A Monument to Monsters

One of the more unusual genres of early medical books focuses on “curiosities” - tales of creatures, conditions, and observations ranging from news of fascinating animals in far off lands to more macabre accounts of conditions we would today refer to as congenital anomalies. The authors of these studies were respected and experienced physicians and natural philosophers, such as Gaspar Schott, who published Physica Curiosa in 1662. Schott was a Jesuit, an author of several works on physics and technology, and a man said to be venerated by both Catholics and Protestants in his hometown of Augsburg. Physica Curiosa is a large compendium of pictures and stories regarding monsters, physical abnormalities, and bizarre animals. Rather than a work of original scholarship, Schott’s book, like many others of its kind, attempts to gather together as much as is commonly known on the topic. Therefore, many of the descriptions of animals and creatures repeat apochryphal accounts as if they are fact, and perpetuate belief in unicorns, satyrs, and other mythical beings. Images of these exceptional figures and animals, such as the rhinoceros or the jaguar (pictured at left) were based on common depictions in other books, creating a visual culture that was self-perpetuating. Despite this accepting attitude, Schott was deeply involved with others conducting scientific inquiry that was quite sophisticated, and many of the leading scientists of the day would write to Schott informing him of their discoveries.

The Ebling Library copy WZ 250 S375p 1697

Our copy of Physica Curiosa is from 1697, 31 years after Schott’s death. It is bound in vellum with a slight yap, or rounded, edge. Some traces of previous owners remain, most significantly the large, elaborate bookplate of J. Eliot Hodgkin (pictured at bottom right). Hodgkin (1829-1912) was an avid collector of all types of printed material. A guide to his collections published in 1902 filled three large volumes. All of these materials were sold at auction after his death, and the Physica Curiosa at some point (perhaps at the sale) was acquired by William Moser, MD, who donated it to the County of Kings Medical Society Library in 1938. Sometime later, for reasons unknown to us now, the book made its way to the health sciences library at the University of Wisconsin, where it is available for use today.