Animal Names and Symbolism in the English Bestiary Tradition

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Abstract

The English bestiary tradition comprises numerous lavishly illuminated manuscripts written in Latin, as well as shorter and less ornate variants of the Physiologus, the foundational text at the heart of the bestiary genre. This article examines several renowned manuscripts, analysing the structure of the animal chapters and the significance of the accompanying illustrations. The aim is to identify connections and intersections between the texts from various sources and to draw conclusions about how the names of the animals relate to their behaviours.

This article explores two primary areas of research. First, it examines the theological significance of the act of naming the animals and its relevance within the context of the bestiary. Second, it highlights the distinctions between the Latin text of the bestiaries and their Middle English and Middle French translations. The article focuses particularly on the description of the siren, as it illuminates certain discrepancies present in the more elaborate Latin bestiaries produced in England, offering potential explanations through evidence drawn from the Middle English version.

The study demonstrates how the animal narratives are employed for distinct purposes in each of these texts and how, despite sharing a common source, they developed in different directions and acquired distinct literary and thematic identities. The findings of this research confirm, on the one hand, the distinctive character of each text: the Latin bestiaries exhibit a more encyclopaedic orientation, whereas the French translations display a markedly poetic quality. At the same time, the study offers new insights into the interactions between these texts, which coexisted within the same cultural milieu and temporal framework.

Keywords: *Medieval bestiaries, Middle English literature, animal symbolism, manuscript illumination.*

Introduction

The English bestiary tradition is predominantly represented by bestiaries written in Latin produced in medieval England. Though largely overlooked in modern times, these works were once remarkably popular, as attested by the considerable number of extant manuscripts, many of which are lavishly illustrated. The source text for these bestiaries is the *Physiologus*, which offered allegorical interpretations of animal behaviour, each serving to convey a Christian moral or didactic lesson. The major additions to this core text were taken from Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*, which sought to explain the Latin names of animals by referencing their characteristics or functions.

The intricate structure of the beautifully illuminated Latin English bestiaries, comprising over a hundred animal chapters that blend moral allegory with elements of natural philosophy, makes them challenging to interpret, as their theological, literary, artistic, and scientific components are deeply interwoven, forming a distinctive genre within medieval intellectual culture. The contemporary interest in bestiaries is further demonstrated by their translation into the vernacular and their presence at the royal court. While several extended versions of the bestiary were composed in Middle French, only a single Middle English translation of the *Physiologus* survives. This thirteen-chapter version is preserved in just one manuscript: Arundel MS 292, located in the British Library. Despite its brevity, this text holds considerable scholarly value, as it provides a crucial link between the continental developments of the *Physiologus* tradition and its adaptation within the English literary context.

1. Naming the Animals: A Sacred Task

The declared purpose of the *Physiologus* text, composed during the second or third Christian centuries, probably in Alexandria[1], was to demonstrate how God's design for humanity was reflected in His creation, particularly through the behaviour of animal, though plants and stones were also included within its scope. Far from offering superficial or merely descriptive accounts of various creatures, the

[1] "This small book, dating from the second or third century and probably written in Alexandria, was from the beginning quite popular and often copied" (Macé, 31).

Physiologus presents them as vivid expressions of divine intervention in the natural order, with their attributes and actions laden with Christian moral and theological meaning. Unlike works of natural science, bestiaries, modelled on the *Physiologus*, did not aim to describe animals for their own sake; rather, the details of animal behaviour functioned primarily to reinforce Christian doctrine. As Hassig notes, "the medieval bestiary was essentially an appropriation of Classical learning \[…] recast in Christian moralizing terms" (Hassig 1995: 19). The term *physiologus*, originally referring to the naturalist figure presented as the anonymous author, eventually came to denote the text itself. While preserving the spiritual and didactic character of the original, later versions[2] incorporated brief additions from sources such as Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae* (seventh century), typically inserted either at the beginning or conclusion of entries. Additions from other authors, including Gaius Plinius Secundus (Pliny the Elder), also appear, indicating an emerging inclination towards a more scientific or encyclopaedic treatment than that found in the earliest form of the *Physiologus*.

The *Physiologus* text survived in several variants and redactions, and there is a notable difference between the English tradition and the continental tendency. Although redactors in both

[2] In Western Europe (and most notably in the areas under the Anglo-Norman rule) there were at least three very influential (and relatively different) versions of this text: the version called *B* of the *Physiologus* (with roughly forty-eight animal chapters, reproduced in the Latin English Bestiaries), *Dicta Chrysostomi* (compiled around 1000 AD with around twenty-seven animal chapters, with some illuminated manuscripts, for instance, MS M.832, Morgan Library, New York, produced in Austria, 12th century, or British Library, Sloane MS 278, folio 44r-57r, late 13th century, in Northern France or South Netherlands, with 23 illustrations) and *Physiologus Theobaldi Episcopi* (eleventh century, with twelve animal chapters, of which Francesco Sbordone lists sixty-one manuscripts (Kay 2016: 120), and which was translated into Middle English).

regions chose to omit most of the repetitive biblical references or paraphrase them, on the continent the text was gradually shortened and included fewer animals: *Dicta Chrysostomi* and *Physiologus Theobaldi*, a twelve-chapter version, being examples of this trend. This continental movement was not followed by English compilers of bestiaries, whose versions became progressively longer (Kay 2016: 121), [3] often including animals familiar to English readers, such as the wolf, the boar, the cat, and the mouse. However, no new fantastical or fairylike creatures were added.

The production of large, illuminated bestiaries in Britain was notably prolific, particularly when contrasted with the comparatively modest examples produced on the Continent. This has led scholars to observe that, "By the twelfth century the bestiary seems to have been taken up in England, and from then on the majority of known copies are written in Latin and were produced in England, with some similar ones made in northern France and Flanders" (Yapp 1991: 3). It is thus significant to recognise that, although composed in Latin, the bestiary, owing to its elaborate and distinctive structure, had acquired a distinctly local character. At the same time, its growing reputation contributed to its dissemination beyond England, thereby establishing it as a cultural artefact of exportable value.

This analysis begins with a brief examination of the ways in which the *Physiologus* text was adapted in the Latin English bestiaries. One of the most significant and visually striking additions is the inclusion of a chapter depicting Adam naming the animals, taken from Isidore's *Etymologies*, the beginning of Book XII, *De animalibus*. While this text (accompanied often by an image) appears at the beginning of

[3] Kay, Sarah, "'The English Bestiary', The Continental 'Physiologus', And The Intersections Between Them", *Medium Ævum*, vol. 85, no. 1, 2016, pp. 118–142. JSTOR, https://doi.org/10.2307/26396473. Accessed 23 Mar. 2025,

some bestiaries,[4] in others it is inserted between the descriptions of two creatures.[5] This episode is highly suggestive and serves as an ideal introduction to a work concerned with the role of animals within the creation and their function of strengthening the relationship between human beings and God.

> *Omnibus animantibus Adam primus vocabula indidit appellans unicuique nomen ex presenti institutione iuxta conditionem nature cui serviret.* Adam was the first to provide words for all living things, naming each one in conformity with the existing order according to its function in nature ("The Aberdeen Bestiary", folio 5v).

The action Adam undertook was not a linguistic task, but a theological one, as he understood each animal's *function in nature* (*nature cui serviret*), i.e. the purpose for which it was created. This implies not only a close connection with God, who gave Adam access to this knowledge, but also a profound bond with each animal, whose inner nature he could correctly identify. This activity is so important that it is represented as a mirror of the creation, since in several manuscripts the position of God creating the animals is very similar with that of Adam naming them (Bodleian Library MS. Ashmole 1511, folios 6r and 6v versus folio 9r; The Aberdeen Bestiary, folios 2r and 2v versus folio 5r, both from early 13th century; and Bodleian Library MS.

[4] It is the case of "Aberdeen Bestiary", folio 5v; University of Cambridge, MS Kk.4.25, folio 55r; and Bodleian Library MS. Bodl. 764, folio 1r, all of them from the 13th century.

[5] It is the case of Add in the British Lib. Add. 11283 (which is a late 12th-century manuscript and the earliest surviving text of a certain type of Bestiary, the second family, which was predominant in the English area, according to Clark 2006: 21). In this manuscript the story of Adam naming the animals appears after three chapters concerning the dog and before the sheep (Clark 2006: 150-151).

Douce 151[6], folio 3r versus folio 5r, early 14th century, etc). This similarity is also important because it shows the relevance of illustrations, which are (theologically) relevant, not just decorative.

Another interesting addition, taken from Isidore's *Etymologiae*, is the presence of an entire chapter about man.[7] Such an entry (of which there is no trace in *Physiologus*) starts with the explanation of the Latin word: *homo*, deriving from *humus* (earth), and after mentioning the duality of soul-body in human beings, continues by describing man's structure, mentioning man's obvious superiority, as he looks upwards towards God (unlike the beasts, who look downwards to the ground). In Aberdeen Bestiary, the entry starts on folio 80v, mentions Isidore by name (*Ysidorus de natura hominis*, in red ink), has a large miniature of Isidore on folio 81r) and goes on for more than twenty pages (until 93v). Yet, the structure of this unique chapter has little relevance in the analysis of the way in which animals are named and described.

Bestiaries are a manifestation of the medieval mentality that all nature is a book written by God, which Christians need to read (i.e. understand) as a way in which God delivers His eternal message for humans. As Thomas of Chobham (1160– 1233 or 1236) stated: "The Lord created different creatures with different natures not only for the

[6] In fact all these manuscripts belong to the same family (IIA – a subfamily of the second family), and display similar traits, although they might have been produced in different areas (which have not been established with certainty).

[7] This excerpt reproduces Book XI (*De homine et portentis*), while the additions for each animal are taken from Book XII, (*De animalibus*). It is debatable whether Isidore himself was inspired from the *Physiologus*. The name appears only once, and although it is used in a manner similar to the way it is used in original work, but it does not really quote *Physiologus*, as Isidore talks about the Chimera (Isidore 2006: 246), which does not appear in the *Physiologus*. On the other hand, the entry about a lizard called *saura*, seems to be taken from *Physiologus* (Isidore 2006: 257), as are some of the stories with Christian significance. There are scholars that "argue for Isidore's use of *Physiologus*" (Wallis, 210), and I agree with them.

sustenance of men (that is to eat them), but also for their [Christian's] instruction, so that through the same creatures we may contemplate not only what may be useful to us in the body, but also what may be useful in the soul" (according to Kay 2017: 156 and Hasing 1995: xv). At the same time, although the author(s) of the bestiaries frequently cite Isidore's *Etymologiae* when discussing an animal's name, they do not consistently emphasise it. Its placement towards the end of entries, in some cases, suggests that etymology was of secondary importance within the overall structure of the text.

2. Animals and the significance of their names – examples

One important remark is that the original *Physiologus* does not emphasise the linguistic explanation of the names of the animals. Despite the extensive biblical associations and theological information, the *Physiologus* displays no interest in the names of the animals. It has to be highlighted that the original *Physiologus* was in Greek and quickly translated in other oriental languages, so a focus on names in a certain language might have been irrelevant. At the same time, once translated into Latin, regarded as a sacred language used in religious services, the interest in names, their etymologies, and potential associations became more readily justified. The compilers of bestiaries selected those paragraphs from *Etymologies*, which gave meaning to the names, as a way of enhancing the importance of the animal, which became better fixed in the universal frame of creation. The information about the significance of the name was usually placed at the beginning or at the ending of the entry.

In order to exemplify the structure of animal chapters, and to comment on how the grafting process occurs I will briefly quote the beginning of the text about *the panther* (*De panthera*), which can be found in all bestiaries. The beginning of the entry is almost identical in: *Cambridge Bestiary* (Cambridge Manuscript Ii, 4.26, 1200-1210, translated into English by T.H. White, in 1954), *MS Add. 11283*, (found in the British Library, London, dated around 1170 -1180 and translated

into English by Willene B. Clark in 2006), *MS. Bodl. 764* (Bodleian Library, 1230-1250 and translated by Richard W Barber, in 1999), *Aberdeen Bestiary* (early 13th century) and *Ashmole Bestiary*, (early 13th century), which proves that it is the customary variant:

> There is an animal called the panther (*panthera*), which has a truly variegated colour, and it is most beautiful and excessively kind. *Physiologus* [*the naturalist*] says *that the only animal which it considers as an enemy is the dragon*. When a panther has dined and is full up, it hides away in its own den and goes to sleep. After three days it wakes up again, and emits a great roar; and there comes a very sweet smell from its mouth like the smell of every kind of scent. When the other animals hear its voice they gather from far and near, and follow it wherever it goes because of the sweetness of its breath. […] The true panther, our Lord Jesus Christ, snatched us from the power of dragon-devil on descending from heavens… (White 1960: 14 and Clark 2006: 123)

The entry is accompanied by beautiful illustrations of the panther which vary in colour and position, either facing the other animals or leading them.[8] The text itself starts with a fragment from *Physiologus*, which clearly stated the association of the panther with Christ (as he saves humans from the dragon/devil), and gathers the people after his resurrection (just like the panther sleeps for three days attracting the people with its pleasant breath when it wakes up). Not all the extensive information from *Physiologus* is reproduced, as many biblical quotations and repetitive ideas are omitted, but it is followed up by the entry from Isidore's *Etymologies* which appears at the end of

[8] Aberdeen Bestiary (on folio 9r, dark blue, facing the dragon hidden in a cave, while the animals follow it), MS. Bodl. 764, (folio 7v, facing the animals and asymmetrically displaying various colours), Cambridge Bestiary (folio 4v, facing the animals and of a rather milky light brown colouring), etc.

the chapter. However, it is to be noted that in this case there is no interest in the etymology of the word which Isidore connects to the Greek word "PAN" which means "all": "The panther is so called either because it is the friend of 'all' animals, except the dragon, […] for in Greek "*pan*" means "all" (Isidore 2006: 251). Although the idea is present in the Bestiary: "Physiologus says of it, that it has only the dragon as an enemy", which implies that all the other animals are friends, the text does not mention Isidore's linguistic association of the Greek word with the name of the *panther*.

Even more surprising is the omission of an important sentence from the *Physiologus*: "Holy Scriptures have said nothing concerning birds and animals without the purpose of our understanding" (Curly 2009: 42). This idea aligns with the central theme of the original *Physiologus*: that the world around us teaches us about God, and that a Christian can discern God's intention for humanity, namely, salvation, in every creature He created. The reason this particular passage, which emphasizes how people should understand animals and learn from their example, was excluded may be to avoid repetition and to maintain coherence in the text, with minimal interruptions from biblical quotations and redundant information.

In some other animal chapters, for instance in the case of the "elephant", the quotation taken from Isidore's work is at the beginning,[9] and it is rather extensive, with many details (the origin from the Greek word, as well as the way the Indians call it). Furthermore, there is a description of a "wooden tower", ("*ligneis turribus*") that is carried by the elephant in the battles. This detail became characteristic of the elephant's representation in bestiaries, despite the fact that it is not present in the *Physiologus,* and in a French translation[10] it was replaced by the word "*castel*" (*Un castel porterait, si*

[9] "The Greeks believe that the elephant (elephans) is named from the size of its body, which looks like a mountain" (Isiodore 2006: 252).

[10] In Guillaume Le Clerc's bestiary (early 13th cent) the term "*granz tors*" ("great tower") is preserved (Guillaume, p.133).

sur sun dos estait: "he will carry a castle, if it were on his back" (Thaon 2003: 30).

The entry of the beaver displays the same structure, as it starts with the story of the beaver, who bites off his testicles when the hunter chases him, in order to escape, presents the moral metaphor: *Sic omnis qui iuxta mandatum dei versatur et caste vult vivere, secat a se omnia vicia, et omnes impudicitie actus* "Thus every man who heeds God's commandment and wishes to live chastely should cut off all his vices and shameless acts.." and mentions the significance of the name at the ending: *Castor dicitur a castrando* ("The beaver is named from castrating"). The story appears in both *Physiologus* and *Etymologies,* but while in *Physiologus* it ends with a moral exhortation, and no explanation for the name, *Etymologies* starts with the linguistic connection: "Beavers (*castor*) are so called from "castrating" (*castrare*)", and continues the story to justify it. Isidore gives two sources, namely Juvenal and Cicero[11] (Isidore 2006: 252), for the story, which is so relevant for naming the *castor*. Therefore, one way of naming (or justifying the name of) an animal is to focus on a trait of behaviour.

The wolf is an important chapter because it emphasises the creativity of the Bestiary authors. *Lupus* was not mentioned by the *Physiologus*, and, in addition, the entry in Isidore is rather short and neutral, as it is the case with most of them. Therefore, although Isidore mentions that the wolf "is a violent beast, eager for gore" (Isiodore 2006: 253), he makes no moral comment on what this attitude can symbolise. The authors of Latin Bestiaries produced in England, on the other hand, are not succinct and they expand the few lines found in

[11] It is essential to note that the belief in the beaver's self-castration has ancient origins, likely tracing back to Egypt, as asserted by Thomas Browne in 1646. Aesop drew upon this notion to illustrate the idea of sacrificing something of secondary value to preserve one's life (Browne, 236-238). In his well-documented *Pseudodoxia Epidemica* (1646), Browne critically examines and seeks to uncover the limits of truth in various stories about animals found in bestiaries and other legends.

Isidore in two pages, interpreting allegorically certain well-known facts about the wolves: "Because a wolf is never able to turn its neck backward, except with a movement of the whole body, it means that the Devil never turns back to lay hold on repentance" (White 1960: 59, and "Aberdeen Bestiary", folios 17r and 17v) or (in other Bestiaries): "The wolf is the devil, who is always envious of mankind, and continually prowls round the sheepfolds of the Church's believers, to kill their souls and to corrupt them" (Clark 2006: 143, Barber 1999: 70, and "Aberdeen Bestiary", 17r). The expansion of the text dealing with this animal can be explained by the fact that the wolf was a familiar fear-provoking animal (which people encountered regularly), and thus both readers and authors of these English Latin Bestiaries knew its behaviour and could create a vivid portrait of the animal they loathed. While the wolf became a menacing symbol of the devil, Christians were warned of the dangers brought about by people with similar behaviour. The animal became not only an image of the spiritual reality, with animals described as images of Christ (or the devil), but also of the ordinary human world.

Therefore, the Latin bestiaries presented a logically coherent vision of a world created by God in a rational manner and for a teleological purpose: to guide the observant Christian towards divine truth. Particularly compelling within their rhetorical framework, which derives from the *Physiologus* and was refined through Isidore's characteristically direct style, is the distinctive rationality, whereby moral instruction is logically supported by the characteristics of animals. The interpretations of both real and imagined animal traits are so skilfully aligned with Christian doctrine and ethical teaching that even nowadays the text resonates powerfully with both our reason and Christian sensibility.

3. The Middle English *Physiologus*

The bestiary is thus regarded as a complex text combining *Physiologus* with Isidore's work and other sources, but there is some confusion in England with this definition. It appears that the appellation *Physiologus* used on the continent is sometimes replaced by *bestiary*, and this is why sometimes we may see the label "the Middle English Bestiary",[12] which is not strictly correct, as this thirteen-chapter text is a version of the *Physiologus*, to be more specific *Physiologus Theobaldi Episcopi*, with no additions.[13] Several Middle French versions existed, either preceding or contemporaneous with the Middle English short version.

There are at least four French versions of bestiaries, by: Philippe de Thaon (early 12th century), Guillaume le Clerc (early 13th century), Gervaise (who uses *Dicta Chrysostomi*, in 13th century), and Pierre de Beauvais (who has two versions: a long one of 71 chapters and a short one of 38 chapters), of which the first two are in Anglo-Norman dialect. The translations into French are relevant indeed for the research on bestiary as a genre, as they display other characteristics than the Latin original, for instance most of the translations are in verses, so one can say that the text itself was beautified.

[12] In his work *Selections from Early Middle English 1130-1250*, the editor Joseph Hall gives the name of the ME P as "THE BESTIARY" (ch. XXI, p. 176 - Arundel 292, British Museum: on vellum, 200 × 130 mm.: late thirteenth century); Morris also refers to this text as "Early English Bestiary based on the Latin *Physiologus* of Theobaldus Episcopus", in his 1928, partial translation of MEPhysiologus.

[13] By the end of the twelfth century a new form of popular nature-book had developed under the generic name of "the bestiary" which, in keeping with the encyclopedic taste of the period, tended to absorb virtually all animal legends, including those of Physiologus, into its pages. While the Latin text of Physiologus contains about fifty chapters, the greatly expanded bestiaries contain as many as one hundred and fifty chapters. (Curly 2009: xxx)

I have to emphasise that these French versions were used in England as well, since in the 12th and 13th century the language of the cultural and political elites was French. The most relevant example is the first bestiary in French, written by Philip de Thaon (between 1121 and 1135) which is a versified version dedicated to Queen Adelaide of Louvaine, wife of Henry I, probably a few years after her marriage to the English monarch in 1121 (Thaon 2003: 3). Her name is given as *Aliz*, in the introduction[14].

It is clear that the bestiary was highly regarded at the English royal court, not only because Queen Adelaide (Aliz) is likely to have owned a copy, as the text was dedicated to her, but also because it was one of the first works to be translated into the vernacular by Philippe de Thaon, who is recognised as one of "the first Anglo-Norman poets" (Short 2003: 208).[15] Thaon's work begins directly with the lion, following a brief introduction of his patrons. In contrast, Guillaume le Clerc addresses the political situation before moving on to the creation of the world and the divine power bestowed upon Adam; however, he makes no mention of Adam's role in naming the animals. He also recounts the history of the Old Testament and the arrival of Jesus Christ, thus setting the stage for his animal narratives, in which the behaviours of the animals reflect the history of salvation. Guillaume's

[14] Philippe de Taun en Franceise raisun / Ad estrait Bestiaire, un livere de gramaire, Pur l'onur d'une gemme, ki mult est bele femme, /
Aliz est numée, reine est corunée, /Reine est de Engleterre, sa ame n'ait jà guere; (Thaon 2003: 7)
Philippe de Thaun into the French language /has translated the Bestiary, a book of grammar, /for the honour of a jewel, who is a very handsome woman, / *Aliz is she named, a queen she is crowned, Queen she is of England*, may her soul never have trouble! /(Thaon 2003: 7)

[15] One of the earliest manuscripts is British Library, Cotton MS Nero A V (folio 41r to 82v, dated from the second half of 12th century) does not have any illustrations, although spaces were prepared for them. On the other hand, there are 13th-century manuscripts which are illuminated: Merton College MS 249 and Kongelige Bibilotek Gl. kgl. S. 3466.

work, which includes an entire sermon on virtues within the description of the ant, is distinctly more spiritual than that of Philippe de Thaon. However, both verse translations share an emphasis on the musicality and literary merit of the text, while deliberately avoiding the scientific approach characteristic of the Latin bestiaries.

There is no complete translation of a complex bestiary into Middle English. In fact, the only known Middle English version of such a text is loosely based on the *Physiologus Theobaldi Episcopi*, an eleventh-century work composed in elegant verse and comprising descriptions of twelve animals. As the title indicates, it was written by Bishop Theobald, who is believed to have resided at the Abbey and College of Monte Cassino (Rendell 1928: 7). It may be argued that the absence of more elaborate English translations stems from the cultural context of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, a period in which English had not yet attained sufficient status or prestige among the educated elite to be employed for texts of this nature.

This singular Middle English manuscript was discovered by Lord Arundel (1585–1646) at Norwich Cathedral Priory and is currently housed in the British Library (Arundel MS 292, folios 4v–10v). It contains neither illustrations nor decorative elements and is generally dated to the thirteenth century, although some scholars contend that it represents a copy of an earlier, likely twelfth-century, exemplar that has not survived (Armistead 2001: 9). As a translation of a continental text that reflects the broader European trend of abridging the *Physiologus* without adding new material, the Middle English *Physiologus* may be understood as a point of convergence between these two developments.

The Middle English Physiologus is shorter and more symmetrical than massive illuminated Latin bestiaries, so the text is also better organised with red ink titles for the "*natura*" of each animal. The Middle English text starts abruptly with the "nature" of the lion ("*natura leonis*"), and there are no commentaries, or a general introduction. Actually, the titles with read "natura" of each animal (for

instance *natura serpentis – Neddre*, *Natura formice – mire*) are written in Latin, but they are not the same as those in *Physiologus Theobaldi*, where the introduction of each animal is "*de serpente*" or "*de formica*". This shows the independence of the English translator, who was not interested in faithfully translating the text, but rather in adapting it, presumably, for the needs of the congregation. There are some obvious differences regarding the structure (as the *Physiologus Theobaldi* is versified while the Middle English *Physiologus* is in prose) and the number of chapters (as the Middle English translation added a final chapter which seems to be a theological conclusion).

At the same time, the manuscript conveys an impression of order and symmetry. The use of Latin names suggests an instructive rather than a moral purpose, while the absence of illustrations stands in stark contrast to the more ornate bestiaries, and likely made the manuscript more accessible and functional for teaching purposes, possibly within the educational setting of Norwich Cathedral.

The presence of illustrations is one of the most distinctive features of illuminated bestiary manuscripts produced in England, playing a crucial role in conveying the layered meanings of their allegorical content. It is generally anticipated that such illustrations would either reflect the textual descriptions or serve to enhance their interpretation. However, it is particularly striking when a divergence arises between the written text and the accompanying illuminations. A notable example of this phenomenon can be found in the depiction of the siren (or mermaid).

The lavishly illustrated English bestiaries, like the famous *Ashmole Bestiary* (Bodleian Library MS. Ashmole 1511, 1200-1230, fol. 65v), or MS. Bodl. 764 (Bodleian Library 1230-1260, fol. 74v), or even the earliest illustrated bestiary (in the first half of the 12th century, Bodleian Library MS. Laud Misc. 247, folio 147 r), etc. present the siren as a being with a body half fish and half woman, which is in total contrast with text that accompanies the illustrations (and the Physiologus version B, where it comes from)! I quote from

Physiologus, version B: "Sirens, so the naturalists tell us, are deadly creatures, which from the head down to the navel are like men, but their lower parts down to their feet are like birds." (Barber 1999: 150 and also Clark 2006: 179).[16]

In searching for the source of the fish-like representation of the siren, one needs look no further than the Middle English Physiologus, which describes the mermaid as: "From the navel downward she is not like a maid / But a fish very certainly with sprouted fins" (Armistead 2001: 86). This same description is also found in the original Latin *Physiologus Theobaldi*.[17] Thus, the most significant English Latin bestiaries depicted the siren in a manner consistent with the version in *Physiologus Theobaldi*, while the accompanying written text quotes from version B of the Physiologus. Moreover, it can be speculated that the illustrators may have relied on a Middle English version of the Physiologus rather than the more widely circulated Latin *Physiologus Theobaldi*, since the Latin text before them appears to have been overlooked. An English translation, it could be argued, might have been more accessible or convenient, especially considering that some scholars suggest the Middle English Physiologus predates the 13th-century Latin manuscript that was preserved (Armistead 2001: 9).

The final chapter, of Middle English *Physiologus* which concerns the dove (columbe, culuer[18]) is an addition unique to the

[16] There are manuscripts (of British origin) which correctly depicts the siren, in accord with the text, for instance, in a 13th-century manuscript (BNF Latin, 3630 – folio 89r.

[17] It is noteworthy that both French translations feature a blend of bird and fish characteristics. Philippe de Thaon describes the siren with the feet of a falcon and the tail of a fish ("E les pez de falcun, e cue de peissun," Thaon, 27), while for Guillaume, the siren is described as either resembling a bird or a fish ("Come peisson ou oom oisel").

[18] The dove is regarded as a sign of promise and hope, which is not only a symbol of the Holy Spirit, but it also appears in the Flood story in the Old Testament.

English version. Although it may have been inspired by Alexander Neckham's *De naturis rerum* (Armistead 2001: 116), the characteristics presented are organised differently and are directly connected to moral exhortation. This brief passage, comprising only ten lines, conveys a clear didactic message, though its full interpretation presupposes a basic understanding of Christian theology. For example, the line "The worm she leaves and lives on seed" may be understood allegorically: the worm symbolises the devil, while the seed represents divine teaching, as in the parable of the sower. In other words, the dove is pure and eats the seeds, symbolising Christ's words, while keeping away from the devil. Similarly, the line: "In the hole of a stone she makes her nest / in Christ's *mercy*[19] our hope is best" ("*in hole of ston ge makeð hire nest in cristes milce ure hope is best*") reinforces a spiritual interpretation that Christ serves as the foundational "stone" upon which every individual's life is built.

Although, unlike *Physiologus Theobaldi*, the Middle English *Physiologus* lacks an independent conclusion, this final chapter consists of seven moralising exhortations. This original addition exemplifies the compiler's pious and didactic aims, resulting in a text that is deeply exhortative, fundamentally moralistic, and clearly distinct from scientific writing.

On the other hand, despite the inclusion of what may appear to be fantastical or implausible accounts, the authors of bestiaries generally accepted the behaviours described therein as factual. It was not until the seventeenth century that such fables began to be systematically challenged, and the distinction between metaphorical representation and empirical reality within bestiaries gradually came to be understood. While the *Physiologus* ought to be interpreted primarily as a theological text, replete with biblical citations and moral instruction, later bestiaries adopted a more structured and scholarly

[19] The word used by Armistead is *forgiveness*, although I believe the word "mercy", is a better solution, as it sounds more religious and closer to the Middle English "milce".

approach, incorporating references to scientific and encyclopaedic sources.

Conclusions

One of the most significant observations concerning the bestiaries is that the act of naming animals, traditionally attributed to Adam, is imbued with deep theological meaning. In many manuscript illustrations, when giving animals names, Adam is depicted in a posture reminiscent of God creating them. This iconography reinforces the idea that Adam, through divine grace, is able to perceive the essential nature of each creature and becomes intimately connected to them.

In contrast to the original *Physiologus*, the names of animals in the bestiaries assume particular importance, a feature further accentuated by the influence of Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*. The etymology of each animal's name is not only frequently included but, in many cases, appears prominently at the beginning of the entry, underscoring the didactic purpose and scholarly character of the text. The inclusion of local animals further enhances the intended encyclopaedic quality of the text.

The Middle English *Physiologus* stands out as a unique and significant work, not only as the sole extant version in English, but also for its distinctive originality. Far from being a mere translation of the *Physiologus Theobaldi*, it displays a carefully structured and symmetrical composition. The inclusion of animal names in Latin further underscores its likely pedagogical function, suggesting its use within an educational or clerical context.

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