

A Bestiary is a collection of short descriptions about all sorts of animals, real and imaginary, birds and even rocks, accompanied by a moralising explanation. Although it deals with the natural world it was never meant to be a scientific text and should not be read as such. Some observations may be quite accurate but they are given the same weight as totally fabulous accounts. The Bestiary appeared in its present form in England in the twelfth century, as a compilation of many earlier sources, principally the Physiologus. A great deal of its charm comes from the humour and imagination of the illustrations, painted partly for pleasure but justified as a didactic tool «to improve the minds of ordinary people, in such a way that the soul will at least perceive physically things which it has difficulty grasping mentally: that what they have difficulty comprehending with their ears, they will perceive with their eyes» (*Aberdeen MS 24, f25v*).



*Leonis vocabulum ex greca origine inflexum est in latinum. Grece enim leon vocatur, et est nomen nothum, quia ex parte corruptum. Leo enim grece, latine rex interpretatur, eo quod princeps est omnium bestiarum. (Aberdeen Bestiary, XII century)*

The name lion, leo, of Greek origin, is altered in Latin. For in Greek it is leon; it is not a genuine word, because it is in part corrupted. For the Greek word for lion is translated «king» in Latin, because the lion is the king of all the beasts.

*De tribus principalibus naturis leonis. Phisici dicunt leonem tres principales naturas habere. Prima natura eius est, quod per cacumina montium amat ire. Et si contigerit ut queratur a venatoribus, venit ad eum odor venatorum, et cum cauda sua tetigit posttergum vestigia sua. Tunc venatores investigare eum nequeunt. Sic et salvator noster, scilicet spiritualis leo, de tribu Iuda, radix Iesse, filius David, cooperuit vestigia sue caritatis in celis, donec missus a patre descenderet in uterum virginis Marie, et salvaret genus humanum quod perierat. (Aberdeen Bestiary, XII century)*



Of the three main characteristics of the lion. Those who study nature say that the lion has three main characteristics. The first is that it loves to roam amid mountain peaks. If it happens that the lion is pursued by hunters, it picks up their scent and obliterates the traces behind it with its tail. As a result, they cannot track it. Thus our Saviour, a spiritual lion, of the tribe of Judah, the root of Jesse, the son of David, concealed the traces of his love in heaven until, sent by his father, he descended into the womb of the Virgin Mary and redeemed mankind, which was lost.

*Ceo que en griu est leün en franceis «rei» ad num. [...] Li leün signefie le fiz sainte Marie; reis est de tute gent senz nul reutement, poanz est par nature sur tute creature. (Bestiaire de Philippe de Thaün, XII siècle).*

What in Greek is lion in French is «king». [...] Lion means Saint Mary's son; he is the king of every man without any doubt, he has natural sway upon every living being.

And one of the elders saith unto me, Weep not: behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, hath prevailed to open the book, and to loose the seven seals thereof. (Revelation 5: 5)

And Jesus, when he was baptized, went up straightway out of the water: and, lo, the heavens were opened unto him, and he saw the Spirit of God descending like a dove, and lighting upon him: And lo a voice from heaven, saying, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. (Matthew 3: 16-17)