

Westminster Bestiary

Its extensive iconographic programme is of such high quality that it would be difficult to find another codex to compare with it. However, despite its importance and beauty, very few images of it have been published.

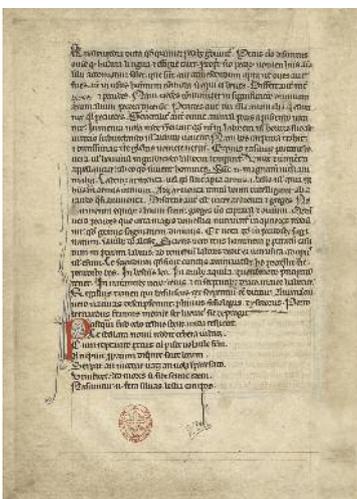


Medieval bestiaries were the most widely read books in the Middle Ages after the Bible, and medieval schoolboys had to learn by heart the Latin versions of the “Physiologus”, which is the original source of these bestiaries.

Its pages represent a perfect X-ray of the mentality of medieval man, in which all the fears and terrors that populate his mind are evident.

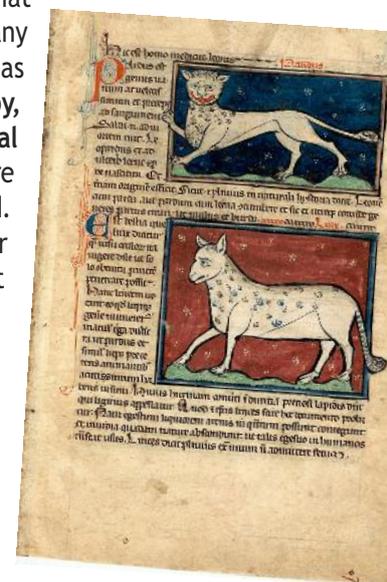
A must for all nature lovers and fans of anthropology, sociology and history, not to mention bibliophiles who have long since made bestiaries veritable cult objects, in addition to them being one of their main collectors' items.

This precious manuscript, belonging to what is known as the Third Family, is considered to be the jewel in the library of the imposing Westminster Abbey. Those who have not yet had the opportunity to take that refreshing cultural plunge into the literally wild territory of beasts and bestiaries –see our introduction to them on this website– will find in this bestiary the perfect opportunity to do so and to discover this delightful manuscript.



The texts of this copy, like those of practically all the other bestiaries, were by no means free of **legendary tales and were full of fantasies and exaggerations**. However, behind the vividness of all these chronicles, we must not forget that bestiaries were very serious and useful books, so much so that many of the **great Benedictine abbeys of medieval England**, such as Canterbury, Peterborough, St. Albans, etc. had their own copy, which shows the inveterate English fascination with the animal world. It is in such places where, as we have said, the bestiaries were written in the form of biblical books and were the most widespread. In any case, this is neither a Natural History nor a “field guide” for exploring forests or islands. In fact, most of these monks never left their abbey.

The Westminster Bestiary was written in late 13th-century England, possibly in the city of York.



It is a rather small copy, with 164 miniatures of great beauty that also display a rare mastery and skill on the part of the artist. In its 160 chapters, in which as many species are reviewed, the book contains stories of fabulous races, domestic animals, wild beasts, birds, fish, snakes, worms, and at the end, inspired by Saint Isidore, also delves into fabulous monsters.

Our bestiary seems to have arrived at the abbey before 1710 as a donation from York. The curious reader should not miss the two handwritten notes at the end of the book which add a little more glamour to its recent history and confirm the special sensitivity of the English royal family to nature in general and animals in particular. Thus we learn that in 1938 Queen Mary and her granddaughters were leafing through it. That is to say, the current Queen of England, Elizabeth II, who was only 11 years old at the time, was already enjoying herself –perhaps in awe– with its portentous images. The second note informs us that, this time in 1980, another illustrious English royal, the Queen Mother –mother of the present Queen– also delighted in scanning its pages.

We end these words almost as we have begun them, with a sense of a certain perplexity and a shudder that runs through our bodies as we read the text of this manuscript at leisure.

We would like to provoke our readers and incite them to dive into the passionate and warm waters of these stories to experience the emotional release and intrigue that lurks behind many of its seemingly candid passages. Be wary, however, as that apparent candour may hide disturbing and unsettling experiences.

For the thrill-seeker, the show –reading the manuscript– is served. Come and read.

This book is also for the intrepid. But have no fear, for not only will you come out of the experience alive and well, but you will rarely have leafed through anything with so much magnetism and so much charm.

