

The Peterborough Bestiary

Medieval wonders of the Animal Kingdom



The animal kingdom described and interpreted in a splendid picture book

Animal books have been known since classical Antiquity and it is no surprise that they were among the most popular illustrated manuscripts of the Middle Ages. A particularly fine example is the Peterborough Bestiary produced around 1300 with great knowledge of art and nature in an East Anglian abbey. Dogs, horses, monkeys and lions, deer, sirens, and the phoenix, feature among the more than 100 animals painted and described in the book which, in accordance with the custom of the time, interprets their behaviour from a Christological perspective. People believed in animals that did not exist and fabulous qualities were attributed to many real animals.

Exuberant decoration with miniatures, decorated initials, drolleries and scrollwork

The Peterborough Bestiary is among the most sumptuously decorated extant bestiaries. A total of 104 miniatures adorn all pages of the manuscript: they are either set on glowing golden grounds within coloured Gothic ornamental frames or on colourfully patterned grounds framed in gold. 108 colourfully decorated initials extending over several lines precede the individual chapters on each animal. Their decoration alternatively consists of either biomorphic interlace or of small male or female portraits. These are a typical feature of English book production. Coloured scrollwork runs in the inter-columnar space, housing small birds and drolleries. The page format of 348 x 236 mm makes the Peterborough Bestiary one of the largest manuscripts of its kind.

Peterborough - a centre of spirituality and learning

Such an elaborate manuscript must have been the work of a well-equipped scriptorium. Throughout the 900 years of its existence, the Abbey and later Cathedral of Peterborough always played an important part in the English ecclesiastical landscape. It not only produced liturgical de luxe volumes but also a wide range of sumptuously decorated manuscripts for scientific research and study. The Peterborough Bestiary has been kept in the Parker Library of the famous Corpus Christi College in Cambridge since 1575, as part of the anthology MS 53.

An original book for both clerics and the laity

Popular with both ecclesiastical and secular audiences alike, Bestiaries, together with Psalters and Apocalypses, were among the most widely read illuminated manuscripts in England and Northern France from the 12th century onwards. They offered the cleric eager to illustrate his sermons a true mine of examples from the animal world whilst private customers took more delight in the original illustrations and the curious animal descriptions.

The reception in classical Antiquity

While knowledge of animal symbolism was wide-spread in the Middle Ages, the Peterborough Bestiary fascinates today's readers with its wealth of late antique knowledge of biology, mythology and philosophy. The book is essentially based on a text called Physiologus that was presumably written around 200 AD in Alexandria. The term of "physiologus" may perhaps best be translated as someone knowledgeable in Nature. Indeed, the anonymous author uses this pseudonym to present the behaviours of real and

fabulous animals and based on the Christian faith, creates allegorical links with God, Mankind and the Devil. The text immediately enjoyed great popularity. It was translated into a great many languages over the centuries and completed with additions from other knowledgeable sources until it finally became a bestiary in the 12th century.

The most extensive addition to the original text goes back to the famous medieval encyclopaedia, the 20-volume *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville from the 7th century. His writings enjoyed uncontested authority throughout the Middle Ages, as did the Bestiary too.

Fabulous local and exotic fauna in Gothic imagery

The descriptions of more than 100 terrestrial and aquatic animals, birds, and reptiles, makes the Peterborough Bestiary one of the most comprehensive works of its kind. It opens with the lion as the king of beasts, while also exploring fabulous creatures, such as the phoenix, the unicorn and the griffon. A particular challenge to the English artist were the exotic animals, such as the antelope, the elephant and the crocodile that he might have known only from model books or travel literature.

The transition from Romanesque to Gothic art, which started in France, also gave rise to a completely new style of painting in England. The wish for increased three-dimensionality generally led to more gracefully painted and swifter lines. The new aesthetics had an impact on the representation of animals of course too, their bodies now standing out clearly from the background, their swift movements making them appear more natural. Thus the miniatures in the Peterborough Bestiary provide a vibrant panorama of the local and exotic fauna, in a manner much closer to nature than preceding Romanesque examples.

The facsimile edition

All 44 pages of the Peterborough Bestiary are reproduced in the original format of 348 × 236 mm in a limited edition of 1,480 copies world-wide. The volume comes in a carefully hand produced and blind-tooled brown leather binding, a faithful replica of a typical Cambridge binding. All sheets are trimmed in accordance with the original and stitched to the contents by hand. The cover is tooled using roulettes, showing motives of the griffon, the lion and the dragon.

An academic commentary volume, including a complete transcription and translation of all texts, by Christopher de Hamel, Director of the Corpus Christi Library in Cambridge, and Lucy Freeman Sandler, the great New York University expert in English book illumination, facilitates the understanding of the manuscript.

The documentary kit contains two facsimile sheets in the original format and a 16-page illustrated information brochure. This kit is available for trial on request.