

Bestiary: Being an English Version of the Bodleian Library, Oxford M.S. Bodley 764

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Bestiaries are a particularly characteristic product of medieval England, and afford insight into the medieval mind. Richly illuminated and lavishly produced, they were luxury objects designed for noble families. Their three-fold purpose was to provide a natural history of birds, beasts and fish; to draw moral examples from animal behaviour, like the industrious bee and the stubborn ass; and to reveal a mystical meaning, for instance, the phoenix as a symbol of Christ's resurrection. Bestiaries drew their inspiration from classical sources, to which were added very early Christianized versions of the work of natural historians. Thus, unreal animals and whimsical names derive from travellers' tales, from the symbolism of oriental art and from misunderstood observations of animal behaviour, giving form to the mysterious unicorn, the man-eating manticore and the phoenix-phenomenon of "anting" in birds. Mixed with this are descriptions of familiar and readily recognizable creatures. It is the combination of engaging text and a vividly depicted animal world, put together with an entirely serious purpose, that makes bestiaries objects of such fascination. This "Bestiary", MS Bodley 764 in the Bodleian Library in Oxford, was produced around the middle of the 13th century, and there are some clues to the patron who commissioned it in the heraldry incorporated in the artist's work. Whomever it was, the resulting manuscript is of singular beauty and interest. The lively illustrations have the freedom and naturalistic quality of the later Gothic style, and make dazzling use of colour. This book reproduces the 136 illuminations to the same size and in the same place as the original manuscript, the text being fitted around them. Richard Barber's translation from the original Latin is a delight to read, reflecting the manuscript's serious intent with a feeling for the underlying charm of the beasts as seen by the medieval world.

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