

Decoding the Morse: The History of 16th-Century Narcoleptic Walruses

The following passage has been adapted from Natalie Lawrence's essay *Decoding the Morse: The History of 16th-Century Narcoleptic Walruses*. It appears in *The Public Domain Review*.

- 1 The walrus was a relatively unfamiliar creature in sixteenth-century Europe, despite the fact that walrus parts had been circulating for hundreds of years through trade with Greenland, Iceland, and Russia. Tusked amphibious beasts, that may or may not have been based on walruses, existed in various sixteenth-century scholarly works. Some of these harked back to classical authorities: Pliny had described a "sea-elephant," with which the Arctic beast sometimes became identified. The elephant-like "morsus," represented on the 1516 world map of Martin Waldseemüller, was most probably the result of such confusing names and a mainland trade of mammoth teeth through Russia.
- 2 Once Europeans began hunting walruses in the Arctic themselves in the late sixteenth century, however, undeniably walrus-like creatures began to appear in natural histories. This wasn't a simple process of "discovery" of walruses. Nobody except the hunters who killed walruses on the Arctic ice saw living walruses: carcasses were immediately channeled through the marketplaces of northern European shores into apothecary shops, curiosity cabinets, and natural histories. Walrus hides were carted off to the tanners and the ivory and bone sent for carving into combs and knife handles or ground up. The blubber was rendered into soaps, lamp fuel, or cooking oil. Tusks and bones were sometimes gilded, carved, and polished for luxury sales to curiosity collectors.
- 3 Apothecaries placed ground-up walrus tusk for sale alongside other exotic and costly medicinal substances. Walrus ivory was often billed as possessing similar qualities to "unicorn horn," a traditional panacea¹ against all poisons. "Unicorn horn" could itself, in reality, be any of a number of powdered, osseous² things, from narwhal or walrus tusks to elephant bone. As long as the apothecary was of good repute, nobody would be any the wiser. They certainly weren't going to be protected from poison, whatever species the powder contained.
- 4 Walruses were physically and metaphorically dismantled and reassembled; they were cut up into transportable parts by hunters and put back together in various guises by scholars who constructed their very own walrus-creatures from walrus artifacts and older textual accounts. These quasi-mythical images had lives of their own. Olaus Magnus's image of narcoleptic³ cliff hangers was particularly long-lived. Parts of walrus images were also broken up and scattered into other depictions. Imposing, walrus-like tusks or bristly manes were featured by many cartographic denizens of treacherous oceans. Elements of the *morse* were used in depictions of monstrous sea-beasts such as the "sea-pig," "sea-boar," "sea-wolf" and "sea-lion" in various books of monstrosity.
- 5 There were, in fact, a number of first-hand accounts from hunters published in this period describing the slaying of hundreds of "see-horses" on the Arctic ice, heroic battles with enraged and red-eyed creatures in the waters, followed by the heavy work of flensing (skinning) and dismantling the slain beasts. But very few intellectuals seemed interested in these kinds of images of what a walrus was, preferring the monsters depicted in more authoritative, scholarly accounts.

- 6 It was only in 1612 that a whole, living walrus was brought to mainland Europe. A walrus pup arrived in Amsterdam, along with the stuffed skin of its mother, on a Dutch hunting ship. It was described by Dr. Everhard Vorstius of Leiden University, as a “sea-beast...much like a seal” with holes for ears and a bristly beard. This small animal “roared like a boar” and was placed in a barrel of water to relax. He was fed porridge oats, at which he sucked slowly and grunted as he ate. Vorstius finished with the ominous mention that the walrus’s fat was rather “toothsome.”⁴
- 7 This porridge-slurping pup was adopted into the roster of morse images in later descriptions, but sat awkwardly with the fierce-toothed behemoths. It certainly did not replace them: they were far too powerful and too resonant with traditional preconceptions of what the Arctic must be like. The walrus remained a mysterious beast from a wonder-filled north, long after Magnus purported to reveal its secrets.

¹ **panacea:** a medicine that cures everything

² **osseous:** consisting of or turned into bone

³ **narcoleptic:** characterized by sudden attacks of sleepiness

⁴ **toothsome:** tasty