



REPRESENTATIVES OF MONSTROUS TRIBES were believed to inhabit actual lands, principally India. Among the foreign peoples described by Herodotus, Ktesias and Megasthenes are (from left to right, top to bottom) the one-eyed people; the Blemmyae,

or headless ones; the long-eared Phanesians; the big-lipped people; the Sciapodes (who used their single foot as an umbrella) and the goat-footed people, later called satyrs. The woodcuts are from the *Liber Chronicarum*, by Hartmann Schedel, published in 1493.

HOMO MONSTROSUS

For 2,000 years most educated men believed that remote areas were inhabited by monstrous races. It was only with the 19th century that it became clear that there was only one species of living men

by Annemarie de Waal Malefijt

When Carl von Linné (Linnaeus) worked out his monumental classification of natural things in the 18th century, he included the species *Homo monstrosus*. By *Homo monstrosus* he meant a species related to *Homo sapiens* but markedly different in physical appearance. To do Linnaeus full justice, he was quite aware that there were men on all continents who belonged to the species *Homo sapiens*. He nonetheless believed, as many of his contemporaries and predecessors did, that in remote areas there were manlike creatures with weird characteristics.

The belief in the existence of monstrous races had endured in the Western world for at least 2,000 years. During that time a rich assortment of semihuman creatures were described by explorers and travelers, whose accounts were probably based largely on malformed individuals and the desire to enhance their own fame at home. No part of the human body was neglected; each was conceived as having elaborate variations. There were, for example, peoples with tiny heads, with gigantic heads, with pointed heads, with no heads, with detachable heads, with dog heads, with horse heads, with pig snouts and with bird beaks. In the absence of knowledge about faraway places (and about the limits of human variation) men populated them with creatures of their imagination.

At the same time there were efforts to explain how such strange beings could have originated and what was responsible for their extraordinary characteristics. Thus in the rise and decline of *Homo monstrosus* one encounters ideas and attitudes that hold much interest for the modern anthropologist. The credulousness of those who accepted the reality of monstrous peoples is not so very different from the unfounded prejudices

that human groups often harbor toward one another today, and one of the major tasks of anthropology is to clear away misinformation that may lead to such misunderstanding.

Among the earlier writers on fabulous peoples was the Greek historian Herodotus. In the fifth century B.C. he traveled widely in the world that was known to him. He was fairly objective in his accounts of the nearby Egyptians and Persians, and he certainly did not believe everything he was told. In lands far from home, however, people and their habits often appear more unusual; as Herodotus wrote, "The ends of the earth produce the things that we think most fair and rare." Thus he reports that in Ethiopia near the Egyptian border a tribe called the Troglodytes live underground. They eat snakes and lizards, and their language resembles the screeching of bats. Near the Atlas Mountains live the Atlantes, who are unable to dream. The Indian Padaei consume their fellow men as soon as they show the slightest sign of illness; the Lybian Adyrmachidae, after catching a flea on their person, give it bite for bite before throwing it away.

If human habits could be so strange, it was perhaps not surprising that physical differences also existed. Herodotus reports that the Agrippaei across the River Don are totally bald. In the mountains of the same region, so the bald men told him, are a goat-footed race of men and another group that sleeps six months of the year, hibernating like bears.

"I don't believe it," Herodotus comments, yet he continues. He describes the Arimaspi, who have only one eye situated in the middle of their forehead, and the griffins (half-lion, half-eagle) that guard hoards of gold. He writes that, according to the Libyans, their region

has dog-headed men, headless people with eyes in their chest, wild men and wild women and many other monstrous races.

It may be that Herodotus actually heard such stories in his travels, but it should be noted that other Greeks of his time were acquainted with similar fabulous tales. Several centuries before Herodotus the poet Hesiod had mentioned one-eyed, dog-headed and breast-eyed tribes. Homer wrote about the one-eyed Cyclops and about giants and pygmies; the epic poet Aristeas spoke of the one-eyed Arimaspi. Herodotus thus did not invent the monsters; he was rather the first to locate them in actual geographic areas.

The Greeks knew that surrounding them were peoples with cultures quite different from their own. This may have made it easier for them to accept the monstrous races as a reality. There was at least one Greek theory of evolution that could account for the existence of hybrid creatures. Empedocles, a contemporary of Herodotus, held that parts of men and animals arose separately and independently. Hands wandered without arms, feet without legs and heads without trunks. These isolated parts combined at random, so that there could be animals with human heads or manlike creatures with the features of animals. Although in time only favorable combinations survived, peculiar ones could still be found.

Soon after the death of Herodotus reports about India added to the credibility of monstrous races. At the beginning of the fourth century B.C. Ktesias, who had once been a physician at the Persian court, wrote that India was populated by many wondrous tribes. He described the Sciapodes, who had a single large foot on which they could hop faster

than any biped. They made further use of this appendage by employing it as a kind of umbrella, holding it over their head for protection against the rain or the heat of the sun. The Cynocephali, or dog-headed ones, were said to bark rather than to use words; the Blemmyae were headless, with their face between their shoulders. There were people with ears so long they covered their arms as far as the elbow; others had long and very hairy tails; still others had eight fingers on each hand and eight toes on each foot.

Similar reports about India came from Megasthenes, the learned ambassador of the Babylonian king Seleucus I. Having served at the Indian court of Chandragupta, he added some new examples to the older ones and was the first to give currency to the tale of certain Indian nomads who had no nose but only small holes for nostrils. He also spoke of Sciapodes whose feet pointed backward, and of the happy Hyborians, whose life-span was 1,000 years. The Phanesians, he said, had ears so long they slept in them, with one ear serving as a mattress and the other as a blanket. There were

also Indian tribes that had dog ears or had an upper lip extending below their chin or had no mouth. The last, being unable to eat (or to speak), subsisted on the odor of roast meat and fruit and the perfume of flowers.

The invasion of India by Alexander the Great in 326 B.C. probably gave rise to similar reports. With Alexander's army were scholars charged with describing the countries through which they passed. Most of these writings have been lost, but the *Romance of Alexander* (which some scholars date back to 200 B.C.) was translated into many languages in the early Middle Ages. Together with the works of Megasthenes it was for centuries an important source of knowledge about the real and imaginary inhabitants of India.

A number of learned Greeks challenged the stories about monsters. The geographer Strabo, who lived at about the time of the birth of Christ, did not hesitate to call such tales mere superstition. Nonetheless, the tradition remained vigorously alive.

In the first century A.D. the Roman naturalist Pliny the Elder devoted sev-

eral volumes of his encyclopedic *Historia Naturalis (Natural History)* to descriptions of the physical nature and manners of mankind. Asserting that he had read more than 2,000 books, Pliny repeated in a systematic manner all that had been said about monsters; he also added a few embellishments of his own. Some later commentators remarked that a more appropriate title for these writings would have been "Unnatural History." Pliny's contributions included the cannibal Scythians, who used skulls for drinking vessels; the Thibii, who had a double pupil in one eye and the image of a horse in the other, and the solitary Essenes, who lived without women and yet propagated. Other Roman writers, such as Pomponius Mela (first century A.D.) and Caius Julius Solinus (third century), elaborated on Pliny. The ears of the Phanesians and the feet of the Sciapodes grew larger and larger; in the land of the Neurers the men were transformed into wolves in summer and re-gained human form in winter. These writers were important sources for the medieval acquaintance with monsters. Belief in their reliability was bolstered by



ANIMAL-HEADED PEOPLE were popular during the Middle Ages. At left is shown one of the Cynocephali, or dog-headed ones, also believed to inhabit India. They were often assigned allegorical roles, at one time signifying harshness of temper, at another meek-

ness. The goose-headed man shown at right and others like him were depicted on printed pamphlets that sold well at 17th-century country fairs. The woodcuts are reproduced from *Monstrorum Historia*, by Ulisse Aldrovandi, which was published in 1642.

reports of travelers and missionaries that were written with apparent sincerity and conviction.

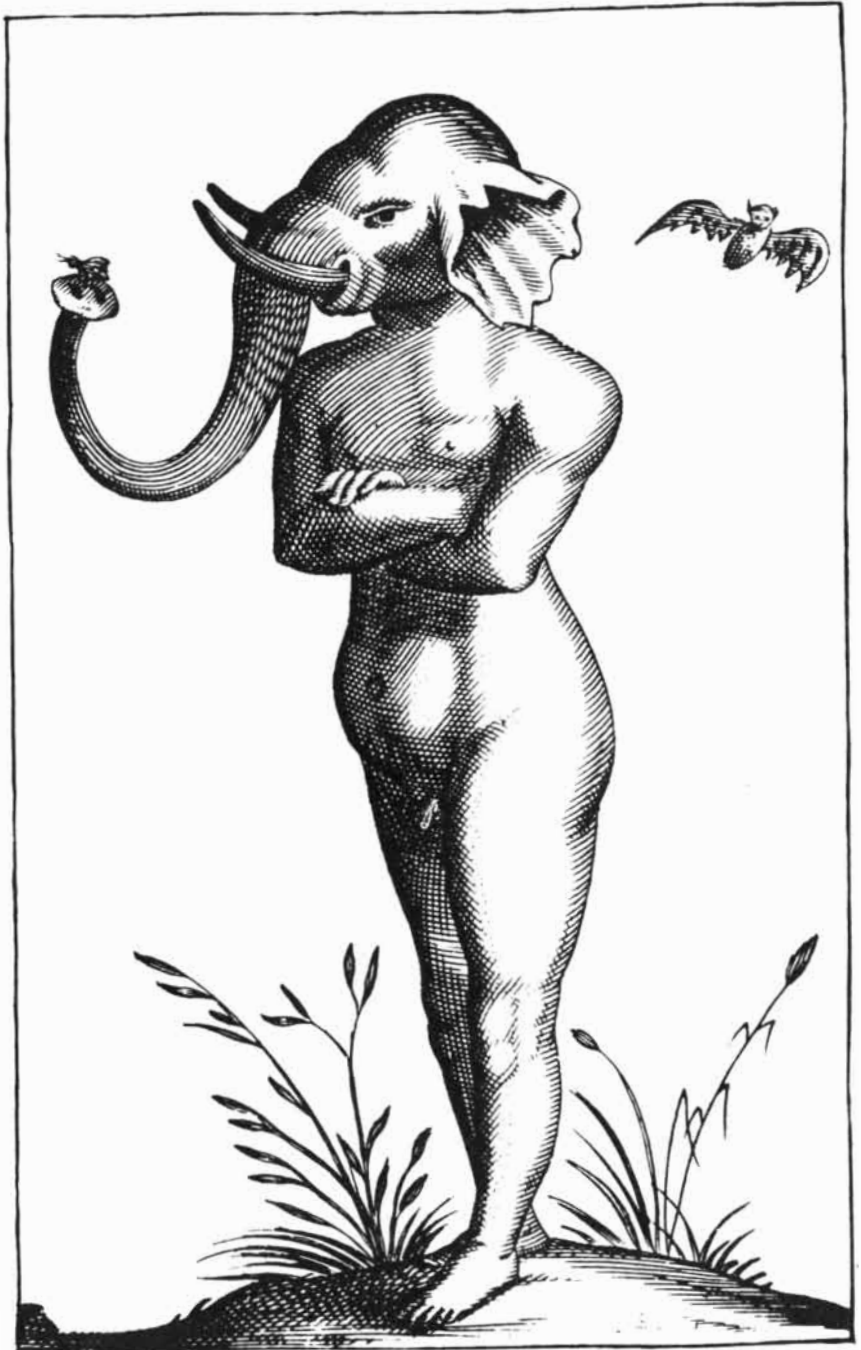
Monstrous races presented a problem for the early church fathers. It was difficult to deny the reality of such creatures, not only because of the missionaries' reports but also because of the Bible. The Book of Genesis refers to races of giants. A passage in St. Jerome's translation of Isaiah reads: "And the hairy ones shall dance there." St. Jerome's own commentary explained that "the hairy ones" might be wild men.

In *The City of God* St. Augustine dealt with the question of the reality of such beings. If, he wrote, the stories about monsters are not plain lies, such beings either are not men at all or, if they are men, they are, like other men, descendants of Adam. St. Augustine tended to favor the last possibility. He argued that individual monstrous births do occur and are clearly descended from Adam. Monstrous races might therefore exist and be human.

Later medieval scholars asked themselves how such transformations could have taken place. A common answer was that the devil had so perverted the souls of some pagans that their appearance had also degenerated. Scripture could be invoked to prove that such changes were possible. The evil king Nebuchadnezzar had been transformed from a man into a beastlike creature: his hair grew like an eagle's feathers, his nails were like a bird's claws and he ate grass.

Other commentators who were less strict about the concept that man—monstrous or otherwise—had a single origin advanced the idea that monsters might have been separately created by the devil in an effort to confound God's creation, man. It was also deemed possible that monsters were creatures of the Antipodes who had managed to climb up over the edges of the (flat) world.

Meanwhile medieval travelers steadily made the monsters more monstrous. There were peoples with one eye, three eyes or five eyes, with eyes in the back of their head, with four or more arms and legs or with enormously long teeth. There were others without nostrils, without eyes, without a mouth or with a mouth so small they could only drink through a straw. Some had ears so long they hindered walking and had to be knotted together behind the back or wound around the arms; some had ears shaped like large fans. Some walked on all fours or had legs that were mere leather strips so that they could only crawl; some had spider legs or goat feet



LATTER-DAY MONSTER was a subject of "scientific" study. Fortunio Liceti, who introduced the elephant-headed man, was one of those who considered fabulous monsters together with cases of abnormal birth. The etching is from Liceti's *De Monstris*, published in 1665.

or bird claws. Some were entirely bald or exceedingly hairy; some had tails or had the neck as well as the head of horses or mice. There was also a tribe of creatures that had only a head; the rest of the body was lacking.

It was understood that monsters had monstrous habits: they were naked, lascivious, promiscuous and filthy; they had a bad smell and no religion. They ate snakes, lizards, dogs, mice, fleas and flies; they ate their parents or (after fattening them for years) their children.

The celebrated myth of Prester John lent further credence to fabulous creatures. In the 12th century there appeared the Latin text of a letter addressed to the Byzantine emperor Manuel Comnenus and purportedly written by Prester John, ruler of a realm in the East. Prester John professed to be a devout Christian whose land was enormously wealthy, harboring not only rich mineral resources but also the fountain of perpetual youth. The inhabitants of the region included, in addition to a

normal human population, nearly all the marvelous and monstrous creatures ever described: wild men, men with horns, one-eyed men, pygmies, giants 40 ells (about 90 feet) tall, centaurs, fauns and so on.

The letter was widely accepted as being genuine. European monarchs were eager to discover Prester John's realm, if only to enlist a powerful ally in their struggle with Islam. Pope Alexander III wrote a letter to Prester John and entrusted it to his physician for personal delivery. The physician never returned. Many travelers who later set out to discover this earthly paradise did return, and they gave "eyewitness" accounts. As late as 1590 an English traveler by the name of Edward Webbe reported that he had visited Prester John's court and had seen a monster there. It was kept chained to prevent it from devouring human beings, but after executions it was fed human flesh. The geographic location of Prester John's country was variously conceived. At first it was usually in or near India; later it was in Abyssinia. The discovery of the Cape of Good Hope was due in part to the efforts of the Portuguese to find Prester John's country. Columbus believed he had passed near it.

Apart from the Prester John myth and

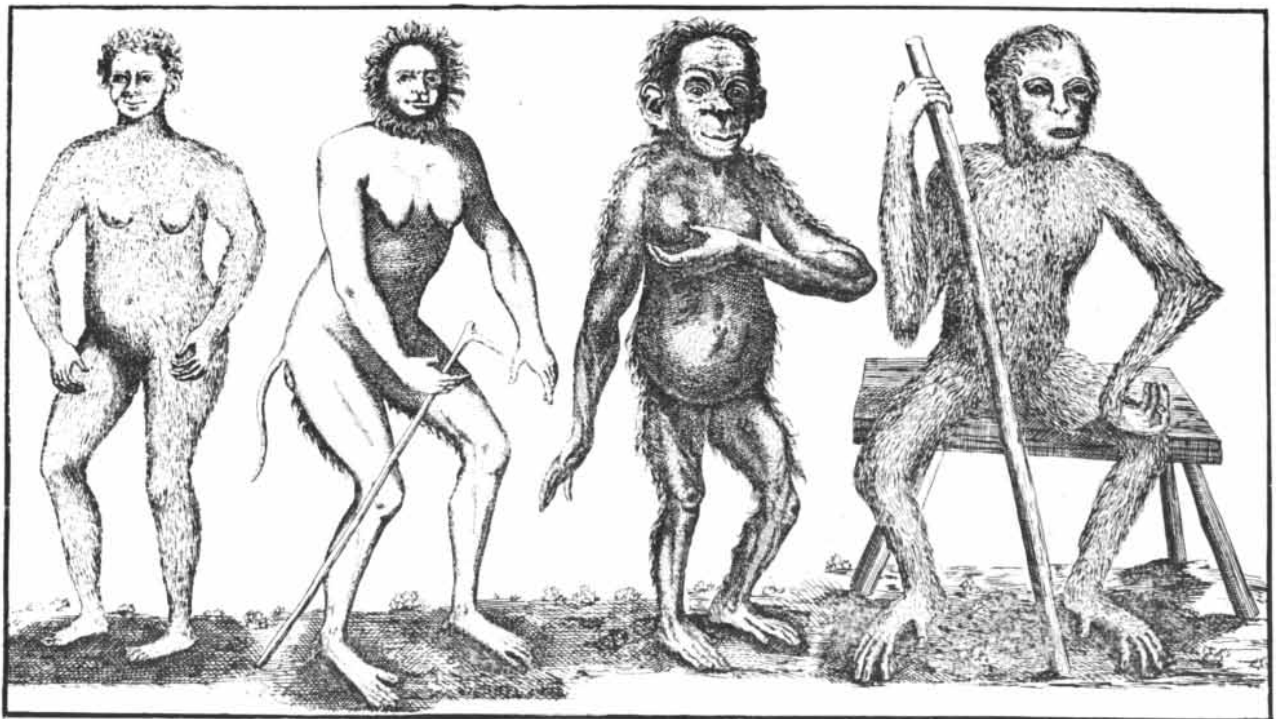
the fictitious accounts of travelers, there were many literary sources dealing with monsters. One of the earliest encyclopedic works was *Etymologies*, written by Isidore of Seville in the seventh century A.D. Isidore attempted single-handedly to summarize all knowledge; he devoted a volume to "men and monsters," and he placed the monsters in definite geographic areas. This immensely popular work was translated into several languages and was often imitated. In the 13th century a similar work explicitly directed to unlearned people (*On the Properties of Things*, by Bartholomaeus Anglicus) was translated into six European languages; with the invention of the printing press it reached 46 editions. The popularity of monsters is further attested by the fact that printed pictures of them were often sold at country fairs.

Monstrous men are also depicted on the medieval *mappa mundi*, maps of the world. In earlier editions the fabulous races were drawn on the maps themselves, indicating their supposed geographic distribution. On a late-13th-century map in Hereford Cathedral the Sciapodes, pygmies and giants are found in India, horse-hoofed and long-eared tribes in Scythia, and tailed satyrs and the Blemmyae in Abyssinia. On later maps the creatures often appear as bor-

der decorations, suggesting the direction in which they might be found.

In the Middle Ages monsters were cited to teach moral lessons. According to one 13th-century source, pygmies denoted humility, giants pride and Cynocephali harshness of temper. The long-lipped races were gossips and mischief-makers. In the widely translated *Gesta Romanorum*, a late-medieval collection of moral tales, the symbolism had changed. Long-lipped people now signified justice; long-eared ones were devout. (They were listening to the word of God.) The dog-headed people were humble. (They were said to be a model for priests.) The headless Blemmyae also represented humility.

The question St. Augustine had raised—Are the monstrous races human?—became a matter of practical concern with the discovery of the New World and its inhabitants. Columbus (convinced to the day of his death that he had found the sea route to India) wrote quite objectively about the Indians of Hispaniola (today Haiti and the Dominican Republic). They were, he said, well-made men who were so generous with their possessions that they never refused anything that was requested. He described the Carib Indians as being handsome of face and figure and intelligent. Nonetheless, Columbus also men-



APELIKE MEN, thought to be human species, were the result of the enduring belief in monstrous peoples and confused observations of apes in the wild. Reading from left to right, the species are

Homo troglodytus, *Homo luciferus*, *Homo satyrus* and *Homo pygmaeus*. The etching is reproduced from an article titled "Anthropomorpha," by C. E. Hoppius, which was published in 1760.

tioned the existence of races that were hairless, tailed or dog-headed.

Later explorers less restrained than Columbus maintained that they had personally met Indians who were monstrous both in appearance and habits. It was necessary for Pope Paul II to declare explicitly (in his Papal Bull of 1537) that American Indians were fully human and in possession of an immortal soul.

Many Europeans had the opportunity to examine human representatives of the New World. Captured "specimens" were shipped to Europe and placed on public display; some of them, dressed in tiger skins and fed raw meat, were exhibited in cages. Even so, it must have been a disappointment to many onlookers that they had no tail, were not very hirsute and had only two eyes, two arms and normal-sized ears.

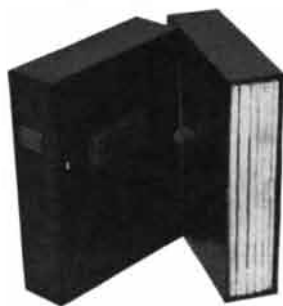
The character Caliban in *The Tempest* no doubt reflects attitudes toward the peoples of the New World in Shakespeare's time. Caliban is "as disproportion'd in his manners as in his shape," "a thing most brutish," a member of a "vile race," a "monster of the isle with four legs." He is filthy and smells like a fish, and one of the European sailors shipwrecked on his island at first mistakes him for a devil. Another sailor calls him a puppy-headed monster. Caliban is said to use the language taught him by his master, but only to curse. He has no capacity for abstraction and understands neither music nor love. "A devil, a born devil, on whose nature nurture can never stick...."

The name Caliban is an anagram of *canibal* and this Spanish word is itself a corruption of *Caribal*, an inhabitant of the Caribbean islands. *Canibal* in turn suggests *canino*, Spanish for "dog." The Cynocephali come readily to mind, the more so because of the term "puppy-headed monster." Shakespeare thus equated the monstrous Caliban with inhabitants of the New World. A further indication that he was thinking of the New World in *The Tempest* is his mention of "vex'd Bermoothes" (Bermuda).

With the development of modern science in the 17th century, emphasis was placed on systematic study by direct observation; this method was also applied to the study of monsters. The only monsters available for examination, however, were those resulting from abnormal births. In the absence of detailed knowledge of embryology, endocrine glands and hormones the causes of such births were little understood. Most of the scholarly works dealing with them were a mixture of science and credulous-

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ness; congenital abnormalities were discussed on the same level as the fictitious monstrous races. In his book *De Monstris* (1665) Fortunio Liceti added an elephant-headed creature to the lengthy catalogue of composite beings. Other students of teratology (the study of monstrous living forms) occupied themselves with classification; they grouped fabulous tribes according to the part of the body that was abnormal. Moral lessons were not lacking: monstrous births were seen as punishment for deviation from accepted customs, most particularly for incest or promiscuity but also for a variety of other transgressions.

In the 17th century, as increasing numbers of animal and plant species were being discovered, efforts were made to arrange the species in an orderly array. In some of the earlier systems of classification the monsters presented no problem: they were simply left out (together with man himself). Linnaeus, however, proposed to classify

everything in nature. In the first edition of his *System of Nature*, which appeared in 1735, he boldly classified man as a quadruped, placing him in the same order as the sloth and the ape. At that time Linnaeus had not yet introduced his binomial system of nomenclature (genus and species); he simply noted that satyrs (described as being tailed, hairy and bearded and having a human body) and tailed men were ape species.

In the 10th edition of Linnaeus (1758) man was given the name *Homo sapiens*, and the separate species *Homo monstrosus* was also listed. Linnaeus considered the satyrs and the pygmies to be closer to the apes, as is indicated by their names: *Simia satyrus* and *Simia sylvanus*. He described a somewhat more human species believed to live in Abyssinia and on Java. They are, he said, nocturnal, they walk erect, they have frizzled white hair, they speak in a hiss, they are able to think and they believe the world was made for them.



HIRSUTE ABORIGINE exemplifies the "hairy nations" described by Pliny the Elder and believed to exist by New World explorers. This woodcut is from *Anthropometamorphosis: Man Transformed: or The Artificial Changeling*, by John Bulwer, which was published in 1653.

Linnaeus granted that it was extremely difficult to distinguish such creatures from man. He was of course severely handicapped; not only were there no specimens of monsters but also he had not seen many apes. The only ape he mentioned as being accessible to him for examination was an immature chimpanzee.

At least two followers of Linnaeus continued to classify fabulous tribes in a scientific manner. C. E. Hoppius, a pupil of Linnaeus', ranked *Homo troglodytus* closest to man. Next came *Homo luciferus*, as Hoppius named human creatures with tails; he was followed by *Homo satyrus* and *Homo pygmaeus*. A German physician named Martinus contended that there were two races of *Homo sylvestris*, the members of one race being smaller than those of the other.

Nonetheless, the end of *Homo monstrosus* and his like was approaching. With increased knowledge of anatomy, in particular the anatomy of the great apes, it was realized that the stories about satyrs and men with tails, if they were not fantasies, came from faulty observations of apes and monkeys. Although many a 19th-century traveler wrote about tailed men, such reports eventually became rare.

The puzzling similarities and differences between men and apes were clarified by Darwin's theory of evolution, but the theory did not solve the problem of man's specific ancestry. The erroneous idea that the lineage of man could be traced to known ape species spurred the search for a "missing link," a creature half-ape, half-man. Eugène Dubois believed that (in the fossil remains of *Pithecanthropus erectus*, or Java man) he had found such a link, a belief many people shared until the discovery of other human fossils changed the picture. With the knowledge that the ancestors of man are not represented among contemporary ape species, the search for links between men and apes ended.

Curiously, however, *Homo monstrosus* is not quite dead. Reports of an "abominable snowman" living in hidden fastnesses of the Himalayas are still in circulation. Speculation about life on other planets gives rise to new monsters with pointed heads and strange appendages. These fanciful beings are mostly invented in a spirit of fun, but the lesson is the same: When men can conceive of some remote place where other men or manlike creatures might exist, he is profoundly motivated to populate the unknown with creatures of his imagination.

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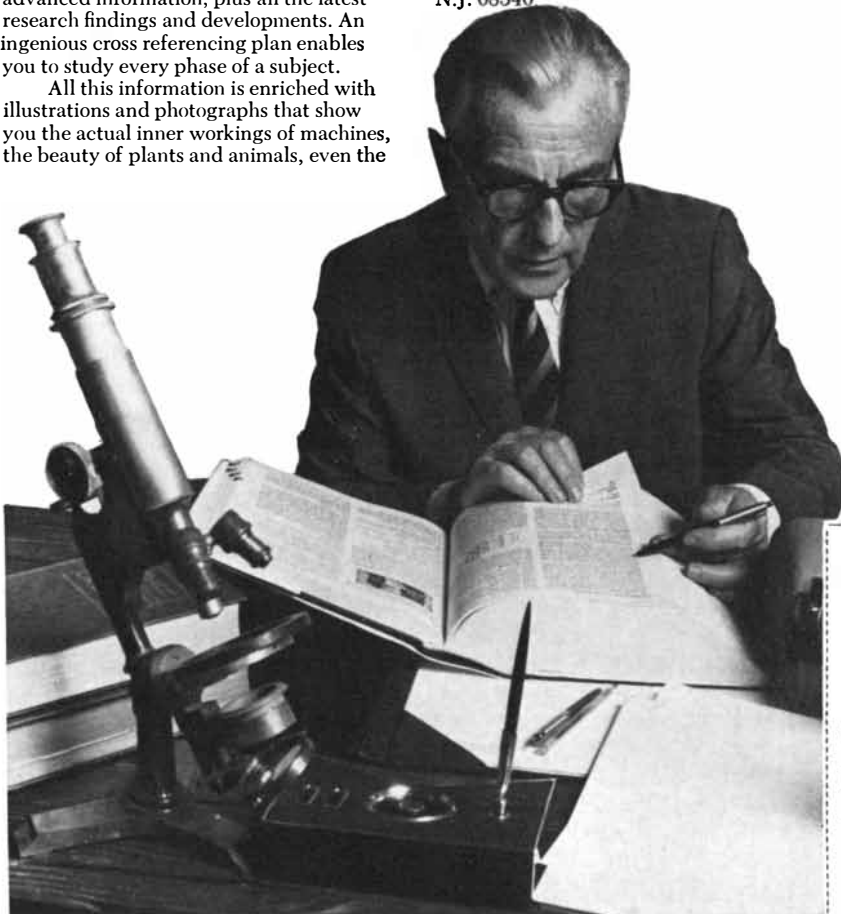
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