The Vegetable Lamb of Muscovy
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Zoophytes, or animals that resemble plants, are a staple of the medieval and renaissance-era herbals. Common half-plant, half-animal creatures included the mandrake (the roots of which were said to be shaped like men that could run away from people!)(Van Arsdell et al., 2009), the barnacle goose-tree (a frankly confusing combination of a tree and crustacean that produced barnacles, inside which geese grew)(Dobson, 1958) and the ‘Barometz’ (a combination of tree and sheep-blossoms) that was said to grow in eastern Europe.

The Barometz, also called the Vegetable Lamb of Tartary, Scythian Lamb, or simply Vegetable Lamb (Ho, 1992), even if considered to be the stuff of legend today, has a fascinating history as it’s story evolved in western Europe over the centuries. While Sir John Mandeville is often credited with the first description (via translation) of the Barometz in English, around 1360 CE, interest in this beast did not seem to gain momentum until the 16th century.

Mandeville describes his encounter with the lamb-plant as:

“Wherefore I say you, in passing by the land of Cathay towards the high Ind and towards Bacharia, men pass by a kingdom that men clepe Caldilhe, that is a fair full country. And there groweth a manner of fruit, as though it were gourds. And when they be ripe, men cut them a-two, and men find within a little beast, in flesh, in bone, and blood, as though it were a little lamb without wool. And men eat both the fruit and the beast. Of the fruit I have eaten, although it were wonderful, but I that know well that God is marvellous in his works.” (Black ed., 2009).

Even at this early stage the story, this half-sheep, half-plant creature is associated with Caldilhe, interpreted as the Volga region, and it’s Tartar inhabitants (Black ed., 2009). The journal of the 14th century Friar Odoric seemingly corroborates Mandeville’s story, mentioning gourds that produce ‘a little beast like vnto a yong lambe’ existing in the Kaspei mountains, probably the Caspian, or Caucasus, mountains (Lee, 1887; The Journal of Friar Odoric).

Although this creature was described as growing within a fruit, or gourd, there does not seem to be any justification of the barometz being considered, for dietary purposes, meat or a vegetable. The barnacle goose may hint at what medieval travelers thought about this exciting new possibility in their diet; the goose was considered to be a type of fish (since the bird grew inside barnacles), and therefore could be eaten on Church fast-days (Cambrensis, 2000). It is possible that a sheep which grew inside a gourd may, similarly, be considered a vegetarian meal.

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As the legend of the Vegetable Lamb circulated in the West, it became more elaborate over time. Sigismund von Herberstein’s *Rerum Moscoviticarum Commentarii* (1549), written after his travels to Russia as an Austrian ambassador in 1517 and 1528, described a creature that had more in common with an animal than a plant:

“...I heard a wonderful and almost incredible story from one Dimitry Danielovich, a man who, (considering that he was a barbarian), was of remarkable dignity and truthfulness. He stated that his father had been on a former occasion sent by the Prince of Moscow to the King of Savoiha, and that in that embassy he had seen in the island a certain seed, somewhat larger and rounder, but not unlike the seed of a melon, from which, when planted, grew up something very like a lamb, of the height of five palms, and that it was called in their language “boranetz”, which signifies a lambkin, for it had a head, eyes, ears, and everything else in the form of a lamb. He also stated, that it bore a very fine wool, which was used by many people in those countries for making caps; and, indeed, I was assured by many people, that they had seen wool of that kind. He said, moreover, that the plant,—if plant it could be called, — had blood in it, but no flesh; but in lieu of flesh, there was a kind of matter very like the flesh of crabs; it also had hoofs, not horny like those of a lamb, but covered with a hairy substance resembling horn. Its stem came to the navel, or middle of the belly; it continued alive until the grass around it was eaten away, so that the root dried up for want of nourishment.”

It is this sessile sheep-like plant, permanently tethered to the ground by its stem and doomed to starve when it has eaten all the grass within reach, that became the usual 16th and 17th century form of this story. The focus also subtly seems to shift from discussing it's edibility, but to the properties of it's fur.

From July 1600 to April 1601, Sir Richard Lee was an ambassador to Russia from the English court of Elizabeth I, who had heard of the mysterious vegetable lamb. In fact, Lee was given, by Tsar Boris Godunov, a “gowne or long cloake, made after the fashion of that cuntrie with the skins of those Tartar lambes” (Appleby, 1997; Macray, 1968). The cloak – nicknamed Joseph's parti-coloured coat – was described in the 17th century of being comprised of skins the size of rabbit pelts (Appleby, 1997), so it seems this cloak was believed to be made from the skins of many Barometz, not merely more typical sheep that grazed in Tartaria.

Adam Olearius (1603-1671) in his account as an ambassador in Russia gives more skeptical information about seeing these mysterious pelts in 1636:

“We were credibly inform'd that near Samara, between Wolga [Volga] and the Doa [Don], there is a kind of Melons, or rather Gourds, that are form'd like a Lamb, whereof this fruit represents all the members, being being fasten'd to the ground by the stalk, which is as it were its navel. As it grows it changes place, as far as the stalk will give way, and, as it turns, makes the grass to wither. The Muscovites call this browning, or feeding, adding, that when it is ripe, the stalk withers, and the fruit is cloath'd with a hairy skin, which may be dress'd and used instead of Furr. They call this fruit Boranetz, that is to say, the Lamb. They

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shew'd us some of those skins, taken off the covering of a bed, and swore it came from that fruit, but we could hardly believe it. They were covered with a soft frizling Wooll not unlike that of a Lamb newly wean'd, or taken out of the Sheep's belly." (Davies trans. 1669; 48)

It appears for much of the period middle ages and renaissance, the Barometz was believed to exist, although the renaissance scholars did seem skeptical. Sir Richard Lee's coat may well have been considered 'proof' of such a wonder at the time, though, as it became a tourist attraction for visitors to the Bodlein Library in the 17th century (Appleby, 1997). But what did later experts think the Barometz was?

There are two threads to this zoophytic myth. The first are the pelts shown, or given, in Muscovy, while the second element is the plant itself.

It appears that Olearius's suspicions about the Barometz fur was correct: it was most likely made from more mundane lambskins (Appleby, 1997; Carrubba, 1993). The mystery was solved by the late 17th century by Engelbert Kaempfer, who travelled east in the hope of discovering a Vegetable Lamb. The cloak, and the bed-covering seen by Olearius, were probably made from the pelts of fetal Karakul lambs, prized for their soft, fine fur that has been described as 'rather like crushed velvet' (Humane Society of the United States, 2001).

As for the 'true' identity of the Barometz, Lee (1887) and Carrubba (1993) consider it's earliest incarnation to be a misunderstanding of the cotton plant, and how the cotton boll splits open to reveal the fluffy, woolly fibres within. As the story became more elaborate, it is possible that it became confused with the rhizome of the tree fern Cibotium barometz, from southern China and Taiwan, which can be trimmed to give the superficial appearance of a small, half-plant half-quadruped creature (Tryon, 1957). A 17th century example of this modified plant can be seen at the Natural History Museum, London (Natural History Museum).

The earliest dated images of a Vegetable Lamb I have been able to find, as yet, is from the early 15th century. It is a manuscript illumination comparing the Occidental barnacle goose and the Oriental vegetable lamb, with one of the melon-like fruits of the tree opened to reveal a fluffy, white lamb (Bnf MS fonds. fr. 2810 f. 210v). From the second quarter of the 15th century comes an image from St. Gallen's Stiftsarchiv, Cod. Fab. XVI f. 84v. The oft-cited image said to have come from a version of Sir John Mondeville's account, of a plant with lambs bursting out from seed pods (eg. Lee 1887), dates to 1481 at the latest (Mandeville, 1481), and cannot be 14th century as it is frequently claimed, as it comes from a printed text.

There then appears to be a gap until the early 17th century. In the 1605 text by Claude Duret. Histoire admirable des plantes (Willis, 2007; NYPL Digital Gallery), the Barometz is shown tethered to the ground with a stem. The second is from the frontispiece of the botanist John Parkinson's Paradisi in Sole Paradisus Terrestris (1629), which shows a tiny lamb growing in the garden of Eden (Wikimedia). It probably can be said for certain, however, that the Barometz is a mysterious creature that captured the imagination of medieval and renaissance scholars, and shows how little information many European people had about the flora and fauna of the Great Steppe, at the time.
Left: Barometz from 1410-1412, in the Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris. (BnF MS fonds fr. 2810 f. 210v).
Right: Vegetable lambs from the second quarter of the 15th century, in the St. Gallen Stiftsarchiv. (Cod. Fab. XVI f. 84v).


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