

Probable Creatures

– a Commentary

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In Brian Ogilvie's essay we encounter insects depicted as flying, hopping or crawling across disciplinary boundaries in early modern Europe. Before entomology was named and transformed into a discipline around the middle of the 18th century, those observing and describing insects were operating within what could be defined as different communities of practice (cf. Star and Bowker 1999). These would sustain separate conventions, aims and codes of representation, but at the same time the small creatures were straddling the borders separating them, these borders being both tightly drawn and highly permeable, as we can read in Ogilvie's article. They were tightly drawn as the practitioners identified themselves as involved in different projects, and they were on the other hand highly permeable as the insects and their representations travelled easily from one community to the other.

But what exactly were insects? Insects are small and reasonable kinds of scientific objects to collect, observe and describe. Reasonable is of course a very relative term, and as Ogilvie and others have made clear, insects were not the most sought out objects for early modern natural historians, painters or collectors. They might be easily found and cared for, but they lacked the moral drama, the emblematic function and exemplary status of other natural objects.

And what exactly could be labelled an insect was far from definite: In his *Mémoires pour servir à l'histoire des insectes* René-Antoine Ferchault de Réaumur generously admitted all animals which were not birds, fishes or fourfooted creatures into the category of insects. "Un crocodil seroit un furieux insecte," he would claim (cited in Pontoppidan 1753:57). Inspired by Réaumur's generosity and Ogilvie's analysis, I will invite another animal which was neither fish, nor bird, nor fourfooted into this commentary: the giant North Sea sea serpent, *Serpens marinus*.

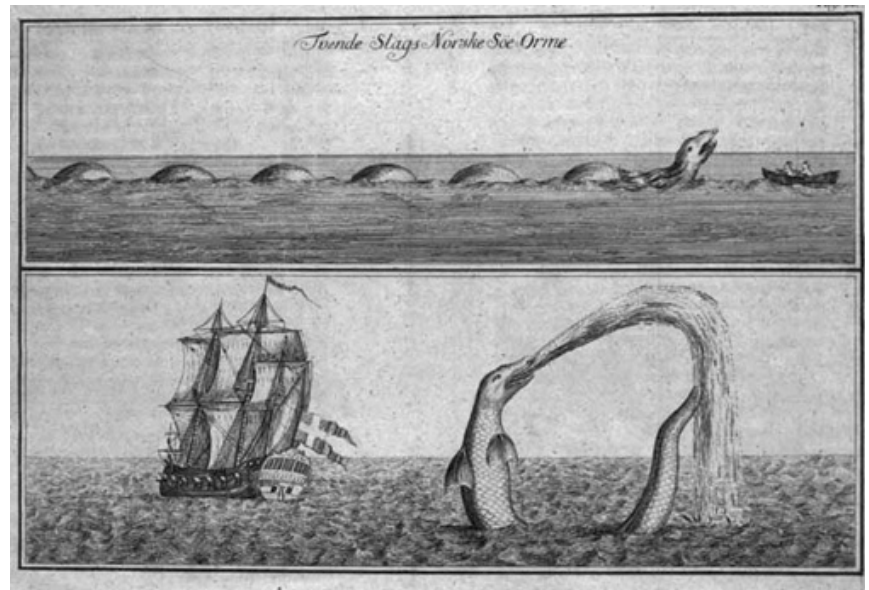
One interesting point in Ogilvie's essay is his presentation of the painter Georg Hoefnagel, a miniature painter who, in the wake of the Dürer Revival, made impressive insect paintings. They were drafted with painstaking detail, even if they were not depictions of real insects. The insects were partly imaginary, but they were made according to what Ogilvie defines as an insect syntax. Encountering the sea serpent we can perhaps talk of a sea serpent syntax, which is helpful for imagining what the animal might be and how it could be represented.

Serpens marinus was the Latin name ascribed to the sea serpents in the North Seas by the bishop of Bergen in the mid-eighteenth century. As Ogilvie describes how insects could be studied within the different frameworks of natural history,

miniature painting, medicine, and anatomy, we here encounter yet another framework, a bishop writing about sea serpents in defence of revealed religion. In Pontoppidan's *Natural History of Norway*, published in Danish in two volumes in 1752-53 and issued in English and German in 1753-55, we can observe "tvende slags Norske Söe-Orme", that is "two types of Norwegian Sea-serpents". *Serpens marinus* is a terrible *monstrum marinum* "which deserves to be taken into account by those who desire to observe the great deeds of God," Pontoppidan stated (Pontoppidan 1753:318). The problem was that they are not easy to observe, since they spend their life at the deep seas, except for a number of days in July and August when they are in heat and can be sighted if the seas are dead calm.

The two sea serpents are presented on the same plate, depicting two different occurrences of sea serpents. They attest to what Pontoppidan has observed: that the family of sea serpents, like other sea animals, come in plural species. One was recorded by the missionary Hans Egede outside Greenland in the 1730s, the other was observed by distinguished men from the west-coast of Norway who had seen the animal on numerous occasions on their way to church, and it was drawn on their testimony by the parson Hans Ström.

The serpent observed by Egede had a pointed nose, two broad fins or flippers, the body was covered with scales and the rest of the body resembled a snake. The body was thick and shorter than most other sea snakes, of which Pontoppidan had heard descriptions. Other snakes had been described as measuring up to 100 metres in length, often lying winded in the sea. The head of the snake could either end in a pointed nose, or be more in the shape of a



horse. The eyes were said to be big and blue, like pewter plates. As opposed to the one seen by Egede, the other snakes would have smooth skin with a skin colour like turtles.

Pontoppidan's text is accompanied by drawings where *serpens marinus* is depicted as sighted in the ocean. In both drawings the serpents are presented as part of a larger picture where they are juxtaposed and seen in relation to boats or ships. They are contextualized, and they are presented as seen and described by witnesses. Difficult as they are to come by, they are here not as general sea serpents, but as particular sea serpents. Even so they substantiate the text, as two particular cases belonging to different species of what Pontoppidan has identified as a family of sea serpents.

Because of the lack of animals that could serve as collected and verifiable proof of the existence of the animal, the particular sightings of the sea serpents served as proof, in Pontoppidan's text. They thereby performed the same rhetorical function as the testimony made in court by a sea captain, who was extensively quoted by

*Hentet fra Erik Pontoppidan:
Det første Forsøg på Norges
Naturlige Historie.
København 1753.*

Pontoppidan. Different sightings and descriptions of sea serpents and the captain's testimony are related in full in the text. The captain insisted on making his description in front of the court, to make his testimony all the more trustworthy. The particular descriptions of the different sea serpents were presented with full names of the court witnesses, whilst the many observations made by fishermen and people living in the north were presented as another kind of proof – their many relations were presented within the frames of making the existence of the animals probable.

Pontoppidan's book, which was particularly broadly distributed in England, achieved status as a standard reference within what is now labelled crypto-zoology, being the first text describing the sea serpent scientifically. And this is, as I see it, also a good definition of Pontoppidan's sea serpent description. As a Lutheran Pietist he had written extensively on the need to rule out superstition and belief in wonders from the true Christian faith. He would praise God's orderly and economical management of the natural world, a world which strictly accorded to natural laws. The existence of sea serpents was wonderful, but not because they were creatures holding portentous meaning. Sea serpents were huge beings attesting to the greatness of God. When Pontoppidan was later attacked (after his death, as he was a powerful bishop in an absolute kingdom with strict censorship), for having presented fables, his adversaries would charge him with being credulous. But he neither saw any reason for not believing that God had made sea serpents as an almighty God could produce the animals he wanted, nor did he see any reason to distrust fishermen and farmers as they were also rational creatures of God.

Pontoppidan had no problem imagining a sea serpent, as land and sea were filled with truly wonderful creatures, but unlike many of the insect studies presented by Ogilvie, he would have trouble making his sea serpents hop and crawl into other contexts. What intrigues me in the comparison of insects to sea serpents is precisely that Pontoppidan sees no big difference between them, their difference in scale considered. Insects come in many sizes, but their scale will often have to be manipulated to make them representable. Observers and describers of insects scaled them up by way of microscopes and detailed drawings in order to make them important and awe-inspiring, and not least, susceptible to a students gaze. As Pontoppidan and many others attest to, giant and monstrous animals were scaled down to fit into book formats as recognizable animals among others, rational, probable and in a suitable size for publishers. When represented, both insects and sea serpents can become probable and made to be true, by way of the representations, and enveloped in books or made into paintings, their syntactic order might be as important as their claim to reality. Looking at drawings of the two kinds of Norwegian sea serpents, it is still one difference which springs to the eye. We seldom see insects contextualized with those who are witnessing them. Sea serpents are in the end not only bigger, but also further from animal syntaxes than insects.

References

- Bowker, G.C. and S.L. Star 1999. *Sorting Things Out. Classification and its Consequences*. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press.
- Pontoppidan, Erik 1753. *Det første Forsøg på Norges Naturlige Historie*. København.