

ON THE LEGEND OF THE SERRA OR SAW-FISH

BY

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Introduction to the Digital Edition

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Author: George Claridge Druce was born in Surrey, England and lived there and at Wimbledon until 1923, when he retired from managing a distillery company and moved to Cranbrook, Kent. He was a member of the Kent Archaeological Society from 1909, as Secretary from 1925 to 1935 and then Vice-President until his death. He was a member of the Royal Archaeological Institute (1903-48, Council member 1921-28) and of the British Archaeological Association, joining in 1920, serving on its Council 1921-38 and then as Vice President (1938-48). He was elected a Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries (F.S.A.) of London in 1912 and served on its Council 1923-6. Druce travelled extensively (by bicycle) with his camera, and built up a unique collection of photographs and glass lantern slides, which in 1947 he presented to the Courtauld Institute in London. Although interested in almost all branches of antiquarian study, he specialized in the study of the bestiary genre, and was widely recognized as an authority on the influence of bestiaries on ecclesiastical sculpture and wood carving. He also studied manuscripts both in England and elsewhere. He contributed articles to various scholarly journals, presented many lectures, and in 1936 produced a translation of *The Bestiary* of Guillaume le Clerc, a Norman-French manuscript which dates from 1210-11. Druce died in 1948.

— *Adapted from an obituary written by Canon Sydney William Wheatley, F.S.A. in The Journal of the British Archaeological Association, 3rd series, 11 (1948), 80.*

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Manuscripts: Some of the manuscripts mentioned by Druce in 1918 have since changed ownership, location or designation. The manuscripts mentioned by Druce as being at the British Museum (B.M.) are now housed at the British Library; the shelfmarks remain the same. The “MS. at Sion College” (formerly Sion College L 40.2/L28) is now in the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, with shelfmark MS. Ludwig XV 3. The “Bestiary that is now the property of Pierpont Morgan” is now Morgan Library, New York, MS M.81 (the Worksof Bestiary).

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Thursday, 28th November 1918.
Sir MARTIN CONWAY, Knt., M.A., Vice-President,
in the Chair.

G. C. DRUCE, Esq., F.S.A., read the following paper on the Legend of the Serra or Saw-fish:

Among the more important marine creatures described and illustrated in the medieval Bestiaries is a beast called the Serra or Saw-fish. It is the subject of a moralized tale. Its legend is a simple one, but not without its picturesque side, and is noteworthy for the little variation that we find in its principal features. It is, however, quite otherwise in respect to the way in which the Serra is illustrated, for it would be hard to find any creature treated by artists in more diverse fashion, and it is frankly evident that none of them knew what it was like, if indeed it was to be seen in the flesh at all.

The story is told in most versions of the Bestiary: Greek, Latin, French, Italian, Arabic, Armenian, and Ethiopian; but for our purpose a translation will suffice of one of the Latin manuscripts in the British Museum, MS. Sloane 3544, of early fourteenth-century date, with such small adjustments as the texts of other manuscripts may suggest.

‘There is a beast in the sea which is called a saw-fish, and has immense wings. When this beast has seen a ship making sail on the ocean, it raises its wins above the water and competes with the ship in sailing. (But when it has competed in sailing or racing against the ship) for 30 or 40 furlongs, being unable to sustain the exertion, it gives up, and lowering [21] its wings draws them in. And the waves of the sea carry it back again, tired out, to its own place in the deep.

‘This beast (usual reading: Now the sea) is a symbol of this world. The ship is a type of righteous persons, who without peril or shipwreck of their faith pass through the midst of the storms and tempests of this world (and overcome the deadly waves, that is, the adverse forces of this world). But the saw-fish, that is that beast which availed not to beat the ship in sailing, affords a symbol of those persons who at first eagerly engage in good works, but who afterwards do not persevere in them, and are led astray by faults of different kinds (that is, of greed, pride, drunkenness, and luxury), which toss them about as it were upon the waves of the sea and plunge them down to the depths of hell. For not to those who only make a beginning, but to those who persevere, is the reward promised.’¹

The miniature in the Sloane MS. (fig. 1) shows on the right a conventionally drawn ship, in which are seated two men in hooded cloaks, with their hands raised apparently in supplication. On the left is the saw-fish, drawn as an immense two-legged, winged dragon approaching the ship with open mouth as if menacing it. Its wings are raised to serve as sails, and are serrated on the edge in the usual way, but no part of the creature is described in this text as being like a saw.

As to the principal events of the story, viz. the saw-fish rising from the sea, racing with the ship, and sinking down again, there is very little to say. The earliest Bestiary (or indeed any manuscript) with which I am acquainted in which it occurs is MS. 10074 in the Royal Library,

1 Cf. Matt. xxiv. 13. Among the Latin Bestiaries which have approximately the same text may be mentioned: MSS. 10074 Bibl. Roy., Brussels and 233 at Berne, of which transcriptions are given in Cahier’s *Mélanges d’Archéologie*, vol. ii. p. 122; MSS. Harl. 4751 and 3244 at the Brit. Mus.; MS. 12 F xii at Brit. Mus.; MS. at Sion College; and the version given in the Appendix to the works of Hugo de Sancto Victore, *De Bestiis et aliis rebus*, bk. ii, ch. 22 (see Migne’s *Patrologiae Cursus Completus*, vol. 177. col. 69).

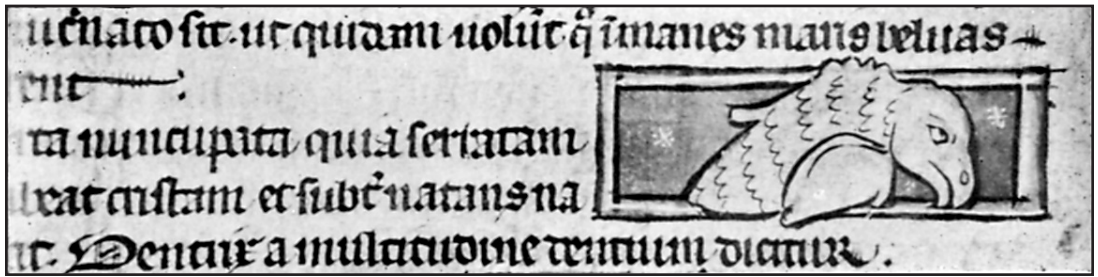


Fig. 4. Saw-fish. MS. 22 Westminster Chapter Library



Fig. 5. Saw-fish. MS. Sloane 278 (B.M.)



Fig. 6. Saw-fish. MS. 14969 Fr. Bibl. Nat., Paris

Brussels, dating from the latter part of the tenth century. One or both of two other Bestiaries at Berne are said to be as early, but these I have not inspected.² Farther back we cannot go, nor does there seem to be any allusion to such a story in any classical author, so far as I am aware, although the length of the race, 30 or 40 stadia, might perhaps provide a clue.

This difficulty as to source has the drawback that it leaves us uncertain as to the original motive of the saw fish in racing with the ship. Was it merely rivalry due to jealousy, or was there a desire to harm the ship and crew? There is plenty of internal [22] evidence in the Bestiaries of an evil intention, but we do not know that it began there. It is more likely to have been already present, and would be natural in view of the reputed size and strange behaviour of the beast. Basil in his *Hexaemeron* tells us that whales were created to strike people with fear and astonishment, and that not only sword-fish, saw-fish, sea-dogs, and whales, but also the ray with its sting, and the sea-hare, are calculated to excite fear and terror.

However this may be from the point of view of the legend, there is definite evidence of hostility on the part of the saw-fish towards ships in another quarter, namely Isidore's *Etymology*,³ where it is described as follows; 'The saw-fish is so called because it has a crest like a saw, and it swims beneath ships and cuts them.' This definition of Isidore was no doubt based on Pliny's accounts in bks. ix, 1 (2) and xxxii, 6 (2). In the first Pliny associates the saw-fish with the grape-fish, the sword-fish, and the cucumber-fish, as examples of forms found in the sea resembling not only terrestrial animals but also inanimate objects. In the second he mentions the sword-fish alone, as having a sharp-pointed muzzle, with which it is able to pierce the sides of ships and sink them. Isidore seems to have accepted this idea as applicable to the saw-fish, and gave it a serrated 'crest' to do it with. The word 'crista' is somewhat widely interpreted, and, whatever may have been Isidore's intention, his description was taken to mean a dorsal crest. Isidore is perhaps more quoted than any other author in the Bestiaries, and his description of the saw-fish passed into the texts of many manuscripts or otherwise influenced them. For instance, Vincent de Beauvais (*Spec. Nat.*, bk. xvii, ch. 127) reproduces it thus: 'The saw fish swimming hidden beneath the ship cuts through its bottom, so that as the water rushes in, it drowns the crew by its crafty device and gorges itself on their flesh.' It had also a marked effect on the illustrations.⁴

The determination of the saw-fish to do harm to the ship is expressed more fully in the French than in the Latin versions. In the metrical Bestiary of Philip de Thau, written about 1121, we get it thus:

Quaut veit nes en mer halt . si se leve en halt.
A la nef fait grant laid . ke devant le nef vait
E si retent le vent . que ele, nen ad nent.
Ne la nef enfant deure de nent ne pot cure.⁵

2 Nos. 233 and 318 in Sinner's Catalogue.

3 Liber xii, cap. 6.

4 See MS. 12F xii (B.M.); MS. 22 Westminster Chapter Library; and MS. 254 Fitzwilliam Mus., Cambridge.

5 MS. Nero A v (B.M.):

When it sees a ship on the high sea it rises up.
To the ship it does great harm, for it goes before the ship
And holds off the wind so that it gets none of it.
Nor can the ship all that time sail on at all.

Cf. Wright's *Popular Treatises on Science*, p. 104. MS. 249, Merton Coll.. Oxford, reads; 'Ses eles leve en halt' and 'kar devant le vent vait', which is probably more correct.



Fig. 7. Saw-fish. MS. 14970 Fr. Bibl. Nat., Paris



Fig. 8. Saw-fish. MS. Vesp. A. VII (B.M.)



Fig. 9. Saw-fish. MS. 249 Merton College, Oxford



Fig. 10. Saw-fish. MS. 249 Merton College, Oxford



Fig. 11. Saw-fish. MS. Roy. 2 B VII (B.M.)



Fig. 12. Saw-fish. MS. Roy. 2 B VII (B.M.)



Fig. 13. Saw-fish. MS. 10074 Bibl. Roy., Brussels

[23] And in the metrical version of Guillaume, of the first half of the thirteenth century:

Les mariners qui par mer vount.
Ne la querent ja encontre.
Quer cest un grant peril de mer.
Si fait sovent la nef perir.
A qy ele put avenir.⁶

Other versions dwell more on the rivalry between the saw-fish and ship, and intimate that the saw-fish is very angry at being unable to beat the ship. In two of the French versions we read that ‘when its breath fails, it is ashamed at being beaten, and exerts itself to the utmost to see if it can reach the ship’.⁷

Some variation is found here and there. For instance, in an Arabic version given by Professor Land,⁸ the saw-fish, which is called a dolphin, is said to take pity on a vessel when driven by a storm and in danger of sinking, and to raise its wings and pass beneath the ship and lift it above the waves. And it does this until it is tired. This is probably a late perversion of the story. In the Arabic version given Tychsen,⁹ in which it is also called a dolphin, this phase is not mentioned.

Practically all manuscripts agree that when the saw-fish rises to the surface it sails or races through the waves and does not fly. The twelfth-century Latin Bestiary at Leiden, of which the text is given by Land,¹⁰ and the Arabic version by Tychsen, say that it imitates the action of ships, the latter adding that it ‘rigs up a yard, as it were, with a sail, after the fashion of ships [24] which set sails’. In the metrical version of Gervais, it expressly plays the rôle of a ship:

Quant ele voit par aventure
Nef coere contre les estoiles
Encontremont traies les voiles
Meitenant vers la nef sadrece
Ses ales estent come tref
De soi cuide fare une nef.¹¹

6 MS. Vesp. A vii (B.M.):

The mariners who cross the sea
Are not wishful to meet it:
For it is a great peril of the sea.
It often makes the ship to founder
To which it is able to get near.

See also M. C. Hippeau’s transcription of manuscript at Paris, in *Le Bestiaire divin*, Caen, 1852, p. 202.

7 Versions of Pierre and the Bestiaire d’Amour. Text of the former from MS. 3516, Arsenal Library, Paris, in Cahier’s *Mélanges d’Archéologie*, ii p. 121; of the latter in C. Hippeau’s ‘Le Bestiaire d’Amour’, dated 1285, Paris, 1860, p. 39.

8 *Anecdota Syriaca*, vol. iv, p. 150.

9 *Physiologus Syrus*, p. 172.

10 *Anecdota Syriaca*, vol. iv, p. 47.

11 MS. Add. 28260 (B.M.); transcribed also by Paul Meyer in *Romania*, 1872, p. 440:

When it sees by chance
A ship sailing against the stars (?)
With sails full set,
At once towards the ship it makes its way;
Its wings are as spread sails,
It reckons itself to be a ship.



Fig. 14. Saw-fish. MS. Sion College, London



Fig. 15. Saw-fish. MS. 3516 Arsenal Library, Paris

Suitas syrie que nunc tyrus dicitur. olim
sera uocabatur a pisce quodam qui illic
abundabat. quem sua lingua sar appellat
ex quo derivatum est huius similitudinis pis-
ciculos sardas. sardinas et uocari.



Fig. 16. Saw-fish. MS. Belonging to Pierpont Morgan, Esq.

The words commonly used in the Latin manuscripts are 'contendit velificare vel currere', in Guillaume's version 'sigle', in the Bestiaire d'Amour 'se saut parmi la mer', and in the Arsenal Library manuscript 'se lance parmi la mer'. In the manuscript of Thaum's version at Merton College it is said to have 'eles pur voler' and that it 'ses eles leve en halt', but it is clear from the context that this is not for flying, but for sailing. The saw-fish, on rising to the surface, puts up its wings and sets sail before the wind.

There is much discrepancy as to the length of the race. In the Latin manuscripts it is given as 'triginta vel quadraginta stadia'. This is evidently the original distance. The French and Italian versions vary. In the Arsenal Library Bestiary, of early fourteenth-century date, the text says that the saw-fish 'cort en coste la nef a estrif a eles tendues ben XL lieues ou C, a une alenee', i. e. 'sails side by side with the ship in competition, with wings extended, full 40 leagues or 100, without taking breath'. The manuscript of the Bestiaire d'Amour quoted by Hippeau is apparently based on the same original and uses similar words, but has LX instead of XL, due presumably to a copyist's error. In the later Italian versions given by Max Goldstaub¹² the words are 'zento meia', a hundred miles, so that the distance did not diminish as time went on.

All accounts agree that after its defeat the saw-fish suddenly sinks back exhausted into the sea, and some intimate that it is in a very bad temper. We noted that it was 'ashamed at being beaten', and one of the Italian manuscripts goes farther and says that it sinks to the bottom 'from the grief that it feels that the ship has escaped it'.¹³

[25] So much for the legend. We will now consider the personality of the saw-fish, with particular regard to the way in which it is rendered in the miniatures. There are two main elements in its description: (1) That of the legend, that it is a sea-monster with immense wings, and (2) Isidore's definition that it has a crest like a saw. The artists had both to work upon. While there was a tendency to draw large sea-monsters such as the sea-tortoise and whale in the form of fish, this does not seem to have been so common in the case of the saw-fish. The word *belua* gave the artists plenty of scope, and as there was little or nothing in the legend itself about saws, it was open to them to treat the beast in any way they pleased. It is true that in the Bestiaire d'Amour and the Italian versions its wings are said to be 'sharper than razors', but this may be regarded as a bit of window-dressing.

In a fair number of manuscripts the saw-fish is illustrated alone, the ship being omitted, as in MS. Harl. 3244 (B.M.) (fig. 2). The heading in this manuscript is very explicit: 'De serra pisce magno pennas sive pinnas habens ad modum serre qua secantur ligna.'¹⁴ The artist has drawn the fore-part of a great scaled fish with a beast-like head, but despite the heading, has given it neither wings nor fins; on the other hand it has a fine row of saw-teeth along its back, due no doubt to Isidore's description. This saw-fish has three fish in its jaws, a feature which we also find in the Merton College manuscript, in Bodl. 602, and in the Bestiary at Sion College. There is nothing as a rule in the Latin texts to throw any light on this, but Thaum's Bestiary tells us that after its defeat 'it dives into the sea to devour the fish'; and this is made the subject of a symbolic lesson. The artists of the Bestiaries seem to have been quite ready to adopt details that they saw elsewhere, but which were not mentioned their immediate

12 *Ein Tosco-Venezianischer Bestiarius*, Halle. 1892, p. 49).

13 Albertus Magnus says that when its wings are lowered it is carried down by its own weight (*De animalibus*, lib. xxiv).

14 About the saw-fish, a great fish, having wings or fins after the manner of a saw with which wood is cut.



Fig. 17. (?) Saw-fish, Tympanum. Netherton (Worc.)

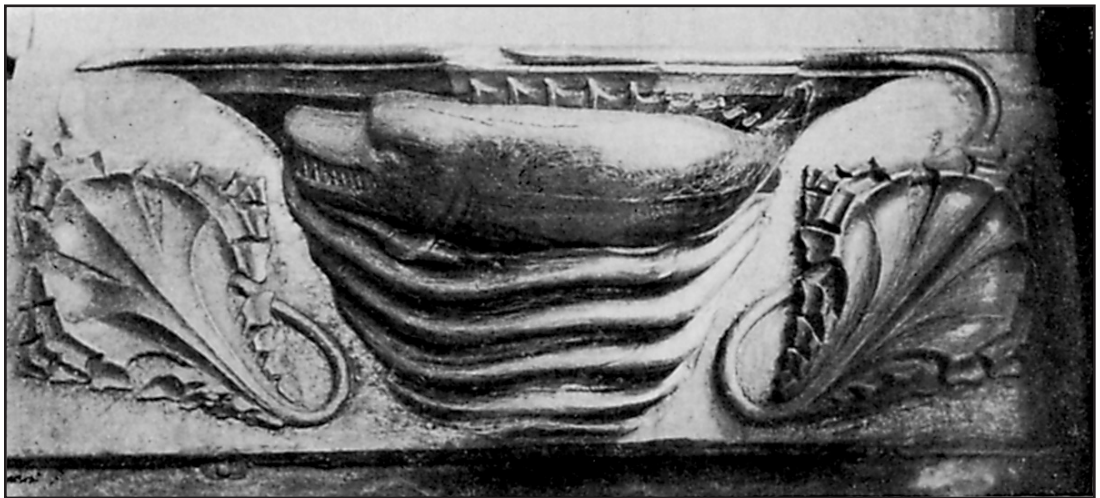


Fig. 18. Saw-fish, Misericord. Bishop's Stortford.



Fig. 19. Saw-fish. Bench-front, Barking (Suff.)



Fig. 20. Fish with long dorsal fin. Bench-front, Great Gransden (Hunts.)

texts. Both *Aspido Chelone* the sea-tortoise or turtle, and *Balena* the whale, are frequently illustrated swallowing fish.

Another instance of this type appears in MS. 254 Fitzwilliam Mus., Cambridge (fig. 3), where the saw-fish similarly has a fine row of teeth along its back. The text here is limited to Isidore's description, which it repeats word for word. In MS. Kk. 4. 25 in the University Library, Cambridge, of the same group, the miniature is on similar lines, and there is a quaint little illustration in MS. 22, Chapter Library, Westminster (fig. 4), which is interesting as showing not only the dorsal teeth, but also a large pectoral fin or wing. The text here again simply repeats Isidore.

The 'serrata crista' was occasionally rendered in an original sort of way. The word *crista* is particularly applied to a cock's [26] comb, and this seems to have been in the mind of the artist of MS. Sloane 278 (B.M.) (fig. 5), who has drawn his saw-fish more or less like a cock, with raised wings as it were 'in full sail'. Isidore's description does not come into the text of this manuscript; it is of the version of Hugo de Folieto and says that the saw-fish has 'spinas prope se longiores'. These are nowhere to be seen, so that it appears to be a case of the artist disregarding his text, and either working off his own bat or from some picture that he was acquainted with. He has moreover put no crew on board, and the ship and saw-fish are approaching one another, which is hardly compatible with a race.

The words 'elevat alas' or 'ses eles leve en halt' no doubt suggested to some of the artists an association with flight, and there are miniatures which show the saw-fish as a bird. In the MS. of Gervais at the Brit. Mus. the text actually commences:

Dedenz la mer un oiseau va

Qui unes longues pennes ha

but there is no miniature. In the manuscript of the Bestiaire d'Amour, illustrated by Hippeau, it appears as a bird flying above the ship, and in MS. 14970 Français (Bibl. Nat., Paris), Guillaume's version (fig. 7), the treatment is the same. For the most part, however, it is on or near the surface of the sea. In MS. Bodl. 602 the ship is in full sail with a crew of four men, three of whom are looking at a great water bird standing on the sea. It has a fish in its beak. In the second Bestiary in MS. Douce 88 (Bodl.) the saw-fish resembles a large bird coming up over the sea. There are three men in the ship variously occupied, one of whom is looking at it, and they seem to be frightened. In MS. 14969 Français (Bibl. Nat.). Guillaume's version (fig. 6), it is a composite creature, semi-bird, semi-fish, with raised wings, fish body and tail, and webbed feet, hovering over the sea. In MS. 1444 Français (Bibl. Nat.), Guillaume's version, the saw-fish is drawn as semi-bird, semi-dragon, and is flying.

It will be seen that we have now got quite away from Isidore's description, and are nearing the 'belua in mare' of the legend. The saw-fish is also called *animal* and *piscis*.¹⁵ The word *belua* naturally admitted the dragon form, as we saw in the Sloane MS. In Thaun's Bestiary the saw-fish is said to have the head of a lion and tail of a fish. In the manuscript of this version at the British Museum the illustrations are not filled in, but in the Merton College MS. there are two. The uppermost [27] (fig. 9) shows it as a two-legged dragon-like creature with dog's head, bird's wings, one of which is raised, and fish body and tail, standing on the sea. Three fish are swimming into its mouth. The illustration at the foot of the page (fig. 10) shows it similarly drawn, with raised wings, devouring fish. Other fish are poking their heads up out of

¹⁵ In the twelfth-century Geek Bestiary at Smyrna the word *κῆτος* is used. For an account, with many plates, of this interesting manuscript see *Der Bilderkreis des griechischen Physiologus* by J. Strzygowski, Leipzig. 1899. In MS. 318 at Berne the saw-fish is called a fish in both heading and text.

the water, apparently to see what is going on. On right is a quaintly drawn ship with crew of seven men. In the Sion College Bestiary (fig. 14) the saw-fish is still more like a dragon, with beast's head, curled tail, and bird's wings. It has two fish in its jaws. In MS. 14964 Français (Bibl. Nat.), Guillaume's version, it appears as a hairy two-legged dragon, with raised wings, on the surface of the sea. In MS. Douce 132 (Bodl.), Guillaume's version, the saw-fish is a monster with both wings and fins, and an enormous mouth opened apparently to engulf the ship. There are two men on board who hold up their hands as in the Sloane MS. In the Bestiaire d'Amour in MS. 1444 Français the ship is without mast and sail, and in the sea below is a two-legged dragon with fish body and tail.

Once embarked on the beast form, there is no knowing where the saw-fish may stop. In MS. Roy. 2 B vii (B. M.), better known as Queen Mary's Psalter, there is an interesting series of Bestiary pictures on the margins, including two illustrations of the saw-fish (figs. 11, 12). It is drawn as a winged dog, its wings having prominent spines. In the upper illustration it is racing over the sea; in the lower it has apparently caught the ship, with dire results; for the mast is broken and the vessel unmanageable. The crew are gazing at the saw-fish in terror, and it certainly may be described in the language of Guillaume as 'un grand peril de mer'. In MS. Douce 167 (Bodl.) it appears as a four-legged griffin-like creature with large wings raised and long tufted tail, facing a ship with a crew of three men.

In view of its description as a fish we sometimes find it drawn that way, with either bird's wings or exaggerated fins, as in the Arsenal Library MS.¹⁶ (fig. 15). The saw-fish is here below the ship. In the beautiful miniature in the Bestiary which is now the property of Mr. Pierpont Morgan (fig. 16), but which formerly belonged to William Morris, the reverse is the case, for the saw-fish is flying above the ship. It is drawn distinctly as a fish, but with its fins transformed into wings. Both saw-fish and ship are travelling the same way with a fair wind.¹⁷ This manuscript dates from the latter part of the twelfth century, and has a curious bit of text, which differs altogether from the texts of other manuscripts. It [28] runs: 'The city of Syria, which is now called Tyre, was formerly named Serra from a certain fish which used to abound there. And this (fish) they called in their tongue "sar", from which it was deduced that little fish of similar appearance to it were called sards or sardines.' This piece also came from Isidore's *Etymology*,¹⁸ but the scribe has written Serra instead of Sarra, the old name of Tyre. Presumably he confused the two names, and copied the wrong paragraph from the *Etymology*.

A further complication arose through confusion between the names of the Serra and the Siren and the fact that ship and crew appear in each scene. In several manuscripts we find the saw-fish represented as a siren or mermaid. This occurs in the early Bestiary at Brussels (fig. 13), where the miniature shows a siren with flowing hair holding up her hands and singing in the usual way, but there is this peculiarity that she has five wings attached to her right arm and hand and four to her left. Cahier suggests with some reason that the artist interpreted the words 'pennas in manes' as equivalent to 'pennas in manibus', i.e. wings on the hands. Her tail ends in conventional foliage. The ship is also conventionally drawn with animal-headed prow, raised stern terminating in foliage, mast, sail and oars, and a crew of four men all asleep,

¹⁶ Illustrated also in Cahier's *Mélanges*, vol. ii, pl. xix.

¹⁷ I am indebted to Messrs. Bernard Quaritch, for the loan of the plate in the catalogue of the Morgan manuscripts.

¹⁸ Liber xii, cap. 6.

in accordance with the Siren legend.¹⁹ There is no doubt that this miniature represents the saw-fish, as the Siren legend is illustrated farther on in the manuscript by three bird-sirens. In MS. Gg. 6 5, a fifteenth-century Bestiary in the University Library, Cambridge, the saw-fish is represented by an excellent siren with the usual mirror and comb. She has large bird's wings, and feathered or scaled body and tail which may be of either bird or fish.²⁰

Then as another variant we find at times a harpy-like creature. There is a good miniature in MS. Vesp. A vii, where it is treated in a strange way (fig. 8). It has a bearded human head with dog's ears, and a feathered bird's body, with raised wings. Its legs are peculiar, for the left consists of a human arm and hand, which grasps one of the ship's stays, and the right a feathered animal-leg ending in a horse's hoof. The sea is rough and the vessel tossing. In the first Bestiary in MS. Douce 88 the miniature presents somewhat similar features. The saw-fish has the form of a harpy with dragon-like head and ears, feathered body, wings and clawed feet, with one of which it holds the ship down. It will thus be seen that there was enormous latitude allowed by the texts, and that the artists took full advantage of it.

[29] The moral lesson founded on the saw-fish is twofold. The more usual form, as already mentioned, is given in the Sloane MS. The sea is the world, and the ship and crew godly folk who pass through its storms successfully; while the saw-fish signifies those who make a good beginning in well-doing, but who through lack of staying-power fall back into their old bad habits.

The theme is well rendered in Guillaume's version, which displays throughout a simplicity and sincerity of mind:

The sea is great and deep;
It signifies this present world,
Which is very bad and bitter
And perilous as the sea.
They who go sailing on the sea
Signify the good folk who be,
Who go voyaging through this world
And steer their ship straight on
Through the waves, through the storms,
Against the dangers and the winds.
This is the meaning to be understood,
They are the good folk whom (the beast)
Cannot catch nor cause to drown,
Who do not cease to battle.
Through this world go sailing
The good men, and steering
So straight that the fell adversary
Is not able to wreck them.
The beast of which I have told you
Which sails over the sea a short way,
Then withdraws and sinks into the deep,
Signifies many who be,

19 Illustrated also in Cahier's *Mélanges*, vol. ii, pl. xxiv.

20 Vincent de Beauvais includes the Siren and Serra under one heading, the account of the Siren coming first.

Who begin by doing well,
 By serving God and loving him:
 And when they come in danger
 Of great ease and of pleasures,
 Of desires which are great,
 And of the vanities of this world;
 Then they give up steering straight;
 Soon they meet with shipwreck
 And fall into calamities
 For their great wickedness,
 Which draw them down to the depths below
 Within the abode of hell.²¹

In the version of Hugo de Folieto in MS. Sloane 278 and in Gervais the ship and crew are termed *apostolos*. Some-times the lesson itself is illustrated. This is the case in the Early MS. at Brussels, in MS. 14969 Français at Paris, and in the Greek Bestiary described by Strzygowski. The miniature in the Paris MS. displays at the top clouds and a V-shaped enclosure, in which is a demi-figure of Christ with [30] cruciferous nimbus and right hand raised in benediction. On the left a monk is teaching a group of eight persons from a book, two of whom are mitred and one crowned, who attend and gaze at the figure of Christ. On the right is hell-mouth as a beast's head with open jaws into which a demon is pressing down a mitred ecclesiastic and two other men, one crowned. With his right hand the demon grasps another mitred ecclesiastic, who with three other men, two crowned, stand close by. On the left a robed figure is seated, with open book.

In the Greek Bestiary at Smyrna there is an ordination scene with altar, priest, and monks. The priest holds his hands over the head of a bearded man clad as a monk, who stands bent in front of the altar. Behind the monk are other monks, one of whom holds some scissors over his head, so that the tonsure is part of the ceremony. Elsewhere a bearded monk is addressing a group of tonsured men, and the legend οἱ ἀπαῶντες, the deceivers, is written opposite to them. A contrast is intended, and the lesson speaks of those who made a beginning with good service, but who have fallen back again into their former worldly ways.

The other form which the symbolism takes is that the saw-fish signifies the devil. In MS. 318 at Berne the moral runs as follows: 'The sea is the world; the ship is holy church in which are the people of God. The fish is the devil who changes himself into an angel of light that he may be able more easily to deceive unwary souls.'²²

In Thaun's version, in which the saw-fish tries to harm the ship by holding the wind off it, the devil similarly tries to deprive people of holy inspiration:

When they hear sermon and preaching,
 They don't want to listen, they will interrupt it.
 The devil does this to them; he withdraws the holy Spirit from them.
 Therefore says the Lord God to his own truly:
 They who are God's people hear the word of God—
 There is hardly any mortal man, but who thinks well and ill;

21 MS. Vesp. A vii. In the Arsenal Library MS. the passage in Matt. xxiv. 13 is introduced. In the version of Gervais the symbolism is on the same lines as in Guillaume.

22 2 Cor. xi. 14.

When he has evil thoughts, then the saw-fish has caught him;
When man returns to good, the saw-fish cannot harm him;
When he cannot tempt the holy man, nor turn him to evil,
Then he plunges into the sea, to devour the fish,
That is he enters into the world, he takes men and confounds them,
Whom he finds in evil, in criminal sin;
As the saw-fish takes the fish; here ends the discourse.²³

In the Italian versions the saw-fish is the devil who follows the good man with his temptations, but failing retires again into [31] hell. One manuscript adds that the good man departs in faith to heaven, at which the devil is so enraged that he cannot contain himself: 'And for this reason may this fish be likened to the devil, because it is as swift as the devil, who is able to pass in a moment from one end of the world to the other.'²⁴

In the *Bestiaire d'Amour* the symbolism is wholly secular. This work is of an erotic character as its name implies, and consists of a love address by a gentleman to a lady and her reply, their sentiments being formulated upon episodes in the regular *Bestiaries*. The gentleman, after recounting the events of the legend, tells the lady that, just like the saw-fish, there are lovers who will follow her as long as their breath lasts. Such a one is ready to do her will so long as it is not contrary to his own, but as soon as it is contrary he would not be sensible of a little ill-feeling towards her, to be hurt and make it up again, but he would give her up altogether because of his anger. 'In that case, I say, you are keeping to him, and he is not keeping to you. But still were you not keeping (to me), it is quite evident that I am clinging to you, because of the many times that you have provoked me at your mercy; and if I through provocation were to force myself to leave you, I should not be loving you so exceedingly as I do. But I love you and cling to you. Why, I should think to have lost you hopelessly, if a man can love what he never had, and so I shall not drift away elsewhere nor change you (for another) no more than the turtle-dove changes her mate'!²⁵

The lady in her reply demurs to his advances, and says: 'I see truly how much it means, and that I should have to act as if nothing might happen to me for which I should be blamed and want to hide myself; and when people would look a good deal at me, then all the more should I want to justify myself and flout those who might be ill-disposed, in order to cover my prank. Truly, by God! But in the end truth must needs prevail and put down my false wings, which would not be able to stand against the truth in the long run, any more than the wind can prevent the ship from ever keeping on its course, so long as there is water left for it.

'In the name of God, it is not possible to do such things nor to hide what such a thing entails. For one must recognize people's pride and life such as it is, whether good or bad. And so I mean that when I should no longer be able to hide my [32] foolish venture, I should be just as abashed as the saw-fish which plunges down to the bottom of the sea'.²⁶

We will now see in what way the saw-fish may be represented in ecclesiastical carving. At the outset we are met by two difficulties, one being the extraordinary variety of form in which it is drawn in the miniatures, and the other the fact that one of these forms is a winged dragon. There are about twenty-five different creatures, mainly serpents and lizards, drawn as dragons

23 MS. Nero A v; cf. Wright, *Popular Treatises on Science*, p. 104.

24 Goldstaub, loc. cit.

25 This introduces the next subject. The legend of the turtle-dove declares that if the hen-bird has lost her mate at the hands of the fowler or the hawk, she laments him to the end of her life, and never takes another partner.

26 Hippeau's transcription and MS. Harl. 273 (B.M.) have been used. The latter gives the man's address only.

in the Bestiaries, and this circumstance I hold to be an important factor in accounting for the multiplicity of dragons carved in churches. They really represent different kinds of serpents. But while we can identify them in the manuscripts by their titles and the texts, we are not able to do so in carving, except in a few cases where particular anatomical features appear, such as the asp with its tail in its ear, the basilisk with cock's head, and the amphisbaena with a head upon its tail; or where there are accessory elements in the scene, as the 'dragon' strangling the elephant, and the hydrus wriggling down the crocodile's throat. It is probable that the carvers did not concern themselves with the identity of the dragons they carved, but simply selected from the illustrations those which took their fancy. The saw-fish may have come in for its share of patronage either in dragon, fish, or even bird form. Positive examples are hard to find, and there is no recorded instance of the race; but there are certain carvings which are worth considering as perhaps representing the saw-fish by itself. The first is on a twelfth-century tympanum removed from the south doorway of the chapel at Netherton (Worc.). This building has long been ruinous, and used for farm purposes. When the tympanum was in position over the south doorway, a tree was allowed to grow up in front of it. The doorway itself had been much pulled about and made narrower by brickwork, and my friend Mr. F. T. S. Houghton of Birmingham thinks that the stone may have been originally over the north doorway, now lost. It is at present lying loose about the place (fig. 17).²⁷ The creature carved upon it is certainly a dragon of some kind, and gives the impression of being in rapid motion. Its head is raised with its mouth open and breath visible; its wings are outspread, and its tail, which is very long, is returned over its back in a curve to harmonize with the curve of the tympanum. There are two incised lines near the bottom; the upper one is straight, the lower wavy. The straight line is evidently its body, the wavy line may be meant [33] for waves; if so, the creature would be sailing. There seems to be some probability that it represents the saw-fish of the legend.

The next is carved upon a fifteenth-century misericord at Bishop's Stortford, and is quite different (fig. 18). It is certainly a fish, for close inspection shows it to be covered with scales. It has a fine row of saw-teeth along its back, a well-defined pectoral fin, and a mouthful of teeth. This I consider fairly represents the saw-fish, and that it was copied from an illustration based on Isidore's description.

There are other carvings of fish which may be mentioned. At Barking (Suff.) (fig. 19) there is a pair on a bench-front, which are spined and are swallowing small fish. These may perhaps be saw-fish in view of the prominent spined dorsal fin. At Great Gransden (Hunts.) there are two pairs on bench-fronts, both having some sort of dorsal fin (fig. 20). The first pair is swallowing fish. It is difficult to express an opinion as to their identity, as *balena*, *aspido*, and occasionally the dolphin are drawn as scaled fish, and the two first swallow fish. The second pair have blunt noses, and presumably are different fish. They may perhaps be intended for whales.

The only remaining point to be dealt with concerns the identity of the *serra* in nature. There is very little to be learnt from classical authors. Pliny's references have been given; they are based on information got from one Trebius Niger. It is to be noted that he puts the saw-fish next after the sword-fish, and this perhaps indicates that he had in mind a creature with a projecting blade such as the saw-fish of modern zoology, the *Pristis antiquorum*, which is native to the Mediterranean. The name *Pristis*, however, appears to be used by Aristotle and Pliny for an animal of the whale class, and Pliny joins it with *balena* in almost the next

27 Since the above was written, the property has been sold, and it has been taken away.

paragraph after his allusion to the *serra*, so that he evidently regarded it as a different creature. The etymology of the word *Pristis* has been the subject of discussion, but it seems to have been decided that where used by Aristotle and Pliny, it is derived from *πρήθω*, to spout, and not from *ρίω*, to saw; but in modern science the word *Pristis*, which literally means a sawyer, is attached to the saw-fish.²⁸

[34] Other suggestions have been made as to the original of the saw-fish of the legend, such as the nautilus, the flying-fish, and the requin or whale which follows ships in shoals. Although a fish with large fins, which could be termed wings, was needed to suit the requirements of the story, it is possible that the idea of the race originated with some other creature, and was afterwards fastened on to the saw-fish. For instance Pliny, Aelian, and others tell us that the lolligines, or cattle-fish, fly out of the water, and in such multitudes that they sink ships. But subject to any modification which might result from the unearthing of the source of the legend, I am disposed to favour the *Pristis antiquorum* as the hero of the tale. The size of its pectoral fins, which are certainly large and suggestive of wings to an imaginative mind, would suffice.²⁹ On the top of this we have Isidore's definition of its serrated crest, which may well be a misplaced description of its blade.

As to the source of the story, I am disposed to look for it in some classical author, for the classics were the happy hunting ground of the early ecclesiastical commentators in their zoological ventures. Somewhere or other there was a tale or even only an isolated event which caught the author's fancy, and which, when connected with the saw-fish, was deemed suitable for hanging moral lesson upon; but where it is I cannot say.

The CHAIRMAN said the author had shown himself an expert on the structure and habits of the saw-fish and had communicated his knowledge in a learned and comprehensive paper. It was interesting to follow the workings of the medieval mind in that connexion: it was strongly attracted by such mythical beasts, and was content to go on describing and illustrating them without demanding a sight of the original. Even if the saw-fish had really existed, the medieval artist or moralist would have transformed it into a dragon, which every one believed in because *vir quidam probes* had seen one.

The Rev. H. F. WESTLAKE had noticed no omissions in the paper, and felt that Mr. Druce had exhausted the subject. He had brought with him one of the most interesting Latin bestiaries, richly illustrated, and a picture of the *serra* from that volume had been shown on the screen. There was evidently some comparison between the *serra* (sometimes spelt *certa*) and the *belua*, which occurred on the previous page. The bestiary [35] artist and writer had a good deal to say about ordinary quadrupeds, but in the fish section only dealt with the very large and very small, omitting altogether the ordinary species. The manuscript in question only

28 Gesner has a long dissertation on the subject. Bochart (*Hierozoicon*, ch. 7 and lib. vi, ch. 15) gives it description of the saw-fish from an Arab source, which says that it is as big as a mountain and has saw-teeth from head to tail, two cubits long, and like black ebony; but he regards it as fabulous. In the Italian Bestiaries the saw-fish is named Vergilio, due to the description of certain fish called the Vergiliades, which were found in lakes Como and Maggiore. Pliny tells us that they were to be seen only at the time of the rising of the Vergiliae (Pleiades) and that they were remarkable for the number of their scales, which strongly resembled hob-nails in appearance. This is repeated by Albertus Magnus.

29 I am indebted to Dr. Harmer, F.R.S., for the Illustration of the *Pristis* (fig. 21).

contained one sermon, which had the *belua* for its text. *Pristis* had been mentioned as a synonym of *serra*, and was also written *pristix* and *pistrix*, the last name occurring in the *Aeneid* iii. 427 (*Scylla immani corpore pistrix*). A curious variety of fishes was illustrated in the manuscript, that above the *serra* being a sword-fish equipped also with a shield.

Thanks were ordered to be returned for this communication.

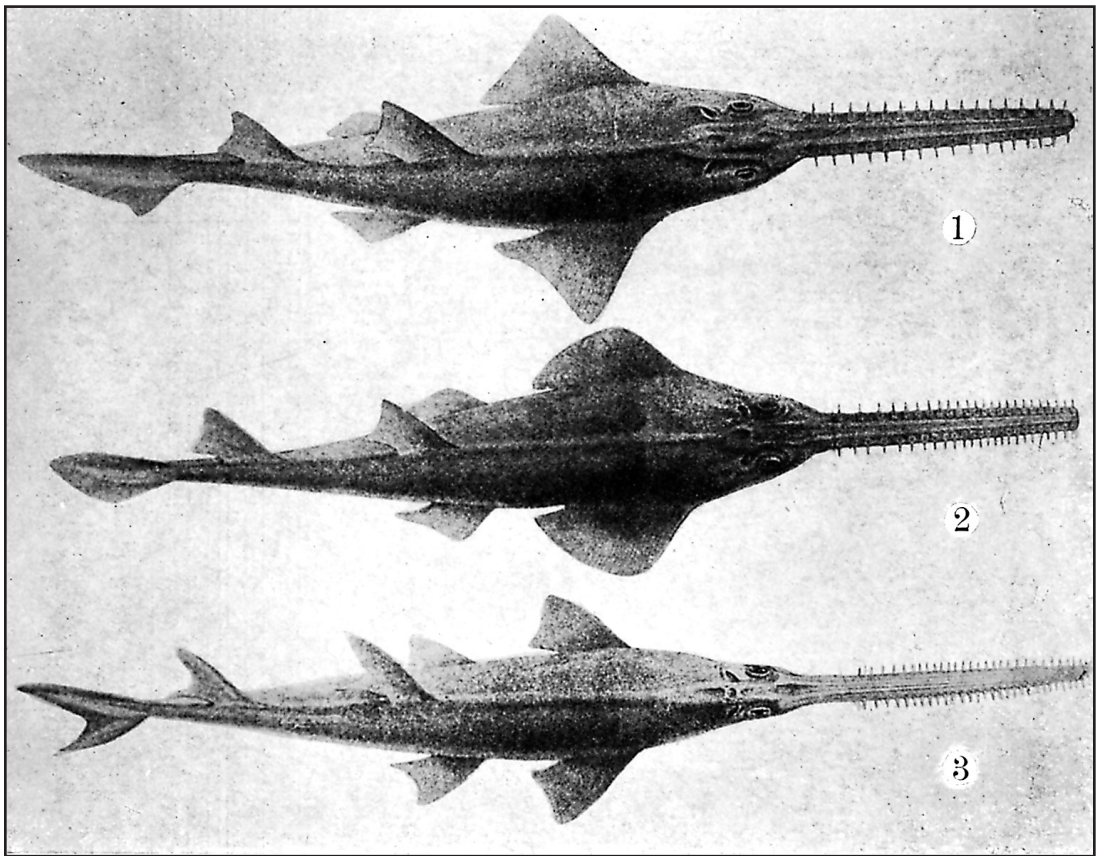


Fig. 21. *Pristis* (Indian). 1. *Perroteti*. 2. *Zysron*. 3. *Cuspidatus*.