





## Animals in the Middle Ages: another humanity

## Animales en la Edad Media: otra humanidad

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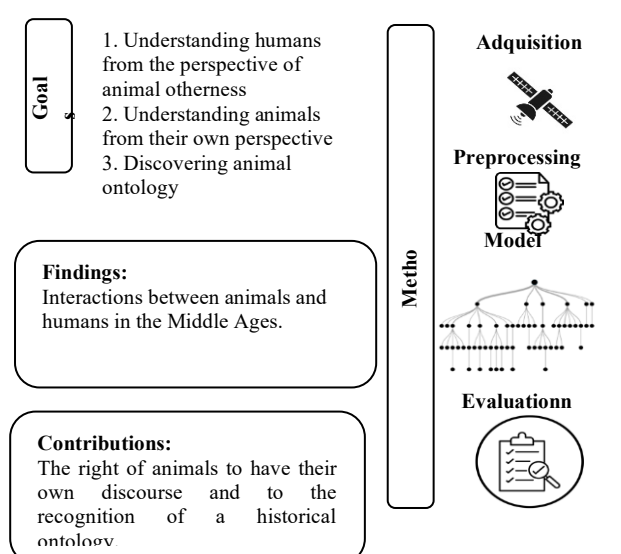
### Abstract

The study of animals in the Middle Ages opens up a world of possibilities in elucidating their relationships and sociability with humans, which have an impact on the socio-economic system and civilizational changes in human groups; but they also reveal the symbolic function that animals have in the creation of the religious system and in the formation of a profuse and fascinating mythical-magical imaginary. These perspectives would have two common priority objectives: to attempt to use the study of the otherness of animals as living beings to better define and understand the human sphere, and to discover animals in their reality, in themselves and from themselves, that is, to be able to describe, analyze, reflect, and write about animals from their position, thus achieving an animal discourse.

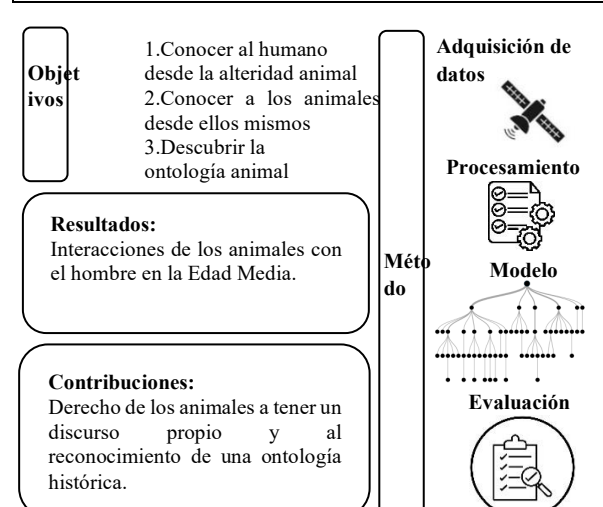
### Resumen

El estudio de los animales en la Edad Media abre un mundo de posibilidades en la elucidación de sus relaciones y sociabilidades con el hombre, las cuales inciden en el sistema económico social y en los cambios civilizatorios de los grupos humanos; pero también revelan la función simbólica que el animal tiene en la creación del sistema religioso y en la formación de un profuso y fascinante imaginario mítico-mágico. Estas perspectivas tendrían dos objetivos comunes prioritarios: intentar que el estudio de la alteridad de los animales como seres vivos permita definir y conocer mejor el ámbito de lo humano, y descubrir a los animales en su realidad, en sí mismos y desde ellos mismos, es decir, poder describir, analizar, reflexionar y escribir sobre los animales desde la posición de estos, logrando así un discurso animal.

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### Beyond a utilitarian conceptualization of animals

### Más allá de una conceptualización utilitaria de los animales

**Area:** Promotion of frontier research and basic science in all fields of knowledge

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Peer review under the responsibility of the Scientific Committee [<https://www.marvid.org/>]- in the contribution to the scientific, technological and innovation **Peer Review Process** through the training of Human Resources for the continuity in the Critical Analysis of International Research.



## Introduction

Discussing animals in the millennium known as the medium aevum or Middle Ages far exceeds the scope of this work, despite its focus on the Latin-Germanic West and, mainly, on the feudal and late medieval periods, for which more information is available than for the early medieval centuries.

The primary sources available for this are overwhelming and very varied: treatises, encyclopedias, and books, which we can now safely call scientific, exegetical and hagiographic texts, monastic, noble, and royal documentation, literary and iconographic works rich in information, and a long etcetera.

As a previous reference, among the treatise writers who deal with animals, Augustine of Hippo [354-430] stands out. He speaks of them as irrational creatures that are part of the natural order, being a means by which knowledge of the Creator is accessed. In his view, they are also images and signs of the virtues and vices of spiritual life and, therefore, a useful moral example for man.

There are many references to this in his works. For example, in *Confessions* he writes: "I asked the earth, the sea, the depths, and the creeping animals, and they all answered me: 'We are not your God; seek him above us'" [Augustine, 1991, Book X, chap. 6, 9].

Other fundamental authors include Isidore of Seville [c. 560-636], a great heir to ancient culture, particularly with his *Etymologies*; Rabanus Maurus [780-856], a man of the Carolingian Renaissance, whose work *De Natura rerum* expands and enriches what Isidore wrote; the Dominican Albertus Magnus [c. 1193/1206-1280], who devoted himself, among other subjects of study, to the scientific observation of animals, as demonstrated in his work *De animalibus*; the Dominican Thomas Aquinas [c. 1224/1225-1274], a disciple of the former, who in his *Questio 64* of the First Part of his *Summa Theologiae* deals with various aspects of animals, highlighting their irrationality and inferiority to man, who sees in them only a utility.

Obviously, Aristotle's *Historia Animalium* is present in all these medieval sources.

To these we must also add the *Physiologus*, an anonymous collection of Latin texts derived from a Greek original probably written in Alexandria in the first century and transmitted in medieval copies, which lists the allegorical meaning of biblical animals, with the aim of establishing a relationship between the earthly world and the afterlife.

Given all these theoretical influences, it is not surprising that in the geo-historical and cultural sphere of medieval Western *Christianitas*, animals were not considered to possess a rational soul, and were classified as reactive beings that neither wanted, nor desired, nor thought, acting simply on instinct. In short: the animal was not a *subiectus*. But this distinction opens a whole world of possibilities for studying the relationships and sociability of humans with animals, their symbolic function, their role in the creation of the religious system and apparatus, and their projection into a rich and fascinating imaginary world.

However, these perspectives would have two common priority objectives to consider: attempting to use the study of the otherness of animals as living beings to better define and understand the human realm, and [this other objective seems much more interesting to me] understanding animals in their reality, in themselves and from themselves, that is, describing, analyzing, reflecting, and writing about animals from the position of the animals, thus achieving an animal discourse. "Être du côté des animaux", being on the side of animals, argues Eric Baratay [<https://doi.org/10.4000/books.psorbonne.114767>], which means accepting an animal ontology, in this case a historical ontology.

Many medievalists work magnificently from this position with surprising results. Needless to say, animals did not write in the Middle Ages, but neither did the social class euphemistically referred to as "subordinate," composed of peasants, artisans, minor clergy, itinerant monks, marginalized people, women... and, contrary to what one might expect, it has been possible to reconstruct the past of all those who made up this voiceless mass. The same methodology that French Analysts used for this purpose in their day can now be applied to listen to animals; it is simply a matter of correctly questioning sources and comparing information of various kinds, among which literature stands out.

## Methodology

The planning and development of this work combines several interdisciplinary strategies, such as the historical-critical analysis of documentary and bibliographic sources together with descriptive observation of iconography, which helps to provide a contextualized explanation of the ideas and content discussed. Both resources interact with each other, thus offering a more complete synthesis of the relationship established between humans and animals in the Middle Ages.

## Development

Along with many other historians, French medievalist Jacques Le Goff, in studying animals in the Middle Ages, distinguishes between the development of a theoretical and ideological system that defines them and everyday experience with them. In this sense, based on the above, we can talk about animals directly related to humans in terms of their economic usefulness, with specific applications for human survival in medicine, agriculture, livestock, farming, war, hunting, festivals, travel, etc., with some of them acquiring great value [horses, falcons, dogs, oxen, etc.] and becoming indispensable for food, defense, trade, and communications. We therefore classify these animals from the perspective of their material usefulness; although, in the same way, they have another function that goes beyond the utilitarian: companionship, provided by domesticated animals [dogs, cats, ferrets, etc.] that live inside houses, or by other wild animals that are only semi-domesticated [crows, magpies, foxes, weasels, etc.].

### Box 1



**Figure 1**

Tacuinum sanitatis, Ms. Lat. 9333, 14th and 15th centuries. Credit: BNF, Paris.

A second category is that of animals used as Christian analogies and symbols, present in bestiaries, the iconography of religious buildings, commentaries and illustrations of Old Testament and New Testament texts, such as the Apocalypse [lion, lamb, pelican, phoenix], symbols of Christ's sacrificial and redemptive death and resurrection.

### Box 2



**Figure 2**

Pelican feeding its young, Bestiary 1278–1300. Credit: J. Paul Getty Museum

This group would also include the animals that make up “the holy zoo,” that is, those that accompany the saints and are recorded in most of the *Vitae sanctorum* and hagiographic sources in general [raven, dove, lion...], although in other contexts these same animals may represent the devil, or the channel through which the evil one tempts souls.

### Box 3



**Figure 3**

Saint Gertrude of Nivelles, patron saint of cats, Ms. Lat. 14th century. Credit: Sainte Geneviève Library, Paris

This explains one of the essential characteristics of the medieval mindset: duality, the incessant interplay of opposites, the existence of two possibilities, two meanings, which generates great ambiguity and leads to the proposal of a third category, the mythical-magical and supernatural, the product of an exuberant imagination populated by monstrous and fantastic animals that are symbols, but also realities. This group includes cases of transhumanism, trans-animality, and hybridization, for example: Animals that behave like humans, surpassing them in every way and forming an animal society with human virtues and flaws. These animals are the protagonists of the well-known *Roman de Renart*, a collection of anthropomorphic French poems written between the 12th and 13th centuries. The main source for this work is the Latin poem *Ysengrimus*, written around 1150 and attributed to the cleric Nivardus of Ghent.

#### Box 4



**Figure 4**

*Roman de Renart*, Ms. 12584, fs. 18v-19r, 14th century. Credit: BNF, Paris.

Men who treat animals as subjects of law, excommunicating or prosecuting them, as recalled in the case of the killer sow of Falaise, in Normandy, which killed a three-month-old baby and was sentenced to be mutilated and executed in 1387 [Dubois, 2021], after a trial was held against her with all the procedural characteristics appropriate for a person. This episode is recounted in the work of American philologist Edward Payson Evans, *Criminal Prosecution and Capital Punishment of Animals*, which documents almost two hundred similar cases, the first of which was against some moles in 824 in the Aosta Valley, according to the *Annales regni Francorum* [8th and 9th centuries], and the last in 1906, in which a dog was sentenced to death in Délémont, Switzerland.

#### Box 5



**Figure 5**

Molding on the Sainte-Trinité church in Faliase, recalling the process of “la truie”. Credit: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fq\\_2ET9pO24](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Fq_2ET9pO24)

Wild men, who resemble animals or wish to be animals, as depicted in codex miniatures, legends related to forests, and palace celebrations. Such is the episode known as the “Dance of the Fiery Ones,” which took place in January 1393 and is recounted in Jean Froissart's *Chronicle*, in which Charles VI of France and five nobles disguised as “savages” accidentally set themselves on fire, killing four of them.

#### Box 6



**Figure 6**

*Le Bal des Ardents*, Illuminated miniature from Jean Froissart's *Chronicles*, Cat. Harley 4380. Credit: BL, London

Animals that rebel and subjugate humans: killer rabbits and giant warrior snails, present in all genres of visual art, but especially in the marginalia and buffoonery of codices.

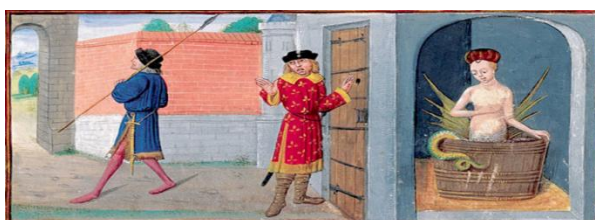
**Box 7****Figure 7**

Rabbit rebellion, Smithfield Decretals manuscript, 14th century. Credit: BL, London

- Hybrid beings, such as Mélusine of Lusignan, whose story, which comes from oral tradition, was recorded at the end of the 14th century by Jean d'Arras, a poet from northern France, to compose the *Roman de Mélusine*, a text dedicated to John, Duke of Berry.

This novel tells the story of Raymond [or Raymondin] of Poitiers, a ruined nobleman who meets an aquatic nymph, a fairy named Melusine, in the forest. She promises him riches and children if he marries her, on the condition that one day a week she will retire to her chambers and he will not be able to see her. But Raymond is overcome with curiosity and drills a hole in the door of his wife's room to spy on her. When he does so, he sees that she is bathing and, surprisingly, has the tail of a snake or a winged dragon. Melusine, realizing she has been discovered, flies away from the castle, and her departure causes further ruin for Lusignan.

Along with the act of breaking a prohibition, which takes us back to Eden, duality is manifested here first in the morphology of Mélusine, half woman, half winged dragon or winged serpent, symbolizing good and evil, the devilish and the holy, the sacred and the profane. We also witness a surprising moral questioning, as Mélusine seeks redemption for her hybrid condition, being generous and fertile, while her husband, the man, who represents society, is the one who punishes her and loses her forever.

**Box 8****Figure 8**

Melusine in her bath, spied on by Raymondin. *Roman de Mélusine*, Ms. 24383, fol. 19, [1450-1500], BNF

However, with her hybridization, Mélusine introduces two positive pre-intentional reflections into her story: the belief that no human being is entirely good or entirely evil and, perhaps from a somewhat forced reinterpretation, an improvement on the idea of women in her time, since it is this woman-animal, and not Raymond, who raises and enriches Lusignan, so that when she escapes from this earth, poverty and desolation fall upon the family, the children, and all the descendants of this house, who will henceforth be considered cursed, as were, for example, those belonging to the royal dynasty of the Plantagenets.

**Conclusions**

In conclusion, I fear that, without sufficient space to explain it in detail, what I have presented may seem like nothing more than a collection of historical anecdotes.

I want to make it very clear that what I have referred to are not anecdotes, nor even fiction, but realities and possibilities.

One of the most complex aspects of the Middle Ages to unravel, and therefore one of the most thought-provoking, is the constant division of human existence into two principles, two positions, two approaches [humanity and divinity, earthly life and supernatural life, body and soul, faith and reason, etc.].

The reality of the medieval world is dominated by marked antagonisms that paradoxically reside, grow, and emerge in actions, attitudes, and individual and social imaginaries: good and evil, the sublime and the base, the spiritual and the material, the sinister and the comic, virtue and temptation, sin and forgiveness, life and death, the human and the animal, are present in medieval daily life in a proportion and balance that is incomprehensible to modern man, so that, as the German medievalist Johannes Bühler explains, sometimes all “these notions [even though they are opposites] often come close together, reverse their positions, and then distance themselves again.” [Bühler, 1946, 39]. There are no boundaries, then, between the visible and the invisible. Jacques Le Goff said of medieval man that not only “[...] the visible is for him the trace of the invisible, but the supernatural bursts into [his] daily life at every moment.” [Le Goff, 1995, 38].

## Article

In short, in a world like this one, where anything is possible, there are no walls dividing humans and animals, at least not like those that a contradictory “supremacist humanism” and reason would later construct. Whatever the case may be, I will conclude by quoting Le Goff once again, who asserts that the Middle Ages cannot be conceived without animals. To do so would be to refuse to understand it in its breadth and depth.

### Declarations

### Conflict of interest

This text is from a single author, so there is no conflict of interest.

### Authors' Contribution

This text is by a single author, so all the work is theirs.

### Availability of data and materials

The images provided are in the public domain.

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### Abbreviations

BNF	Bibliothèque Nationale de France
BL	British Library

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