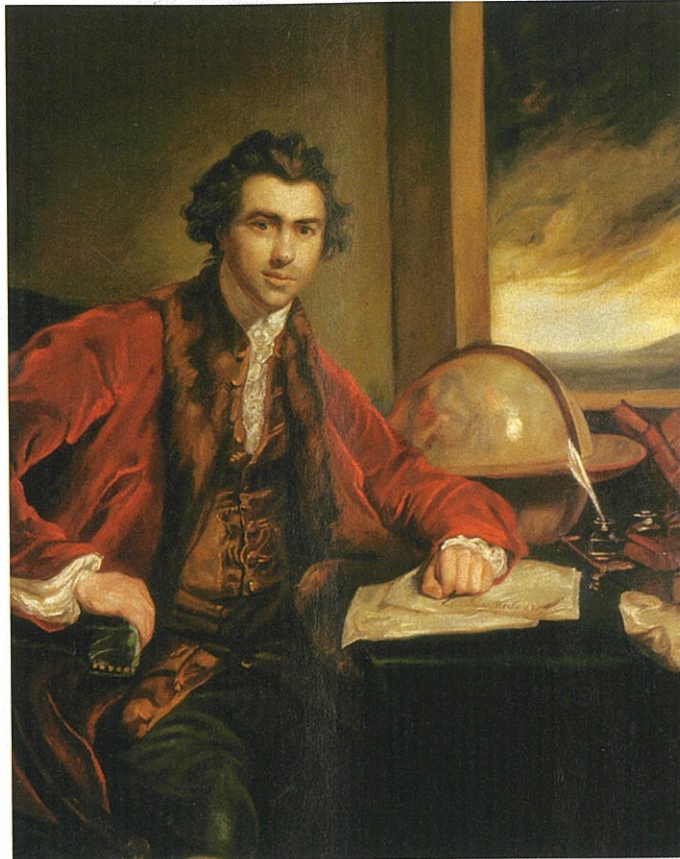


## High priests and kraken soup

Scientists were rather more open to the idea of giant squid than cryptozoologists think says **CHARLES PAXTON**

**R**ichard Freeman in a recent opinion piece (FT357:55) discussed the fascinating life of Pierre Denys de Montfort, who, according to the article, died penniless in the gutter in Paris having seen his career destroyed because he argued for something that the “high priests of science deemed to be an old wives tale” – the existence of giant cephalopods (the taxonomic group that consists of squids, cuttlefishes and octopuses). It’s a great story, deriving in part from Bernard Heuvelmans’s early, rather odd interpretation of the history of the discovery of the giant squid, *Architeuthis*.<sup>1</sup> It is clear that Denys de Montfort has not had his due, but at least part of this story is somewhat inaccurate: the high priests of science (or at the very least the British ones) did not disbelieve the existence of giant cephalopods. And this was not least because one high priest of science – Sir Joseph Banks, President of the Royal Society and surely the personification of the scientific establishment in early 19th century Britain – would have had no doubt about the existence of large cephalopods at all. Indeed, it could be said that he would have happily swallowed the idea of large cephalopods – because in his youth he had eaten one!

In 1768, Joseph Banks, elected at the ridiculously young age of 23 to the Royal Society, was appointed as a naturalist on James Cook’s *Endeavour* expedition to the Pacific. One day, he embarked on an unusual meal. From the journal of Joseph Banks (reproduced verbatim): 3rd



LEFT: Sir Joseph Banks, elected to the Royal Society at the age of 23 and a naturalist on Cook’s Pacific expedition.

March 1769 approx. Lat. 36° 49’ S. Lon. 111° 34’ W (co-ordinates taken from Cook’s journal of same day). “I found also this day a large *Sepia* cuttle fish laying on the water just dead but so pulld to peices by the birds that his Species could not be determind; only this I know that of him was made one of the best soups I ever eat. He was very large, differed from the Europaeans in that his arms instead of being (like them) furnished with suckers were armd with a double row of very sharp talons, resembling in shape those of a cat and like them retractable into a sheath of skin from whence they might be thrust at pleasure.”

From the description, the species in question was not *Architeuthis*, the giant squid, but probably, given the location and the presence of the “talons”, *Taningia danae*, which reaches

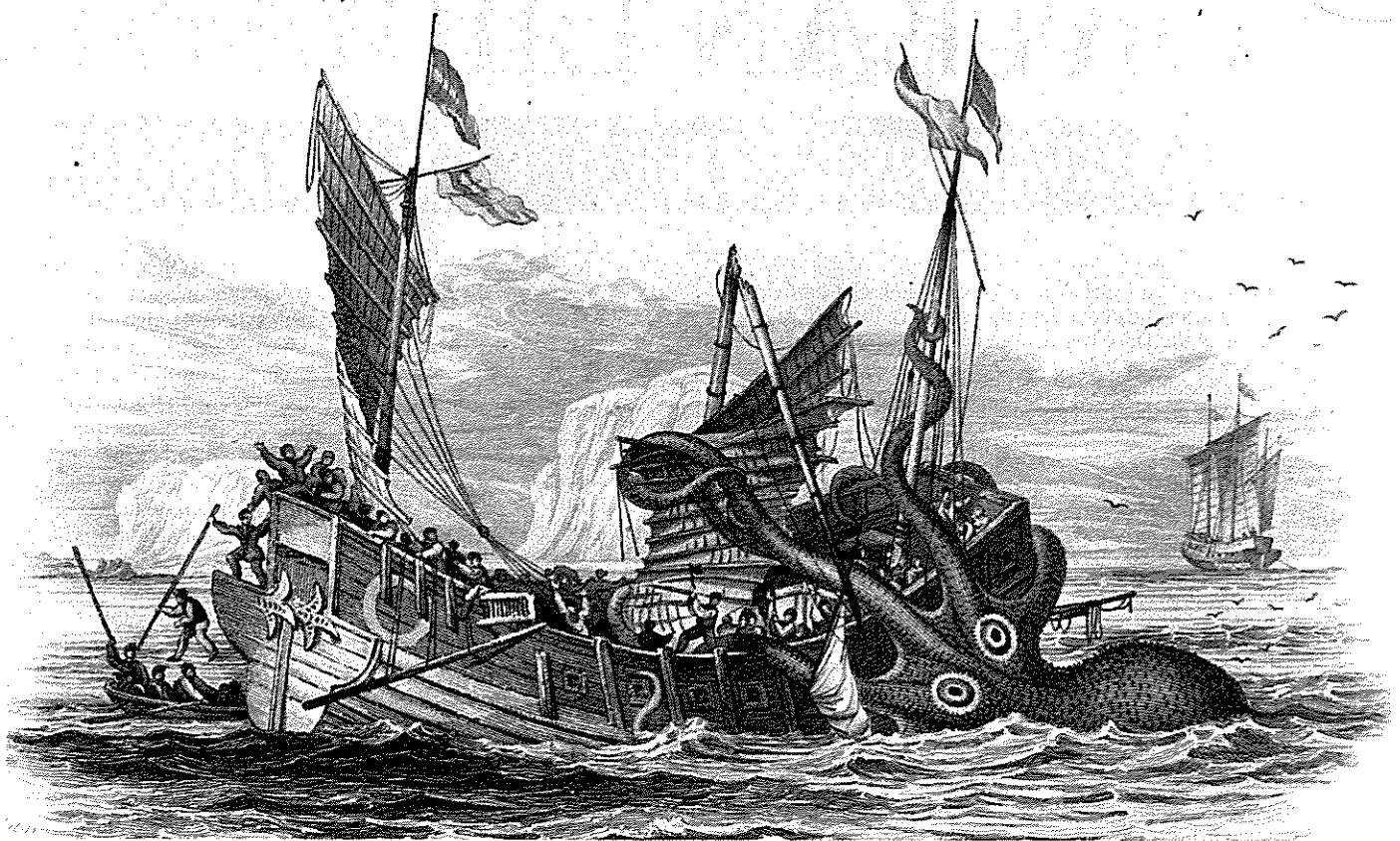
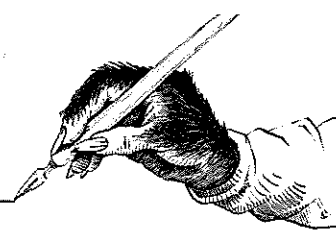
*“I found also this day a large *Sepia* cuttle fish laying on the water just dead”*

a respectable mantle (body) length of c.1.7m (5.6ft); or, if it was the same species that was returned to England after the expedition, *Onychoteuthis banksii*, which reaches a more modest mantle length of 30cm (12in) and seems irreconcilable with the description as “large”.

Banks returned to Britain and participated in the activities of the Royal Society. In 1788, he became President at the age of 35, a post he subsequently

held for 41 years. He pushed for expeditions around the world, including Captain Bligh’s expedition in the *Bounty*, advocated the colonisation of Australia and, as a committed scientific internationalist, tried to maintain scientific links with continental Europe during the Napoleonic wars. Like all members of the Society, he could present papers to be considered for publication in the house journal *Philosophical Transactions*. In 1783, he presented a paper by one Dr Schwediawer, “An Account of Ambergris”, in which Schwediawer correctly recognised ambergris as a product of the digestion of squid beaks by sperm whales. Schwediawer mentioned a *Sepia* “tentaculum 27ft [8m] long” and went on to say: “When we consider the sheer bulk of the tentaculum of the *Sepia* here spoken of, we shall cease to wonder at the common saying of the fishermen that the cuttlefish is the largest fish in the sea.” This is not the only mention of big cephalopods in the pages of *Philosophical Transactions*. A paper in 1758 uncritically mentions Pliny’s discussion of large “polypi” in the Mediterranean: At no stage are the accounts dismissed as old wives’ tales or similar.

Schwediawer’s comment would go on to be cited uncritically by such books as Beale’s *Natural History of the Sperm Whale* (1839). So clearly some influential naturalists of the 18th and early 19th centuries had no problem with the idea of giant cephalopods. Did anyone disagree? Not that I can find, except for some faint doubt over the existence of large cephalopods that came from the zoologist Richard Owen, who in an article in Todd’s *Cyclopaedia of*



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ABOVE: A kraken attacks a ship in an early 19th century engraving. Scientists doubted the destructive power of large cephalopods, but not their existence.

*Anatomy and Physiology* (1836) wrote: "The natives of the Polynesian Islands, who dive for shell-fish, have a well-founded dread and abhorrence of these formidable Cephalopods, and one cannot feel surprised that their fears should have perhaps exaggerated their dimensions and destructive attributes." But he describes the squid Banks encountered as "gigantic" in the same article.

Thus, the early 19th century Anglophone zoologists, far from being close-minded priests, were open-minded naturalists. They had no reason to disbelieve accounts of giant 'calamaries' from the abundant eyewitness testimony and physical evidence of large species, but they might not have associated them with the kraken, as first-hand accounts of that monster were rare and, contrary to the perceptions of modern day cryptozoologists, the concept of "kraken" was somewhat amorphous (see FT:265:54). Sometimes it was employed as a generic term for

"sea monster" and it was not necessarily distinguished from a sea serpent in some sources as late as the second decade of the 19th century. More often it was a huge animal that looked like a large, flat island, albeit with horns that could emerge from the sea; but when its zoological affinities were speculated on, it could be a crab, brittlestar, halibut or cephalopod. Indeed, it was Denys de Montfort himself who did much to tie the idea of the kraken and cephalopod together.

I have not studied the French texts with regard to the reception of Denys de Montfort's ideas about the giant squid, but Heuvelmans lists some,<sup>2</sup> and it is clear that Denys de Montfort's claims about the existence of giant cephalopods was not the problem, but his somewhat unsupported claims about them attacking ships. Heuvelmans's last work on the history of the giant squid plays down the argument that the scientific establishment disbelieved in

the giant cephalopods prior to 1857, but still bizarrely insinuates there was a body of doubters out there – despite not citing a *single* text that advocates such a position, and mentioning only one after 1857! Scientists were rightly doubtful of animals capable of dragging boats to the depths, but not the existence of giant cephalopods *per se*. *Architeuthis*, when it was formally described, increased the size record for squid but hardly shattered the world-view of a zoological community well used to tales, and examples, of large specimens.

Science really is not a close-minded priesthood: all scientists require is evidence. Indeed, it does not even have to be physical, a fact that might surprise both believers and disbelievers in cryptids. For example, I recently argued on statistical grounds that *Architeuthis* could grow substantially longer than teuthologists suspected (although not as large as perhaps Denys de Montfort would have had the

world believe) and I managed to publish my arguments in the peer-reviewed *Journal of Zoology*.

The philosopher of science Paul Thagard suggested one difference between a science and a pseudoscience is that the latter never progresses.<sup>3</sup> If cryptozoologists wish to escape accusations of pseudoscience then, like scientists, they should be constantly developing new methods in the hunt for animals whose existence is controversial and challenging existing viewpoints, even of their own high priests like Heuvelmans. There really is very little evidence that a large body of zoologists doubted the existence of giant cephalopods prior to 1857.

#### NOTES

1 Bernard Heuvelmans, *In the Wake of the Sea Serpent*, Rupert Hart-Davis, 1968.

2 Bernard Heuvelmans, *The Kraken and the Colossal Octopus*, Kegan Paul, 2003.

3 PR Thagard, *Proceedings of the Philosophy of Science Association*,