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EDITORIAL

EVERY PICTURE TELLS A STORY

If you have never been there, one of the most exciting and fascinating places to visit is medieval England. Be careful, it also includes the Black Death, but that aside, take time to explore the detail of a world of which we know little. In fact the word 'medieval' as used today is almost derogatory; this is most unfair.

Régine Pernoud, in her book *Pour en Finir avec le Moyen Age*, explained that to understand the middle ages you have to appreciate that for the people of that time faith had the same role in life as physical health does for us today. Religion was the inspiration and aspiration of people and as such bred an arcane superstition; the church was central to life (in fact there is good reason to believe that clocks were invented because monks had so many rituals to perform).

Despite the comments of many historians the medieval world was not a shadowy place; it was vibrant. While poverty, ill-health and social inequality were rampant a well-developed society existed. This was a world that lived in its environment and exploited its natural resources to the maximum; for example timber was well classified – elm for floorboards and coffins, yew for longbows, ash for cart axles and wheels, box for pestles and mortars, sycamore for milk pails and oak for building.

And, above all, building was dominated by the church; which brings us to the point. Medieval manuscripts were illustrated; in fact English manuscripts of this period are some of the finest examples of this art. Look not only at marvellously

historiated initials, at the miniatures within the text and the frequently alarming grotesques, but also examine the margins and the borders. This is where the artists had free rein to illustrate, not always with reference to the text *per se*, but invariably with a good representation of their contemporary world.

Günther Binding's book *Medieval Building Techniques* is a unique collection of some 900 line drawing copies from illustrated manuscripts and provides the best insight available into craftsman's tools and construction in the Middle Ages; it is a book worth reading. Incidentally, these pictures show how much timber was needed for masons to work – few traces of this activity now survive. Study of these images also provides an insight into the role of the horse, carts, wagons and their use – and so we come, at last, to the reason for this editorial diversion.

In these remarkable contemporary miniature illustrations, mostly hidden in British and other European libraries we can see details of harness, collars, yoked oxen, pack mules, the odd companion dog and even a dog cart (John Rylands library, Manchester); one part of the picture of animals in everyday life.

While we know that veterinary medicine in the middle ages had probably regressed from the limited (but often practical) knowledge of the Roman times such images allow us to get a picture of contemporary life. Of particular interest and relevance are three important English texts, now available in facsimile, which convey the absolute magnificence and talent of the age: these are *The Lutteral Psalter*, *The Holkham Bible* and the *Liber Bestiarum*.

Of these, *The Lutteral Psalter*, (one of the prize treasures of the British Museum), is probably the most important. Made for Sir Geoffrey Lutteral about 1330-45 it has two distinct illustrative forms – most striking and mainly in the body of the text are a series of surreal grotesque pictures (frequently vulgar and 'earthy'). However it is the borders, usually at the foot of the page where the paintings are of greatest interest. Bear in mind that up to the 13th century the psalter was the principal devotional manual and that the pictures invariably carried an allegorical message; a stag signified Christ; a hare chasing a rabbit indicated sexuality; a ferret chasing a rabbit down a hole is, or so we are informed, a well-known symbol of the sexual act (one has to note that these feature so frequently that one has to wonder who had the problem, society or the artist?); the cat was a symbol of the threat of temptation and the menace of evil, while the mouse represented the faithful caught by temptation!

However, one can see animals in the context of daily life: blacksmiths tools (pincers) are often shown, tongs as a twitch on the nose of a bear, dogs with belled and spiked collars, a ram with a bell (the bell-wether), Tamworth type

pigs, teaching a dog to jump through a ring, an excellent bull, bearbaiting with a dog, many sheep (drawn with a very curly wool), a tethered hen with chicks, numerous illustrations of horses with various equipment, fish nets, eel traps, beehives, a tended rabbit warren (we are told, again, a popular symbol of sexuality and promiscuity) and then (folio 163) a wattle sheep pen with two women, one milking and the other treating the head or neck of a sheep. Look and you shall find! Remember that until the industrial revolution wool was Britain's leading industry; sheep scab was a major problem and salves of varying mixes were in every shepherd's bag.

An equally exceptional book is the *Holkham Bible*, written in Anglo-Norman about 1328-40 and now in the British Museum. This remarkable book is scripture in pictures, little text, but page after page of beautiful reproductions of the Bible stories in contemporary dress and scenes. Many animals feature in the images; horned cattle, very razor-backed Tamworth-faced pigs (for the Gadarene swine), donkeys, and sheep, sheep and more sheep, everywhere demonstrating the then dependence on wool, as well as a meat and dung source. A section translated from the Garden of Eden text reads 'from the earth grew herbs and flowers, from which physicians make their cures'. No obvious direct veterinary pictures but most amazing (folio 21) a portrayal of the Annunciation, the angel appearing to the standing Virgin who has risen from a chair on which sits a small capped lapdog! The commentary states 'the sort of dressed-up pet favoured by then fashionable youth'. So, not only a thriving livestock industry, but also a potential pet market. Incidentally the urban pictures are recognised as the best portrayal of life and London in the mid-1300s.

Our third book, the *Liber Bestiarum*, was written in the mid-13th century and is now held in the Bodlian library. This book of beasts (most real but some mythical) is an attempt to portray all animals and birds. It is a monastic text, a devotional book, and one needs to be aware of the large element of convention in the writing. The illustrations (even in facsimile) are almost beyond superb; all the domestic animals are shown including the dairy cow being milked; the cat is termed a mouser and its night-sight capability is recognised, but the words about the dog are interesting (folio 30). Opening with 'there is no creature cleverer than the dog' as hunter, tracker and guard; the old and possible misconception that a dog's tongue will heal a wound if he licks it is stated, as well as, 'the tongues of puppies are a very good cure for wounds of the intestines' (but no clarification). As in books of that time, observations are followed by allegorical religious statements, i.e. 'when the dog returns to its vomit, it signifies those who fall into sin again after they have confessed'! Not much guidance for today but a beautiful book to examine and admire.

Finally, for me, the most exciting find; in 1387 Comte Gaston de Foix (aka Gaston Phébus) dictated his *Les Deditz de la Chasse*. This ‘book of hunting’ was completed in 1389; the original is now presumed lost, but over forty copies made in the 15th and 16th centuries have survived. Parts of this manuscript were translated and appeared in early English hunting books, possibly providing the first printed English words on diseases of the dog.

The most remarkable of these copies is in the Bibliotheque National in Paris; leaving aside its intriguing history the interest is in the illustrations. The prologue sets the book in its medieval time, in justifying the practice of hunting the reader is reminded that it provides excellent exercise for the mind and body and contributes to the health of the soul by preserving man from the sin of idleness – the mother of all vices.

The interest for the veterinary reader is the second part which deals with the nature of dogs and their training: it covers breeds, kennels, muzzles, collars, management etc, and all illustrated with pictures of exceptional detail and quality. The section dealing with illnesses has one page with eight dogs of various breeds being tended by dog ‘valets’. Emphasis is given to early treatment if an illness is to be cured and also that as pack dogs live as a group, they are particularly vulnerable to rabies, meaning that a stock can almost completely disappear unless great care is taken. In the illustration the dog valets are depicted, overlooked by their master, inspecting the mouth, ears, paws and eyes; cutting claws with small clippers; bandaging a fractured leg and bathing feet (when paws were painful or wounded reliable cures were given as baths of salt water or vinegar and soot). These remarkable pictures and those of the whole manuscript are reproduced in *The Hunting Book of Gaston Phébus*.

I have dealt with four manuscript books but there are literally thousands more, mostly in European libraries, but many also now in the USA. Most have never been examined, at least with a veterinary eye. Who knows what treasures still await to be revealed? When such study is undertaken another part of the very early days of what became the veterinary art, and then the science, may be discovered.

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DID YOU KNOW?

In the last 4,000 years no new animals have been domesticated! Or have they? Answers on a postcard please!