

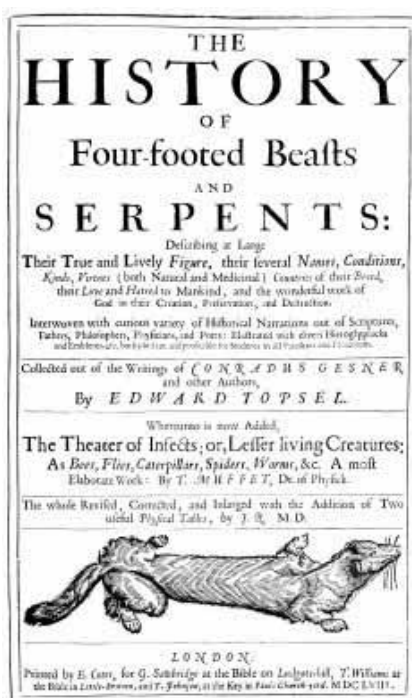
# Edward Topsell , *The History of Four-footed Beasts and Serpents*, 1658

Special Collections featured item for March 2006 by Helen Westhrop, Rare Books Library Assistant

**Topsell, Edward ca.1572-1625. *The History of Four-footed Beasts and Serpents*. London : E. Cotes for G. Sawbridge,1658**

**Item held in the Cole Library, University of Reading Library**

Edward Topsell was born in Sevenoaks, Kent and baptised in 1572. He matriculated as a sizar at Christ's College, Cambridge in 1587, and graduated BA in 1591 or 1592. He probably went on to achieve a MA before becoming a Church of England clergyman. Topsell held a variety of positions in Sussex, Hertfordshire and Northamptonshire, eventually being appointed perpetual curate of St Botolph, Aldersgate, London in 1604. He died in 1625.



Topsell wrote several books on religious and moral themes. *The reward of religion: delivered in sundrie lectures on the book of Ruth* (1596) reflects upon marriage and duty. *Time's lamentation or an exposition of the prophet Joel in sundry sermons or meditations* (1599) condemns vanity and frivolity or any worldly preoccupations. Topsell's trust in sound spiritual judgement and his belief that the ways of God are not like the ways of men is reflected in *The householder, or, perfect man: preached in three sermons* (1610).

*The historie of foure-footed beastes and serpents* is dedicated to Richard Neile, Dean of Westminster. Topsell goes to great lengths to explain that his purpose in collecting together pictures of animals and stories of their ways is to *profit and delight the reader, whereinto he may look on the holiest deities...*

This second enlarged edition contains Topsell's section on serpents (first published in 1608) and Thomas Muffett's famous work on insects, here translated from the original Latin. Each work has a separate title page.

The wood cut on the main title page is of a weasel, perhaps chosen because it conveniently fits the space available.

Some modern scholars have been critical of Topsell's contribution to natural history. Topsell was not a travelled man and makes no claim to be a naturalist. His work instead collects information out of *divine scriptures, fathers, philosophers, physicians, and poets*. Topsell relied heavily on *Historia animalium* (1551-1558) a work by the Swiss protestant encyclopaedist Conrad Gesner (1516-1565) which Topsell copies, paraphrases or edits as he thinks fit, although he openly acknowledges Gesner's contribution to his work on the title page. Gesner was arguably the greatest naturalist of his age whose book was published in four volumes. The first volume covered four-footed animals, the second amphibians, the third birds and the fourth fishes. Gesner incorporated the observations of classical scholars and those of his contemporaries. His work was made possible by the network of leading naturalists throughout Europe who sent him ideas, plants, gems and animals. Modern readers can appreciate the difficulties that Gesner and Topsell faced when gathering information but may find it strange that they include proverbs relating to the animal in question, appearances in the bible, pagan myths and hieroglyphics and that equal weight is often given to real and mythical creatures.

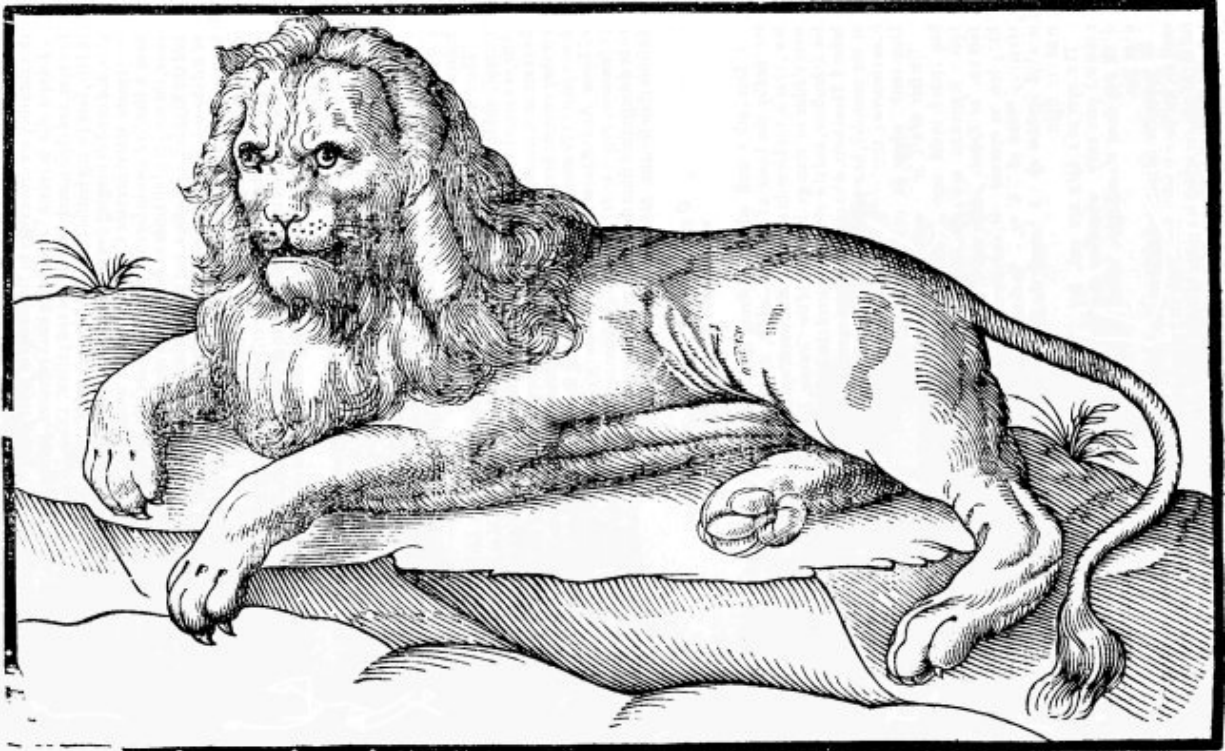
What made Gesner's work stand out was that it was the first book of its type to use illustrations. The beautiful woodcuts in Gesner's work were credited to the artist Lucas Schan of Strasburg but he probably collaborated with other artists and Gesner may also have drawn his own illustrations as well. The illustrations in both Gesner's and Topsell's books not only made their work more appealing, but less ambiguous.



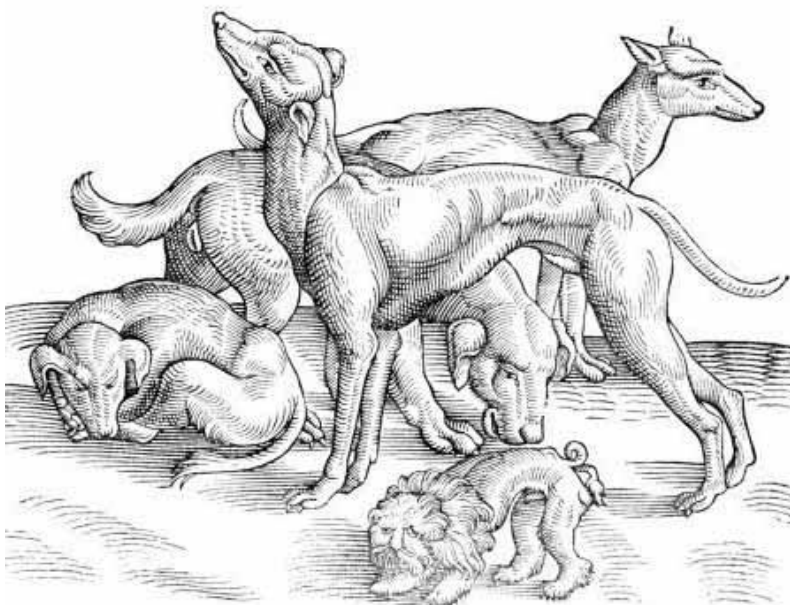
Topsell and the engraver would have had no difficulty in creating an accurate image of a cat. However here we see a rather childish impression of an overweight cat that is out of proportion with small ears, large eyes and short whiskers.

The lion [see below] has a human expression with a carefully dressed mane and demonstrates Topsell's belief that his animals have human intrinsic worth and moral qualities as well as a hatred of mankind

Topsell's introduction to his section on lions attempts some rather heavy-handed humour. The lion, he says, is *justly titled by all writers the King of Beasts*, but recalling the proverb of the ass, which was torn in pieces by a lion for failing to portion out a large enough share of meat to him, Topsell says that he had better give the lion an extra big section in his book, lest he be set upon by *illiterate and envious men, (who)... would censure me with as great severity, if I should, like an Asse, forget my self.*



Of the *DOG* in general.



Unlike the cat the dogs are lean and long and some of their heads resemble the weasel seen on the title page.

In the seventeenth century the nature, size and breed of a dog were as important as they are now and they were adapted for different uses, *some for hunting, some for war and defence, some for boar, bull or bear, some for the hare, cony, or hedgehog: ... some are smaller called hounds, beagles shepherd dogs etc.* Topsell tells us that dogs have reason and use logic in their hunting and *it is the nature of a dog, when he maketh water, to hold up his leg.*

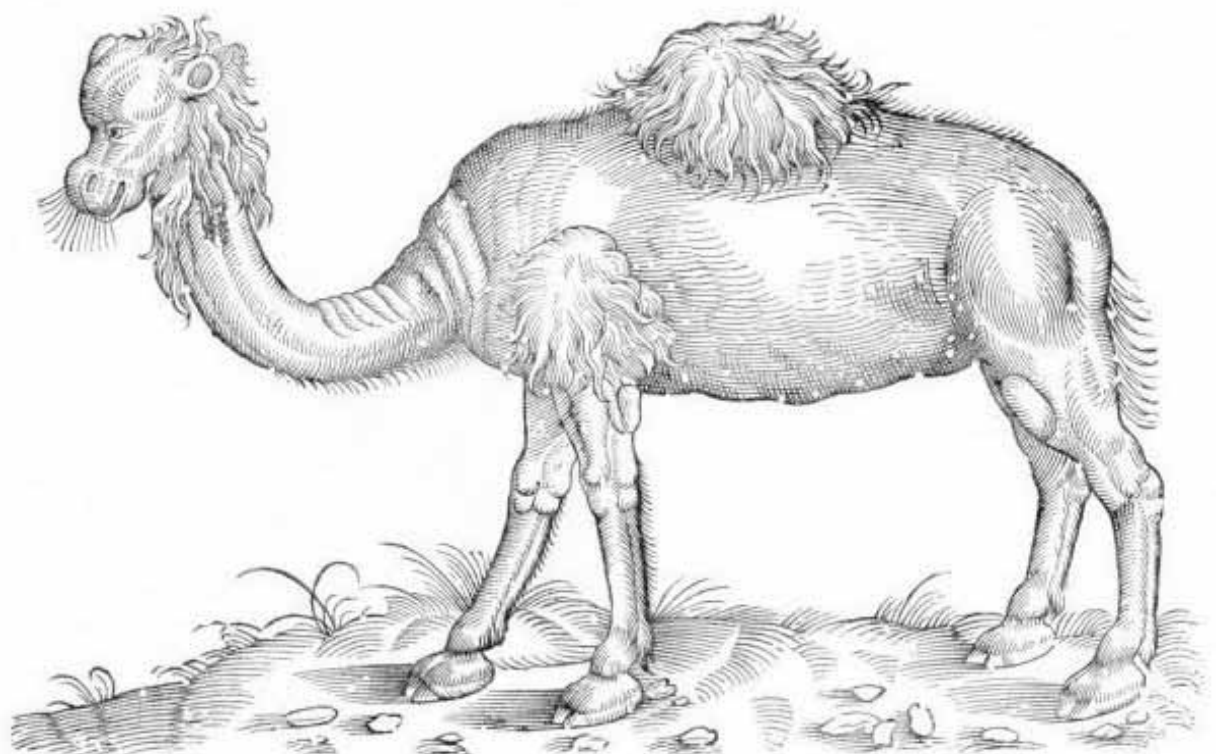
Several types of dog are described in detail, for example (see below) the Mimick or Getulian.

Of the *MIMICK*, or *GETULIAN-DOG*, and the little *MELITÆAN-DOGS* of Gentlemen.



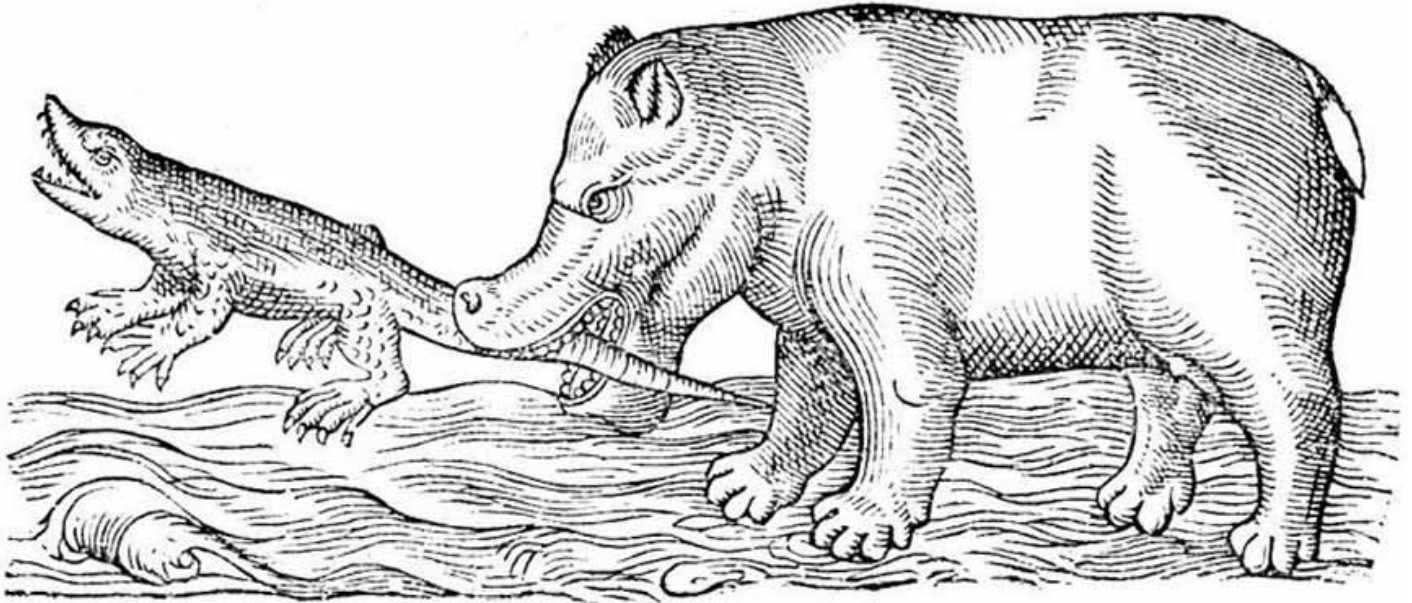
**T**Here is also in *England* two *John Cay.*  
 other sorts of Dogs, the  
 figure of the first is here expres- *The first gene-*  
 sed, being apt to imitate all *ration of Mi-*  
 things it seeth, for which cause *mick Dogs,*  
 some have thought that it was  
 conceived by an Ape; for in wit  
 and disposition it resembleth an  
 Ape, but in face sharpe and  
 black like a Hedge-hog, hav-  
 ing a short recurved body,  
 very long legs, shaggie hair,  
 and a short tail: this is cal-  
 led of some (*Canis Lucernari-*  
*us*) these being brought up with  
 Apes in their youth, learn very  
 admirable and strange feats, *The feats of*  
 whereof there were great *Dogs.*  
 plenty in *Egypt* in the time of  
 King *Ptolemy*, which were taught  
 to leap and play, and dance, at  
 the

This illustration of the dromedary [see below] looks so wrong to the modern well travelled reader as to appear humorous. The body is unmistakable but the neck and head are more reminiscent of a representation of a friendly dragon. Among Topsell's sources for the etymology of the dromedary's name as well as its size and physique are Didymus and Diodorus. We also learn that a camel is a gentle and pleasant tame beast whereof there are plenty in Africa especially in the Deserts of Lybia, Numidia and Barbary by which Africans estimate their own wealth.

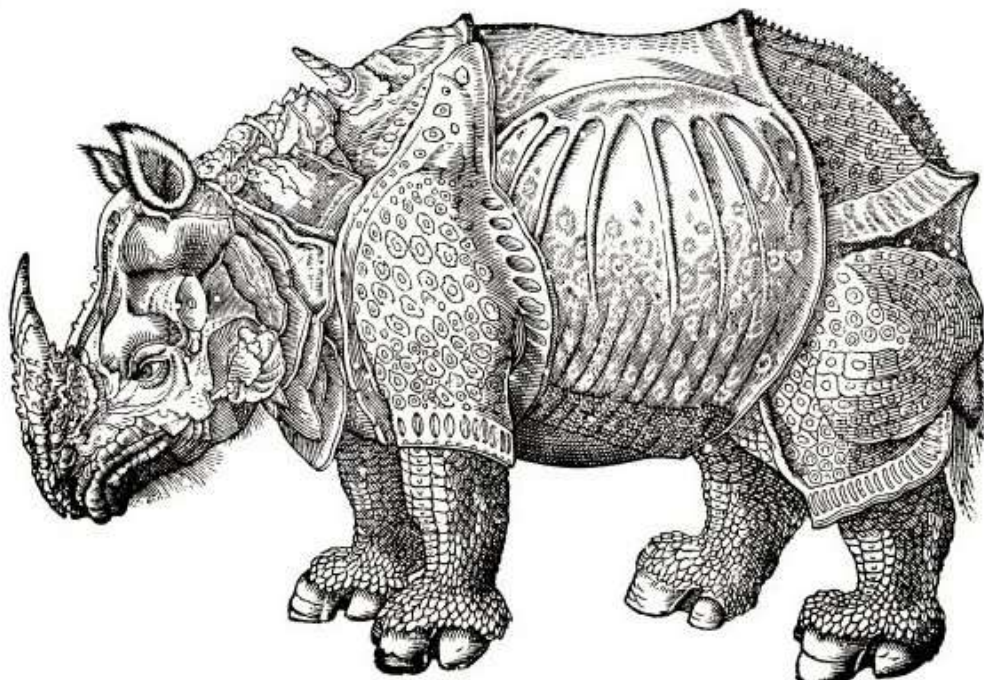




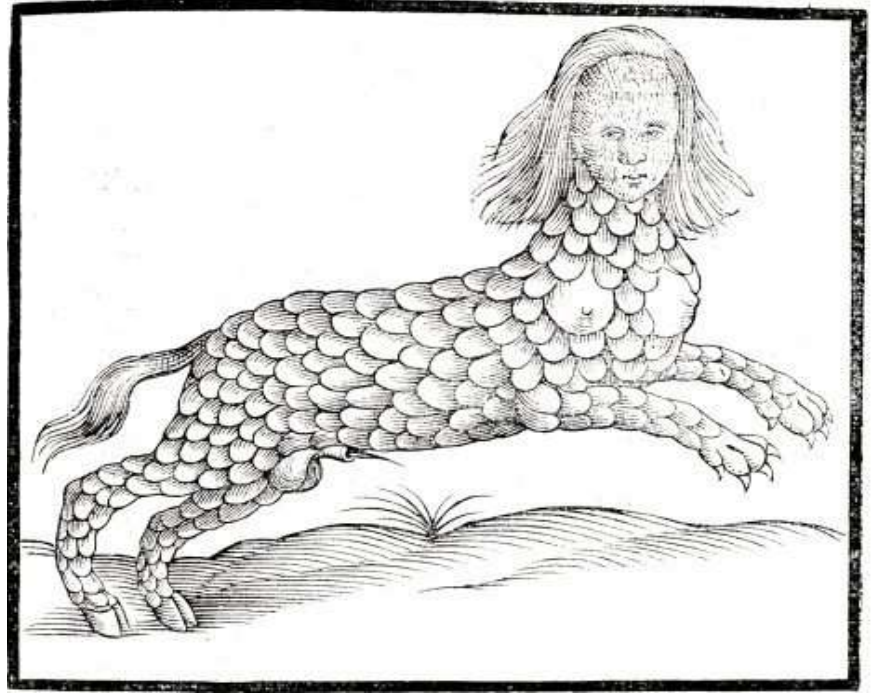
At around 120,000 words, the section on horses is the longest in Topsell's History. Incongruously it includes a small section on the sea-horse, better known to us as the hippopotamus. The sea-horse, Topsell says, is *a most ugly and filthy Beast living for the most part in the Nilus* where it devours *whatsoever cometh in the way* as can be seen from the picture below, found in a volume in the Vatican, showing a hippopotamous eating a crocodile.



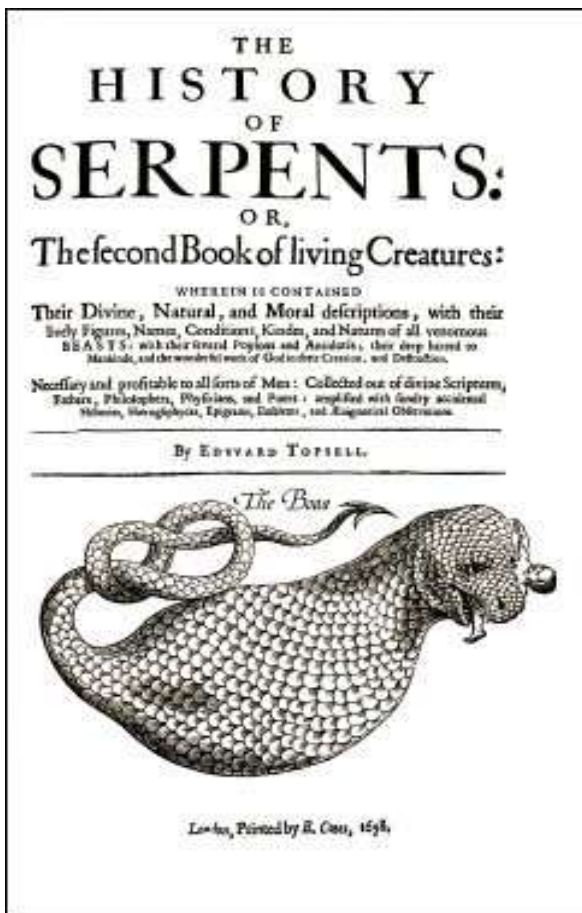
The rhinoceros on the other hand was considered to be the second wonder in nature after the elephant. In the author's opinion this creature is admirable in every way, both on the outside and also for inward courage. The illustration below is taken from a wood cut made by Albrecht Durer in 1515. It is thought that Durer produced a likeness of the Indian rhinoceros that was bought to Lisbon from India in that year. It was one of the first rhinos to reach Europe since the third century unlike the elephant which was comparatively common. Only a learned few would have recognised the rhino from Roman coins and cameos. The original woodcut, according to T.H. Clarke, shows the rhinoceros as *a sympathetic, naïve creature, with beady eyes its forelegs hobbled and chained, its folds of skin clothing it like a surcoat, the ribs, which have been likened to the spokes of an umbrella are more like an uncomfortable saddle.*



Among the real animals in this book Topsell includes the mythical Lamia (see right). According to Greek mythology; Jupiter loved Lamia, but in a jealous rage Juno deformed her and took her children. Driven mad by this, Lamia killed and ate every child that she could. The engraving shows a monster with the hind parts like a goat, the fore legs like a bear, the upper parts a woman and with a body scaled like a dragon. Topsell relates that *when they see a man, they lay open their breastes, and by the beauty*



*thereof, entice them to come neare to conference, and so, having them within their compasse, they devour and kill them.* He reports various sightings of such a beast or similar but allows that there may be no such creature or that it might be a monster compounded of beast and fish .



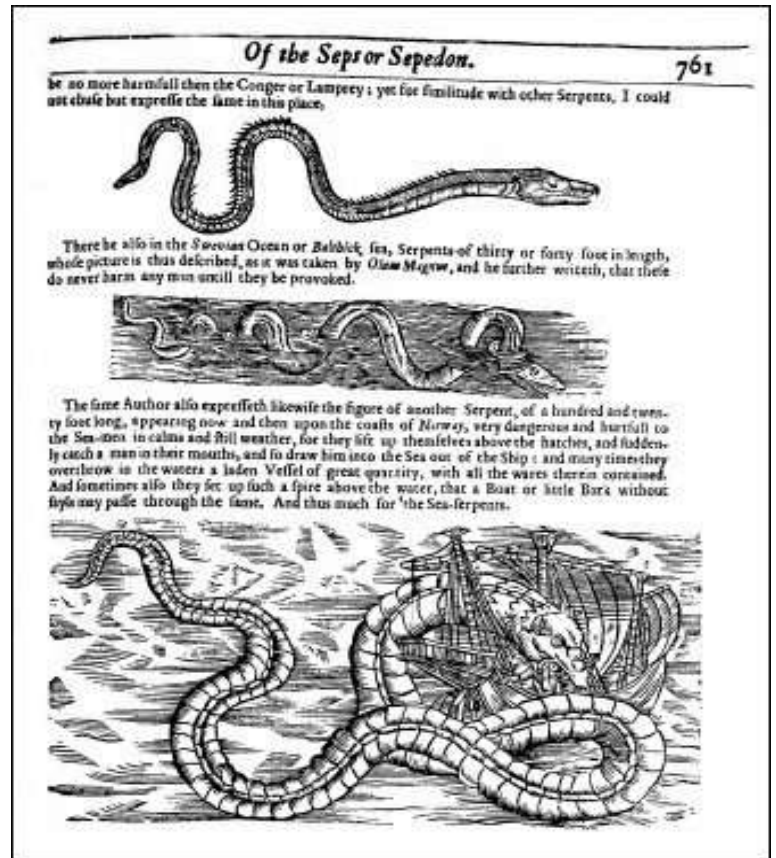
The second part of Topsell's book is *The History of serpents - A general treatise of serpents, divine, natural and moral.*

The title page features a boas in the act of swallowing a child. The boas, Topsell says, is so called by the *latines* because *by sucking cowe's milk it so increaseth.* The boas, unlike the boa constrictor which enfolds and crushes oxen, swallows its prey whole *not a bone thereof broken.* The author quotes Solinus who tells us that Claudius had a boas slain in the Vatican at Rome.

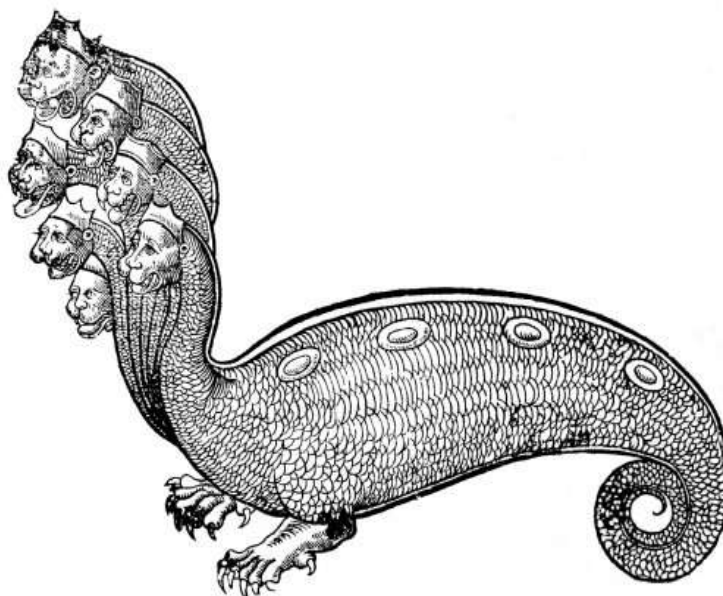
Although unlikely to be seen in a modern zoo the boas does have some similarities to the manatee sometimes called the sea cow that swims in the sea around Florida.



Serpents were 'the latest thing out' during the time of James I. On this subject Topsell has written a 'Historie' which, if not altogether truthful from our perspective, is amusing. He begins with their creation, and the biblical mentions of them, and then passes to the power of man over them in charming and taming them. He continues to tell tales to illustrate this. The page on the right gives an idea of how text and pictures are combined.



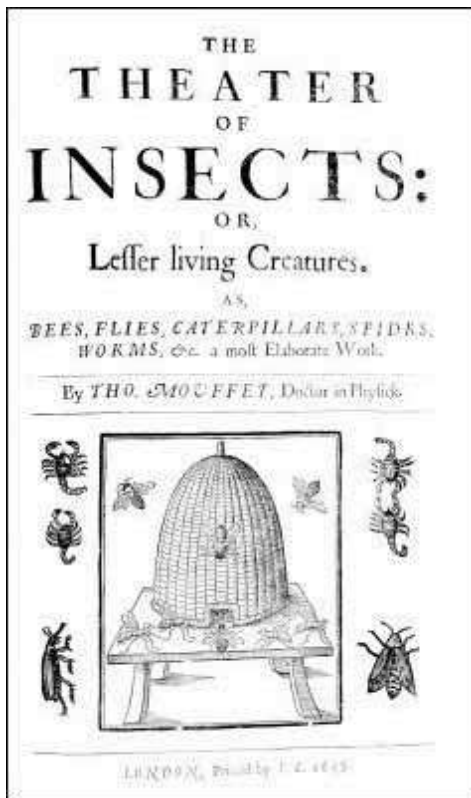
In Greek mythology the Hydra was a nine headed monster which dwelled in a marsh near



Lerna, Greece. It was a menace to all of Argos, had fatally poisonous breath and when one head was severed, grew two in its place; its central head was immortal. Hercules was sent to kill the serpent as the second of his twelve labours. He succeeded in slaying it by burning off the eight mortal heads and burying the ninth, immortal head under a huge rock.

Topsell gives some explanation of this monster's existence. A modern theory advanced by Henry Lee in his book *Sea fables*

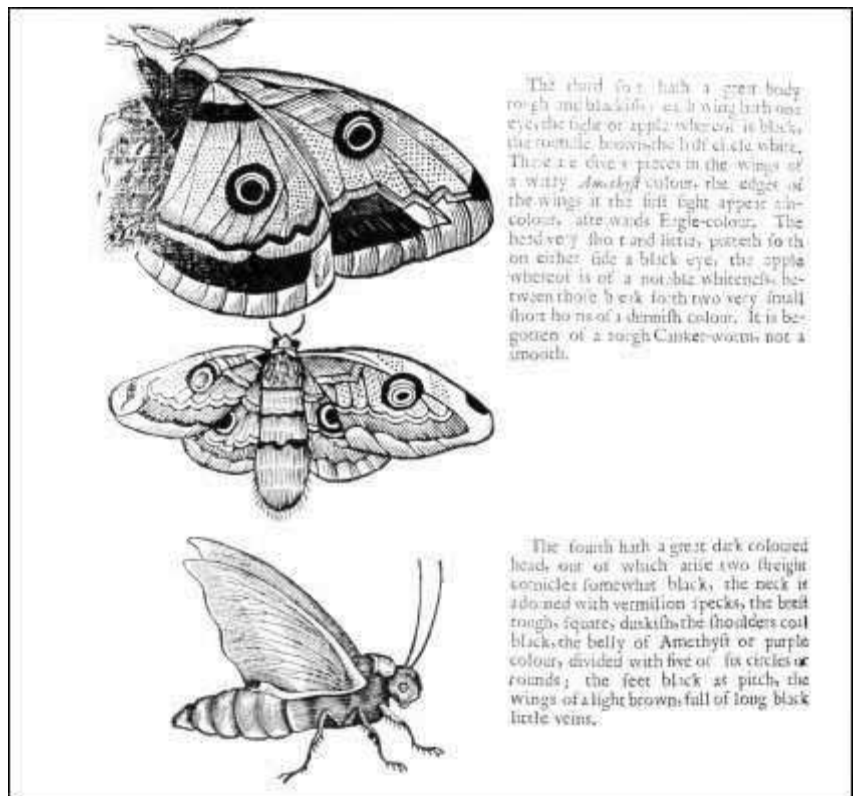
*explained* is that the Lernean hydra was probably a huge octopus



The historie of four-footed beasts collected out of the writings of Conradus Gesner is often bound with 'The theatre of insects or lesser living creatures as bees, flies, caterpillars, spiders, worms etc. a most elaborate work by Thomas Muffett.

Dr Thomas Muffett (or Moufet), an entomologist, died in 1604 and his work was published posthumously. It is said that Thomas Muffett had a daughter Patience whose encounter with a spider was immortalised in the rhyme *Little Miss Muffett*. But as this was not published until 1805 in *Songs for the nursery* the connection cannot be proved.

In 1585 Sir Walter Raleigh went to America with Thomas Harriot the astronomer, Joachim Ganz the metallurgist and John White the artist. The latter's botanical findings were published by John Gerard in his *Herball*, by Thomas Muffet in his *Theatre of Insects* and by Topsell in his *Historie*. The illustrations are evidence of close observation of actual specimens.





### The Reading University copy

This copy is part of the Cole collection but is also noteworthy as related to the Cotton Bee collection. *British bee books : a bibliography 1500-1976* by the International Bee Research Association lists this edition of Topsell's work as being *the great picture book of the seventeenth century... nearly always tattered, dog eared and imperfect*. Although this copy is not tattered and torn it has signs of age and damp. There has also been censorship of some of the pictures where genitalia have been hatched out.

The book, printed by E.[Ellen] Cotes in London 1658, is bound in full calf with marbled endpapers and gilt edgings by Riviere & Son. There is an alphabetical table of all the creatures described and also an index constructed by Dr John Rowland that contains *remedies for all diseases incident to the body of man drawn from several creatures contained in this volume* such as alopecia and colic.

### References

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