

Introduction

OF WATER AND MONSTERS

[Received September 27th 2022; accepted September 28th 2022– DOI: 10.21463/shima.182]

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The work on the present volume of *Shima* commenced amidst the first waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. By that time I had been based at Lancaster University (UK) for five years and was well familiar with the Lancaster Canal. Originally designed to connect Westhoughton and Kendal, in the 19th century it was used to transport coal and chalk. Now navigated by a few private barges, the canal became a somehow abandoned place. One could jog or cycle along its bank down to the beautiful Lune Aqueduct, often haunted by the smell of weed, without encountering that many people except for bunches of hooded youths. Everything changed during the national lockdowns. Once we were allowed our walks outside, every day the whole town seemed to be drawn to the canal. I think the reason for this was that the still waters of the canal offered us some positive change, which our stagnant lives required. One could notice that the shade of water surface would be different each day reflecting the hues of the sky. In summer, it suddenly got covered by a thick carpet of bright-green algae and over the Christmas of 2020 the canal froze and everyone in possession of a stick would poke the ice to see how hard it was. And of course, there were monsters. The canal is extremely shallow, almost knee-deep, and it is surprising that it is even inhabited by tiny fish (as testified by a few anglers). Yet walking at dusk one would still see a floating log out of the corner of their eye, and turn around to get a proper look - 'Funny, that looks like a crocodile'. With the lift of the lockdown measures and the re-opening of pubs, shops, and cinemas, the spell was broken, and the canal bank became empty again.

Why do we expect monsters to dwell in the waters, even those so familiar and tamed as the Lancaster Canal? And why, amidst the terrifying events of the past few years, do we still want to retell stories of monstrous creatures? The current volume has gathered articles attempting to answer these questions. The original idea was to call this issue 'Aquatic Monstrosities', but later we decided to expand it to 'Aquatic Mythologies and Monstrosities'. This change was motivated by us not wishing to attach the connotation of 'monstrosity' to mythological water-dwelling creatures present in folklore and culture, as it could be understood as incorrect or even derogatory. Yet as the volume is primarily concerned with monsters it is worth laying out how we understand this construct. The Latin *monstrum* means 'evil omen', and the verb *monstro* stands for 'to show', 'to teach'. The word 'monster,' as used in the present issue, should not be interpreted in its modern connotations as something repulsive, disgusting, or terrifying. Monsters are books telling us stories of how they became what they are.

Multiple ways of reading monsters were laid out by J. J. Cohen in his *Monster Theory: Seven Theses*, where he proposed "a method of reading cultures from the monsters they engender" (Cohen, 1996: 3). Cohen has suggested seven ways in which a monster can be understood. First, a monster should be interpreted as a metaphor for ideas and events.

Second, we read monsters in the contexts of the cultures that created them. Third, monsters tend to subvert the established systems of categorisation. Fourth, a monster embodies 'otherness', being "an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond" (1996: 7). Monsters' bodies are often employed for the constructions of alterity. Fifth, by terrifying us the monster prevents us from going into the unknown and exploring it. Sixth, a monster represents forbidden practices that we may secretly desire. We envy monsters' freedom, even when we do not confess it to others. Cohen's Seventh Thesis is titled 'The Monster Stands at the Threshold...of Becoming' and argues that monsters demonstrate us how we interpret and represent – or misrepresent – our surroundings through imagining monstrous creatures. Cohen left this point significantly underexplored, in contrast to the other six, summarising it in a brief paragraph. While the articles gathered in the present volume will engage in various ways with all of Cohen's theses, Thesis Seven – what we can learn from monsters – will be the overarching theme of this issue.

Despite their abundant presence in cultures and societies throughout the centuries, water-borne monstrous creatures are only recently beginning to receive appropriate scholarly attention. Cohen himself has mentioned them strictly as entities preventing intellectual mobility, claiming that sea monsters were drawn on maps commissioned by medieval merchants to discourage rivaling companies from looking for alternative trade routes. Indeed, it appears that humans tend to imagine something horrible dwelling in the depths. Jamtli Museum in Östersund showcases a giant trap that was employed to try and catch Storsjöodjuret – a giant monster allegedly inhabiting Swedish lake Storsjön at the end of the 19th century (Figure 1). The



Figure 1 - A trap designed to catch Storsjöodjuret, Jamtli Museum, 19th century (rom the author's personal archive).

beast, however, was not attracted by the pig used as bait (Jamtli Museum, 2019). Today Lovecraftian horror stories of a malign underwater civilisation have transformed in a TikTok conspiracy theory claiming that NASA allegedly abruptly stopped exploring the ocean and "started working on getting us off the planet" (TeaFreak, 2022). Yet as this volume will demonstrate, fearful monstrous creatures are useless for limiting or restricting our knowledge. On the contrary, monsters offer us a great potential for understanding our own lives. Since classical Antiquity, aquatic monsters' bodies were constructed on the premise that each terrestrial being had a water-borne counterpart. This led to the appearance of multiple representations of quirky hybridised creatures containing parts of terrestrial animals, and sometimes even inanimate objects incorporated into their own bodies (Figures 2 & 3).

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The custom of understanding water-borne organisms as the doppelgangers of terrestrial human and nonhuman animals lingers in the fish names we use: horsefish, goatfish, Napoleon wrasse – this list can be continued. Hence it is important to study and understand water-borne monsters: still waters run deep because they allow us to see our own reflection.



Figure 2 - Fish mirroring terrestrial animals (Bodleian Library MS.Ashmole 1511, fol. 86r, c. 1201-1225- reproduced with permission).



Figure 3 - A creature known in the Middle Ages as serra ('saw') with a saw for a tail. (Kongelige Bibliotek GKS 3466 8^o, fol. 43v - reproduced with permission.)

I am concluding the work on this volume in my current affiliation – Linköping University in Sweden. Working on the University’s campus in Norrköping (a former industrial town nicknamed ‘Sweden’s Manchester’), I again find myself very close to the water. The university’s offices are re-purposed factory buildings, standing on the river that used to power local industry. Every day I walk past a complex system of waterfalls – always in motion, never resting. And here I encounter monsters again. Every now and then one sees rusty skeletons of bicycles or electric scooters rescued from the bottom of the river a little too late. Formerly familiar objects, they acquired a new uncanny appearance after having been in the water for too long. Water that embodies contaminating otherness is another theme connecting the contributions to the current issue, as each of the articles deals with how humans treat other humans, creatures, or events which fall out of the familiar pattern. In this dimension aquatic monstrosities do expose ugliness – not of the monsters, but rather of humans.

The articles opening the present issue deal with topical themes of disasters and injustice. Claudia Merli discusses the role of the Amabie – a mythological Japanese entity – both as a messenger of upcoming catastrophes and a source of comfort and protection during the current COVID-19 pandemic. Merli’s article draws on several important parallels between our world and the world of underwater creatures – real or imaginary. Both the virus and aquatic mythological creatures, such as Amabie, are invisible and cannot be fully comprehended by individuals, yet their effect upon our lives can be immense. As the virus has reduced its victims to gasping for air like fish out of water, the protective image of Amabie has grown popular first in Japan, and then globally. Merli also reminds us of how victims of the diseases raging in the global South remain ignored by the global North unless the latter is affected. Like the depths of the water, the global South stays invisible until the monster – in this case the virus – wreaks havoc upon everyone. The article by Hazel T. Biana also deals with the theme of invisibility – in this case, of the young factory workers in Philippines, who are not protected by society or the government, from natural disasters. Biana examines an episode from a popular Philippine horror series *Shake, Rattle, and Roll* entitled *Rain Rain Go Away* (2011) where the young victims of the typhoon flood return as ghosts to seek revenge against the people who did not protect them. Portraying these drowned children as assuming the shape of monsters, the episode highlights the processes of exclusion and dehumanising of the poor.

The themes of invisibility and monstrosity are also raised in the articles dealing with indigenous mythologies. Virgilio A. Rivas analyses the ways in which a Philippine-made anime *Trese* (2021) revives the myths of the *aswang* (a female vampire-like monster) and the history of *babaylans* (female shamans), long suppressed by the colonial rulers of the three waves of invasion – Spanish, American, and Japanese. Olga Lavrenova tackles the topic of colonialism in the completely different context of Russia. Lavrenova looks into the mythologies of indigenous peoples inhabiting the territory of modern Russia and traces the process of the mythological creatures being pushed away to the liminal space of the swamp. While mainland Russia is obviously not an island culture, Lavrenova makes an interesting case for the presence of aquapelagic elements in the cultures inhabiting marshlands as she argues that for such mythologies the swamp replaced the ocean as the origin place of the world.

According to Cohen, the monster always escapes. One of the terrifying things about a monster is that it cannot be identified or explained rationally. It slips away and eventually re-emerges in a slightly morphed form to match the changes in our society. Robert L. France has attempted to capture a monstrous fish described in a pamphlet *A Relation of a*

terrible Monster called a Toad-fish by suggesting a few possible identifications as real-life species. Ryan Denson approaches the issue of identifying a monster from a different angle, searching for the literary origins of *nicoras* – obscure water-borne beasts featured in *Beowulf*. In contrast to previous research, which tried to pinpoint *nicoras* as a particular animal, Denson interprets these creatures as imaginary constructs that draw upon earlier tradition. Giorgio Verdiani, Paolo Formaglini and Filippo Giansanti take yet another approach: an endeavour to capture a monster that resulted in a first-ever digital analysis of Pietro Tacca's 'Marine Monsters' fountains. Stefano Beggiora provides an overview of the most significant creatures associated with water in Hindu pantheon, in the context of monster theory and Indian environment.

As the present issue intends to showcase, aquatic monsters act as keys for understanding our surroundings and ourselves. And if there is no monster available, perhaps it is worth inventing one. Ronald M. James deals exactly with such case. The Morgawr, a sea monster allegedly living off the southern coast of Cornwall (Britain), originates from a prank staged in 1976. Tracing Morgawr's origins history, James analyses how Morgawr managed to fill a niche in popular culture and to provide a new lens for explaining events at sea. Firouz Gaini discusses the dynamics between two mythological creatures of the Faroe Islands: the ancient seal woman and the relatively young boat spirit called shoveller which appeared in the 19th century in connection with deep-sea fishing. The article investigates into how the images of the shoveller and the seal woman have been developing to reflect the challenges faced by the islanders. Martine Mussies analyses online fanfiction which re-discovers ancient aquatic mythologies to endow them with new meanings that challenge traditional patriarchal views upon femininity and the environment. The section concludes with Philip Hayward's analysis of Robert Eggers' film *The Lighthouse* and the way it re-invents the traditional image of a mermaid to address the relationships between the film's two male leads.

We may not be aware of what is happening in the deep waters of oceans or in swamps, or which creatures inhabited these hard-to-reach areas. Without appropriate equipment these areas will for a long time remain invisible for humans. Indeed, even the bottom of the knee-dip Lancaster Canal remains concealed from us by the muddy water. In contrast to these dwellings of aquatic monstrosities, the areas and the events discussed in the present volume are available to study and explore. And if they become invisible, this is because we choose not to see them. Monsters can be easily dismissed due to their belonging to the realm of imagination. Yet these fantastic creatures address and expose non-imaginary issues: infections, natural disasters, poverty, colonialism and the erasure of indigenous cultures, political upheavals, objectifying of women, the perils of going in the sea, and the dangers of loneliness. With this volume we hope not only to showcase the exciting mythologies of aquapelagic cultures, but also to increase the exposure of the problems and injustices the following articles address.

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