How did people of the mediaeval period explain physical phenomena, such as eclipses or the distribution of land and water on the globe? What creatures did they think they might encounter: angels, devils, witches, dog-headed people? This fascinating book explores the ways in which mediaeval people categorized the world, concentrating on the division between the natural and the supernatural and showing how the idea of the supernatural came to be invented in the Middle Ages. Robert Bartlett examines how theologians and others sought to draw lines between the natural, the miraculous, the marvelous, and the monstrous and the many conceptual problems they encountered as they did so. The final chapter explores the extraordinary thought-world of Roger Bacon as a case study exemplifying these issues. By recovering the mentalities of mediaeval writers and thinkers, the book raises the critical question of how we deal with beliefs we no longer share.

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THE NATURAL AND THE SUPERNATURAL IN THE MIDDLE AGES

The Wiles Lectures given at the Queen’s University of Belfast, 2006

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Contents

List of Illustrations 

Preface 

1 The Boundaries of the Supernatural 

2 "The Machine of This World": Ideas of the Physical Universe 

3 Dogs and Dog-heads: The Inhabitants of the World 

4 "The Secrets of Nature and Art": Roger Bacon’s Opus maius 

Bibliography of Works Cited 

Index
List of Illustrations

2. Miracle of Rods Changed into Serpents. New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, M.394 (Bible Historiale of Guyart Desmoulins), fol. 43v; French, early fifteenth century. ........................... 24
3. Spheres. University of Toronto, Stillman Drake collection, annotated printed edition of Sacrobosco’s Sphere. By permission of the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto. ............................. 40
4. Macrobius World Map. Bodleian Library, University of Oxford. MS. D’Orville 77, fol. 100; German, tenth or eleventh century. ................................. 42
5. Eclipses. (Image du monde), fol. 117; French, late thirteenth century. © British Library Board. All Rights Reserved (Sloane 2435) ........................................ 53
6. Eclipse at the Crucifixion. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS français 2090 (life of St Denis), fol. 34; French, 1317 ................................. 68
7. Angels. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS français 50 (Vincent of Beauvais), fol. 14v; French, 1463 ................................. 74
8. Three-headed Trinity. Cambridge, St John’s College, MS K.26 (Psalter with Bible pictures), fol. 9v; English?, second half of the thirteenth century. By permission of the Master and Fellows of St John’s College, Cambridge................................. 78
9. Night-flying. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS français 12476 (Martin le Franc, Champion des dames), fol. 105v; French, 1451............................... 82
10. Dogs Protecting Their Master. Aberdeen University Library, MS 24 (Aberdeen Bestiary), fol. 18v; English, c. 1200................................................................. 93
11. St Christopher as Dog-head. Byzantine and Christian Museum, Athens; Greek icon, 1685. ......................... 96
12. Monopod. London, Westminster Abbey Library, MS 22 (Bestiary), fol. 1v; English, late thirteenth century. © Dean and Chapter of Westminster. ....... 104
14. Aristotle Teaching Alexander. New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, M.771 (Guillaume de Tignonville, Dits Moraux des Philosophes), fol. 103; French, c. 1460............................................................... 133
It is a great honour to be invited to give the Wiles lectures. They were founded by the late Janet Boyd of County Down in memory of her father, Thomas S. Wiles, and, over the last fifty years, Mrs Boyd’s imaginative generosity has encouraged numerous historians to produce, first in the lecture hall and then usually in print, reflections on the historical concerns that were preoccupying them. For a Wiles lecturer-elect, it is indeed a somewhat daunting experience to come to realize how many classics of history in fact had their origins in these lectures. Amongst the previous lecturers, I would like to make a special mention of the late Rees Davies, whose 1988 lectures appeared in print, with Rees’ customary promptitude, in 1990 as Domination and Conquest: The Experience of Ireland, Scotland and Wales 1100–1300.¹ Rees was a much-loved man as well as a deeply respected scholar, and his death in 2005 at a relatively young age was a loss to humanity as well as to scholarship.

The strenuous four days at Queen’s were enlivened by the comments and companionship of a group of distinguished visitors, many staff members of Queen’s, and others who attended the lectures and discussions. I am very appreciative of this.

PREFACE

Professor David Hayton, Head of the School of History and Anthropology, and Trevor Boyd, the son of the benefactress, and his wife watched over us with grace and courtesy.

A special debt is owed to Nora Bartlett, who provided a valuable preliminary sounding board for these lectures.

My title is fairly grandiose, and clearly these lectures do not aim at comprehensiveness but, I hope, at illuminating examples and general considerations.