THE ROUTLEDGE COMPANION TO MEDIEVAL ICONOGRAPHY

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MONSTROUS ICONOGRAPHY

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Introduction: “The inexhaustible history of monsters”

Monstrous iconography was a major, even central, element of the visual arts throughout the entire medieval period, early Christian through late Gothic, east and west, north and south. There are few—if any—medieval cultural traditions that do not rely on monstrous imagery for vital cultural functions. Within this catchall category, often defined through exclusion from all of the more clearly defined categories of the period, there is tremendous dynamism and variety, as well as great hermeneutic and epistemological potential. There have been a few attempts to define the monstrous, though the protean nature of the subject eludes final clarity.1 However, the study of the iconography of the monstrous was, until relatively recently, underdeveloped. It was a subject of interest within the period, but was not frequently discussed in secondary scholarship about the period. In this essay, we will provide a historiography of modern monsters studies, with particular attention to works addressing iconographical concerns, and then will consider the differing cultural and artistic functions of the monstrous.

It is worth noting that prominent medieval scholars, most notably Augustine of Hippo and Isidore of Seville, wrote important works theorizing the role of the monstrous. For Augustine, in City of God, the monstrous provides a context for understanding God’s infinitely orderly creation and his power over the bodies of men: what seems to be aberrant to our partial vision is orderly and beautiful in God’s whole. Just as relatively trivial human differences cannot be understood as divine error, differences on a larger scale—he covers Cyclopses, Antipodes, Hermaphrodites, Astomi, Pygmies, Sciopods, Blemyes, and Cynocephali, before turning to the minor variation of people born with a finger or toe more than the usual—are similarly part of God’s intentional creation and as such exhibit for us the power of that creation, the fact that “even if a greater variation were to arise, he, whose works are justly faulted by none, knows what he has done.”2 The monstrous in its apparent violations of the norm thus demonstrates at once the power and orderliness of God’s creation and the limits of human vision. Isidore takes up the etymological connection to the Latin monstrare and demonstrare. For Isidore, and many other medieval theorists, the monstrous, in its form as portents, prodigies, or omens, points to meaning located elsewhere. Omens (monstrum), for example, “derive their name from admonition (monitus), because in giving a sign they indicate (demonstrare) something, or else because they instantly show (monstrare) what may appear.”3 For Isidore, as for Augustine, the potential violations or threats of the monstrous are neutralized and the monstrous is normalized by its capacity to
function as a sign or demonstration of something else. As Bruno Roy argues in his 1974 essay, "En marge du monde connu: Les races de monstres," the monstrous is both recognized and assimilated as part of its function throughout the Middle Ages. Roy offers three propositions regarding the medieval monstrous: a) ils existent; b) on les connaît; c) on les assimile" (a) they exist; b) they are known; c) they are assimilated). That is, medieval scholars and theologians (as well, presumably, as the larger populace) believed in the existence of beings that we would now call monsters — hybrids, giants, magical creatures, fire-breathing, dog-headed anthropophages, and so on — and believed not only that they had accurate knowledge of them but also that these beings were ontologically meaningful. As part of God’s rich and vast creation, they had to bear the mark of his divine plans and intentions. From their places on the periphery, they seemed to threaten, disturb, and disrupt, but ultimately they were absorbed back into and thus reaffirmed the power of the center.

Monsters and the monstrous were therefore as worthy of careful study as all other natural and supernatural phenomena, and so we should not be surprised that vital patristic and medieval scholars dedicated their energies to thinking about a subject that much scholarship of the twelfth century saw as marginal, at best. Émile Mâle, one of the founders of the iconographical methodology and a towering figure in medieval art history, gives the subject substantial treatment in his landmark study, L’art religieux de XIIIe siècle en France: Étude sur l’iconographie de moyen âge et sur ses sources d’inspiration, later published in English as Religious Art in France, XIII Century: A Study of Medieval Iconography and Its Sources. He gives, for example, a detailed reading of the monstrous figures of the famous portals of the Basilica Church of St. Mary Magdalene at Vézelay and the Cathedral of Saint Stephen at Sens. Ruminating on the figures more generally, Mâle asks,

What is the meaning of all the plants, animals, monsters? Are they due to caprice or have they significance, and do they teach some great and mysterious truth? May one not suppose that they too are symbols, clothing some thought like the statues and bas-reliefs which we shall have occasion to study later?

Mâle seems to dismiss some as “monsters born of the craftsman’s fancy,” but others (especially, unsurprisingly, those of the Physiologus and bestiary traditions) were, he argued, freighted with meaning, and whether that meaning was the production of “imagination” was irrelevant to the seriousness with which the symbolism was received during the period. As Mâle argues,

It occurred to no one, moreover, to verify the accuracy of stories in the Bestiary. In the Middle Ages the idea of a thing which a man framed for himself was always more real to him than the actual thing itself, and we see why these mystical centuries had no conception of what men now call science. The study of things for their own sake held no meaning for the thoughtful man. How could it be otherwise when the universe was conceived as an utterance of the Word of which every created thing was a single word?

This is a complex passage, suggesting as it does that the monsters of the bestiary and their “moral interpretations” — now generally referred to as “moralizations” — were made up, but were also a meaningful reflection of and on the Word. For Mâle, the fact that monsters were generated by and then “framed for” human consumption did not diminish their significance during the period. And yet, he is not convinced that every monster is freighted with specific, symbolic meaning, and derides those who think they are:

Ingenious archaeologists have, it is true, claimed to leave nothing in the cathedral unexplained. According to them the tiniest flower or smallest grinning monster has a
meaning which the mediaeval theologians can reveal to us . . . Each of these monsters became a minute psychological study, setting forth some state of the soul, and precisely illustrating the combination of passions which may co-exist in a single consciousness. [Such scholars] demonstrated one thing only — that the old craftsmen were never so subtle as their modern interpreters. What likelihood is there that they would have attempted to express so many and such subtle meanings through figures which are invisible from below except with good glasses? 

This all may seem somewhat inconsistent. Monsters are meaningful, except when they are not; they bear meanings imprinted by the Word of God, except insofar as they are products of the imagination of craftsmen. And Mâle’s seemingly contradictory assertions reproduce contradictions explicit within medieval discussions: Isidore, for example, explains that monsters as portents have divine meaning, though he does not link specific monsters to specific meanings, and he warns that although some monsters are portents, others are imaginary, human constructs, explanations of natural or cultural phenomena, and he does not provide us with any way to distinguish between these kinds of meanings. There are medieval monsters with very specific iconographical meanings, and others that are imaginary, or invented, or resist such interpretation. Given that there is no single, correct way to “read” all the monsters of the Middle Ages, in the medieval context or in our own, in this essay, we will consider some of the roles monsters play in medieval art, each of which requires a different route toward interpretation. We will also argue that this multiplicity of meanings, the excess and thus opacity of monstrous iconography, may function not to disable interpretation but to make visible, to demonstrate, and thus to allow for re-vision of the very ways we make and find meaning.

Throughout the twentieth century, among the handful of landmark studies of monstrous iconography, Rudolf Wittkower’s “Marvels of the East: A Study in the History of Monsters” (1942) stands out for its depth of engagement with the subject, as well as its erudition. This article follows a traditional iconographical approach by locating literary sources for a few characters from within what he refers to as the “the inexhaustible history of monsters, those compound beings that have always haunted the human imagination.” He traces their origins to a diverse array of Latin, Greek, and Sanskrit sources, including Herodotus, Pliny, and the Mahabharata; these textual sources have become something like gospel in modern studies of medieval monsters, particularly the Latin texts, likely owing to the linguistic strengths of medievalists. Wittkower’s work also privileges certain modes of thought — the section on ancient Greece is subtitled “An Enlightened Interlude,” which he describes as notable for its “progressive scientific attitude” and rejection of “superstition.” He then performs iconographical readings of some monsters, relying on textual “moralizations.” However, Wittkower presses beyond the static, overly fixed iconographical readings of some of his contemporaries, noting that “late mediaeval moralizations are interchangeable and attach to the moral values of human society.”

There was little art historical response to Wittkower’s article, and the next major contribution to the study of the iconography of the monstrous was, in a sense, not deliberate. Lilian M. C. Randall’s major 1966 catalogue, *Images in the Margin of Gothic Manuscripts*, tackled the iconography of the monstrous in Gothic marginality. Her volume is largely an iconographical index, with nearly two hundred pages of subject headings, indexed to over seven hundred illustrations. That many of these are in some way monstrous is less the result of Randall’s interests and more a practical result of the nature of gothic marginalia. Still, she chooses to open her study with Bernard of Clairvaux’s famous *Apologia*, with its critique-cum-advertisement of the
“distractive influence” of “those half-men” and other such monstrosities.15 Randall argues that, in incorporating them, “the Church . . . often endow[ed] them with symbolic overtones.”16 Her main goal is to draw attention to the marginal images that had been to this point largely overlooked, and of course—as art historians are now well aware—monstrous and grotesque figures were a staple thereof. Randall chronicles (and at times endorses) the view that “a good initial and border . . . is spoiled by a repulsive grotesque.”17 Though she notes that she has omitted any references to “isolated renderings of inactive creatures,” including “monsters, and hybrids, which constitute stereotype elements of marginal decoration,” her index lists several entries under “Monster,” as well as entries for “Centaur,” “Mermaid,” and other individual monsters.18 The “Monster” entries, including “Monster crippled” and “Monster vomiting,” clearly deserve their own study.19 In essence, Randall provides the first major guide to the iconography of the monstrous without either setting out to do so or at any point theorizing the nature of her subject.

John Block Friedman’s 1981 The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought significantly extends Wittkower’s treatment and surveys representations of the monstrous throughout the Middle Ages.20 Friedman’s extended examination includes different approaches to the monstrous within the medieval tradition. As he notes of the early medieval manuscript illustrations in London, British Library Cotton Vitellius A.xv (Figure 38.4) and Cotton Tiberius B.v (both containing the Wonders of the East), the moralizations of the bestiary even in the early tradition partner very uneasily with some of the monstrous illustrations: the monstrous images in these manuscripts fill or extend beyond the margins of their frames, and for Friedman,

[...] this uneasy relationship of creature to frame suggests that the monstrous men are leaving the borders confining them to the static page and beginning to occupy landscapes; they cannot be contained in isolation, as they were in the miniatures presenting the moralists’ point of view.21

It is perhaps not coincidence that Michael Camille opens Image on the Edge, his landmark study of Gothic marginalia (broadly categorized), with the very same text used by Randall: Bernard’s Apologia. He says, “I could begin, like St. Bernard, by asking what do they all mean, those lascivious apes, autophagic dragons, [and] pot-bellied heads . . . that protrude at the edges of medieval buildings, sculptures and illuminated manuscripts,” but he might just as well have said, “I could begin, like Lilian Randall . . .”22 Indeed, he cites her volume in the next paragraph as the most notable in the field. While he deals with the subject of the monstrous throughout Image on the Edge, Camille’s most direct treatments of the iconography of the monstrous are in two essays. First, he took on the very notion of iconographical practice via monsters in 1993 in his “Mouths and Meanings: Towards an Anti-Iconography of Medieval Art,”23 and then in 1996 used monstrous iconography to challenge the art historical canon and the basic notion of canonicity in “Prophets, Canons, and Promising Monsters (Rethinking the Canon).”24 Camille was perhaps the most imaginative and invigorating scholar of medieval art in the late twentieth century; ask any mid-career medieval art historian what drew her to this subfield, and Camille’s work is a likely answer. His work is iconoclastic, in that it challenged traditional conceptions about medieval art and the Middle Ages, and the period that we now discuss seems a messier, sexier, dirtier thing than the Middle Ages of scholarship prior to Camille’s work.

It is fitting that, in tackling two of the central pillars of the field—iconographical practice and the artistic canon itself—Camille would turn to monstrous imagery for rhetorical assistance.
Monsters are not really the subject of either “Mouths and Meanings” or “Prophets, Canons, and Promising Monsters.” Instead, monsters are, for Camille, as for Bernard, a concise means of approaching his subjects. In “Mouths,” he offers the magnificent, roiling mess of the trumeau now mounted on the inner side of the west wall of the Abbey of Sainte-Marie at Souillac, “a work of medieval art that has long intrigued art historians precisely because of its resistance to written models of explanation.” Through this work, Camille exposes flaws in traditional text-based iconographical approaches. As he writes,

Suffused with language, either iconically (in the form of inscriptions and speech scrolls) or indexically (by referring to written narratives of the Bible text) medieval art is often described as though it were entirely text-driven. Ever since Male’s influential metaphor, taken over from Romantic writers like Victor Hugo, that medieval artists are “writers in stone,” the notion of legibility has been used unproblematically, reducing medieval images to a neatly coded series of signs waiting to be decoded by scholarly exegetes. But, as Camille argues, much of medieval art—perhaps especially evident in the iconography of the monstrous—is rooted in “the unscripted codes and cultural practices that are generated orally and performatively.” Surely, many of us would like to discover a passage from Augustine or Isidore that would explain away the Donestre, or a bit from Bede that clarifies just what an elf is, but these passages likely do not, and did not, exist. The trumeau might be tied to various passages from Augustine, Peter of Celle, Bernard of Clairvaux, Caesarius of Heisterbach, and Ysengrimus (as Camille dutifully demonstrates), but it cannot be reduced to a visual cipher for these passages of text. When “stone turns to feathers, claws and fur, textures that ruffle and slither between the cranky joints of shaft and pillar to create an architecture of animality, a spiraling ascent and descent of biting bestiality,” a work can become “more like a scream rent from a human body than words written outside it.”

Camille is more explicit in his focus on monsters in “Prophets, Canons, and Promising Monsters.” In his desire to press back against the “set of predetermined, isolated images of ‘great works’ reproduced in books,” the “worthy objects” of the canon, he settles on a small monster from Sensis Cathedral, which he describes as “a superbly ambiguous thing, less than a foot long, part reptile, part bird, and all stone.”

Whereas the canon is a transcendent, uncreated text, like the Bible or the Torah, the monster is a material creature, a creation. Whereas the canon is constructed out of the always already known, prejudged and expected, the monster, being unstable, crosses boundaries between human and nonhuman, mingling the appropriate and the inappropriate, showing itself in constantly novel and unexpected ways . . . [T]he monster is always lurking somewhere, guarding the threshold . . . The monstrous . . . is all sensation, at one point soft and shiny, at another sharp and spiky. These are not properties that can be accessed via traditional text-based iconography, nor are they qualities of the artistic canon. Some scholars therefore have dismissed their significance. For Camille, monsters are neither codes to be unlocked nor masterpieces to be venerated, but opportunities to connect on a human and intimate, visceral way with art, giving him a route not “to worship at the shrine of actual art or to read in the inscribed traces of the historical past [but] to feel my flesh crawl and to be haunted.”
Monstrous iconography

What are monsters for?

In the preface to *Monster Theory*, Jeffrey Jerome Cohen echoes Camille as he argues that the monster in its hybridity and doubleness "introjects the disturbing, repressed, but formative traumas of "pre-" into the sensory moment of "post-", binding the one irrevocably to the other." He continues:

The monster commands, "Remember me"; restore my fragmented body, piece me back together, allow the past its eternal return. The monster *haunts*; it does not simply bring past and present together but destroys the boundary that demanded their twinned foreclosure.34

As we consider the question "What are monsters for?" we recognize the difference monsters demonstrate on many levels – temporal difference, physical difference, cultural and linguistic difference – but we also recognize that even in its marginality, the monstrous, in Cohen's term, "commands," exerts powerful, if profoundly contradictory, calls to interpret, to "piece together," the fragmented into a whole. And while this call may appear conservative, a "restoration" rather than a creation of something new, it also exaggerates, and thus renders legible, the otherwise invisible processes of interpretation: piecing together requires separation, categorization, reinforcing of boundaries even as it traverses them. It is no surprise to consider the number of monstrous representations and interpretations that appear within or take as their source the great encyclopedic texts of the Middle Ages – texts themselves that are attempts at categorizing and piecing together the world. For this reason, we have chosen as our "case study" a number of the widely present monsters of the Alexander materials, and have followed the contemporary work of Jesse Hurlbut in our examining of the images of British Library Royal 20 B.xx, a lavishly illustrated fifteenth-century French *Historia de poedis*, containing images of confrontations between Alexander and these monsters.

In his work with the "manuscript average," Hurlbut superimposes digitized manuscript images, creating startling, evocative, haunting hybrid images. He approaches the project not with the explicit aim of departure from the "original" but rather as a return from the partiality of the digitized image to an idea of the physical whole of the manuscript as well as the sensual apprehension of that whole. He writes,

Without the physical presence of the actual volume between our hands, is there a way for us to take in some aspect of it all at once? For instance, what if we took all the pages of a given manuscript and overlaid them as if they were transparent?35

His "manuscript average" reveals continuities across the images – format, color spectrum, framing – continuities that bind the images and texts of the manuscript as a whole, though often unconsciously for the reader/viewer. At the same time, the superimposition makes it impossible to recognize single figures or images; rather, what emerges from an attempt to locate a whole figure or coherent image in the fields of colors and lines are fragments. With Hurlbut's generous help, we have generated not a full manuscript average but something of a "monster average" by superimposing transparent images of the numerous images in Royal 20 xx containing scenes of battles between Alexander and his men and hordes of monsters, some particularly creative and bizarre (Figs. 38.1, 38.2, and 38.3).36 We clarified the image some by increasing the contrast and making other small image adjustments. In the Royal 20 xx "monsters average," fragments emerge from the Chagall-like image: a snout, a foot, perhaps a wing, a stirrup. With reference to this new
Figure 38.1  "Monster Average," London, British Library, MS Royal 20 B.xx, Historia de proelis in a French translation (Le Livre et le vraie hystoire du bon roy Alixandre), c. 1420.

Figure 38.2  Alexander Battles Blemmyes, London, British Library, MS Royal 20 B.xx, f. 80, Historia de proelis in a French translation (Le Livre et le vraie hystoire du bon roy Alixandre), c. 1420, © The British Library Board, All Rights Reserved.
composite image, made by overlaying twenty-four existing images, as our “case study,” we survey three roles monstrous iconography serves in medieval art.

1 Monsters demonstrate difference, and thus at once threaten and confirm the norm – in body, in culture, and in language

The monsters of the Alexander material include monsters of culture, like the wild man; monsters of language, like the horse-headed and dog-headed peoples whose bodies disallow speech; and monsters of body, including hybrids like the dog-headed people but also creatures of excess and lack, like giants or the famous Blemmyes (people with no heads; Fig. 38.2). All of these monsters can be subject to broad iconographical readings: the nakedness and hairiness of the wild man itself, as Friedman observes, “was a sign of wildness and bestiality – of the animal nature thought to characterize those who lived beyond the limits of the Christian world” (Fig. 38.3).\textsuperscript{57} The Blemmye, also naked, whose later medieval moralizations would range from humility (the Gesta Romanorum) to the extraction of excessive legal fees (Liber de monstrosis, Thomas of Cantimpré),\textsuperscript{58} often appears with a club as his characteristic weapon. As Friedman argues, the linking of the monster and such a nonchivalric weapon poses “a resemblance between the representative of a monstrous race and the rustic or churl whose uncivil nature is commonly shown by the club he wields”:\textsuperscript{59} the Blemmye as a monster of culture is also a monster of class.

Whereas the monstrous as it appears in contexts like the mappae mundi (e.g., the Psalter Map, BL MS Add. 28681, fol. 9\textsuperscript{v}) and the Marvels of the East manuscripts (perhaps mostly clearly in BL Cotton Vitellius A.xx, Fig. 38.4\textsuperscript{iv}) is often presented as a catalogue or in a sequence of monsters, often without human interactants, the Alexander material more often partners these monsters with representations of Alexander and his men, figures of the Western, the human, the masculine, the normative. The hairy wild men and naked Blemmyes with their clubs in Royal 20 B.xx
are clearly contrasted with and outnumbered by the highly armed and armored Alexander and the right group of his sword-wielding men. Perhaps
more effectively than ever the right frames of the Psalter Map, the miniatures on which our

Figure 38. Cotton Vitellius A x, f. 3, Monastic of the East.

By Alexander, the putatively monstrous in this sense, the monstrous figures affirm and con-

from the power of the norm in the "monster average" image the left side is dominated by what
had been in the miniatures the figures of Alexander, his men, and their horses. Above them is a bristling forest of pikes and lances. Their side of the image is all dynamic, forward motion, pressing toward the monstrous average to the right. Of course, we recognize which side of the average is Alexander’s and which belongs to the monstrous only by disambiguating the superimposed frames of the “average,” and thus by reinscribing the very work of differentiation which underlies one function of the monstrous. Here, making sense of the image of the “monstrous average,” the call to “piece it together,” can be articulated only in pulling the image apart into the miniatures by whose accretion it is formed, by returning to difference which both antecedes and constitutes the image. And the return to difference is also affirmation of boundary, legibility, and the normative.

2 Monsters demonstrate difference, and thus embody and make visible the difference already within the norm

As David Gordon White argues, although monsters are positioned as “marginal groups that haunt the boundaries of human, civilized spaces,” nonetheless we cannot conclude that “they have been of marginal concern to humans living within such bounded spaces.” And the fascination with the monstrous cannot be restricted even to the question White poses in this context of where the human begins and ends. Even the foregoing readings of the Blemmye and his club complicate our discussion of what monsters are for (Fig. 38.2). If the club links the Blemmye to class anxieties as it represents the “uncivil nature” of the monster, at the same time, difference externalized in the figure of the monster exists within the nonmonstrous: class difference is a human matter.

As Michael Camille has observed, in Gothic art, animal and human realms are usually represented as clearly distinct territories, with the notable exception of the monstrous. He argues that the half-human, half-animal bodies of some monsters can figure illicit, but nonetheless extant, desires and actions: given the definition in canon law of acts like sodomy as being both bestial and “against nature,” the activities of the monstrous body could make visible “illicit couplings that could not be talked about, but could be pictured.” That is, the monstrous can represent not simply the unknown or unknowable, but also acts and relationships, ways of being that are proscribed but nonetheless known, even intimately familiar. In our “monster average,” at the interface between the two halves of the image, what had been the human and the monstrous in the miniatures interpenetrated. There are two clear halves, but there is nonetheless no actual point of divide between them. The “human” half, taken in aggregate, and with the horses and weapons and armor, forms a mass just as monstrous and hybrid as the “monster” half. And throughout the “monster” half, there are traces of the human, perhaps most clearly the foot and stirrup in the lower right corner of the image. The monstrous and the human interpenetrate, however strenuously – or perhaps even because of how strenuously – they are differentiated. That interpenetration emphasizes that the difference externalized in the monster is never simply a difference from but rather also a difference within the norm. Returning to one of the original images from the manuscript, one of the layers of our “average” image, the Battle with Boars and Wild Men reveals the same sort of blurring of sides as the composite image (Fig. 38.3). While one Wild Man hefts a class-identifying club like that of the Blemmyes, another has a curiously self-reflexive image on his shield. The boar-tusked Wild Man bears a shield carved with the face of a Wild Man. The style of the illumination allows for slippage, here, in that the shield appears as lively as the being who carries it is. However, across the image, at the far left, one of Alexander’s men bears as shield that seems to reflect the self-reflexive shield, as it is carved with another Wild Man face. Indeed, the two rather
animate, smiling shield-faces seem to be making eerie eye contact across the battle, as if sharing in a private joke. Perhaps they notice that both sides wield similar spears, and one combatant on each side raises a giant, curved sword more appropriate to the monstrous warrior than to the noble knight striving against him. How different, then, are these mortal combatants? And, inversely, how similar, how unified, how resolutely normal are Alexander’s men? The British Library’s Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts titles this image “Detail of a Miniature of Alexander’s Battle with Boars and Many-Handed Savages,” and yet the “savages” each have a rather underwhelming complement of only two hands, and the knights, with a seemingly alive Wild Man face and giant’s sword among their more noble weapons, enact again and again a violence that, in its ferocity and its scale, is savage.45

3 Monsters demonstrate difference and thus signification, in image as well as language

In his study of the monstrous, Deformed Discourse, David Williams stresses the importance of Isidore’s etymological definition of the monster, through monstrum, demonstrare, and monstros, as we have discussed earlier:

It would be difficult to exaggerate the importance of this definition of the monster, not only because it was universally accepted in the Middle Ages and not only because by its acceptance and celebration of the monster it sets this period apart from the periods that preceded and succeeded it but also because this definition elevates the monster in all its various manifestations – as the deformity and as the grotesque that arise from negation – to the level of conceptual sign.46

The monster in its difference from itself, and in its capacity to point away from itself to meaning elsewhere, embodies and figures signification itself. It is no surprise then to find monstrous forms as text itself – for example, in anthropomorphic alphabets, or in monstrous initial capitals.47 In the Alexander materials, too, in Alexander’s Letter to Aristotle, bound with the illustrated Wonders of the East in Cotton Vitellius A.xx, Alexander’s journey into the land of the monstrous unfolds as the progress of the letter itself: the insistent concern with writing and the letter in that thread of the Alexander material replicates the coterminous concern with the monstrous. And again, this coterminous concern re-presents the monstrous not as experiential but as representational: the transmission and sometimes even the origin of the monster are in text and image, even when the reception of the monster is as reality rather than representation or fiction. As Wittkower details, the origins of medieval monsters can be traced in literature back to Herodotus, Megasthenes, and Ktesias. Even there, as he notes, “the majority of the fabulous stories were of literary origin; they were borrowed from the Indian epics.”48 As Mary B. Campbell notes, even beyond literary origin, some monstrous figures arise in the act of writing itself: unlikely creatures such as the “bird-centaurs of Wonders of the East belong to the genre of fact, but they do not and never did exist – they were begotten of an error in scribal transmission.”49 Hence, at least in part, the durability of the monstrous in the face of increasing geographic and scientific knowledge: even when the monstrous is apprehended, in contexts like the Wonders traditions, the encyclopedias, and even the Alexander materials, as “real,” it also inheres in the representational strategies through which we continue to encounter it.

The monstrous as we encounter it in medieval art and thought is seemingly infinitely accretive. We can attempt to trace its sources, its interpretations, and its functions as we read it; as David White proposes in his study of the dog-man, we can attempt to “go back in time, and move
from a complex sedimentation of symbols and socio-religious elements to simpler, less elaborate composites." White is concerned with following through a specific analysis and its capacity to "intercept, as it were, certain very basic human categories in their embryonic formation." Doing so more generally than White does in his study, however, often presumes the existence of an entity recognizable as the monstrous before and behind the accretion of those sources, interpretations, and functions. And the problem with that assumption is that the monstrous, as we have argued earlier, appears exactly in and through those representations.

Even if we do not pose such an "original," certainly the iconography of the monstrous requires a degree of stability, and in many senses stability persists. Campbell argues,

Visual representations of the dogheads, for instance, remained as constant as verbal ones, throughout centuries of stylistic change in the languages of both visual and verbal mimesis. This is perhaps because a very bare minimum of features was necessary for definition, and once these features had been sketched or mentioned, the image "doghead" had been evoked to the limit of its usable significance.52

We can read the Cynocephalus in BL Cotton Vitellius A.xv as a Cynocephalus, and similarly the two Cynocephali from the famous tympanum of the Benedictine abbey church of Sainte-Marie-Madeleine at Vezelay as Cynocephali by the informing contexts, the text of the manuscript, the surrounding figures in tympanum, and the shared features of the representations, the human bodies and elongated, muzzle-like faces (Fig. 38.4 and 38.5). And once we identify these figures

\[\text{Figure 38.5 Cynocephali, Tympanum of the Benedictine Abbey Church of Sainte-Marie-Madeleine, Vezelay. Image courtesy of Karl Steel.}\]
as Cynocephali, we can progress with the pluralities of iconographical readings that, as Cyno-
cephali, they point to. But if we limit our focus to these stabilities through which we identify and
read the Cynocephalus as such, we also elide the problem that these monsters are significantly
different from each other, even in those identifying features. The Vitellius figure is elaborately
clothed, even regal, in contrast to the bent and twisting figures on the Vézelay tympanum, one
naked and one clothed in a short, simple tunic, for example. And furthermore, even the identifying
features like the dog-head are not so transparent: the elongated muzzle-like faces in both the
BL Cotton Vitellius A.xv and the Vézelay figures, for example, are not simply or unambiguously
canine, and not, for example, dissimilar in shape to the horse-heads represented in Royal 20 B.xx
(f. 29). The problem we are articulating here is also the invitation offered through Hurlbut’s
“manuscript average.”

These “average images” are something of a rebuke to traditional iconography, which, espe-
ially since Erwin Panofsky’s landmark work, has in seeking to determine the “correct iconog-
raphical analysis” of a work of art taught us to look away from that work, and inevitably toward
a text. “Literary sources,” he says, are “indispensable and sufficient for an iconographical anal-
ysis,” when coupled with “a corrective principle which may be called the history of style,” and,
if absolutely necessary, some knowledge of cultural context. Any remaining ambiguities are, for
Panofsky and his method, problems rather than strengths in works of art, and can be dismissed
as the result of “clumsiness,” “incompetence” of a “poor . . . copyist,” and other examples of
“failure.” Indeed, even when his system is functioning well, for Panofsky, “we deal with the
work of art as a symptom.” In contrast, Jennifer Borland encourages us to embrace the idea that
“in cases where so little is known about the object, its function, or its meaning,” as is so often the
case with monstrous imagery, we can adopt an approach that “acknowledges and capitalizes on
necessary speculation,” since “iconography demands knowledge of ‘original’ meanings usually
based on textual sources that we often do not have.”

Of course, we can still posit iconographical meanings in the absence of reliable texts, but the
“manuscript average” images ask us to look at art differently, in a way never before possible, to
look at manuscripts and the monsters they contain in more complete ways than our eyes can
manage. The result does not produce the sort of clarity and “correctness” that Panofsky was
seeking, not the “oneness” he praises in Renaissance art. Rather, the bizarre and beautiful one-
ess of our “monster average,” this composite aggregate image of hybrid monsters and collective,
vigorous action, invites puzzled contemplation: how did that stirrup come to be on the monster
side? What are those leathery wings attached to? Who, if anyone, is winning? In the singular
images, time and again Alexander triumphs, but the “average” emphasizes the endless nature of
these battles, and the endless chains of signification they imply.

Hurlbut’s project is restorative in its explicit aim: the recreation of the apprehension of the
manuscript as “a whole thing,” complete with weight, the smell, the groaning of the bindings, the
crackling of parchment. Of course, one other premise must also be that such recreation, through
another kind of digitized image, creates something different, necessarily dislocated from the man-
uscript as an original object, however effectively it evokes that “whole thing.” There is no view of
an actual manuscript – seen in person in a library reading room, held in the hands, its sharp scent
smelled, its leather cover and vellum pages felt – that affords anything close to the view provided
by Hurlbut’s wonderful reimagining and reimagining of the manuscripts he has “averaged.” There
is, without such techniques, no way to see “a whole thing” at once, except perhaps in one’s mind.
In this sense, his “manuscript averages” and, following his lead, our “monster average” are new
creations, but ones that generate previously unarticulated information about the original artifacts.
And further, as the “manuscript averages” evoke the simultaneity of the “whole thing” we expe-
rience in the manuscript, they also allow for what both Camille and Cohen have described as
the “haunting” of the monstrous: in that simultaneity, in the disorienting superimposed frames, we can see, feel, and know something, even though we may not be able to articulate what that something is without losing what provokes it in the first place.

Conclusions: “A great bulk of material, which may seem bewildering”

Any study of the iconography of the monstrous arrives quickly at a sense of excess, in the proliferation of material offered up for examination, in the exponential expansion of possibilities for interpretation, and in the seemingly unavoidable self-reflexiveness of iconographical readings of images created as signs, in representation, and thus as signs of signs, and, as such, demonstrating the process of interpretation itself (among many other things). Uneasiness with this excess is manifest in Mâle’s suggestion about the monstrous figures on the Vézelay portals, that “ingenious archaeologists” may read more than “the old craftsmen” could have intended in images “which are invisible from below except with good glasses.” It is certainly tempting to counter the suggestion — for example, with discussion of the impact of these highly detailed figures barely discernable from below, in the context of the cathedral, or of the fact that these images are now available in high resolution in digital photographs, and their reception cannot be limited, now, to only the physical context of the cathedral itself. But more important than the immediate argument about the cathedral portal is the expression of discomfort with the interpretation of these figures, and by one of the founding scholars of iconographical methodology itself. Uneasiness about the monstrous becomes immediately discomfort with too much “subtlety” or too much “ingenuity” — that is, with excess in interpretation, with the implication that we can go too far in our attempts to make and find meaning. We suggest here that going too far is part of what engaging with the monstrous requires of us, that, haunted and bewildered, we have in the iconography of monstrous the chance to see and feel more than we might know how to write about.

Notes


2 Augustine, De Civitate Dei, PL 41, ed. J.-P. Migne (Paris, 1845), 16.8: “Ita esti major diversitas oritatur, scil. quid egerit, cujus opera juste nemo reprehendit.”

3 Isidore of Seville, The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville, trans. S.A. Barney, W.J. Lewis, J.A. Beach, and O. Berghof (Cambridge, 2006), XI.iii.3, 244.


7 Mâle, Religious Art (as in note 5), 33.

8 Mâle, Religious Art (as in note 5), 47–47.

9 Etymologies XI.iii.28–31 (as in note 3): “Dicuntur autem et alia hominum fabulosae portenta, quae non sunt, sed ficta in causis rerum interpretantur.”

10 See Mâle, Religious Art (as in note 5), 47, for further discussion.


12 Wittkower, “Marvels of the East” (as in note 11), 165.

13 Wittkower, “Marvels of the East” (as in note 11), 178.

Randall, Images (as in note 14), 3, with internal quotation and translation from Apologia ad Gaitlemon Sancti Thoederici Abbatem, MPL, CLXXXII, cols. 915–16.

Randall, Images (as in note 14), 4.

Randall, Images (as in note 14), 10, sympathetically quoting as “not unjustifiably in the particular instance”: M. J. Rickert, Painting in Britain: The Middle Ages (Baltimore, 1954), 148–49.

Randall, Images (as in note 14), 15.

Randall, Images (as in note 14), 189.


21 Friedman, Monstrous Races (as in note 20), 154.


25 Camille, “Mouths and Meanings” (as in note 23), 45.

26 Camille, “Mouths and Meanings” (as in note 23), 43.

27 Camille, “Mouths and Meanings” (as in note 23), 44.

28 Camille, “Mouths and Meanings” (as in note 23), 43.

29 Camille, “Mouths and Meanings” (as in note 23), 54.

30 Camille, “Prophets, Canons, and Promising Monsters” (as in note 24), 199.

31 Camille, “Prophets, Canons, and Promising Monsters” (as in note 24), 200.

32 For a personal account of the dismissive attitude, see Mittman, “The Impact of Monsters and Monster Studies” (as in note 1), 1–2: “Listen, Asa, you’ve got to drop all this monster stuff and start doing real scholarship.”

33 Camille, “Prophets, Canons, and Promising Monsters” (as in note 24), 201.


36 For many of the images from this manuscript, see “Detailed record for Royal 20 B XX,” British Library Catalogue of Illuminated Manuscripts (no date), http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=6533&CollID=16&NStart=200220 (accessed August 2015).

37 Friedman, Monstrous Races (as in note 20), 32.

38 Wirtkower, “Marvels of the East” (as in note 11), 178.

39 Friedman, Monstrous Races (as in note 20), 33.


41 For a complete color facsimile of the Wonders of the East, see A.S. Mittman and S.M. Kim, Inconceivable Beasts: The Wonders of the East in the Beowulf Manuscript (Tempe, 2013).


44 For a discussion of the unification of warrior and armor into a posthuman cyborg, see A.S. Mittman and P. MacCormack, “Rebuilding the Fabulated Bodies of the Staffordshire Hoarders,” postmedieval 7:3, “Hoarders and Hoards: Responses to the Staffordshire Hoard” (October, 2016), 356–68.


47 Williams, Deformed Discourse (as in note 46), 216–22.

48 Wirtkower, “Marvels of the East” (as in note 11), 164.

49 M.B. Campbell, The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400–1600 (Ithaca, 1991), 4. For discussion of a similar instance of scribal transformation of a monster, the People with Three Colors, see Mittman and Kim, Inconceivable Beasts (as in note 41), 79–81.

50 White, Myths of the Dog-Man (as in note 42), 31.

51 White, Myths of the Dog-Man (as in note 42), 33.
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57. Panofsky, “Iconography and Iconology,” (as in note 54), 223 (emphasis added).
59. Panofsky (as in note 54), 224, 234.
60. Hurlbut, “The Manuscript Average” (as in note 35).
61. Wittkower, “Marvels of the East” (as in note 11), 159.