with extraterrestrial space and the names given to marine fauna from the depths of the ocean's abyss, not by chance the most bizarre at the aesthetic level, of which the demon fish is a paradigmatic example. It is worth noting that both these environments are marked by dense, disturbing darkness, precisely the nocturnal attributes that terrified ocean travellers in the late Middle Ages and early Modern Ages.

51   To deepen the subject of fear of the sea see Jean Delumeau – *História do Medo no Ocidente 1300 – 1800*. São Paulo: Companhia das Letras, 2001, p. 18-22; Luís Krus – Primeiras imagens do mar: entre o Desejo e o Medo. In *A arte e o mar*. Lisboa: FCG, 1998, p. 29-39; José Mattoso – O imaginário marítimo medieval..., p. 231-244; José Mattoso – O mar a descobrir. In *Obras Completas José Mattoso...*, p. 219-229; José Mattoso – Os antepassados dos navegadores. In *Obras Completas José Mattoso...*, p. 245-264.

52   Luís Adão da Fonseca – O imaginário dos navegantes portugueses dos séculos 15 e 16. *Estudos Avançados* 6:16 (1992) 35-51.

On another level, like the act of travel itself the sea monster stimulates the imagination while arousing reflection and questioning. It therefore acts as a means of acquiring knowledge of the world, its enigmas and mysteries, as well as of its farthest reaches. And the medieval world, especially from the 12th century on, revealed more and more curiosity – curiosity about everything, including distant geography and marine geography, as the Italians, Portuguese and Spanish would prove.

By conveying a subverted image of Order, a monstrous being is at the same time mystery and mystification. Its specific characteristics are disconcerting, and the more organised and hierarchically justified the universe is, the more glaring is the enigma it represents. For this reason, concerning the imagination of oceanic space it inspires contradictory feelings: it frightens and stimulates, confuses and explains, it attracts as it fascinates and repulses, it limits but also opens up horizons and perspectives. And, consequently, it invites discovery (in fact, it is not by chance that coeval seamen projected their fantasies, desires and fears onto it).

Right or wrong, sea monsters (in truth, all monsters) cause an expansion of horizons which resulted in a parallel increase in the fascination for the wonderful things that those same remote spaces, beyond the security of Christianity, had in store. Paradise islands are a model example[53]. Everything bizarre that inhabited those distant and chimerical places where the Middle Ages continuously escaped to, served to disproportionately whet the curiosity and astonishment of medieval man, who was characterised by possessing aprioristic definitions and frameworks of understanding. As Le Goff points out, "The imagination nourishes man and makes him act[54]."

d. The specificity of the sea monster

As Claude Kappler observes, a monster is defined in relation to the norm, and this is a postulate of common sense[55]. Hence, as St. Augustine and Isidore of Seville stated, it is an integral part of creation and belongs to the population of the world, especially in the periphery.

In this way the sea monster – which as a physical materialisation is by definition *beyond* – is established as a joining element, an intersection in the relationship between the known and the unknown, thus stimulating human imagination as well as the desire to know what is different – a important function in the psyche of medieval man which would be pivotal in the context of the Discoveries. Thus, in the

---

53   Jean Delumeau – *Uma História do Paraíso – O Jardim das Delícias*. Lisboa: Terramar, 1994.

54   Jacques Le Goff – *O Imaginário Medieval...*, p. 16.

55   Claude Kappler – *Monstros, Demônios e Encantamentos no Fim da Idade Média*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1994, p. 291.

multiple variants of its appearance, the monster is present everywhere: in literature, in sculpture (especially in churches) and in paintings.

From another aspect, this central function of the sea monster has a double purpose, that of the wonderful in general: to instruct and entertain, the *prodesse et delectare* of the Middle Ages. Medieval man cannot, therefore, do without this figure and the extreme character it entails. In it, medieval man projects his fantasies and recreates a certain "reality". Hence, it is *par excellence* the place of the plurality of senses, functions and forms. It attracts while it fascinates and repulses, awakening the most primeval human fears.

Its figure combines human anguish, desire, and salvation[56]. By conveying a subverted image of Order, it is both mystery and mystification. Its specific characteristics are deeply disconcerting and the more organised and hierarchically justified the universe is, the more glaring is the enigma it represents.

It is in this sense that the sea monster should be interpreted: as a "normal anomaly" and therefore mysterious evidence of divine creation, it constitutes the enigma that gives man an opportunity to reflect and achieve knowledge of the world. Particularly in relation to the imagination regarding the ocean, a monster inspires contradictory feelings and appetites, it frightens and stimulates, confuses and explains, limits but opens up horizons and perspectives. And, to this extent, it is a *leimotiv* of discoveries[57].

The great terrestrial setting of monsters is undoubtedly the East: a "great reservoir of wonder, the East is the vast, oneiric, magical horizon of the men of the medieval West"[58]. However, following Pliny, it is up to the ocean to take on the role of great repository of the most dangerous and disturbing monsters – a status closely related to the unstable and human-unfriendly nature of the aquatic element itself.

Within the framework of medieval imagination and the ample mass of what constitutes the monstrous, a sea monster has its own specificity. Like the very element in which it grows, it is volatile, disquiet, unpredictable and hostile. Again, we highlight the thinking of Pliny and Roger Bacon, who pointed out the causal relationship between the place of birth and the being itself. In other words, the monster is conceived as having been produced by the place that contains it. This place is therefore its first reason for being.

It is a "natural law" that enables the monstrous being to maintain a harmonious and coherent relationship with its place of origin. This principle acquires a superlative meaning when applied to the relationship between the ocean and the sea monster.

56   Claude Kappler – *Monstros, Demônios e Encantamentos no Fim da Idade Média...,* p. 363.
57   Luís Adão da Fonseca (ed.) – *O Atlântico: a memória de um Oceano.* Vol. 1..., p. 20.
58   Jacques Le Goff – *O Imaginário Medieval...,* p. 62.

In this context, the ocean is necessarily the great setting of the monstrous and also its first and definitive explanation/justification.

Due to its nature and situation in the universe, the ocean is a place predestined for a mythical function, as it germinates what is wonderful and surprising. And as we have already had the opportunity to see, sea monsters are *per se* the perfect materialisation of this process.

In conclusion, if it is inherent to these creatures to be what they are where they are, then each sea monster takes on the role of its own place, and it mirrors *per se*, i.e., in its specificity, the mystery of that same place. In a word, as the biblical Leviathan proves, the sea monster *is* the ocean.

We would also draw attention to the Islamic view of the ocean, in particular the Atlantic, which is best expressed in the theories widely disseminated throughout Islam by al-Idrisi, the famous 12th century geographer from Ceuta. In the mid-12th century, al-Idrisi wrote as follows regarding the Atlantic Ocean: "No-one knows what happens in that sea, nor can you find out, because of the difficulties the deep darkness opposes to navigation, the height of the waves, the frequency of the storms, the innumerable monsters that populate it and the violence of its winds."[59] This description of the ocean as a negative space and an insurmountable obstacle seems more to come from someone like Avienus, a Carthaginian navigator or an ancient Greek poet, than from a 12th century man of science. All the more so given that al-Idrisi was born in Ceuta, completed his education in Cordoba and worked at the school of Palermo – a centre for cultural studies and contact between the European and Muslim worlds whose importance was comparable to that of the Toledo School of Translators. However, his fear of the endless ocean, particularly as a place populated by monsters, is unequivocal.

It is worth noting that this view of the sea and of its intrinsic monsters was certainly known in Western Europe, since al-Idrisi's world map (1154), known as the *Tabula Rogeriana* and accompanied by a book known as *Geografia,* which graphically expresses this whole conception, was included in the famous Kitâb Rudjâr or *Book of Roger* by the medieval Arab geographer, which was presented to the Norman king Roger II of Sicily (1095-1154)[60].

---

59 Al-Idrisi quoted in Guillermo Céspedes del Castillo – *La exploración del Atlântico...*, p. 65.
60 Michael Barry – Realidade e simbolismo de um mito: a tradição do piloto árabe de Vasco da Gama. In *Culturas do Índico.* Lisboa: CNCDP, 1998, p. 55-70.

e. The role of the ocean night in the potentiation of the sea monster

Monsters are unmistakable and inescapable evidence of medieval imagination[61], and were clearly present in the mentality of men at the time of the Discoveries, in particular the navigators. After all, the most favourable state of mind for credulity and fabrication is the daily state of extreme receptivity and apprehension in which ocean travellers find themselves.

Within this context, the ocean's night becomes the moment *par excellence* for the anxiety caused by monsters. The ocean immersed in darkness lends itself to all kinds of ghosts and fears: a human being does not thrive in "empty" spaces or in the night which blots out shapes and brings with it strange noises. From here comes the anguish that creates hallucinations. During the hours of darkness, the sea, like deserts and forests, becomes the stage for spirits and the "unnatural". In its bosom blooms the mysterious and the unwonted, i.e., the *monstrous.*

Consequently, within the limits of medieval mentality and imagination surrounding the sea, myth, legend and *mirabilia* were always ahead of reality. When the latter "arrived", the former "was already there" – whether this meant gigantic sea serpents, dangerous whirlpools, the sea in flames or the dark abyss that rose up and swallowed entire ships at a single stroke.

f. The Christian solution

Many were the sea monsters that assiduously haunted the imagination of the navigators of the Discoveries. Some deserve special mention, like mermaids with their chants, nereids, tritons, dragons and unicorns, the sawfish, the giant octopus (the Scandinavian Kraken), the sea man, the *De aquatilibus* or sea horse, the hydra, the sea devil, the *scylla* (a sea girl, always avid for human blood), the sea monk (which called seafarers to their "games", and when they approached, attacked them), the salamander, the basilisk (not exactly a marine being, but it flew dangerously over the water), and of course Leviathan. Then, when it comes to the depths of the abyss, there were myriad other sinister monsters. In fact, there were so many dangers, particularly at night, that it was difficult for navigators to mentally prepare themselves to face them. The *solution* in the final centuries of the medieval period would reside in Christian sacredness: "Here in Muscat also arrived Ruy Vaz Pereira (…) in a galleon called São Rafael, (….) who told us that after passing the islands of Tristan da Cunha by the cape, sailing so fast with all the wind they could bear in all their sails, a frightful black fish followed them the

---

61   Leonardo Cappelletti – *Mirabilia Naturae*: il caso del *Monstrum* nella Scolastica…, p. 61-76.

like of which had never been seen, and ran after the galleon two days and two nights, circling the galleon many times, from time to time spewing up a spout of water higher that the galleon, and everyone was very frightened and entrusted themselves to Our Lord to deliver them of such a fish (…). The fish had on its back some fins that it raised as high as to the middle of the standing rigging, and on its scrag there was a hole with a hatch through which it could spout water so high as to cover the galleon, which was half flooded, so much so that had all its water fallen in, it would have sunk the galleon. With all this everyone was deathly afraid, begging God for mercy and throwing upon the fish relics and holy water that a clergyman blessed, saying many prayers, and not daring to touch the fish because had it become enraged, it might with little effort overturn the galleon. The fish took the galleon at tierce and thus kept it still, so that we did not move all day and night until the next day when the sun came out, whereupon it let us go and we left the fish at our stern as the galleon sailed ahead. As the fish turned it showed its flanks, which was a dreadful thing to see, so that we all thought it was the devil itself, and never stopped praying, afraid it would turn about and ram the ship; and in the afternoon the fish, sending up great spouts of water, moved on across the sea until it was seen no more. With that, everyone again and again praised the Lord who had delivered them from the devilfish, as they called it".[62]

Accompanying, on the one hand, the movement of urban and commercial expansion that marked Western Christianity since the 12th century, and, on the other hand, the progressive conquest of European coastal spaces from Islamic civilization, during this period there emerged a more positive view of the ocean. In the end, this change was connected to the fact that Christian Europe was no longer almost exclusively rural and continental, but had become more urban, maritime and commercial. While the previous spaces and the dynamism that had been lost with the fall of the Western Roman Empire were being restored, there emerged a new way of looking at and perceiving the sea. These were the first signs of the new era that was about to begin.

But such a transformation could never have occurred and succeeded without the structural support of the religious sphere of society. The Church was present and active in the most diverse areas of human activity, not only accompanying this movement but justifying, legitimising and even encouraging it. In effect, at the basis of this long and wide-ranging process was a new ecclesiastical and scholarly position regarding the ocean, materialised in the establishment and proliferation of

---

62   Gaspar Correia – Lenda do Quarto Gouernador da India, Diogo Lopes de Sequeira, que do Reyno partio o anno de 1518. In *Lendas da Índia.* Ed. M. Lopes de Almeida. Vol. II. Porto: Lello & Irmão, 1975, p. 594-595.

propitiatory rituals and beliefs which in practice legitimised this new conception of the sea[63].

In essence, these were practices within the sphere of the sacred whose main aim was to Christianise the sea, thus drawing it towards the holy *security* of the Christian world[64]. In this way the harmful negative charge of the ocean was neutralised, and divine protection was ensured for travellers of ocean routes. The impenetrable sea was thus made navigable. Together with the actual physical routes, mental paths were opened up in favour of the ocean's immensity.

The alteration of religious experiences related to the sea, particularly the dissemination and intensification of the worship and devotion to saints who protected seafarers (especially on the part of coastal communities), had profound parallel effects both in terms of mythical imagination and artistic production.

Regarding the patron saints of travel, i.e., those who prevented storms and shipwrecks, we can highlight the figures of St. Christopher (?-251)[65], St. Brendan (whose hagiography *Vita Sancti Brendani* became one of the most often copied writings of the high Middle Ages and underwent various translations and versions[66]), St. Amaro[67] and St. Elmo[68]. Of these, the last three held the distinction of being declared seafaring saints, or saints whose devotional preference largely resulted from the fact that they themselves had faced and mastered ocean storms. This therefore constituted direct identification.

In the art field there was a resurgence, in Christian religious architecture, of marine themes and motifs, namely boats, mermaids and fish (an ancient Christological symbol of Mediterranean Christianity)[69].

As far as the universe of writing is concerned, of particular note are works that justified maritime travel, such as accounts of the voyages – not very distant from each other, time wise – of clerics like Brendan (c. 484-c. 577)[70] or Patricius (c. 387-c. 461), which emphasize the new prominence given to ocean islands. In fact, from this time on the presence of islands in the ocean's mass began to be prolifically

---

63 Fernando Gomes Pedrosa – As devoções marinheiras através dos tempos. *Anais do Clube Militar Naval* CXVI (Out.-Dez., 1986) 553-591.

64 Luís Krus – O imaginário português e os medos do mar. In *A descoberta do homem e do mundo*. Org. Adauto Novaes. São Paulo: Ministério da Cultura, Fundação Nacional de Arte, Companhia das Letras, 1998, p. 95-105.

65 A very popular saint regarded as the holy protector of pathways and especially revered by sailors, boatmen and travellers.

66 It was translated from Latin into Portuguese in the 14th century. See Aires Augusto Nascimento – *Navegação de S. Brandão nas fontes portuguesas medievais*. Lisboa: Edições Colibri, 1998, p. 7-77.

67 Christian saint originating from legends. Elsa Maria Branco da Silva – Conto de Amaro. In Aires Augusto Nascimento – *Navegação de S. Brandão…*, p. 243-281.

68 Pedro González Telmo (c. 1190-1246), a Castilian Catholic priest. He is the patron saint of seamen and boatmen, and from early on enjoyed great popular devotion.

69 Luís Krus – O imaginário português e os medos do mar…, p. 101.

70 Up until the 13th century, *Navigatio Sancti Brendani* was a real breath of fresh air in the context of medieval imagination regarding the sea. See Aires Augusto Nascimento – *Navegação de S. Brandão…*, p. 7-77.

recorded, often accompanied by legends concerning the Christian heroes who visited them (such as Brendan), and were consequently integrated into Christianity by means of their sacralisation – we could even speak of Christianisation of the myths about the travelling heroes of antiquity.

In the stories narrating these holy voyages, central elements of medieval European imagination were transfigured and adapted to the new reality and to new aims. Some examples of this are the desert, which lends its mystery to the ocean; and the forest, whose magical and dreamlike qualities now seductively emerge in Atlantic islands[71].

Another example, this time profane, in written culture that favoured a reinvigorated dissemination of marine themes and motifs, were late-13th century lyrical Galician-Portuguese troubadours, positively and openly making their voices heard in favour of the sea; this was a far cry from the sombre spectrum imparted by previous terrors and views of the ocean as a dark destination. In addition, there were Iberian chronicles revealing the ocean not as the final goal but rather and above all as a means of passage, a way to achieve a goal.

However, there were other writings which modelled a growing curiosity about the sea and, consequently, the unknown. A case in point is the literary voice of John Scotus Eriugena (c. 800-c. 877), who, although metaphorically, went so far as to praise the act of sailing: "'It is necessary to raise one's sail,' he wrote, 'it is necessary to navigate. There, pressing reason lies: it has experience of the high seas, it is not frightened by the threat of the waves, it does not fear the sinuous shore, nor the Sirtic Sea, nor the rocks, because it deems it more attractive to exercise its power in the mysterious straits of the divine ocean than to lazily rest upon a calm sea without obstacles, where it cannot show what its strength is worth'"[72]. Also worthy of note is *The Seafarer*, an Old English poem which praises the direct experience of navigation: "The seafarer renounces the pleasures and tranquillity of land to venture, day and night, in the midst of waves, cold, storm, ice and hail. In spite of all the dangers, he feels a fascination for the restlessness of the sea: '[…] my heart forces me to venture into the bottomless sea, in the tumult of the salty waves; at all times my heart's desire incites my spirit to the voyage, to seek the home of strangers far away'"[73].

No less significant is the fact that cartography closely followed the course of this change, especially regarding islands which from then on were repeatedly

---

71 Jacques Le Goff – *O Imaginário Medieval…*, p. 83-99.
72 *Periphyseon* citado em José Mattoso – O imaginário marítimo medieval…, p. 236.
73 S. Rose – *The Medieval Sea*. London: Hambledon Continuum, 2007, p. 237.

mentioned and whose contribution to the above-mentioned sacralisation of the oceanic element was decisive[74].

The sea, where quests for Paradise were led by venerated Christian figures, was now duly included in Christianity and in its themes of choice. And the people who sailed it, as well as the activities connected with it, now benefited from the benign charge provided by precisely such worship.

This was therefore a structural and civilisational change: the elevation of the urban and mercantile model and ultimately a movement from a landlocked terrestrial Europe to an outward-facing Europe turned towards "new" paths of communication, supported by a new collective mentality – especially in the coastal regions – which from now on placed the violent, dark and dangerous ocean within the safe, light-filled bosom of Christianity. In other words, the terror of the unknown so characteristic of the High Medieval Period had given way to curiosity and the urge to explore that same unknown. Luís Krus, in his turn, mentions the setting up of a "doctrine capable of including and supporting voyages and the commercial and oceanic routes".[75]

What is at issue here is not a momentary and therefore superficial transformation – related to a brief period, an event, an individual, i.e., short-term history (*histoire événementielle*)[76]. Nor is it the medium-range, conjunctural history "of the cycle and even of the 'inter-cycle' – which offers us a choice of ten years, a quarter of a century and, ultimately, the half-century of the classic Kondratieff wave"[77]. It is rather a decisive mutation with very deep movements that revolves and replaces the foundations of mental frameworks and, consequently, of the structures of the imagination, which is thus irreparably altered. The kind of mutation Braudel speaks of when he evokes the history of "secular amplitude"[78] and "great permanence"[79], i.e., "history of long, and even of very long, duration"[80].

In this regard, Georges Duby points out that "it is in fact convenient to apply to the study of mentalities the scheme proposed by Fernand Braudel, which invites one to distinguish, in past time, different levels and especially three great rhythms of duration – in other words, three histories […]. Micro-history, 'mindful of brief time, the individual, the event', of small news and drama, of the surface; history

74   Chet Van Duzer – The History of the Azores as *Insulae solis* or Islands of the Sun in 16th-Century Cartography. *Terrae Incognitae. The Journal of the Society for the History of Discoveries* 40 (2008) 29-46.

75   Luís Krus – O imaginário português e os medos do mar…, p. 100.

76   Fernand Braudel calls it "a brief time span, tailored to individuals, to daily life, to our illusions, to our quick awareness". Fernand Braudel – *História e Ciências Sociais*. Lisboa: Editorial Presença, 1990, p. 10.

77   Fernand Braudel – *História e Ciências Sociais…*, p. 12.

78   Fernand Braudel – *História e Ciências Sociais…*, p. 10.

79   Fernand Braudel – *Gramática das Civilizações*. Lisboa: Teorema, 1989, p. 42.

80   Fernand Braudel – *História e Ciências Sociais…*, p. 10.

with medium-range oscillations, measured in several decades, which we could call 'conjunctural' [...]; and more profound history, 'of long, even very long duration', which is counted in centuries"[81].

Western Christian Europe was thus prepared to contact the civilizational Other and the new and unknown parts of the world, those that classical tradition evoked and about which it composed fables. The ocean that had been considered endless, the quintessential place of chaos and death whose limits were unknown, then began to be perceived in a different way, more as an area that simply separated the known from the unknown.

There was an increasing curiosity to unravel its mysteries. And seamen were progressively beginning to face the big blue, despite all its dangers and tragedies. This metamorphosis carried an inkling that Seneca's (4 B.C.-65 A.D.) prophecy in *Medea* was being fulfilled: "Centuries will come when the Ocean will open its barriers and new lands will appear; Thetis will discover new orbs [...]."[82] However, as we pointed out at the beginning of our reflection, the fear did not simply disappear, especially regarding sea monsters – the archetypal theme of dread and anxiety about the ocean.

In fact, in addition to the weight of traditions, which were always present, the figure of the sea monster definitely contributed to this permanence and even to the continuing fear of the sea as chaos and as a consummately unpredictable place. For instance, the hybrid monstrous being known as a triton would continue to be a a mythical/magical figure much mentioned in Portugal, particularly during the Renaissance. Besides an important reference in Damião de Góis' work (1502-1574) dedicated to Lisbon (*Urbis Olisiponensis Descriptio,* 1559), one can observe its frequent presence in Portuguese cartography in the centuries from the Middle Ages to Modernity – a period in which monstrous elements did not only have decorative and merely aesthetic functions, as would be the case later on[83]. Other demonstrative examples appear in the illuminations of *Leitura Nova* (1504-1522), one of the great symbols of politics and of the reign of King Manuel I (1469-1521). Equally noteworthy, still in the context of the Renaissance in Portugal, is its sculptural presence in the window of the Convent of Christ in the city of Tomar. This work, commissioned by King Manuel I and designed by the noted Portuguese architect Diogo de Arruda (before 1490-1531), is the best-known example of Manueline

81 Georges Duby – *Para uma História das Mentalidades*. Lisboa: Terramar, 1999, p. 34-35.

82 Séneca – *Medeia.* São Paulo: Editora Abril, 1973, p. 123.

83 Look at the work of Chet Van Duzer on sea monsters and its location in the medieval and modern charts. Chet Van Duzer – A Northern Refuge of the Monstrous Races: Asia on Waldseemüller's 1516 'Carta Marina'. *Imago Mundi* 62:2 (2010) 221-231; Chet Van Duzer – Hic sunt dracones: The Geography and Cartography of Monsters..., p. 387-435; Chet Van Duzer – *Sea Monsters on Medieval and Renaissance Maps*. London: British Library, 2013. See also: Asa Simon Mittman – *Maps and Monsters In Medieval England*. New York & London: Routledge, 2006, p. 63-82.

architecture, illustrating its exotic naturalism and the use of maritime details. It is also possible to find important representations of sea monsters in the Monastery of Jerónimos in Lisbon.

The "new" formulas for protection, namely the on-board marine devotions that were usual in the 15th and 16th centuries, ensured the Christianisation of the sea, which in turn made permanent the premise defended in distant centuries by figures like St. Augustine, that the monster was part of Creation and should be understood as such. However, even though the fear of marine monsters somewhat lessened, or at least became "accepted" as part of the process of oceanic navigation so that it did not prevent such voyages from then on, in truth it had not disappeared. Admittedly, people no longer backed off from curiosity, duty, commercial ambition and their hunger for wealth; but the fear and unease provoked by the prospect of imminent contact with sea monsters retained a power that was comparable only to the dread of being shipwrecked.

The disquiet directly resulting from the idea of the monstrous in the ocean remained a reality aboard ships, as is clearly shown in numerous documents from the 16th, 17th and 18th centuries, particularly in the context of navigations along the sea route to India[84].

Final Notes

The reflection we have carried out here was guided by a fundamental issue: the centrality of the figure of the monster in medieval maritime imagination and the important role played by the monstrous in structuring that imagination. What emerges as unequivocal when performing this analysis is that, in a possible attempt to define an identity for the ocean in the Middle Ages, monsters and the character of monstrosity must necessarily be present (and, in the second order of importance, the resulting topics of extremes, anxiety, the unpredictable and, ultimately, fear).

A sea monster mirrors the very mystery of the ocean, for it *is* the ocean. Its extreme nature results from the excessiveness immensity of the space it inhabits and in which it was born. This is demonstrated by the quintessential example of the Bible's Leviathan.

From yet another perspective, the monster that emerges from the aquatic element exposes human fears and the deepest recesses of our being. In the Middle Ages this figure was therefore necessary to explain the world itself, in particular the vast oceanic space. It is a symbol of deviation from the norm although it is part of it; its presence is ultimately needed in order to make sense of one's existence.

---

84   The abundant Jesuit correspondence contains multiple examples of this reality.

Paradoxically, because in practice it represents the absolute opposite, the monster has the function of imparting order to human life. The episode of Jonas attests to this: "[Jonah:] 'Take me and cast me into the sea, and the sea shall grow calm, for I know that it is because of me that this great storm has come upon you.' […] Then they took Jonah and threw him into the sea, and the fury of the sea abated […]. The Lord made it so that a great fish was there to swallow Jonah; and Jonah stayed in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights. Jonah said this prayer to the Lord his God from the belly of the fish (…). Then the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah upon the beach".[85]

Fantasy and reality, the truth and the implausible, were all mixed together in medieval man's perception. One of the consequences of this mental process of interpreting the information received was that the entire receiving public avidly "drank in" information about strange and exotic things originating from places beyond the boundaries of what was known, i.e., beyond the Order and safety ensured by Christian authority. As Mandeville himself states in an almost prophetic tone: "All the world is always pleased to hear of new things".[86] The result was an imagination as rich as it was diverse, particularly with regard to the aquatic element. In this context, because the ocean is immense, unstable and above all unknown, it occupies a central place and is perceived as widely inhabited by monstrous beings.

Although in late medieval centuries, metamorphosed by increasingly frequent experiences of the high seas and especially by a number of religious solutions that, by sacralising the ocean, enabled people to face it as well as the risk of contact with the excessive and portentous beings that inhabited it, the mental state of apprehension and fear caused by sea monsters prevailed well into modernity. In the words of Claude Lecouteux: "the monster experiences various fortunes in the writings of the Middle Ages, it is found more or less frequently according to the times, but it never disappears completely"[87]. And, indeed, as Baltrusaitis points out, the Middle Ages would never renounce the fantastic. It returned to it incessantly throughout its history, particularly at the end, either reviving its old formulas or enriching them with new systems. Nor did it renounce the ample ancient and exotic repertoires that long fed its imagination[88]. Therefore, monsters – particularly sea monsters – continued to proliferate right up to the 18th century and beyond.

---

85 BÍBLIA Sagrada…, p. 1241-1242.
86 Jean de Mandeville – *Viagens de Jean de Mandeville*, Ed. Susani Silveira Lemos França. Bauru: EDUSC, 2007, p. 255.
87 Claude Lecouteux – *Les monstres dans la pensée médiévale europeénne…*, p. 184.
88 Jurgis Baltrusaitis – *La Edad Media Fantástica, Antigüedades y exotismos en el arte gótico.* Madrid: Ediciones Cátedra, 1987, p. 9.