



The kraken

Anima Loci, February 2025

Until not so long ago, by sailing the northern seas, one could glimpse entire islands appearing and then suddenly vanishing among the tides. But these floating territories, at times even added to maps, may in fact have been the gargantuan body of the Kraken, a legendary monster with multiple arms, capable of sinking entire ships and whose actual existence was long debated. In this excerpt from his 1887 book *Monsters of the Sea*, author John Gibson provides a short summary of views and accounts on the unsettling animal, eventually suggesting that the apprehension and ignorance of seafarers facing the open sea could have led to the exaggeration of the features and actions of actual existent creatures.

Keywords: Animals, Folklore, Nature.

In the early days, when as yet the sea had not become the highway of the nations, little was known of the denizens of the deep. The element in which they lived, with its dangers and its depths, forbade too close a scrutiny; but it gave free play to the glowing imaginations of the dwellers by the sea, who thus manufactured monsters of their own out of the living wonders of the deep.

Such a monster was the kraken, famous in the traditions of the Scandinavian coasts. According to Pontoppidan, the Norwegian bishop, who published in 1750 an account of this mysterious sea monster, the Norse fishermen one and all affirm that when they row out several

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miles to sea, particularly in the hot summer days, they occasionally find a depth of twenty or thirty fathoms, and even less, where, from their position, they expect a depth of eighty or a hundred fathoms.

This is to them a pleasing circumstance, as in such places they always find abundance of fish, especially of cod and ling, their lines being no sooner out than they are ready for drawing in with a fish on every hook. They know by this that the kraken is at the bottom, and that to its presence the unusual shallowness of the fishing-ground is due.

Sometimes, he says, twenty boats or more are thus engaged fishing at a moderate distance from each other, and the only thing they have to watch is whether the depth continues the same, or whether it becomes shallower. In the latter event they know that the kraken is rising to the surface, and that it is time consequently for them to be off. Accordingly as soon as the water shows shallowing they cease fishing, take to their oars, and get away as fast as they can. They stop as soon as they have reached water of the natural depth, and being now out of danger they rest on their oars and watch the monster as it rises slowly to the surface.

Its back or upper part, says Pontoppidan, appears to be about a mile and a half in circumference, and at first resembles a number of small islands surrounded with something that floats about like seaweed. Here and there a larger rising, like a sand-bank, is observed, on which fishes of various sorts are seen continually leaping about till they roll off at the sides into the water.

At last several bright points or horns appear, which grow in thickness the higher they rise above the surface of the water, and sometimes they stand up as high and as large as the masts of a middle-sized ship. These, it seems, are the creature's arms; and such is their strength, that if they seized the largest man-of-war they would infallibly drag it to the bottom.

After remaining a short time at the surface, the kraken descends as slowly as it rose; but even then the danger is not less for any vessel within reach, as in sinking it displaces so great a volume of water as to give rise to a whirlpool capable, like that of the Maelstrom, of drawing everything down with it.

Its arms, he affirms, are used for moving with, as also for gathering its food. For the latter purpose the kraken is likewise provided with a strong and peculiar scent which it can emit at certain times, and by means of which other fish are attracted towards it. As if this were not enough, he tells, on the testimony of many old fishermen, of another curious provision in the kraken for capturing its prey.

They had observed that for some months the kraken is constantly eating, and that in other months it voids its excrement. The voiding of the latter renders the surrounding water thick and turbid — a muddiness which is so agreeable to the senses of fishes that they gather from all quarters to it. Seizing its opportunity, the monster lays hold of them with its arms and swallows them, the digestive process that follows converting them into bait for other fishes.

In all accounts the kraken is represented as being large enough to be mistaken for an island. On one occasion some fishermen are said to have landed on its back, taking it for land; but when they had lighted a fire on it, the creature sank beneath their feet, and engulfed them in the eddying waters. More fortunate than these poor fishermen was a certain Norwegian saint, who when sailing on Sunday on board a Norwegian ship regretted that he could not celebrate mass on dry land. Immediately there arose from the waves at no great distance a new island.

Everybody landed, and the good saint officiated at an altar which was immediately erected. But they had scarcely quitted the island and regained the ship before it gave a shudder and sank deep into the sea. The island was a kraken. This sea monster was believed to be of rare occurrence, and was generally regarded as immortal. This, however, is hardly consistent with the account given by Pontoppidan of the finding of the dead carcass of one. In 1680, as he was told, a kraken had come into the water that runs between the rocks and cliffs of the parish of Alstahoug, though its general custom was to keep several leagues from land.

It happened that its long extended arms caught hold of some trees standing near the water, which might easily have been torn up by the roots; but, besides, he had further entangled himself in some openings or clefts in the rocks, where he stuck so fast, and hung so unfortunately, that he could not work himself out, but perished and rotted on the spot. The carcass, which was a long while decaying,

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and filled great part of that narrow channel, made it, he says, almost impassable by its intolerable stench.

When the bishop comes to recount the harm done by the kraken he has to confess that there is little to be told. This, he hints, may be due not to any supposed harmlessness in this huge creature, but to the thoroughness with which it destroyed – that, in fact, no one attacked ever lived to tell the tale. Passing, however, from conjecture to facts, he tells of two fishermen who accidentally got into a slimy piece of water like a morass – the surroundings usually produced by the presence of a kraken.

They immediately tried to get out of the place; but before they could accomplish this one of the creature's arms came down on their boat and crushed part of it, so that they had the utmost difficulty in saving their lives on the wreck, although the sea was calm, as it is always represented to have been when this monster appeared on its surface.

While there is much to smile at in the accounts of the legendary kraken, the animal itself is not to be dismissed as altogether mythical. Its numerous arms and the use to which it put them, its habit of rendering the water thick and turbid, as well as its musky scent, all point to one or other of the numerous class of cuttle-fishes as the true original of the Scandinavian kraken.

Ignorance and superstitious wonder, no doubt, led the Norsemen to exaggerate its size, and to clothe it with unearthly terrors; but the reader will see in the following account of what is now known regarding the cuttle-fishes that they are both big enough, and in many cases hideous enough, to have suggested such a monster as the kraken to an ignorant and credulous people.

Footnotes & references

Extract from: Gibson, John, d. (1887). *Monsters of the sea, legendary and authentic*. London: T. Nelson.

Cover image: Edward Etherington, illustration from John Gibson's *Monsters of the sea, legendary and authentic*, 1887.