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Woodcuts of Human Oddities in the *Fasciculus temporum*

Within our edition of the *Fasciculus temporum* there are two woodcuts which stand out from their counterparts in the text. While many woodcuts display religious or royal events, such as Noah's Ark, Jesus Christ, or the elaborate frontispiece with a monarch receiving knowledge, the two obscure pieces discussed here depict human oddities. Later in this report the significance of said oddities will be explained; however the fact that they received both page space and their own individual woodcuts indicates that these likely held particular interest for Rolewinck and for the printer of the *Fasciculus temporum*, Johan Prüss. Given that the *Fasciculus temporum* purports to chronicle the entire history of the world, the inclusion of what may seem to be otherwise unimportant events deserves a further look. The significance of these woodcuts is largely related to rarity of the phenomena depicted in their content.

One of the two woodcuts displays two infants, both possessing extraordinary qualities, as well as an eclipse in the background. The traits of the infants differ greatly: one infant features a lack of hands and eyes and possesses a prominent fish tail in the place of legs. The other infant in this woodcut looks ordinary enough aside from having legs where the arms should be. The presence of these physical anomalies in conjunction with the eclipse imagery suggests that these births were markers of local sin, or prominent warnings of bad tidings in the near future.¹ We can tie both the well-established mysticism regarding eclipses to the many beliefs associated with

¹ Daston and Park, *Wonder and The Order of Nature*, 57.

abnormal births to come to this conclusion without the need to translate the inscription.² When a child was born with an abnormality, it was considered a responsibility of those who witnessed it to record these events, in writing, as our author Rolewinck does, or in a visual capacity, as in the case of our woodcut.³ Another example we can observe of this practice in medieval Europe exists on display outside of a hospital located in Italy. The display features a conjoined twin depicted on the facade of the building intended as a warning of the approaching end-times.⁴

What these births indicated to local holy men was that the mother was engaged in sin, or rather the locality was.⁵ These were often considered direct messages from God, and thus their presence remains recorded for generations to come in formats such as Rolewinck's chronicle. The offending sins in question varied widely, although one most commonly thought to be the case in animal human hybrids was bestiality.⁶ While our fish-tailed individual most likely does not indicate the belief that mother laid with a fish, such speculated behavior could be confused as the cause for the second woodcut featuring this kind of oddity.

The second, and apparently more wondrous, of the two oddities Rolewinck included in his chronicle is the woodcut of a humanoid figure in possession of a dog's head and a human body. While this may be an unusual sight to the modern observer, the dog-headed human or *cynocephalus* was a figure deeply entrenched in European mythology. The earliest reports of cynocephali appear in Greek sources such as Herodotus, though they continue to appear in stories and sailing legends.⁷ Early accounts of Greek philosophers describe the figures as large,

² An example given by Daston and Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature*, 52, describes the local fear of a city uprising due to the presence of a comet.

³ Daston and Park, 57.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Daston and Park, 56.

⁷ Herodotus, *Histories*, trans. Godley, 4.191.3; Daston and Park, 64.

dark skinned, hairy, and rather dull.⁸ One characteristic often repeated in their reporting is that they communicate in barks, and that they consumed a diet consisting entirely of meat.⁹ The initial Greek report given by Ctesias (an early fifth-century physician and historian) describes their territory as being somewhere near India, which played into their believability for medieval observers. Of literature available to Europeans in the medieval period, only two sources would cover the region of India in detail. The source most likely responsible for the legend of the *cynocephali* existing in India was Ctesias.¹⁰ Due to Europeans' lack of knowledge concerning the regions outside of these more classical texts and infrequent traders' reports, the existence of *cynocephali* was already well-established in the minds of those who had read these classical texts, Rolewinck likely among them.

Belief in the existence of faraway oddities was substantiated by the existence of real 'oddities' reported back to Europe. For example, creatures like giraffes, elephants, and other creatures made the existence of creatures like dog-headed humans a more acceptable reality for many.¹¹ The fact that *cynocephali* are often described as part of an exotic and distant population is supportive of their enduring belief in European culture, yet this does not fully explain our dog-headed friend. The accompanying Latin inscription reveals many interesting factors as to what the identity of our *cynocephalus* may be.

However, it is vital to understand how *cynocephali* were being represented around the time of publication of Rolewinck's work in order to pick out what is odd about the woodcut in Portland State's edition of the *Fasciculus temporum*. The most common dog-headed individual

⁸ Edward Tyson, *Orang-Outang, sive, Homo Sylvestris, or, The Anatomy of a Pygmie* (London, 1699).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Rudolf Wittkower, "Marvels of the East. A Study in the History of Monsters," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 5 (1942): 163.

¹¹ Daston and Park, 63.

to be recognized in art of the time is St. Christopher.¹² Resulting from a mistranslation of the Latin word for Canaanite, artwork featuring a dog-headed St. Christopher could be found across medieval Europe. While some of these pieces would include him in a more feral state, it was more likely to come across him depicted with both a dog-head and wearing clerical regalia. What visually marks the dog-head individual depicted in the *Fasciculus* as different from the depiction of St. Christopher (beyond the included inscription) is the fact that our dog-head individual is entirely nude.

The nudity of our dog-headed individual poses other difficulties in comparison with examples of *cynocephalic* art from around 1480. Around this time, it had become far more in vogue to display *cynocephalic* creatures wearing clothing, and as functioning members of Western European society, rather than as a savage monstrosities.¹³ This then begins a line of questioning as to why our figure remains in a more natural and monstrous state of being. The answers for this question, as well as the others, can be found in the previously hinted at inscription.¹⁴

The translated inscription reads:

Anno Christi DCCCCXIII. In the year of Christ 914, a monster having the head of a dog and (having) other limbs just as a man was presented to [Emperor] Louis [III], and he was well able to indicate the monstrous condition of this time, when headless men staggering about hither and thither barking like dogs.

There are several interesting aspects to the choice of language in the passage. The first thing to bear in mind is the date of the inscription. Though the chronicle was published in the fifteenth

¹² Leslie Ross, ed., *Medieval Art: A Topical Dictionary*, 50.

¹³ Daston and Park, 31.

¹⁴ Thanks to Jeremy Michael Maly and Professor John Ott, both of Portland State University, for translation assistance.

century, the information Rolewinck is using to describe the *cynocephalus* is from the tenth century. This may be one of the factors for the manner in which the artist was commissioned to depict the creature in the woodcut. Furthermore, the description given declines to mention any form of clothing to attribute to the creature, which may further explain its rather plain appearance. The description of the actions applied to our figure is what makes the passage more interesting in connection with the woodcut.

A key word within the quote is “presented” – the dog-man was reported as being presented to Louis. While we cannot be completely certain of the identity of this Louis, it is likely that it was Louis III, who ruled over Provence at the time of the date of the inscription.¹⁵ As king, Louis III would have been a key figure in the interpretation of obscure phenomena in his locality and what they could mean for his community in the near future. If one is to assume the descriptions in classical legends applied to this tenth-century dog-head (depicted from a fifteenth-century point-of-view), then the act of presentation was likely a very arduous task. And yet, perhaps it was not.

A medical doctor from the Netherlands has begun retroactively looking back at ancient humanoid oddities and diagnosing them with modern medical terminology. His diagnosis for the *cynocephalus* is that of human afflicted with *anencephaly*.¹⁶ *Anencephaly* is a birth defect in which the neural tubes do not fuse during pregnancy, usually resulting in an almost immediate death for the infant. The infant often has larger ears, as well as a wider and more pronounced lower jaw area.¹⁷ The symptoms of the disease could result in individuals possessing medieval

¹⁵ Philip Grierson and Mark Blackburn, *Medieval European Coinage: Volume 1, The Early Middle Ages (5th–10th Centuries)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 256.

¹⁶ C.A. Bos and B. Baljet, “Cynocephali en Blemmyae. Aangeboren afwijkingen en middeleeuwse wonderbaarlijke rassen [Cynocephali and Blemmyae. Congenital anomalies and medieval exotic races],” *Nederlands Tijdschrift voor Geneeskunde* 143, no. 151 (1999): 2580-5.

¹⁷ National Center on Birth Defects and Developmental Disabilities, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Facts about anencephaly,” <https://www.cdc.gov/ncbddd/birthdefects/anencephaly.html>.

understanding of medicine and physical anomalies to profess them as other-than-human, and characterizing these individuals as having the features of a dog due to individual's facial structure.

If the *cynocephalus* presented to Louis was in fact an infant, the logistics and realistic ability of that presentation would make more sense. For one, they would have a feasible physical specimen. Beyond that, bringing forth a deceased infant is far more plausible than containing a ferocious canine monstrosity. Another pointer to this potentially being an infant is the mention of a “monstrous condition of the time.” If we are to use our earlier example of the abnormal births serving as markers for bad tidings in the near future, Rolewinck's addition of this case may very well serve the same purpose. Furthermore, the phrase “without a head” suggests the possibility of *anencephaly*. While this may very well be expressing the nonsensical nature of these perceived beasts, it could instead represent a condition of those born with this birth defect.¹⁸ The CDC reports that one of the leading causes for this defect to occur during pregnancy is a lack of certain vitamins or insufficient maternal nutrition.¹⁹ This may point towards a famine within the locality of Louis the III at the time of this event. While necessarily hypothetical, the evidence allows for the possibility.

The evidence against this being an example of a birth anomaly come in the latter half of the passage where Rolewinck remarks that there were “men staggering about hither and thither barking like dogs.” The term “men” plays a key role in refuting the infant theory, as it suggests that the figures observed had to have grown to maturity, instead of exhibiting signs of a usually fatal birth defect. This point is important to consider when looking into the infant hypothesis for our dog-headed figure, as it could simply be a sign that Rolewinck found an older story amusing

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

and wanted to represent the beasts as the story described them. What may be the case, however, if we are to try and create a logical explanation of this inscription beyond pure legend, is that the explanation within the passage exists as a combination of the two. Perhaps both the presentation of the infant and the sprinkled existence of legends around the continent combined to create the content of the inscription within our text.

Whatever the case may be, it is certain that this figure sparks interest from the moment one views it. It is perverse to the human eye, breaking the very laws of nature. Perhaps this is why it intrigued Rolewinck in the first place. Its inclusion in the *Fasciculus* indicates that Rolewinck believed the *cynocephali*, as well as other, less fatal forms of abnormal births were considered significant enough to be in a chronicle of the history of the entire world. Whatever one believes about the reality behind the images, it is certain that both those in the medieval period and those in the modern share a fascination with the topic.

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