



# Mermaids

ECL 305: Literature and the Environment

Fall 2025. Professor Pressman

Day 4: *Merpeople: A Human History*

# ADMIN

- Canvas assignment- due tomorrow
- Wordpress password
- Next week readings...

# Group Discussion

- What stood out at you in the reading? (Passage/page number)
- What do you want to discuss today?



Oxford Bodleian Library - MS Ashmole 1511 fol-65v

uitae exemplum salutis: dat religiosi

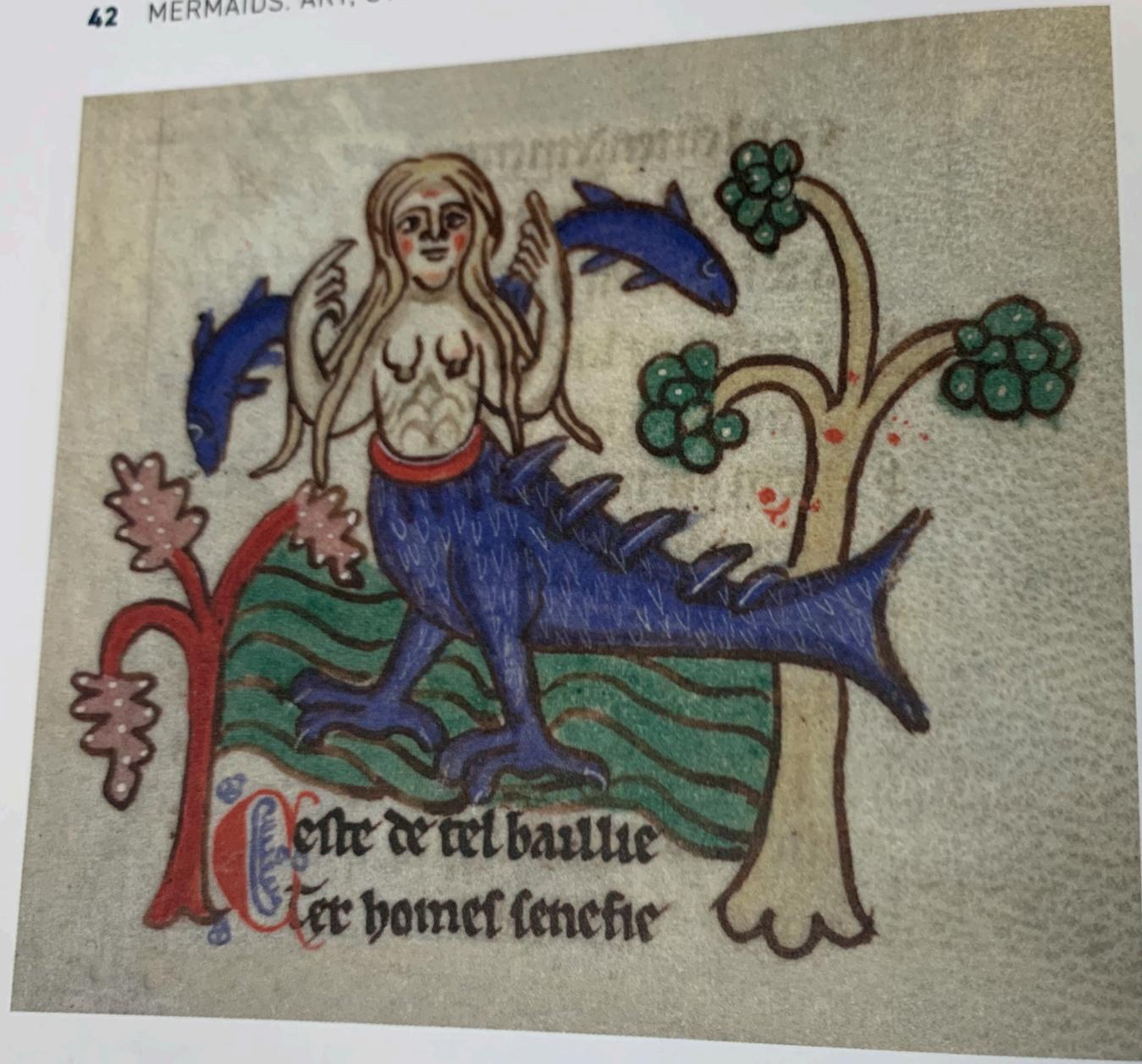


uocis auctus hominum a longe na

# Jonah and the Whale— as merman



- 14th C Wall Painting Holy Monastery of Saint Nicholas Anapausas *Meteora Thessaly*



**Figure 3.1** A Siren with the combined features of the bird Siren and Scylla, with the features of a woman from the waist up, a fish tail and bird feet. This illustration appears in the *Bestiary* of Philippe de Thaon, 1121.

12th C

double snake-tailed Echidna  
double fish-tailed creature with bird  
double fish-tailed Scylla

# Greek Sirens



# Greek & Etruscan Scylla

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**Figure 2.15** A Greek Scylla with one long dragon-like tail and two dogs protruding from her girdle; 12.5 cm tall. This Melian terracotta relief dates from 460–450 BCE and probably originated in the Cyclades.

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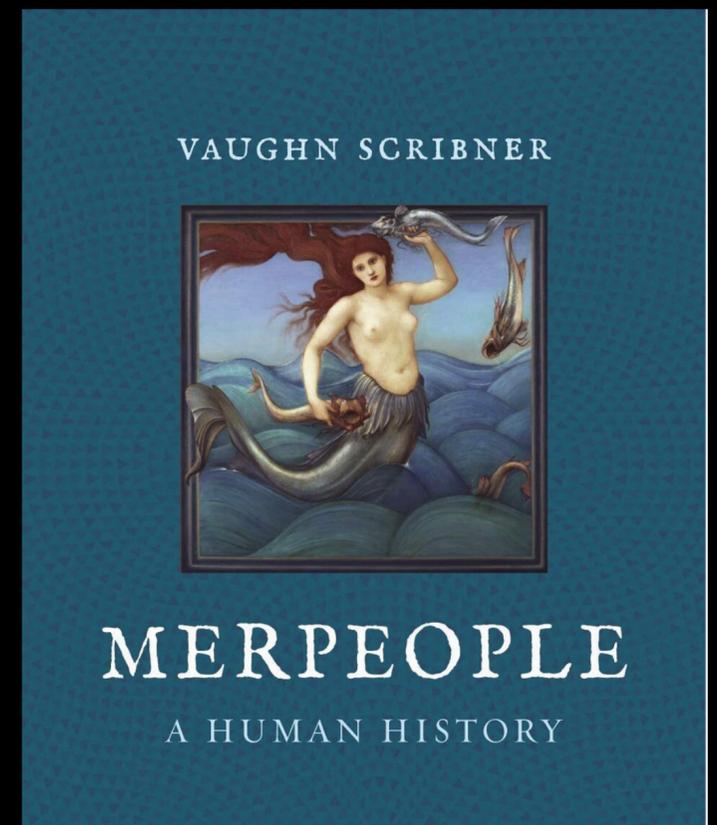


**Figure 2.21** Etruscan bronze statuette showing an early, beautiful artistic interpretation, presumably of Scylla, seventh to sixth century BCE. It was found at a necropolis in Strozze, Italy.

**Mermaids: Art, Symbolism and Mythology**

by Christopher Halls, Axel Muller, Ben Williamson (Univ. of Exeter Press, 2022)

*Merpeople: A Human History*  
Vaughn Scribner  
Chicago UP, 2020



**Chapter : The Middle Ages**

**“During the medieval period, merpeople defined— and reflected— Westerners’ understanding of religion, sex and power” (29)**

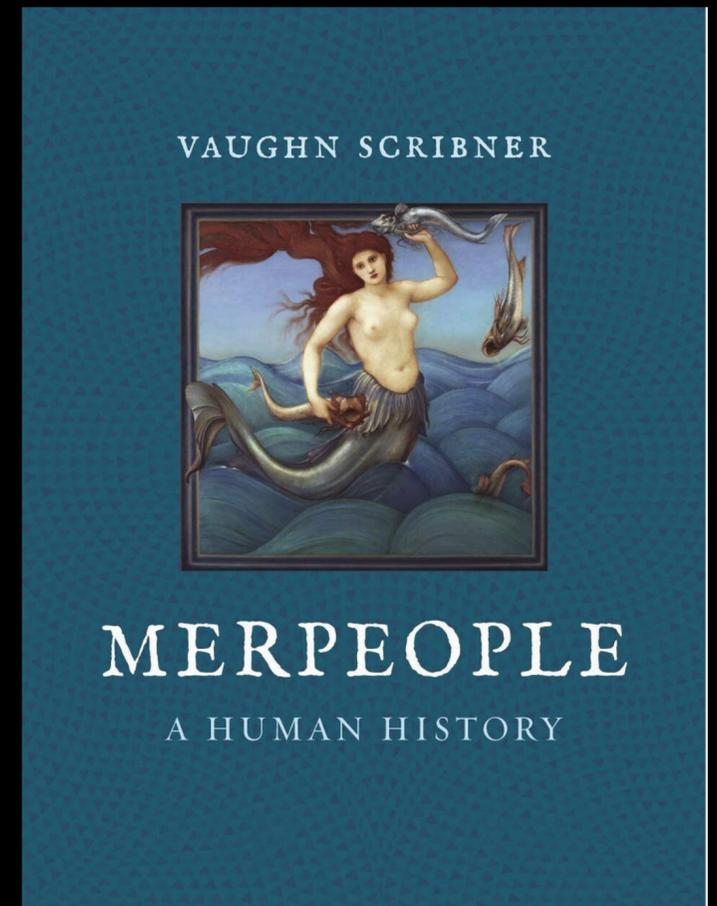
**“The Church created our modern understanding of mermaids and mermen” (29)**

**–“mermaid imagery did not emerge in its current form until the medieval period, when churchmen altered Greek and Roman depictions of Scylla and the sirens into what they considered an even more ghastly personification of death, power, and sex” (37)**



*A mermaid holding a mirror and comb, GKS 1633 Bestiarius England, fifteenth century, and decorative mermaids from Harley MS 4972 f. 20r, 1275-1325.*

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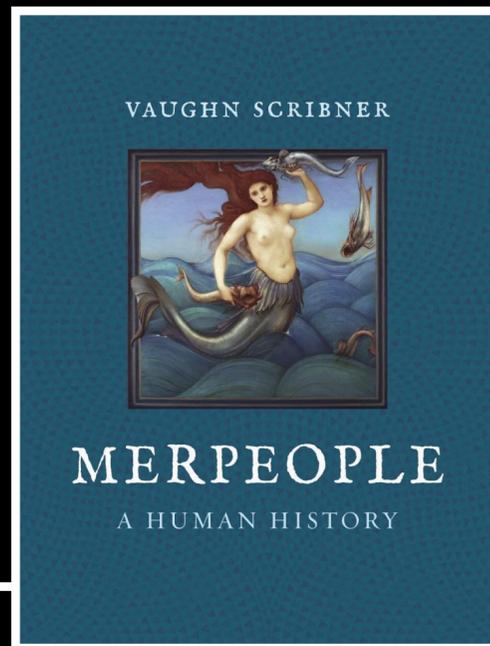
**Chapter 2: New World/Age of Discovery (15th-16th C)**

**“These climatic, environmental and biological fears coalescence around Europeans’ perceptions and merpeople” (61)**

**From art to science, merpeople had become critical facets of the European worldview” (68)**

In this [map of the Arabian Peninsula](#) created by Ptolemy and printed in Basel in 1545, we can see a mermaid swimming in the Gulf of Aden. She is depicted with a crown-like braid, a style popular with high-born maidens of the Renaissance-era, and she has wings or fins instead of arms.





## *Merpeople: A Human History*

Vaughn Scribner

Chicago UP, 2020

“the ‘Age of Discovery’ only solidified Westerners’ long-standing beliefs and cultural traditions surrounding merpeople. By 1492 Westerners had long lived in a world of merpeople: especially in wealthy, sea-faring societies like Venice or Genoa” (15)



Diego Gutierrez map of America-1562

VAUGHN SCRIBNER



# MERPEOPLE

A HUMAN HISTORY

## *Merpeople: A Human History*

Vaughn Scribner

Chicago UP, 2020

“by the early nineteenth century, ‘mer-  
mania’ had reached fever pitch”

A nineteenth-century Westerner  
would have encountered a sighting,  
specimen, show or study of a  
merperson in his local newspaper at  
least once a month during the first  
half of the nineteenth-century” (20)



*Monster Theory: Reading Culture*

Ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen and Introduction by Cohen

Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1996

“America, a society that has created and commodified ‘ambient fear’—a kind of total fear that saturates day-to-day living, prodding and silently antagonizing but never speaking its own name. This anxiety manifests itself symptomatically as a cultural fascination with monsters” (viii)

“The monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the monstrum is etymologically ‘that which reveals,’ ‘that which warns’” (4)

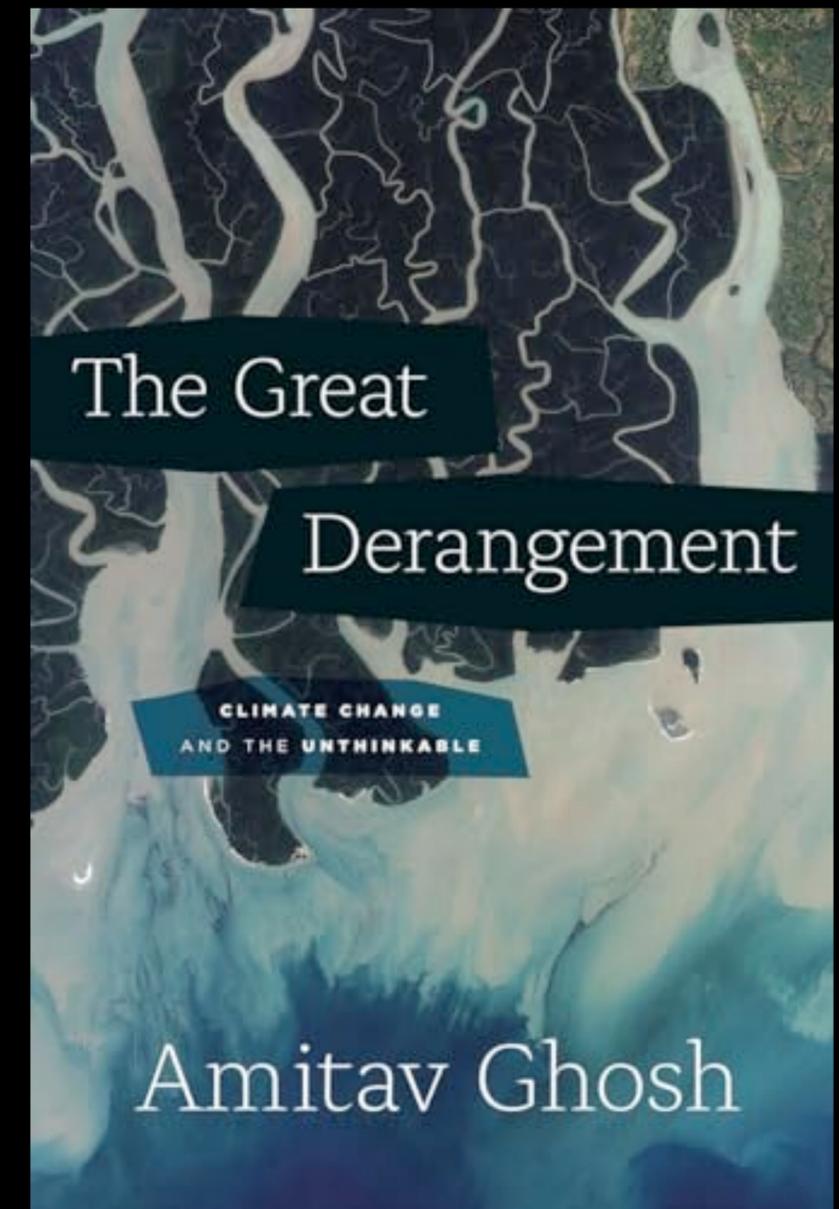
“These monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance towards its expressions. They ask us why we have created them” (20)

Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement:  
Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (University of Chicago Press, 2016)

-“the climate crisis is also a crisis of culture, and thus of the imagination” (9)

“is it possible that the arts and literature of this time will one day be remembered not for the daring or the champion of freedom but for their complicity in the great derangement? As a former collusion?” (121)

-“in short, the great, irreplaceable potentiality of fiction is that it makes possible the imagining of possibilities. And to imagine other forms of human existence is exactly the challenge that is posed by the climate crisis” (128)



**Take aways?**