

A Bestiary

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What you see before you is a limited bestiary, a bestiary which contains only those animals found in the heraldry of members of the shire of Vanished Wood (my home shire.) Bestiaries were books which told people about the nature of animals. They were popular throughout the middle ages and the renaissance. Bestiaries were the sum of the author's knowledge about animals. This knowledge was rarely drawn from direct observation but more commonly from hearsay and "research" done by reading other authors descriptions of animals. Many bestiaries tried to explain the actions of animals in human terms. Another feature of the bestiary is the use of allegory. Animals actions were often thought to be parallels to and symbols of religious principles.

This bestiary was written in the manner of the 12th century bestiary Cambridge II.4.26, from which much of the information was drawn. It was written "in persona," thus there are no inherently "modern" commentaries about the improbability of the description. Each of the animals is presented at face value. I hope this information proves interesting, enlightening and entertaining as you discover the medieval personality of a few animals.

Apes, the Bee is a beast of the air. Bees are very orderly creatures. They take great care in the building of their houses. Bees have a strict social structure, much like our own. They live in families, serve a king, and go to war. A bee who disobeys a law of its king will do penance, sacrificing its own life by stinging itself to death just as the people of Persia do unto this very day. They are highly skilled in the science of making honey. Bees can produce poison instead of honey if they are aggravated and will even lay down their own lives in their thirst for revenge. Ovid tells us that bees are generated from the maggots found in rotting animal flesh. Bees grow from ox flesh, drones from mule flesh, wasps from donkey flesh, and hornets from horse flesh.

Aquila, the Eagle is a beast of the air. It is known for its keen eyesight. This is so acute that it can see even the smallest creatures of the earth and sea from a great height, thus allowing him to swoop down upon his prey and carry it away before it is aware that he is there. When the eagle gets old his wings become slow and his eyesight poor. Then he flies above a fountain to the height of the sun and allows its rays to burn away the infirmities of age. He then plunges headlong into the fountain three times over and he is thereby renewed.

Canis, the Dog is a beast of the earth. This is a truly intelligent, noble and loyal beast. The lick of a puppy can cure men who suffer from internal maladies and the tongue of a full grown dog can cure cuts and other wounds by licking them. A dog is very temperate in its eating habits though it will often return and eat its own vomit, in the same way that men who have been forgiven for their sins will return to their former folly. There are many breeds of dogs, some hunt for stags and other animals, some guard flocks of sheep against marauding wolves and some guard castles against the evil of man. These dogs will fight off robbers though their lives be in mortal danger and even guard the body of their master after he is dead. Such is the loyalty of a dog. Many dogs will refuse food and water upon the death of their master feeling it better to die rather than live without him. It is the nature of dogs that they cannot live without the company of man. In the tale of King Garamantes we find the virtues of dogs proclaimed. For when he was taken captive as a slave, over two hundred of his finest dogs gathered themselves into a raiding party and attacked the enemy army thus freeing him from his bondage.

Delfines, the Dolphin, also called the Simone is a beast of the sea. They are named for the form Apollo took when he founded the Oracle at Delphi. They can be found congregating in schools in order to make music beneath the waves. They are the fastest creatures in all the seas and can even outrun the swiftest ships in the ocean. Sailors tell that their presence is a warning of foul weather to come. There is a breed of dolphins in the River Nile, in Egypt that is said to attack marauding crocodiles and slice open their soft underbellies with their razor sharp dorsal fin. The dolphin is the symbol of the French Royal Prince.

Draco, the Dragon is a beast of the earth and the air. The dragon is the largest of all the serpents. Dragons live in places such as India and Ethiopia where the climate is extremely hot. The dragon's strength is not in its teeth as is the case with most other serpents but rather in its tail with which it stings. The dragon has no venom. It lives in a cave and will attack any living thing. Even the elephant is not immune to its wrath because of its size. In order to attack an elephant the dragon ties a knot in its tail and snares the leg of the elephant when it walks by the dragon's lair. The elephant is then strangled with the body of this huge serpent. The dragon is the principal charge upon the arms of our Great Kingdom of the Middle.

Erius, the Hedgehog, also called the Urchin is a beast of the earth. It is covered with spikes and curls itself into a ball when it senses danger. It also uses its spines to gather food. When grapes and such fruits have fallen to the earth, it rolls on its back and skewers them. Thusly he delivers them to his young. If however he drops one, so Pliny says, then he will fling all of them to the ground and stomp the earth in a fit of anger.

Fenix, the Phoenix is a beast of the air. It is found in Arabia and is named for its red-purple color. When the phoenix is becoming aged, it covers itself with frankincense and myrrh and builds a funeral pyre and thereby it immolates itself. In the nine days after the fire it becomes a worm and begins to mature at a miraculous rate until upon the ninth day afterward it returns to life in the manner of our Savior. It emerges from the ashes fully formed. Doing this the phoenix can live well beyond five hundred years.

The Griffin is a beast of the earth and the air, being made from the hind quarters of a lion, the forepart of an eagle and the ferocity of both. They are the steadfast enemies of horses and have been known to attack men as well. They live in the mountains and other desolate parts of the world. The he-griffin is called a keythong and has no wings.

Lupis, the Wolf is a beast of the earth. These are ill tempered and evil beasts. They are greedy and massacre anyone who passes by. They keep their powers in their chest and jaws and their strength in their paws. There is very little power in their loins. The she-wolf whelps only one month in a year, in the month of May and then only in stormy weather. When hunting the wolf searches for prey far from its home. If it must hunt for sheep at night then it does so in the manner of a tamed dog in order to deceive any sheepdogs that stand guard. It walks boldly and calmly into the fold always keeping the wind at its back so that it may not be detected. If it should break a twig or make a noise while hunting then it punishes the offending foot by biting it. At night the wolf's eyes shine like lanterns. You may defeat a wolf in battle if you see it first, for it loses its ferocity, but if it should see the man first then he is done for, unless he be of great strength. On a wolf's back there is a small patch of hair, which if taken from the wolf while it is still living, acts as an aphrodisiac. Wolves guard this hair jealously and will pull it out with its own teeth if it believes that it will be captured.

Pavo, the Peacock is a beast of the air. His plumage is bright like the jewels in our king's crown. This beast is tough to cook, though if eaten it will cure a hot stomach. Peacocks are often served to kings and worthies as a symbol of their prowess and glory. While the peacock is proud

of its beautiful plumage, Epiphanius tells us that he is embarrassed by the diminutive nature of his feet and cries loudly at the sight of them.

Salamandra, the Salamander is a beast of the earth. It is a creature related to the element of fire. Aristotle reports that the salamander may put a fire out by walking through it. Pliny tells us that the ashes from a burned salamander may be used in medicine, though he neglects to tell us how to get the ashes of a beast who extinguishes flames and whose wool may be used to make fire proof cloth. He further tells us that the salamander's skin is very cold to the touch. This beast is highly venomous. Not only is its bite deadly but it imparts its poison to any fruit that it touches, thus making the fruit poisonous as well. Salamanders also poison water in the same manner.

Syren, the Winged Serpent is a beast of the earth and the air. The serpent is of snow white color and has long wings. This beast lives in Arabia. It can slither or fly faster than a horse can run. Its bite contains venom so deadly that men usually die before they feel the pain of the bite. When snakes drink from a river they must first spit out their venom into a hole lest they be poisoned by the drinking of it. When serpents of all breeds get old they lose their sight although by shucking their skin their sight is restored. If a snake sees a man naked, in the manner of Adam, he is afraid of him, yet if he sees him clothed then he strikes at him immediately. Snakes propel themselves by using the scales on the bottom of their ribs like claws. These scales are arranged evenly on their bottom from the neck downward to the tail. As snakes are moist the slimy trail they leave obliterates any marks these rib-feet would leave. When the Devil appeared to Eve he appeared in the guise of a serpent.

Volpis, the Fox is a beast of the earth. He is a deceiver. When no food can be found then he throws himself in a puddle of red mud so that he appears to be bloody and lays on the ground. He lays perfectly still, sticks his tongue out, and does not seem to breathe. Thus when the birds of the air see him they believe him to be dead and land on him. He then pounces upon them and devours them wholly.

Here Endeth the Bestiary