

**MSC 2020****International Scientific and Practical Conference «MAN. SOCIETY.  
COMMUNICATION»****THE MONSTROSITY PHENOMENON IN RUSSIA DURING  
PETER'S THE GREAT TIME**

Konstantin Desyatskov (a)\*

\*Corresponding author

(a) Yaroslav-the-Wise Novgorod State University, Veliky Novgorod, Russian Federation  
Des-con@yandex.ru**Abstract**

The article investigates the cultural practices associated with the activities of Peter I and his associates in the transmission of Western scientific knowledge and scientific perception of the phenomenon of monstrosity in Russia in the first quarter of the XVIII century. The author tried to trace how, alongside with the folk and religious perception of monsters, the scientific approach to this problem was introduced in Russia during Peter's reign. For the Russian society of that period, several discursive fields converged in this context: the ratio of natural and cultural, folk and fictional, religious and scientific, a sign from heaven and a physiologically explicable deviation. New clothes, new manners, new style, the Academy of Sciences and the Kunstkamera, libraries and public theaters, the Navy, the capital city bordering on the Western boundaries are the indicators of the tendency proving that "in the cultural hierarchy, the word gradually gave way to the thing.". The "dual" nature of the transition period in Russian society at the beginning of the Enlightenment was manifested by the introduction of a new perception of the "other", including the "non-human", monstrous body by the state. In addition to forming collections of "living" (dwarfs, giants and many more "others") and "inanimate" monsters, founding museums and anatomical theaters, symbolic rituals at carnival and buffoonery ceremonies at the court of Peter I also reproduced these trends..

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past few decades, modern historiography has undergone a real revolution in relation to the phenomenon of the body, both in theoretical and conceptual and practical terms. Until this moment, the body served as the ultimate concept that separates human nature from its history, the medical and biological sciences from the cultural sciences, respectively. However, this distinction, especially in the context of cultural, technical and scientific interdisciplinarity of the late XX - early XXI centuries, is becoming increasingly blurred. Nevertheless, we should not forget the specifics of the problematics of the body of the "other" that interacts with the perception and comprehension of the notion of "Eurocentrism" by the world historical community, as well as an increasing awareness of historians concerning the relativization of the body and recognition of its cultural specificity. In order to escape this ambiguous and largely paradoxical situation, a wide variety of techniques and practices are implemented: from studies of mimetic (mimesis – similarity, reproduction, imitation) learning processes by which a person explores the human and natural environment (Wolf, 2008) to "mapping" the body, when the subject's body receives a special code associated with symbolic compulsion (Sarazin, 2005). In such cases, regulated behavior and institutional violence draw a slowly changing, historically random grid of dividing lines on the body. Eventually, there appears a concrete body that exists in society, embedded in the current system of cultural relationships, norms of behavior and values (Elias, 2001; Geertz, 2004). Therefore, attention to the body mobilizes different sciences, forcing them to vary methods and change theories depending on whether it is the study of sensations, techniques, consumption or expressions (Korben et al., 2012).

The situation becomes even more complicated if we are talking not just about the body of the "other", but about the so-called "non-human" body, for example, the body of a monster or the phenomenon of monstrosity, in particular. Moreover, in the end of the XVII–XVIII centuries, the problem of perception of the studied phenomenon in the West and in Russia was investigated at the interface of several discursive fields, which usually converged: the ratio of natural and cultural, folk and fictional, religious and scientific, a sign from heaven and a physiologically explicable deviation. At the same time, originated in the West, in the context of the rapid development of the natural science knowledge, the science of teratology (the science that studies deformities) as part of biology during the Age of Enlightenment and due to Western (Netherlands and England) influence, gradually penetrates into Russia. However, the problem of the formation of a scientific and empirical type of perception of monstrosity in Peter's Russia, when the cultural hierarchy was undergoing a process of changing the traditional to the rational, and the word gradually gave way to the thing (Panchenko, 1984), remains poorly studied. Deep aspects of the perception of monsters in Russia were formed under the influence of the Orthodox Church and remnants of pagan tradition and were associated with various "bestiaries". Orthodox Christian demonology of high, bookish culture and archaic beliefs in the nature spirits of folk tradition were frequently intertwined. The situation with the perception of teratology features in Russia becomes even more complicated in the turbulent epoch of Peter's reforms. A new scientific-rational approach, largely introduced from outside, is added, which correlates the phenomenon of monstrosity in biology to other natural anomalies.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The research focuses on the insufficiently studied interdisciplinary problem of transmission and penetration of Western scientific knowledge into Russia and the scientific perception of the phenomenon of monstrosity during the reign of Peter the Great. Based on the analysis of cultural practices of the formation of folk, religious and scientific perception of monsters in Russia in the XVII–XVIII centuries, an attempt to show the modification of the situation at the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment is made. This phenomenon is investigated resorting to different types of sources (textual, visual, and others), considering such processes as the desacralization of monsters, their image and fictional diversity, as well as the construction of the concept of monstrosity.

## **3. Research Questions**

The stated problem required coverage of the process of gradual penetration of the ideological and practical corpus of the Western science of teratology (the science that studies deformities) as part of biology in the context of the reform activities of Peter I and his entourage into Russia in the first quarter of the XVIII century. Additionally, it is necessary to analyze the interaction of the new scientific approach in the perception of monstrosity with the traditional ones that existed in Russia before Peter I. It is also essential to address the problem of systematic construction of images of various monsters, namely, the replacement of real natural monsters with virtual ones. The constructed monster shades and reinforces the discourse of normativity, which is becoming more and more important for the European society of the XVII century, including both scientific and empirical, and moral regulation and control. This practice, taking into account its convenience for the authorities, was partially used in Peter's Russia, interacting with traditional methods of perception of the "other".

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

The attempt to consider the phenomenology perception of the "inhuman", more precisely, the "monstrous" body in Russia of the XVII–XVIII centuries and some aspects of its modification during the reign of Peter the Great in the context of the formation of a new discourse of normativity is made in the research. Based on the analysis of the features of the introduction of Western teratology by Peter I and his entourage into the culture and consciousness of the "new" Russian man, such processes as the desacralization of monsters, their image and fictional diversity, as well as the construction of the concept of monstrosity in the new Imperial Russia are touched upon.

## **5. Research Methods**

This research aims to analyze the problems of transmission and penetration of Western scientific knowledge into Russia and the scientific perception of the phenomenon of monstrosity during the reign of Peter the Great. Both traditional (comparative-historical, structural-functional) and innovative methods and approaches (semiotic, historical-anthropological) were applied. In addition to investigating numerous

research for the purpose of revealing the historical context and profound analysis of the problem, various resources (textual, visual, and physical) were also used.

## 6. Findings

The word "monster" in the Western tradition could have many different meanings, although usually its etymology is ascribed to the Latin *moneo* – to warn, and later, around the XVI century, it includes "violation of proportions", and "colossal size", and also "miracle of God", and "warning to people". Probably the synthetic definition of monstrosity in the XVI–XVII centuries belongs to the lexicographer John Florio in "A world of words": "...something demonstrated, exposed, declared (Makarov, 2011, p. 118).

It is the concept of the "miraculous", derived from the Latin "mirabilia", that is, mainly connotated with the words having the meaning of visual perception associated with the main feature of the miraculous – the ability to appear, directly explains the etymological roots of the monster as an event and phenomenon. Here is the influence of the "field of view" and the shift of perception frames, and even a frank "eye-gazing" on the "miracle" (Le Goff, 2001, p. 48). On the other hand, human fantasy and imagination are involved alongside with the traditional moral-eschatological context, where every element of the monster's ugly body has a symbolic meaning. It is fantasy images that represent the Other, created by the consciousness and will of a person and necessary as a justification for self-identification. It is possible both in contrast to the Other, and to express certain aspects of human nature that are so frightening that they must be destroyed in the form of a sinister and hostile Other (Shapinskaya, 2012).

From the origin of science, humanity was constantly haunted by the grotesque shadow of a monster. This process is accelerated in the second half of the XVII–XVIII centuries. By means of ordering the general configuration of objects and methods of knowledge, by adjusting the orientation of the curious gaze, which gradually removes the sacred and occult elements from the area of science, and also subjects randomly compiled collections of unusual samples to a more strict analysis and classification – teratological exceptions are introduced, although not without some resistance, into the structured space of natural science collections (Korben et al., 2012).

As for the phenomenon of monstrosity, the overall picture is much more complex: more body and signs, silence and speech, and even presence and absence. This is not a sudden collapse of the experience of perception, but a systematic construction of images for their multifunctional consumption and circulation; not an anxious wandering of the gaze, but a curious reading or listening (Korben et al., 2012). In other words, monstrosity can be defined as replacing real natural monsters with virtual ones created in the world of signs. The constructed monster is infinitely diverse and protean (capable of taking a variety of forms and embodiments), although more often it is based on a natural monster. It simultaneously shades and reinforces the discourse of normativity, which is becoming more and more important for the European society of the XVII century, including both scientific and empirical, as well as moral regulation and control. By going beyond the norm, the monster constantly "... threatens the very identity that it helps to define" (Makarov, 2011, p. 121).

Back in the early 1980s, Park and Daston (1981), the European researchers of the history of science, identified three fundamental aspects of the attitude to monsters in Classical Antiquity and the Middle Ages: 1) "scientific description... in the style of Aristotelian biology"; 2) "the birth of monsters as... a sign from

heaven"; 3) "cosmographic" or "anthropological description... of monstrous peoples" (p. 22-23). However, at the turn of the XVI–XVII centuries, according to the authors, under the influence of the empirical method, modification in the perception of monsters takes place – the folk tradition continues the second and third aspects. Scientific perception increasingly correlates the phenomenon of monstrosity in biology to other natural anomalies: floods, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions.

In Russia, taking into account the specifics of culture, scientific knowledge of the XVII century developed mainly under the strong influence of the Orthodox Church, so in this case we can talk about the folk and "book" tradition of perception of monstrosity (Antonov, 2010). Long ago, in Russia, under the gaze of the Christian tradition, natural monsters were identified most often with various "bestiaries" of demons: from numerous zoomorphic snakes and monsters to anthropomorphic human-like demons and deities of the pagan Pantheon. In Russia, the demons were connected with a variety of ambivalent and evil characters: the wood spirit (leshy), bathhouse gnome (bannik), water spirit (vodyanoy), fever-tremblers, hobgoblin (kikimora). Moreover, the book and folk traditions of monstrous perception were influenced by numerous book tales about animals of the X–XVII centuries: "The Shestodnevny", "Physiologist", "Tolkaya Paleya", "Flowers of Talent", "Serbian Alexandria" (Belova, 1999, p. 14-21).

Until the XVI–XVII centuries, folk ideas almost did not penetrate the pages of manuscripts: most literary texts were created by scholarly scribes, most often by monks. In the XVII century, the situation began to change rapidly. The number of authors was replenished at the expense of the most different "writing fraternity". Several types of sources – polar, but closely related - can tell a lot about the "folk demonology" of the XVII–XVIII centuries. These are "black" plots that mention demons, various ABC books, and investigative cases against warlocks and wizards.

"Folk" demons are very similar to creatures of flesh and blood. In 1723 Vasily Voinov said that he had water devils in his service and their head - "sotona Mikha", and in the investigative case of 1730 there is a whole list of various "devils": "kings and princes of the black, demons, earth and water, winged, furry, air and swamp, forest and house" (Zhuravel, 1996, pp. 48-50, 114-115). In another text of the XVII century, "The Miracle of the Monk Iov Uschelsky", the demon is akin to a water one. The "impure water spirit" attacks people who cross the Mezen river. He walks in the water like a huge fish, rocks the boat and tries to sink the horse (according to popular belief, the horse is one of the favorite animals of the water spirit (Nikitina, 2008, p. 100). People do not fight off the annoying demon with crosses, but with oars. Finally, the prayer to the locally-venerated Iov wards him away.

In this context, the transformation of demons and devils that took place in the Russian iconography of the XVI–XVII centuries under the influence of both Western art and local folk tradition is indicative. It turns out that Western "standards" of perception and depiction of monsters, primarily hybrid demonic images, were the first in Russia to be adopted by icon painters. In the XVII century, instead of human heads, devils appear with dog, lion, pig or bull muzzles, noses similar to the beaks of birds. Their bodies are covered with many eyes, and a long red tongue protrudes from their mouth, which is related to wild, predatory animals in images (Nersesyan, 2007).

But the new written sources of images of monsters that appeared at the turn of the XVII–XVIII centuries, the so-called "planted letters" of the old believers can be safely attributed to a variant of the constructed monstrosity. In 1707, another work with a bright "portrait" of evil spirits appeared in Novgorod.

The letter itself has not been preserved, but we know about it thanks to the refutation made by the Novgorod Metropolitan Iov. He wrote "a short answer to a planted letter about the birth of this time Antichrist" and entered into a polemic with an unknown author-an old believer. The most interesting details relate to the appearance of the terrible "child". He is more black than white, has a "pointed" head, a forehead with "red spots", a short neck, large ears, a crooked mouth, a flat nose and sharp teeth. After transmitting the story of his opponent, the Metropolitan immediately retorts that this is not a seducer who will be taken for the Messiah, but "a bogeyman in the form of a human". Metropolitan Iov considered this allusion and, paraphrasing the author of the "planted letter", wrote that the fantastic baby, was not born and does not live (Iov, The Metropolitan of Novgorod, 1707, pp. 1-6).

Since the beginning of the Age of Enlightenment in Russia, a third scientific and empirical type of perception of monstrosity has gradually emerged. It is inextricably linked with the activities and personality of Peter I and his associates. Even now, the Peter's epoch is striking in its richness and innovative variety. The figure of Peter I is certainly paradoxical, since literally all the elements of human creativity, all kinds of activities were tried by him. To reach the level of European civilization, as Peter believed, it was necessary to act not "by the production of words, but by the production of things". New clothes, new manners, new style, the Academy of Sciences and the Kunstkamera, libraries and public theater, the Navy, the capital city directly bordering on the Western boundaries - all these are the indicators of the tendency proving that "in the cultural hierarchy, the word has given way to the thing". "From the verbal "Museum of rarities" of Simeon Polotsky to the St. Petersburg Kunstkamera, a real Museum of monsters and curious things - such is the rapid evolution of Russian culture" (Panchenko, 1984, p. 189).

The young Tsar could see something similar to European "cabinets of curiosities" in the Russian capital: these are rarities stored in the collection of his father, and exotic "Embassy gifts" from the Armory of the Moscow Kremlin. However, it was only during his first trip abroad with the Great Embassy (1697-1698) that Peter saw the original Museum collections, which had a great influence on the creation of a private "Sovereign's Cabinet", and later a public Kunstkamera in St. Petersburg. In Holland, the Tsar, through his good friend Nicholas Witsen, mayor of Amsterdam, meets an international celebrity in anatomy, Professor Frederick Ruysch, visits his home and observes his collections. "...In Amsterdam, I saw the doctor's anatomy; bones, veins... I have seen 50 infant bodies that are imperishable for many years... I saw a head made of wood, a human head; it speaks; they wind it up like a clock, and what you say, the head says" (Melgunova et al., 2016, p. 182). In addition to Ruysch, the Tsar met other luminaries of Dutch medicine and anatomy: Gottfried Bidloo and Anthony Leeuwenhoek. It is significant that during the second trip abroad in 1716, Peter I ordered his doctors R. Erskine and L. Blumentrost to buy a set of collections of F. Ruysch for 30,000 guilders. The collection contained more than 2000 preparations on human embryology and anatomy, as well as 1179 samples of small mammals, reptiles and insects, 259 birds, etc. (Kopanevoj, 1997, pp. 104-105).

The British impact on the formation of the scientific type of perception of monstrosity was manifested more indirectly. This includes the famous natural science collections of the British Royal Society Museum, which the young Peter I visited during the Great Embassy. It is also necessary to take into account the influence of the two closest associates of the Tsar – the Scots R. Erskine and J. V. Bruce on the development of empirical science in Russia (Le Goff, 2017). It is no accident that the rich collections

and library of the latter became part of the Kunstkamera after his death in 1735. On February 13, 1718, Peter I issued a famous decree on collecting monsters, or rather "freaks and rarities". In the first decade after its publication, both dead and living freaks were regularly delivered to the Kunstkamera. Its main attraction at that time was the presence of "living exhibits": a young hermaphrodite (who later escaped) and the "monsters" called Foma, Yakov and Stepan, who simultaneously served as stokers (Kopanevoj, 1997, p. 20). The solemn opening of the Museum in the new building took place on November 25, 1728, after the death of the Tsar. Simultaneously with the Museum, the Anatomical Theater was opened. "I want," said Peter, "people to watch and learn" (Shtelin, 1787, p. 115).

Although the main "living" monstrous exhibits of the Peter's epoch for a long time remained court jesters and dwarfs, recruited, according to the fashion of the time, from people with certain natural deviations (the average height of dwarfs – about 1 m). The dwarfs always kept a historical secret and at the same time were the expression of an attempt to model the accessible, everyday world in their face. The weddings of dwarfs, which were often arranged by Peter I, can be also mentioned here. Some authors attribute these unusual amusements of Peter to his belief in the ability to change the world not only socially, but also on a physical level (Belozerova, 2000). It is believed that the famous book about Gulliver, written by Swift a year after the death of the Russian Tsar, was inspired by the stories of foreigners about the outlandish and ridiculous entertainment at the court of the Russian autocrat.

#### Conclusion

Recalling other carnival and buffoonery ceremonies in Russia during Peter I reign, it should be noted that the "dual" nature of the transition period in Russian society at the beginning of the Enlightenment was manifested by the introduction of a new perception of the "other", including the "non-human", monstrous body by the state. This was achieved in a variety of ways: from transmitting the Western scientific and empirical experience of teratology, by founding scientific and educational medical institutions (hospitals, museums, anatomical theaters) to conducting "parodies of the Seventh sacrament" and Royal sharivari with the participation of live monsters often acting the main roles. On the one hand, there observed the modification of traditional rites and rituals with their deliberate distortion (weddings and mummery), the burlesque use of the image of the "Other" (indecent poses, gestures and rude jokes); on the other hand, we can see the performance of the function of the new culture: coercion, fear and oppression, violence against the body and personality of the "new" Russian person. His body increasingly belongs to the state, not to himself, which is achieved by means of the new symbolic forms and rituals of Peter's official culture.

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