Can monsters exist as real creatures?

Evidence for monsters existing in the lives of the ancients goes as far back as both art and literature can take us. They have continued to affect those of modern times as well. The definition of monster however has changed, dependent upon the culture and time it was used. In diverse cultures there is a difference in the fears they hold and the monsters that are faced in myth. Catherine Atherton states that they "get defined in relation to communities and to their standards of what is good, acceptable, normal or natural…."[1]. The Ancient Greeks described monsters as mainly a physical monstrosity, which was usually a creature of extraordinary size that is usually not human or animal[2]. The modern-day definition however has progressed to numerous meanings, although three of these meanings still follow the archetypal monster of Ancient Greece. These definitions are as follows:

1. 'A large, ugly and frightening imaginary creature.
   1.1. an inhumanly cruel or wicked person.
2. A thing of extraordinary or daunting size and
3. a congenitally malformed or mutant animal or plant.'[3]

Interesting is that creatures, although usually defined as being an 'Animal as distinct from a human being'[4] can also be defined as something fictional or imaginary. What will be discussed is whether these monsters exist as creatures in the real world and not just in literature and art alone, whilst keeping in mind the definition of monster and creature.

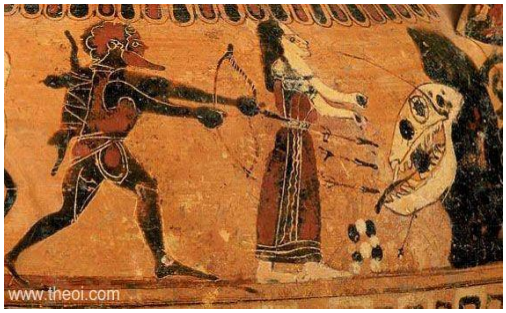

Figure 1: Heracles, Hesione and the Sea-Monster. Woodford 1993: 46.

Many myths surrounding monsters usually have a hero who fights and normally prevails. One such hero was Herakles who battled the Monster of Troy seen in figure 1. His heroic deeds are usually depicted upon vases, and one struck a chord for folklorist Mayor on the monsters of Ancient Greece possibly existing. The Corinthian vase shown in figure 1 was from the sixth century BC, and drawn in black figure. Unlike other pieces of work however, according to Mayor art historians have viewed it woefully inadequate in its interpretation of the sea monster[5]. Nevertheless, in her studies Mayor went on to connect the imagery with a key piece of history, a fossil: 'They thought it was a poorly drawn sea monster, but actually it's a very well – drawn fossil skull.'[6]. Considering this view and evaluating the image once more, it is agreeable that the monsters head in figure one does represent that of a fossil. It is a view that opens many new thoughts upon the monsters of the ancient world, however what

[1] Atherton.1998: x
[2] Felton 2012:104
[3] Stevenson, 2010: 1146
[4] Stevenson 2010: 408
[5] Nelson. 2000: e11
[6] Nelson 2000: E11

must be remembered, according to Holland is that though 'these explanations were wrong doesn't mean that they deserve our contempt. Just the opposite.'[7].

It is not difficult to imagine fossils being unearthed in ancient times via farmers or even perhaps the builders of temples. According to sources 'for millennia, fossils in the area have washed out of gullies during rainstorms, emerged from eroding hillsides and coastlines, and appeared after being thrust up by violent earthquakes'[8]. This view can be accepted as even in today's era historians are still finding ancient and prehistoric artefacts this way. However, despite the Ancient Greeks unearthing these mighty bones it is very unlikely they knew what it was they were discovering: 'The Greeks knew nothing about dinosaurs, of course.'[9]. Though evidence does demonstrate that this is true, it is far from right to say they knew nothing, as historians do not have access to all the information from the Ancient Greek era and therefore half of what they wrote and knew is lost to us. This suggests that it cannot be stated they 'knew nothing 'with complete conviction. However, it must also be remembered that at the time the 'largest known land animal was the horse'[10] therefore it was likely daunting for the Ancient Greeks to discover such bones, especially when they had no idea what creature could have had such a bone structure. 'Greek mythological monsters were indeed usually immense'[11] and as such it is not hard to question whether the possible discovery of these bones produced the idea of monsters. Surely, during ancient times, if such fossils had been unearthed it would answer many questions as to the belief of monsters, or at the very least the idea behind them as scholars have agreed, for example 'it appears that Greek images of griffins were based on weird-looking skeletons found in the distant region, which was east of the Black Sea.'[12].

Emperor Augustus (31 BC to 14 AD) established what is known as the paleontological museum[13], it was said to hold many different bones that was thought to be the remains of sea monsters and giants. Furthermore, Ancient scribes mentioned these huge bones, sometimes attributed to be local heroes or even giants[14]. It was only due to a lack of communication between scholars and palaeontologists that prevented anyone from making a direct correlation between the myths and the bones discovered. Scholar Mayor crossed this bridge and through looking at old literary references on the griffins and communicating with different palaeontologists, she found a possible connection between a griffin and the dinosaur named Protoceratops[15]. Although griffins did not originate from Greece they still were mentioned in several classical Greek writings, and classed as monsters. When the Ancient Greeks found the fossils, it is likely they 'assumed they belonged to a bizarre creature still living beyond the Black Sea, and they call it the griffin.'[16]. If Ancient Greeks had made this assumption with the griffins it is therefore likely that they made this assumption again with other monsters written in myth.

Through continuing her research, Mayor has built a map that is based on the ancient geographical descriptions of where people had discovered the bones of giants, heroes and monsters[17]. Out of all the sites looked at in the modern-day Greece and Turkey, only five have not been verified to hold

[7] Dinosaurs, Myths and Monsters. Jamie Muir, 2011: 1:24 – 1:29
[8] Nelson 2000: E11
[9] Arnold, 2015: 59
[10] Campbell 2014: 579
[11] Gilmore 2012: 44
[12] Nardo, 2011: 13
[13] Mayor, 2001:12
[14] Dinosaurs, Myths and Monsters, Jamie Muir, 2011: 12:31 – 14:28, 14:59 – 15:24.
[15] Knudsen. 2011: 13, Nelson. 2000: E11, Mayor. 2011: 48
[16] Nardo, 2011: 13
[17] Mayor 2011: xvi

fossils, highlighting the clear thought that the monsters that plagued myths of Ancient Greece were partly based upon the fossils they found[18]. Furthermore, it appears that ancient writers understood that a fossil was a preserved organism from a previous time. Alan Cutler states 'The very earliest of the Greek philosophers, the so-called pre-Socratics, made it a keystone of their various theories of the world six centuries before Christ'[19]. However, these creatures were believed to be the monsters in their myths such as the Lamia, giants, and many more. Herodotus writes of one such find that was believed to be the bones of a giant:

> 'the man took notice of his attention, and desisted from his labour. "stranger of Sparta," said he "you seem to admire the art which you con-template: but how much more would your wonder be excited, if you knew all that I am able to communicate! Near this place, as I was sinking a well, I found a coffin seven cubits long: I never believed that men were formerly of larger dimensions than at present: but when I opened it, I discovered a body equal in length to the coffin;…"'[20]

At the time this 'coffin' was believed to be the body of Orestes, and it is not the first time that 'Bones of an extraordinary size, found in different regions, have obtained such opinions credit.'[21]. However, it is not only the fossils that could indicate the monstrous beings of myth being real creatures.

Scholars have found key observations between real mammals, both in sea and land that would have contributed to the creation of monsters. This certainly led to the question many have asked, 'whether aquatic chaos demons and mega-snakes are simply ancient myths or descriptions of real creatures glimpsed in the long ago past.'[22]. The hydra for example is thought by Henry Lee to have been possibly 'a huge octopus'[23], with its long tentacle necks and re-growing ability it is not difficult to see why, and yet the correlation between the two seems to end there. Of course, it is not the first of the monsters believed to have been based on a "real" marine creature.

Figure 2 Scylla, Cheney, D.R., 1969 7

The Scylla (figure 2) who fed on large sea animals and humans is thought to be based on the giant squid (figure 3); 'Because of the tentacle-like necks, some have wondered if Scylla's image was inspired by glimpses of a giant squid'[24]. The connection can easily be agreed upon when looking at figures 2 and 3. It can be particularly seen when one removes the heads and adds an eye near to where what would be labelled the Scyllas' tail. It is through cases such as these, where the imagery looks so close, when a key question could be asked: which came first, the creature or the myth itself? If it was the creatures, then the question to this essay is basically answered, as monsters were real creatures since they are based on and evolved

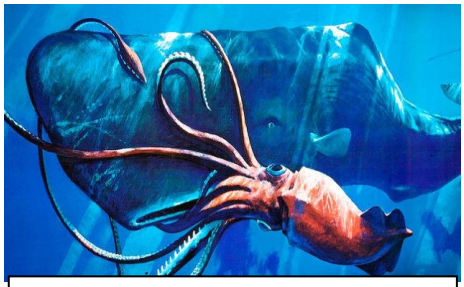

Figure 3: Giant Squid. (Giant squid, 2017)

[18] Nelson 2000: 1
[19] Cutler 2003: 8
[20] Herod, Herod: 1.21/22
[21] Herod, Herod:1.21
[22] Godfrey 2009: 24
[23] Lee 1884: 164
[24] Godfrey, 2009: 21

around the creatures we label differently today. Paul Harrison says 'undoubtedly, sea-faring folk did witness giant creatures in the seas and oceans of the world and many were hitherto unknown species'[25]. It is difficult to disagree with this view as even those in today's era who travel via sea can sometimes witness marine life. In any case, whatever these creatures were it could be easily construed that they were likely to be what we now know as squids, sharks or even whales, which for the Greeks (as it would for anyone seeing such creatures for the first time) would have been terrifying, and those who saw the creatures would no doubt call it a monster; 'For example, those who encountered the whale for the first time could be forgiven for misinterpreting it as a nemesis of evil, surfacing from the deep to wreak carnage and devastation upon civilization as we know it.'[26].

Ancient literature demonstrates the fact that Greeks had seen whales on numerous occasions, in fact 'Some of the earliest references to human encounters with whales were produced by ancient Greek and Roman authors'[27]. These references can be found in Homer[28], Aristophanes[29] and Diodorus Siculus[30]. *Ketos* was the term usually applied to the mythical sea-monsters[31], particularly those of considerably size, e.g. the whales. It is recognized that whales were present in the general area of ancient Greece by scholars such as Ogden[32] and Kaplan[33]; this belief can be accepted due to the evidence backing their argument, that parts of the whale were found and used by Ancient Greeks such as the 'whale shoulder bone that was used as a chopping board'[34], the ancient references and the modern-day sightings.

Figure 4: (Ancient Corinthian vase depicting Perseus, Andromeda and Ketos (Names are spelled in the archaic Corinthian variant of the Greek alphabet)., 2017)

Figure 4 depicts Perseus fighting the monster known as Cetus, a monster believed to have been based (like most sea-creatures) on a whale. Both sea monsters faced by Heracles [see figure 1] and Perseus [Figure 5] were named Cetus, the name derived from the Greek word Ketos, and though similarities can be found between the two images both look incredibly different. The reasons for this could stem from different bones being discovered or the fact the monster that Perseus fought was drawn from another creature, perhaps one seen in the sea. Whatever the case, it is difficult to obtain evidence on whether the monsters in myth were based on the real creatures seen in marine life today. However, it is likely that the monsters in figure 1 and 4 were based on the idea of whales or sea creatures due to their name sake and that the word is not only used in the passages describing the monster but 'to refer generally to any large creature of the see…. {including} a variety of whales,… a number of large fish….'[35]. Therefore, it can be deduced that this Cetus monster was based on marine life. Godfrey thinks that there is a possibility that perhaps the ancients had seen something the modern-day era

[25] Godfrey, 2009: 25
[26] Godfrey, 2009: 25
[27] Szabo, 2008: 34
[28] Homer. Ill, Xiii 29-52.
[29] Eberhart, 2002: 272
[30] Diod, T.H.D.S. C.A.T.M.M.G.A.F.A.W.U.W.T:124
[31] Szabo 2008: 34, Ogden 2008: 87
[32] Odgen, 2008: 87
[33] Kaplan, 2013: 87
[34] Kaplan, 2013: 87
[35] Szabo,2008: 34

has not[36], a thought that is plausible as the ocean has not been explored to its full capacity even now.

Such monstrous creatures that dwelled on sea and land may well be lost to us, yet it must be remembered that 'these creatures were very real to the ancients who believed that ocean waves were churned by chaos demons'[37] and fossils were the remains of bones. If anything, it is not that monsters in myth were real, it is that they were based on real creatures, and for example what the modern-day world has labelled as dinosaurs – a creature that can be classed as a monster – were simply classed under different names in the ancient world and the remains of their impressive figures made more monstrous. As Holland aptly puts it in his documentary

> "Science begins in wonder and a yearning to fathom what may at first seem unfathomable. In that sense, at any rate, our ancestors did have something of the palaeontologist about them. And in one fundamental respect, they were absolutely spot on. Monsters had indeed once trodden the earth.'[38].

[36] Godfrey 2009: 25
[37] Godfrey, 2009: 25
[38] Dinosaurs, Myths and Monsters, Jamie Muir, 2011: 1:30-1:49

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Ancient Corinthian vase depicting Perseus, Andromeda and Ketos (Names are spelled in the archaic Corinthian variant of the Greek alphabet). (2017). [image] Available at: https://images.google.co.uk/imgres?imgurl=https%3A%2F%2Fupload.wikimedia.org%2Fwikipedia%2Fcommons%2Fthumb%2Fa%2Fa2%2FCorinthian_Vase_depicting_Perseus%252C_Andromeda_and_Ketos.jpg%2F1200px-Corinthian_Vase_depicting_Perseus%252C_Andromeda_and_Ketos.jpg&imgrefurl=https%3A%2F%2Fen.wikipedia.org%2Fwiki%2FCetus_(mythology)&docid=er6STQqPF8D0vM&tbnid=O2beC-qsl0iZiM%3A&vet=1&w=1200&h=900&source=sh%2Fx%2Fim [Accessed 27 Nov. 2017].

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