

IAN: A wonderful fish or beast was lately killed by James Stuart as it came of its own accord to him out of the sea to the shore where he was alone on horseback at the harbor of dingle had two heads and ten horns and upon eight of the said horns about eight hundred buttons which resembled little coronets and each of them was a set of teeth the body was bigger than a horse and was not ten feet long horns and all the great head thereof carried only the said ten horns and two very large eyes and the little head thereof carried a wonderful strange mouth and two tongues in it which had all power to draw itself out of or into the body as its own necessity required all persons who desire to be further satisfied in the truth hereof may see the little head and two of the horns with the coronets there on a draft of the holes that appeared together alive with a certificate from responsible hands and a great relation of all the passages witnessing the truth thereof the three castles on the lower end of cork hill

ALEXA: wow what the heck. What is that?

IAN: well, it's a sea monster of some sort or maybe a fish or maybe a sort of giant squid.

ALEXA: hi I'm Alexa Sand

IAN: and I'm Ian Macinnes

ALEXA: And this is real fantastic beasts

IAN: this is our very first episode and we are so excited we thought we'd say a little bit about the plan and what we do in every episode before we get into the the sea monsters themselves. Every episode we will take a creature from that was of interest in the Middle Ages or the Renaissance and Alexa will talk about the Middle Ages, and I will talk a little bit about the renaissance and together we'll also talk about the real as well as the fantastical, because all of the animals that we will look at are both fantastic and real in many ways.

ALEXA: Absolutely. Animal lore was so important in the middle ages and also in the early modern period and it was probably because they inherited this very rich tradition from antiquity including a book that will be referring to fairly often here called the Physiologus so this was a book that was composed in greek for christian audience sometime in the first three centuries after christ and it pulls together a ton of Greek, Egyptian Roman, and Mesopotamian lore about animals some of which is truly fantastic some of which is pretty real it also includes a lot of sort of moralizing and allegorizing so comparing certain traits or behaviors of the animals to kind of religious truths and then another major source for all of our writers and artists in this period is esop's fables which is much older body of literature reaching back into the probably the seventh century BC and that was super popular in the middle ages and Renaissance in fact it's one of those books that um you really could argue it's an all time best seller and it was almost continually in projection in manuscript and then later in print so those along with you now Aristotle local oral traditions are some of the

literary sources that will be reverencing and there's also like this burgeoning field of animal studies people scholars from all different disciplines looking at the non human in the middle ages and I think we really owe a debt to that work for drawing attention to this incredibly rich body of material.

IAN: Some days we will be inviting some of those scholars to come talk about their particular interests in animal studies.

ALEXA: Real fantastic beast experts.

IAN: experts

ALEXA: I'm not an expert on animal studies I'm always intrigued though by the way animals show up in the illuminated manuscripts small ivory sculptures that I like to work on and now they can seem sort of incidental or marginal but if you start to really interrogate them they're working really hard to make you think harder and I think that one things that will continually return to as well as this idea that animals are really productive places for us to think about what it means to be human what it means in many cases to be European what it means to be christian or jewish or or moslem in medieval Europe so so animals are good for thinking

IAN: all of that helps us helps us understand our place among our fellow creatures today

ALEXA: absolutely

IAN: So one of the one of the early modern sources that I will use quite a bit is book by a guy named Topsell called the history of four footed beasts ,which combines a lot of that old lore with a new kind of proto-natural history approach to the world which is always fun when you're getting the natural history of an animal that we know is entirely imaginary

ALEXA: or do we know that oh we will we will find out more

ALEXA: all right so getting back to this crazy description of a sea monster or a giant and or whatever that was tell me a little bit about that. Is that from Topsell?

IAN: Ah, that is not. That's actually a document from the national library of Ireland from 1673, and it's basically just a collection of some manuscript sources on this event. This creature turns up in Dingle and is killed and then put on display.

ALEXA: I said squid because one of the things that we like to do often when we see early accounts of sea monsters just figure out what was it quote unquote really that they were finding but if you notice to make it into a giant squid you have to ignore actually quite a few elements of the account itself.

ALEXA: yeah

IAN: Namely the fact that it came up on the beach and attacked this guy as he was riding along one day, which is not really the behavior of a giant squid ever.

ALEXA: Yeah I mean they're deep sea creatures so not hanging out on the shore line and as far as we know they don't come out of the water intentionally at any time

IAN: Exactly. Washed up on the beach maybe, dramatic attack on men on horseback not. But that's typical of what we find is that there's elements of many accounts that make us think that maybe there's some real modern and understanding of what was going on. Then there's so many elements of these accounts that are also fantastical and inexplicable if we simply try to concentrate on displacing legendary creatures.

ALEXA: Yeah

IAN: I think we do history a disservice. We do the human imagination a disservice

ALEXA: And maybe also the fantastic creatures I mean —

IAN: Of course. Poor sea monster

ALEXA: Yeah they have their purpose they have their work to do right I mean I think at least for the middle ages there's also this this perception of the sea

ALEXA: Or this understanding of the sea that is really interesting it's the sea is a way to get from one place to another first and foremost right so we have these maritime cultures and they build ship so they travel on the sea and in fact in the literature of medieval Scandinavia and viking literature these these pathways across the sea are called whale roads so the idea is that like the whales are these creatures who traverse the sea and who have these sort of distinct pathways just as on land there are roads the roads on the sea too and I find it really interesting they're associated with whales specifically s large creatures but what goes on beneath the surface is really a mystery to people in the middle ages I mean the sea is fairly mysterious even now we understand so little about what is happening in the sea compared to what we understand about what's going on the land going on on the land or even what is how say on the surface of the moon it's super mysterious and it's a great place to begin talking about real fantastic beast because the sea is literally stuffed with creatures that defy our imagination

IAN: And for a long time the sea was, well a large amount was bottomless because they did not have ways of sounding beyond a certain depth. There's a famous moment in as you like it Shakespeare's *As You Like It* where a character says that her love has has no bottom, like the bay of Portugal. Until they were in soundings, that is they can drop their line over the side to know where the bottom is, they are in essentially a

bottomless abyss. There is no understanding of where the sea might stop. It might go all the way down, which means it could contain almost anything.

ALEXA: And I think it's important that you say all the way down because what's at the very bottom of the sort of order of things is hell right and so secrets are often imbued with a kind of devilish or satanic energy there's this great old english poem called the whale and in the poem the the poet tells us a little bit about um whales sort of at first you think it's just now telling us about whale behavior but of course that's not really what's going on he actually borrows a story from the *Physiologus* and I think he tells it really well so I'm just going to read this nice trans on that I have here he says his aspect is like a leprous stone like those that crumble over by the water surrounded by sandy hills a most mighty reef so that the waves sailors believe that they might be looking with their eyes upon some island and then tether their high proud ship to that non land by their anchor ropes settling their sea steeds there being at an end and then the brave hearted go up on to that island their keels standing fixed by the shore wound about by the tide then the weary spirited sailors make camp looking no wickedness on that island awakening a fire kindling large flames the morning heroes become joyful longing for rest when crafty and crime he that's the whale perceives that s who have come upon him abiding fast keeping their camp wishing for good weather then forthwith he turns downward into the salty waves with them as plunder this gast of the spear waves seek the bottom and then fixing that ship with its crew round in that death hall so in inevitable old english poetical style the poet is telling us the whale who has this kind of craggy appearance and if you've ever seen a right whale or any of the whales the they grow sort of barnacles and stuff their head so that's what I imagine he sort of describing this whale looks like an island the sailors tie up to him and as soon as they were kind of comfortable and lulled into to to a lack of attention he sounds he dives deep kills them all and this of course is a story that find in the *Physiologus* but it's repeated here I think in much more colorful detail and of course it's an allegory because the whale is like satan who s you into sitting and then pulls you down into the depths of hell.

IAN: I think that that image was so or that that idea was so well understood that it informs that passage in Milton's paradise lost where satan lying on the burning lake is compared to leviathan then the little story is the exact same story: Leviathan's on the water and a little pilot of his skiff attaches the anchor there and the audience clearly understands the allegory and the connection with Satan and why it's just expected it whale is Satan. Right and I mean obviously they're also picking up on things that you find in um the bible this sort of biblical concept of Leviathan as a it's not actually ever really clear whether in the Hebrew text whether the animal in question is more like a whale or whether it's more like a serpent or a fire breathing dragon it seems to be all three of those things at different times depending on who's talking the most extended description is from the book of joe but it definitely breathes fire there but what's super interesting is that figure for sort of a satanic creature a creature of evil also gets picked up on in medieval jewish thought in the Zohar which is sort of one of the main cabalistic text in the thirteenth century it gets picked up on as a kind of figure for enlightenment the idea being that it s sort of portal like through its hideousness it

draws you all the way down and then you and then you have some kind of a revelation or some kind of coming to knowledge of god through this actually consumption of the leviathan you actually eat it

IAN: As opposed to being eaten by it, because I was going to say that the mouth of leviathan is always a gateway to somewhere

ALEXA: yeah it's just so large. in that same poem the second and the poem is concerned with the very large mouth of the whale in fact and the fact that it gets hungry and so it opens up its mouth and listen to what it's doing here because it's so actually sound like the observation of of baleen whale behavior. The whale opens up its mouth and just holds it open and the poet says and the this incredibly fragrant perfume and all the fish of the ocean are drawn to it and swim into its mouth just as satan exhales a fragrant perfume to attract centers

IAN: Yes got to love the persistent allegory in the medieval tradition. For we'll see this again and again It's one of the things to look forward to, to see how animals are allegorized.

ALEXA: Absolutely

IAN: So here's a question for you. In the bible isn't the leviathan sometimes referred to Cetus?

ALEXA: Yeah so Cetus is this greek sea monster I guess you could say um he's a sea monster or it's a sea monster that really plagued uh the ancient greeks according to greek mythology and in particular features in the story of Persia so Perseus is this greek hero and he has to rescue this princess andromeda whose parents have chained her to a rock and this sea monster cites is going to consume her so he has to free her and kill the monster and then marry her and we get description of Cetus but it's it's kind of vague in the greek literature it's just a monster you're supposed to know what a monster looks like interestingly though that name that greek name becomes the root for the latin word for whale so clearly somebody at some point was thinking that it as a whale that sites was a whale so we call the latin or the Linnaean nomenclature scientific nomenclature for wales as a group is patients

IAN: Their monstrosity is built into them

ALEXA: Absolutely

IAN: From the beginning

ALEXA: Absolutely

ALEXA: And I mean they feature whale it's in particular in dolphins and porpoises feature in medieval accounts pretty prominently because they are so large but they are

also pretty rare there's a lot of debate about whether medieval people engaged in active whale hunting in Europe or whether they instead just sort of waited for these creatures to wash up the shore there's a really famous story about a saint named Philibert you got to love that he was the founder of an abbey called Muti which was on the coast France by the mouth of the river and it was bad times at the monks didn't have enough food the local peasants were starving everybody was hungry and sat Philibert did what any good saint would do he got down on his knees and he prayed for it's assistance and lo and behold the very next morning two hundred and thirty seven whales well they're actually porpoises or dolphins I think in the account washed up on the shore of the beach by the mouth of the river so it's very specific two hundred and thirty seven so I think in this case you know they're primarily being understood as food and it's interesting to because if you look at sort of series of monastic rules that were written in Ireland around the time one of the rules is you can't eat any carrion you can't eat food you know animals that have died not through slaughter except for whales and end dolphins that wash up on the beach you can eat those as long as they don't smell too bad yeah

IAN: Is this why most of the early pictures we have of people cutting whales up are clearly whales that have been beached rather than anything anything associated with fishing activity?

ALEXA: I would imagine that's the case. I mean whaling for large pelagic whales is incredibly dangerous as anyone who's read movie dick can you right and it requires a kind of level of skill and equipment and a size of ship that isn't really available to medieval europeans now there are of course indigenous people in the arctic who hunt whales from tiny kayak or canoes but they have a different set of cultural skills than these medieval europeans who just aren't that technologically advanced to do that

IAN: Yeah although they're doing a lot of fishing which we can talk about.

ALEXA: Yeah I mean it is interesting because it's not for lack of opportunity that they don't become well that's why there's some i think debate about whether there was wailing or not and part of the problem arises from the fact that the category of whale is not a very clearly understood category it's all mixed up with the sea monsters you know and who goes monster hunting except heroes heroes go monster hunting

IAN: Monster hunting!

ALEXA: Yeah

IAN: And well and fish itself right?, i mean there isn't a separation between the mammals out there and the fish out there in their minds they're just all different sizes of fish

ALEXA: right and the thing that James Stewart killed is a wonderful fish right?

IAN: Yes, if it's in the water, it's a fish

ALEXA: If it's in the water it is a fish

IAN: Yes

ALEXA: Which gets us back to kind of that thing about the surface of the sea being kind of this veil that's drawn over a great deal of mystery

IAN: In the early modern period there are there are a lot more kind of representations of what we would call sea monsters and I think our traditional kind of image of what you think a sea monster or a sea serpent is probably comes from illustrations on maps from the early modern period which are in part kind of an exercise for the engravers an advertisement for the map itself rather than an attempt represent what's actually going on people expected a certain kind of map the kind that you would pay a lot of money for to be very beautiful it's an art object and there's a lot of open space out there when you're in a map you want to fill it with things and one thing to fill the water with is ships being attacked by sea monsters so they they're they're there and they're represented sometimes as giant octopi or whales or surf in anyway but part of it part of it sort of marketing and I think it also becomes accounts of sea monsters become a sub genera of travel literature

ALEXA: So they're just making stuff up?

IAN: Of course well all right so I'll give you an example. This is is from sir Humphrey davy's trip to Newfoundland davy set up the first english colony in north America that was during queen Elizabeth's reign and in this expedition Davis himself drowned on the way home but here's this account told by a guy named Edward hays who was the captain of one of the smaller ships so here's what they encountered he says he passed along between us and towards the land which we now forsook a very lion to our seeming in shape hair and color not swimming after the manner of a beast by moving his feet but rather sliding up the water with his whole body accepting the legs in sight neither yet diving under and again raising above the water as is the manner of whales dolphins tones porpoises and all other fish but confidently showing himself above water without hiding notwithstanding we ended ourselves in open view and gesture to amaze him I guess they're all jumping up and down as all creatures will be commonly at a sudden gaze in sight of men thus he passed along turning his head to and fro yawning and gaping wide with ugly demonstration of long teeth and glaring eyes and to be a farewell coming right against the hind that's the name of his ship he sent forth a horrible voice roaring or bellowing as doth a lion which spectacle we all beheld so far as we were able to discern the same as men prone to wonder at every strange thing as this doubtless was to see a lion on the open sea or a fish in the shape of a lion what opinion others had thereof and chiefly the general himself I forbear to deliver but he took it for a good omen rejoicing that he was to war against such an enemy if it were the devil.

ALEXA: And then he drowned.

IAN: He did so if that's what he's warring against he didn't do so well but it's this weird kind of combination there's a little bit of natural history there right there carefully observing this creature they're comparing it with known species they're trying to sort of provoke a response right like just let's see like does it recognize us there's all that but then there's also like spectra curiosity wonder and this sort of anthropomorphism right the creature wants to bid them farewell and of moving on and counts like this helped make voyage is like this popular and there therefore fundable move in the future so when you see accounts like this there an odd kind of combination of like that new kind of sense of like natural history and the curious creatures that might actually be out there in the real world to be found and then more of the kind of fantastic sea monster lore including comparing to the devil right at the end of your realistic account.

ALEXA: Right and I mean one does wonder did they see something and if they saw something what was it of course not to try to assign it modern scientific classification but clearly they saw something wondrous and they needed to find some language and some descriptive terms in to contain this experience they couldn't really otherwise now qualify.

IAN: Yeah

ALEXA: Fascinating

IAN: I want to say it's a sea lion, right? A lion in the sea. Except that they're not in the Atlantic ocean.

ALEXA: Right and that doesn't sound like a sea lion I mean so there are these like living sea monsters right and and there's a sort of market value to these accounts of um m ah ah now how do you see that being processed in the sort of mentality of the time I mean does shakespeare talk about about this shakespeare are index of all things early while and in England

IAN: Living sea monsters are the basis for these sensational accounts that you could sell it or that could help you sell your narrative dead sea monsters turning up on the beach are curiosities to be marked too sometimes for a price and even that count of the creature in Ireland ends with this like if you want to go see it you can go here and there's pieces of it and there's like like documents that will attest its reality it was clearly an event then it becomes from a sea monster into like a something for ticketing and shakespeare has a great scene in the tempest where there's this character caliban who is the native inhabitant of this island and europeans come across caliban while he's sleeping and they mistake him for what they call a strange fish they I'm clear exactly what caliban looks like caliban costumes have been different in many productions but they call him a strange fish and the first thing they think is wow let's bring him back to Europe and we can make a tune by charging admission

ALEXA: it's kind of tragic, , the mighty Leviathan, the image of the devil, falls into the status of circus freak

IAN: circus freak but that's I mean that's that sums up the sort of the evolution of the marvelous in lots of ways throughout the early modern period that it repeats some of the early stuff but then can end up in just sensationalism and spectacle

ALEXA: yeah

IAN: So here's the thing. That that lion fish, right you think well sea lion can't be a sea lion then you think fur seal. Fur seals are a lot like sea lions they make noises like lion they seem lionish except that Humphrey Davies and all the people on that trip were perfectly well acquainted with fur seals.

ALEXA: Right

IAN: and all these other creatures i, mean they're able to run down and say it's not whales, dolphins, tunas, porpoises.

ALEXA: Right

IAN: Like, "no, no, no, can't be this, can't be this..."

ALEXA: Right

IAN: They're not ignorant. They're not seeing everything as a monster and they clearly have a lot of knowledge about the sea they're spending a lot of time out there. Northern European cultures were of many of them seafaring cultures going back into the into the early middle ages.

ALEXA: Absolutely

IAN: So maybe they're not whaling, but they know a lot,

ALEXA: Exactly and yes the surface of the sea represents this veil over the unknown but of course for economic reasons and for reasons simply views many people knew quite a lot about what lived in the sea um so I could say that perhaps fish are really respond pole for the European union the American revolution and the stock market all those things happened because of medieval and early modern fish

IAN: Wait, wait! how does that work?

ALEXA: Well

IAN: The European union?

ALEXA: Okay so historians archeologists have done a ton of work these people in environmental history have done a lot of work on fishing because fishing and sort of agriculture and the sort of collapsing fish stocks are so currently important so these historians of fishing think that around one thousand see um sort of at the end of what we used to call the dark ages people were living in towns and the towns began to grow in Europe and they just began to eat a lot more fish and there were a couple of reasons for this one was that in the christian calendar there were days when you couldn't eat meat but fish doesn't count as meat so you can eat fish on a fast day they even called them fish days um in so getting enough fish became a real priority and instead of only catching fish you caught yourself or locally there were these whole industries that developed especially in the north Atlantic of catching particularly codfish and which were also known as stock fish and catching them drying them salting them preserving them if you've ever had back allow that's a that's a dish made from salted dried cod fish and all of this long distance fishing because the cod or pelagic fish in the ocean um promoted all of this exploration across the Atlantic long day it's trade so you can say sort of global economy begins with a fishing trade and also new England is basically founded as a fishing lane right and yeah if you go to the Massachusetts state house in the legislative chambers is it carving of a cod and I'm not making this up it's called the sacred cod of Massachusetts so that's how central cod is and then course these north American colonists European colonists in north America began trading their dried fish for other goods again across these whale road so I guess you could say and particularly trading the dried fish to the Caribbean in exchange for slaves and rum um and England din and said to the American colonists you have to pay higher taxes on this because you're making too much money off it and all of this taxation without representation led to—

IAN: I thought it was about tea or stamps or

ALEXA: no

IAN: I don't know I never never thought about it as cod

ALEXA: It's all about cod. In fact there was an eighteenth century prime minister of Britain who called cod the British gold I guess what I'm saying is that like fishing is one of the sort of pathways that countries begin to use to conceive of their economic interests on this kind of national level and terms of competition with other nations and that essentially is the underlying thinking and sort of ideological contract European union

IAN: International trade collaboration was often about fishing and fish i guess?

ALEXA: Absolutely. The founding members of the EU are the same list of countries as those with the vested interest in the cod fisheries, basically the same list.

IAN: so I do know that there there is interesting kind of archaeological evidence that people would often prefer cod stock fish salted cod over locally available fresh water fish like trout which sort of blows my mind to think that like you're your goat that you'd rather choose salt cod than rainbow trout but I think that probably there's a lot of know there is a kind of a status is associated with the ability to serve some of these these fish up because of their economic importance

ALEXA: exactly it's not unlike salmon today mean salmon is a prestige fish right on on

ALEXA: global tables in the twenty first century and part of the prestige comes from the

ALEXA: sort of difficulty catching salmon and bringing fresh salmon to the table

IAN: no it's too bad if you don't really like salmon like I don't

ALEXA: well I'm a Seattle girl so have my feelings about salmon.

IAN: I prefer I know I prefer bluefish and mackerel: the new England fishes

ALEXA: yeah what was it we always had in college

IAN: how you were brought: up right

ALEXA: baked scrod that I'm actually surprised it's not the sacred scared of Massachusetts because when I lived in Massachusetts it was all about the scrod anyway.

So where does this put us with sea monsters?

IAN: hmm I don't know there's a it's like there're two things at once or like the ocean is this place of intense economic activity and knowledge and they're they're processing these fish but on the other hand they're reporting monsters from the sea right through the early modern period it's like they have a double vision they're seeing the world both in terms of the marvelous and the fantastical and as a place of kind of economic exploitation and nascent natural history all at the same time.

ALEXA: right I mean it's really hard to avoid Melville in this context because in some ways movie dick brings all of this together right the sort of the notion of the whale or the the massive sea creature as a kind of monster as a kind of embodiment of evil but also really as a if for an allegory for all that we hold inside of that is dark and sinister but also Moby Dick is a novel about whaling and there's some of my favorite passage in that book are the descriptions of what they do like what the processes are like and how they recruit the whalers I mean they're really long and when I read them for a work course in college I was like come on let's get through this but now those are some of my favorite passages because they really do sort of represent the interweaving of this very work of day reality of maritime community s you know what what we do on the

sea and around the sea and what our relationship is to the animal relation of the sea and how human communities and those those non human communities interact on the one hand and then on the other hand all of this kind of psychological I jist and cosmological stuff that's going on there the sea is a bottom

IAN: yeah but so from I mean Melville it's there's a kind of like profundity which means depth. Right for Melville there's there is a kind of profundity to this material but it also means that sea monsters could be turned into as they do in the Middle ages with allegory even in the early modern period they could be just political opportunities so that creature that we started with one of the letters in that in the collection isn't referring to the creature just as a sea monster but argues that it's clearly a symbol of the evils of the catholic church the horns are representing catholic countries et cetera it goes down the sea monster and all the parts somehow represent catholicism and so this is sixty seventy three in ireland like to see it that way is a deeply kind of political exercise because violent conflict on that point had lasted until really recently in Ireland

ALEXA: right

IAN: so and at least one person kind of walks up to a strange creature on the beach and says to himself like oh look hope is bad

ALEXA: and the sea being both a space of freedom I guess from national boundaries I mean in the middle ages there were no um national waters that there was no sense that you know ten miles off the coast or whenever that's that's still within the boundaries of a nation state the sea was pretty much unbounded that way as we understand it

IAN: though I believe that the wars were still fought over fisheries

ALEXA: oh absolutely absolutely

IAN: because yeah and fishing well if not fishing rates at least the ability to continue fishing in a particular area

ALEXA: Exactly. not to say that there wasn't conflict about who got to use what parts of

ALEXA: the ocean but more the sense that i mean the romans called the entire mediterranean our sea right so you could have a sense of ownership over the ocean but the boundaries are quite literally fluid so you know there's that

IAN: Anyway I think that's all we have time for today. If you if you like what you heard please subscribe to our podcast share it with your friends you can also go .. we have a website: realfantasticbeasts.com. You can find show notes transcripts pictures of some of these real creatures as well as fantastic ones

ALEXA: yeah well thank you for joining us today

IAN: right until next time

IAN: keep your eyes peeled

ALEXA: bye