

# Beasts

Els animals en l'art medieval del MEV

## Beasts. Animals in the medieval art of the MEV

Medieval art is full of animals. Alone or accompanied by other animals or humans; in isolated scenes or as part of wider stories; perfectly drawn, deformed or fitted into a pre-established space in order to decorate it..., what are so many beasts doing on capitals, altarpieces and objects of all kinds? What do they mean? And how can we decipher it?

The art of the Middle Ages used animals to express visions of the world and of human existence strongly marked by Christianity, but at the same time rooted in traditions prior to and outside of Christianity. The numerous beasts that appear in medieval works of art, therefore, cannot be interpreted in a rigid way, but keeping in mind a variety of motivations and contexts.

Based on the wealth of the MEV's collections, this exhibition illustrates different aspects, modalities and intentions of the abundant presence of animals in medieval art, bringing us closer to the way of thinking and living of men and women of the Middle Ages.

### 1. From the scarab to the pegasus. Animals and art, an ancient relationship

Animals have always coexisted with humans, who have treated them as potential enemies or as companions, as a source of food or as labor force. Their forms and behaviors were immediately associated with character traits or supernatural forces, easily applicable to

individuals, families, social groups, or deities. Also the myths that explained the universe often included real or imaginary animals. For all these reasons, the beasts were already present in many artistic creations of Mediterranean Antiquity.

#### Pectoral of a mummy

Egypt, between 4th c. BC and 4th c. AD.  
Linen and plaster cardboard painted in tempera

MEV 3006

Many Egyptian gods were represented with a human body and the head of a beast in order to associate animal behaviors to a certain vision of transcendence. The pectoral of the mummies could host the representation of the path of the deceased through the afterlife, where according to the Egyptian belief he was led by the jackal-headed god Anubis, or the hawk-headed god Horus, among others.

#### Heart scarab

Egypt, 18th-19th dynasties (16th-12th c. BC). Sculpted, polished and carved black granite

MEV 3022

For the Egyptians, the scarab or *khepror* had the ability to reproduce itself and for this reason it was considered a symbol of renewal associated with the solar cult. The scarabs were amulets with different functions: one of them was to replace the heart of the deceased during the mummification process, to facilitate eternal life in the other world.

#### Animal figurines: baboon, cat, fish, hedgehog

Egypt, Ptolemaic dynasty (4th-1st c. BC).

Lime paste, bronze, stone, steatite

MEV 3013, 3015, 3018, 3034

Many Egyptian amulets were in the shape of an animal. The baboon screamed at dawn and therefore it was associated with the solar cult. The goddess Bastet, protector of midwives, was cat-headed. Fish were generically interpreted as symbols of food and life. The hedgehog

was usually associated with the cult of the crocodile god Sebek.

### **Lamb and boar**

Northwestern Iberian Peninsula  
(Celtiberian culture?), 4th-1st c. BC. Cast  
bronze  
MEV 5887

In many ancient cultures, animals were sacrificed with magical-religious intentions. The known parallels of this object come from Celtiberian settlements in Galicia and northern Portugal, from the second Iron Age or the beginning of the Roman conquest. It is probably a votive object, rather than ritual.

### **Deer head**

Catalonia (Iberian culture?), 1st c. BC.  
Cast and chiseled bronze  
MEV 4323

This small head was found in a field in Torelló in 1912 and for this reason it has been related to the tribe of the *Ausetani*, the Iberians who inhabited present-day Osona. Perhaps it was a pendant or was placed on a staff. The deer, common in the art of Peninsular protohistory, was usually associated with hunting, virility or the transition to the afterlife.

Tytios Painter

### **Enochous with humans and animals**

West Central Italy (Etruscan culture), ca.  
530-520 BC. Black figure pottery  
MEV 17244

This jug for serving wine is decorated, at the bottom, with real (lion and young caprid) and fantastic (sphinx and griffin) animals. In the Hellenic imagination, which greatly influenced Etruscan culture, there are many stories with fantastic animals and also the famous fables, in which human attitudes are attributed to animals.

### **Pitcher with winged horse**

West-Central Italy (Faliscan culture),  
second half of the 7th c. BC. Impasto  
ceramic  
MEV 1524

Since ancient times, the horse has been a symbol of aristocracy. This vase comes from a noble tomb: the winged horse, probably adopted to reflect the high position of the deceased, is also a sign of the oriental and archaic Greek influence that dominated the cultures of central Italy even before the expansion of Rome.

### **Bird-shaped askos**

Ibiza (Punic culture), 4th c. BC. Ceramic  
MEV 6885

Many fertility goddesses, such as Mesopotamian Astarte or Phoenician Tanit, had a bird as their symbol. This vase comes from a tomb in the island of Ibiza, home of an important Phoenician and Carthaginian colony; perhaps it was used in rituals dedicated to Tanit. Similar vases have been found in Iberian sites in the east of the Iberian Peninsula.

### **Lamp with an octopus**

Roman Empire, 1st-3rd c. AD. Molded  
ceramic  
MEV 3392

In a popular Roman story, an octopus that knew how to climb up pipes stole food from humans. It was considered, therefore, an intelligent animal and at the same time a mischievous one, evocative of the transgression of natural limits. Medieval Christian symbolism conveyed similar ideas through other beasts, such as the donkey musician.

### **Fragment of sarcophagus cover with a sea bull**

Roman Empire, second half of the 2nd c.  
AD. Carved Luni marble  
MEV 3217

This serpent-tailed marine bull, ridden by a putti, could be part of a *thiasos* or retinue of the god Neptune, a theme often represented on ancient sarcophagi as a funeral procession: the divinities and monsters of the sea gather to accompany the soul of the deceased towards the islands of the blessed.

City of Emporion, issuing authority  
**Drachma with a pegasus**

Empúries (Alt Empordà), 2nd c. BC.  
Silver, die  
MEV 23529

Gaius Julius Caesar (100-44 BC), issuing authority

**Denarius with elephant and snake**

Territories dominated by the Roman Republic, ca. 49-48 BC. Silver, die  
MEV 18502

City of Nemausus, issuing authority

**Dupondius with a crocodile chained to a palm tree**

Nîmes (Provence, France), 28 BC. – 30 AD. Bronze, die  
MEV 18841

Greco-Roman coins often feature animal figures. The polis of Emporion adopted the mythological pegasus. Caesar sometimes used an elephant trampling a snake, to indicate dominance over the enemy. In the Roman colony of Nîmes, the crocodile was a reminder of the veteran legionnaires from Egypt who had settled there.

**Engraved gem with a goat or antelope**

Mediterranean (Roman Empire), 1st c. AD. Carnelian  
MEV 6093

**Engraved gem with a lion**

Mediterranean (Roman Empire), 1st-3rd c. AD. Black agate  
MEV 6102

**Engraved gem with a warrior and a horse**

Mediterranean (Roman Empire), 1st c. BC. – 1st cc AD. Carnelian  
MEV 6088

**Engraved gem with a feline and two scorpions**

Sasanian Persia, 6th-7th c. AD. Hematite  
MEV 6098

Engraved stones, objects of luxury in the ancient and late antique world, sometimes contained animal figures that were often associated with symbolic

systems such as the zodiac or with all kinds of occult beliefs. During the Middle Ages, many carvings with animals maintained that magical value, despite criticism from the Church.

## 2. The lamb of God and the dragon of Satan. Animals in medieval Christian culture

Medieval Christian culture separated animals according to their religious and moral significance into two opposing groups: positive and negative beasts, which represented the dualism between good and evil. Thus, an animal could symbolize Christ or Satan, but at the same time goodness and faith or evil and heresy, providing examples of human behavior. However, depending on the authors, the same animal could be described as positive or negative, like the lion.

**Sepulchral box with two peacocks from Sant Pere de Casserres**

Osona, 13th c. Limestone  
MEV 10623

The peacock, like the fish, is one of the animals used as a symbol by early Christians. It was associated with the resurrection of Christ and eternal life and therefore is often found in funerary contexts, such as in this ossuary. However, the animal has an oriental origin and the sources include other older symbolisms, not always positive.

**Panel of a canopy**

Val d'Aran or bishopric of Comminges, last quarter of the 13th c. Tempera on wood

MEV 4120

Since the fourth century, the image of God is usually accompanied by the Tetramorph: a winged man and three winged animals (ox, lion and eagle) mentioned in the book of Ezekiel and in the Apocalypse. Irenaeus of Lyon (2nd c.) associated the bull with the evangelist Lucas, who begins his story with a

sacrifice; the lion to Mark, who speaks of the Baptist's cry in the desert, and the eagle to John, who rises up for his wisdom.

### **Relief with the Lamb of God**

Vic, third quarter of the 12th c. Limestone  
MEV 10812

With the blood of a lamb sacrificed at Passover, the Hebrews saved their firstborn from death and freed themselves from Egyptian slavery. In the New Testament, John the Baptist points to Jesus saying, "behold the Lamb of God." Especially when it carries the banner with the cross, this animal becomes a symbol of Christ, the risen victim of the paschal sacrifice.

Master of Fonollosa (active during the first half of the 15th c.)

### **Gable of the altarpiece of Santa Coloma de Centelles: Pentecost**

Diocese of Vic, first half of the 15th c.  
Tempera on wood  
MEV 7036

The Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity, can take on the appearance of a dove, as recorded in the account of Christ's baptism according to Luke: "the Holy Spirit descended on him visibly, like a dove." This also allows the Holy Spirit to be represented in other scenes of the New Testament such as the Incarnation or Pentecost.

Master of Glorieta (active during the second quarter of the 15th c.)

### **Compartment of the altarpiece of Mas de Bondia: the Nativity**

Region of Tarragona, second quarter of the 15th c. Tempera on wood  
MEV 1051

The ox and the mule in the manger only appear in an apocryphal text of Christ's childhood, the Pseudo-Matthew (7th c.). In it, they point to the fulfillment of the prophecies of Isaiah and Habakkuk, which speak of these beasts. For certain theologians, the bull signified the sacrifice of Christ and the sterile mule, by contrast, the creative force of God.

### **Alms basin with the Original Sin**

Germany (Nuremberg?), early 16th c.  
Hammered brass  
MEV 892

In the scene of the Original Sin, the serpent, the personification of Satan and the malefic animal par excellence in medieval art, appears coiled over the Tree of Good and Evil. He tricks the first parents into defying God and thus drags all of humanity into sin with them.

### **Ceiling seal with a dragon**

Catalonia, 14th-15th c. Tempera on wood  
MEV 5997

The dragon is one of the most emblematic medieval beasts and at that time it took the form we know today. Before, it was represented as a huge snake, because in Latin *draco* means both dragon and snake. In Christian symbolism it is the incarnation of Satan who confronts the forces of good.

Lluís Borrassà (ca. 1360-1425) or Mateu Ortoneda (active between 1391 and 1433)

### **Compartment of the altarpiece of Santa Margarita de Montbui: the temptations of Saint Anthony**

Barcelona, first third of the 15th c.  
Tempera on wood  
MEV 788

Saint Anthony, a fourth-century Egyptian hermit and one of the fathers of monasticism, was very popular in medieval art. The demons that torment him represent the temptations he suffered in the desert. On other occasions the devil appears to him in the form of a maiden, but the claws that stick out from under her skirt give away her identity.

Bernat Saulet and workshop (active in the second quarter of the 14th c.)

### **Compartment of the altarpiece of Sant Joanipol: descensus ad inferos**

Sant Joan de les Abadesses, 1341-1342.  
Carved, vitrified and polychrome alabaster  
MEV 576

In medieval art hell is often depicted as the gaping jaws of a monster that devours sinners. A devilish monkey armed with a hook tries to prevent Christ from freeing souls. Because of its disturbing resemblance to human beings, the ape was considered a hellish beast, a symbol of human degeneration.

### **2.1. The beasts of the saints**

In hagiographic stories beasts often appear: the saint fights them, helps them, trains them, receives some sign from them or involves them in miracles. This literary genre began with the stories of the Desert Fathers and culminated around 1260 with the *Golden Legend* of the Dominican Jacopo da Varazze. Some of these beasts became very popular, such as Saint George's dragon, Saint Anthony's little pig or Saint Mark's lion.

#### **Relief with the lion of Saint Mark**

Vic, third quarter of the 12th c. Limestone  
MEV 9770

Already included in the Tetramorph, the winged lion often carries a cartouche with the name of Mark or the Gospel book in its claws. The beast usually accompanies the independent images of the evangelist and also came to represent the political entities that had him as patron, such as the city and ancient republic of Venice.

#### **Altar frontal of Santa Margarida de Vilaseca**

Vic workshop, last quarter of the 12th.  
Tempera on oak wood  
MEV 5

As Saint Margaret did not want to renounce the faith, the prefect Olimbrius locked her in prison, where a devilish dragon swallowed her. But Margaret made the sign of the Cross and the dragon's belly ripped open to let her out. Because of this story, the saint was represented accompanied by a dragon and was invoked by the midwives.

#### **Alms basin with Saint George slaying the dragon**

Germany (Nuremberg?), early 16th c.  
hammered brass  
MEV 1833

The *Golden Legend* promoted the spread of the medieval story of Saint George as a Christian knight. Raising his sword, he appears about to slay a dragon to which a princess had been given as a victim. It is one of the most popular stereotypes of the fight of Good against Evil and the defeat of sin by Christian virtues.

#### **Pere Vall (active between 1405 and 1411) Gable of the altarpiece of Sant Vicenç de Cardona: the body of Saint Vincent protected from wild beasts**

Cardona, first quarter of the 15th c.  
Tempera on wood  
MEV 10731

Animals can also have a relevant role in the history of a saint without being his or her attributes. According to the legend of Saint Vincent, his dead body was thrown into a dung heap for dogs, wolves and foxes to devour, but two ravens prevented it. The protection of the birds is an echo of the funerals celebrated by the angels.

### **2.2. The Bestiary, the book of beasts**

The text of the Bestiaries discusses the physical appearance and behavior of different animals mainly in symbolic and religious terms. Halfway between natural history and a moral treatise, this genre has its origins in classical culture and in writings from the first centuries of Christianity. There were bestiaries in almost every medieval library, in one or another of the versions written in Latin or in vernacular languages. The volumes could only contain the text or be luxuriously illustrated. For both preachers and artists, they were leading works when it came to understanding, explaining and representing animals and proposing them as examples to the men and women of the time.

#### **Fragments of a bestiary in Catalan**

Catalonia, 14th-15th c. Ink on paper  
ABEV, ms. 228, f. 135v-136

In the Episcopal Archives of Vic is preserved one of the few ancient bestiaries extant in Catalonia. In the first folio the fox and the raven are described as diabolic animals and symbols of the sinner; and in the other, the partridge and the lion are interpreted as allegories of Christ and the good believer. In their sermons, the mendicant orders made a great diffusion of the bestiaries and their moralities.

### Explore a Bestiary

This interactive bestiary contains a selection of twenty-one animals explained according to their moral allegories. The illustrations come from four of the most lavishly illuminated Bestiaries of the Middle Ages.

### 3. Whoever has a horse does not travel on foot. Animals and social representation

Although their symbolism derives from the Christian imaginary, animals were used at the same time in a multitude of works of art created for profane spheres. Equestrian or hunting themes, with ancient roots, were especially valued in an aristocratic context. Animals also served as an excuse for social criticism or as symbols of courtly love. For all these reasons, it is not strange that beasts are frequently found on heraldic shields.

#### Belt buckle plate

Kingdom of Burgundy (between present-day Burgundy and Provence), ca. 560-620. Cast and chiseled bronze  
MEV 3488

#### Belt buckle plate

Hispanovisigothic, between the second half of the 6th c. and the beginning of the 7th c. Cast and chiseled bronze  
MEV 8463

The horse, expensive to purchase and to maintain, became even more prized in Late Antiquity because of the growing importance of cavalry units. In the

Hispanic buckle there are two of them in the form of pegasus. In the Burgundian one, three characters (the Wise Men?) pay homage to another seated: the two horses in the lower register underline their high social position.

Lluís Borrassà (ca. 1360-1425)

#### Compartment of the altarpiece of Saint Andrew of Gurb: the saint dragged by a horse

Barcelona, 1415-1418. Tempera on wood  
MEV 4524

The estate of the *bellatores* or nobles is summarized in the figure of the knight, consolidated in the High Middle Ages, who expresses status through the mount. Still in the imaginary of the fifteenth century, the proconsul who condemns Saint Andrew has the appearance of a proud aristocrat who terrifies the villagers with the pirouettes of his steed.

#### Falconry treatise

Catalonia, early 14th c. Ink on parchment  
ABEV, ms. 200, f. 63v-64

The practice of hunting with a falcon, typical of the nobility, is described in treatises such as that of the Occitan troubadour Daude de Pradas (active between 1214 and 1282). It details which are the most effective birds of prey and how to care for and train them. This manuscript is a version in Catalan, embellished with simple drawings of falconers.

#### Harness decorations: pendant with a dog and appliqué with hunting scene

Catalonia, 14th-15th c. Cast and chiseled copper  
MEV 5944 and 6027

In keeping with their prestige, the nobles' horses were adorned with harnesses that incorporated more or less luxurious metallic decorations. In many cases these decorative elements included images of animals and frequently, as in this case, related to hunting, a typical activity of noble leisure.

#### Corbel with a dog

Vic (?), second half of the 12th c.

Limestone

MEV 10830

The bestiaries describe the dog as a shrewd and faithful animal, guardian of homes, goods and livestock and capable of loving humans. Also valued as a hunter among the aristocrats, in funerary art he is usually represented at the feet of the recumbent statues of their owners, their honest wives or religious faithful to their vows.

### **Panel of a painted ceiling**

Castile (Valladolid or Burgos), 1386-1410.

Tempera on wood

MEV 12299

Fights between knights and real or fantastic animals are frequent in courtly art, troubadour literature and love bestiaries: they symbolize the desire to win the heart of the beloved. Here the brave knight gives his beloved a ring and proves his courage by fighting two wild beasts, the legendary Roc bird and the ferocious lion, whom he fights in the guise of a centaur-knight.

### **Chest**

Barcelona, early 15th c. Wood, stucco, punched, gilded and polychrome

MEV 4158

This chest presents love themes with human figures, animals and plant motifs. It is a type of object that the groom used to give to the bride in the context of courtship. Of this specific type, only some fifty copies are preserved throughout the world.

### **Box lid**

Northern Italy, second half of 14th c.

Walnut and bone

MEV 4159

Two ladies and a gentleman play musical instruments while a young man holds a falcon. In the center, the fountain and the peacock evoke a garden, an emblematic space of courtly love. The peacock, common in the gardens of the medieval aristocracy, displays a fascinating tail as a

symbol of the pleasures of loving seduction.

### **Wooden box with birds and leopards**

Northern Italy, 14th-15th c. Carved

cypress wood

MEV 7318

The ferocity and agility of the leopard and the exotic markings on its fur made it a favorite animal in medieval European courts. Some princes even had some in captivity, gave them to each other or used them for hunting, according to a custom originating in Muslim countries. It is not uncommon to find them as decoration of courtly objects and ambiances.

### **Relief: coat of arms with a deer**

Catalonia, first half of 15th c. limestone

MEV 10661

Already at the beginning of heraldry, in the 12th century, many lineages choose for their coats of arms animals that could immediately express their names: thus, the Cervera or the Cervelló adopted the deer. It used to be animals considered honorable as well, such as the deer itself, which was believed to cry healing tears or even to be a symbol of Christ.

### **Roof tile with heraldry from Castile and León**

Castile, 15th-16th c. Ceramics

MEV 7427

In the second quarter of the 12th century, King Alfonso VII of León adopted a banner with this animal, whose name resembled that of its capital (the city of *Legio*, founded by a Roman legion). Thus the nobility, ferocity and courage of the beast were attributed to the king and the kingdom. The kings of Castile also adopted a speaking symbol, in this case of an architectural nature.

### **Fragment of a joist from the castle-palace of Santa Coloma de Queralt with the coat of arms of the Cabrera family**

Catalonia, ca. 1355. Tempera on wood

MEV 7356

The relationship of the names of certain animals with that of some families was not the only factor that determined the adoption of beasts as heraldic signs. In Catalonia, only the Cabreras used the goat; The griffin, on the other hand, appears on the shields of more than twenty lineages of unrelated names, such as Conesa, Bartomeu or Riquer.

**Harness ornaments with heraldic elements: Cabrera coat of arms, helmet with a wyvern crest, lion's head**

Catalonia (?), 13th-15th c. Cast and chiseled copper

MEV 3477, 3478 and 3480

The decoration of the harnesses could also include heraldic elements with animals, either inside shields (as in the case of the Cabreras), or in the guise of related elements such as helmet crests with dragons, lions or other beasts. The crest with the wyvern, typical of the kings of Aragon, is attributed to Jaume I but was actually adopted by Pere the Ceremonious.

#### **4. Bestly forms. Between reality and fiction**

In its beginnings, medieval art was distinguished by its more conceptual than sensorial orientation. As for animals, the result was a schematic and stylized visual code, as seen in heraldry. Its limitations, evident above all when it came to representing exotic beasts, allowed at the same time to create conventional images of fantastic animals such as unicorns, dragons or mermaids, never seen but well described in bestiaries. Monsters had a great presence in medieval culture and their deformity was used to express disorder, a moral trait associated with Evil and the Devil. Towards the end of the period, the growing interest in nature not only relativized the existence of these monstrous beasts, but also returned to the generalization of a naturalistic aesthetic.

Joan de Rua (documented between 1493 and 1502)

**Central panel of the altarpiece of Sant Miquel de Verdú**

Catalonia (Montblanc?), 1483-1484.

Tempera on wood

MEV 1768

The devil vanquished by Saint Michael is here a monstrous hybrid with snake eyes, feline ears, a fox's tail, and bird's feet. Even the human limbs are negative: sagging breasts, a Turk's mustache, a second face on the belly. In contrast to the elegant archangel, the scene presents the two extremes towards which human nature can tend.

Guillem Ermengol, copyist (?)

**Books of the Paralipomena**

Vic, 1055-1056. Ink on parchment

ABEV, ms. 6 (LX), f. 1v

Some monsters from ancient mythology such as the mermaid continued to be popular in the Middle Ages, albeit in a new form of hybrid between a woman and a fish. According to bestiaries, it was a demonic creature, often equated to the serpent from Original Sin. That is why on this page the mermaid is opposed to Calvary.

**Horse harness pendants with dragons, griffin and harpy**

Catalonia (?), 12th-15th c. Engraved and enameled copper

MEV 3704, 9073, 9087 and 9101.

The harness pendants could also be decorated with fabulous animals. Although according to the Bestiaries some of them such as the dragon or the harpy were considered infernal creatures, popular culture and their association with heraldry made it easier for them to be attributed an apotropaic value, as protective amulets for horses and riders.

**Chest wall light with two harpies guarding the Tree of Life**

Hispano-Limousin workshop, 12th c.

Engraved and enameled copper

MEV 9082

The harpy, a hybrid with the body of a bird and the head of a woman, comes from Persian culture and was common in Greco-Roman and Muslim art. In oriental fabrics and decorations, two harpies guarding the Tree of Life augured prosperity for the owner. But in Western bestiaries they were evil creatures, bearers of misfortune.

### **Alms basin with the Annunciation and a unicorn**

Germany (Nuremberg?), early 16th c.

Hammered brass

MEV 3620

The unicorn, a fast and ferocious animal with a large horn on its forehead, could only be captured when it docilely rested its head on the lap of a virgin. Christian doctrine made him a symbol of purity and chastity. That is why it can appear in the Annunciation, as a symbol of Jesus incarnated in the womb of Mary.

### **Ceiling seal with a wild man fighting a goose**

Catalonia, 14th-15th c. Tempera on wood

MEV 5998

In the medieval imagination, the wild man was a rough, hairy creature who lived in the woods, outside of society; here he attacks a harmless goose, armed with shield and spear. The scene betrays the savage as a symbol of human bestiality, while ridiculing him; comic and role reversal decorations, called *marginalia*, are frequent in the margins of medieval manuscripts.

### **Panel of a painted ceiling**

Castile or Aragon, late 13th or early 14th c. Tempera on wood

MEV 6008

Four circles contain an eagle, a boar, a bear, and a crowned lion. Their shapes obey a graphic code close to that of heraldry, based on conceptualization and stylization. With these conventions the viewer could easily recognize the animals, even if they looked little like the real thing or had never seen them before.

### **Madonna with Child**

Catalonia, second third of 14th c. Carved and polychrome alabaster

MEV 10633

As a result of internal evolutions and also of the incipient Humanism focused in classical Antiquity, Gothic aesthetics opted, in general terms, for a greater naturalism. Painters and sculptors gave more credibility and expressiveness to human figures and also to animals, as shown by this little bird in the hands of the Child.

### **Book of hours of Bishop Morgades**

Ghent or Bruges, first quarter of 16th c.

Illuminated parchment

ABEV, ms. 88, f. 52v

In the art of the end of the Middle Ages, the will to faithfully represent the physical aspect of spaces, objects or living beings began to predominate. The trend is very clear in Flemish painting, the context in which this manuscript was produced: the locust and the flower seem to come out of a Natural Sciences treatise.

### **4.1. *Hic sunt dracones*. The beasts from the ends of the world**

In the medieval imagination, the mermaid and the unicorn were as real as the elephant and the crocodile. It was believed that these fabulous animals lived in the Orient, a distant, unknown and disturbing territory, as explained in travel books and shown on medieval world maps. Dragons and all kinds of monstrous creatures inhabited the edges of the world, frightening and at the same time fascinating women and men of the Middle Ages.

## **5. Animals that talk? In search of meanings**

What does an animal mean within a specific medieval work of art? Despite containing clear definitions, often the simple use of Bestiaries does not allow us to find out for sure, because different authors could give different readings to

the same beast. In addition, in the medieval world, images were not perceived in exactly the same way as they are today: the reiteration of an animal in a fabric did not completely deprive it of meaning, nor did its situation alone in the middle of a capital or a painting give it a strong and revealing sense of deep realities.

The precise chronological and historical context of a work of art, the reasons for its creation, its constituent materials, the use to which it was put, its position in space or the other pieces with which it perhaps formed a set are determining factors when trying to find out possible meanings of the beasts that decorate it.

### **Canopy beam from Tost**

Workshops of the Seu d'Urgell, around 1220. Tempera and stucco with gilding on wood

MEV 5166

Flanking a central section with five lions, symbols of Christ, a repertoire drawn from bestiaries and related to the allegorical struggle between Good and Evil is displayed. On one side, a warrior fights a ferocious bear and a violent centaur shoots a bull, symbol of Christ's sacrifice; in the other, a lustful mermaid transforms a man into a *grylla* (a kind of subhuman beast) while a deceitful ostrich faces off against a daring archer.

### **Ampula of Saint Menna**

Egypt, 4th-7th c. Ceramics

MEV 3535

Menna, a fourth-century Egyptian hermit and martyr, was venerated above all in the East. The camels that carried his body stopped at Lake Mareotis in Alexandria, thus marking the place chosen for his burial. The saint and the camels identify the vials of blessed water or oil that were obtained in that sanctuary.

### **Volute of a crosier**

Limoges, 13th c. Cast, chiseled and enameled copper

MEV 8032

Since the central Middle Ages, the crosier usually ends in a volute to remind that bishops are shepherds. The texture of reptile-like scales alludes to the bronze serpent that Moses raised in the desert on a staff to protect the Israelites from snakes. The little animals in the knot may mean the subjected Evil.

### **Agnus Dei wax disks**

Rome, 14th-15th c. and 1566-1572. Wax and oil molded and polychromed

MEV 7766 and 17262

Since the 9th century, in the first year of each pope's reign and every seven years since then, such medals were made with wax from the paschal candle and chrism oil from the previous year. On Saturday after Easter, the Pope blessed them and distributed them as souvenirs. The whiteness of the material is consistent with the purity of the lamb, a symbol of Christ, and also with its behaviour: someone very meek was said to be "made of Agnus paste".

Pere Serra, silversmith (active between 1360 and 1401)

### **Cross of Sant Joan de les Abadesses**

Girona, 1388. Poplar wood, silver and low-cut enamel

MEV 855

On the back of medieval crosses, the Lamb usually appears in the center (a vestige of the ancient Christian rejection of representing Christ crucified) and around the Tetramorph, an attribute of the Majesty of God. The set constitutes an apocalyptic iconography that alludes to the second coming of the dead and risen Christ at the end of time.

### **Glossed Decretals of Popes Gregory IX, Innocent IV and Gregory XI**

Around 1280-1300. Illuminated parchment

ABEV, ms. 144 (V), f. 1

Since the end of the 13th c. and during the 14th c., the margins of the manuscripts were populated with grotesque, hilarious and even scatological figures, without any

necessary relationship with the content of the text. They are called *drôleries*, a genre that shows how funny, scandalous or subversive medieval art can be.

### **Miter of Saint Bernat Calbó, Bishop of Vic (1233-1243)**

Catalonia, ca. 1362. Silk, linen, gold thread and applied glass

MEV 2251

This miter was deposited in 1362 in the tomb of Saint Bernat Calbó, replacing the original, which was badly damaged. It is not clear whether the eagles have any precise meaning here; they could be an allusion to Saint John and the lofty wisdom of his gospel. In the Byzantine rite, the eagle, also associated with the Empire, symbolizes the episcopal ministry.

### **Fabric of the Strangler of Lions, called Gilgamesh, from the pontifical vestments of Saint Bernat Calbó**

Almería, first half of 12th c. Silk and gold thread

MEV 791

According to tradition, when Jaume I conquered Valencia (1238), he gave this cloth to Saint Bernat Calbó, Bishop of Vic. The motif derives from the Mesopotamian myth of Gilgamesh, considered by the Persians as a symbol of royal power. Christians interpreted it as the biblical representation of Daniel in the lions' den.

### **Capital with dragons**

Vic (Vic-Ripoll workshop), second half of 12th c. Limestone

MEV 10824

Real or fantastic animals (lions and eagles, dragons and griffins) are frequent in the capitals of the Romanesque cloisters and portals. Apart from what the bestiaries say about them (in this case, the dragon as a symbol of Evil), it is difficult to attribute a precise meaning to them if we do not know their relationship with the images on the other capitals. In any case, they were considered ornaments appropriate to the dignity of religious buildings.

### **Dragon-shaped gargoyle**

Vic, 14th c. Sandstone

MEV 13755

The gargoyles or corbels standing out from medieval churches are often sculpted with disturbing beasts, ferocious like dragons or provocative like apes. In a generic way, a double symbolic role is attributed to them: protection against Evil and, at the same time, warning against the material and spiritual dangers that lurk outside the Church.

## **6. The beasts are alive!**

The reasons that explain the popularity of animals in medieval culture have remained alive to this day. The association with traits of the human character, the fascination for exoticism, the need to give free rein to fantasy, irony or social criticism, or the desire to re-enact the eternal combat between good and evil, are principles always in force in art and literature, in cinema and in videogames. From Moby Dick, through Harry Potter and even the festive and popular Catalan bestiary, animals keep accompanying and inspiring us.

### **Fabric of the Eagles, from the chasuble of Saint Bernat Calbó**

Al-Andalus or Byzantine Empire, first half of 12th c. Silk thread

MEV 790

The eagle was considered the queen of the animals of the sky; when holding as prey a lion, king of the beasts of the earth, it symbolizes the victory of the spiritual world over the earthly one. In the context of the Catalan festive bestiary, it represents the municipal authority. Vic's eagle, documented in the late Middle Ages like others in Catalonia, had been lost. In 2001, it was recreated using the MEV's Fabric of the Eagles as a model.