

Animals in Medieval Literature

A Project for an Interdisciplinary Encyclopaedia

Aim of the Encyclopaedia

The long-term aim of the project is the compilation of the current knowledge about the

- presentation
- meaning
- function

of animals in the literature of medieval Europe in form of an alphabetically ordered encyclopaedia.

As a consequence, the encyclopaedia aims to provide:

• Finding Aid

The encyclopaedia lists relevant text passages where the animal under discussion plays a central role.

Furthermore, it refers the reader to already existing encyclopaedic articles and other relevant literature

• Research Overview

By summarizing publications on well-studied animals the encyclopaedia compiles, revises and resumes the current research on animals in medieval literature.

• Pioneering Work

The encyclopaedia serves as a pioneering work with respect to the less studied animals. This will probably be the case for about half the animals of the corpus.

• Impetus for further research on animals in literature

The encyclopaedia combines basic research with innovative approaches.

The encyclopaedia thus addresses not only medievalists and literary scholars but also students of other fields of study, such as cultural history, history of art, history of the book, cultural anthropology, etc. The encyclopaedia is designed to give the reader a concise and sound overview of the presentation, meaning and function of animals in medieval literature.

Why an Encyclopaedia of Animals?

In medieval literature the animal signifies with a special intensity and quality. The animal differs fundamentally from other signifiers (such as, for instance, plants, precious stones, numbers, and colours) as it is closest to humans in the hierarchy of things. Unlike these other signifiers, animals have the potential to interact with human protagonists or even replace them, as can be seen in beast epics. This potential is characteristic of animals not only in medieval literature. As numerous individual studies have shown, the animal plays a major role for our understanding of medieval literature.

Current Research Findings

At present, there exists no interdisciplinary scholarly encyclopaedia which pools information on the presentation, meaning and function of animals in medieval literature. Previously published animal encyclopaedias usually cover only single aspects of the matter and aim at a general, non-academic readership. Apart from these, articles about topics related to animals as well as about individual animals can also be found in specialised encyclopaedias. However, the choice of animals in these encyclopaedias is often very rigid, the structure of the articles seldom unified and often of varying quality. By contrast, the number of individual studies discussing single aspects of the matter or individual animals is nearly endless. An informed overview of these findings is thus highly desirable. and an interdisciplinary encyclopaedia gathering information on the presentation, meaning and function of animals in medieval literature as well as in the cultural memory is a desideratum.

Research Context

The project on animals in medieval literature stands in the tradition of the studies in medieval signification founded by Friedrich Ohly and is thus a valuable addition to other encyclopaedia projects (on colours and numbers) and catalogues (i.e. precious stones) realised in Münster.

Components of the Encyclopaedia

The project for the development of the animal encyclopaedia comprises two basic components: a bibliographical database and the encyclopaedic articles.

Encyclopaedic Part

(planned as a publication on the internet for the time being)

The encyclopaedic part will comprise extensive articles dealing with the single animals, as well as an introduction, a list of abbreviations, various indices, etc.

Bibliography

(in form of a database)

The bibliographical database will – if possible – cover the complete body of criticism on the animal in the Middle Ages, in particular the animal in medieval literature. A number of search functions will allow easy access to this corpus.

Scope of the Encyclopaedia

In order to ensure the feasibility of the project, the encyclopaedia will initially focus on a central core. If desired, this can later be extended by various optional components.

Hence, European literatures connected to the Latin inheritance are going to be in the focus of our attention. Likewise, it appears to be necessary to restrict the number of animals described to the “central” ones (about 100 to 150 animals including mythical creatures). The time frame is limited to the Middle Ages (i.e. the era from 500 to 1500 A.D., including an outlook for the 16th century).

Possible additional (optional) components are European literatures with a closer connection to Greek culture (namely Byzantine and Slavonic literature), as well as Oriental literature. An extension into the domain of Iconography is also possible. Furthermore, it is desirable to include less studied animals as well as to extend the time span into Early Modern Times (until 1800).

General Principles for the Encyclopaedic Articles

General principles will be: alphabetical order, division of work and completeness. The three working languages of the encyclopaedia are German, English and French.

Structure of the Articles

Each article consists of three parts: head, text, and bibliography.

The **head** comprises:

- as lemma: the common name of the animal in Modern German, English and French
- references to existing articles

The text proper is subdivided according to subject areas and philological traditions.

A. The real animal (consisting of a sketch of the animal's actual forms of existence during the Middle Ages)

B. Traditions of thought

B.1 – Zoological works of Antiquity

B.2 – The Bible and biblical exegesis

C. Latin literature

D. Romance literatures

D.1 – French and Occitan literatures

D.2 – Italian literature

D.3 – Spanish and Catalan literatures

D.4 – Portuguese literature

E. Germanic (and Celtic) literature(s)

E.1 – Nordic literature

E.2 – English literature

E.3 – Dutch literature

E.4 – German literature

(E.5 Celtic literature)

Option I: F. Byzantine, Slavic and Oriental literatures

F.1 – Byzantine literature

F.2 – Slavic literature

F.3 – Oriental literature

Option II: **G. Iconography** (this category needs to be subdivided further)

Each philological tradition is, if necessary, subdivided into:

I. Terminology

II. Zoology and animal lore / animal allegory

1. Physiologus, bestiaries

2. Encyclopaedia studies, zoology and animal lore

3. Literature written for a particular purpose ('Gebrauchsliteratur') (i.e. hunting manuals, medical treatises etc.)

III. Animal poetry

1. Fable

2. Beast epic

3. (possibly animal fairy tales, animal comic tales)

IV. Animals in (non-animal centred) literature

1. Narrative texts

2. Lyrics and poetry

3. Discursive texts

4. (possibly drama)

(This section can be further subdivided if required, but the medieval genres are to remain the main structural categories.)

The **bibliography** lists the relevant literature at the end of every section and philological sub-section. Also, the author of each paragraph is indicated.

See also our examples "[Elephant](#)", "[Dolphin](#)", "[Ant](#)", "[Crane](#)", "[Wolf](#)" and "[Camel](#)".

Form of Publication

A net-based publication is the primary aim of our project, although a publication in print is not ruled out for a later date.

English Version: Thomas Honegger