

Medieval Monsters



Miikka Tamminen (miikka.tamminen@tuni.fi)

Associate Professor (title of Docent) in Medieval Cultural History

Tampere University



Themes of the Lecture

- Monsters & monstrosities in medieval culture
- Introduction to some of the most common species & debates about them
- The function & definition of the monster
- Discussion on the importance of monsters during the Middle Ages

Medieval Worldview

- Three-part division: sentient, living creatures
- 1. animals - physical bodies, natural & mortal
- 2. humans - physical bodies, natural, mortal & immortal souls
- 3. spirits - immaterial bodies, supernatural & immortal souls
- Monsters were encountered in all the groups



British Library, Yates Thompson MS 13, f. 139r

Monstrous Animals

- Many different kinds of monstrous beasts
- In particular reptiles: dragon, basilisk, salamander, amphisbaena, iaculus etc.
- Biblical explanation: serpent seduces Eve (The Fall of Man)



Monstrous Humans

- Physical abnormality was the most common form of perceived monstrosity
- Monstrous “races” lived in Africa or India (vague medieval concepts), and elsewhere
- The monsters were placed in the unknown regions of the world
- They were discussed in histories, geographical treatises, maps, missionary works, letters, medical works, sermons, legal treatises, biblical commentaries by priests, philosophers, doctors, lawyers, merchants, popes, poets, saints, travellers, crusaders etc.



Supernatural Monsters

- The monstrous spirits were often called demons (a term borrowed from the ancient Greeks)
- During the Middle Ages many supernatural creatures were combined together as a single group (fairies, goblins ect.)
- The demons lurked in the dark or in the daylight & ambushed people
- The demons were also responsible for the persecution of human souls in the afterlife (in Hell & in Purgatory)





Defining the Monster

- The term “monster” derives from the Latin word “monstrum”
- The modern term is clearly more negative; during the middle ages the term could have neutral or positive connotations
- Ancient Romans had similar terms (omen, portent)
- *Monstrum* was a message or a warning from the gods
 - gods *demonstrated* something
- Monstrous births could be interpreted as signs from God (The Monster of Ravenna 1512)

Definition & Function

- Monsters were strange creatures: deformed, atypical, unnatural, abnormal
- Misfits that did not belong in any category/violated the existing boundaries



- Monsters had many functions: caused excitement & suspense, inflicted horror, aroused interest & amusement (the comic element of the *bonnacon*) taught moral lessons, explained the world, gave a sense of control to the chaos



The Origin of the Monsters



- Theological considerations: monstrous men were the descendants of Cain, who was responsible for their disfigured form; the monstrous animals were created by God and demonstrated His creative powers

Monsters & Theology

- The *antipodes* (“opposite-footed”) were monsters that created problems during the Middle Ages
- They were originally described as the people on the opposite side of the globe
- The Roman Church branded this as a heresy (against basic teachings)
- The Church promoted a different explanation: the *antipodes* had their feet on the wrong side of the body



Immoral Monsters

- Hybrid monsters were combinations or crossbreed of different species (manticore & siren)



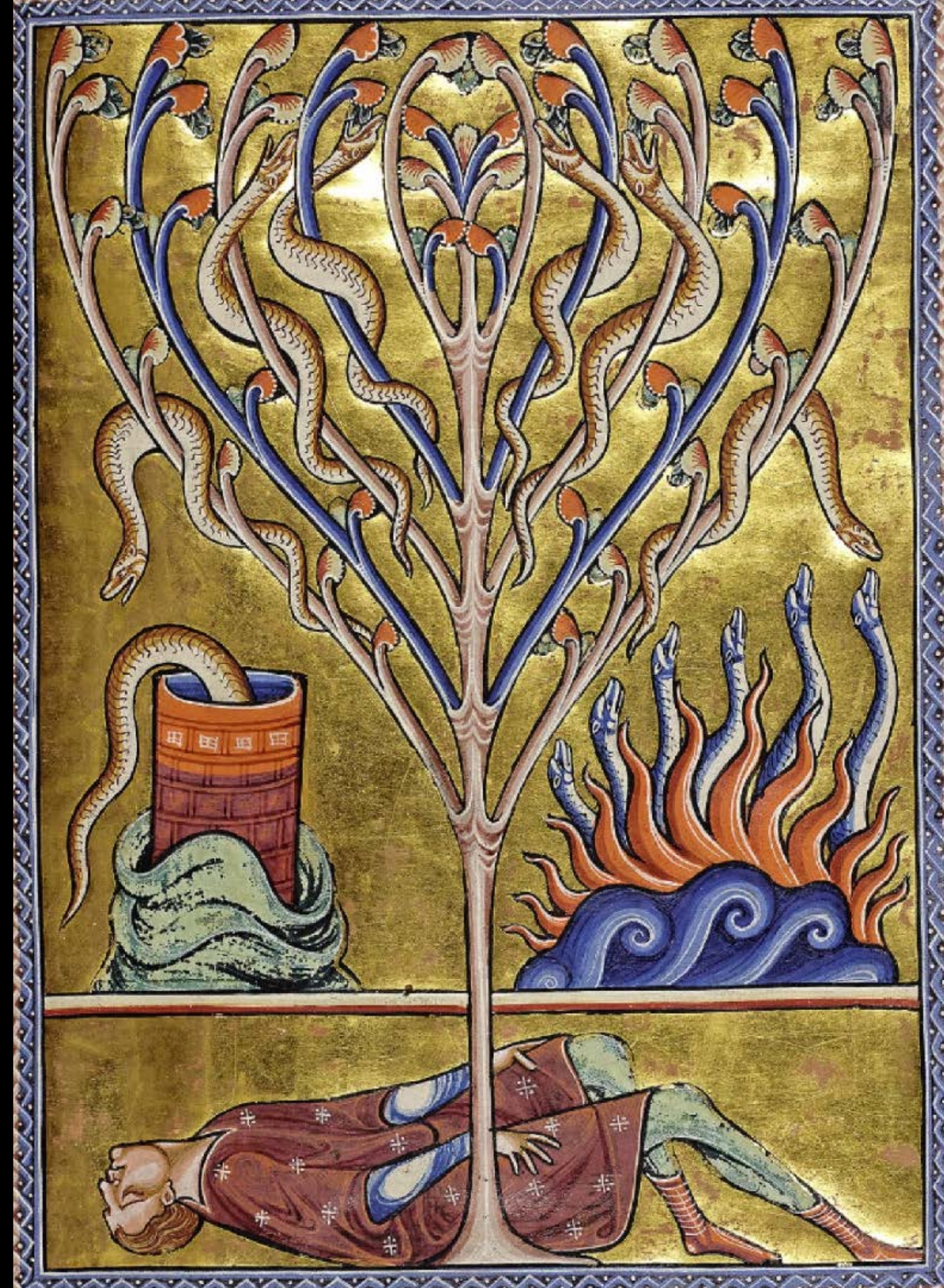
Bibliothèque municipale de Besançon, MS 69, 456



British Library, Royal MS 12 CXIX, f. 29v

Allegorical Monsters

- Monstrous serpents were often regarded evil, poisonous, lethal, deceitful, base, earthly/material
- In medieval allegorical interpretations serpents represented the Devil, temptation, and sin, but symbolic language was complex
- Salamander could represent diabolic evil, but also innocence & sinlessness of men and women



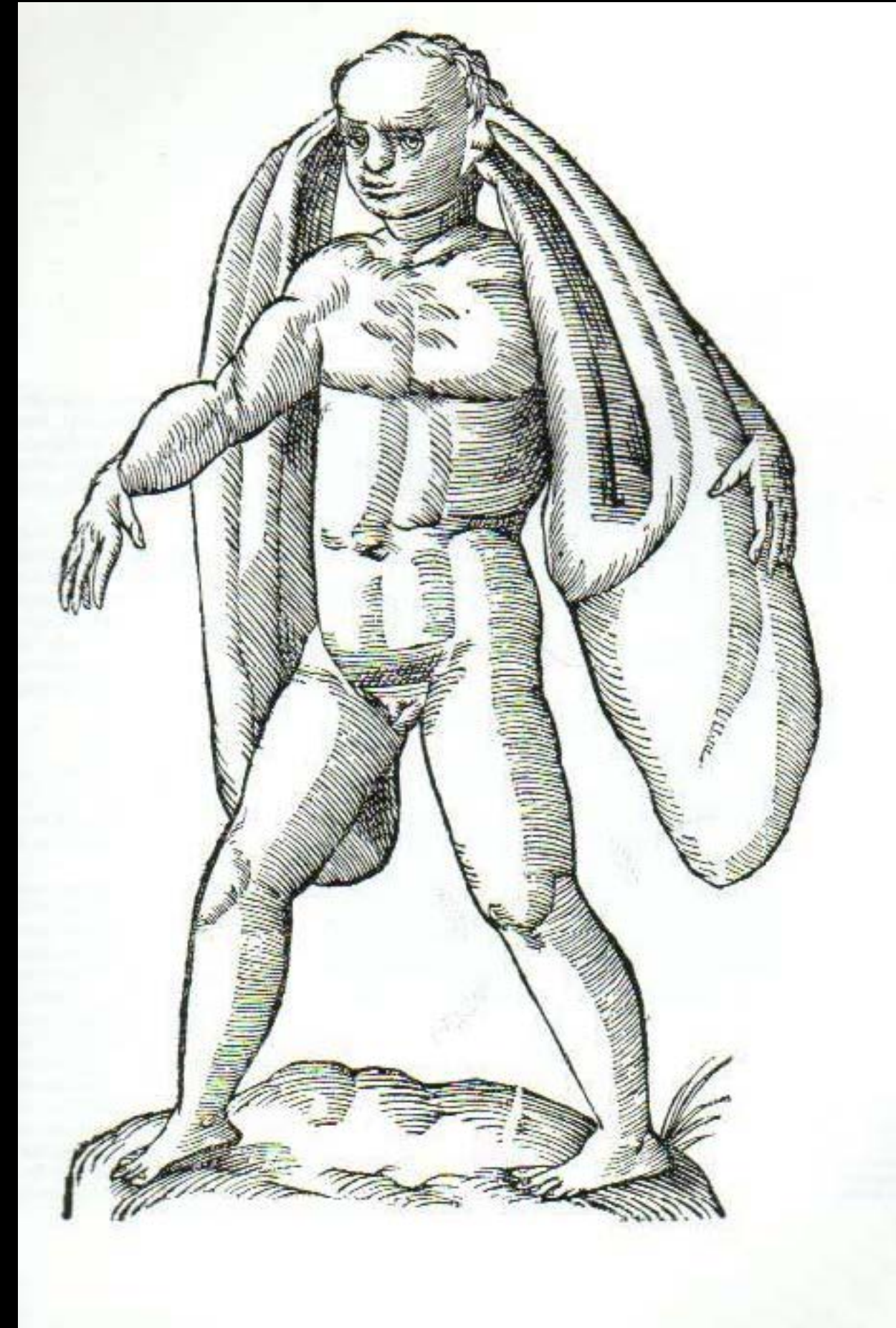
Controlling the Chaos

- The menace of the unknown - the response to threat was to describe in detail all the possible monsters (to give them names, specific habits etc.) and thus to have control over the unknown



Controlling the Chaos

- Various human monsters were known to be in the world; monstrosity appeared in different forms and locations



- (*panotii*, “the all-ears”, were shy creatures and had huge ears)

Monstrous Predators

- The *Donestre* was an extremely dangerous man-eating monster
- Most medieval monsters were cannibals, but *donestre* was an exceptional & much feared
- The monster was a polygot, who knew every language in the world & was able to talk to anyone
- The monster lied to its victims & attacked the unguarded & ate them & mourned with their decapitated head
- A monster, who transgressed both social & natural law



Dangers of the Sea

- Sea voyages were risky; shipwreck a real possibility
- Sea imitated the land: there were similar fields, mountains, towns, fruits, inhabitants, social order, and monsters under the waves



Monstrous Humans



- Not all of the monstrous “races” had physical anomalies or peculiarities
- “The wife-givers” were people, who gave a wife to all travellers, who wandered into their lands
- Many monsters had strange eating habits, which made them monstrous (eating snakes or raw fish)
- Many were normal & rational, but naked & talked differently
- The discussion on monsters defined what was normal and what was abnormal, the permitted and the forbidden

Monsters & Science

- The climate theory: earth was not flat, but a globe with five climatic zones
- The zones of extreme heat & cold in the polar regions created monsters
- In between the extremes there were two habitable zones
- Black skin colour was caused by the burning heat of the sun, which also curled the hair (some argued that it was not the sun, but the sins of the people of Africa)



Monsters & Racism

- Differences & similarities with the modern concept of racism
- Term used: proto-racism
- Most common form: religious racism
- During the Middle Ages conversion usually freed people from persecution
- The new Christians vs the old Christians



• St Christopher



• St Maurice

The Destruction of the Monsters

- Benoît de Sainte-Maure (c. 1150): In extreme South there are “people of different kinds who have no law, religion, or reason, justice or discretion; not knowing the difference between right and wrong, they are more felonious than dogs.”



Monstrous Humans & Ethnicity

- Some ethnical groups were occasionally regarded as monstrous races: the Africans (dark skin colour), the Jews, the Mongols, the Turks etc.



Medical Considerations

- Children or animals born with major deformities were considered “monstrous births”
- Different reasons for the deformities were put forward
- Harmful herbs could be the cause for monstrosities or signs from God
- Immorality of the parents (sins against nature/unnatural sexual intercourse)
- The imbalance of the human fluids (humoral theory)



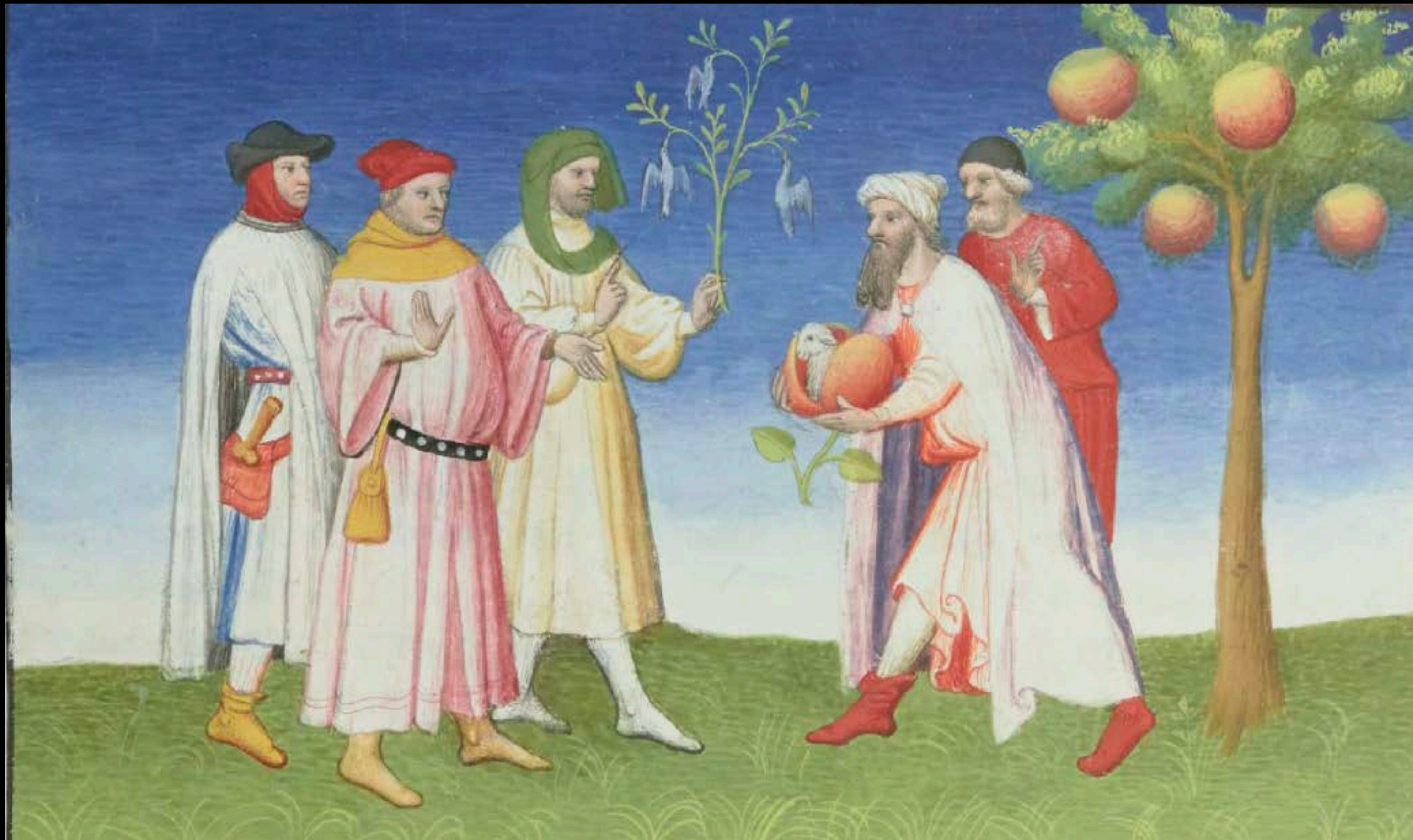
Monstrous Plants & Stones

- *Mandrake* (*Mandragora*) a plant with a human-shaped root

- In medical use (the root is narcotic)



Monstrous Plants



- *Borametz* was a vegetable lamb from Tartary or from the “Caspian Mountains”

Supernatural Monsters

- The Devil (Lucifer, Satan, Diabolos) was regarded as the enemy of the human race, the enemy of God, and the Prince of Hell



Supernatural Monsters

- The Devil was created by God (not equal to God; part of the creation)
- A high-ranking angel, who was beautiful and proud - sinned against God & many followed
- The supernatural monsters explained why there was evil in the world (a major theological problem)
- God was good & had not created evil; Evil was born out of the Devil, the demons & the human frailty





Supernatural Monsters

- The demons tempted, abused & molested humans
- They were often depicted as hairy beasts with wings, horns, claws, a trunk or a snout, long ears & a tail
- They were noisy, smelly, quarrelsome, but highly intelligent
- The demons could also have additional faces on their bellies, knees or buttocks, which illustrated moral ugliness & inner chaos

The Temptation of St Anthony

How to Combat the Supernatural Monsters?



The Evolution of the Monsters & the Crane-man



Aldrovandi, Monstrum historia (1642)



Bibliotheque nationale de France (1664)



British Museum, 1843,0719.19 (1664)

The Evolution of the Crane-man

- Some of the monsters evolved/changed during the early modern period



Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Reus en zoon met lange nekken



Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Mosnterlijke kameel-mens (1690)

