



title: Bestiary : Being an English Version of the Bodleian Library, Oxford M.S. Bodley 764 : With All the Original Miniatures Reproduced in Facsimile

author: Barber, Richard W.

publisher: Boydell & Brewer Ltd.

isbn10 | asin: 085115753X

print isbn13: 9780851157535

ebook isbn13: 9780585232607

language: English

subject: Bestiaries, Didactic literature, Latin (Medieval and modern)--Translations into English, Manuscripts, Latin (Medieval and modern)--England--Oxford, Animals--Folklore--Early works to 1800, Animals in art.

publication date: 1992

lcc: GR820.B47 1992eb

ddc: 398.245

subject: Bestiaries, Didactic literature, Latin (Medieval and modern)--Translations into English, Manuscripts, Latin (Medieval and modern)--England--Oxford, Animals--Folklore--Early works to 1800, Animals in art.

Bestiary

Being an English Version of the Bodleian Library, Oxford M. S. Bodley 764
with All the Original Miniatures Reproduced in Facsimile.

Translated and Introduced by Richard Barber

THE BOYDELL PRESS. WOODBRIDGE. 1999

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First published 1992

The Folio Society

Reissued 1993

The Boydell Press, Woodbridge

Reprinted in paperback 1999

ISBN 0 85115 329 1 hardback

ISBN 0 85115 753 X paperback

The Boydell Press is an imprint of Boydell & Brewer Ltd

PO Box 9, Woodbridge, Suffolk IP12 3DF, UK and of Boydell & Brewer Inc.

PO Box 41026, Rochester, NY 146044126, USA

web site: <http://www.boydell.co.uk>

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 922466

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Printed in China

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Introduction

The bestiary, or book of beasts, offers us a unique insight into the medieval mind. If we are to begin to understand it, we must lay aside all the mental attitudes we have accumulated from writers and thinkers since the Renaissance, and abandon the ideas on which modern science is founded. For the bestiary is an account of the natural world, which, although it goes back to those same Greek philosophers from whom our scientific concepts ultimately derive, looks at nature in a very different light. We find in it a description of a number of beasts, birds or fishes, varying from the instantly recognisable to the wholly fantastic, but the details are very rarely based on observation, on the experiences of the everyday world. Instead, the text is taken from *auctores*, writers recognised as authorities on the subject. It is as if each description began 'I have it on good authority . . . ' Whether it is a question of a salamander that lives in fire or a cat that catches mice, the appeal is not to the evidence of our eyes, but to the books in the scribe's library.

For the object of the bestiary is not to document the natural world and to analyse it in order to understand its workings. The writers of bestiaries knew the laws of nature before they began their work, and were concerned only to expound them. They knew that everything in Creation had a purpose, and that the Creator had made nothing without an ulterior aim in mind. And they knew, too, what that purpose was: the edification and instruction of sinful man. The Creator had made animals, birds and fishes, and had given them their natures or habits, so that the sinner could see the world of mankind reflected in the kingdom of nature, and learn the way to redemption by the examples of different creatures. Each creature is therefore a kind of moral entity, bearing a message for the human reader.

Beyond the natural lore and moral meaning is a third aspect: the mystical significance of each creature, as reflected in Holy Scripture. While the relationship between nature and morality is often relatively straightforward, and the example is plain enough for even our obtuse twentieth-century minds to grasp, the mystical significance was much more of a problem for the compiler of

the bestiary, because the same creature might well represent both good and evil, Christ or the devil, in different texts from the Bible. Confusion often ensued, and the writer was reduced to attributing two meanings to the same beast, one good and one evil, with several shades of probable meaning between the two extremes as well.

If the bestiary was a book which depended on authorities, what were these authorities to whom the writers of bestiaries appealed? Their immediate source was usually an earlier bestiary. In the case of the present text, which is found in two manuscripts written between 1220 and 1250, the compiler has taken as his main exemplar a manuscript written in the late twelfth century and has added excerpts from a treatise on beasts which forms part of Rabanus Maurus's *On the Nature of Things*, which includes a large number of references to Scripture. He has also included some good stories from Gerald of Wales's *Topography of Ireland*, about badgers, barnacle geese and other Irish birds, and has plundered Hugh of Fouilloys's *The Aviary* and Peter of Cornwall's *Pantheologus* as well. The last three works were quite recent, but the bestiary itself and Rabanus Maurus were much older: Rabanus was a German monk who wrote at the end of the eighth century, and he in turn owed much to Isidore of Seville's great encyclopedia called *Etymologies*, written in the sixth century. This explains why so many entries begin with an attempt to explain the name of the beast, often garbled and with a smattering of Greek, a language largely unknown in thirteenth-century England. Where Latin and Greek are quoted in the text to illustrate etymologies, the original is given exactly as in the manuscript, and is often, after centuries of copying, mere nonsense.

Behind the work of Isidore, one of the key texts of medieval learning, and behind the bestiary itself, there lay a common ancestor, the book called *Physiologus*, a Latin text which had been translated from the Greek into Latin at much the same time that Isidore was writing. The *Physiologus* is still present in our thirteenth-century version as the ultimate authority: 'Physiologus tells us . . . ' 'Physiologus says . . . ' writes our compiler. I have translated Physiologus as 'the naturalists', because the

Physiologus represents a Christian version of the accumulated knowledge of the natural historians of the ancient world. The Greek text of the *Physiologus* was put together in Alexandria, the home of knowledge *par excellence* where pagan and Christian learning met and mingled, at some time between the second and fifth centuries AD. The inheritance of the Classical world was, so to speak, frozen, or rather, preserved in a kind of Christian aspic, until the Renaissance; the recorded habits of the beasts were fixed as unwavering traditions, and only the commentary varied.

The *Physiologus* was enormously popular; if we include the bestiary as being a version of it, 'perhaps no book, except the Bible, has ever been so widely diffused among so many people and for so many centuries as the *Physiologus*. It has been translated into Latin, Ethiopic, Arabic, Armenian, Syriac, Anglo-Saxon, Icelandic, Spanish, Italian, Provençal and all the principal dialects of the Germanic and Romanic languages'.

The *Physiologus* was an attempt to redefine the natural world in Christian terms; and its material was drawn from the Greek philosophers and their Latin followers, notably Aristotle, Pliny and lesser luminaries such as C. Julius Solinus and Lucan. These were very different texts, scientific or poetic descriptions of the natural world, based on observation, a hesitant attempt to collect data from which an analysis of man's environment might begin. But the grain of literal truth in the bestiary is very much the grain of sand around which the pearl forms. To take a simple example: the unicorn probably arises from a Greek traveller's misreading of Persian sculpture such as that at Persepolis, where bulls and other horned animals are represented in low relief but from a strictly two-dimensional perspective, so that two horns become one. Other fantastic beasts are echoes of symbolism from Oriental art: the winged lions develop into gryphons, the man-headed beasts of Persian art grow into the manticore, and the parijata tree becomes the perindens. For other creatures, a real but misinterpreted habit may be at the root of the imaginative development of a being that never was: modern naturalists have observed the phenomenon of 'anting' in birds, during which they will approach fire and emerge unscathed, phoenix-like. Other

stories, such as the gold-digging ants of Ethiopia, are the products of too much learning and too little lore: their name is *myrmecoleon*, which was Latinised as 'ant-lion', *myrmex* being the Greek for ant. The animal which the original writer had in mind was probably the honey-badger, and the Ethiopian gold was simply the honey which it digs out of the ground and on which it feasts. Other stories were elaborated as they passed from author to author: the tigress deceived by her image in a glass sphere goes back to an anecdote in Pliny's *Natural History* as retold by St Ambrose in his *Hexaemeron*. The yale, with its movable horns, has been traced back to African tribes who train one horn of their cattle forward and the other backward; the curious appearance of these beasts would have led travellers to believe that the cattle themselves could point their horns at will in any direction they pleased. But such reconstructions are a matter of guesswork; another recent book firmly insists that the yale is the Indian water-buffalo, introduced into England by Richard of Cornwall, brother of Henry III, in the mid-thirteenth century.

The bestiary is not simply a book of marvels, a collection of fantasies. Less than a tenth of its space is given up to creatures of a kind that the artists used to fill the blanks of their maps with 'Here be monsters'. Monsters *are* here, but very much in a minority. For what is the good of a lesson that can only be taught by hearsay, relating to a beast that no one has ever seen in the flesh? The longest sermons are devoted to topics drawn from everyday life: the ant and the bee display the virtues of humility, obedience and industry, the viper warns against the sin of adultery. Of particular interest is the attention given to falcons and horses, because these were the enthusiasms of the nobility, and many of the illustrated manuscripts written in England may have been produced for members of the nobility, whether abbots or lay patrons. In the case of the present manuscript, it may well have had a lay patron, for in the miniature of the elephant the shields hung on the castle on its back show recognisable coats of arms. In the centre is *azure, a lion rampant argent*; to the right, *or, three chevrons gules*; to the left, *or, a bend cotised gules*; and on a pennant at the front of the tower, the arms are *gules, a chevron argent*. Three of the

four shields can be positively identified as belonging to barons with lands on the Welsh marches. The centre shield belonged to Roger de Monhaut; the Berkeley arms are on the right-hand shield, and the arms of Clare are on the pennant. The left-hand shield is a problem, but could be that of the Bohun family, earls of Hereford. Given the relative prominence of the different arms, it looks as if Roger de Monhaut, whose shield is in the centre, commissioned the book, but it could also be the Berkeley family. The miniature makes this one of the earliest examples of a manuscript which contains a heraldic reference to the family for whom it was made, a device which was common in the fourteenth century.

The bestiary was an obvious subject for illustration, and a copy of the Greek version from the eleventh century has illustrations which may represent a tradition going back to the period before the controversy over images in the Orthodox church, when in the seventh century the iconoclasts attacked all representations of sacred subjects in art. Some, but not all, of these pictures were taken over in the Latin versions of the *Physiologus*, and a good proportion of all the Latin texts have some kind of illustration. Creatures from the bestiary appear in their traditional roles in the borders of the Bayeux tapestry, and are widespread in Romanesque and Gothic art. There is a fascinating contrast between text and miniatures in our manuscript: the text tells very little about the cat, for example, but the artist tells us that it will try to get at a bird in a cage, loves to sleep by the fire, and shows it on a background of moon and stars to indicate its nocturnal habits. In two other cases the artist has solved a problem presented by the text by illustrating two different creatures when the text gives the same name but different descriptions: these are the screech-owl (*ulula*) and the hoopoe (*epopus/upupa*).

Richly illuminated bestiaries are a peculiarly English phenomenon, and reached their apogee in the first half of the thirteenth century. The Ashmole bestiary, now in the Bodleian Library, with its lavish use of gold grounds, is perhaps the most luxurious and expensively produced copy. But the manuscript (Bodley 764) whose miniatures are reproduced here is artistically much more

lively; it is two or three decades later than the Ashmole volume, and the Gothic style has moved on, into a more free and naturalistic world, with dazzling use of colour replacing the glow of the gold. Just as the text derives from earlier copies with variations, so the composition of the pictures can be traced back to earlier copies: there is a closely-related manuscript in the British Library (Harley 4751), which may have been produced at Salisbury. This in turn derives from a bestiary illustrated with outline drawings, which may or may not have been intended for painting; the manuscript is now at Cambridge, and was the text which T.H. White used for his notable version of the bestiary. *The Book of Beasts*. The style of the Cambridge volume harks back to that of twelfth-century book illumination, where colour was often not used, or was restricted to a wash background.

In all of those manuscripts, the subjects are often closely copied from each other: the most striking instance is the whale, for which not only the Cambridge, Harley and Bodley manuscripts, but also a bestiary until recently at Alnwick Castle, have an almost identical picture. These illuminated de luxe bestiaries are clearly a close-knit group, produced in a relatively short period, perhaps through the enthusiasm of a small number of artists and their patrons. From the fourteenth century onwards, books of hours became the focus for luxury productions for individual owners, but these were much more personal, because they were books for private devotion, and often in daily use. There is no clear explanation as to why this fascinating group of copies of the bestiary should have come into existence, or why it did not continue to flourish. Perhaps we can claim the fantastic 'babewynes' which lurk in the borders of fourteenth-century English manuscripts such as the Luttrell Psalter as the descendants of the luxury bestiaries.

The contents of the bestiary, as we have already indicated, varied with each successive manuscript; it is the exception rather than the rule to find two manuscripts with texts that are nearly identical. The *Physiologus* was a short and relatively stable text, and the main Continental versions do not vary greatly. The earliest English bestiaries, such as one which may have come

from Christchurch, Canterbury (Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 247) were no more and no less than versions of the *Physiologus* in Latin, but with the crucial difference that additions from Isidore of Seville's *Etymologies* were included. At this point, the original text ceased to be sacred; and once the idea that it could be augmented took hold, the bestiary rapidly attracted all kinds of new material. The original Latin version of the *Physiologus* had thirty-nine chapters, while the most expansive thirteenth-century bestiaries had grown to four times that length. Much of this expansion, as the late Brunsdon Yapp pointed out, is due to the addition of northern fauna to the essentially north African creatures in the original *Physiologus*. The new entries in the English bestiaries are generally familiar creatures, though a few fresh curiosities such as the yale and the rhinoceros creep in. The present manuscript and its twin, Harley 4751, have entries for the sow, badger, tragelaphus, and hare which are not in earlier texts, and which rarely reappear at a later date. A similar pattern applies to the birds; the largest number of additions are in the first English bestiaries, while our text augments these with the Irish birds from Gerald of Wales's *Topography of Ireland*. However, the basic structure remained description, moral, meaning even though the neat colophon of each *Physiologus* entry ('Well, therefore, did the Physiologus speak concerning the lion', or whale, or amphisbaena) disappeared among the enthusiastic collection of biblical references.

The most important step forward was when someone, probably in the late twelfth century, decided to group the entries by type, and to classify them as beasts, birds, snakes and fishes, and to expand greatly the contents, going back to either Isidore of Seville or Rabanus Maurus, who had himself derived most of his material from Isidore, but had added his own moralisings and biblical quotations. The present manuscript has particularly large extracts from Rabanus. Some apparently random insertions became traditional: in the section about dogs, a stray sermon beginning 'Whatsoever sinner . . . ' has attached itself to the text, but breaks off incomplete. It is found, with no apparent recognition that it is an anomaly, in a number of manuscripts

which are by no means identical copies. It does imply that the scribe was not usually responsible for the selection of material to be included in the bestiary, or he would have edited out this part: instead, it seems as if the compiler told the scribe to copy out the basic bestiary text (by now including the sermon) and to add the passages he indicated from other books. In our text, the entries are in better order, because it starts with the general observations about animals, which are often found after most of the animals have been described.

The Latin of the bestiary is distinctly problematic. It contains words found nowhere else, and because the writers whoever they may have been among the many hands that contributed over the centuries are often trying to describe things about which they are unsure, the text is often obscure, and all translators who have attempted a rendering into modern languages have ended up by admitting to a degree of intelligent guesswork rather than an absolutely certain equivalent. In identifying the beasts, which is often very difficult, I have in general followed the modern equivalents set out by Wilma George and Brunson Yapp in their very useful study of the bestiary, *The Naming of the Beasts*.

If the content and meaning are a problem, so is the style. I have settled for a version which is straightforward, with perhaps an echo of the language of the Authorised Version, rather than a colloquial rendering, because this seems closer to the spirit of the work. It is after all a work which takes a high moral tone, and preaches at its reader; so I have treated it as a sermon rather than as a series of anecdotes. T.H. White wrote of the text which he translated that the original 'sometimes gives the impression of having been written by a schoolboy who has suffered a course of Bible reading'. This is more than a little unfair: the author would have been more than a match for Macaulay's omniscient schoolboy, and in the case of our text the quotations from Rabanus Maurus can only be described as being an attempt at a kind of high style. I hope I have caught something of the voice of the original; I am sure that it is at any rate a serious voice. (Much as I admire T.H. White's work, I think he does the original an injustice when he lightens the tone: his parrot says 'What-cheer?' or

'Toodle-oo!' for the Latin and Greek equivalents of 'Hallo'.) But I have taken the same liberties as he did with the text in the interest of ease of reading, and have not annotated the many silent amendments which have to be made to arrive at a readable version. (There is no critical edition of the later versions of the bestiary to which the translator can turn, and the first task was indeed to establish a working Latin text.)

From the outset, it was intended that this edition should use the layout of the original manuscript; the miniatures are reproduced to their original size and in their original positions on the page, so that what appears in the following pages was designed by a thirteenth-century scribe and his illuminator, the only change being that the text is in a modern typeface rather than a highly abbreviated formal Gothic book-hand. As a result, and because the English equivalent comes out longer than the Latin text, discreet cutting of the text has been necessary, and I hope that the reader will pardon this. Fortunately, because the author quotes Scriptural examples so freely towards the end of each entry, the effect is perhaps to redress the balance of natural history, morality and mystical meaning in favour of natural history; very little of the text describing the inhabitants of the bestiary has been omitted.

The work which follows can be read and enjoyed on many levels. It will entertain as a collection of curious lore; it will edify as a series of moral examples; it will lead us, if we wish, into a world reminiscent of Jungian symbolism, with a Christian gloss; and it will delight the eye with some of the most charming miniatures to be found in any medieval manuscript.

Suggestions for Further Reading

Books on the bestiary are few and far between; the most accessible are T.H. White's translation *The Book of Beasts* (London 1954) and Wilma George and Brunsdon Yapp's *The Naming of the Beasts* (London 1991). M.R. James's introduction to the facsimile of the Cambridge bestiary manuscript (Cambridge University Library Ii.4.26) is unfortunately only available in the very rare Roxburghe Club edition (London 1928), and the only other general work is by an American scholar, Florence McCulloch (*Medieval Bestiaries*, Philadelphia 1962; not published in Britain).

Preface

Adam, as the first man, gave to all living beings a designation, calling each by a name which corresponded to the present order and according to their nature and function. The heathens, however, gave each beast a name in their own language. But Adam gave them names, not in Greek or Latin, nor in any of the languages of the barbarian peoples, but in that language which was common to all peoples before the Flood, and which is called Hebrew. In Latin they are called animals or animate beings, because they are animated by life and moved by breath. Quadrupeds are so called because they go on four feet (*quatuor pedibus*); although they are like cattle, they are not under man's control. Quadrupeds are deer, fallow deer, wild asses and so on. But they are not wild beasts like lions, nor domestic animals which help men in their labours. Everything that lacks a human face and tongue we call cattle. In its strict sense, however, cattle is usually reserved for those beasts which are suitable for food, such as sheep and pigs, or which are used by men, such as horses and oxen. But there is a distinction between cattle in general (*pecora*) and edible cattle (*pecudes*). Men of old used the description cattle of all animals. 'Pecudes' are only those animals which you eat (*pecu edes*). All grazing