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MIRACLES, MARVELS AND MONSTERS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

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The subject of wonders and monsters in the Middle Ages is a broad, fascinating and complex one. In the Middle Ages, wonders did not occur at random, but were subject to certain rules. Far from being signs of irrationality, they were a widespread phenomenon that the intellectual elites addressed as well. But a belief in wonders is not restricted to the Middle Ages. Every now and then each of us hopes for a miracle, whether with or without divine assistance, and some of us are convinced that we have actually experienced one: Every year, more than five million people visit the French pilgrimage site of Lourdes.¹ Having watched pilgrims streaming into the town in search of miracles, Kurt Tucholsky called the place 'one big anachronism', but his 1927 account develops a wide-ranging analysis of society and the period, touching on national cults, class differences, the modern church and mass events in war and peacetime.²

Analyses of wonders are always social analyses as well. A look at mediaeval miracles also opens up key fields of society in those days: politics, religion, social relations, world-views and much more. We should not proceed from a linear progression of history that, beginning in the Renaissance, increasingly pushed wonders to the margins before they disappeared completely in the modern natural sciences. The history of wonders is one of many intersections, which took ever-new paths and shapes. This is evident in the history of monsters, a sub-group of the mediaeval phenomenon of wonders, as we will see at the end of this introduction.

First, however, we need to become acquainted with the various categories of mediaeval wonders, which were related in countless examples. Our point of entry will be a tale from the famous work of the Italian scholar Jacobus de Voragine (1228–1298) on the wondrous lives of the saints. The following image of St Margaret and the accompanying story address various

types of wonders



Fig. 1: The Martyrdom of St Margaret

St Margaret, according to Jacobus de Voragine, lived in Antioch at the time of the Roman Empire and was a great beauty. Margaret converted to Christianity against her father's

wishes. The Roman prefect of Antioch fell in love with the beautiful maiden, wanted to marry her and took her prisoner. Since Margaret refused to abjure the Christian faith, the prefect had her cruelly tortured and 'ripped her flesh down to the bare bones'. Everyone who saw this wept agonized tears and begged Margaret to profess herself a pagan to save her life. Margaret, however, remained steadfast. She prayed to God to show her the devil who had tempted the prefect to do this evil deed so that she might battle her true enemy. Thereupon the devil appeared in her prison cell in the guise of a dragon, took Margaret in his enormous mouth and began to devour her. Before he could swallow her, however, Margaret made the sign of the cross. The dragon split open 'thanks to the wondrous power (*virtute*) of the cross' and Margaret remained uninjured. Then the devil assumed the shape of a man. Margaret seized his head, threw him to the ground, put her right foot on his neck, interrogated him and then let him go.

After this victory Margaret knew that a human enemy of the faith such as the prefect could do her no harm. The following day the prefect tortured her so terribly with burning torches that all spectators marvelled (*mirarentur*) that she could bear the pain. The prefect had her shackled and thrown into a vessel of water to heighten the pain. The earth shook, but Margaret remained unharmed. Among the spectators, 5,000 men converted to Christianity on the spot. Fearing further conversions, the prefect ordered the saint's decapitation. Margaret prayed to God for herself and her persecutors, proclaiming that any woman who invoked her during labour would give birth to a healthy child. She walked upright to her execution. The executioner cut 'off her head with a single blow, and thus did she receive the martyr's crown'.

This story addresses the diverse mediaeval world of wonders. Through her steadfast faith Margaret acquired supernatural powers. The first wonder, her struggle with the devil, occurs in prison, without witnesses. It gives Margaret the certainty that no human being can harm her. The next miracle, the integrity of her body after the second terrible round of torture, occurs before a large audience, who respond with appropriate wonderment and even conversion. We shall see that the wonderment (*admiratio*) of spectators was a constitutive element of mediaeval wonders. Margaret's execution is not her defeat, but rather her final step towards sainthood. Dying for her faith grants her the martyr's crown. Margaret knows this, and faced with the martyr's crown she proclaims a third miraculous power, which would take effect after her death: she will come to the aid of women experiencing complications during childbirth and ensure a healthy baby (Jacobus makes no mention, however, of saving the mother's life).

Jacobus de Voragine's Latin *Legenda aurea* (Golden Legend), from which this version of the Life (*vita*) of St Margaret is taken, was disseminated in the late Middle Ages in numerous manuscripts and translations (see chap. [Legenda Aurea](#)). The illustration of St Margaret comes from the fifteenth-century manuscript of a French translation now in the Bibliothèque

Nationale in Paris.⁴ The 'legends of the saints' presented in the *Legenda aurea* are organised by the occurrence of the saints' days during the calendar year (the Vita of St Nicholas, for example, is on 6 December). The word legend should not be understood here in the present-day sense of a fictional narrative. Rather, it signified that the vita of a saint should be read aloud in churches and monasteries on his or her saint's day: in Latin, *legenda* means 'that which should be read'.

Jacobus and his mediaeval contemporaries saw these liturgical readings as true and central to Christian salvation. This did not mean, however, that they accepted all versions of a saint's Life as true. The matter of the veracity of certain details or entire Lives was hotly contested. Witness testimonies to a saint's miracles were central to authenticating wonders and classifying persons as true saints. Jacobus, whose work drew on many sources, depicted the widely held mediaeval belief that the dragon had taken Margaret in his mouth and had burst as a result, but he believed this version to be false. Instead, the dragon had merely attacked Margaret in her prison cell with the intention of eating her, but had vanished as soon as she made the sign of the cross: 'Accounts of the dragon devouring and bursting', he notes, 'are considered apocryphal [i.e., non-canonical, not recognised as valid] and foolish'.⁵

There is no evidence of Margaret's existence in the third century. We also know nothing of the origins and evolution of her story. The figure of St Margaret first appears in early mediaeval catalogues of saints (so-called martyrologies). There was a sort of twin saint in the Byzantine Empire, St Marina, whose Vita is identical to Margaret's. The cult of these two saints developed quite differently, however: In the Greek Orthodox Church Marina was known primarily as a demon-slayer, while in the Roman Catholic Church and Latin convents for women Margaret was venerated as a model of chastity and virginity and gradually developed into a patron saint of childbirth.⁶

In this capacity, Margaret became one of the Fourteen Holy Helpers. The Holy Helpers were a widely known group of saints in the late Middle Ages. Each one had a special area, from St Agathius, who stood by the faithful who feared for their lives to St George who could perform miracles in battles and in cases of fever and plague, or St Vitus, who helped sufferers from the ailment known as St Vitus dance. Margaret was an outstanding specialist invoked during complications in childbirth, but she was not the only one. Accounts of birth wonders come mainly from the late Middle Ages, with the survival of the mother taking precedence over that of the child.⁷

Finally, the figure of the dragon points to a further type of wonder. The metamorphosis of the devil into a dragon shows that saints were not the only ones who could work wonders; demons could perform them too. The dragon was one of the many animals whose guise the Devil adopted. It belonged to the wondrous beings that lived in distant lands. The

Encyclopedia of Isidore of Seville (c. 560–636), which was much read in the Middle Ages, has the following to say about dragons:

The dragon is the largest of all the snakes, or of all the animals on earth. The Greeks call it δρακων [*drakōn*], whence the term is borrowed into Latin so that we say *draco*. It is often drawn out of caves and soars aloft, and disturbs the air. It is crested, and has a small mouth and narrow pipes through which it draws breath and sticks out its tongue. It has its strength not in its teeth but in its tail, and it causes injury more by its lashing tail than with its jaws. Also, it does not harm with poison; poison is not needed for this animal to kill, because it kills whatever it wraps itself around. Even the elephant with its huge body is not safe from the dragon, for it lurks around the paths along which the elephants are accustomed to walk, and wraps around their legs in coils and kills them by suffocating them. It is born in Ethiopia and India in the fiery intensity of perpetual heat.⁸

On the Ebstorf world map, the largest and most lavishly illustrated surviving mediaeval map of the world (c. 1300), which depicts many wonders, dragons appear at the margins, near the ocean surrounding the flat earth, in the outermost reaches of Asia, Africa and Europe (see chap. [Ebstorfer Weltkarte](#)).⁹ Travellers also told of curious animals and people in faraway lands. John Mandeville's fourteenth-century travel account, which was translated into many languages, tells of a journey to Jerusalem, Egypt, Africa and all the way to China via India (see chap. [Reisebericht John Mandeville](#)). The travelogue was compiled by an unknown author (we do not know who was behind the pseudonym Mandeville) from other sources, including the account of Marco Polo. The further John Mandeville travels, the more fabulous the creatures he encountered become: He sees gigantic snail's shells large enough for men to crawl into, dragons, two-headed wild geese and poisonous snakes that only attack people born out of wedlock. The peoples are wondrous as well: people with the heads of dogs or only one leg, dwarves, giants with one eye in the middle of their foreheads, headless people with their faces on the chests and hermaphrodites.¹⁰ These fabled peoples were referred to as *monstra*, among other names, which would evolve into the modern word monster. All of these marvels in far-off lands were part of divine creation and, along with comets, shooting stars and other natural wonders, could be specifically interpreted as part of God's plan for salvation. Their fantastical quality, however, also aroused astonishment and curiosity, and had high entertainment value.

The world of mediaeval wonders was thus quite diverse. The Latin sources (like English) use a number of different words for what German refers to as *Wunder* (*signa, prodigia, monstra,*

portentia, *mirabilia*, *miracula*). Religious wonders are generally referred to as *miracula*. Those curious things that travellers encountered on their voyages to distant lands, in contrast, were known as *mirabilia*. Both terms could also be used as synonyms, and the lines between them are fluid. Gregory of Tours (538–594), for instance, referred to the Seven Wonders of the World as *miracula*, although in contrast to divine miracles they were created by human beings and thus for the most part no longer existed.¹¹ It is nevertheless useful to distinguish between two major categories of mediaeval wonders. After a look at mediaeval theories and concepts of wonders, these two groups will be introduced in a separate section.

Mediaeval concepts of wonders¹²

In the early Middle Ages scholars only occasionally pondered the question of how to define wonders. A wonder was anything unusual, excellent and out of the ordinary, that evoked fear or awe. Moreover, according to the Church Father Augustine of Hippo, God's world was the greatest miracle (*miraculum*) of all. Proceeding from the great interest in the rules governing the world, philosophers and theologians began to examine wonders. The English scholar Gervase of Tilbury (c. 1150–1235) took up the belief of early mediaeval thinkers that wonders evoked astonishment, wonderment and admiration. According to Gervase, a wonder evokes *admiratio* (wonderment or admiration) because it appears inexplicable and incomprehensible. Gervase distinguishes between *miracula*, which are not subject to nature, and *mirabilia*, which occur naturally, although they elude the human capacity to explain them:

Now we generally call those things miracles (*miracula*) which, being preternatural, we ascribe to divine power, as when a virgin gives birth, when Lazarus is raised from the dead, or when diseased limbs are made whole again; while we call those things marvels (*mirabilia*) which are beyond our comprehension, even though they are natural: in fact the inability to explain why a thing is so constitutes a marvel.¹³

Beginning in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the distinction between *miracula* and *mirabilia* became well established. This left many open questions, however, or even raised new ones. The theologian Thomas Aquinas (c. 1225–1274), for example, divided miracles into three different categories. First, the supernatural miracles (*miracula supra naturam*), in which God effected something that nature could not possibly create, such as reanimating the dead; nature could, to be sure, create life, but not in a corpse. Second: In miracles against nature (*miracula contra naturam*) God created that which was against nature. Thomas takes the example of the Biblical story of King Nebuchadnezzar, who sentenced three young men to die in a fiery furnace for refusing to worship an idol. The men miraculously survived, much like St Margaret, because God suspended the usual power of fire to burn.

The third group of miracles is closest to natural phenomena: the miracles that are preternatural (*miracula praeter naturam*). In these cases, God achieved what nature was in principle capable of, but in such a way as nature could not do – as when Jesus changed water into wine. To be sure, wine is created naturally from the water that the vines need to form grapes. God, however, can effect this transformation of water into wine directly and immediately. Another example is healing the sick, which God grants when the ailing invoke the saints – nature can heal too, but not suddenly; it needs time.¹⁴

The questions of what constitutes a wonder, what forms it takes and how it comes to be were associated with broad themes that the scholastics discussed on a high level: God's complex influence on the world, nature, its rules with cause and effect, form and matter as well as the question of how change and transformation took place. It is noteworthy that wonders were glossed over theoretically and natural explanations found: The more scholars discussed wonders, the less wondrous they appeared. According to Thomas Aquinas, when multiplying the loaves Christ had not created new bread matter, but had simply added external, already existing matter, in the way grain grows in a field.¹⁵ Mediaeval scholars were also often sceptical of the veracity of accounts of concrete marvels and miracles performed by saints: Witnesses could be wrong and travellers from faraway lands might embellish or even invent stories. They also took into consideration the importance of site dependency for human perception.

One example is the French cleric Jacques de Vitry (c. 1165–1240), who spent a few years in Palestine. He wrote about the Holy Land, where the Christians, because of their sins, relinquished the captured Crusader territories to the Muslim infidels. After describing the holy sites and the many peoples and religious communities residing in Palestine and the Near East, he also reports on the marvels in these lands, the lions, elephants, camels, dragons and basilisks, birds, fishes and precious stones. This finally brings him to the marvellous peoples who populated the 'Orient', such as Amazons, giants, dog-headed men, peoples with inverted hands and eight toes, peoples born with grey hair that turns black in old age or whose women give birth at the age of five years and whose members only live to be eight. Jacques de Vitry considers these tales from antiquity to be essentially lacking in credibility and points out that marvels are only created in the eye of the beholder and are thus relative:

We force no one to believe the above written that we, however incredible it may appear, have added to the present work [from various sources and accounts [...]: Each of us has his own intellect! We do not, however, consider it dangerous if somebody believes in something that does not violate religion or good morals. For we know that all God's works are marvels – although those for whom [certain] marvels are common and everyday, because they see them frequently, feel no sense of wonder (*admiratio*). The Cyclopes, all of whom have but one eye, may marvel just as much at those who

have two eyes as we (or others, who perhaps have three eyes) marvel at them. Just as we consider the Pygmies to be dwarves, they might regard us as giants were they to see one of us in their midst.¹⁶

Overall, the theories of wonders developed complex models in which miracles and marvels were variously classified, disbelieved or proclaimed to be true. The account by Jacques de Vitry is one of the works that does not stress theoretical explanations, but presents the wonders themselves in various meaningful contexts. Another example is the Cistercian monk Caesarius of Heisterbach (c. 1180 – c. 1240), who penned a 12-volume work, the 'Dialogue of Miracles' (*Dialogus miraculorum*), about the 'miraculous events' that occurred in his order.^[1] The text is written as a didactic dialogue between a Cistercian monk and a novice, was read aloud during meals at the monastery and conveyed the values of the order within twelve themes: conversion (as a turn to a godly life in general and the order in particular), contrition, confession, temptation, demons, the virtue of simplicity, the Holy Virgin Mary, divine visions, the body of Christ, miracles (*miracula*), the dying, and rewards and punishments for the dead.

Caesarius thus uses the category of the miracle to refer to the entirety of miraculous events, into which he imbeds the history of his order and the Cistercian quest for salvation. The miracles make up book 10, which presents a particularly large number of accounts of miracles. As in all of the books, Caesarius relates entertaining stories and exempla in short chapters – here, for example, about 'a tattling baker's wife, whose bread was transformed into excrement' (chap. 17), 'a cleric who was slandered by a harlot and did not feel the flames' (chap. 34), 'a cross that appeared in the air over Frisia at the time of the sermon preaching the Crusade' (chap. 37), 'a man who mocked the sacrament of ashes and thereupon choked to death on the dust from them' (chap. 52), 'a female stork killed for adultery' (chap. 58) and 'a toad found in the bottle of a bibulous priest' (chap. 68). Finally, at the beginning of the book about miracles we read a further definition, in which Caesarius condenses the varied discussions of his time:

We speak of a miracle (*miraculum*) whenever anything is done contrary to the wonted course of nature, at which we marvel (*mirarmur*). (...). God is the author of all miracles [Ps. 77, 15]. Miracles are even wrought by wicked men as well as by the good. (...) The reason [for a miracle] is manifold and not to be explained by me. Sometimes God works miracles as in the elements that he may show His power to mortals. Sometimes he bestows various tongues, or the spirit of prophecy that He may show His own wisdom. Sometimes He grants the favour of healing, that He may declare to us His great pity.¹⁸

Miracles performed by saints

The wonders that God worked through saints, which were usually referred to as *miracula*, made up a large proportion of mediaeval wonders. This brings us to a complex quite different from the theories and concepts of wonders developed by scholars. In the worship of saints, practical piety and hagiography were tightly intertwined. Apart from a godly life (or death), saints were characterised by two kinds of miracles: those that God effected with the intercession of saints during their lifetime (*miracula in vita*) and after their death (*miracula post mortem*). Both types of miracles were performed either in the immediate presence of the saint (*post-mortem* miracles took place at the grave, an individual relic or a sculpture of the saint at the shrine to which the faithful made pilgrimages) or as long-distance miracles in which the saint was invoked. The stories of miracles by saints were recorded either in Lives of the saints (also known as hagiographies or Vitae) or separately in miracle books.

During the Middle Ages, the group of saints by no means remained the same; new saints were constantly being added. Apart from the early Christian, frequently ascetic martyr saints (such as Margaret), saintly status and the working of miracles could also be attained by asceticism alone, as in the case of St Anthony (d. 356), or mission (for instance St. Patrick in Ireland). Beginning in the sixth century, saints were increasingly aristocratic, for example bishops, abbesses and kings. Promoting the worship of saints – with the attendant *post-mortem* miracles at the shrine – was always an act of power politics (although the cult of a saint could never be wholly controlled). This was not a Machiavellian instrumentalisation of religion for political ends, however. By promoting the cults of saints, the various interest groups – abbeys, bishops, dynasties, monastic orders and so forth – acquired the legitimacy and religious capital over which they were competing.

One example was the cult of St Gertrude (626–659), daughter of the Merovingian mayor of the palace Pippin the Elder and an ancestor of Charlemagne.¹⁹ Her cult was closely associated with the efforts of the Pippinid mayors of the palace to establish themselves as a leading noble family in the Merovingian empire. Gertrude's mother had founded the abbey of Nivelles (in Brabant in present-day Belgium, one of the oldest abbeys in the region) against the resistance of rival noble families. Gertrude became its abbess, furnished it with relics and lived and died as a pious and learned ascetic. Some ten years after her death, a monk composed a Vita of St Gertrude, but included only a few miracles. At the same time, the political position of the Pippinids was critical, and the abbey's lands endangered. A second Vita was written around 700, which contains a total of nine wonders of different categories.²⁰ In this Vita we learn how the cult of Gertrude became established at the abbey, and how after her death the saint appeared on the abbey roof during a fire and managed to stop the blaze. In visions the nuns were told to venerate Gertrude's bed and build a church for it, in which a miracle involving light occurred after the consecration: The torches extinguished the night before were burning again in the morning. The news of Gertrude's miraculous powers spread,

'so that people came from near and far to the tomb of the holy virgin [Gertrude] to beg for the salvation of body and spirit'.²¹ The Vita tells of two miraculous healings at the shrine, in which a blind woman and girl each recovered her sight. Miracles involving prisoners are also represented: An unjustly enslaved boy is able to shed his chains after invoking St Gertrude, as is a criminal convicted of 'grave misdeeds': The saint's mercy extended to repentant sinners. Around 691 Gertrude's sister Begga founded a sister abbey in Andenne, some 70 kilometres away, to which Gertrude's bed was transferred. This foundation of an abbey also had a political background. Pippin the Middle had recently attained dominance in the Merovingian empire as mayor of the palace and re-established the power of his family. The Life of Gertrude reports on this foundation and ends with one of the widespread punishment miracles that occurred when saints did not receive the veneration and power of faith owed them: A noblewoman visits Andenne abbey with her young son and refuses to celebrate St Gertrude's feast day with the nuns. Her son thereupon falls into the abbey well and dies. The nuns lay out his body on Gertrude's holy bed, where he comes alive again, and the noblewoman is converted. The second Life of Gertrude to recount this miracle, written around 700, i.e., shortly after the founding of the sister abbey of Andenne, documented God's approval of the rise of the Pippinids. The accounts of miracles thus had a political dimension.

In the eighth century, when the Carolingians Pippin the Younger and Charlemagne rose to the rank of Frankish kings who ruled over large swathes of Europe, Gertrude continued to lend the dynasty legitimacy as a saintly ancestor. The veneration of Gertrude spread across central Europe. Gertrude was considered the patron saint of travellers, pilgrims and hospital inmates and in the late Middle Ages was also invoked for protection against plagues of rats and mice.²² The cult of Gertrude thus accompanied the rise of the Pippinids and Carolingians politically and religiously and then continued to exist in a variety of contexts. As in the case of Margaret, the cult changed the miracles attributed to Gertrude.

The group of saints also changed in the context of the rising cities and in the framework of a papacy that sought to enforce an increasingly Rome-centric ecclesiastical structure. From the eleventh century, the curia developed the papal process of canonisation as an elaborate and costly procedure that proved better suited to obstructing than creating saints: A mere 71 canonisation proposals with documented miracles were submitted to the curia between 1198 and 1431, and only 33 of those were successful.²³ In contrast, the modern Pope John Paul II canonised 482 saints during his pontificate (1978–2005).²⁴ The number of saints canonised during the Middle Ages was therefore very small; in the thirteenth century, there were around 21 non-canonised saints for every saint created by the pope.²⁵ Among the new types of saints in the high and late Middle Ages were ascetic mendicant friars (such as Francis of Assisi) and the women associated with them (such as Catherine of Siena).

In the late Middle Ages²⁶ the number of sites where the faithful could ask for miracles also increased. At the same time, the sought-after relics diminished in significance, and the statue of the saint alone sufficed as a wonderworking image. Beyond the long-distance pilgrimage routes of the nobility (Jerusalem, Rome, Santiago di Compostela) pilgrimages became shorter and more local, and above all they were made by the rural population. Shrine miracles were increasingly replaced by invocation miracles: People in dire situations invoked a particular miraculous image and 'promised' themselves to it, that is, they vowed to make a pilgrimage to the wonderworking image after their request was fulfilled, frequently with an offering such as a candle or a hen.

Once the miracle was performed, it was 'announced' to the local priest, who noted it down on a miracle card if he considered it credible. These cards were hung near the wonderworking image, often with sculptures of healed limbs or revived infants. From these cards, the authors of miracle books chose those miracles that seemed to them especially vivid to document the power of the miraculous image. The miracle books were usually chained near the wonderworking image. The miracles they recounted were thus already multiply filtered through the clergy. Clerics mainly recorded miracles performed on members of the (mainly village) upper and middle classes. The poor and beggars, who theoretically continued to be the preferred addressees of holy mercy, were left out. Simultaneously, the spectrum of miracles expanded – alongside the still spectacular wonders such as raising the dead, the faithful with smaller sorrows and less serious illnesses were also heard. The miracles now covered a larger segment of everyday life.²⁷

The late mediaeval small-scale pilgrimage with the 'new omnipresence of the saints'²⁸ saw the expansion of a cult that eclipsed all others: the veneration of the mother of God, Mary. In the late fifteenth century, the printing press brought a new dynamism to the media of dissemination. Altötting in Bavaria with its Black Madonna, for example, owed its rapid development into a supra-regional pilgrimage site to printers from Nuremberg and Augsburg: With the reproduction of collections of miracles, they could reach a wider readership.²⁹ In the context of these printing enterprises, in 1497 Canon Jakob Issickemer of the pilgrimage chapel in Altötting published a miracle book entitled *Buchlein der zuflucht zu Maria der muter gottes in alten Oding* (Little Book of Refuge in Mary Mother of God in Old Oding) (**chapter Das Mirakelbuch von Altötting**). The title page shows the mother of God, surrounded by rays, helping pious Christians, some of them hobbling to the shrine on one leg, with 'miraculous signs and works' in a time full of sin and eschatological anxieties. As a sign of miracles already performed, sculpted limbs and infants hang next to her wonderworking image:



Fig. 2

As one example out of the 77 miracles recorded in this miracle book, let us look at a healing miracle transcribed from the original and translated from Early Modern German. A certain Leonhard Schnuerrer, it relates, contracted syphilis and vowed to walk some 180 kilometres from his home near Augsburg to Altötting if Mary came to his aid.³⁰

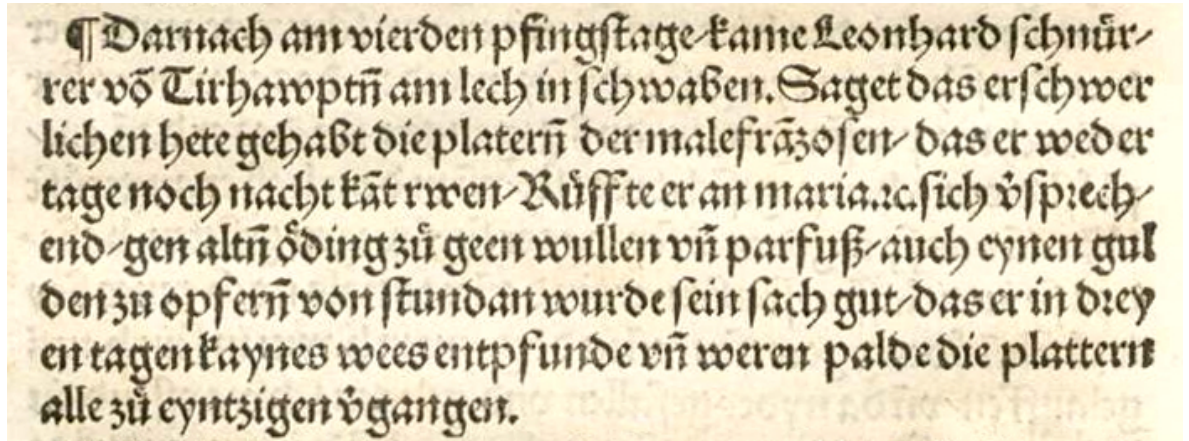


Abbildung 3

Darnach am vierden pfingstage / kame Leonhard schnuerr von Thierhaupten am lech in schwaben. Saget das er schwerlichen hete gehabt die platernn der malefranzosen / das er weder tage noch nacht kant rwen / Rueffte er an maria etc. sich versprechend / gen alten oeding zue geen wullen und parfuss / auch eynen gulden zu opfern von stundan wurde sein sach gut / das er in dreyen tagen kaynes wees entpfunde und weren palde die plattern alle zue eyntzigen vergangen.

Thereafter on the fourth day of Pentecost Leonhard Schnuerr from Thierhaupten on the Lech in Swabia came and said that he suffered so greatly from the French pox that he found rest neither day nor night. He called upon Mary and promised to make a barefoot pilgrimage to Altötting and to offer one florin. From that moment on he began to feel better, so that after three days he was without pain and soon every single one of the pustules had disappeared.

Miracle books are valuable sources for historical research. Their numerous accounts of wonders make them suitable for statistical analysis. Accordingly extensive calculations were conducted during the heyday of quantitative historiography in the 1970s and 1980s.³¹ In 1985, for example, Pierre Sigal analysed 4,756 miracles from high mediaeval France and divided them into various categories. The *posthumous* miracles (ca. 75 percent) clearly dominate over those that saints performed during their lifetimes (ca. 25 percent *miracula in vita*). Around 57 percent of all miracles were healing miracles for various diseases. The remaining 43 percent were divided among visions (ca. 28 percent), punishments (22 percent), favourable interventions (17 percent), protection from danger (11 percent), deliverance from prison (8 percent), glorification of the saint (7 percent), prophetic visions (4 percent) and obtaining children (1 percent).³²

Such calculations are interesting, but they have disadvantages. They subject diverse individual cases to a single schema and homogenise the miracles. Each miracle book, however, reflects

its own political, religious, cultural and social surroundings. Moreover, anyone who has ever put much effort into preparing such statistics has faced the question of what can actually be done with these mute figures. Any statistical investigation demands a historical line of enquiry and corresponding analytical groundwork and contextualisation if it is to say something relevant. The essay by Gabriela Signori in chapter [Bauern, Wallfahrt und Familie](#) is a good example of the illuminating possibilities of combining quantitative with qualitative analysis.³³ Using miracle books from St Gallen, Signori provides a fascinating perspective on the question of which kinship relations (nuclear versus extended family, relationships between spouses, parents, children, siblings etc.) appear most frequently in the texts. Accounts of miracles are thus far more than mere sources for the belief in wonders, regardless of whether they are analysed quantitatively or qualitatively. They constitute a virtually inexhaustible treasure trove for historians, which – in combination with other sources – offers insights into authority and social relations, the history of medicine and the body, forms of piety, gender, legal and economic history and much more.

Mirabilia: The History of Monsters

Like miracles, marvels encompass a variety of different phenomena, events and creatures in God's wondrous world. They, too, became the subject of treatises of the most diverse kinds.³⁴ Beginning in the fifteenth century, they were increasingly collected in cabinets of wonders and curiosities.³⁵ As an example, we turn our attention here to the subgroup of monsters from the Middle Ages to the present. The term *monstrum*/monster refers to animals, human beings and hybrid creatures whose appearance and nature are classified as deviating fundamentally from a given order. Monsters fascinate and entertain, whether as far-off legendary creatures or the familiar, friendly Cookie Monster. Their history, however, is chequered, complex and associated with many topics, only a few of which can be addressed here. It is a history that treats of the form and boundaries of the human, which formulates and challenges orders of all kinds, a history of ambivalences and emotions, of wonderment, amazement, joyous curiosity and tolerance, of horror, disgust, fear and uneasiness.

The question of when a body is classified as special or as a playful, inventive variant on nature, and when as disturbing, wrong and malformed is also part of this history. As we shall see, in the early modern period the category of the monstrous encompassed not just clear exclusions but also peaceful inclusions, while this became less the case from the eighteenth century on. The history of first individual and second collective groups or peoples of *monstra* ran along two tracks, which repeatedly intersected. The main focus here will be on human *monstra*.

In classical antiquity, individual *monstra* were classified among other things as extraordinary natural phenomena or *prodigia*, which the gods used to express their wrath.³⁶ From Greek historians (Herodotus, Ctesias of Knidos) the Romans also adopted accounts of the monstrous races who supposedly lived mainly in India.³⁷ In his multi-volume *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder (ca. 23 – 79 CE) repeatedly mentions monstrous peoples and at the beginning of Book 7 lists many of the monstrous races known at his time.³⁸ The canon of monstrous races rooted in antiquity became part of the mediaeval Christian world-view and was recast in ever-new versions. Apart from *prodigium* other terms were also current (*portenta*, *ostenta*, *monstra*), which Bishop Isidore of Seville elucidated as follows in the seventh century:

On Portents

Varro [Roman polymath, 116AD-27AD] defines portents as beings that seem to have been born contrary to nature – but they are not contrary to nature, because they are created by divine will, since the nature of everything is the will of the Creator. (...) Portents are also called signs [*ostenta*], omens [*monstra*], and prodigies, because they are seen to portend and display [*ostendere*], indicate [*monstrare*] and predict future events. The term ‘portent’ (*portentum*) is said to be derived from foreshadowing (*portendere*), that is, from ‘showing beforehand’ (*praeostendere*). ‘Signs’ (*ostentum*), because they seem to show (*ostendere*) a future event. Prodigies (*prodigium*) are so called, because they ‘speak hereafter’ (*porro dicere*), that is, they predict the future. But omens (*monstrum*) derive their name from admonition (*monitus*), because in giving a sign they indicate (*demonstrare*) something, or else because they instantly show (*monstrare*) what may appear; (...) A monster to which a woman gave birth, whose upper body parts were human, but dead, while its lower body parts came from diverse animals, yet were alive, signified to Alexander [the Great] the sudden murder of the king [Alexander] – for the worse parts had outlived the better ones. However, those monsters that are produced as omens do not live long – they die as soon as they are born. (...) Just as, in individual nations, there are instances of monstrous people, so in the whole of humankind there are certain monstrous races, like the Giants, the Cynocephali (i.e. ‘dog-headed people’), the Cyclopes, and others.³⁹

But how should one characterise these monstrous races? Were they part of God’s plan for salvation and thus human beings who could accordingly attain divine redemption? The church father Augustine (354–430) posed the question of whether it was credible that the ‘monstrous races of men’ (*monstrosa hominum genera*) were, like all other human beings, descended from Noah and thus from Adam. Like many others, Augustine was sceptical about whether the reports of faraway monstrous races were true or sprang from the vivid imaginations of

scholars and travellers. Nevertheless, these reports could not simply be dismissed as fabrications. Since there was incontrovertible evidence for the existence of individual monsters – such as hermaphrodites – it was perfectly possible that the human race encompassed entire peoples of monsters. Moreover, God alone knew the beauty of the universe. Augustine thus concludes

But whoever is anywhere born a man, that is, a rational, mortal animal, no matter what unusual appearance he presents in colour, movement, sound, nor how peculiar he is in some power, part, or quality of his nature, no Christian can doubt that he springs from that one protoplast [= the first man, i. e. Adam].

The interesting and entertaining group of monstrous races provided occasion for various reflections on the history of salvation and divinely ordained nature and its playfulness and regularity. Accounts of monstrous races can be found in the high and late mediaeval encyclopedias and descriptions of nature and occasionally in chronicles (for example those of Vincent of Beauvais, Gauthier of Metz, Gervase of Tilbury, Konrad of Megenbergh, Brunetto Latini and Adam of Bremen).⁴¹ Living far as they did from the Christian heartland, they offered scant occasion for horror and fear. Hartmann Schedel, who published a world chronicle in 1493,⁴² classified the monstrous races as belonging chronologically to the second aeon (of seven), which extended from the Great Flood to the birth of Abraham, and thus placed them at a great temporal distance. Schedel presents a total of 21 monstrous races with illustrations, some of which he elucidates briefly (in what follows we begin with the usual term, and then give Schedel's translated explanation):



Fig. 4: *Dog-headed people (Cynocephali)*: 'In India there are people with dogs' heads who bark when they speak. They nourish themselves with birdsong and dress in animal skins'.



Fig. 5: *One-eyed people (Cyclopes)*: 'Many [in India] have but one eye on their forehead over the nose and eat only animal flesh'.



Fig. 6: *Headless/Chest-faced people (Acephali)*: 'In Libya many are born without a head, [but] have a mouth and eyes'.



Fig. 7: *Hermaphrodites*: 'Many [in Libya] are of both sexes. The right side of the breast is male, the left female. They mate with one another and produce offspring'.



Fig. 8: *Shadow feet (sciapods)*: Schedel offers no explanation. The sciapods are known for having such a big foot that it provides them with shade.



Fig. 9: *Mouthless people (Astomi)*: 'Near Paradise [located in the farthest corner of the Orient] on the River Ganges live people who do not eat, for their mouths are so small that they must drink through a straw. They live from the scent of apples and flowers and die the moment they smell something bad'.



Fig. 10: '[In Ethiopia] many have horns, long noses and goats' feet, about which you can read in the legend of St Anthony'. (Here Schedel includes the demons that St Anthony went looking for in the desert in the list of monstrous races.)

The interest in individual monsters rose sharply in the fifteenth century, with a remarkable shift. The monsters were no longer located as peoples or races in distant lands or eras, but now were born as individuals on one's own doorstep, in Cracow, Zurich or Florence. These monstrous births were recorded and disseminated through the printing press. A famous example is the *monstrum* of Ravenna.⁴³ According to the first Italian broadsheets this birth occurred in Florence in 1506, bringing forth a hermaphrodite with the limbs of various animals, lending it quite a monstrous appearance⁴⁴:



Fig. 11

Later broadsides relocated the birth of the monster to Ravenna and interpreted it as a dire portent of the military struggles over Italy (French troops pillaged Ravenna in 1512). The French chronicler Joannes Multivallis saw each of the *monstrum*'s abnormalities as a sign of God's wrath over a particular sin:

The horn [indicates] pride; the wings, mental frivolity and inconstancy; the lack of arms, a lack of good works; the raptor's foot, rapaciousness, usury and every sort of avarice; the eye on the knee, a mental orientation solely toward earthly things; the double sex, sodomy. And on account of these vices, Italy is shattered by the sufferings of war, which the king of France has not accomplished by his own power, but only as the scourge of God.⁴⁵

The literature on monsters and portents flourished in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries above all in Germany and Italy. Broadside reported monstrous births, but also earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and celestial phenomena. The Central Library in Zurich owns a collection of broadsides known as the *Wickiana*, which was painstakingly compiled by the pastor Johann Jacob Wick (1522–1588) (siehe Kapitel [Wickiana](#)). This 'Cabinet of Curiosities on Paper' reveals the mood and mentality of people at the period who believed they were living in the apocalyptic end times shortly before Judgement Day.⁴⁶

As Lorraine Daston and Katherine Parks have shown, monstrous births aroused a variety of emotions.⁴⁷ On the one hand, they were considered terrible, cruel and gruesome. Freaks of nature like the *monstrum* of Ravenna violated moral norms and were powerful signs of God's wrath in a sinful era. But monsters could also serve as entertainment. Parents of conjoined twins, for example, earned money by exhibiting them at fairs. Following mediaeval debates, scholars discussed in their anatomical, theological and aesthetic writings whether monsters were 'supernatural' or 'natural' in origin. The Italian physician Fortunio Liceti (1577–1657) believed that the word *monstrum*, as generally assumed, derived from *monstrare* (to show), but offered a completely different interpretation for this etymology: In monsters, God was by no means showing his anger over sins; instead, they aroused bafflement, surprise and wonder when they were 'shown'. Like an artist, nature used imperfect matter to fashion ever-new and astonishing forms.⁴⁸

Monstrous births were increasingly dissected and analysed in anatomical treatises in order to unlock the laws of nature. In the process, the interpretive framework shifted. Monsters were no longer viewed as sports of an inventive Nature, but rather as objects on the basis of which the strict regularities of Nature under Almighty God were to be determined. Once again, disgust at the bodily deformities observed by scholars dominated. Voltaire, who devotes an entry in his *Dictionnaire philosophique* to monsters, notes there that monsters are far more difficult to define than one might imagine. When, for instance, does a snake assume

monstrous proportions? For Voltaire, the key factor was our sense of horror at the sight of a monster, which could very well have two sides: A woman with four breasts whom Voltaire saw at a fair was a monster when she showed her breasts, but agreeable in appearance as soon as she covered them. Voltaire ultimately capitulated before the topic. Too many questions remained open for him, and at the end of the article he exclaims, 'Let each of us boldly and honestly say, How little is it that I really know.'⁴⁹

The anatomists, too, could not agree on how to define monsters.⁵⁰ The more strictly natural philosophers and theologians postulated divine regularities, the greater the problems grew: How could such massive deviations be reconciled with the splendid regularity of Nature and God's omnipotence? In his famous *Universal Lexikon*, Johann Heinrich Zedler distinguishes between *monstra* and freaks (*Missgeburten*). A *monstrum* is 'anything that is against nature or that is born, or as it were denies or alters the true origins of its birth by assuming an alien form'. A 'freak [or] monstrous birth (Latin *monstrum, ostentum, portentum, prodigium, partus monstrosus*) is actually a natural birth, which in some way deviates from the order and form of its species' – such as when hands, feet or fingers are missing or there are too many of them or twins have grown together from natural causes, without divine wrath over human sins playing a role.⁵¹ This terminological distinction was not maintained, however, and both monstrous types of deviation continued to be morally associated with sinfulness.

In addition, as had already been the case in the Middle Ages, freaks and monsters were discussed within general theories of the origin of organisms. In the meantime, the theory of epigenesis (bodily abnormalities develop through a sequence of steps) replaced the theory of preformation (all deviations already exist in the cells). If bodily abnormalities are not there from the outset, however, but rather arise in various developmental stages, one can no longer speak of an intrinsic *monstrum* – thereby abolishing the category of monsters in the philosophy of science.⁵² The specimens of freaks that had once been a part of cabinets of curiosity were now transferred to anatomical and pathological collections. A new discipline, teratology (the study of deformities) arose, whose name however picked up semantically where the history of monsters had left off (the Greek word *teras* means monster), and it remained a problematic 'paradiscipline'.⁵³

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, monsters and monstrosities became increasingly popular in two other areas, though, which followed on from the early modern history of *monstra*. First, monsters became popular as fictional figures in literature, art and film. As hybrid, irrational and animalistic creatures like Frankenstein's monster, they spread fear and terror. As stammering liminal beings at best who threatened or challenged the prevailing order, they usually end up being killed. As in Robert Louis Stevenson's novella *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), the monster also stands for the monstrous potential of human beings. Vampires transgress the boundaries of gender and normative sexuality like the early modern

hermaphrodites before them.⁵⁴ The genre of science fiction in film and literature takes up the tradition of mediaeval monstrous races in far-off lands by locating monsters in distant galaxies.

The second field was criminology, which from the second half of the nineteenth century dealt academically with the figure of the criminal who threatened the order of decent society. The Italian criminal anthropologist Cesare Lombroso (1835–1909) described the criminal as a monstrous figure, a throwback to an earlier stage of human development who exhibited specific anatomical traits, notably certain skull shapes. Others saw moral failings such as alcoholism and prostitution as signs of degeneration and inferiority caused by illness.⁵⁵ The construction of the physically and culturally degenerate criminal was associated with racist models that also extended to Jews. The body became a template upon which ‘the qualities of a threatening and reprehensible nature were inscribed’. The line between deformities and monstrous freaks who were deemed unfit to live became permeable again.⁵⁶

Behind an endearing figure like Sesame Street’s Cookie Monster, who threatens no more than Ernie’s stock of goodies, or the tragic death of King Kong, lies a long history of monsters and monstrosities that prompts fundamental questions about the human, natural and divine orders. Beyond the realm of entertaining stories, the modern category of the monster is a – on many levels – problematic figure of dissociation with a high potential for violence, but also for repression. This affects not just the classification of people as monstrous freaks, but also the creation of monstrous perpetrators. Thus, for example, the classification of Josef Fritzl, whom the press in 2008 dubbed the ‘Monster of Amstetten’, may be quite understandable given his indeed terrible crimes, but it is also a convenient mechanism for removing people and acts we find abhorrent from the midst of society.

Structure of the chapters and research tips

The two major categories of mediaeval wonders – miracles and marvels, with the monsters as a sub-group – overlap, are almost infinitely ramified and can be viewed from various perspectives. Under ‘Sources’, the two chapters on miracles, marvels and monsters list exemplary, sometimes illustrated, texts: Unlike the common use of the term sources, academic historians consider only documents from a certain period to be sources, but not modern secondary literature. A wealth of mediaeval sources on wonders is freely available on the Internet. A source such as John Mandeville’s travel account, which was widely disseminated in the Middle Ages, can be found for instance in the form of digitised manuscripts and early printed editions, frequently in several languages. The problem for non-specialist readers is that these manuscripts are quite difficult to read without a knowledge of palaeography and the language of the time. Reading printed works requires less practice.

Digitisation projects carried out in conjunction with libraries with holdings of rare books and manuscripts are genuine treasure troves:

www.e-codices.unifr.ch (Digital copies from Swiss libraries)

www.digitale-sammlungen.de (Digital copies from the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich)

<http://gallica.bnf.fr/> (Digital copies from the Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris)

www.bl.uk/manuscripts/ (Digital copies from the British Library in London)

For additional links:

<https://www.propylaeum.de/mittel-und-neulateinische-philologie/digitale-sammlungen/>

The very readable source editions at archive.org offer a good alternative, but most of them are from the nineteenth century and do not conform to current scholarly standards. If one wishes to use the source for scholarly purposes, it is thus necessary to find out whether a relevant newer ('critical') edition exists of the text, which is generally only available in print form. For this purpose, consult the secondary literature. A look at the catalogues of academic libraries or the relevant Wikipedia articles can also be useful.

While mediaeval sources are well represented on the Internet for initial research, one will not get far there when looking for secondary literature. A visit to an academic library is recommended. The list of relevant literature mentioned under chapter [Literature List](#) provides an introduction. In addition, the research needed to answer even apparently simple questions is also usually time-consuming and requires practice and if possible a BA course in history to learn the working methods. We recommend the online Mediaeval History tutorials listed in chapter [Online-Tutorien](#), which history departments have compiled for their students.

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⁷ Signori, Gabriela: *Wunder : eine historische Einführung*, Frankfurt a. M. 2007, S. 111–114.

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⁹ See the interactive version of the Ebstorf world map with seven results for the search under 'Drachen' (dragon): *Die Ebstorfer Weltkarte*, Ebstorf um.1300. Online: Leuphana Universität Lüneburg, <<http://www.uni-lueneburg.de/hyperimage/EbsKart/start.html>>, Stand: 29.07.2015.

¹⁰ Mandeville, John: *Reisen des Ritters John Mandeville vom heiligen Land ins ferne Asien 1322-1356*. Aus dem Mittelhochdeutschen übersetzt und hg. von Christian Buggisch, Darmstadt 2004.

¹¹ Which wonders were counted among the seven wonders of the world varied (on this, see Brodersen, Kai: *Die sieben Weltwunder. Legendäre Kunst- und Bauwerke der Antike*, München 1996). Gregory of Tours includes two biblical structures on his list: 1. Noah's Ark, 2. The Walls of Babylon, 3. Solomon's Temple, 4. The Mausoleum of Halicarnassus, 5. The Colossus of Rhodes, 6. The theatre in Herakleia, 7. The Lighthouse of Alexandria. Tours, Gregor von: *De cursu stellarum ratio, qualiter ad officium implendum debent observari*, in: Krusch, Bruno (Hg.): *Gregorii Turonensis Opera*, Bd. 2, Hannover 1885 o. D., S. 404–422. Online: *Monumenta Germaniae Historica digital*, <

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¹⁶ Vitry, Jacques de: Histoire orientale - Historia orientalis. Introduction, édition critique et traduction par Jean Donnadieu, Turnhout 2006, S. 406.

¹⁷ Heisterbach, Caesarius von: Dialogus miraculorum . Dialog über die Wunder, Bd. 1 / 6, Turnhout 2009, S. 200-201.

¹⁸ Heisterbach, Caesarius von: Dialogus miraculorum. Dialog über die Wunder, Bd. 5 / 6, Turnhout 2009, S. 1894–1897.

¹⁹ See the introduction and the Vita (with German translation) by Vogel, Bernhard: Virtutes sanctae Geretrudis, in: Herbers, Klaus; Jeroušková, Lenka; Vogel, Bernhard (Hg.): Mirakelberichte des frühen und hohen Mittelalters, Darmstadt 2005 (Ausgewählte Quellen zur deutschen Geschichte des Mittelalters, Freiherr-vom-Stein-Gedächtnisausgabe 43), S. 51–67 sowie Madou, M. J. H.: Gertrude de Nivelles (Sainte), in: Aubert, Roger; Baudrillart, Alfred (Hg.): Dictionnaire d'histoire et de géographie ecclésiastiques, Bd. 20, Paris 1984, Sp. 1066f.

²⁰ See the entire dossier of sources in: Krusch, Bruno (Hg): Vita Sanctae Geretrudis, in: Scriptorum rerum Merovingicarum 2: Fredegarii et aliorum chronica. Vitae sanctorum, Hannover 1888, S. 447–474. Online: Monumenta Germaniae Historica digital, <http://www.dmgh.de/de/fs1/object/display/bsb00000749_00005.html?zoom=0.75&sortIndex=010:020:0002:010:00:00>.

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- ³¹ Siehe dazu den Überblick bei Bartlett, Robert: *Why can the dead do such great things? Saints and worshippers from the martyrs to the Reformation*, Princeton 2014, S. 342–348.
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Illustrations

Fig. 1: The Martyrdom of St Margaret, in: Voragine, Jacques de: La Légende dorée. Traduction de Jean de Vignay, 1401, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Signatur: Français 244, S. Ausschnitt aus Fol. 197r. © domaine public. Online: gallica.bnf.fr, <<http://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8442920n/f415.item>>, Stand: 24.11.2015.

Fig. 2: Titelblatt, in: Issickemer, Jakob: Das buchlein der zuflucht zu Maria der muter gottes in alten Oding: Mit Widmungsbrief des Autors an Johann Graf, Nürnberg 1497, Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek, Signatur: Rar. 847. © CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. Online: Münchner Digitalisierungszentrum, <http://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/bsb00029499/image_6>, Stand: 25.11.2015.

Fig. 3: Issickemer, Jakob: Das buchlein der zuflucht zu Maria der muter gottes in alten Oding. Mit Widmungsbrief des Autors an Johann Graf, Nürnberg 1497, Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek, Signatur: Rar. 847, © CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. Online: Münchner Digitalisierungszentrum, <http://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/bsb00029499/image_33>, Stand: 28.07.2015.

Fig. 4–10: Schedel, Hartmann: Register des Buchs der Croniken und geschichten mit figuren und pildnussen von anbeginn der welt bis auf diese unnsere Zeit (= Liber chronicarum, Schedelsche Weltchronik), Nürnberg 1493, Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg, Signatur: B 1554 B Folio INC, Fol:12r. © CC-BY-SA 3.0 DE. Online: Heidelberger historische Bestände - digital, <<http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/is00309000/0045>>, Stand: 25.11.2015.

Fig. 11: Czu Wissen das diss monstrum geboren worden ist in disem iar so man zelt M.D. und VI. umb sant Jacobs tag zu Florentz vo[n] ainer frawen. und so es kund gethon ist unserm hailigen vatter dem babst. hat sein hailigkait geschaffen man solt ym kain speysung gebe[n] besunder on speyß sterben lassen, ca.1506, Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek München, Signatur: Einbl. VIII, 18. © CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0. Online: Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek Bildsuche, <<http://bildsuche.digitale->

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