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“COBRAS DA ÍNDIA DE DUAS CABEÇAS NÃO FAZEM MAL”
CODEX CASANATENSE 1889, Fl. 91

by
PETER MASON*

Più non si vanti Libia con sua rena;
ché se chelidri, iaculi e faree
produce, e cencri con anfisibena
DANTE, *Inferno*, XXIV, 85-87.

In describing what has come to be known as the juggernaut, the chariot bearing a Hindu idol that was carried in procession and was said to crush devotees under its wheels, the author of *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* drew an explicit parallel with the world of Christianity, which was, in his view, in urgent need of moral reform: “And truly they suffer so much pain and mortification of their bodies for love of that idol that hardly would any Christian man suffer the half – nay, not a tenth – for love of Our Lord Jesus Christ”.¹ Several folios of the *Codex Casanatense* depict various forms of human sacrifice too, including not only the juggernaut (fl. 78) but also a Brahman carrying a decapitated head on a platter that is reminiscent of the fate of St John the Baptist (fl. 86).² Between such scenes and one showing three multiple-armed deities (fl. 92), we find a half-sheet (fl. 91) showing a Brahman climbing a mountain and another half-sheet (fl. 92) with a tree, perhaps a banana tree, and three snakes. Clearly these sheets do not belong together, as the presence of a loose arm on the left-hand sheet indicates, but if they were originally in this position in the codex, a European viewer might be forgiven for having wished to read them in the light of such parallels with

* Independent scholar. Rome.

¹ J. MANDEVILLE, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, trad. C. W. R. D. Moseley, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1983, p. 126.

² BIBLIOTECA CASANATENSE, Rome, Ms. 1889 (*Figurae variae cum hominum, tum animalium Asiae et Africae in lingua Lusitana*).

Christianity too. After all, a serpent and a tree (or rather, two trees) feature in the oldest story of the Christian Bible; if the tree is to be identified as a banana tree, its scientific name *Musa sapientium* alludes to its identity with the Tree of Wisdom and its fruit is associated with the forbidden fruit that Eve offered to Adam.³

However, while there was a *tree* of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden, we are here confronted by *serpents* of opposing qualities, as one is harmless and the other two are deadly.⁴ Moreover, the serpent at the bottom of the picture is not biting its own tail, as in the classical symbol of eternal life, but is outstretched horizontally and has a head at each end of its body. We shall therefore find ourselves on firmer ground if we leave the position of folio 91 within the codex (its syntagmatic aspect) out of account for present purposes, and concentrate on earlier and later representations of the two-headed serpent (the paradigmatic aspect). The existence of such a creature has been called into question on many occasions. An examination of some of these will help to establish the credibility of the visual evidence presented in this folio, which in turn reflects on the credibility of the images contained in the rest of the codex.

Folio 91 of the *Codex Casanatense* shows two hooded rattlesnakes on either side of a plant or tree (Fig. C27). Below it, in between the tree and some vegetation with red flowers that frequently occurs on the other folios, is a snake labelled as follows: “cobras da india de duas cabeças não fazem mal”. There is a very pointed contrast between the venomous rattlesnakes and the innocuous two-headed serpent. Indeed, the symmetry of the composition as a whole suggests an origin in heraldry rather than direct observation of the natural world, and its claims to verisimilitude have been called into question. In what follows I shall suggest a different reading.

In a very useful article on the illustration of exotic animals in sixteenth-century Portugal, Palmira Fontes da Costa concludes that the inclusion of this creature in the codex “testifies to the fact that not all representations were based on direct observation” and adds: “Moreover, the rare and the unexpected was still associated with the East”.⁵ It is easy to understand the reluctance of a scholar writing in the twenty-first century to accept the possibility of the existence of such a creature, and therefore to accept that the illustration of one might be based on direct observation. Indeed, doubts about the possibility of the existence of such a creature were already raised many centuries earlier. On the other hand, there is a long, if uneven, history

³ P. WAGENER, “O mundo das plantas nos quadros de Eckhout”, in E. de Vries (ed.), *Albert Eckhout volta ao Brasil 1644-2002, Simpósio Internacional de Especialistas*, São Paulo, 2002, pp. 105-115.

⁴ The first mention of the deadly bite of the hooded rattlesnake by a Portuguese writer is in the *Suma oriental* of the royal apothecary Tomé Pires, written between 1512 and 1515.

⁵ P. Fontes da COSTA, “Secrecy, Ostentation, and the Illustration of Exotic Animals in Sixteenth-Century Portugal”, *Annals of Science*, Vol. 66, n. 1, 2009, pp. 59-82, here p. 66.

of alleged sightings of serpents with a head at each end of their body – known in the ancient world as *amphisbaenae*⁶ – that extends down to a surprisingly late date. So in order to assess the credibility of the illustrator of the *Codex Casanatense*, we have to consider the fact that he was not alone in representing what seems to be an impossible being.

Consideration of alleged imaginary beings in a sixteenth-century codex has to start from an examination of what was taken to belong to the realms of possibility at the time, irrespective of present-day beliefs, claims or prejudices upheld by scientists or others.⁷ In a volume of essays that may be said to mark a turning-point in the study of natural history, William Ashworth Jr. has written:

Natural history in the Renaissance was an area of study that bore little resemblance to our modern notions of the discipline. Renaissance natural historians had reasons for studying nature and ways of writing about nature that contrast strongly with our own. The Renaissance approach is well worth understanding, since it sheds a great deal of light on Renaissance culture as a whole, but to appreciate it properly we must put aside all preconceptions of what natural history should be and allow ourselves to encounter Renaissance natural history on its own terms. We need to forget everything we know about zoology and comparative anatomy and taxonomy and be willing to entertain approaches that seem to venture far beyond the pale of what we consider science. If we can manage this, however, we will be richly rewarded. The Renaissance view of the natural world was more densely layered and more intricately interwoven than ours, and it can be a great pleasure to reconstruct that view and perhaps dwell within its sight for a brief while.⁸

To clear one matter aside, we are not here concerned with serpents with multiple heads as such. For instance, the author of a *Liber Monstrorum*, probably dating from the eighth century, included in his treatment of serpents a category of Indian serpents with two or three heads.⁹ The Herculean Hydra is merely a multi-headed version of the same typology. Indeed, Thomas Browne found such a multiplicity of heads at one end of the body easier to accept than the existence of heads at opposite ends of the body: "And therefore this duplicity was ill contrived to place one head at both extrems, and had been

⁶ The first mention in Greek literature is in the fifth-century BC *Agamemnon* of Aeschylus, line 1233, where it is used for comparison with the monstrous nature of Clytemnestra for her role in the murder of her husband Agamemnon.

⁷ Cf. P. MASON, "Dos o tres cosas que sé acerca de los animales llamados imaginarios", in *Historia Naturalis De Quadrupedibus de Johannes Jonstonus. Estudios y traducción de la edición facsimilar*, Burgos, Ediciones Siloé, 2013, pp. 131-151.

⁸ W. ASHWORTH JR, "Emblematic natural history of the Renaissance", in N. Jardine, J. A. Secord and E. C. Spary (ed.), *Cultures of Natural History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, pp. 17-37, here p. 17.

⁹ F. PORSIA, *Liber Monstrorum (Secolo IX)*, Napoli, Liguori Editore, 2012, pp. 338-339 (though note the author's concluding words: "Among the serpents that I have described here, some are authentic, others are far from every truth", *Ibid.*, pp. 374-375).

more tolerable to have settled three or four at one. And therefore also Poets have been more reasonable than Philosophers, and *Geryon* or *Cerberus* less monstrous than *Amphisbaena*".¹⁰ For the most salient feature of the *amphisbaena* is the presence of a head *at each extremity of the body*. The Greek etymology of the word refers to the capacity to *move* (*bainein*) in two (opposite) directions, hence the most striking feature of the *amphisbaena* is its peculiar mode of locomotion. Claudius Aelianus, a Roman who wrote seventeen books *On the Characteristics of Animals* in Greek in the second century AD, resolved the problem in the following manner (IX, 23): "When it advances, as need for a forward movement impels it, it leaves one end behind to serve as tail, while the other it uses as a head. Then again if it wants to move backwards, it uses the two heads in exactly the opposite manner from what it did before". The sixteenth-century Bolognese polymath Ulisse Aldrovandi even mentions a serpent from Ceylon with no less than four heads that is capable of moving in the direction of all four points of the compass.¹¹

A very early reference to a double-headed serpent can be found in an ancient Near Eastern text relating to Esarhaddon's march through the desert to Egypt in 671 BC, though, as Stephanie West has pointed out, it is not clear whether the reptile's two heads are both at the same end or each at one. She adds that the sand-boa, whose distribution extends to India, is often exhibited as a snake with a head at each end of its body by snake-charmers, although the existence of a second head is spurious; belief in it is facilitated by the existence of a very short, thick and blunt tail, which, if carefully manipulated, might be mistaken for a second head.¹²

The Spanish-born poet Marcus Annaeus Lucanus mentions that a trade in Egyptian reptiles developed between Egypt and Italy in his own time – the first century AD –,¹³ and no doubt a growing interest in and familiarity with such exotic imports lies behind the catalogue of deadly snakes that attacked the army of Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus as it marched through Libya to be found in the ninth book of Lucanus' *Pharsalia*. This is the context in which Lucanus refers to the *amphisbaena*: according to his account – which Walter Benjamin singled out as one of the "scenes of horror" in the poem¹⁴ –, it was one of the snakes born from Medusa's blood that dripped onto the Libyan desert as Perseus flew through the air carrying the Gorgon's head.¹⁵

¹⁰ Thomas BROWNE, *Pseudodoxia Epidemica*, London, [1646], 6th ed. 1672, III.xv.

¹¹ U. ALDROVANDI, *Serpentum, et draconum historiae libri duo*, Bologna, 1640, p. 239. The work was published posthumously.

¹² S. WEST, "The amphisbaena's antecedents", *The Classical Quarterly (New Series)*, Vol. 56, n. 1, 2006, pp. 290-291.

¹³ M. A. LUCANUS, *Pharsalia*, IX, 706-707; see L. BODSON, "A Python, *Python sebae* (Gmelin, 1789), for the King: The Third Century B.C. Herpetological Expedition to Aithiopia", *Bonner zoologische Beiträge*, Vol. 52, n. 3-4, 2004, pp. 181-191.

¹⁴ W. BENJAMIN, *The Arcades Project*, trans. H. Eiland and K. McLaughlin, Cambridge and London, Belknap Press, 1999, p. 324.

¹⁵ "[...] et grauis in geminum uergens caput *amphisbaena*», LUCANUS, op. cit., IX, 719.

To these poetic sources we can add the testimony of Plinius and other prose writers, some of whom add that its eyes shine like lanterns.¹⁶ Later works like the illustrated *Hortus Sanitatis*, published by Jacob Meydenbach in Mainz in 1491, essentially echo the same ancient and medieval sources (Fig. 1).¹⁷



The persistence in the sixteenth century of medieval models from the bestiaries can be seen in an illustration of a two-headed *amphisbaena* among the miniatures of animals added at some time in the century to an earlier manuscript *De omnium animalium naturis atque formis* by Pietro Candido Decembrio.¹⁸ But it is in the same sixteenth century – when our codex was produced – that the age of geographical explorations brings with it fresh reports of the *amphisbaena*. The naturalist Pierre Belon, who in the course of his travels through the Middle East in the middle of the century had the opportunity to dissect the serpents of Lemnos, noted the persistence of the ancient Greek term to refer to a type of serpent found on the island.¹⁹ But

¹⁶ For a survey of the ancient and medieval *literary* sources, see Cl. LECOUEUX, *Les monstres dans la littérature allemande du moyen âge*, Göppingen, Kümmerle, Vol. II, 1982, p. 167; for the medieval *visual* sources, see W. GEORGE and B. YAPP, *The Naming of the Beasts. Natural History in the Medieval Bestiary*, London, Duckworth, 1991, pp. 199-200.

¹⁷ The amphisbaena is illustrated and described in this work in chapter ix of the *Liber de Animalibus*.

¹⁸ BIBLIOTECA APOSTOLICA VATICANA, Cod. Urb. Lat. 276. The original manuscript was dedicated to Ludovico II Gonzaga. The *amphisbaena* is reproduced in *Einhorn und Nachtigall. Die 200 schönsten Miniaturen aus dem Tierbuch des Petrus Candidus*, Stuttgart and Zürich, Belser, 1993, p. 74.

¹⁹ P. BELON, *Les observations de plusieurs singularitez et choses memorables...*, Paris, 1588, fl. 71. There is a modern edition: *Voyage au Levant (1553). Les Observations de Pierre Belon du*

it is above all the new world of the Americas that provides startling new evidence for the existence of the *amphisbaena* based on direct observation.

A word of caution is due at this point. On the American continent we have to deal with the fact that several Mexican and Andean cultures featured bicephalous beings in their mythologies. One of the most famous Meso-american items in the British Museum is a ceremonial object consisting of a turquoise mosaic of a serpent with a head at either end of its body,²⁰ its twin heads perhaps stemming from the ambiguity of the Nahuatl term *coatl*, which may refer to both serpent and twin.²¹ Serpents with their double heads facing in opposite directions are also to be found as bracelets and anklets on the monumental sculpture of the goddess Coyolxauhqui from the Templo Mayor in Mexico City.²² Bicephalous serpents with a head at each end of their body also feature in pre-Columbian ceramics such as Moche ceramics from the coastal plains of Peru, where they are associated with the rainbow,²³ and in ceramics from the Valle Santa María (1000-1470 AD) in North-West Argentina (Fig. 2). There is thus a risk that mythological beings might end up as imports in or influences on the natural historical record.

However, the most striking aspect of reports of *amphisbaenae* from the Americas in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is the emphasis on the veracity of the account and, when accompanied by an image, of the image



Mans, ed. A. Merle, Paris, Chandeigne, 2001, in which the *amphisbaenae* of Lemnos appear on p. 128.

²⁰ C. McEwan, *Ancient Mexico in the British Museum*, London, The British Museum, 1994, p. 80.

²¹ C. McEwan and L. LÓPEZ LUJÁN (ed.), *Moctezuma Aztec Ruler*, London, The British Museum, 2009, p. 239.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

²³ M. LÓPEZ-BARALT, "The *Yana K'uychi* or Black Rainbow in Atawallpa's Elegy: a look at the Andean metaphor of liminality in a cultural context", in E. Magaña and P. MASON (ed.), *Myth and the Imaginary in the New World*, Amsterdam, CEDLA, 1986, pp. 261-303, here p. 267.

too. Thus after referring to Plinius and Galenus, Ulisse Aldrovandi refers to a Jesuit authority writing from Brazil in 1560 about the existence of a crab-like serpent in Brazil with two heads of unequal sizes, though he does not illustrate the creature.²⁴ A contemporary, Pêro de Magalhães Gândavo, mentions the deadly bite of the two-headed *hebijara* in his *História da Província de Santa Cruz*.²⁵ During the same period, fray Bernardino de Sahagún shut himself up in the Colegio de Santa Cruz in Tlatelolco, to enrich his *Historia General* with information from local informants and experts.²⁶ He reported the existence of a Mexican *amphisbaena* with a head and a mouth at each end of its body and four black stripes on its back.²⁷ Reports from Brazil of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries continue to attest to the presence of two-headed serpents there.²⁸

An important eye-witness is the Dominican Pietro de Aloaysa, a native of Lima, who had written a book about the activities of his order in the Americas and with whom the Lincean Johannes Faber had several delightful conversations in Rome in the year 1626.²⁹ The most striking of these for present purposes is Faber's account of the reaction of the friar when the German physician showed him a picture of an *amphisbaena*:

That serpent which I saw among us in 1623 was not very different from this, it is a snake with two heads, while the rest of its body is marked with blackened and red scales. It is so terrible that there is no cure for its bite.³⁰

It would be hard to overestimate the importance of the first-hand testimony that such persons brought with them from the Americas to Rome. Not only could they corroborate or refute reports that circulated in Europe on the basis of their own experience, but we may suppose that they were an important channel through which local, native knowledge about the New World

²⁴ U. ALDROVANDI, *op. cit.*, p. 239.

²⁵ Pêro de Magalhães GÂNDAVO, *Tratado da Terra do Brasil. História da Província de Santa Cruz*, Belo Horizonte/São Paulo, Itatiaia/EDUSP, 1980, p. 60.

²⁶ See especially J. PARDO TOMÁS, "Conversion medicine: communication and circulation of knowledge in the Franciscan convent and college of Tlatelolco, 1527-1577", *Quaderni storici*, 142, Vol. XLVIII, n. 1, 2013, pp. 21-42.

²⁷ B. de SAHAGÚN, *Historia General*, XI, 79; cf. M. DE ASÚA and R. FRENCH, *A New World of Animals. Early Modern Europeans on the Creatures of Iberian America* Aldershot, Ashgate, 2005, p. 46.

²⁸ For the seventeenth century, see Fr. Vicente do SALVADOR, *História do Brasil*, Belo Horizonte/São Paulo, Itatiaia/EDUSP, 1980, p. 72. The *ibijara* is among the six types of *cobra* mentioned by the Jesuit Anselm Eckart in the eighteenth century, see N. PAPAVERO *et al.*, "As notas do Padre Anselm Eckhart, S.J., sobre alguns animais do Estado do Grão-Pará e Maranhão (1785)", *Boletim do Museu Paraense Emilio Goeldi. Ciências Humanas*, Vol. 6, n. 3, 2011, pp. 593-609, here p. 603 and n. 83.

²⁹ *Rerum Medicarum Novae Hispaniae Thesaurus*, Roma, 1651, p. 695. See especially G. GABRIELE, *Contributi alla storia della Accademia dei Lincei*, Rome, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1989, pp. 1567-1576.

³⁰ *Rerum Medicarum Novae Hispaniae Thesaurus*, *op. cit.*, p. 799.

was transmitted to the Old World. Faber and other Linceans could evidently be expected to take advantage of the presence of such expert knowledge in Rome in and immediately after the Holy Year of 1625 to fill the gaps in their own knowledge.

Faber tells in detail how his ideas on one particular creature were shaken by a stop press arrival. That creature, introduced to Faber through the mediation of Cassiano dal Pozzo, was an *amphisbaena*. Faber was writing his explanatory comments on the woodcut of a *Maquiztetzauhuatl* or *Amphisbaena mexicana* (Fig. 3).



Although the creature in the illustration has only one head, he plunges into a lengthy discussion of both the fear and the veneration of serpents in antiquity and on their venom, before moving on to the question of whether it is possible for creatures with two heads to exist:

For what exceeds the bounds of nature and the order of created things more than to paint, or even to draw, let alone to observe a living animal with two heads, not in one place, as is often seen in monsters, but one where the head is naturally placed, and the other where the tail is accustomed to be [...]?³¹

The question was to plague Nieremberg in the same decade, when he tried to decide whether, if the soul was located in the head, an *amphisbaena* could be considered to have two souls or one.³² Faber's ruminations were of a more down-to-earth kind. After citing a host of ancient and medieval authorities, some credulous and some critical, he raises doubts of a more logico-medical kind about the impossibility of the organ by which food is digested coinciding with the organ by which it is expelled from the body, and

³¹ Ibid., p. 792.

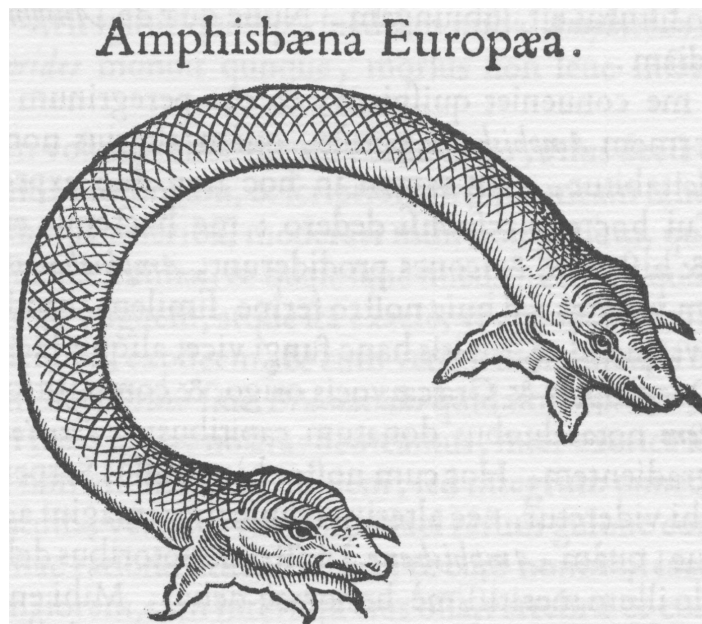
³² J. R. MARCAIDA LÓPEZ, *Juan Eusebio Nieremberg y la ciencia del Barroco. Conocimiento y representación de la naturaleza en la España del siglo XVII*, diss. Ph. D., Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, Madrid, 2011, p. 56.

about the possibility of the creature’s being driven in two opposite directions at the same time. This in turn leads him into the intricacies of vertebrate and invertebrate motion.³³

At this point he receives a revelation:

Completely unexpected and contrary to my opinion, the illustrious Cavaliere Cassiano dal Pozzo, one of our Lyncei, showed me a most accurate image of an *Amphisbaena* rendered in its proper colours. He declared that, in this very week in which I had entrusted the above pages to the typesetter for printing, it had been brought to Paris, and that a representation had been made from the animal itself by a certain friend of his with a great curiosity in exotic things, and sent to him.³⁴

Both exhilarated and embarrassed, Faber recants. He launches into a disquisition on the necessity of having the humility to change one’s mind when faced with the limitless possibilities of the divine creation. If the Creator chooses to create an *Amphisbaena*, so be it. Even though the German physician has never seen a head like it on any live or dead serpent, nor in any drawing or painting of one, he instructs the engraver to make a woodcut of Cassiano’s image for publication in the *Mexican Thesaurus* (Fig. 4).³⁵



Both Faber and Cesi were well aware of the shortcomings of the technique of woodcut illustration, and they regretted the obstacles, particularly of an economic kind, which barred them access to the higher quality of

³³ *Rerum Medicarum Novae Hispaniae Thesaurus*, op. cit., pp. 793-795.

³⁴ Ibid., p. 796. Cassiano had already commissioned an illustration of a “serpe stravagantissimo”, in Paris in the previous year; see G. GABRIELE, *Il carteggio linceo*, Roma, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1996, p. 1061 [Dal Pozzo to Faber, August 1625].

³⁵ *Rerum Medicarum Novae Hispaniae Thesaurus*, op. cit., p. 797.

printmakers on the other side of the Alps.³⁶ It is therefore difficult to deduce from the rather rudimentary woodcut of the *Amphisbaena europaea* what the drawing made for Cassiano will have looked like. Incidentally, the fairly close parallel between this woodcut and the image of an *amphisbaena* on folio 234 of the *Fish Book* of the Dutch beachcomber Adriaen Coenen, written between 1577 and 1579, suggests that Faber's woodcut goes back to a sixteenth-century original, possibly deriving, like many of Coenen's images, from a popular pamphlet of the time.³⁷ At all events, given the combined scientific and aesthetic interests of the Cavaliere and the high quality of the images preserved in his *Paper Museum*, it may be assumed that the original drawing was of a sufficiently high and convincing quality for Cassiano to have been prepared to pass it on to a trained physician.³⁸ Cassiano's drawing must have seemed to confirm the Dominican's eye-witness testimony.³⁹

We can securely place the artist Pieter Paul Rubens in the same circle of learned friends. He and Johannes Faber had both arrived in Italy from the North in 1600. As Faber tells us in the *Mexican Treasure*, he had cured Rubens of a serious pleurisy during the latter's stay in Rome. As a token of gratitude, the Flemish painter had given him a portrait and a painting of a cock inscribed with the words "For my [recovered] health, to the illustrious doctor Johannes Faber, my Aesculapius, I – once condemned – willingly pay my debt of gratitude".⁴⁰ The learned allusion contained in these words to the dying words of Socrates ("Kriton, we owe a cock to Asclepius; please pay it and don't let it pass") as recorded by Plato in the *Phaidon*,⁴¹ is evidence not only of the close ties of friendship between the two men, but also of the

³⁶ I. BAÇLDRIGA, *L'occhio della lince. I primi Lincei tra arte, scienza e collezionismo (1603-1630)*, Roma, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 2002, pp. 235-237.

³⁷ On Adriaen Coenen and his writings, see F. EGMOND and P. MASON, *The Mammoth and the Mouse. Microhistory and Morphology*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997; and Idem (ed.), *The Whale Book of Adriaen Coenen, 1585*, London, Reaktion, 2003.

³⁸ A completely different, but unconvincing, interpretation of this episode is offered in D. FREEDBERG, *The Eye of the Lynx*, Chicago, Chicago University Press, 2002, pp. 361-365.

³⁹ For a fuller discussion of this episode, see P. MASON, *Before Disenchantment. Images of exotic animals and plants in the early modern world*, London, Reaktion, 2009, Chapter 5.

⁴⁰ "PRO SALUTE V C. Ioanni Fabro M.D. Aesculapio meo, olim damnatus L. M. votum solvo", *Rerum Medicarum Novae Hispaniae Thesaurus*, op. cit., p. 831. A large painting of a cock, *The Rooster and the Jewel*, in the Städtisches Suermondt-Ludwig-Museum in Aachen, has been brought into connection with this anecdote, although it lacks the dedication; see P. C. SUTTON, cat. entry n. 118, in P. C. Sutton et al., *The Age of Rubens*, Ghent, Ludion, 1993, p. 560; G. GABRIELE, *Contributi*, op. cit., Vol. II, p. 1579.

⁴¹ Interpretation of Socrates' words as recorded by Plato has, not surprisingly, provoked scholarly dissent. For a review of the different lines of approach and the suggestion that they refer to Plato's recovery from illness, see G. W. MOST, "A Cock for Asclepius", *The Classical Quarterly (New Series)*, Vol. 43, n. 1, 1993, pp. 96-111. For their general interpretation in a spiritual sense in the Renaissance, see E. McGRATH, "The Drunken Alcibiades: Rubens's picture of Plato's *Symposium*", *Journal of the Courtauld and Warburg Institutes*, Vol. 46, 1983, pp. 228-235, especially note 39.

interest in Neo-Stoicism – and thus reverence for Seneca – that they shared with Philip Rubens and other members of the Lincei.⁴²

This close connection between the German physician and the Flemish painter explains the presence of Faber's second *amphisbaena* (the one based on a drawing provided by Cassiano dal Pozzo) in the mythological painting *The Head of Medusa* that has been in the Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna since 1876.⁴³ Some of the other reptiles in the painting have been identified as lifelike renderings of European species, such as the fire salamander and the grass snakes or water snakes of Medusa's hair,⁴⁴ and it is known that Rubens purchased the volumes of Ulisse Aldrovandi's works of natural history as they came out to make sure that his biological knowledge was abreast of his times.⁴⁵

In attempting to account for the presence of the *amphisbaena* among such company, some critics have taken it to mark a retreat to the mythical past, rather than to be a sign of an interest in the observable phenomena of the natural world. Peter Sutton, for instance, has written about *The Head of Medusa*: "Thus hand in glove with the rigorous empirical observation that imbued naturalistic animal painting with its outward realism was a continuing recognition of the uncritical scientific theories of classical antiquity".⁴⁶ That we find an American *amphisbaena* and European reptiles in a scene purporting to be the *Libyan* desert will not have been regarded as an obstacle by a painter in search of scientifically reliable images of exotic fauna with which to populate the foreground of a painting with a mythological subject. After the sale of *The Head of Medusa* in Antwerp in 1648 had made it available

⁴² As Baldriga points out (*L'occhio*, op. cit., p. 154, n. 12), the first scholar to have emphasised the importance of this influence was Giuseppe Olmi; see the chapter "In esercizio universale di contemplazione, e pratica": Federico Cesi e l'Accademia dei Lincei", in G. OLMI, *L'inventario del mondo. Catalogazione della natura e luoghi del sapere nella prima età moderna*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1992, p. 356 n. 161. However, S. E. RENZI, "Un linceo alla sapienza: la natura del fuoco e dei metalli in un'orazione di Johannes Faber", in A. Battistini, G. de Angelis and G. Olmi (ed.), *All'origine della scienza moderna: Federico Cesi e l'Accademia dei Lincei*, Bologna, Il Mulino, 2007, pp. 271-316, questions the total hegemony of Neo-Stoic thought in Rome during this period and mentions Faber's critique of the Neo-Stoics in his oration of 1622.

⁴³ S. FERINO-PAGDEN, *I cinque sensi nell'arte. Immagini del sentire*, [Cremona], 1996, p. 56. The identity of the painter or painters is not without controversy: while the traditional and earliest attribution is to Peter Paul Rubens and Frans Snyders, Rubens' assistant has also been variously identified as Jan Brueghel the Elder or Paulus de Vos; and the possibility that Rubens was quite capable of painting the canvas without any assistance at all has also been raised. For discussion of the various theses see A. T. WOOLLETT and A. VAN SUCHTELEN, *Rubens & Brueghel. A Working Friendship*, Los Angeles, J. Paul Getty Museum, 2006, catalogue entry n. 24.

⁴⁴ P. C. SUTTON, op. cit., identifications by Dr José Rosado of the Museum of Comparative Zoology, Harvard University.

⁴⁵ J. M. MULLER, "Rubens's Collection in History", in K. L. Belkin and F. Healy (ed.), *A House of Art. Rubens as Collector*, Antwerp, Rubenshuis, 2004, pp. 10-85, here p. 33.

⁴⁶ P. C. SUTTON, op. cit. The *amphisbaena* was already spotted by A. BALIS, "Facetten van de Vlaamse dierenschilderkunst van de 15de tot de 17de eeuw", in *Het aards paradijs. Dierenvoorstellingen in de Nederlanden van de 16de en de 17de eeuw*, Antwerp Zoo, Antwerp, 1982, p. 45.

for other artists to copy, we find the same *amphisbaena* in the lateral panel “Angola” of *Asia* by Jan van Kessel the Elder, painted around 1664-1666, while other creatures from *The Head of Medusa* are recycled in the panel representing “Arkhangelsk” in the same painting.⁴⁷ By now the geographical references in these panels have clearly become entirely aleatory.⁴⁸ As we have seen, the literary source that connects an *amphisbaena* with the head of Medusa is the *Pharsalia* by Marcus Annaeus Lucanus, on which Dante also drew.⁴⁹ Always eager to display his classical erudition, Rubens will have hoped that at least some viewers of the painting would recognise the allusion to a recondite source, since the detail of the *amphisbaena* is not to be found in the more familiar Ovidian account of the myth.⁵⁰ The *amphisbaena* appears in other works by Rubens’ contemporaries, such as *The Cabinet of a Collector* (1617) by Frans Francken the Younger,⁵¹ where it is certainly one among a number of curiosities, but that does not make it mythical. The same artist included an *amphisbaena* lurking in the grass beside a stone bearing his signature in his *The Adoration of the Kings* (1632).⁵²

More than a century later, in 1774, in the era of the so-called Age of Enlightenment, Gerónimo Matorras, governor of the province of Tucumán in Argentina, set out to explore the territory of Gran Chaco, to pacify the indigenous population, and to settle them in *reducciones*. His chronicler, Blas Joaquín Brizuela, produced what has been called both an official report and a first-hand testimony of the events.⁵³ Some of the data contained in the “official” sections are derived from the *Descripción Corográfica del Gran Chaco Gualamba* (1733) by the Jesuit Pedro Lozano, but everything in Brizuela’s account of the sighting of a serpent with a head at either end of its body points to first-hand observation:

⁴⁷ D. Martins TEIXEIRA, *Brasil Holandês. A “Alegoria dos continentes” de Jan van Kessel “o Velho” (1626-1679)*, Rio de Janeiro, Petrobras, s.d., pp. 47 and 39 resp; M. B. MENA MARQUÉS (ed.), *La Belleza encerrada*, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado, 2013, p. 264. “Angola” was also reproduced in C. LUZ, *Das exotische Tier in der europäischen Kunst*, Stuttgart, Cantz, 1987, p. 175.

⁴⁸ On the concept of the exotic genre see P. MASON, *Infelicities. Representations of the Exotic*, Baltimore and London, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998, pp. 16-41.

⁴⁹ “[...] et grauis in geminum uergens caput amphisbaena”, LUCANUS, op. cit., IX, 719; S. KOSLOW, “How looked the Gorgon then...’ The Science and Poetics of ‘The Head of Medusa’ by Rubens and Snyders”, in C. P. Schneider, A. I. Davies and W. W. Robinson (ed.), *Shop Talk: Studies in Honor of Seymour Slive*, New York, Arthur Schwartz, 1995, pp. 147-149.

⁵⁰ Nicolas Poussin’s practice of preferring to refer to recondite sources was similar; see P. MASON, “The letter as deferred presence. Nicolas Poussin to Paul Fréart de Chantelou, 28 April 1639” in F. BETHENCOURT and F. EGMOND (ed.), *Correspondence and Cultural Exchange in Europe, 1400-1700*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 163-186.

⁵¹ C. WHITE, *The Later Flemish Pictures in the Collection of Her Majesty the Queen*, London, Royal Collection, 2007, n. 32.

⁵² Frans II. Francken. *Die Anbetung der Könige und andere Entdeckungen*, Petersberg, Michael Imhof, 2009.

⁵³ M. PENHOS, *Ver, conocer, dominar. Imágenes de Sudamérica a fines del siglo XVIII*, Buenos Aires, Siglo Veintiuno, 2005, p. 37.

El Sargento Mayor, D. Agustín López, sujeto muy formal, dijo haber visto otra [víbora] de figura particular; pues en cada extremo de ella se hallaba una cabeza; y cuando la espantaban de un lado retrocedía sin volver el cuerpo. Se mando á un soldado por ella, y traída á nuestro real, hallamos la verdad del Sargento Mayor, de que no quedamos poco admirados.⁵⁴

The precise identification of the sergeant major, the emphasis on his reliability ("muy formal") and the verification carried out to confirm that reliability, all take us far from the province of invention and imagination. We know that Aldrovandi's *Serpentum et Draconum Historiae* was in the collection of the Jesuit Colegio Máximo in Córdoba,⁵⁵ which might have triggered interest in the *amphisbaena*, but everything in Brizuela's account suggests (or is meant to suggest) direct observation of the reptile in question.

This survey has ranged over a highly diverse range of persons and types of source material to show that military commanders, members of religious orders, intellectuals, artists and others all showed a lively interest in documenting the existence of the *amphisbaena*. For them it was not beyond the pale of what they considered science. If we are to respect the specificity of the cultural context of each of the instances that has been considered in this short contribution, it will be necessary to abandon the real/imaginary dichotomy. "Fantastic" or "imaginary" are epithets that are applied to objects which, in the opinion of the person passing judgement at that moment in time, do not correspond to his or her vision of the world.⁵⁶ The imaginary is in the eye of the observer. The historian's task, then, is to investigate the cultural context that supports or sustains belief in the existence of creatures that are considered imaginary by others (by ourselves or by the members of other cultures). Instead of attempting to purge the pages of the past of "imaginary" *Fremdkörpern*, it will be more faithful to the object of study to contemplate them in their entirety. This in turn requires a long apprenticeship in the study of the forms of representing the natural world. Seen in this light, there is nothing exceptionable about the folio of the *Codex Casanatense* under consideration, nor any need to assume that it is not the record of direct observation, however naïve its artistic interpretation may be.

⁵⁴ "Diario de Matorras", in P. de Angelis, *Colección de obras y documentos relativa a la historia antigua y moderna de las provincias del Río de la Plata*, Vol. V, Buenos Aires, Lajouanne, 1910, p. 151, cited by M. PENHOS, op. cit., p. 59.

⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 59, n. 85.

⁵⁶ P. LI CAUSI, *Sulle tracce del mantichora. La zoologia dei confini del mondo in Grecia e a Roma*, Palermo, Palumbo, 2003, pp. 9-12, 134-135.

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