

# A Field Guide to Medieval Monsters



# Medieval Monsters

TERRORS, ALIENS, WONDERS

July 7–October 6

Unicorns. Griffins. Dragons. Sirens. Some of these monsters you may recognize from fairy tales, Greek and Roman mythology, or books about your favorite boy wizard. In the Middle Ages, these monsters and many more made their way onto the pages of illuminated manuscripts. These handwritten texts, which include bibles, books of hours, and books of psalms, were often decorated with elaborate designs and images. This exhibition, *Medieval Monsters: Terrors, Aliens, Wonders*, explores how images of monsters played a complex role in medieval society and operated in a variety of ways, often instilling fear, revulsion, devotion, or wonderment.

*Medieval Monsters* is organized by the Morgan Library & Museum, New York.

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**Before you start exploring, there is some monster terminology you may need to know.**

- Anthropomorphic** a creature or object having humanlike characteristics
- Cryptozoology** the study of hidden creatures, which aims to prove the existence of beasts from folklore like bigfoot, aliens, or chupacabras
- Illuminated manuscript** a written text that includes decoration or illustrations. Illuminated manuscripts take many forms, such as bibles, books of hours (personal devotional books), psalters (books of psalms), and sacramentaries (book used by a priest during Catholic services).
- Monster** from the Latin verbs *monstrare* (to show) and *monere* (to warn), monsters are a disruption of the natural world that often take the form of unreal creatures.
- Normative** what the most powerful members of a society value as proper. Non-normative people are often represented as monstrous in these manuscripts.
- Personify** represent a quality or concept through a humanlike form, for example, “a harpy can personify the winds”
- Quadrupeds** an animal with four limbs specialized for walking. Can be used to describe an unreal creature, such as “a dragon is a reptilelike quadruped”

**You are ready to go! Use this field guide to identify monsters you encounter throughout the exhibition.**



**Basilisk** a reptile or serpent who can cause death with a glance, often described as a crested snake or as a rooster with a snake’s tail. Here, the basilisk appears in an image that is supposed to represent Ethiopia.

*Livre des merveilles du monde* (Book of Marvels of the World), in French, c. 1460. Illuminated by the Master of the Geneva Boccaccio. France, Angers. Ink and tempera on vellum. The Morgan Library & Museum, Purchased by Pierpont Morgan (1837–1913), 1911, MS M.461 (fol. 26v–27r)



**Blemmyes** headless people whose facial features are on their chest. During the Middle Ages, blemmyes were thought to inhabit Africa and later, India.



**Cephalophore** a saint or martyr who carries their own head

*Golden Legend*, in French, c. 1445–65. Flanders, Bruges. Ink, tempera, and gold on vellum. The Morgan Library & Museum, Purchased by Pierpont Morgan, 1911, MS M.675 (fol. 139v–140r)



**Cetus** a large sea creature often depicted as a whale or shark who swallowed Jonah, saving him from his death in the biblical book of Jonah

*Jonah Cast Up*, c. AD 280–90. Asia Minor. Marble. The Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund, 1965.238



**Demons** evil spirits that are active in the world, often working on behalf of Satan. Demons can also be associated with animals like foxes, wolves, and snakes.

*Saint Anthony Tormented by the Devils*, 1400s. Martin Schongauer (German, c. 1450–1491). Engraving. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Dudley P. Allen Fund, 1923.227



**Dracontopede** a serpent with the head of a maiden. The dracontopede was thought by some to be responsible for tempting Eve in the Garden of Eden.

*Speculum humanae salvationis* (Mirror of Human Salvation), in Latin, c. 1350–1400. Germany, Franconia (Nuremberg?). Ink and tempera on vellum. The Morgan Library & Museum, Purchased by Pierpont Morgan (1837–1913), 1902, MS M.140 (fol. 3v–4r)



**Dragon** a type of winged serpent sometimes used to represent Satan. The story of Saint George killing a dragon appears in many prints and illuminated manuscripts.

*Book of Hours*, 1415–20. Illuminated by the Master of the Morgan Infancy Cycle. Netherlands, perhaps Delft. Ink, tempera, and gold on vellum. The Morgan Library & Museum, Purchased with the assistance of the Fellows, 1953, MS M.866 (fol. 142v–143r)



**Elephants** although common creatures in other parts of the world, the medieval European person considered elephants to be creatures of imagination and wonder. Their ivory was thought to smooth wrinkles and whiten teeth, and they were also considered the enemies of dragons.

*Bestiaire d'Amour* (Bestiary of Love), in French, c. 1290. Richard de Fournival (French, 1201–1260). Ink and tempera on vellum. The Morgan Library & Museum, Purchased by Pierpont Morgan (1837–1913), 1911, MS M.459 (fol. 20v–21r)



**Giants** humanoids of extraordinary size, strength, and appetite, often with little intelligence. Popular medieval examples include Goliath, Nimrod, and Saint Christopher.

*Book of Hours*, in Latin, c. 1520. Illuminated by Simon Bening (Flemish, c. 1483–1561). Flanders, Bruges. Ink, tempera, and gold on vellum. The Morgan Library & Museum, Purchased by Pierpont Morgan (1837–1913), 1907, MS M.307 (fol. 160v–161r)



**Griffin** a creature with the body of a lion and the head and wings of an eagle. Griffin sculptures can be guardian figures at some Catholic churches.

*The Griffin*, 1400s. Martin Schongauer. (German, c. 1450–91). Engraving. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Dudley P. Allen Fund, 1926.466



**Gryllus** a squat creature with a human head that sits on bestial haunches

*Cuerden Psalter*, in Latin, c. 1270. Illuminated by the Workshop of William of Devon (English, active c. 1260–70). England, Oxford. Ink, tempera, and gold on vellum. The Morgan Library & Museum, Purchased, 1929, MS M.756 (fol. 10v–11r)



**Harpy** a bird with the head of a woman. In Greek mythology, harpies personified storm winds.

*Capital with Adorsed Harpies*, 1200s. Southwest France, Languedoc, Toulouse(?). Limestone. The Cleveland Museum of Art, Gift of the John Huntington Art and Polytechnic Trust, 1916.1983



**Hellmouth** the entrance to hell, imagined as monstrous mouth

*Psalter-Hours of Yolande de Soissons*, in Latin and French, main section c. 1280–99, exhibited pages c. 1400. France, Amiens. Ink, tempera, and gold on vellum. The Morgan Library & Museum, Purchased, 1927, MS M.729 (fol. 404v–405r)



**Leopard** considered legendary beasts. Leopards were thought to be the degenerate offspring of a lion and a pard (a mythical, spotted cat associated with sin).

*Book of Hours*, in Latin, c. 1475. Illuminated by Robinet Testard (French, active 1475–1523). France, Poitiers. Ink, tempera, and gold on vellum. The Morgan Library & Museum, Purchased on the Fellows Fund, 1979, MS M.1001 (fol. 87v–88r)



**Leviathan** a demon representing Satan. The Leviathan eats God's creations and threatens upheaval.

*Book of Hours*, in Latin, c. 1475. Illuminated by Robinet Testard (French, active 1475–1523). France, Poitiers. Ink, tempera, and gold on vellum. The Morgan Library & Museum, Purchased on the Fellows Fund, 1979, MS M.1001 (fol. 87v–88r)



**Lynx** the lynx's urine was believed to solidify into a mythical gemstone.

*Fountains Abbey Bestiary*, in Latin, c. 1325–50. England, perhaps North Yorkshire. Ink on vellum. The Morgan Library & Museum, Gift of Alastair Bradley Martin, 1958, MS M.890 (fol. 1v–2r)



**Mandrake** the root of a plant whose ointment was reputedly able to cure all ailments except death. The root was thought to resemble a human body.

*Compendium Salernitanum* (Salerno Compendium), in Latin, French, and Italian, c. 1350–75. Northern Italy, perhaps Venice. Ink and tempera on vellum. The Morgan Library & Museum, Purchased with the assistance of the Fellows and special assistance of William S. Glazier, 1955, MS M.873 (fol. 61v–62r)



**Mermen** the mythical male equivalent to mermaids, mermen are marine creatures with the upper body of a man and the tail of a fish.

*Leaf from a Commission, Saint Mark Giving the Keys of Venice to Francesco de Priuli*, c. 1523–24. Benedetto Bordon (Italian). Ink, tempera, and gold on vellum. The Cleveland Museum of Art, the Jeanne Miles Blackburn Collection, 2011.69



**Panotti** a mythical race of people possessing large ears

*Livre des merveilles du monde* (Book of Marvels of the World), in French, c. 1460. Illuminated by the Master of the Geneva Boccaccio. France, Angers. Ink and tempera on vellum. The Morgan Library & Museum, Purchased by insert J. Pierpont Morgan (1837–1913), 1911, MS M.461 (fol. 26v–27r)



**Satan (Devil)** a cosmic force of evil that was the catalyst for the original sin: tempting Eve in the Garden of Eden. In the Bible, Satan is referred to as the ancient serpent or dragon, enemy, adversary, accuser, attacker, and devil named Beelzebub.

*The Temptation of Christ*, 1400s. Master L Cz (German). Engraving. The Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund, 1954.743



**Satyr** part man and part beast, a mythical woodland creature that had the body of a man with the ears and tail of a goat or horse, sometimes with hooves

*Dancing Satyr Group*, 500–475 bc. Greece, Boeotia. Painted terracotta. The Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund, 1992.352



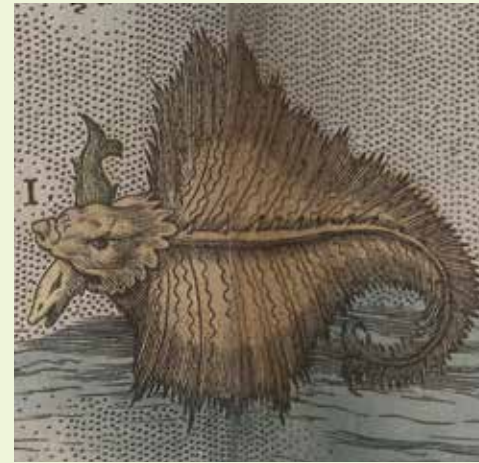
**Sea Swine** a monstrous kind of fish resembling a boar

Map of Iceland from *Theatrum orbis terrarum* (Theater of the World), in Latin, 1595. Abraham Ortelius. Antwerp: Plantin. The Morgan Library & Museum, Gift of J. P. Morgan, 1936, PML 33485; plate after fol. 103



**Siren** a hybrid woman combining the characteristics of a bird and/or fish. A siren's irresistible song was blamed for luring sailors to their deaths.

*Les abus du monde* (The Abuses of the World), in French, c. 1510. Pierre Gringore (French, c. 1475–1538). France, Rouen. Ink, tempera, and gold on vellum. The Morgan Library & Museum, Purchased by Pierpont Morgan (1837–1913), 1899, MS M.42 (fol. 14v–15r)



**Skautuhvalur** a monstrous kind of fish with great raylike fins, so large they appear as an island and are able to overturn ships

Map of Iceland from *Theatrum orbis terrarum* (Theater of the World), in Latin, 1595. Abraham Ortelius. Antwerp: Plantin. The Morgan Library & Museum, Gift of J. P. Morgan, 1936, PML 33485; plate after fol. 103



**Sphinx** according to Greek tradition, a mythical creature that is part woman, serpent, and lion, sometimes also pictured with eagle wings

*La destruction de la noble cité de Thèbes* (The Destruction of the Noble City of Thebes), in French, 1474. France. Ink on paper. The Morgan Library & Museum, Gift of the Trustees of the William S. Glazier Collection, 1984, MS G.23 (fol. 7v–8r)



**Tarasque** similar to a dragon, the legendary spawn of the biblical Leviathan and Onachus (a scaly, bison-like creature). The tarasque was thought to have terrorized the countryside of southern France before it was tamed by Saint Martha.

COVER IMAGE  
*Hours of Henry VIII*, in Latin, c. 1500. Illuminated by Jean Poyer (active 1465–1503). France, Tours. Ink, tempera, and gold on vellum. The Morgan Library & Museum, Gift of the Heinenan Foundation, 1977, MS H.8 (fol. 191v–192r)



**Tricephalic** something having three heads. Here it is used as a tool to illustrate the concept of the Holy Trinity (Christ, God, and the Holy Spirit).

*Historien Bibel* (Biblical History), in Latin and German, right page c. 1375-1400, left page c. 1522. Germany. Ink on vellum. The Morgan Library & Museum, Purchased by Pierpont Morgan (1837-1913), 1907, MS M.268 (fol. 1v-2r)



**Unicorn** a horselike creature with a pointed horn thought to be able to detect poison. In order to capture a unicorn one needed a virgin, so they were often associated with the Virgin Mary. The tusks of narwhals, a type of whale native to Arctic waters, were traded and purported to be unicorn horns.

*Book of Hours*, in Latin and Dutch, c. 1500. Illuminated by the Master of Edward IV (Flemish, active c. 1470-90). The Netherlands, Utrecht. Ink, tempera, and gold on vellum. The Morgan Library & Museum, Gift of the Trustees of the William S. Glazier Collection, 1984, MS G.5 (fol. 18v-19r)



**Wild Men (Wild Women / Wild Children)** mythical humanlike creatures covered with hair who live in the wilderness. Wildmen are comparable to satyrs and associated with woodlands.

*Book of Hours*, in Latin, about 1490. South Netherlands. Ink, tempera, and gold on vellum. The Morgan Library & Museum, Bequest of E. Clark Stillman, 1995, MS S.7 (fol. 29v-30r)



**Ziphius** a horrible sea monster native to deep waters all over the world, imagined as a beaked whale

Map of Iceland from *Theatrum orbis terrarum* (Theater of the World), in Latin, 1595. Abraham Ortelius. Antwerp: Plantin. The Morgan Library & Museum, Gift of J. P. Morgan, 1936, PML 33485; plate after fol. 103



## Related Programming

**Gallery Talk: *Medieval Monsters*** Tue/Jul 16 and Tue/Sep 10, 12:00 p.m. Jennifer DePrizio, director of interpretation, highlights how monsters were used in the Middle Ages to instill fear, communicate morality, and explain natural phenomenon.

**Gallery Talk: *Contemporary Monsters*** Fri/Aug 23, 6:00 p.m. Contemporary artist Sean Foley reflects on key works in *Medieval Monsters* using “nonsense” as a way to explore monsters and wonder. Imaginative inquiries and curiosity encouraged.

**Lecture: *Beast or Monster? Animals in the Medieval World*** Wed/Aug 14, 6:00 p.m., Gartner Auditorium. Explore animals both real and imaginary in the Middle Ages with Dr. Elizabeth Morrison, senior curator of the Department of Manuscripts at the J. Paul Getty Museum, through the bestiary: a kind of medieval animal encyclopedia.

**Docent tours** Jul 17–Sep 29, Wed and Sun, 2:00 p.m. Join CMA volunteer docents for tours of *Medieval Monsters*. Meet at the atrium information desk. Reservation required. Limit 25.

**Self-guided tour: “Beyond *Medieval Monsters*”**

In the ArtLens App (download for free on iOS and Android devices)

**Open Studio** Every Sun, 1:00–4:00 p.m. Let *Medieval Monsters* spark your imagination with a variety of prompts and materials related to July’s theme of *Imagine*.

**Workshop: *Medieval Monsters* and Creative Drawing**

(all levels). Sat/Sep 28, 10:00 a.m.–4:00 p.m. Explore the terrors, aliens, and wonders of *Medieval Monsters* as a creative springboard for expressive and abstract reinterpretation in your own drawings. \$100, CMA members \$85.