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*Christ or Aristotle: Where did this book come from?*

Although easily dismissed for its casual attention to detail, poor scholarship, and flair for the fantastic, the medieval bestiary offers a wealth of information – not, perhaps, about animals themselves, but about the people who wrote about them. A critical examination of a bestiary, with special attention to the order of the catalogue and the kind of details that were recorded, can return a vivid image of the medieval European cosmology, shedding light on how Europeans distinguished themselves from animals, whether they believed animals were a positive or negative aspect of their world, and similar issues. It can provide insight on the evolution of Christianity, a factor that cannot be given too much importance in the medieval world.

<b>Order of Animals</b>	23 Parandrus
	25 Yale
	26 Wolf
1 Lion	27 Dog
2 Tiger	28 Wolf Hound
3 Panther	<i>Short Sermon</i>
4 Antelope	<i>The Quadrupeds</i>
5 Unicorn	29 Sheep
6 Lynx	30 Wether
7 Griffon	31 Lamb
8 Elephant	32 Goat
9 Beaver	33 Boar
10 Ibex	34 Ox
11 Hyena	35 Cow
12 Bison	36 Camel
13 Monkey	37 Donkey
14 Satyr	38 Onager
15 Stag	39 Horse
16 Goat	40 Mule
17 Wild Goat	41 Cat
18 Monoceros	42 Mouse
19 Bear	43 Weasel
20 Leucrota	44 Hedgehog
21 Crocodile	45 Mole
22 Manticore	46 Ant

Upon first reading, the bestiary comes across as hopelessly disorganized, as if the author chose his animals and penned the words as they entered his head. The common and exotic, the real and fictional all intermingle haphazardly, with entries jumping from felines to equines to enormous mammals to small ones without any discernable division. However, it is possible to identify certain patterns which may explain how the author viewed the animal kingdom. Firstly, I would say that the author moves from what we might have deemed the ‘great beasts’ to the humbler, the more mundane. Lions, tigers, and panthers were the socially accepted kings of the animal world, antelopes were the swiftest of beasts, and unicorns, lynxes, and griffons were all distinguished by their nobility, power, or savagery. In fact, all of the animals in the first section of the bestiary (until the sermon after number 28) possessed unusual (or, in our modern view, supernatural) characteristics. The elephant has no desire to copulate and does so facing away from his mate for shame; the bear gives birth to a formless mass that she then gives form with her tongue; even the local wolf possesses a patch of aphrodisiac hair on its backside. The second section contains the animals that are, in some way, ‘lesser’ creatures. These include domesticates, small woodland creatures, and even an insect. None of them are mythical, and while not entirely devoid of supernatural traits, these animals are distinctly more mundane than those in the first section. While there is quite

a lot of deviation from this rule, the animals are also roughly divided by physical appearance, something similar to our modern system of classification today. Great cats, wild quadrupeds, canines, domesticated quadrupeds, and rodents are all grouped together. Beyond the ‘quality’ and ‘shape’ of the animals, it is hard to see any further organization the author employed – the ‘good’ and ‘evil’ creatures appear evenly throughout the text, and he applies Biblical allegory to quite a few animals, seemingly without any regard for whether the animal is clean, dirty, good, evil, big, small, reptilian or insect.

The organization of this work, then, seems mostly based upon the animals’ unusual or powerful characteristics and their physical shape. This harkens back to the heritage of Aristotle, who believed that animals existed in a rigid hierarchy – some were simply better than others. There was no doubt in anyone’s mind during this time that the lion was truly the King of Beasts. Of course, there was no system for evaluating an animal’s ‘greatness’; at no time does the author state *why* the lion is the best animal. Thus we know that animals, in the middle ages, had a cultural rank that caused them to be either esteemed or reviled. The reliance upon basic aspects of animal form also suggests a connection with Aristotle, who observed and recorded the details that distinguished one kind of animal from another. While it had yet to be systematized and perfected, this concept of defining animals by their physical characteristics certainly existed in the minds of the medieval Europeans. The illustrations give us a further insight into this subject – while the animals that an illustrator would have had common experience with are fairly well represented, the exotic and fictional animals which the illustrator would have never seen tend to look the same. The illustrator could have opted to draw unicorns, elephants and manticores with wildly different bodies and features; after all, no one could have claimed that he was doing it wrong. Instead, he tends to make them all look like some kind of generic dog, then attaches the unique feature. Thus, unicorns look like dogs with one horn, a bear is a dog with shaggy fur, the crocodile is a dog with fangs and scales. I think this reflects the Aristotelian mentality towards the classification of animals: all animals are basically the same except for that which makes them different. All of these aspects of the bestiary’s organization suggest that the classical view of animals was alive and well in the medieval world.

What, then, of the religious allegory that accompanies so many animals in their descriptions? Although the author is writing about the animal world, he seems to believe that it symbolizes human society in some way. As the rulers of the animal world, lions are connected to Christ. The author tells us that lion cubs are born stillborn, and on the third day after the birth, the father comes to breathe life into them: “Just so did the Father Omnipotent raise Our Lord Jesus Christ from the dead on the third day” (8). Christ is also associated with the sweet-smelling panther and the unicorn. Other animals represent different figures in Christian society. Because it has no desire to copulate, the elephant must eat from a special tree, and in this way become like Adam and Eve. The Devil is said to be like the monkey, with a head but no tail (scripture), and he is also the violent, rapacious wolf. Good churchmen imitate the wild goat, ever climbing the heights of morality and eating the cleansing herb of confession and dogma. Hypocrites and the avaricious are like the crocodile, which lives on the land but sleeps in the water. Animals are also models for good (or bad) behavior. The reader is advised to imitate the beaver, who, when pursued by a hunter (the

devil), casts off his genitals (renounces worldly pleasure). Similarly, the ant is a model of diligence and frugality. Throughout the bestiary, the author interjects with religious symbolism and advice, as if to prove that this is a morally uplifting book to read.

As Joyce Salisbury states, early Christian thinkers sought to pull away from the pagan tradition of Aristotle by strictly adhering to a literal interpretation of the Bible, which explicitly stated that men and animals were completely different, the former created to rule over the latter. However, as time went on, Aristotle and the Greco-Roman naturalistic thinking began to creep back into the European cosmology, and as it did so, medieval scholars such as St. Thomas Aquinas sought to Christianize this influence in order to render it harmless and, indeed, beneficial to the Church. The bestiary is no doubt a product of this effort, and like so many other areas of European society, has the appearance of a fundamentally pagan work glossed over with a varnish of Christian theology. This is especially true when one considers how eagerly the author makes connections between animals and the human world; in some ways, he may have done better to leave the connections out and discuss the animals in a clinical and dry manner, as if they were aliens living on another planet. Perhaps even more dangerously, he assigns some animals various feelings and faculties that are normally reserved for humans. The horse is the only creature that “can weep for man and feel the emotion of sorrow” (86). Dogs, he claims, possess a kind of sagacity, even to the point of being able to conduct syllogistic logic (64). Foxes, too, are fraudulent and ingenious, elephants are gentle and kind, and the kingly lion, like any good monarch, shows compassion for his subjects. In most of the animals’ descriptions, more weight is given to their personalities and behaviors than to their physical appearance, thus focusing on their most human-like characteristics (although it is important to note that only two kinds of animals are distinguished with these traits – the ‘great’ animals or those who are very close to men in their daily lives, such as dogs and horses). In short, this bestiary seems to be a medieval continuation of Aristotle’s tradition, sometimes blurring the boundary between men and animals, yet keeping itself beyond criticism by continuously invoking Christian references for its readers.

Interestingly, the descriptions of the animals within the bestiary seem to deviate somewhat from both the Christian and Classical models, yet elements of both can be found. Aristotle rightly claimed that he was an observer of the natural world, and while his conclusions were certainly mistaken quite a lot of the time, he never intentionally strayed away from what his eyes led him to believe. He focused on real, observable behavior in the animal world, and whenever he did not have access to certain animals, he used the most reliable sources he could find. The author of this bestiary never had this overhanging preoccupation with valid and accurate information, it seems. Without hesitation, he eagerly writes about the medicinal powers of puppies’ tongues or the saw-shaped horns of the antelope that can fell the largest of trees. Indeed, he claims the Hyena carries a magic stone that, if placed under the tongue, allows one to look into the future. He fills his pages with references to the arcane and magical, which not only seems problematic for the rationalistic Classical tradition, but the Christian one as well. This may suggest a third influence in the writing of this bestiary, one which is probably much stronger than most academics give credit for: the local tradition. It is important to remember that, while Aristotle was a major force in the

academic and intellectual worlds of Rome and its successors, his influence in the European villages must have been much smaller. Similarly, Christian teachings, while known and at least given lip service in most parts of Europe by this time, may not have been fully understood or even embraced by the majority of country folk. Fairy tales, folklore, magic, and superstition undoubtedly competed with these urban mentalities and cosmologies, and part of the reason why these bestiaries were so popular must have been because readers actually *believed* that Lynx urine hardened into a precious stone, or that goat's blood could dissolve adamant.

With all these competing intellectual forces, could we say that this is even a Christian book? Clearly, people in the middle ages were accustomed through their folk traditions and exposure to Greco-roman culture to thinking of animals as an integral part of their world, even assigning them human-like emotions, personalities, and habits. As I have noted, nearly all of the animals in this bestiary seem to be more than just animals. They connect with the human world in multiple ways: some exhibit distinctly human attributes; others serve as allegorical or symbolic devices to represent groups of people or religious figures. However, this bestiary maintains the Christian idea that humans and animals are separate and distinct, and while it allows that animals *may* exhibit human traits and personalities, they are most definitely *not* human. In my view, this is closer to what was originally proposed by Aristotle than by the early Christians. This is not to say that the author of the bestiary was not Christian; rather, it is an illustration of the evolution and development of the religion itself. While maintaining that humans were distinct from animals, Aristotle acknowledged the ties and similarities between them. Early Christians, on the other hand, dismissed and refuted any possible links, believing that it was sacrilegious to put animals and humans too close to each other. As time passed, Christianity grew and matured into a continental religion and began to relax its guard and allow different ideas and thinkers to modify its doctrines. With the revival of Classical thought, European cosmology shifted back to a world where animals and humans did have much in common. This bestiary is evidence of that shift, and while, as a Christian work, it never questions the uniqueness of man, it does allow a Classical anthropomorphism of its subject. It is a prime example of the synthesis of the two traditions that was taking place during the middle ages.