

Where The Wild Things Are: Columbus's Search for Monsters in the New World

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Reimagining Columbus

Christopher Columbus is arguably one of the most well-known explorers in history. A talented mapmaker and avid navigator who grew up in Italy but worked for the Spanish monarchy, his quest to find a faster route to India led him to the present-day Americas. Here he made the first European contact with the civilizations that would later be recognized as Indigenous American tribes, many of whom had traditions dating back thousands of years. Columbus' carefully kept travel logs are one of the most important relics from this period; his dutiful reports allow a window into his findings, which he writes with the belief that he is in India. In the reading of these logs, it becomes clear that Columbus has taken this voyage with preexisting beliefs about the people and animals that he would encounter while traveling. He is not simply observing the native peoples; he is actively searching for proof of differences, both physical and cultural. Columbus makes repeated references to looking for something other than what he was finding, saying after months of exploration that "In these islands, I have so far found no human monstrosities, as many expected..."¹ This forces the question: why did he go into his explorations expecting he would find differences so extreme he considered them monstrous? This single quotation is easily overlooked but is possibly one of the most interesting points in his log. The use of the words "so far" and "expected" make it clear that not only did Columbus know what he was looking for, but he was not deterred by not finding it at the time of this letter, which he wrote to the Spanish monarchy. This preexisting belief that he would find "human monstrosities" was so strong that he continued to look for it even after finding no proof of it himself.

Why Columbus believed so strongly in a phenomenon he had no firsthand experience with, to the point that he would disregard what his own eyes were seeing, is a question worth exploring. This research paper argues that Columbus was directly influenced by writings from

¹ Columbus, 200, 1960

Antiquity. The extent to which he was influenced is impossible to know for certain, but there is clear evidence that Columbus was versed in authors such as Ctesias and Arrian, and used their broad statements about the “barbarians” in India as a guide to the monsters he should be looking for while on his journey. In addition, there is an attempt made to further probe the question of what makes a monster a monster, both in Columbus’ day and Antiquity. Physical differences, culture, and geographic location all played different roles in othering people, labeling them as monsters for being different from the normalized worldview of the perceivers. In aiming to compare the portrayal of differences in Antiquity to differences in Columbus’ day, a string is pulled out and traced; to what extent did authors in Antiquity influence Columbus’ thoughts during his travels? As Anthony Grafton argues in the opening of his book, *New Worlds, Ancient Texts*, “...authoritative texts provided the Europeans of the Renaissance with the only tools they had for understanding the thoughts and values of alien societies. Like other tools...incompetent and corrupt craftsmen used them badly. But many of them also showed astonishing flexibility and resilience, changing as they were used and often changing those who used them.”² There is an abundance of scholarly work done on this topic, and it is impossible to come up with a definitive answer in this research paper alone. However, by delving deeper into primary sources such as Columbus’ travel log, as well as secondary scholarly sources from renowned historians in the last century or so, this paper aims to add to the breadth of work already done on this question.

The Makings of a Monster

After extensive research, I have identified the three factors that I see as the basis of a “monster,” both in Columbus’ day and Antiquity, and these are the three that I have chosen to focus on for much of my paper. This essay will look at and analyze appearance, culture, and

² Grafton, 10, 1995

geographical location as major factors that may have influenced the perception of other people as “barbarians” or “monsters,” drawing on a number of different sources from a range of time periods. The facets of someone’s existence invariably caused others to pass judgment on them; difference, in any form, was often the defining factor of a monster, regardless of the shape that it took. In his book, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, John Block Friedman says that “The works of Ctesias, Megasthenes, and other Hellenic travelers reveal both a fascination with the strangeness of other peoples and places and an implicit revulsion from the ‘other,’”³ something that this paper will discuss as well. It is important to recognize that authors in Antiquity as well as explorers in Columbus’ day were not only taking a negative view of the new people they encountered; they were often also extremely interested in the people themselves. This is not to say that their interest was in any way coming from a place of goodness; this essay will attempt to avoid passing judgment on the inner feelings of the people it aims to analyze. However, this duality cannot and should not be ignored.

In addition, there is the question of the audience. It cannot be overlooked that both authors in Antiquity, such as Ctesias, and authors in the Age of Exploration, such as Columbus and Bartolome de las Casas, were writing with the knowledge that other people would read what they had written. To preface, I feel it is necessary to make clear that I do not find the feelings of the aforementioned writers of vital importance. However, their knowledge of the social culture of their time clearly influenced the way in which they went about producing and promoting their works. It was something that was surely in their minds; they had the desire to make their writings palatable and interesting. Carole Myscofski pushes this narrative in an article in the journal *History of Religions*, saying “...they failed to perceive and describe the exotic in front of them and instead returned to the imagined exotics of Europe... Authors and artists alike relied on the well-known conventions of the “wild man,” witch, Amazon, and cannibal to convey the differences they

³ Friedman, 26, 2000

discovered in—or constructed about—the New World.”⁴ Sandra Ferdman, writing in the *Hispanic Review*, shares this viewpoint, saying that “Columbus, like many of the great travelers before him, abundantly writes of marvels to impress his readers with the truth of his trip, the truth of his words, and the truth of his speculations and wonderings.”⁵ This also contributes to the making of a monster; it is important to keep in mind that there may have been other motives at play, especially in the case of Columbus, that explorers were thinking about when detailing the things they had seen or heard about.

Appearance as a Monster

The first crucial factor in determining what makes a monster a monster is physical appearance. Physical differences are discussed extensively in the selections from Ctesias, Strabo, and Arrian, as well as in Columbus’ travel log. In Ctesias’ *Indica*, he talks about “...the *martichor*, a wild animal found in India that has a human face”⁶ as well as “...men with dog heads.”⁷ These descriptions of Indians served to immediately alienate and isolate them from the ancient Greeks and Romans. Columbus used similar language when describing the things that he thought he would find. According to Nicolas Wey Gomez, Columbus actually mentions searching for the “men with dog heads,” an incredibly important connection in the search to prove that Columbus had exposure to Ctesias and was using some of his writings as a guide when setting out on his travels. Wey Gomez states in his book, *The Tropics of Empire*, that “Columbus also came to believe in the course of his first voyage that as he southered further away from the Bahamas and toward the lower, more extreme latitudes of the Caribbean, he was bound to find the *caniba* or *caribe*—a physically and morally deformed people ‘with dog’s snouts who ate men...’”⁸ The

⁴ Myscowski, 144, 2007-8

⁵ Ferdman, 488, 1994

⁶ Ctesias, 275, 4th century BCE

⁷ Ctesias, 278, 4th century BCE

⁸ Wey Gomez, 89, 2008

importance of this discovery cannot be overstated. It seems incredibly unlikely that Columbus would have come up with the idea of men with dog heads out of nowhere- as has been previously stated in this essay, Columbus set out on his voyage with prior knowledge. He was well-read; he was as prepared as he thought he could be, and he had performed notions about the people that he would encounter. His mention of searching for the *caniba* only reinforces the idea that he was at least partially influenced by texts from Antiquity, and actually takes it a step further by providing strong evidence that he was influenced by writings from Ctesias in particular.

In 16th century Europe, the term monsters was discussed extensively, with the word often being applied to physical deformities and becoming synonymous with the word ugly. Lorraine Daston discusses this in her book *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, saying “...anatomists regarded monsters as organisms that had failed to achieve their telos, their perfect final form...monsters of all sorts represented a full-scale violation of the rule of law, both natural and civil— ‘the perversion of the order of natural causes, the health of the people, and the authority of the king.’”⁹ The mention of telos again connects back to Antiquity; this is not a Renaissance idea but an idea proposed by ancient philosophers. In addition, Daston describes European monsters; for example, conjoined twins. These physical differences led Europeans to be classified as monsters or monstrous as well; lending credibility to the idea that monstrosity is primarily based on physical appearance. Bodily anomalies are something that was also emphasized heavily in Antiquity. Writing in *Histories*, Herodotus says about the Indians that “Their semen, which they ejaculate into their women, is not white like that of other men, but is black like their skin.”¹⁰ This again shows the focus on physical differences that were a point of interest for both authors in Antiquity and authors in the Renaissance era.

Culture as a Monster

⁹ Daston, 203, 1998

¹⁰ Herodotus, 273, 5th century BCE

The second factor to be analyzed in this paper is culture as a form of monstrosity. This is a very expansive topic, and it is impossible to cover it fully in the time that we have; therefore, this essay makes no broad claims but rather would like to discuss it using specific evidence from more modern writings that have emerged as scholars have studied this topic in Columbus' time; the Myscowski article, in particular, discusses cannibalism as a form of sensationalism that serves to alienate, in this case, native Brazilian women. She quotes the Scottish philosopher Frances Hutcheson, saying "Hutcheson admitted that the "ordinary employment of the...Indians" would not excite and horrify the readers as much: "But a human sacrifice, a feast upon enemies' carcasses, can raise a horror and an admiration" for the distant barbarian."¹¹ This is a very interesting point that circles back to an earlier point made in this paper. It makes sense that some of Columbus' writings would be sensationalized for consumer appeal, leading certain aspects to be exaggerated or even fictionalized. Cannibalism in particular is something that seems to be so far outside the norm that it would immediately inspire strong feelings in the people who were reading about it; however, this is far from the only aspect of culture that is discussed, and follows a pattern dating back to Antiquity. Herodotus says of the Indian tribe the Padaeoi: "Whoever falls ill, whether it be a man or a woman, is killed by their closest friends...They also sacrifice and eat anyone reaching old age."¹² Strabo describes the Encotocoitae, saying their "...ears stretch to their feet and which are so strong they use them to pull up trees and snap bow strings,"¹³ combining physical description with a cultural aspect.

The difference here is that explorers in Columbus' time often saw cultural differences as a form of religious inadequacy; because many of them had gone exploring with the intention of

¹¹ Myscowski, 143, 2007-8

¹² Herodotus, 274, 5th century BCE

¹³ Strabo, 288, 1st century BCE/1st century CE

converting any natives that they met to Christianity, the culture of the natives immediately seemed backward to them, although they appreciated some aspects of it, such as Columbus' statement that "...they all understand one another, which is a very curious thing, on account of which I hope that their Highnesses will determine upon their conversion to our holy faith, towards which they are very inclined."¹⁴ In contrast, many of the authors from Antiquity noted these cultural differences, seemingly with contempt in a select few cases, but in general, did not make any move to try and change the culture from what it was.

Geography as a Monster

The last aspect to be analyzed is geography in the discussion of what makes a monster a monster. Renaissance scholars writing about travel took a more developed view of this, saying that "rarity and the wonder it occasioned were often dependent on geography: a pygmy might appear to western Europeans as a preternatural marvel, but in pygmy land, the reverse was true."¹⁵ This is an important point that emphasizes geography as something that was thought about heavily and shows a recognition of the idea that everyone may be a monster to someone else. The same was true in Antiquity; geography as a concept was heavily linked between Antiquity and the Age of Exploration. In *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, Friedman says "At the center of such a world was the perceiver. His race, language, and cultural characteristics were the mean, and everything moved toward the extreme as it moved further from him. The very greatest extreme was assumed to exist beyond the borders of the known..."¹⁶ This is a very important image of geography in the context of monsters. The idea that the "perceiver" recognizes his own characteristics to be the norm shows a degree of self-awareness

¹⁴ Columbus, 197, 1960

¹⁵ Daston, 122, 1998

¹⁶ Friedman, 35, 2000

that is interesting for this time period. In addition, the idea that there is some plane of existence that is unknowable, that there will always be another level of monstrosity that cannot even be imagined, is an important concept. This also furthers the claim that the definition of a monster is something that differs from the norm, or the person perceiving it. We have looked at differences in physicality and culture; now we observe differences in physical distance as well. These differences are also made clear through Columbus' wonder at the land around him; he immediately sees it as a land full of natural gifts and resources, and although he has his own opinions of the people living there, he can separate those from the physical space, saying "In the trees, fruits, and plants, there is a great difference from those of Juana. In this island, there are many spices and great mines of gold and of other metals."¹⁷ This shows Columbus' observation of the differences between his homeland and the new land he was exploring as well as his immediate cataloging of things that could possibly be useful to him.

Impermeable Columbus

By this point, each aspect of a monster has been touched upon. It is time, therefore, to bring the conversation back around to Columbus. This essay does not claim to know where the ancient writers got their beliefs from; there may be some truth in their statements, and it may just as well be all secondhand knowledge presented as fact. However, it is clear from Columbus' logs and letters that he was not finding monsters; yet he continued to search. His own eyes were of less importance to him than his steadfast belief that he would find the things he had read about. This paper has hopefully touched on some of the reasons why he believed he would find monsters; now I want to leave you with another question. Why did he continue to believe, even after months of fruitless exploration? What could have had such a hold on him that he continued

¹⁷ Columbus, 194, 1960

to search for monsters he would never find? Todorov suggests that “There is nothing of the modern empiricist about Columbus: the decisive argument is an argument of authority, not of experience. He knows in advance what he will find; the concrete experience is there to illustrate a truth already possessed, not to be interrogated according to preestablished rules in order to seek the truth.”¹⁸ I tend to agree with this line of thinking. The question of who is allowed to be an authority is a difficult one. However, Columbus was clearly so heavily influenced by the authors of the texts that he read in preparation for his voyage that he trusted them over his own observations; “He sees clearly that the “mermaids” are not, as he has been told, beautiful women, but rather than conclude that mermaids do not exist, he corrects one prejudice by another: the mermaids are not so beautiful as is claimed.”¹⁹ It may be audacious to make the claim that Columbus was not only influenced by authors in Antiquity, but held them up as fact rather than treating them with discernment. He did not just form opinions of the people he would encounter but believed these to be immutable truths, unchangeable even when presented with no evidence to further these claims. One is not incapable of arguing that Columbus was not so much an explorer to find new things as he was an explorer to find things he knew existed. As he said, “In these islands, I have so far found no human monstrosities, as many expected...”²⁰ It is clear that he, at least, expected to find monsters. He was ready to continue looking.

¹⁸ Todorov, 17, 1984

¹⁹ Todorov, 16, 1984

²⁰ Columbus, 200, 1960

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