

# WONDERS

SEEKING THE TRUTH IN A UNIVERSE OF MYSTERIES

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## MERMAIDS

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# WONDERS

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**EDITORIAL**

## **The New Forbidden Fruit**

In the 19th century the Scandinavian sagas that told of the New World were suspect – they were forbidden fruit. As late as 1911 Fridtjof Nansen was still arguing that while the Norse might have reached the New World the sagas were full of myths. Now at the start of the twenty-first century the sagas are celebrated by archaeologists who love them as an inspiration to find and identify the remains of a Norse/Viking presence on the edge of the American continent. Now there is a new forbidden fruit.

The sagas contribute to the story of the pre-Norse Europeans in the New World, the inhabitants of Greater Ireland (also referred to as White-Man's Land or Albania). It had been argued that the sagas of Vinland were false just as the stories of Greater Ireland were false. Others have observed since that the corollary is true. If Vinland is to be real then Greater Ireland is a reality too. But the academics don't want you to be wondering about Greater Ireland, so they scarcely mention the subject. Only a few writers such as Carl Sauer, Farley Mowat, Paul Chapman, and Arlington Mallery have had good words to say about it.

The famous L'Anse Aux Meadows site in Newfoundland makes a better remnant of Greater Ireland than a strictly Norse site. But Helge Ingstad who first excavated the place did not face up to this possibility. He simply wrote off the subject as a "purely legendary account."

When writing of Vinland in *Wonders* Vol. 5 No. 2 this subject could not be avoided. And we shall bring it up again with more detail in the next issue of *Wonders*. Some of us love the taste of forbidden fruit.

# A PRIMER ON MERMAIDS

by Mark A. Hall

We might best designate as “mer-beings” all the mermaids, mermen, and their kin heard of around the world. They are a far-flung and diverse family of alleged creatures said to be at home in the water (both fresh and marine) and to come out on land as well. They have become the archetype of something not to be credited with a real existence. Despite this reputation, people have told of seeing them for some thousands of years.

And a few stalwart individuals will still speak up after such an encounter even in recent years. It may be that we have yet truly to learn the lesson of the fable of “The Emperor’s New Clothes.” In that story almost everyone was made to believe that the person who could not see the Emperor’s new clothes was not fit to hold his station. We are taught that anyone who thinks mermaids could be real is the same. But the historical record suggests that we have been cowed into silence on a topic that is indeed real.

Here I will venture to introduce the basic issues of what, where, and how of mer-beings – what is behind the reports of them, where they might be found, and how such creatures might have evolved into a modern reality.

Folklorists Arthur Waugh and Gwen Benwell were able to fill an entire book, *Sea Enchantress*, [1] with their examination of the mermaid theme. Others who have discussed them at length include Edward Rowe Snow (1902-1982) [2] and US Naval Lieutenant Fletcher Bassett (1849-1893) [3].

Mermaids have been taken seriously at many points in the past. One of the best examinations in what we might refer to as the modern era of the past two centuries was penned by Philip Henry Gosse (1810-1888). In the Second Series of his *Romance of Natural History* published in 1862 (London: James Nisbet and Co.) he offered us a lengthy consideration of mermaids. What follows is his entire discourse on the subject. I have added a few footnotes as marked and some long

**paragraphs have been split into two paragraphs.**

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According to Berosus<sup>1</sup> there came up from the Red Sea, on the shore contiguous to Babylonia, a brute creature named Oannes, which had the body of a fish, above whose front parts rose the head of a man; it had two human feet, which projected from each side of the tail; it had also a human voice and human language. This strange monster sojourned among the rude people during the day, taking no food, but retiring to the sea again at night; and continued for some time, teaching them the arts of civilised life. Other ancient authors, as Polyhistor and Appollodorus, allude to the same tradition; and we gather that the portrait of the learned stranger (not painted *from the life*, we presume, considering the condition of the people when he appeared, unless we may suppose it to have been the effort of one of this pupils in the pictorial art under his instruction) was preserved at Babylon to the historic period.

In an elaborate sculpture of the later Assyrian period, discovered by M. Botta at Khorsabad, a maritime expedition is portrayed, and the sea around the ships is filled with various marine animals, and among them the compound mythic forms of winged bulls and bull-lions, in which the Assyrians delighted, together with a figure composed of the body and tail of a fish extended horizontally, and the perpendicular trunk and foreparts of a man, crowned with the sacred cap, possibly representing the traditional Oannes.

The god Dagon of the Philistines, and the goddess Atergatis of the Syrians were worshipped under the same combination of the human and piscine forms, and the Tritons of classical mythology perpetuated the idea.

It is curious that in almost all ages and in almost all countries there should have prevailed a belief in the actual living existence of creatures like this. Was the mythological symbol the origin of the persuasion? Or is there any marine animal uniting so much of the general form of the fish with that man as to have given the conception of the idol?

A naturalist of deserved eminence has maintained, on purely scientific grounds, that such an animal must exist, – that though the amount of force which his reasoning, possesses will be estimated differently according as

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<sup>1</sup> A Babylonian priest who lived in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. -- MAH.

we reject or accept the hypothesis of circularity of the great plan of nature, we may as well see what he has to say for a marine primate, – be he man or ape, mermaid or mermonkey.

“There is yet,” says Mr Swainson,<sup>2</sup> “another primary type necessary to complete the circle of the quadrumanous animals, and it is that which we have elsewhere distinguished as the natatorial; but of such an animal we have only vague and indefinite accounts. It will be seen that, throughout the whole class of quadrupeds, the aquatic types are remarkably few, and in general scarce; and that they contain fewer forms or examples than any other, and are often, in the smaller groups, entirely wanting. To account for this is altogether impossible; we can only call attention to the fact, as exemplified in the aquatic order of *Cetacea*, in that of the *Ferae*, in the *Pachydermata*, in the circle of the *Glires*, and in all the remaining natatorial types of the different types of the different circles of quadrupeds.

We do not implicitly believe in the existence of mermaids as described and depicted by the old writers – with a comb in one hand and a mirror in the other; but it is difficult to imagine that the numerous records of singular marine animals, unlike any of those well known, have their origin in fraud or gross ignorance. Many of these narratives are given by eye-witnesses of the facts they vouch for – men of honesty and probity, having no object to gain by deception, and whose accounts have been confirmed by other witnesses equally trustworthy. Can it be supposed that the unfathomable depths of ocean are without their *peculiar* inhabitants, whose habits and economy rarely, if ever, bring them to the surface of the watery element ?

As reasonably might a Swiss mountaineer disbelieve in the existence of an ostrich, because it cannot inhabit his Alpine precipices, as that we should doubt that the rocks and caverns of the ocean are without animals destined to live in such situations, and such only. The natatorial type of the *Quadrumana*, however, is most assuredly wanting. Whatever its precise construction may or might have been, it would represent and correspond to the seals in the circle of the *Ferae*, or rapacious quadrupeds; while a resemblance to the *Simiadae*, or monkeys, must be considered an essential character of any marine animal which is to connect and complete the circular series of types in the *Quadrumana*.”

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<sup>2</sup> William Swainson (1789-1855) English naturalist who emigrated to New Zealand. – MAH.

Mr Swainson absolutely excludes Man from the zoological circle, on grounds which few naturalists are disposed to think sufficient; else we might suggest that man himself is the natatorial type of the *Primates*. Taking this author's own selection<sup>3</sup> of the characters which mark the natatorial types of animals, for our guide, we find that the largest size, the smallest fore-limbs, the most obtuse muzzle, the most carnivorous appetite, and the most natatory habits (for I do not know that the Apes, or the Sapajous, or the Lemurs, or the Bats, ever take to the water voluntarily, whereas savage Man is always a great swimmer), belong to Man, and so, *Swainsonio ipso judice*, constitute *him* the true aquatic primate.

But if so, we do not want a merman or mermonkey; nay, we should not know where to insert him in the zoological circle if we found him; he would be awkwardly *de trop*.

But yet nature has an awkward way of mocking at our impossibilities; and it *may be* that green-haired maidens with oary tails lurk in the ocean caves, and keep mirrors and combs upon their rocky shelves. Certainly the belief in them is very widely spread, and occasionally comes to us from quarters where we should hardly have looked for it. A negro from Dongola<sup>4</sup> assured Prince Puckler Muskau that in the country of Sennaar<sup>5</sup> there was no doubt that Sirens (mermaids) still existed, for that he himself had seen more than one.<sup>6</sup>

In my boyhood I will recollect being highly excited by the arrival in our town, at fair-time, of a "show," which professed to exhibit a mermaid, whose portrait, on canvas hung outside, was radiant in feminine loveliness and piscine scaliness. I fondly expected to see the very counterpart within, how disposed I did not venture to imagine, but alive and fascinating, of course. Had I not seen her picture? I joyfully paid my coppers, but oh! woeful disappointment! I dimly saw, within a dusty glass case, in a dark corner, a shrivelled and blackened little thing which might have been

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<sup>3</sup> *Geog. and Classif. Of Animals*, 249.

<sup>4</sup> Dongola on the Nile River in northern Sudan. - MAH.

<sup>5</sup> That is, Sannar, an ancient kingdom now part of Egypt, lying between Bahr-el-Azrek and the White Nile. -- MAH.

<sup>6</sup> *Egypt and Mehemet Ali*, ii, p. 322.

moulded in mud for aught I could see, but which was labelled, "MERMAID!" So great was my disgust, so bitter my feelings of shame and anger at having been so grossly taken in, that I did not care to observe what might have been noteworthy in it. I read afterwards that it was a very ingenious cheat; the trunk and head of a monkey had been grafted on to the body and tail of a large salmon-like fish, and the junction had been so cleverly effected, that only a very close examination detected the artifice.

It is professed to have been brought from China, but possibly was an importation even thither, if Steinmetz is correct. According to this writer, "A Japanese fisherman contrived to unite the upper half of a monkey to the lower half of a fish, so neatly as to defy ordinary inspection. He then gave out that he had caught the creature alive in his net, but that it had died shortly after being taken out of the water; and he derived considerable pecuniary profit from his cunning in more ways than one.

"The exhibition of the sea-monster to Japanese curiosity paid well; but yet more productive was the assertion that the half-human fish, having spoken the few minutes it existed out of its native element, had predicted certain a certain number of years of wonderful fertility, and a fatal epidemic, the only remedy for which would be possession of the marine prophet's likeness. The sale of these pictured mermaids was immense. Either this composite animal, or another, the offspring of the success of the first, was sold at the Dutch factory, and transmitted to Batavia, where it fell into the hands of a speculating American, who brought it to Europe and here, in the years 1822-3, exhibited his purchase as a real mermaid at every capital, to the admiration of the ignorant, the perplexity of the learned, and the filling of his own purse. Indeed, the mermaids exhibited in Europe and America, to the great profit of the enterprising showmen, have all been of Japanese manufacture."<sup>7</sup>

This, however, will not account for the frequent reports of the living creatures having been seen, and unbelievers have to form some other hypothesis. In the tropical seas the cow-whales, uncouth marine *pachydermatata*, have been assumed to be the originals of these stories. Megasthenes<sup>8</sup> reported that the sea which washed Taprobane, the modern

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<sup>7</sup> *Japan and her People*, p. 193.

<sup>8</sup> A Greek historian who lived circa 350-290 B.C. -- MAH.

Ceylon, was inhabited by a creature having the appearance of a woman; and Aelian<sup>9</sup> improves the account by stating that there are whales having the form of satyrs. "Tis true the Manatee and the Dugong are rather mer-swine than mer-maids; but there is something in the bluff round head which may remind a startled observer of the human form divine.

Sir Emerson Tennent considers that this rude approach to the human outline, and the attitude of the mother while suckling her young, pressing it to her breast with one paw, while swimming with the other, the head of both being held perpendicularly above water, and then, when disturbed, suddenly diving and displaying her broad fin-like tail, — these, together with her habitual demonstrations of strong maternal affection, may probably have been the original form which the pictures of the mermaid were portrayed, and thus that earliest invention of mythical physiology may be traced to the Arab seamen and to the Greeks, who had watched the movements of the Dugong in the Red Sea and Indian Ocean.

The early Portuguese settlers in India had no doubt that true mermen were found in those seas; and the annalist of the exploits of the Jesuits narrates that seven of these monsters, male and female, were captured at Manaar in 1560, and carried to Goa, where they were dissected by Demas Bosquez, physician to the Viceroy, and "their internal structure found to be in all respects conformable to the human."

Making allowances for the very limited acquaintance which the worthy physician was likely to have made with human anatomy by actual autopsy, this statement goes for little: — the real resemblance, assuming them to have been Dugongs, was about the same as that presented by the hog, whose inwards are popularly believed by our own country people to be in very close acquaintance with those of "Christians."

Sir. E. Tennent has embellished his book with a very taking portrait of the mermaid on the Dugong hypothesis; showing two females, each holding a baby [is it right to say *merbaby* ?], emerging from the sea-wave; they do look, to be sure, sufficiently human, but the well-known monogram of our clever friend Wolf in the corner of the cut suggests shrewd doubts that the portraits were not "ad viv."

It is, perhaps, among the Scandinavian races that the belief in the merman has reached its culminating point. So many particulars are

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<sup>9</sup> AKA Aelianus, an A.D. second century Greek writer -- MAH.

inculcated concerning the mode and conditions of life of these submarine beings, that the most intimate relations appear to have subsisted between the terrestrial and aquatic peoples. According to the creed of the Norsemen, there exists, far beneath the depths of the ocean, an atmosphere adapted to the breathing organs of beings resembling in form the human race, endowed with surpassing beauty, with limited supernatural powers, but liable to suffering, and even to death. Their dwelling is in a vast region, situate far below the bottom of the sea, which forms a canopy over them, like the sky over us, and there they inhabit houses constructed of the pearly and coralline productions of the ocean. Having lungs not adapted to a watery medium, but formed for breathing atmospheric air, it would be impossible for them to pass through the volume of waters that separates our world from theirs, if it were not that they possess the power of entering the skin of some marine animal, whose faculties they thus temporarily acquire, or of changing their own form and structure so as to suit the altered condition, through which they are to travel.

The most ordinary shape they assume is, as everybody knows, that of a man (that is, their own proper form) from the waist upward, but below that of a fish. Whether they now breathe by gills or lungs, the anatomists, it seems, have not yet determined; we must presume the former alternative, since else it is not apparent what they have gained by their piscine metamorphosis of tail; though where the branchiae are situate we are a little at a loss to imagine. These, however, are matters which doubtless the scientific world will one day determine : it seems certain that they do thus acquire an amphibious nature, so as not only to exist submerged in the waters, but to land on the shores of our sunny world, where they frequently doff their fishy half, resume their proper human form, and pass muster while they pursue their investigations here.<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, but one of these resources can ever be availed of by any individual mer-man or -maid, nor can any "son or daughter of the ocean borrow more than one sea-dress of this kind for his own particular use; therefore if the garb should be mislaid on the shores he never can return to his submarine country and friends. A Shetlander, having once found an empty seal-skin on the shore, took it home and kept it in his possession. Soon after he met the most lovely being who ever stepped on the earth,

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<sup>10</sup> See Hibbert's *Shetland Islands*. p. 566.

wringing her hands in distress, and loudly lamenting, that, having lost her sea-dress, she must remain for ever on the earth. The Shetlander, having fallen in love at first sight, said not a syllable about finding this precious treasure, but made his proposals, and offered to take her for better or for worse, as his future wife! The merlady, though not, as we know, much of a woman of the world, very prudently accepted the offer! I never heard what the settlements were, but they lived very happily for some years, till one day, when the green-haired bride unexpectedly discovered her long-lost seal-skin, and instantly putting it on, she took a hasty farewell of everybody, and ran towards the shore. Her husband flew out in pursuit of her, but in vain! She sprang from point to point, and from rock to rock, till at length, hastening into the ocean, she disappeared for ever, leaving the worthy man, her husband, perfectly planet-struck and inconsolable on the shore!"<sup>11</sup>

Nor are there lacking in the rocky cliffs of our own northern islands fit lodgings for these sea kings and queens. The gifted pen of Sir Walter Scott has sketched one of these from his own observation: "Imagination can hardly conceive anything more beautiful than the extraordinary grotto discovered not many years since upon the estate of Alexander MacAllister, Esq. of Straithard [in Skye]. The first entrance to this celebrated cave is rude and unpromising; but the light of the torches with which we were provided, was seen reflected from the roof, floor, and walls, which seemed as if they were sheeted with marble, partly smooth, partly rough with frostwork and rustic ornaments, and partly seeming to be wrought into statuary. The floor forms a steep and difficult ascent, and might be fancifully compared to a sheet of water, while it rushed whitening and foaming down a declivity, had been suddenly arrested and consolidated by the spell of an enchanter. Upon attaining the summit of this ascent, the cave opens into a splendid gallery, adorned with the most dazzling crystallizations, and finally descends with rapidity to the brink of the pool, of the most limpid water, about four or five yards broad.

There opens beyond this pool a portal arch, formed by two columns of white spar, with beautiful chasing upon the sides, which promises a continuation of the cave. One of our sailors swam across, for there is no other mode of passing, and informed us (as indeed we partly saw by the light he carried) that the enchantment of MacAllister's cave terminates with

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<sup>11</sup> Miss Sinclair's *Shetland*.

this portal, a little beyond which were was only a rude cavern, speedily choked with stones and earth. But the pool on the brink which we stood, surrounded the by the most fanciful mouldings, in a substance resembling white marble, and distinguished by a depth and purity of tis waters, might have been the bathing grotto of a naiad. The groups of combined figures projecting or embossed, by which the pool is surrounded, are exquisitely elegant and fanciful. A statuary might catch beautiful hints from the singular and romantic disposition of those stalactites. There is scarce a form or group on which active fancy may not trace figures or grotesque ornaments, which have been gradually moulded in this cavern by the dropping of the calcareous water hardening into petrifications. Many of these fine groups have been injured by the senseless rage for appropriation of recent tourists; and the grotto has lost, (I am informed), through the smoke of torches, something of the that vivid silver tint which was originally one of its chief distinctions. But enough of beauty remains for to compensate for all that has been lost."<sup>12</sup>

But these tales are the *nugae canorae*<sup>13</sup> of the naturalist. Once more, – Is there any substratum of truth underlying these fancies? or must they be unhesitatingly dismissed to the region of fable? Certainly, if there were not two or three narratives which have an air of veracity and dependableness, bearing out the belief to some slight extent, I should not have noticed it here.

How simple and circumstantial is this story told by old Hudson,<sup>14</sup> the renowned navigator! a man whose narrative is more than usually dry and destitute of everything like, not only imagination, but even an imaginative aspect of ordinary circumstances. On the 15<sup>th</sup> of June, when in lat. 75°, trying to force a passage through to the pole near Nova Zembla, he records the following incident:

This morning one of our company looking overboard saw a

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<sup>12</sup> Notes to *The Lord of the Isles*.

<sup>13</sup> Tuneful trifles – MAH.

<sup>14</sup> Henry Hudson (?-1611). The entry is from the voyage of the *Hopewell* in 1607. – MAH.

mermaid; and calling up some of the company to see her, one more came up, and by that time she was come close to the ship's side, looking earnestly on the men. A little after, a sea came and overturned her. From the navel upward, her back and breasts were like a woman's, as they say they saw her; her body as big as one of us; her skin very white; and long hair hanging down behind, of colour black. In her going down they saw her tail, which was like the tail of a porpoise, and speckled like a mackerel. Their names that saw her were Thomas Hilles and Robert Rayner.<sup>15</sup>

Whatever explanation be attempted of this apparition, the ordinary resource of seal and walrus will not avail here. Seals and walruses must have been as familiar to these Polar mariners as cows to a dairy-maid. Unless the whole story was a concerted lie between the two men, reasonless and objectless, – and the worthy old navigator doubtless knew the character of this men, – they must have seen, in the black-haired, white-skinned creature, some form of being as yet unrecognized.

Steller,<sup>16</sup> a zoologist of some repute, who examined the natural history of the Siberian seas, reports having seen, near Behring's Straits, a strange animal, which he calls a Sea-ape. "It was about five feet long, with a head like a dog's; the ears sharp and erect, and the eyes large; on both lips it had a kind of beard; the form of the body was thick and round, but tapering to the tail, which was bifurcated, with the upper lobe longest; the body was covered with thick hair, grey on the back, and red on the belly. Steller could not discover any feet or paws. It was full of frolic, and sported in the manner of a monkey, swimming sometimes on one side of the ship and sometimes on the other, and looking at it with seeming surprise. It would come so near the ship that it might be touched with a pole; but if anyone stirred, it would immediately retire. It often raised one third of its body above the water, and stood upright for a considerable time; then suddenly darted under the ship, and appeared in the same attitude on the other side; this it would repeat for thirty times together. It would frequently bring up

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<sup>15</sup> *Hudson the Navigator* by Asher, Voy. ii.

<sup>16</sup> Georg Wilhelm Steller, (1709-1746) – MAH.

a sea plant, not unlike a bottle-gourd , which it would toss about and catch again in its mouth, playing numberless fantastic tricks with it."

There is nothing in this description which would exclude it from well-recognized zoological classification. It is highly probable that it was one of the seal tribe, but of a species, perhaps a genus, not yet identified. All analogy would suggest that fore-paws must have been present in an animal with a dog-like head, and clothed with hair; but they were perhaps small, – smaller even than in either *Phocadae*, and may have been so concealed in the long hair, or held so closely pressed to the body, as not to be visible.

The only other difficulty is in the posterior extremity. This is described by Steller in terms that imply a true piscine tail, expanded in a direction vertical to the plane of the body, and of that peculiar form called *heterocercal*, which distinguishes the cartilaginous families of Fishes, the Sharks, and Rays. But the animal was indubitably a Mammal; and therefore we may almost with certainty assume that, if the body terminated in a natatory expansion, it would be, as in the whales, and manatees, a horizontal expansion, and not a vertical one. But if the strange creature was indeed, as I conclude, of the Phocine type, we have only to suppose the tail, which is usually very small in this family, to have been so greatly developed, as to exceed the united hind feet, which may have been small, and the appearance, seen momentarily, and in the wash of the waves, might well seem that of a heterocercal tail.

Captain Waddell,<sup>17</sup> well known for his geographical discoveries in the extreme south of the globe, relates the following story:

A boat's crew was were employed on Hall's Island, when one of the crew, left to take care of some produce, saw an animal whose voice was even musical. The sailor had lain down, and about ten o'clock he heard a noise resembling human cries; and as daylight in these latitudes never disappears at this season, he rose and looked around; but, on seeing no person, returned to bed; presently he heard the noise again; rose a second time, but still saw nothing. Conceiving, however, the possibility of a boat being upset, and that some of the crew might be clinging to some detached rocks, he walked along the beach a few steps,

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<sup>17</sup> James Waddell (1787-1834) – MAH.

and heard the noise more distinctly, but in a musical strain. Upon searching round he saw an object lying on a rock a dozen yards from the shore, at which he was somewhat frightened. The face and shoulders appeared of human form, and of a reddish colour; over the shoulders hung long green hair; the tail resembled that of a seal, but the extremities of the arms he could not see distinctly. The creature continued to make a musical noise while he gazed about two minutes, and on perceiving him it disappeared in an instant. Immediately when the man saw his officer, he told this wild tale, and to add weight to his testimony, (being a Romanist,) he made a cross on the sand which he kissed, as making oath to the truth of his statement. When I saw him, he told the story in so clear and positive a manner, making oath to its truth, that I concluded he must really have seen the animal he described, or that it must have been the effects of disturbed imagination."<sup>18</sup>

The *green* hair in this description is the most suspicious element; it is so exactly that attributed to the poetical mermaids, and so entirely without precedent in the whole range of known zoology, – that, if taken literally, I fear it would condemn the narrative. But among the Antarctic seals, both golden yellow fur, and black fur, are found; and if hairs of these two colours were about equally intermingled, the result would be an olive-green, as we see in the some of the monkeys; and then some allowance must doubtless be made for imagination, in one little accustomed to precise observation, and “somewhat frightened” withal. I should say, with little hesitation, that this creature was of the seal family, only that the seaman’s daily habits brought him into the most familiar contact with various kinds of seals; and, unless the animal in question had differed notably from such as he was acquainted with, he would not have been so affected by the phenomenon. In such stories, the sorts of creatures familiar to the observation of the narrator, and the amount of surprise produced in his mind by the stranger, – must always be carefully estimated, as important elements in the formation of our judgment.

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<sup>18</sup> *Voyage towards the South Pole*, p. 143.

To come nearer home, Pontoppidan<sup>19</sup> records the appearance of a *merman*, which was deposed to on oath by the observers:

About a mile from the coast of Denmark, near Landscrona, three sailors, observing something like a dead body floating in the water, rowed towards it. When they came within seven or eight fathoms, it still appeared as at first, for it had not stirred; but at that instant it sunk, and came up almost immediately in the same place. Upon this, out of fear, they lay still, and then let the boat float, that they might better examine the monster, which, by the help of the current, came nearer and nearer to them. He turned his face and stared at them, which gave them a good opportunity of examining him narrowly. He stood in the same place for seven or eight minutes, and was seen above the water breast high. At last they grew apprehensive of some danger, and began to retire: upon which the monster blew up his cheeks, and made a kind of lowing noise, and then dived from their view. In regard to his form, they declare in their affidavits, which were regularly taken and recorded, that he appeared like an old man, strong-limbed, with broad shoulders, but his arms they could not see. His head was small in proportion to his body, and had short curled black hair, which did not reach below his ears; his eyes lay deep in his head, and he had a meagre face, with a black beard; about the body downwards this merman was quite pointed like a fish.<sup>20</sup>

But the most remarkable story that I know of in recent times, is that adduced by Dr Robert Hamilton, in his able history of Whales and Seals, in the *Naturalist's Library*, he himself vouching for its general truth, from personal knowledge of some of the parties:

It was reported that a fishing-boat, off the island of Yell, one of the Shetland group, had captured a mermaid by its getting

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<sup>19</sup> Erik Pontoppidan (1698-1764) – MAH.

<sup>20</sup> Pontoppidan's *Nat. Hist. of Norway*, p. 154.

entangled in the lines !! The statement is, that the animal was about three feet long, the upper part of the body resembling the human, with protuberant mammae like a woman; the face, the forehead, and neck were short and resembling those of a monkey; the arms, which were small, were kept folded across the breast; the fingers were distinct, not webbed; a few stiff long bristles were on the top of the head, extending down to the shoulders, and these it could erect and depress at pleasure, something like a crest. The inferior part of the body was like a fish. The skin was smooth, and of a grey colour. It offered no resistance, nor attempted to bite, but uttered a low plaintive sound. The crew, six in number, took it within their boat, but superstition getting the better of curiosity, they carefully disentangled it from the lines, and a hook which had accidentally fastened itself in its body, and returned it to its native element. It instantly dived, descending in a perpendicular direction.

After writing the above, (we are informed) the narrator had an interview with the skipper of the boat and one of the crew, from whom he learned the following additional particulars. They had the animal for three hours within the boat; the body was without scales or hair; was of a silvery grey colour above, and white below, like the human skin; no gills were observed; nor fins on the back or belly. The tail was like that of a dog-fish; the mammae were about as large as those of a woman; the mouth and lips were very distinct, and resembled the human.

This communication was from Mr Edmonston, a well-known and intelligent observer, to the distinguished Professor of Natural History in the Edinburgh University, and Mr E adds a few reflections, which are so pertinent, that we shall avail ourselves of them. That a very peculiar animal has been taken, no one can doubt. It was seen and handled by six men, on one occasion, and for some time, not one of whom dreams of a doubt of its being a mermaid. If it were supposed that their fears magnified its supposed resemblance to the human form, it must at all events

be admitted that there was some ground for exciting these fears. But no such fears were likely to be entertained; for the mermaid is not an object of terror to the fisherman; it is rather a welcome guest, and danger is to be apprehended only from its experiencing bad treatment. The usual resources of skepticism, that the seals and other sea-animals, appearing under certain circumstances, operating under excited imagination, and so producing ocular illusion, cannot avail here. It is quite impossible that, under the circumstances, six Shetland fishermen could commit such a mistake.<sup>21</sup>

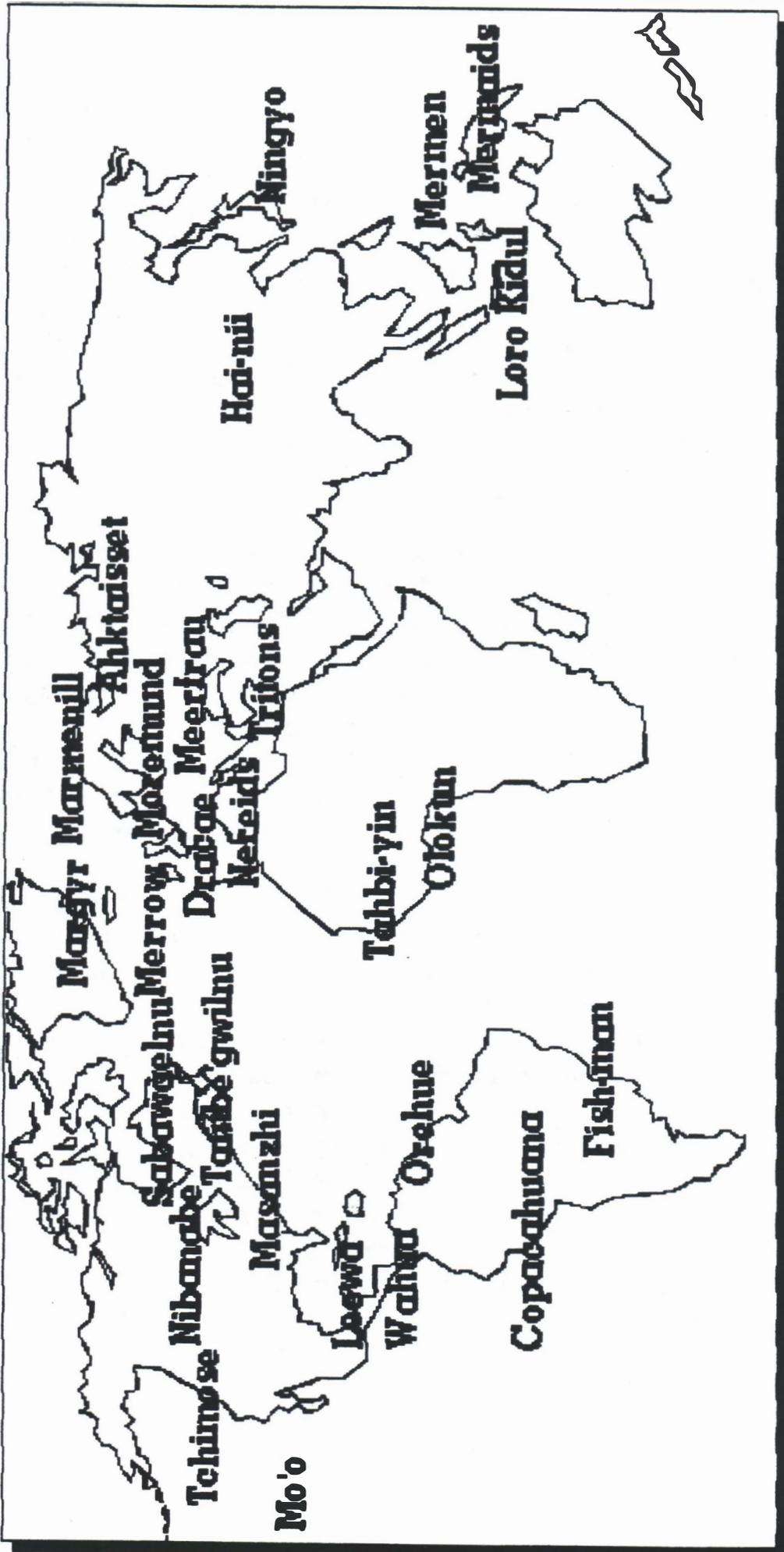
There is, no doubt, much in this account which signally distinguishes it from all other statements with which it can be compared, except that of Hudson's sailors, with which it well coincides. The protuberant mammae, resembling those of a woman; the human, or at least simian face, forehead, and neck, and especially the mouth and lips; the distinct unwebbed fingers; the erectile crest of bristles; the nature of the surface, – without scales or hair; the colour; and the tail, – like that of a fish; – are all very remarkable points; and unless we conclude the entire story to be a lie, a mere barefaced hoax, – must necessarily indicate a creature of which scientific zoology knows absolutely nothing.

It is observable that, here again, the tail is said to have been piscine and heterocercal, "like that of a dog-fish:" while the naked skin, and the colour – silvery grey above and white below, – will well agree with the characteristics common to the smaller *Squalidae*.

It is a pity that an account like this, avouched by six witnesses, was not thoroughly sifted. I have no doubt that, if a person tolerably conversant with zoology, and accustomed to the habit of cross-examination, had examined these six eye-witnesses *separately*, making full notes of what each could remember to have observed, and had then checked each deposition by all the others, a mass of testimony would have been accumulated that would be in an instant have convinced any candid inquirer what measure of truth lay in the story. Points in which the whole six, or even three or four, agreed, might unhesitatingly have been set down as correct: suggestive questions, (not, however, suggesting the sort of

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<sup>21</sup> *Edinburgh Magazine*, vol. xiii.



Map 1. Names for mer-beings known around the world.

answer,) as, "Had the creature so and so, or so and so?" could not have received the same reply from all of the deponents, without being worthy of credence: even the points on which they would have differed might themselves have been instructive to an intelligent inquirer.

I do not know that any such precautionary measures were resorted to in this case, and the tale must remain as we get it; but I make these observations for the purpose of suggesting, in the event of any similar occurrence, the advantage of *separate* examination at getting at the truth. On a review of the whole evidence, I do not judge that this single story is a sufficient foundation for believing in the existence of mermaids; but, taken into combination with other statements, it induces a strong suspicion that the northern seas may hold forms of life as yet uncatalogued by science.

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Gosse has anticipated the common elements of later discussions of mermaids. The manufactured "mermaids" are the darlings of debunkers who find in them the essence of the entire subject – all sham and nothing to bother with. Gosse takes up what has become a universal assumption that dugongs and manatees are behind the historical reports. He correctly puts them in their place. Those creatures have a limited distribution in nature and, in addition, cannot account for the details that people give for close-up sightings and examinations of mer-beings. The same is true for walruses, seals, and so on.

We need to appreciate the importance of the reports recorded by Henry Hudson and James Waddell. Along with the world-wide distribution of mermaid reports (see Maps 1 and 2) they indicate a great success on the part of mer-beings. Their pole-to-pole distribution suggests they have probably been around a long time to have achieved this. There will be diversity in such a successful creature, much as human beings can be as varied as the Ainu of Japan, the Australian aborigine, the Masai tribesman, the Congo pygmy, the Eskimo, and American Indian. We should not expect one description to suit mer-beings everywhere, though we will find (as has been done) similarities occur by geographical regions. But there does not have to be a strict sameness by geography either. The Congo pygmies, for example, live beside larger humans.

There is likely to have developed a pygmy form of mer-being in

these circumstances because that very condition is suggested by some reports we have. I will return to this category later.

We should quickly dispel some notions suggested in Gosse's discussion. If there be mer-beings, they are *not* half-fish. Also, they do *not* temporarily assume the characteristics of some marine animal by "entering its skin." And they do *not* temporarily "change their own form and structure" either. None of these things are possible or necessary.

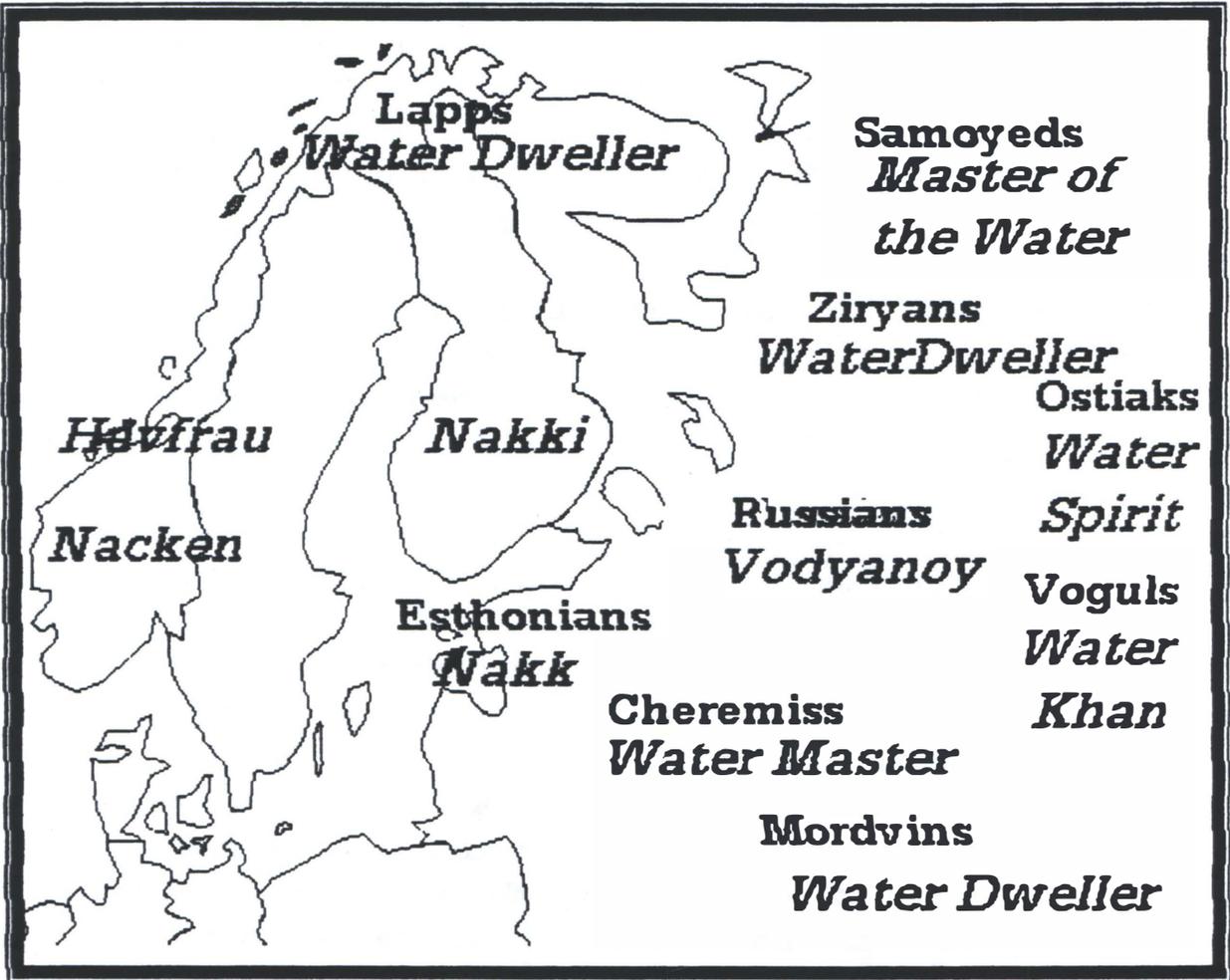
How such impressions could have been created will be evident after we consider the likely source of these creatures, i.e., how they evolved and what they are capable of doing.

For the likely origin of the mer-beings we must look back about 16 million years – to the middle Miocene – when many apes were in a competition according to the fossil records we have so far. The most successful in that competition will be those who have living descendants. Among those are *Gigantopithecus*, which is still around as the True Giant [4], *Dryopithecus*, which is still around as the Yeti of Asia and his close kin in Africa and the New World [5], and an ape that led to the later hominid line that flourished in the past few million years. [6] Which Miocene ape was the ancestor of the hominids is still unresolved. My proposal is that a fourth ape of the time, *Oreopithecus* [7], is the ancestor to the line of mer-beings that evolved since that time.

The obvious distinction that assisted the survival of these primates into the present is their evolution to an erect posture. Or in the case of *Dryopithecus* at least a semi-erect posture. It reportedly gets around on both two legs and four limbs.

Known from fossils first identified in 1870, *Oreopithecus* was a swamp ape. Its remains have turned up in Italy, in coal mines. It was an ape between four and five feet tall. Perhaps worthy of note, one of the most complete fossils uncovered in 1958 was found in what appeared to be a position as if swimming.

Some of the fossils have been found in circumstances that suggest an island environment. It has been observed that the build of *Oreopithecus* seems to have been unsuitable for swimming. But no one is suggesting that *Oreopithecus* was born to be a "sea-ape." Rather it appears that in competition with the apes of its day, especially that modern dweller in trees and swamps *Dryopithecus*, the living form of



MAP 2

Traditional names have been given to mer-beings by different ethnic groups both on seacoasts and in inland areas where the mer-beings are identified with rivers and wetlands. Mer-beings have been identified by different ethnic groups by the names shown here. Ethnic groups are indicated (e.g., **Russians**) and below their name is the traditional name for the water-dwelling creatures (e.g., *Vodyanoy*).

*Oreopithecus* might have found an advantage in taking to the water, to reach safety on islands, and perhaps later by fleeing to and remaining in the water. Over millions of years, this ape might have adapted itself to freshwater and marine worlds to become the mermen and mermaids observed by humans in recent centuries.

Such wet worlds would routinely dispose of the remains of such creatures, so fossil finds of the descendants of *Oreopithecus* would be rare.

The mammalian diving reflex (MDR) is very likely to have played a part in the evolution of mer-beings. The MDR is recognized even in human beings where it is regarded as a survival from the fetal life when the developing human has to survive in a fluid environment. The MDR is a reaction to cold water that causes a slower heartbeat and reduces blood flow through the body, allowing a longer survival time without external oxygen. People have survived up to 40 minutes underwater and recovered fully due to the MDR. [8]

Also noteworthy, a swimmer in Washington State once survived four hours underwater because he found trapped air under a large rock and he was wearing a wetsuit. [9]

Building upon such capabilities, *Oreopithecus* could have evolved over millions of years to a successful life in and under the water. The use of skins (both seal and fish) is simply the use of tools to assist that success. They are no more surprising than the development by humans of swim fins, goggles, and wetsuits.

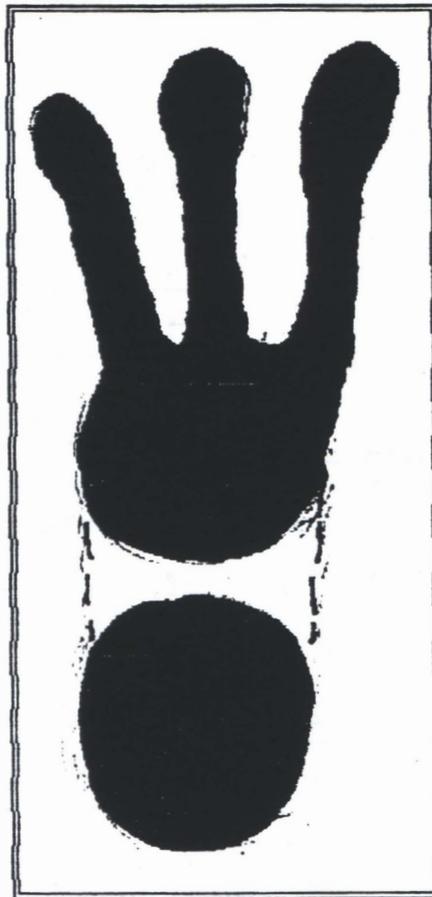
When mer-beings come out on land they are reported to take off their supplementary skins and get about without them. By accounts that have become legendary, we are given the impression that such a skin or wetsuit is considered vital to the survival of a mer-being. After all, they probably need mobility to avoid the hazards of their environment.

We should be wary of over-simplifying the appearances and types of mer-beings. It is possible and even likely that some mer-beings will have adapted to a water world without the use of these skins. The widespread success, long period of evolution, and the likely diversity from such a past need to be kept in mind.

In addition to a merman as much as seven feet tall reported in 1988, the existence of diminutive varieties of mer-beings has been suggested by traditions of such creatures. (Figs. 1-4 show varieties of mer-beings



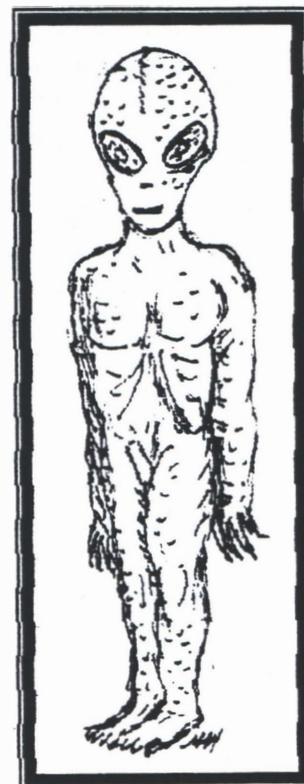
**Fig. 1. Seven-foot tall Mer-man as reported in 1988.**



**Fig.2. Track of the Mer-man which measured 7" x 14"**



**Fig. 3. The three-foot tall "Dover Demon."**



**Fig. 4. Pygmy Mer-man (3ft).**

**TABLE 1**  
**CHRONOLOGICAL SAMPLE OF MER-BEING REPORTS**

<b>WHEN</b>	<b>WHERE</b>	<b>WHAT</b>	
558	Ireland	capture of mermaid	BW 61
1118	Ireland	two mermaids captured	BW 64
1187	nr Suffolk, England	capture of merman	B 171
1305, 1307	Grimsey Island, Iceland	merman seen	B 173
1576	nr Kalundborg, Denmark	mermaid seen	B 177
1610	St John's, Newfoundland	mermaid seen	S 102
1614	Maine	mermaid seen	S 102
1619	betw. Norway & Sweden	merman seen	B 177-8
1670	islands off Denmark	mermaids seen	B 178
1670	Faroe Islands	mermaids seen	B 178
ca 1673	Casco Bay, Maine	merman seen	S 102
1712	Dutch East Indies	mermaid caught & died	S 109
1723	off Sweden	merman seen	B 178
1730	off Newfoundland	merman seen	S 102
1782	Lake Superior	mer-being seen	1
1797	Thurso, Scotland	mermaid seen	B 181
1809	Caithness, Scotland	mermaid seen again	S 118
1812	Exmouth, Scotland	mermaid seen	S 118
1814	Portgordon, Scotland	merman seen	S 119
1819	Ireland	mermaid seen	S 118
ca 1870	Buchan, Scotland	mermaid seen	S 118
1871	Scotland	mermaid seen	B 181
1940s	Morotai Island, Indonesia	mermaid caught & died	2
1988	Bishopville, So. Carolina	merman seen	3

reported.) An example of a pygmy mer-being is the so-called "Dover Demon" [10] which was seen in Massachusetts along the Charles River in 1977. It has similarities and some differences with the gray mer-being reported elsewhere as illustrated in Fig. 4. There are traditions of such small water-dwelling creatures known to the American Indians across North America.

These creatures have kept their distance even from the Indians. This is made clear in stories of them told by writer Russell Bates. His detailed accounts appeared in the *INFO Journal* for May of 1987. In "Legends of the Kiowa" he told of happenings in the 20<sup>th</sup> century where people encountered the "Tonh-kyanh-hee" in Oklahoma and Texas. The Kiowa people know them as the "People who live under the water and mud." The few who have seen them described them as black, two to three feet tall, with large eyes, and covered with scales. [11]

The records of mer-beings are scattered in many places, and we would benefit from a broad and detailed study of what has been recorded about them in recent years and what has been taken down in the form of traditional lore about them. No one presently has the time and resources to make such a study.

A sample of mer-being reports is listed in Table 1. The years represented are AD 558 through 1988. The most recent are incidents of the so-called "Lizard Man" in South Carolina. They were some of the most detailed to surface in recent decades. His appearance as reported is shown in Fig. 1. The story of the "Lizard Man" and similar reports of that time will be covered in detail in a future book. [12]

The tracks associated with those reports (illustrated in Fig. 2) were typical of others attributed to the largest of the mer-beings. They show

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#### ***SOURCES FOR TABLE 1.***

**BW = Benwell and Waugh, *Sea Enchantress***

**B = Bassett, *Legends and Superstitions of the Sea and Sailors***

**S = Snow, *Incredible Mysteries and Legends of the Sea***

**1 = David Dougald, "Mermaids," *Inland Seas* 27:218 (1971).**

**2 = Loren Coleman and Patrick Huyghe, *The Field Guide to Bigfoot, Yeti and Other Mystery Primates Worldwide* (NY: Avon, 1999), 152-3.**

**3 = Press reports for July-August 1988.**

only three large toes. There is usually a high arch apparent when the tracks are distinct. The descriptions of pygmy mer-beings indicate that they have four toes.

The tendency to a reduced number of useful digits in large primates is something that has come up in past discussions of the living fossils among the primates. The tracks of True Giants show only four digits. The tracks of the likely survivor of *Simopithecus*, the giant baboon, indicate three large toes but of a different appearance than seen among the mer-beings. [13] There will be no simple identification of track-makers by toe-counts. The feet of mer-beings are likely to have some unique adaptations to the water world.

Mer-beings have been around a long time. The reports of them and their past success – demonstrated by their appearances around the world – indicate that they are a hardy type of primate. Today they are simply unable to enjoy the same level of success due to changes in suitable habitat.

Inland the suitability of rivers, lakes, and wetlands has been drastically altered by humankind's agriculture and other uses of the landscape. The seacoasts are no longer the remote areas they once were. Human populations frequent them and claim the spaces for their use. They create local pollution.

So it is that mer-beings probably have a day-to-day struggle to find places away from humans and to outwit their natural competitors in a hazardous element whether freshwater or marine. They dwell nowadays on the fringe of human culture. They have joined the other animals who must avoid humans to survive.

Cryptozoologists are sometimes criticized for expressing the very idea that such a survival of mermaids and mermen is at all possible. But the fate of the mer-beings seems to be a common one among the topics of cryptozoology. They have survived in many small niches of suitable habitat rather than trying to occupy one zone where they would be easily cornered, die out from disease, or be subjected to systematic extermination.

Some of these survivors find frequent movement is a necessary way of life. Perhaps some of the mer-beings are similarly inclined to make their way in a modern age of environmental stress and change.

There will be no easy way for human beings to come to grips with the survival of *Oreopithecus*, if that is indeed what these extraordinary primates turn out to be. They appear to be capable of considerable intelligence, and they have been around a lot longer than we humans. They probably have a unique view of the world that we have shared with them up until now. It would be a shame not to find out some day what they know about their world and ours. A great challenge exists for humans to bridge the gap between ourselves and these amazing survivors in the waters around us.

#### NOTES

1. Gwen Benwell and Arthur Waugh, *Sea Enchantress: The Tale of the Mermaid and Her Kin* (NY: Citadel Press, 1961, 1965).
2. Edward Rowe Snow, *Incredible Mysteries and Legends of the Sea* (Boston: Dodd, Mead, 1967).
3. Fletcher S. Bassett, *Legends and Superstitions of the Sea and Sailors* (Detroit: Singing Tree Press, 1971; originally published 1885 by Belford, Clark in Chicago).
4. Mark A. Hall, *The Yeti, Bigfoot & True Giants* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Minneapolis, MAHP, 1994, 1997), 61-92.
5. *Ibid.*, 3-30.
6. Mark A. Hall, *Living Fossils* (Minneapolis: MAHP, 1999), 101-110.
7. John G. Fleagle, *Primate Adaptation and Evolution* 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed., (NY: Academic Press, 1999), 471-2, 474.
8. *Science News*, 108: 09 (5 July 1975).
9. Associated Press dispatch, Bremerton, Washington, 28 June 1977.
10. Loren E. Coleman, *Mysterious America* (Boston: Faber and Faber, 1983), 41-56. To be reissued in a revised edition in 2000 by Paraview Press.
11. Russell Bates, "Legends of the Kiowa," *INFO Journal*, May 1987, pp. 4-10.
12. Mark A. Hall, *Enigmas in Natural History*, forthcoming in 2001.
13. Hall, *Living Fossils*, 104; Hall, *The Yeti*, 69.

## The Pre-Norse Europeans in the New World

by Mark A. Hall

*Vikings: the North Atlantic Saga* edited by William Fitzhugh and Elizabeth Ward (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 432 pp., softbound, \$34.95.

*The Farfarers: Before the Norse* by Farley Mowat (South Royalton, VT: Steerforth Press, 1998, 2000), xiv + 377 pp., softbound, \$16.00.

Many questions surround the Norse/Viking presence in the New World a century ago. Some of these are: What is the place of the L'Anse aux Meadows site in Newfoundland in the record of the Norse? What is the history of the "White-Man's Land" appearing in the Norse sagas? Who were the carriers of the Dorset culture and what part did they play in the period of Norse colonization of the New World? How far did the Norse venture into the New World?

You won't find good answers to these questions in *Vikings*, a huge and lavishly illustrated book. Its good intentions have been undercut by ill-founded assumptions and moss-backed academics propagandizing over battles they have lost but cannot concede. With the addition of a rubber band this book has the bulk to serve as a good door-stop.

Fortunately at the same time as its appearance the latest work by Farley Mowat, *The Farfarers*, has been published in the USA. His book was originally published only in Canada in 1998. Mowat has followed up many puzzles he found when writing his previous book *Westviking* (1965). He has made great strides toward understanding the answers to the questions cited above. True to form his work is given no response in *Vikings* but is summarily dismissed as "fanciful."

Two keys unlock for us the mysteries of this past era of activity in the Arctic and northeastern Canada. The first is that the region was invaded not only by the Norse a thousand years ago but also by pre-Norse Europeans some hundreds of years earlier. Mowat calls these people the "Albans" but I find this construction too narrow. They appear to have been a mix of peoples including the Irish, Albans, and later even Icelanders. Their experience in the New World was in sharp contrast with that of the Norse who followed on. The pre-Norse Europeans got along sufficiently with the native peoples to establish colonies, where the Norse came to blows with the native peoples and especially with the

members of the Dorset culture. The Vikings called them "giants" or "trolls." One Viking saga boasted of having killed all the "giants" in Helluland. (Mowat, *Westviking*, p. 469).

The second key to understanding this era is the identity of the carriers of the Dorset culture. The contributors to *Vikings* and Mowat all make the mistake of assuming the Dorset were simply an earlier Eskimo-like people. To his credit Mowat emphasizes how little we know about them. I have been pointing out since 1995 (*Wonders*, Vol. 4, No. 1) that the culture known to the Eskimos as Tornit/Tunnit (i.e., those associated by archaeologists with the Dorset culture) were the primitive men and women represented by *Homo gardarensis*. The bones of this hominid were excavated in a centuries-old Norse churchyard in Greenland in 1926. In my book *Living Fossils* (1999) I have urged that these unique bones be given the study they deserve. Then they can take their rightful place as establishing the modern existence of the tall, muscular, and hairy hominids who were numerous a thousand years ago and are still seen today in small numbers in North America.

Mowat suggests that the pre-Norse Europeans worked with the Dorsets to exploit the resources of the Eastern Arctic. Such an alliance goes a long way to explaining the sites across the Arctic identified by archaeologists as simply Dorset. Distinctive cairns attributed to the Dorset serve as a marker for the past presence of their combined activities. They are identified over a wide area of the Arctic. Of special significance, Mowat finds records of such cairns on both sides of southern Newfoundland.

The question that most fascinated the contributors to *Vikings* was: "How did the Greenland colonies end?" Decades ago the mysteries of Greenland were discussed based upon varied historical sources. Now that we have archaeological studies done in Greenland and nearby there is a tendency to push aside and downplay those historical sources. There has been snickering at the "stories of pirates" when the impact of the undoubted pirate raids in the later years of Greenland's Eastern Settlement would have been a major factor in reducing the health of the colony.

Further on the neglect of historical material, Mowat points to the appendix in his *Westviking* where he details the church records that show early references to Iceland and Greenland (then called Cronaland). These, he notes in *Westviking* (pp. 401-4), have been dismissed as fraudulent because they are unwelcome in the scheme of things such as we still find presented in *Vikings*.

Since the early 1960s the archaeological site at L'Anse aux Meadows at the tip of northern Newfoundland has been declared to be Norse. There is nothing in *Vikings* that pins down such an identity. It is simply assumed to be Norse. One sidebar in the book looked promising. It was titled "Who Lived at L'Anse aux Meadows?" (p. 217). But it turned out to be about the origin of jasper fire-

starters found at the site. They came from Iceland, the western coast of Greenland, and Newfoundland itself. The pre-Norse Europeans traveled through and traded with these places too, so such origins settle nothing.

Since the site does not fit well with the sagas it is portrayed as "a staging area for trips into Vinland." This reminds me of the "wide arcs of sea travel" William Babcock once proposed for the Viking journeys southward in the New World. They weren't in the sagas either, but they were needed to support his placement of Vinland in New England.

The site might be better explained as having been used by the Dorsets and the pre-Norse Europeans for the hundreds of years indicated by radiocarbon dates. It might have been their "staging area for trips into the Arctic." As for sorting out where Vinland was, you would do better to consider the ideas proposed by Andrew Fossum (*The Norse Discovery of America* - 1918), Farley Mowat (*Westviking* - 1965), and Paul Chapman (*The Norse Discovery of America* -1981). They each have different ideas, but at least they have based their solutions in the geography the Norse knew a thousand years ago. The editors of *Vikings* still haven't realized that Erik the Red explored Baffin Land (the Western Wilds) over a thousand years ago.

The Norse knew of the Europeans who preceded them. In the New World these colonists occupied a region known variously as White-Man's Land, Albania, and Greater Ireland. But the Norse were never interested in writing the history of these other people. So they are mentioned incidentally in Norse records. The case for them is too lengthy to be summarized here. Their presence in Iceland before the Norse is dismissed in *Vikings* for lack of archaeological certitude. But for a different view of the years before the Norse in Iceland see Mowat (*The Farfarers*, pp. 176-185) or Katharine Scherman's *Daughter of Fire: A Portrait of Iceland* (Boston, Little, Brown, 1976, pp.68-80).

Geographer Carl O. Sauer (1889-1975) has written in support of an Irish presence in White-Man's Land (see his *Northern Mists*, 1968, Berkeley, University of California Press). He is not mentioned in *Vikings*.

The subject of this land comes up once in *Vikings*. Brigitta Wallace suggests that a Norse reference to White-Man's Land might have been meant to indicate the Dorset people wearing polar bear coats.

That the Norse interacted with the Dorset on occasion is indicated by the presence of two young trolls living with the Norse at Eriksfjord in Greenland in 1385 (Sauer, *Northern Mists*, p. 149). Also, as we have noted already, one troll was buried in the churchyard at Garder, But the rest of the sagas indicate a dislike for the "giants." Dorset archaeological sites have contained things thought to be of European origin (*Vikings*, pp. 241-2; 277, 323). It is more likely they came to the Dorset by way of the pre-Norse Europeans than the Norse.

*Vikings* gets off to a bad start on page 23 where C.C. Rafn is incorrectly identified as the source of what was actually an 18<sup>th</sup> century tradition of a Viking origin for the Newport (RI) Tower. (See my article in *Wonders* Vol. 5 No. 2.) A chapter in *Vikings* accuses the "Vinland Map" for a second time of being a forgery and beats up on the late R.A. Skelton. Another chapter wastes space with still more maps suggesting the Norse were wandering all over the Atlantic coastline.

In one of the thirty-one chapters in *Vikings* Brigitta Wallace and William Fitzhugh claim to be describing the stumbles and pitfalls of Norse study. Their treatment of the topic of the Kensington Runestone is so contrary to historical facts that it calls into question their accuracy in treating all other subjects. There is a long and entirely bogus passage where it appears as if the rune experts for one hundred years made no mistakes whatsoever in discussing the stone. The facts are that they were mistaken when dismissing the stone at the start, and their claims to finding fatal flaws in the inscription have all fallen apart.

The stone's defenders are barely recognizable here. Richard A. Hall Jr. is reduced from the scholar he is to an "amateur" in *Vikings*. Sivert N. Hagen is never mentioned. Like Theodore Blegen before them, Wallace and Fitzhugh are afraid you will read his treatment of the stone and be exposed to a true and recognized scholar. (Hagen's article appeared in *Speculum: A Journal of Mediaeval Studies* for July 1950.) That is part of the method of these propagandists who seek to influence a trusting public. They ignore some critics and denigrate the rest.

This disgraceful historical deception is topped off by a flat lie. According to Wallace and Fitzhugh, Jonas/John Gran, a neighbor to the finder of the stone, Olof Ohman, taped a confession to fraud for the Minnesota Historical Society.

Here are the facts regarding the Gran family. Jonas/John Gran died in 1946. In 1973 some of his relatives got together and taped some reminiscences for the Minnesota Historical Society. The deceased Gran had (in the 1920s) encouraged some family members to visit their neighbor Ohman and get him to let them "in on the joke." Something they never did. They had the impression that John Gran was somehow involved in "the joke." All this shows is that not all Ohman's neighbors accepted the veracity of the runestone. This is no revelation and tells us nothing about the origins of the stone. This meaningless episode has been misrepresented since 1977 when it was first publicized. The exploiters of the "Gran Tapes" have made it the most successful hoax ever perpetrated in the Midwest. It has now been compounded in *Vikings*.

Don't expect this error to be corrected. They don't admit mistakes. The influence of this sloppy work goes beyond this sorry book. See *Time Magazine* for 8 May 2000 on page 78 where the stone is described as "a modern forgery." See *US News & World Report* for 24-31 July 2000 on page 70 where "the museum

[Smithsonian Institution] says it is a fake."

As this review is about to be published, one of the contributors to *Vikings* has leveled criticisms at the book. Kirsten Seaver, writing in *Mercator's World* (September-October 2000, Vol. 5 No. 5) makes a similar point about the spread of misinformation caused by errors in *Vikings*. Referring to three maps discussed in the book she writes, "Many of this volume's mistakes concerning the dates, creators, and purposes of these maps have since been replicated through articles in, for example, the *New York Times* and *Time* magazine."

It is valuable to realize not only what is true and false here, but also to understand how pseudo-scholars of all stripes get away with what they do. To put it briefly, you can say anything, commit any blunder, and defame or ignore people at will if you are defending the view that the "consensus" is always right. Such people are wedded to the status quo for the length of their careers.

There are many points where my own views of the Norse experience differ from those of Mowat as expressed in *The Farfarers*. They are too numerous to list them here. But Mowat is on the right track to resolving the past. The alliance of the pre-Norse Europeans with the Dorsets explains the long success of these primitive men and what has been left behind by them. The distinctive cairns should be preserved and studied, and any other examples should be recorded to fill out the story of what went on in the New World in this period of fifteen hundred to a thousand years ago.

Be warned that Mowat gives his version of the detailed early history of the Albans in Europe, and he has included fictional interludes in his book to display his talents in that field.

*The Farfarers* deserves to be read and appreciated for his interest in pursuing the difficult issues that surround the pre-Norse Europeans in the New World. I think he goes too far at times in outlining their success, such as how successful they were in Greenland. I think it more likely that they moved on relatively quickly to better locations in the areas of Newfoundland and Quebec. The Norse were unable to do the same. The Norse fought the Indians and slew the carriers of the Dorset Culture. They lacked the diplomacy of their predecessors. And they arrived centuries later.

In contrast to Mowat's work, the editors of *Vikings* don't even know there is a track to be found to solve the mysteries of the Vikings. They have made so many bad assumptions that they are happy to live in ignorance of what the future might hold. They cling to old ideas and hope not to be proven wrong in their own lifetimes. The *Vikings* should be shunned. It will only confuse people. No one should be asked to pay this much per pound of baloney.