

Animals in the Time of the Middle Ages

The Knowledge

The animal kingdom held a lively interest for man during the Middle Ages, even though little was known about the natural sciences.

From the category known today as mythic animals -- unicorns, dragons, giant snails whose shells were inhabited by humans, there was no doubt of their existence. Such creatures simply lived in distant, far away lands, or at a time so long past that only their fossils remained.

According to the Christian religion, wild animals were seen through a prism of morality, and could experience the same realities that humans faced. The panther, for example, was considered a good, gentle, and restrained creature, with "breath of sweet perfume"; the lion was merciful, even fearing the white rooster and the creak of the chariot wheel!

Scientific facts about animals came from ancient sources like Pliny the Elder's *Natural History*, an animal catalog written in the 1st century A.D.

The first collection of animal fables was written in Greek and dedicated to Alexander in the 2nd century. *Physiologus* was based on the Bible and animals had symbolic importance.

Aristotle's *History of Animals*, written in the 4th century B.C., was not rediscovered until the 8th century.

At the end of the 12th century, the animal world was treated in a more scientific and natural way, according to an essay written by Hildegarde de Bingen. In the 13th century, Albert le Grand composed a *De animalibus*, and the encyclopedist Barthé l'Anglais classified animals according to size in his *Book of Properties of Things*.

Parallel to these works, essays written about farming, livestock and hunting put more emphasis on the animal and its everyday existence, particularly in the natural habitat where it lived and multiplied.

Animal images are found in numerous works of art, stained glass, sculptures, and in the margins of illustrated manuscripts. The animal is also very present in the decor of middle class and aristocratic dwellings, particularly in animal-shaped objects that furnished the home.

On rooftops, finials in the shape of wings, horses, or deer antlers were mounted on houses to protect it. The light of day illuminated images of birds painted on the windowpanes of taverns and priories alike.

Inside palaces, walls displayed tapestries woven with images of wild rabbits, squirrels and birds, while furniture was upholstered with embroideries of animals, real or symbolic.

On palace grounds, pavement tiles were decorated with deer, boar, bear, swans or parrots, like those at the home of Duke Jean de Berry.

At noblemen's tables, saltshakers in the shape of goats or wild sheep matched the splendor of silver vessels or pottery jugs shaped like lions, griffins, giraffes, and even basset hounds.

Animals also influenced children's games and toys, like their small wooden or lead horses and clay bird whistles.

During the 15th century, King René of Anjou hung leopard and lynx skins in his menagerie; his son hung skins of civet (otter) that gave off a musk odor, considered fashionable at the time.

Small pigeon statues were affixed to pigeon houses to lure mates; on inside walls, paintings of pigeons were thought to increase fertility. Breeding cages, sparrow coops, and birdcages were mounted everywhere on castle grounds.

The medieval castle resembled a true pet shop.

The Wild Animal

The forest was the natural habitat for a large number of species, certainly for deer, squirrels, wild cats, lynx, and boar. For the fox and other animals that inhabited the plains, the forest became a place of refuge.

The Changing Forest

At the height of the Middle Ages, one half of the total territory corresponding to modern France, some 40 million acres, was covered with forests. Between the 11th and 13th centuries, the large clearing of land modified the countryside, leaving only 14 million acres of forest.

Agriculture and the food industry were initially responsible for this deforestation, necessary to nourish an ever-expanding population, which grew from 7 million in the 11th century to 20 million in the 13th century.

To their detriment, forests were being developed equally by artisans, working in combustibles (glassmakers, potters, metallurgists), and by livestock breeders, who required vast areas of pastureland for cows and oxen on deforested acreage.

In order to respond to a double demand for food and clothing (wool), sheep production became an industry.

Other activities that led to the deforestation of the entire region: the smoking of herring that required beech wood, eliminating the tree from coastal regions; the feeding of domestic animals that grazed at the forest's edge, and nourishing pigs from the acorns of oak trees, the most esteemed of trees during the Middle Ages.

The Selection of Species

The transformation of natural space led to the disappearance of animal species, either directly through hunting or indirectly through the exploitation of forests.

Wild animals, classified as either useful or harmful, faced more frequent hunting practices with less restriction. On Anglo-Saxon islands and in the Mediterranean, the wolf was tracked to extinction. On the other hand, falcons, sparrow hawks, and ferrets were useful to hunters, and deer were fed in order to increase their numbers, which resulted in better hunting.

Social Implications

Forests were protected from further destruction by subdividing them into hunting reserves and areas of defense (young woods forbidden to livestock).

Nonetheless, aristocrats were still able to exploit the forests by seizing the best hunting grounds for themselves.

However, some arrangements favored the peasants, who were permitted to set traps to help eliminate the fox that killed hens, or the wolf that attacked flocks of sheep or cattle. They profited not only from the hunting bonuses they received for killing wolves, but also from the fur pelts they took from the animals.

Work Animals

Animals served as man's work force. Depending on their qualities -- power, sense of smell, quickness, intuition, or fitness, animals performed all the heavy work duties that helped man in his daily life.

Guardian Angels

Medieval homes were invaded periodically by pests that took food "from the mouths" of homeowners. The most persistent parasites were the gnawers -- mice and rats. A large variety of traps were available to the medieval customer at the end of the 14th century. But even these contraptions did not exempt a house from having a "garrison of good cats," as Paris' Director of Households reminded his wife.

The dog was especially appreciated as both hunter and faithful companion to the household's master. And he guarded the home's valuables if thieves should invade the residence.

Good or Bad Omen

Because animals were credited with the ability to predict man's future, their behavior was closely observed, even into the 15th century. Bats who flew around a house were a harbinger of home fires. Magpies chattering on a roof and doves darting from their usual nesting spot were considered bad omens. A crow that cawed on an ill person's chimney meant death. A spider resting on an individual, however, was a good sign.

During the 11th century, people believed it was dangerous to leave home before the rooster crowed, yet it also signified healing of the sick or the unexpected arrival of a miracle.

Animals also served as predictors of weather: when chickens gathered under a shed, they sensed bad weather; a cat licking its hindquarters announced rain. Animals could also reveal the state of the world: when deer came to graze near villages, it meant all was well, but when wolves howled, it signaled great pestilence, hunger, or war.

From the Wheat Field to the Battle Field

In the area of agriculture, animal used for hauling supplies or for pulling farm implements were aided by 11th century innovations like the shoulder harness and the single-file yoke.

Cattle pulled the plow and horses pulled the harrow for sowing seeds. Donkeys, more resilient than horses, were used to move firewood or heavy sacks of wheat.

Pack or harnessed animals were requisitioned in times of war. Cows were needed to pull war equipment, horses were not only ridden on the battlefield but were used, along with mules, to move wooden beams that sheltered army camps and its food, water, and wood. Flocks of sheep and cattle served as food supplies for encamped armies.

Since antiquity, animals have served in war. The specialized vocabulary reveals how animals inspired and influenced men in battle: the torture (from tortoise), a wooden shell used for defense; the battering ram; and the "cat," a war machine with multiple shells, equipped with claws, and able to scale the highest walls. Even dead animals served man in the war effort. Proven military strategies included throwing animal carcasses into starving villages, and polluting springs and fountains with animal organs or rotting fish.

Animal Products

Animal breeding was aimed at designing both a top work force and the highest quality of products and materials. Bees, cows and sheep gave honey and wax, milk and wool, respectively. Butchered animals provided bones, fat, leather hides, horns and flesh meat.

Food

Between the 12 and 15th centuries, meat from hunting sources was minimal; it was animal livestock that provided the food necessary to feed the growing population.

In the trilogy of large consumed animals -- cows, sheep, hogs, cattle supplied Northern Europe and the West, followed by sheep, then goats - dominant in the Mediterranean region, then pork. Cattle consumption was ranked higher in noblemen circles than in the peasant world.

Not all rural areas raised livestock...not even hogs. However, all regions raised poultry. Chickens and geese made up a food complement of extreme importance, especially eggs, eaten hardboiled, fried, or as omelets.

Fish, from river or sea, was essential in nourishing the population one out of every three days during the Middle Ages. Fish could be salted, dried, smoked, eaten fresh, or pickled, like herring. Every part of the fish was used, including the oil for fat during Lent.

And the main sweetener of foods during the Middle Ages came from the animal world -- honey from the bee.

The Leading Animal Products

Wool was the essential material used to make undergarments. Industrial wool was the principle product of Western Europe; nothing was more costly than a beautiful dyed wool dress.

Silk came from the Far East and from Byzantium, made by silkworms inhabiting mulberry bushes. Until the 13th century, silk was reserved for princes and kings.

Dyes made from animal matter were scarce. Red was obtained from the eggs of ladybugs, or from insects found on the kermes oak. Purple was extracted from the murex shell, but only the wealthy and powerful could afford the dye.

Feathers were also valuable. Goose feathers served as quills for writers, or quivers for arrows. Feathers from goose, duck or chicken were used in the making of feather beds and for stuffing the mattresses of the rich. Peacock feathers or variegated feathers from exotic birds decorated joust helmets. Feathers were even used to make bouquets.

Bone played a big role in daily life because it was a resistant and pliable material that was put to many uses. Pig or wild boar teeth made polish for pots; horse jaws became children's toboggans, and cattle bones were made into ice skates.

From pig's anklebones came the game of knucklebones. Even the vulture's ulna bone was used to make flutes. Dice, chess pawns and spinning tops found among archeological remnants were made of bone.

Cow horn was used to make lanterns, combs, hunting and shepherd's horns, writer's inkwells, birdbaths, sword and knife handles. Goat horns were made into baby bottles.

In the game of checkers, bone or ivory, cetacean, large mammal bones, deer antler or the horns of bulls were all used.

And for jewelry or works of art, coral, pearls, tortoise shell, and ostrich eggshells were used for such creations.

Animals as Amusement

Menageries

Menageries were signs of power and political influence. Originally, only kings and princes were rich enough to maintain them but by the end of the Middle Ages, some towns and abbeys had also installed them.

Lions, leopards, cheetahs, panthers, bears, camels, dromedaries, even elephants, made up a typical menagerie, but assorted other animals were found there also.

From the 14th to the 15th centuries, the dukes of Burgundy had the most impressive menageries, followed by the king of France.

In Dijon, Philip the Bold had monkeys, leopards, beavers, porcupines, a bear cub and even a porpoise. Each of the royal gardens of his brother, Charles V, had a "lion hotel," making the Paris address of the Hotel Saint-Pol the *true* Lions-Saint Paul Street.

Exotic animals that Fearless John received as gifts were sent to menageries on his estates, namely Hesdin Castle. A journal entry in 1405 mentions the duke's camel and expenses for hay, until the fateful day of September 24, 1411, when the journal records that "the aforementioned camel died."

Saint Louis, however, did not like to hunt and did not have a menagerie. He shipped his elephant, a gift from an Egyptian sultan, to his brother-in-law Henry III, King of England.

Animal Intelligence

A particular intelligence was recognized in animals, similar to “sensible thought” properties (caution, judgment, instinct) found in humans.

Animals had a practical intelligence, were industrious, knew how to build dwellings, and were able to use stones as tools, as was the case with some birds.

Like humans, animals were capable of deductive reasoning and could dream during sleep. Deer were considered clever, while elephants possessed a remarkable memory, donkeys could calculate the hours of day, and geese and roosters could measure the twilight hours!

A Formative Closeness

Animals could not compete with man’s intelligence, but the closeness and affection they offered elevated them to a near-human level. In the 13th century, Brunet Latin speculated that the horse “is a beast of great intelligence because he lives among men, who impart to it judgment and memory.”

The frontier provided the opportunity for greater openness and a more equal relationship between man and animal. “I talk to my dogs like I would to a man. And they hear me and do what I say better than any of my servants,” said Gaston Phébus.

The Animal Showman

Living in close harmony with man brought about changes in animal behavior. Animal showmen knew how to select the keenest animals and train them to imitate humans. Performing bears and monkeys and talking birds were the most entertaining. Spectators were amused to see that man’s shortcomings had been passed on to animals.

“There are talkative dogs, deceitful and scatterbrained dogs, just like people; other dogs are wise,” said Gaston Phébus.

Animal, Mirror Image of Man

The boundaries between man and animal remained pervious, even if monkeys were trained as clowns, perversion (i.e. bestiality) was a crime, and humans could not, by law, disguise themselves as animals.

Animals did share some moral values with humans – courage and loyalty, and the physical virtues of strength and beauty. Not astonishing, then, that the ideal horse was described as having many human qualities at the end of the 14th century.

“Know then, Master John, that a horse ought to posses sixteen qualities: three from the fox -- short, straight ears, strong and healthy fur,

and a tail straight and full; four from the hare -- a delicate head, heightened senses, suppleness, and a quick, rapid step; four from the cow -- hips large, fat and wide, huge intestines, large protruding eyes, and solid lower legs; three from the donkey -- good feet, strong spine and fine character; and four qualities of a young girl: a beautiful (head of hair) mane, beautiful chest, good kidneys and a fat bottom!"

Likewise, men borrowed traits from the animal to enhance their own self-images: strong like a bull, courageous like a lion, sly like a fox -- not surprising considering the vast array of animals portrayed on shields.

One third of species -- wild, tame, mythical, of land or sea, were represented on medieval coats of arms. Even the herring and the cod were part of the important heraldic "furniture."

The dignified rooster ("gallus") represented France (Gallia) until the end of the 16th century, and animal metaphors carried moral messages in Christian discourse: the grasshopper and the ant were seen as figures of a model society. No wonder animals carried so much influence during the Middle Ages.

Humans Take on Animal Names

Baptismal names were evidence of the popularity of animals: all the Leos, Leonards ("lion"), Lionels ("little lion"), Arthurs and Barnards (bear), even Ursules ("little bear"), made reference to some of the animals that humans admired, including some Falcons and Canins ("canine). There was no shame in sharing the name of an animal, wild or tame. Saints who chose the name Wolf (Loup), the patron saint of shepherds, or Bear (Ours), the patron saint of the Duke of Berry, set an example by choosing such names.

Animal names that became family names at the end of the 14th century had equal stature among citizens: Paolo Ucello took on the name of a bird and the painter Fouquet, a squirrel name. A coach driver named Cochon feared no ridicule with the image of a pig emblazoned on his family banner. And Lord Bar (bass) chose this fish as his mascot and perched it on top of his jousting helmet.

Humans Share Names with Animals

Animals that were raised as livestock, or exotic animals that lived in the princes' menageries, were often given men's, and sometimes women's, names. René d'Anjou named his lions Martin and Dauphin.

Cats were named Tybert or Gilbert, donkeys Baudoin or Yvonnet (little Yvon), cows Tholosa or Columba -- women's first names. Horses of legendary soldiers were named Marchegai, Bayard, Blanc Jouer (white player), or Gringalet -- a word that simply meant "horse."

Nicknames

The majority of names given to pet cows and other livestock were nicknames; likewise, many men had nicknames between the 13th and 14th centuries. Even today, nicknames like Grand, Petit, Bon, Lenoir, LeBlanc, LeRoux (Red) are still used.

Skin color or the color of fur often justified an animal's nickname, like Martelé (Spot), Fearless John's dog. Cows and horses were also named in this way: Morellus, Brunelle, Roger, or Rougeaud, like in *Roman de Renard* ("Story of the Fox"). A physical trait or defect could also distinguish an animal -- Le Borne (One-eye).

For cows considered part of the family, the list of nicknames was endless -- some even charming and feminine: Mignota, Blonda, Bruna, Blanchona, Morina (somber like a Moor), Chataigna (Oakie) -- a name inspired by physical size, or shape, like Ronda or Bassetta, or by character, Torta (Mischief).

Familiarity

Animal names conveyed a certain close relationship to humans. Animals that were "baptized" were destined to live out a long life in close proximity to their owners. Creatures associated with the nobleman included cats, dogs and horses, while the peasant was surrounded by goats, wet nurses, milk cows, and animals not destined for the butcher's knife. But this closeness to human beings was not without some danger.

Animal Trials

Animals caused different types of accidents in their physical attacks on humans: bulls charged and pigs devoured children. Other creatures took advantage of situations: wolves attacked herds and insects destroyed crops.

Medieval society reacted to such aggression from a theological approach. Did animals have souls? If so, were they responsible for their actions? In certain cases, could they be judged?

To these bewildering questions, men of authority often responded affirmatively, bringing animals to trial during the 13th and 14th centuries.

However, the process was not the same for all. If insects or rodents had invaded an area, church officials in the surrounding locale where the damage had occurred settled the affair. If the guilty crickets or rats did not leave the affected sites by a certain date, they were excommunicated.

For accidents caused by domestic animals, the following process took place: the animal was captured and put in prison at the seat of criminal justice. A

judge conducted a trial, led an inquiry and charged the animal with a crime. Officers of justice heard evidence from witnesses and the animal's lawyer, then reviewed all information and returned a verdict, which often resulted in confining the animal to a cell. It was then up to the public to apply the penalty. Sometimes the accused animal was dressed like a man and executed in front of similar animals. In one out of 10 cases, the accused animal was a pig.

Using man's system of justice to punish animals seemed to have value, especially for those animals perceived to be like their masters. The law served as a warning to both man and beast!

An Animal Paradise?

In their immense numbers, animals came to an end – often thrown into ditches after being stripped of their fur or hides, their lard, bones, even their flesh, as in the case of dogs, whose meat was given to falcons.

However, with the death of family pets, medieval man did not restrain his emotions: he shed tears over his beloved creatures, sometimes buried them in his garden or in a cemetery, prayed for them and fantasized about an animal afterlife.

Translation by Peggy Linrud, from "L'animal au Moyen Age"
August 2010

