

Part I

SOURCES

I

INTRODUCTORY

I have read somewhere that the charm of Chinese poetry lies, not in harmony of sound or even in sensitive lucidity of thought, but in the endless shades of association, some strong, some faint yet haunting, which cling to the ideograms, surrounding the sharply defined meaning of each phrase with an aura of half-seen beauty. It seems to me that something of this shadowy glamour, lying outside the focus of plain meaning, also surrounds the medieval carvings of animals. Many of them are grotesque, few of the rarer beasts bear any resemblance to the creatures they are meant to represent, and yet their appeal is infinitely romantic. The legendary science of the *Bestiaries*, based on strange tales collected from old authors to satisfy the curiosity of a young civilization, and the complicated medieval symbolism which saw the reflection of some act of God in every natural phenomenon, give to the study of these curious beasts a richer quality of interest than scientific accuracy could have afforded. Modern thought tends more and more towards simplification; we try to purge our minds, as well as our rooms, of all that we consider useless, and the absolute truth of what we retain becomes corre-

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spondingly important to us. We accept as commonplace truths about the animal kingdom which the medieval naturalists would probably have refused to believe, while many of the facts which they retail appear to us so fantastic that we can hardly credit their belief. Yet in this clarification of our knowledge something has escaped us which is not without value so long as men's minds are developed by the richness of their imaginative experience. We have not yet charted all the boundaries between the Possible and the Impossible, but each generation helps to draw the line more clearly, and the power of the Known to suggest glowing images of the Unknown is correspondingly diminished. In the Middle Ages so much of the world was unknown to Europeans, and the animals which their limited explorations had revealed were so strange, that it is hardly to be wondered at if they allowed their imaginations to roam at will over the seemingly boundless realms of the Possible. If the giraffe could be true why not the basilisk?

The more enlightened students probably believed very few of the Bestiary legends, though they did not consider that a story made any the worse text for a sermon because it happened to be entirely untrue. Ralph Higden (died 1364) says in his *Polychronicon*: "Though feigning and saws of misbelieved and lawless men, and wonders and marvels of divers countries be yplanted in this book, such serve and are good to be known of Christian men." Whether he was justified in this contention as a general rule does not matter to our present purpose, which is to show that they are "good to be known" of those who

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would enjoy medieval carvings to the full and recapture some of that lost aura of association which too much learning has taken from us.

II

ANALYSIS OF SOURCES

The importance of what we may call these “associative interests” will emerge more clearly when we come to consider the animals in detail. They may be divided into five groups according to their different sources, and these we must now consider :

- (1) Animals which typify some particular person.
- (2) Animals of the *Bestiary*.
- (3) Animals of the Romances.
- (4) Heraldic animals.
- (5) Animals studied from nature.

For clarity I have also grouped together the various recognizable types of human monstrosities, though they are derived, in many cases, from the same sources as the animals.

The real, or imaginary, habits of an animal will often determine the source of a carver’s inspiration, but where these are not illustrated we get no help in determining the importance of the different sources from the comparative frequency with which different animals appear, for the same creatures are generally singled out as especially important in all classes. Thus the lion and the eagle are the symbols of St Mark and St John respectively, have the most complicated histories given them by the *Physiologus*, and are favourite heraldic devices.

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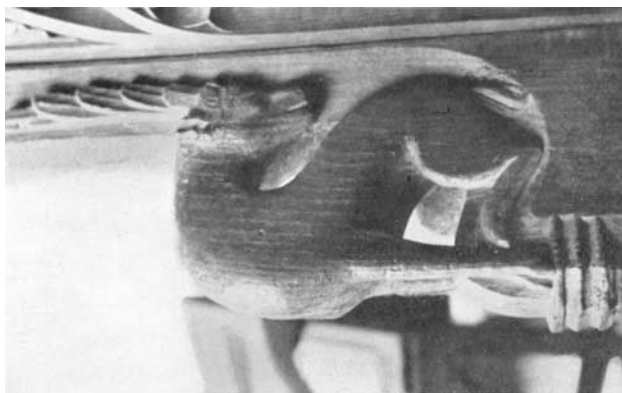
(1) *Animals of personal symbolism.* The most important example of the first group is the Agnus Dei, or Lamb of God, which is still recognized as the symbol of Christ throughout the Christian world, while the meaning of most of the animal symbolism of the early Christian art has been forgotten by all but specialists. Isidore of Seville tells how various animals symbolize different aspects of Christ: thus the lamb represents His innocence; the sheep, His patience; the ram, His leadership; the kid, His likeness to sinful flesh; the calf, His sacrifice for us; the lion, His kingship and courage; the serpent, His death and wisdom; the worm that comes from the ashes of the phoenix, His Resurrection; and the eagle, His Ascension.

Next in importance are the four symbols of the Evangelists. From the early days of Christianity men were agreed that the creatures with the faces of a man, a lion, a bull, and an eagle, seen by Ezekiel near the river Chebar, and the four beasts, described in the Book of Revelation, represented the four Evangelists. The symbolism of their identification was explained to the congregations on certain days, by a passage from the work of Rabanus Maurus on Ezekiel, which is preserved in some twelfth-century French lectionaries. St Matthew represented the man because he begins his Gospel with an account of Christ's earthly descent; St Mark begins with the description of the "voice crying in the wilderness" (like a lion), and St Luke's account of the sacrifice of Zacharias in his opening chapter made the sacrificial bull an appropriate symbol for him. St John, who carries

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M.D.A. pages 16, 27, 28
3. WIGGENHALL ST GERMAN
Heraldic Antelope



M.D.A. pages 16, 27, 28
2. WALPOLE ST PETER
Natural Antelope

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his readers at once into the presence of God, was associated with the eagle which, alone among animals, could gaze undazzled on the sun.

I shall deal with the animals associated with less important saints as they occur in the catalogue, as also with the ever popular Dragon, the symbol of the Evil One.

(2) *The Bestiary*. By far the most interesting influence upon the animal carvings of the Middle Ages was that of the *Bestiary*, a work whose history we must now briefly consider. As early as the fifth century we hear of a book called the *Physiologus* or “natural historian”. The author remains anonymous, but is thought to have been a Greek monk, living in Alexandria, who was perhaps influenced by the *Fables* of Aesop, and who drew his material from references to clean and unclean beasts in the Bible, and from the works of SS. Ambrose, Basil and Eustathius on the “Hexameron” or six days of Creation. He also used Gregory’s *Moralia* and the *Etymology* of Isidore of Seville, who in turn had borrowed largely from earlier writers such as Pliny and Solinus, hardly adding any first-hand observations, or correcting any of their predecessors’ errors. Aristotle had been a distinguished pioneer in the study of natural history, and his *History of Animals* contained much correct and valuable information, but social convulsions caused his works to be ignored in Europe until the thirteenth century, when they were translated from Arabic to Latin and played an important part in stimulating the revival of learning. The references to his works in the *Bestiary* are generally misreadings quoted in sup-

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port of fantastic statements, but even if its authors had had easy access to his writings it is probable that they would have preferred the more colourful authorities who misled them. Pliny's *Natural History* was the richest mine of information for the medieval student who wished to enlarge his knowledge beyond the limits of his own observation, but although there was much valuable information in Pliny he also had depended largely on the writings of others, such as Ctesias and Megasthenes, which were more full of wonders than facts. The *Physiologus* had a wide distribution, being translated into many languages; there are Syriac, Armenian and Ethiopic texts and even Icelandic. The greater number of manuscripts remaining are in Latin and French.

In the early sixth century the book was declared to be heretical, but this does not seem to have lessened its popularity. Some twelfth-century writer, thought to have been English, rearranged the entries, which had hitherto been without any fixed order, classifying the animals as beasts, birds or fishes. At the same time a great deal of new material was added, drawn largely from the works of Isidore of Seville, St Ambrose and Rabanus Maurus, and the number of chapters rose from the original 40 to 100 or 150. These later additions are less fantastic than the original chapters, and their pictures are generally mere representations of the animals, no attempt being made to show their characteristic and symbolical activities. It is therefore almost impossible to decide whether carvings of these animals are copied from the manuscripts or from nature.

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The chapters generally begin with some Biblical mention of the animal, followed by what the *Physiologus* said about it; the spiritual significance is then explained in an address to “a man of God”, and the section usually, though not invariably, ends with the words “well therefore did the *Physiologus* speak concerning” the animal in question.

Later writers also took a hand in reshaping the *Bestiary*; a well-known twelfth-century version was attributed to Hugo de Sancto Victore; Philippe de Thaun* also composed a French version soon after 1121, and Guillaume le Clerc wrote a rhymed *Bestiary* in Norman-French, about 1210, which has been translated into English by Mr G. C. Druce. Perhaps even more important than these paraphrases were the borrowings of the encyclopaedists, who based much of their natural history upon the *Physiologus*; for since their works dealt with every branch of human knowledge, they were naturally regarded as mines of information whence all students might draw material for their own work, and their statements, whether fact or fiction, were thus widely disseminated.

Vincent de Beauvais (c. 1190–c. 1264) was one of the most important of these encyclopaedists, and his *Speculum Majus* summarizes almost all the human knowledge of the thirteenth century. Since he covers so vast a field (his quotations are taken from about 450 authors), it is no wonder that, in his own words, he “took small

* Translated by Thomas Wright in his *Popular Treatises on Science in the Middle Ages*, 1841.

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pains to reduce the sayings of the philosophers to concord, striving rather to repeat what each hath said on every matter". The more modest encyclopaedia of Bartholomaeus Anglicus, an English Franciscan who taught at the University of Paris, in 1230, is of importance to us for two reasons: it was written for the use of Franciscan friars at a time when these were preaching in many English villages, and its similes therefore were made familiar to the common people, and it was one of the most widely read books of the Middle Ages, retaining its popularity until the sixteenth century.

At first sight it seems curious that in an illiterate age the influence of the *Bestiary* should be so great as to outweigh that of direct observation, but this is certainly the case. Not only do the carvers infinitely prefer to represent animals which they are most unlikely to have seen (and some of their renderings make it painfully obvious that they had not seen them), but even in dealing with creatures with whose real habits they must have been familiar, they do not hesitate to follow the *Bestiary* in its most fantastic mis-statements. If the *Physiologus* says that stags eat serpents by all means let them be shown doing so, however unlike the ways of the native red deer it may seem (fig. 17). When it was supposed that most medieval churches were designed, down to the last detail, by ecclesiastics, this seemed natural enough, but the pendulum of praise has swung the other way now, and the bishops and priors are only allowed the credit of having financed buildings designed by master-masons. That the carvers did not fully understand the

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M.D.A.

pages 29, 30

4. EDLESBOROUGH
Bat



F. H. Crossley

pages 14, 28

5. MANCHESTER CATHEDRAL
Apes robbing a Pedlar