

# Medieval Othering: Western Monsters and Eastern Maskhs

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**ABSTRACT:** The following article is a comparative reading of medieval Othering in the context of monsters and *maskhs*. While monsters had an integral role in defining the non-Christian Other in the West, *maskhs* played a similar role in the East. The article suggests that understanding the meaning, function, and interaction of monsters and *maskhs* in the Middle Ages contributes to further understanding the concept of medieval Othering that can still be noticed even in today's world.

**I**N 1377, MEDIEVAL FRENCH PHILOSOPHER Nicole Oresme (c. 1325–82) completed his book on natural philosophy titled *Le Livre du Ciel et du Monde* (The book of the heavens and the world). In the book, Oresme details his view on the natural universe and how it functions. Among the many things that he explores, Oresme observes the East from his Western standpoint and notes that Eastern peoples—as opposed to Western ones—are “less noble, for many parts of their region are dangerous because of the disturbances and irregularities of the air, the contamination of the water, and the poisonous nature of the various kinds of snakes and other animals.” Substantiating his depiction of Eastern peoples, Oresme cites Giraldus Cambrensis (c. 1145–1223), author of *The Marvels of Ireland* (c. 1188), borrowing the image of monsters and associating it with the East by stating that “the monsters reported by Saint Augustine in Book Sixteenth of *The City of God* are born in the east.”<sup>1</sup> The West, in contrast, is the antithesis of the monstrous East. It is depicted as the natural place for human beings since “the air in the west is gentler and more salubrious to human beings than that of the east.”<sup>2</sup>

Oresme's account represents an approach through which one culture perceives another as inferior and uncivilized, using the metaphor of monsters as an instrument for creating an abject

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<sup>1</sup> Nicole Oresme, *Le Livre du ciel et du monde* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1968), 351.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

Otherness. Monsters, as noted by medievalist Jeffery Jerome Cohen, are the “embodiment of a certain cultural moment—of a time, a feeling, and a place” mirroring “fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy.”<sup>3</sup> In other words, that which “is seen as monstrous in a specific, historical context shows the concerns and anxieties of that context.”<sup>4</sup> As such, Othering, in its monstrous medieval context, is a process of abjection enrooted in cultural trepidations projected upon the different, the foreign, and the Other.

In this article, I observe the concept of Othering through the prism of monster metaphors in two medieval cultures: the Christian West and the Muslim East. How did each culture view its perceived antithetical Other through its understanding of monsters? How were monsters understood in both cultures in the Middle Ages? The article focuses on the religious—and ultimately political—meaning, function, and role of monsters and monstrous beings in defining the Other as an inferior entity.

What, then, is a monster? In the West, the term “monster” is derived from the Latin *monstrum*, which is associated with the terms *monstrare* (meaning to show or demonstrate) and *monere* (meaning to remind or to warn). The demonstrative physical appearance of the monster is one of the first, direct indications of the creature’s abnormality, difference, and Otherness. By sheer existence, the monster draws attention to itself as a visual digression and deviation. Monsters fascinate inasmuch as they frighten. In the Middle Ages, monsters were mostly thought of in religious terms. Their presence was viewed as a warning of divine wrath and a reminder of God’s power and authority.<sup>5</sup>

This religious anxiety about monsters and their meaning is mirrored in medieval Christian thought. Lucifer, for example, the angel-turned-monster, appears at the beginning of the Christian narrative occupying a considerable amount of debate among early and medieval Christian thinkers as a complex figure of fascination.<sup>6</sup> The same Christian narrative concludes with monsters roaming the scene more vividly in the Book of Revelation as omens signifying the end of time. They appear with “exaggerated features and frighteningly mismatched body parts, often with multiple eyes and mouths.”<sup>7</sup> The enemy of God at the beginning of time returns with an army of monsters against Christ’s followers in a final battle between Good and Evil. Such religious images impose their perceived meaning on creatures or people who were deemed enemies of Christ and Christianity, dictating where they should be located vis-à-vis the Christian body.

Outside of theology and biblical accounts, and within the natural world, monsters represented entire races inhabiting the margins of, or the wilderness beyond, Christian communities. They were placed outside the city walls or the towns’ borders, generally located in humanly uninhabited places like caves, swamps, mountain tops, jungles, oceans, and remote lands. Such places and others were considered to be within the “domain of the monsters”<sup>8</sup> signifying a kind of “distant

<sup>3</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, ed., *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), 4.

<sup>4</sup> Line Henriksen, Morten Hillgaard Bülow, and Erika Kvistad, “Monstrous Encounters: Feminist Theory and the Monstrous,” *Women, Gender and Research* 2, no. 3 (2017): 3–11.

<sup>5</sup> Tina Pippin, “Mapping the End: On Monsters and Maps in the Book of Revelation,” *Interpretation: A Journal of Bible and Theology* 74, no. 2 (2020): 183–96.

<sup>6</sup> Gerald B. Guest, “The Beautiful Lucifer as an Object of Aesthetic Contemplation in the Central Middle Ages,” *Studies in Iconography* 38 (2017): 107–41.

<sup>7</sup> Pippin, “Mapping the End,” 183.

<sup>8</sup> Sophia Rose Arjana, *Muslims in the Western Imagination* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 21.

wilderness”<sup>9</sup> in which monstrous places were regarded as “something to be avoided.”<sup>10</sup> Inhabiting wild places, monsters were often depicted as uncivilized creatures “whose very existence is a threat to the civilized order.”<sup>11</sup> In addition, monstrous races appear in travel literature and cartographic accounts like the famous medieval *mappa mundi* (world maps) where they are placed in Eastern geographical locations,<sup>12</sup> reemphasizing Saint Augustine’s convictions about the East.

Indeed, Saint Augustine places marvelous creatures and monstrous beings in the East despite the fact that he himself was born to a mostly Berber family in Thagaste (modern-day Algeria) which is considered an Eastern territory. However, Augustine was heavily “Westernized” in his home, where he only spoke Latin, and in his school, where he was forced to learn Greek—through which he was exposed to Western authors and thinkers like Virgil, Cicero, and Seneca, among others.<sup>13</sup> It is the dominant culture and its anxieties, then, that produce monsters and demarcate geographical location in relation to the culture’s position. The monster, as Jeffery Jerome Cohen claims, is ultimately a cultural body.<sup>14</sup> Thus, Augustine’s East is a cultural concept that materialized in territories that are Eastern not only to Christendom but also to Christian identity and beliefs. Augustine’s “East” corresponds with the classical and medieval understanding of two main regions—India and Ethiopia<sup>15</sup>—both of which are the “East” to Augustine’s birthplace, to his cultural education, and to his religious beliefs.

Medieval Western monsters, then, do not only function as mere metaphors for Otherness, but they also draw clear geographical boundaries, emphasizing an interior Christian identity against an exterior non-Christian deformity. In other words, when monsters are pushed to the edge of Christendom, a “collective [Christian] identity emerges, but it does so under the constant threat of the monster it created.”<sup>16</sup> Consequently, every practice, belief, diet, or any norm exercised by non-Christian groups living beyond the “limits of Christian identity”<sup>17</sup> would be regarded as monstrous.

Many non-Christian groups were placed under this category, especially after the rise and expansion of Islam in the seventh century. Muslims and Jews were part of those groups that inhabited Christianity’s imagined East. Like many monsters, Muslims lived beyond the limits of Christian identity and land. Yet, unlike other monsters, Muslims posed a real political and religious threat to Christianity’s dominion, as the image of “irrupting, swarming [Muslims,] figures an other without a [fixed] place, a shifting, mobile threat to the limits of Christendom.”<sup>18</sup> While Christians and Muslims interacted with each other through either trade or war, the obsession

<sup>9</sup> David D. Gilmore, *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 12.

<sup>10</sup> Bettina Bildhauer and Robert Mills, eds., *The Monstrous Middle Ages* (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 2003), 4.

<sup>11</sup> Talal Asad, *On Suicide Bombing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 91.

<sup>12</sup> Rudolf Wittkower, “Marvels of the East: A Study in the History of Monsters,” *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 5 (1942): 159–97.

<sup>13</sup> Henry Chadwick, *Augustine of Hippo: A Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 6–7.

<sup>14</sup> Cohen, *Monster Theory*, 4.

<sup>15</sup> Asa Simon Mittman and Susan M. Kim, “Monsters and the Exotic in Early Medieval England,” *Literature Compass* 6, no. 2 (2009): 332–48, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2008.00606.x>.

<sup>16</sup> Michael Uebel, “Unthinking the Monster: Twelfth-Century Responses to Saracen Alterity,” in *Monster Theory*, Cohen, 264–91.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

with fixed limits that defines the clear categories of the self and the Other were threatened with the continuous expansion of Islam into the Christian body. This expansion threatened the narrative of the dominant Christian culture. In fact, this was one of the factors that led to launching the Crusades to preserve the “purity and fixity of origins.”<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the monster had to be confronted and stopped before it crossed the borders of Christendom and desecrated the sanctity and the authority of the Christian body.

One of the most notorious examples of monster depictions of Muslims appears in the form of the dog-headed monster, known as the cynocephalus. The cynocephalus is a bestial monster noted for its hybrid nature: a combination of the head of a dog and the body of a man. Bestiality is one of the ways through which monstrous identities are depicted in icons and symbols.<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the “cynocephali were familiar throughout [...] the Middle Ages as culturally expedient forms in which to embody the enemies of Christendom.”<sup>21</sup> Muslims—as the rising enemy of Christendom—met the conditions of monster-making through espousing animal and human elements in one body to create a form of ugliness that became further illustrated when juxtaposed against the beauty of Christ.

The hybridity of beast and man suggests that the monster is the fruit of a horrid sexual relationship between humans and animals, thus combining “the impossible and the forbidden.”<sup>22</sup> This suggests that the monster does not become. It rather is. The monster’s identity is decided upon birth. It is not something that one acquires along the way: the dog-headed creature was born that way exactly like the Muslims who were already monstrous by nature and thus deserve their punishment.

Depicting Muslims as people with dog heads dehumanizes their identity and further illustrates their Otherness to the Western Christian. Choosing the dog in particular to link it to Muslims is based on the fact that “to Muslims, dogs are considered impure.”<sup>23</sup> The dog head has other implications, though. It suggests that Muslims—much like dogs—can be wild and pose danger, but they can also be tamed, contained, and subjugated to the power apparatus of the enlightened, superior European Christian mind. Dogs, in particular, according to David Gordon White’s reading of the cynocephalus, “[lurk] at the threshold between wildness and domestication and all of the valences that these two ideal poles of experience hold.”<sup>24</sup> Thus, Muslims representing the evil crouching on the borders of Christendom are destined to be defeated, killed, or tamed by the powers of Christ. Consequently, everything related to the Muslim monster becomes tainted with inferiority.

Muslims are thus rendered aliens and Others whose cultural and religious identities are utterly foreign and monstrous to the Christian body. Indeed, their identity, culture, faith, and language are deemed monstrously non-Christian. The monsters’ language, or its lack thereof, was one of the ways to indicate one’s monstrousness. The cynocephalus served as a stigma perpetuating the monstrous image of foreign or incomprehensible tongues. Thus, Muslims—with their Oriental

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Arjana, *Muslims in the Western Imagination*, 52.

<sup>21</sup> Jeffery Jerome Cohen, *Of Giants: Sex, Monsters, and the Middle Ages* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 132.

<sup>22</sup> Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974–1975* (London: Verso Books, 2016), 56.

<sup>23</sup> Debra Higgs Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, and Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 159.

<sup>24</sup> David Gordon White, *Myths of the Dog-Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 15.

languages—were thrown outside the domain of Christianity (physically or metaphorically), becoming complete aliens and foreigners whose languages are inapprehensible to the ears of the more superior human Christians. As White notes, the dog-headed monsters “are always located far away, beyond neighbors that are close enough to be known as enemies or allies, often over the last known mountain range or body of water. They always belong to another land, live under another sky, live according to other statutes [...] and speak (or bark) other tongues.”<sup>25</sup> The monsters are pushed farther away, so far from the Christian body or identity that their language turns into a non-human language, a mere sound, a bestial barking. Like Dante’s experience in *Inferno*, “language becomes inarticulate” the more he descends within the hellish realm of monsters.<sup>26</sup>

Language is one way through which ethnic and religious identities express themselves and a key contributor to shaping their cultural identity that highlights their Otherness. The absence of language in the cynocephalus is associated with the absence of the human head and thus human reason and intellect. The presence of the dog head instead signifies madness as an antithesis to reason, and the rise of chaos, backwardness, and feral means of communication. Stripping the symbolic creature of human language and replacing it with “barking” produces a kind of Otherness, whose status is—by definition—less than that of the Christian who is able to produce a fathomable language through reason. In other words, while language becomes Christian, barking becomes synonymous with the absence of Christianity and with non-Christian languages.

Whereas the Christian/human produces knowledge and harmony through language, the non-Christian monster produces ignorance and instability in the eyes of the former. The non-Christian cynocephalus, as a metaphoric symbol, calls attention to itself by way of its physical deformity and its bestial non-language. The groups associated with the symbolic monster not only function as aliens expressing fears and anxieties in the eyes of the Christian Other, but their foreign languages turn into an image of “barking.” Like dogs whose barking reveals the identity of the creature, the groups associated with the dog-headed monster bring attention to themselves through the foreignness of their language the minute they start producing that language vis-à-vis the “superior” culture.

This foreign and Eastern cynocephalus is thus contextualized with other monsters reaffirming that it does not belong, and neither does it have the right to dwell among Christians, let alone take away their land. Other monsters that appear in the same realm of the cynocephalus include the Blemmyes (headless people) and Monopods (one-legged people), among many others. In *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, the author mentions the Blemmyes as “ugly folk without heads, who have eyes in their shoulders; their mouths are round, like horseshoe, in the middle of their chest.”<sup>27</sup> He goes on to describe the Monopods as creatures having “only one foot, which is so broad that it will cover all the body and shade it from the sun. They will run so fast on this foot that is a marvel to see them.”<sup>28</sup> In the same account, he describes the cynocephalus whose habits are monstrous and non-Christian. Not only do such monsters lack Western civility and Christian virtues as they “go quite naked” and “worship [a gold or silver] ox as their god,” but also “if they captured any man in battle, they eat him.”<sup>29</sup> This medieval image of the man-eating Muslim who

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 18.

<sup>26</sup> Christopher Livanos, “Dante’s Monsters: Nature and Evil in the ‘Commedia,’” *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society* 127 (2009): 81–92.

<sup>27</sup> John Mandeville, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, trans. C. Moseley (London: Penguin Classics, 2005), 176.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid, 177.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid, 172.

adopts erroneous beliefs will remain relevant in the depiction of Muslims in later centuries with the rise of the Ottomans, the increase of their power in the East, and the threat they will pose to Christian Europe.

Nevertheless, like medieval Christians whose identity was further solidified thanks to Othering non-Christians through monsters, medieval Eastern Muslims had their own monsters. The Eastern Muslim understanding of the monster has its similarities with the Western one in terms of the monster's religious and political role against non-Muslims or Muslims who are deemed sinners. However, the religious interpretation of such creatures adds an extra layer to their complexity when juxtaposed against their Western counterparts.

In the medieval Muslim East, the closest creature that resembles the Western monster and its religious role is called *maskh* (Arabic: مَسْخ; literally: transmogrified).<sup>30</sup> *Maskhs* have strong religious connotations as they draw the line between the divinely punished and the blessed and between the perfect human form and the inferior nonhuman shapes that express God's wrath and power inasmuch as they reflect his marvelous works. Unlike Western monsters found in the natural world who were born with their deformity, the *maskhs* found in the physical world are originally human. The originally human *maskhs* were deformed by God and turned into hideous creatures with explicit bestial qualities as a form of divine punishment, demonstrating that they are sinners.<sup>31</sup> A *maskh* may appear in the form of a full animal like a pig or a spider.<sup>32</sup> *Maskh* features may appear in hybrid creatures with various animal or human parts fused together in one body, like mermen and mermaids.<sup>33</sup> Alternatively, *maskhs* may appear as inanimate objects transmogrified from a human form.<sup>34</sup> Ḡalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, one of the most prolific writers and scholars of the Middle Ages, cites a *hadith* by Prophet Muhammad in which the latter details types of original animalized *maskhs* and their corresponding sins. The *maskhs* mentioned by the Prophet in the *hadith* include, for example, an elephant *maskh* who used to be a tyrant who made love to almost anything in his original human form and a bear *maskh* who used to be a woman luring people into sleeping with her.<sup>35</sup>

The *maskh*, then, is an explicit sign of Otherness that highlights sinners and abnormal creatures reflecting the power of God. In other words, *maskhs* signify a clear separation between sinners and believers and between perfect humans and deformed nonhumans through the physical image of the body. As such, *maskhs* set a moral system that embraces the human/believer and throws the nonhuman/unbeliever outside the moral context. This binary categorization becomes clearer when *makhs* are examined as signs of Otherness on the natural and religious levels.

Creatures with *maskh* qualities fill the natural world in travel, geographic, and cartographic accounts. In such accounts, the creatures, similar to Western monsters, dwell in humanly uninhabitable places like deserts, oceans, and mountain tops and have wild traditions and qualities.

<sup>30</sup> In modern Arabic, the term *Wāḥṣ* (وَحْش) is used as a translation of the word "monster." Yet, in medieval Arabic, the term *Wāḥṣ* refers to an animal, a beast, or the wild in general, but not a monster in the abnormal sense. See definition of the word *Wāḥṣ* in *Lisān al-'Arab* (completed in 1290) by Arab lexicographer Ibn Manẓūr.

<sup>31</sup> Muḥammad Ibn Manẓūr, *لسان العرب Lisān al-'Arab* [The tongue of the Arabs] (Cairo: Dar al-Ma'arif, 2008), 4199.

<sup>32</sup> Ḡalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *الدر المنثور في التفسير بالمأثور Al-Durr al-Manthur Fi Tafsir Bil-Ma'thur* [The scattered pearls: Intertextual exegesis] (Beirut: Dar al-Fikr, 2011), 249.

<sup>33</sup> Kamal al-Dīn al-Dumiri, *حياة الحيوان الكبرى Hyāt al-Ḥayawān al-Kubra* [The book of animals] (Damascus: Dar al-Marifa, 2013), 40; 144.

<sup>34</sup> Ibn al-Wardī, *خريدة العجائب وفريدة الغرائب Kharīdat al-'Ajā'ib Wa Farīdat al-Gharā'ib* [The perfect pearl of wonders and the precious pearl of extraordinary things] (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqafa al-Dineyya, n.d.), 234.

<sup>35</sup> Ḡalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, *The scattered pearls*, 249.

For instance, in his *Tuhfat al-Albāb* (Gifts of hearts), Andalusian traveler Abū Hāmid al-Gharnāṭī (c. 1080–1170) describes a nation of *maskhs* encountered outside the city of Sanaa in Yemen who used to have a human form before they were divinely cursed and transmogrified (*musekhu*) into hideous creatures whereby “every one of them is half a human who has half a head, half a body, one hand, one foot [...] with no brains, [they] live in jungles and in the land of the trees, and on the shores of the Indian sea [i.e., ocean]. Arabs call them al-Nansas, and they hunt them down.”<sup>36</sup> In the same account, al-Gharnāṭī moves on to describe a nation of creatures “with no heads, whose eyes are in their shoulders and mouths in their chests. They are great in number. They reproduce like animals [and] they have no brains.”<sup>37</sup> The same *maskhs*, al-Nansas, and the no-head creatures appear in other Arabic accounts like al-Qazwini’s (c. 1203–83) *Aja’ib al-Makhluqat wa Ghara’ib al-Mawjudat* (The wonders of creatures and the marvels of creation) in the thirteenth century. He mentions al-Nansas *maskhs*, describing them as fierce runners on a single foot and the no-head nation inhabiting distant islands in the Chinese sea.<sup>38</sup>

Like Western monsters, *maskhs* demarcate the extension and the limits of human/Muslim identity in the natural world. The space of *maskhs* is the contrast of the civilized Muslim world, considering the creatures’ shapes, habits, and, most importantly, morality. They remind people of God’s wrath through their deformity, and with it they invite the moral and religious judgment by those who do not belong to their group. Placing *maskhs* outside of Muslim societies contributes to defining the territorial, legal, and political components of the *ūmma* (the Islamic community) within *dar al-Islam*—the abode or House of Islam.<sup>39</sup>

On the religious level, *maskhs* have an Othering role affecting how the natural world is perceived based on religious understanding. Like the monsters who dominate the scene in the Christian apocalyptic book of Revelation, *maskhs* are an integral part of Islamic eschatology. *Maskh*-like creatures arise in the end of days with many monstrous characters like the Antichrist, satanic entities, and an army of monstrous men called *Yājūj* and *Mājūj* (Gog and Magog). Similar to the story in Christian sources, and similar to the place *maskhs* occupy in the natural world, Gog and Magog are separated from humans by a giant wall. According to tradition, the wall was built by Alexander the Great, or *Dū l-Qarnayn* (the two-horned one), as the name appears in Islamic sources.<sup>40</sup> The inhabitants of Gog and Magog remain behind the wall until they are unleashed in the end of times.

Gog and Magog are the perfect example of medieval, monstrous Othering in both Islamic and Christian cultures. They appear in Islamic geographic accounts like that of tenth-century geographer and historian Ibn Faqih, who retells the Islamic narrative of Gog and Magog. In Ibn Faqih’s account, Gog and Magog recall monstrous and animalized features of the *maskh* for at “their hands they have claws instead of nails; they have molars and canines like those of wild

<sup>36</sup> Abū Hāmid al-Gharnāṭī, *Ṭuḥfa al-ʿAlbāb wa Nuḥbatu al-ʿAjaʿib* [Gift of hearts and quintessence of wonderful things] (Beirut: Dar al-Afaq al-Jadida, 1993), 42.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 45.

<sup>38</sup> Zakariyyā’ al-Qazwīnī, *ʿAjāʾib al-Makhluqāt wa Gharaʾib al-Mawjudāt* [The wonders of creatures and the marvels of creation] (Beirut: Al-ʿLami Publications, 2000), 383. There are striking similarities with Mandeville’s account on monsters in the West. This may suggest that Western monsters and Eastern *maskhs* may have a common origin, perhaps in ancient Greek mythology.

<sup>39</sup> Manoucher Parvin and Maurie Sommer, “Dar Al-Islam: The Evolution of Muslim Territoriality and Its Implications for Conflict Resolution in the Middle East,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 11, no. 1 (1980): 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.1017/s0020743800000246>.

<sup>40</sup> Donzel and Schmidt, *Gog and Magog* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2009), 59.

cats, and they have large ears, one of which serves them as bed, the other as cover.”<sup>41</sup> The same monstrous race is seen in Islamic cartographic accounts most noticeably in al-Idrisi’s world map. Al-Idrisi (1100–65) illustrates the wall behind which Gog and Magog dwell.<sup>42</sup> That same wall is present in many versions of the medieval Christian *mappa mundi*,<sup>43</sup> noticeably in the thirteenth-century Ebstorf world map, wherein Gog and Magog are depicted as naked, monstrous people consuming human flesh and drinking human blood behind a giant wall.<sup>44</sup>

*Maskhs*, then, like monsters, create the limit that signifies Otherness. This limit appears to be physical and temporal. The physical body, boundaries, and space contribute to forming a religious, political, and moral position against the *maskh* by the human/Muslim. *Maskhs* and monsters also create a temporal limit. This is evident in the idea that those creatures ultimately cross the physical border at the end of time to play their role in the apocalypse. They also appear vividly at the other end of time, at the beginning of creation with Lucifer’s story in the Christian tradition and *iblis*’s in the Islamic one.

In the Islamic story of creation, the first *maskh*, before the creation of man, was *iblis* (the Islamic counterpart of Lucifer). *Iblis* used to be a beautiful, angel-like creature who disobeyed God. As a result of his perceived arrogance, *iblis* loses his place of favor, and God transmogrifies him into Satan: the most hideous of all creatures. Philosopher and theologian Abu Hāmed Al-Ġazali (c. 1058—1111) provides a dramatic description of *iblis*’s physical transmogrification into the *maskh* of all *maskhs* following his fall from grace:

So, God stripped him off the glorious image and degenerated him like a pig, and made his head like the head of a camel, his chest like the hump of a large camel, his face like the face of an ape, his eyes cleft along the length of his face, his nostrils open like a cup, his lips like an ox’s, and his fangs sticking out like a pig’s [...] Because he has become one of the *kafereen* [unbelievers].<sup>45</sup>

*Iblis* is the ultimate *maskh* whose punitive transmogrification altered his physical identity into a hideous amalgam of animal parts, most of which correspond with the original animal *maskhs* in the Prophet’s *hadith* cited by al-Suyūṭī earlier, reflecting the ugliness of the creature’s sin as if the animalization punishment seen in the corporeal exterior of *iblis* is a conspicuous physical expression of an interior, otherwise obscure nature. Animalization is one aspect that characterizes Eastern *maskhs*. Its significance is particularly noted when the punished creature is juxtaposed against the perfectly created human form in Islam.<sup>46</sup> Unsurprisingly, then, *maskhs* and *maskh* features were used as pejorative metaphors to depict and label the political and religious enemies of Islam.

Like the Muslim cynocephalus in the Christian West, the Muslim East had one of the most demeaning *maskh* forms that illustrated a degenerate form of Otherness: the pig *maskh*. When al-Ġazali begins to describe *iblis*’s transmogrification, he uses the image of the pig as a metaphor

<sup>41</sup> Ibn al-Faqih, كتاب البلدان *Kitab al-Buldan* [The book of countries] (Baalbek, Lebanon: A’alam al-Kutub, 1996), 594.

<sup>42</sup> Jerry Brotton, *Great Maps: The World’s Masterpieces Explored and Explained* (London: DK, 2014), 48–49.

<sup>43</sup> It is noteworthy that the Gog and Magog also “find their place in Christian and Jewish scriptures [representing] shared eschatology of final destruction.” See Travis Zadeh, *Mapping Frontiers Across Medieval Islam: Geography, Translation, and the Abbasid Empire* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2011).

<sup>44</sup> Bildhauer and Mills, *The Monstrous Middle Ages*, 79.

<sup>45</sup> Abu Hāmed al-Ġazali مكالفة القلوب المقرب إلى حضرة علام الغيوب *Mukāshafat AlQulūb, AlMuqarrib Ilá Ḥaḍrat ‘Allām al-Ġuyūb* [An exposition of the hearts] (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-‘Imeyya, 1996), 45.

<sup>46</sup> See Surat At-Tin in the Quran: “We have certainly created man in the best of stature” (95:4).



emphasizing the severity of *iblis's* punishment: "God stripped him off the glorious image and degenerated him like a pig."<sup>47</sup> The pig is the title and the introductory opening for presenting other *maskh* parts in *iblis*.

The pig plays a central role in Othering non-Muslim groups in the Middle Ages like Christians and Jews even when they were regarded as People of the Book. The Prophet's *hadith* cited by al-Suyūṭī refers to the pig as one of the *maskhs* who used to be one of the Christians who disbelieved (*kafaru*) in Christ's miracle of the table.<sup>48</sup> "As for the pig, it was one of the Christians who asked [Jesus] for the table and when they saw it, they expressed their disbelief [in the miracle]."<sup>49</sup> The pig here is not only associated with Christians but also appears in a dietary context (the table of food). In Islam, God has forbidden Muslims from eating pigs<sup>50</sup> since the creature is perceived as impure and degenerate. As such, Christians consuming pigs are aligned with what the creature represents in Islam.

The pig as an image for Othering associated with Christians goes even beyond the mere worldly impurity or dietary. It has an instrumental, symbolic role in Islamic eschatology. In Islam, Jesus is not a divine being but a human prophet. He did not die on the cross but was rather risen to God, and he will return in the end of days to bring justice to the world.<sup>51</sup> Among the many things Jesus will do in the Final Hour when he descends from heaven, according to renowned *hadith* compiler al-Bukhārī (810–70), is that he "will break the cross and kill the pig."<sup>52</sup> The symbolism of killing the pig in the context of destroying crosses has an overwhelmingly anti-Christian effect.<sup>53</sup> According to Muslim exegesis scholar Ibn Kathir, Jesus will eliminate all religions except Islam. He concludes that Jesus will ultimately punish Jews and Christians for their misdeeds and false beliefs and compel Christians to accept Islam "under the penalty of the sword."<sup>54</sup>

Thus, when perceived through the concept of the *maskh* and its function, Christianity and Christians receive an inferior status vis-a-vis Muslims and Islam. Through the image and role of the pig in Islamic eschatology, Christians represent the impure, the unholy, and, ironically perhaps, the very enemies of Christ himself in Islam; the one who destroys the cross signifying that the Christian faith is false and eliminates all Christians or forces them into becoming Muslims.

The conflict between medieval Christians and Muslims, then, can be examined as a struggle between monsters and *maskhs*; between the Muslim cynocephalus who poses a threat to Christian faith and dominion and the Christian pig whose very existence as the enemy of Islam defiles the Muslim model of purity and true faith. Ultimately, both images clashed directly in the real world in the context of the Crusade wars in the East. Western Christians launched their military campaign to face the threat of the expansion of the Muslim monster and to reclaim Jerusalem and the Holy Land from the unholy presence of Islam in the holy body of Christendom. The

<sup>47</sup> Al-Ġazali, "An exposition of the hearts," 35.

<sup>48</sup> In the Islamic narrative, Jesus asked God for a table full of food for his disciples. The table descended from heaven. Yet, a group of people who did not believe in Christ remained unbelievers even when they witnessed the table descending from heaven.

<sup>49</sup> Al-Suyūṭī, "The scattered pearls," 249.

<sup>50</sup> The Quran, 16:115.

<sup>51</sup> Zeki Saritoprak, *Islam's Jesus* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2020), 129.

<sup>52</sup> Muḥammad al-Bukhārī, صحيح البخاري *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* [Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī] (Damascus: Dar Ibn Kathir, 2002), 530.

<sup>53</sup> Gabriel Said Reynolds, "The Muslim Jesus: Dead or Alive?" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 72, no. 2 (2009): 237–58.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

Muslims, on the other hand, had to face the fact that Christians—the ones who bear the legacy of the degenerate pig *maskh* in Islam—captured Jerusalem, desecrated their holy places, and crossed the border that separates *maskhs* from the Muslim space, as if summoning the calamities of the end of days.

Indeed, in his famous ceremony in 1095, Pope Urban II declared the beginning of the Crusades. In his speech, the pope called for European Christians to raise their armies, march eastwards, and restore Jerusalem and the Holy Land into the Christian body from the Muslim who is “despised, degenerate, and slave of demons,” demanding the Christian Franks to “fight against the infidel” whose bloodthirstiness is integral to his nature.<sup>55</sup> The pope goes on to separate the “human race” who was redeemed by Christ and the “unclean [and] wicked race” of the Saracens who are Christ’s “enemies.”<sup>56</sup> The pope’s polemic follows a legacy of Christian sources that often referred to Muslims as “a race of dogs”<sup>57</sup> whereby the Prophet himself was linked to that image by many Christian writers, like Eulogius of Cordoba (c. 810–59), and later by William of Rybruk (1210–c. 1270), who records a conversation between Christians and Saracens wherein a Christian monk says: “I know that they are dogs [...] I speak the truth: you and your Mahomet are vile dogs.”<sup>58</sup>

On the other hand, Muslim accounts, like that of Usāma bin al-Munqith (1095–1188),<sup>59</sup> who was a contemporary of the First and Second Crusades, refer to European Christians as “damned by God,” “devils,” and “*kuffar* [infidels]” whose language is unfathomable and whose best qualities are synonymous with those of “beasts.”<sup>60</sup> Usāma’s account borrows monstrous characteristics from the traditional views on *iblis* as the damned, the *kafer*, and the devil along with bestial features associated with *maskhs* to describe the non-Muslim invaders.

Other writers, like traveler and geographer Ibn Jubayr, borrow the image of the pig and the cross from Islamic eschatology. Ibn Jubayr visited the city of Acre under the Franks in the Third Crusade. He describes the city as the “capital of the Frankish cities in Syria [where] unbelief and unpiety [...] burn fiercely, and pigs [Christians] and crosses abound. It stinks and is filthy, being full of refuse and excrement.”<sup>61</sup> Ibn Jubayr reemphasizes the image of the Christian pig in the same account on Acre, calling the lord of the city “this pig” who is the son of his “sow” mother, the queen.<sup>62</sup> Both Ibn al-Munqith and Ibn Jubayr contextualize their prejudices against the Christian presence in the Muslim East within religious anxieties that borrow *maskh* elements from Islamic eschatology.

<sup>55</sup> Edward Potts Cheyney and Dana Carleton Munro, *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History: Series for 1894* (University of Pennsylvania: Legare Street Press, 2021), 5.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>57</sup> Strickland, *Saracens, Demons, and Jews*, 159.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> In his book, *Kitab al-I'tibar* (The book of learning by example), Usāma bin al-Munqith gives accounts of his direct interactions with the crusaders in time of war and peace. He was a noble man, a poet, and a knight who traveled across the Levant and was in direct contact with people of influence during his lifetime, like the famous Saladin.

<sup>60</sup> Usāma bin al-Munqith, *كتاب الاعتبار Kitab al-I'tibar* [The book of learning by example] (Amman, Jordan: Al-Maktab al-Islami, 2003), 96–193.

<sup>61</sup> Ibn Jubayr, *رحلة ابن جبير Reḥlat Ibn Jubayr* [Ibn Jubayr’s travel] (Beirut, Lebanon: Dar al-Kitab al-Lubnani, 1985), 211.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 210–215.

To conclude, it is not surprising for images of monsters and *maskhs* to enter the lexicon of profanity and offensive language. Monsters and *maskhs* express people's anxieties, fears, desires, and prejudices toward the Other. They are part of human nature that practices its Othering through an instrument of fear that is enrooted in ignorance. As time progresses, other interpretations of monsters/*maskhs* appear. In the Age of Discovery, for instance, especially with the discovery of the Americas, a racial monster begins to take shape in the West. The term *maskh* will evolve into its modern, secular version, *wāḥṣ* (وَحْش), to continue its expression of inferiority and anxiety. Monsters and *maskhs* are liminal creatures. The fall of empires and the rise of the nation-state create new kinds of borders. These borders allow for new kinds of political monsters and *wāḥṣ* to emerge and to maintain glimpses of a bygone medieval Otherness that still finds a footing in the twenty-first century. A