

SOME TWELFTH-CENTURY ANIMAL CARVINGS  
AND THEIR SOURCES IN THE BESTIARIES

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**Author:** A. (Arthur) H. Collins appears to have been an English clergyman; little else is known about him. His Christian church background is evident in his writing, which has a decidedly religious flavor. He may have lived from 1880 to 1952, in England. He is also the author of *Symbolism of Animals and Birds Represented in English Church Architecture* (1913). This article may have been written some time before its 1940 publication date; in it Collins acknowledges the assistance of George C. Druce, who died in 1932.

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**Formatting:** The digital edition differs from the original printed text in layout, typeface and pagination, though all text of the original has been included as printed; no editing has been done and all original spelling and punctuation has been retained. The manuscripts described in this article were in the British Museum when the article was written; they have now been moved to the British Library. The original British Museum attribution has been retained in this edition.

The illustrations have been moved to the end of the article and are shown somewhat larger than in the print edition. Where the text refers to an illustration, there is a note like this: [\[pl. 10\]](#); this refers to the photographic plate numbered 10 at the end of the article. The reference is a link; click it to jump directly to the illustration. The illustrations are shown in the order they appeared in the print edition.

The page numbers shown in this edition (at the bottom of each page) do not match the page numbering of the original printed edition. The original page numbers have been added to allow references to the print edition to be located; the number indicates the start of the print edition page. These page numbers appear imbedded in the text, formatted like this: [\[238\]](#).

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# SOME TWELFTH-CENTURY ANIMAL CARVINGS AND THEIR SOURCES IN THE BESTIARIES

By THE REV. A. H. COLLINS

[238] ONE of the most striking features of the richer Norman doorways of our country is the abundance of animal carvings. Of these a great many represent signs of the Zodiac, or are drawn from ancient fables; some call to mind sacred symbols or stories in the Bible; but a large residuum can only find their explanation in the pages of mediaeval Bestiaries. Though the Bestiaries are drawn from many classical and postclassical sources, their origin can be traced to a smaller work called the *Physiologus*, which was probably written in Alexandria by a Greek monk, c. A.D. 400. As the popularity of the book spread, more and more material was added. The earliest Bestiaries treated of less than forty animals, but some of the Twelfth Century in our country treated of more than a hundred.

The illustrations were the chief reasons for their popularity. They are sometimes exquisitely, often very naïvely, drawn, but neither they nor the associated text have any scientific value. The short chapters deal with nonexistent as well as with known animals or birds, but the stories of the latter are almost equally fanciful.

The Bestiary chapters abound in Biblical references. Frequently amusing instances of bad etymology are given. The habits of the Creature are described, and then the moral or spiritual lessons which those habits can be made to convey to the Christian.

Although the animals on Norman doorways point to the same religious values as those in the Bestiaries, they are much more difficult to recognize. There is necessarily a simplification in treatment. The carvings do not follow any scale. It is not always easy to know for instance whether we are looking at a traditional dragon, or at some tiny reptile [239] which is a few inches long.

We are very fortunate in having on the South doorway at Alne, Yorkshire, a sort of half-way house between the Bestiaries and the usual architectural examples. For at Alne some of the subjects have their titles on the face of the little ornamental arches which enclose them. From them we have chosen the Fox, the Panther, the Eagle, the Caladrius, and the Hyena as specimens. Three at least of these are performing the actions which are associated with them in the Bestiaries. On the other hand, the wild goat feeding, the lion and the dragon have no titles to be seen. As we should expect, the more domestic or accessible the animal is, the more clearly and consistently is it depicted. But representations of little-known creatures vary in a most puzzling manner. As a rule, the mythical animals such as the siren, the centaur, the griffin, or the mantichora are easily recognized from their traditional characteristics.

With the help of a study of Bestiaries, and a knowledge of the carvings at

Alne, we have a standard of comparison which will frequently guide us rightly elsewhere. On the left hand of the outer order at Alne the fox is the first animal carved [pl. 1]. He is lying on his back, with open mouth, and brush half extended. A fowl is bending over his body on the left, and another appears to be pecking his lips.

The Bestiaries say that VULPIS = Volupes, nimble of foot. The fox is deceitful [240] and tricky, ready to run in tortuous curves. When he is hungry he feigns to be dead. First he covers himself with red earth in order to look bloody and tempting; he lets his tongue hang out, and holds his breath. Soon the birds come to investigate, and are swiftly caught. Sometimes a man will be deceived, and throw the body into his cart as he drives on his way. The fox speedily devours his provisions, jumps out and makes off. The fox is the Devil who pretends to be dead, until he gets those who live according to the flesh into his power. We cannot see at Alne, a delightful feature of the MS., the little foxes below the body which are looking out of holes in expectation of a meal [pl. 2].

The panther of the Bestiaries is a parti-coloured female animal very gentle in disposition. Only the dragon is her enemy. When sated with food the panther sleeps in her den for three days, and then awakes with a roar. A pleasant smell as of all spices issues from her mouth. Animals are attracted by her in crowds, but the dragon retreats into its lair. The panther represents Jesus Christ in His gentleness and attractiveness. After three days in the grave, He awakes out of sleep, and attracts men to Him by His sweetness. But the Devil flees dismayed. In the MS. given, we can see five animals mostly horned which are attracted to the panther, while the dragon is looking rather sickly below [pl. 16]. At Newton-in-Cleveland the dragon is shown half coiled with a head at each end [pl. 3]. The panther has an open [241] mouth, and a much more bushy tail than at Alne [pl. 5].

The panther's mate is the pard, of different temperament and not half so interesting. He is often shown in profile, and *passant gardant* with tongue outstretched because he is bloodthirsty [pl. 4]. The tail, which is like a lion's, is returned over his body. In MSS. he is frequently represented as chasing or seizing an animal. It may be, as Mr. G. C. Druce thinks, that pardus is the heraldic leopard. Close by him at Dalmeny we have a fine griffin, and a rabbit or hare escaping from a beast of prey [pl. 6]. At the bottom of one of the orders is an *Agnus Dei*. The carving of the label of the doorway shows Viking influence.

Our picture of the hyena gives an unattractive beast with long ears, hog mane and a bushy tail dragging the body of a woman from her sepulchre [pl. 11]. The Bestiaries say that the animal has a continuous neck and backbone, so that his head cannot separately be turned. He haunts sheepfolds, and imitates the human voice, that the shepherds may be deceived and come out to their destruction. There is no Norman carving of a hyena robbing graves, but there is a late mediaeval example at Hereford in the roof of one of the cloisters. At Alne the hyena has in his mouth what may be a large bone, carved however like a branch or flower [pl. 5]. The carving on the tower at Alton in Hampshire is very similar, and the tail is equally bushy [pl. 12]. So we are fairly safe in our attribution.

The eagle at Alne has his title shortened to Ala instead of Aquila [pl. 5]. Many tales are told about the eagle. His sight is so keen that he can see the fish in the sea far below him. [242] When his eyes become dim, and his wings heavy, he flies up to the sun to scorch himself and then is rejuvenated by plunging into water. The story which our MS. represents is that of the parent eagle forcing his young to gaze at the sun [pl. 7]. Two eaglets obey, but the third which fails is pulled out of the nest by the scruff of the neck. Our readers will be glad to know that a coot is ready to mother the rejected bird. The carving on the doorway at Ribbsford, Worcestershire, may represent the eagle with three young ones. One is held in the parent's talons. The carving is very flat, and the sun is not shown.

The caladrius in a decayed carving at Alne is perched on the body of a sick man and gazing on his face [pl. 9]. By the direction of the bird's gaze, he prophesies whether or no the sick are to recover. If the bird turns his gaze away, the omen is most unfavourable. The caladrius, a perfectly white bird, is a symbol of Jesus Christ without spot or stain, who came to save both Jew and Gentile. But He had to turn away from the former. The miniature shows the bird foretelling the recovery of a king, who is leaning on his elbow and almost turned away. The caladrius is found in the courts of kings. The subject may also be found on a voussour at St. Margaret's, York [pl. 8].

The MS. illustration of a mantichora shows a fearful and spirited beast striking down a man [pl. 14]. The name is akin to the Persian for man-eater. The Bestiaries say that the mantichora is a native of India. It has triple rows of teeth fitting alternately, the face of a man with blue-grey eyes, and the body of a lion, except that it is the colour of blood. Its tail has a scorpion's sting, and its voice is like reed pipes. It is very fond of human flesh. The carving at Kilpeck, Herefordshire, gives most of the details correctly, though the man is absent, and the tail is far too bushy for a scorpion's sting [pl. 15].

It is with regret that we must say that we have no certain twelfth-century carvings of a wolf, such as we can see on the stalls at Faversham, Kent, or again of the unicorn. The Faversham carving shows the wolf either licking his feet to make him tread softly, or biting one foot if it has made a noise by treading on a twig [pl. 17]. [243] The unicorn is more interesting still. In the Bestiaries he has the body of a horse, but an elephant's feet, a stag's tail and a long sharp horn [pl. 13]. A unicorn could be captured by stratagem alone. A chaste virgin, decked with beautiful ornaments, is put in a solitary place in the forest which the animal frequents, and when the unicorn sees her he lays his head in her lap and goes to sleep. The huntsmen then carry the captive to the king's palace, and receive much treasure. The unicorn is said to represent Jesus Christ, who raised up a horn of salvation for His people. The mighty men of the world sought to lay hold of Him, but it was through the blessed Virgin Mary that He became Man.

A number of other comparisons of Bestiary subjects with Norman details could be made, but enough has been shown to prove the sources of many of the animal carvings of the period. Many other animals carved are certainly derived from

sources other than the Bestiaries, but the possibility of finding parallels makes a most interesting study.

For the photographs of the MS. miniatures, the writer is indebted to his friend, Mr. G. C. Druce, and to the Royal Archaeological Institute for the loan of the block of Mr. Druce's photograph of the caladrius drawing. Such help, so freely given, is a great pleasure to receive and acknowledge.

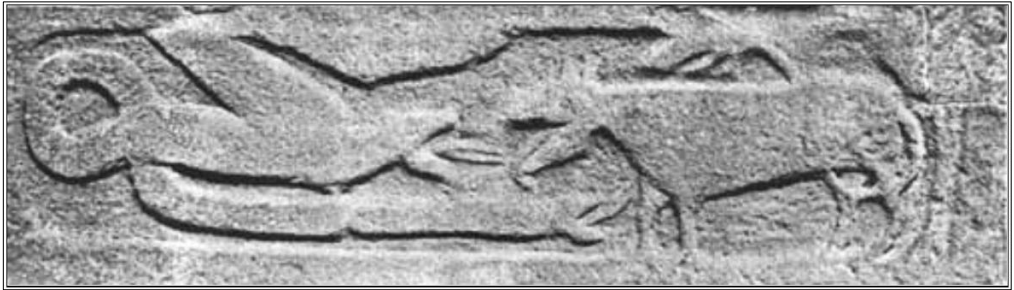


1. Fox carving from the south door at Alne, Yorkshire



2. Fox feigning death: from manuscript 61 at S. John's College, Oxford





3. Panther and two-headed dragon: from Newton-In-Cleveland, Yorkshire



4. Pardus: from manuscript no. 22 in the Westminister Chapter Library



5. Panther, eagle and hyena: Alne, Yorkshire





8. Samson slaying lion, caladrius &c.: S. Margaret's, York



9. Caladrius and wild goat: Alne, Yorkshire



10. The caladrius foretelling recovery: Harleian MS. 4751: British Museum



11. Hyena devouring corpse: from Harleian MS. 4751: British Museum



12. Hyena with bone, at Alton Church, Hampshire



13. Unicorn with head in virgin's lap: MS. 22, in Westminster Chapter Library



14. Mantichora striking down a man: from Harleian MS. 3244: British Museum





15. Mantichora: beast fond of human flesh: Herefordshire





16. Panther: from Harleian MS. 4751: the British Museum



17. Wolf: a twelfth-century wood carving: from a stall at Faversham, Kent