The Middle Ages was a period of time in Europe where there was very little trade or contact with other parts of the world. Even after the Middle Ages ended and Europeans were exploring faraway areas, there was an idea that monsters might exist in the ocean or an undiscovered land. We’re going to look at some maps made right after the Middle Ages in the 1400s and 1500s to see the creatures they believed in.

This map was made less than twenty years after the last map. It was published in a book that described everything that was “known” about the world, sort of like an encyclopedia.

This map was made before Europeans knew about North and South America. It shows Asia, Europe, and Africa along with pictures of the men that settled each continent according to the medieval church. A man named Sem was believed to be the father of all of Asia, Japhet the father of all Europe, and Cam the father of all Africa.

On the side of the map are pictures of monstrous people that were believed to live in faraway places. Medieval scholars believed in them because the ancient Greeks and Roman writers had described them.

Interaction: This top picture shows a man with six arms. Can anyone tell me where you might have seen pictures of people with many arms? (Hindu gods are often pictured with four, six, or eight arms).

The picture second from the top shows a woman covered in hair. This is probably based on a birth defect, called Hypertrichosis, which makes a person grow thick hair all over their bodies. There are even portraits of people suffering from Hypertrichosis from the 1500s.
This map was made in the 1550s, when European nations were conquering parts of the New World and Africa.

Even though Europeans had come in contact with native people that were clearly not monsters, there was still some fear that people from other parts of the world might be monstrous, either in the way they looked or the way they acted. These two men in the top left corner have the large lip that we saw on the last page we looked at. This is probably based on the Mursi tribe in Ethiopia. When a woman becomes engaged in the Mursi tribe, she might choose to pierce her lip. Over many years, she slowly stretches out the piercing until she can fit a small plate in it. It might seem strange to our eyes, but it is considered beautiful to the Mursi people.

Interaction: The men pictured in the lower left corner do not appear monstrous, but they are doing something that Europeans believed made them monsters. Can anyone figure out what they are doing? (eating people)

There are a few more creatures on this map that we might find interesting. Near the top of the map are a few Amphiptere, dragons with wings but no legs. And near the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean is a sea monster.

This map has even more sea monsters on it. It was made by a man named Abraham Ortelius about 15 years after the last map we saw.

It might seem silly for people to have believed in sea monsters for so long, but a lot of the stories were based on real animals.

Interaction: For example, the monster labeled “A” at the top of this map is called Nahual. What real creature might the Nahual be based on? (Narwhals)

Interaction: The sea monster labeled “I” is another one probably based on a real animal. What animal does this look like? (stingray)

Activity Transition

I have a book about sea monsters that each of you will get to take home, but first we need to finish them.