

## **The Depths of Fear: Cross-Cultural Consciousness of Sea Monsters in Folklore, Mythology, and Popular Culture**

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“I can call spirits from the vasty deep” - Shakespeare, *Henry IV*

From medieval hagiographic accounts of man-eating seals to the contemporary scientific hunt for the giant squid, sea monsters and their undersea ilk have captivated and terrified societies for as long as we have looked to the sea and wondered what lay beneath its surface. Sea monsters allow us to explore how we give imaginative form to our fears, how we relate to and set ourselves apart from the natural world, how terror and wonder inform our understanding of the unknown. In part an attempt to understand the ocean's unknown depths, our perennial fascination with sea monsters is also a way for us to plumb the subconscious and primitive architecture of our imagination. From ancient Greece to medieval Europe to shogunal Japan and the great age of Norse expansion, sea monsters are a globally and temporally universal fiction, and thus provide varied points of entry into the study of diverse understandings of culture, science, and epistemology.

The study of sea monsters - and imaginative sea creatures in general - has broad applications in the fields of literature, psychology (*e.g.* Jung's analysis of embodied fear and the unknown), the history of science (*e.g.* the famous scientific battle over the molecular composition of the “St. Augustine monster”), cultural history, religion (*e.g.* Jonah and the whale), folklore, and music (*e.g.* the Rhinemaidens in Wagner's *Ring Cycle*). Students with interests in the theoretical underpinnings of environmental studies and marine biology will also be interested in our exploration of subaqueous monsterdom, for the questions that motivate the creation of these beasts are the same questions that drive scientific and environmental exploration: how do we attempt to understand the sea and our relation to it?

In this course, we will navigate a broad collection of texts, images, films, stories, and art that probe the crux of the question of sea monsters. We will examine the science and pseudoscience of sea monsters and their fluid position on the spectrum of reality and fantasy - for instance, how, in a short span of years, could the North Sea selkie shift in the public imagination from the phantasmagorical to the scientifically verifiable (and back again) in 18th century Scotland? We will investigate the gendering of sea monsters - why do sea monsters gendered as women (sirens, Rhinemaidens, morgens, selkies, naiads, etc.) rely on guile and artifice to lure their prey, while male-gendered monsters more typically take on leviathanic proportions and brute force instead? What can Jung and Lacan, in their respective psychoanalyses of primitivism and fear, tell us about what it means that humans have long figured the unknowable elements of the sea as home to monstrous harbingers of death and maritime despair? What is the historical significance of these monsters through time and across cultures - what, for instance, does Homer's treatment of Odysseus' ill-fated voyage and recurring encounters with sea monsters tell us of ancient Greek nautical expeditions? How, for that matter, is *Godzilla* - a creature of subsea origin - a filmic representation of post-WWII Japanese anxieties of nuclear warfare?

The two of us come from different upbringings and academic backgrounds, but we have a shared

interest in the sea and its mythical inhabitants. Alex grew up hundreds of miles from the ocean, yet with an unaccountable fascination with whales, sea serpents, and ships. He has read and re-read *Moby-Dick* more times than he cares to admit. Dan was raised on the Maine coast fishing, sailing, and hearing stories about the twelve-foot shark that almost upturned Warren's boat, or the forty pound lobster that could take your arm off. He has worked several summers on a lobster boat, hauling strange creatures from the ocean floor.

## **Potential Topics and Readings**

### **The Symbolic Psychology of Fear, Imagination, and Sea Serpents**

Jorge Luis Borges, *Book of Imaginary Beings*

Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols*

Ernest Becker, *The Denial of Death*

Pierre-E. Lacocque, *Fear of Engulfment and the Problem of Identity*

Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents*

Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psychoanalysis* ("Fear and Anxiety")

Douglas Allchin, *Monsters & Marvels: How Do We Interpret the "Preternatural?"*

Marshall McLuhan *The Mechanical Bride: Folklore of Industrial Man*

*Godzilla* (Dir. Ishirō Honda)

*Jaws* (Dir. Steven Spielberg)

Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick*

*The Abyss* (Dir. James Cameron)

Carlo Collodi, *The Adventures of Pinocchio*

Michael Crichton, *Sphere*

### **Mermaids, Sirens, Sailors and their Sexual Anxiety**

*The Secret of Roan Inish* (Dir. John Sayles)

Lucian of Samosata *De Dea Syria* (*Concerning the Syrian Goddess*)

Clarissa Pinkola Estés, *Women Who Run With the Wolves: Myths and Stories of the Wild Woman Archetype*

Michael A. Messner, *Barbie Girls versus Sea Monsters: Children Constructing Gender*

Hans Christian Andersen, *The Little Mermaid*

Richard Wagner, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*

*Sir Patrick Spens* (Child Ballad)

Homer, *The Odyssey* (Sirens)

*Bylina* (Russian Epic Poem)

### **Deep Sea Demigods: Ancient and Medieval Sea Monsters in Myth, Folklore, and Religious**

## **Texts**

*Adi Parva, Book 1 of The Mahabharata*

*The Bible (Book of Jonah)*

John K. Papadopoulos, Deborah Ruscillo, *A Ketos in Early Athens: An Archaeology of Whales and Sea Monsters in the Greek World.*

Marion Lawrence, *Ships, Monsters and Jonah*

Anonymous *Life of St. Brendan*

Anonymous, *Nibelungenlied*

Homer, *The Odyssey* (Scylla and Charybdis)

Hermann Palsson (translator), *Orkneyinga Saga*

Robert Kirk, *The Secret Commonwealth*

Albert S. Gatschet, *Water-Monsters of American Aborigines*

Erik Johan Stagnelius, *The Watersprite*

Geoffrey of Monmouth, *Vita Merlini*

Jacob Grimm, *Teutonic Mythology*

Michael Ashkenazi, *Handbook of Japanese Mythology*

Linda Ivanits, *Russian Folk Belief*

## **Science, Sightings, and Science Fiction**

Richard Ellis, *The Search for the Giant Squid: The Biology and Mythology of the World's most Elusive Sea Creature*

Carr et al., *How To Tell a Sea Monster: Molecular Discrimination of Large Marine Animals of the North Atlantic*

Matthew K. Chew, *The Monsterring of Tamarisk: How Scientists Made a Plant into a Problem*

Tim Dinsdale, *Loch Ness Monster*

Rupert Thomas Gould, *The Case for the Sea-Serpent*

Anonymous, *A Full and True Account of the Strange Monster*

Jules Verne, *20,000 Leagues under the Sea*

Jules Verne, *A Journey to the Center of the Earth*

H.P. Lovecraft, *The Call of Cthulhu*

*It Came from Beneath the Sea* (Dir. Robert Gordon)

*The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms* (Dir. Eugène Lourié)

*Atragon* (Dir. Ishirō Honda)

## **Potential Speakers:**

**Stefan Helmreich** - Elting E. Morison Professor of Anthropology, MIT. Specialist in maritime and oceanic anthropology and multispecies anthropology. Author of *Alien Ocean: Anthropological Voyages in Microbial Seas*.

**Peter Dendle**- Professor of English at Penn State Mont Alto- specializes in the monstrous in film, folklore, and society. Author of *Cryptozoology in the Medieval and Modern Worlds*.

**D.L. Ashliman**- retired professor from the University of Pittsburgh and Folklore researcher, specializing in Germanic folk tales and has published material on water spirits.

