The Fabulous Natural History
of the
Middle Ages

by


Illustrations by F. W. Fairholt, Esq. F.S.A.

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**Author:** Thomas Wright was an English antiquarian and writer. He was born in 1810 near Ludlow, in Shropshire, and was descended from a Quaker family. He was educated at the old grammar school, Ludlow, and at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he graduated in 1834. In 1835 he came to London to begin a literary career. Over the next forty years Wright produced an extensive series of scholarly publications. He helped to found the British Archaeological Association and the Percy, Camden and Shakespeare societies. He was a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries as well as member of many other learned British and foreign bodies. In 1859 he superintended the excavations of the Roman city of Uriconium (Wroxeter), near Shrewsbury. He died in 1877 at Chelsea, at the age of 67.

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THE FABULOUS NATURAL HISTORY OF THE MIDDLE AGES

The history of science in the middle ages contains much that is rational and new, but it is mixed with strange and extravagant notions. This is peculiarly the case in the natural sciences, where, beyond the dim outline of positive observation, men’s imagination ran wild, and the natural love of the marvellous gave being to a host of monsters which have gradually disappeared before the light of modern research. The vague notions of the ancients relating to the animals of the interior of Asia and Africa, formed the groundwork of many a strange and romantic medieval fiction, and these latter were intermixed with monstrous stories of Saracenic origin. From these materials were compiled a great number of medieval treatises on natural history, which most commonly passed under the title of Bestiaries. Natural history in the middle ages, especially subsequent to the eleventh century, was treated with two objects—the cure of diseases, or the moral doctrines which were supposed to be mystically typified in the qualities and habits of the different tribes of animated nature. The last was the peculiar object of the popular Bestiaries, where the description of each animal is followed immediately by its moralisation, as in Æsop’s fables: medicine was the more peculiar object of the herbals. Bestiaries and herbals are of frequent occurrence in early manuscripts, and are often accompanied with drawings which picture to us more exactly than the text the notions of different people in different ages of the animals of far-distant climes.

One of the favourite animals of the medieval naturalists was the unicorn, or, as it was named by the ancients, the monoceros. Pliny (Hist. Nat. viii. 21) sums up in a few words the notions of the ancients relating to this animal: it had the body of a horse, the head of a stag, the feet of an elephant, the tail of a boar, with one black horn two cubits long in the middle of its forehead. According to the ancients, it was impossible to take this fierce animal alive. The medieval legends differed in this point: this animal, the symbol of chivalry, became tame in the presence of a pure virgin. One of the [175] earliest bestiaries, the Anglo-Norman poem of Philip de Thaun, written in the reign of Henry I. gives the following account of the mode in which it was caught:
“Monosceros est beste, 
un corn ad en la teste, 
Pur geo ad si à nun, 
de buc ad façun; 
Par pucele est prise, 
or oez en quel guise. 
Quant hom le volt cacer 
e prendre e enginner, 
Si vent hom al forest 
ù sis repairs est; 
Là met une pucele 
hors de sein sa mamele, 
E par odurement 
monosceros la sent; 
Dunc vent à la pucele, 
e si baiset sa mamele, 
En sun devant se dort, 
issi vent à sa mort; 
Li hom survent atant, 
ki l’ocit en dormant, 
U trestut vif le prent, 
si fait puis sun talent.”

“Monosceros is an animal 
which has one horn on its head, 
Therefore it is so named, 
It has the form of a goat; 
It is caught by means of a virgin: 
now hear in what manner. 
When a man intends to hunt it, 
and to take and ensnare it, 
He goes to the forest 
where is its repair; 
There he places a virgin, 
with her breast uncovered, 
And by its smell 
the monosceros perceives her; 
Then it comes to the virgin, 
and kisses her breast, 
Falls asleep on her lap, 
and so comes to its death; 
The man arrives immediately, 
and kills it in its sleep, 
Or takes it alive, 
and does as he likes with it.”

If a damsel ventured on this undertaking who was not a pure virgin, she was in danger of being torn to pieces. Our woodcut, representing the capture of the unicorn in the manner described above, is taken from an illumination in a very good manuscript of the common Latin bestiary, of about the end of the twelfth century (MS. Harl. No. 4751, fol. 6, v°.). The horn of the unicorn was a terrible weapon, so hard and so sharp that nothing could resist it. The wonders of this horn, as related [176] by European and Arabian
writers, are too numerous to repeat. It was supposed to be an absolute preventive against the effects of poison. When used as the handle of a knife it would give notice, by a sudden sweating, of the presence of poison in the meats that were served on the table; and any liquid drunk from a cup made of this material was a certain cure against the poison when taken. Even in the writings of the naturalists of the Elizabethan age, the unicorn occupies a prominent place. Although the question of its existence had then begun to be debated, the wonderful virtues of the horn were still recounted at full.

The great enemy of the unicorn was the elephant. When the former went in search of its gigantic foe, it is said that it sharpened its horn by rubbing it on a stone, and then slew the elephant by piercing it in the belly.

The people of the West, in their frequent intercourse with the Saracens, must often have had opportunities of making themselves well acquainted with the form and habits of the elephant; yet even this animal is the subject of many fables. As early as the year 807, the khalif Haroun al Raschid sent an elephant as a present to Charlemagne, which was an object of wonder and admiration to the Franks. In 1255 the king of France, St. Louis, sent an elephant to Henry III. of England, of which there is a drawing by Matthew Paris in MS. Cotton. Nero D. I., made, according to the statement of that writer, from nature, yet evidently inaccurate. Another drawing of the same elephant is found in a manuscript of the time, also in the Cottonian Library (Julius D. VII.), at the end of the chronicle of John of Wallingford. Both these chronicles give an account of the elephant and his habits, containing some truth mixed with a good deal of fable. It is described as ten feet high. The drawings of the elephant in old manuscripts differ essentially from one another. This animal is described by medieval naturalists as having no joints, yet in both the examples we give the joints are made very visible. The first is taken from a MS. of the fifteenth century (MS. Reg. 15 E. VI.), where it forms one of the illustrations of the romance of Alexander, which is interspersed with descriptions of the strange animals and monsters of the East. The elephant is here represented with hoofs like those of a cow, and its trunk is made in the form of a trumpet. The romance of Alexander, just mentioned, contains frequent allusions to elephants and to their use in war among the Easterns, which must have made them familiar to the innumerable readers of that work. The English version of this romance, composed in the fourteenth century, pretends that there were forty thousand elephants in the army of Darius: —
“Fourty thousand, alle astore,
Olifauntes let go to-fore.
Apon everiche olifaunt a castel,
Theryn xii. knyghtis y-armed wel.
They scholle holde the skirmyng,
Ageyns Alisaundre the kyng.”

In our next cut (taken from MS. Harl. No. 4751, fol. 8, v°., of the end of the twelfth century) we have an elephant, with its castle and armed men, engaged in battle.

The bestiaries relate many strange things of the elephant. They say that, though so large and powerful, and so courageous against larger animals, it is afraid of a mouse; and they inform us that it is of nature so cold, that it will never seek the company of [178] the female until, wandering in the direction of Paradise, it meets
with the plant called the mandrake, and eats of it, * and that each female bears but one young one in her life.

The mandrake (*mandragora*) was one of the most remarkable objects of medieval superstition. At the end of the sixteenth century, when the credit of this plant was on the decline, Gerard, in his Herbal, gives the following description of it:—“The male mandrake hath great, broad, long, smooth leaves, of a deep green colour, flat spread upon the ground, among which come up the flowers of a pale whitish colour, standing every one upon a single small and weak footstalk, of a whitish green colour: in their places grow round apples of a yellowish colour, smooth, soft, and glittering, of a strong smell, in which are contained flat and smooth seeds, in fashion of a little kidney like those of the thorn apple. The root is long, thick, whitish, divided many times into two or three parts, resembling the legs of a man, with other parts of his body ad-joining thereto, as it hath been reported; whereas, in truth, it is no otherwise than in the roots of carrots, parsnips, and such like, forked or divided into two or more parts, which nature taketh no account of. There have been many ridiculous tales brought up of this plant, whether of old wives, or some runnagate surgeons or phisickmongers, I know not (a title bad enough for them); but sure some one or more that sought to make themselves famous in skillfulness above others were the first broachers of that error I spake of. They add further, that it is never or very seldom to be found growing naturally but under a gallows, where the matter that hath fallen from the dead body hath given it the shape of a man, and the matter of a woman the substance of a female plant; with many other such doltish dreams. They fable further and affirm, that he who would take up a plant thereof must tie a dog thereunto to pull it up, which will give a great shriek at the digging up; otherwise, if a man should do it, he should certainly die in short space after; besides many fables of loving matters, too full of scurrility to set forth in print, which I forbear to speak of; all which dreams and old wives tales you shall from henceforth cast out of your books and memory, knowing this that they are all and every part of them false and most untrue. For myselfe and my servaunts

* Si autem voluerit facere filios, vadit ad orientem prope paradisum, et est ibi arbor quae vocatur mandragora, et vadit cum femina sua, quae prius accipit de arbores, et dat masculo suo, et seducit eum donee manducet, statimque in utero concipit. MS. Harl. No. 4751, fol. 8. v. The English metrical bestiary, printed, from a manuscript of the thirteenth century in the British Museum, in the Reliquiae Antiquae, i. 222, says: —

“Oc he arn so kolde of kinde,
  at no golsipe is hem minde,
  til he neten of a gres,
  ðe name is mandragores,
Siðen he bigeton on, &c.”
also have digged up, planted, and replanted verie many, and yet never could either perceive shape of man or woman, but sometimes one straight roote, sometimes two, and often sixe or seaven braunches comming from the maine great roote, even as nature list to bestowe upon it as to other plants. But the idle drones that have little or nothing to do but to eate and drinke, have bestowed some of their time in cariving the rootes of brionie, forming them to the shape of men and women, which falsifying practice hath confirmed the errour amongst the simple and unlearned people, who have taken them, upon their report, to be the true mandrakes."

The extraordinary virtues of the mandrake were celebrated even in the classic ages, and Pliny (Hist. Nat. xxv. 13) describes the caution with which it was gathered. Those who are going to dig it up, he says, avoid a contrary wind, and first circumscribe it with three circles with a sword; afterwards they dig, looking towards the west. It was said by some to have been the ingredient used by Circe,—

"whose charm’d cup
Whoever tasted, lost his upright shape,
And downward fell into a grovelling swine."

And hence it was by some named Circeum. Pliny says nothing of the close resemblance which, in the middle ages, the root of the mandrake was said to bear to the human form, even to the distinction of the sexes in the male and female plant. The woodcut in the margin gives two representations of the mandrake: one from MS. Cotton. Vitel. C. III. of the tenth century, where it is illustrative of the Anglo-Saxon translation of the pseudo-Apuleius de herbis; the other, of the female plant, from drawings by an Italian artist, in MS. Addit. No. 5281 (in the Brit. Mus.), of the earlier part of the sixteenth century. The Saxon treatise says of it:—"This plant, which is called mandragora, is great and large in appearance, and it is very efficacious. When thou shalt gather it, when thou comest to it, thou wilt perceive it by its shining by night like a lamp. When thou first seest its head, bind it quickly with iron, lest it escape thee. Its virtue is so great that when an impure man comes to it it quickly escapes
him. Therefore do thou bind it with iron, as we said before, and so thou shalt dig around it, so as not to touch it with the iron; but it would be better to dig the earth with an ivory staff: and when thou seest its hands and feet, bind them. Then take the other end, and bind it to a dog’s neck, so that the dog be hungry; afterwards throw meat before the dog, where he cannot [180] reach it without tearing up the plant. It is of this plant that it has so great power, that whatever thing draws it up, that thing will instantly perish.” Philip de Thaun; in his bestiary, adds some particulars to this descriptive account. He says:—

“The man who is to gather it must dig round about it, must take great care that he does not touch it; Then let him take a dog bound, let it be tied to it, Which has been close shut up, and has fasted three days, And let it be shewn bread and called from afar; The dog will draw it to him, the root will break And will send forth a cry, the dog will fall down dead At the cry which he will hear; such virtue this plant has, That no one can hear it, but he must always die. And if the man heard it, he would immediately die: Therefore he must stop his ears, and take care. That he hear not the cry, lest he die, As the dog will de which shall hear the cry.”

This superstitious legend was an article of belief down to a late period, and is alluded to more than once in Shakespeare. Thus, in the “Second Part of Henry VI.” act iii. scene 2,—
“Would curses kill, as doth the mandrake’s groan.”

And in “Romeo and Juliet,” act iv. sc. 3,—

“And shrieks like mandrakes, torn out of the earth,
That living mortals, hearing them, run mad.”

Figures of the male and female mandrake, with its is representing a clearly defined human body, are found in nearly all the illustrated herbals from the tenth century to the sixteenth. It may be sufficient to refer to the Herbarius zü Teütsch, printed at Augsburg in 1488: the Hortus Sanitatis, printed in 1491; the “Grete Herball,” printed in England early in the sixteenth century, and the somewhat earlier French work from which it was compiled. The fabulous accounts of this plant had, [181] however, begun to be controverted at the beginning of the sixteenth century; and in a few illustrated books, such as the collection of woodcuts of plants published at Franckfort-am-Mayn, in 1536, under the title of Herbarum imagines vivæ, the mandrake is represented with a carrot-shaped root, which presents no extraordinary characteristics. Still, at a much later period, the old legend is frequently referred to, as in Sir William Davenant’s comedy of “The Wits” (Dodsley’s “Old Plays,” vol. viii. p. 397),—

“He stands as if his legs had taken root,
A very mandrake.”

The delusion was long supported by the tricks of people who made artificial mandrakes, which were carried about and sold “unto ignorant people.” Sir Thomas Browne (“Vulgar Errors,” lib. ii. c. 6), speaking of the common belief relating to the mandrake, says:—“But this is vain and fabulous, which ignorant people and simple women believe; for the roots which are carried about by impostors to deceive unfruitful women, are made of the roots of canes, briony, and other plants; for in these, yet fresh and virent, they carve out the figures of men and women, first sticking therein the grains of barley or millet where they intend the hair should grow; then bury them in sand, until the grains shoot forth their roots, which, at the longest, will happen in twenty days: they afterward clip and trim those tender strings in the fashion of beards and other hairy integuments. All which, like other impostures once discovered, is easily effected, and the root of white briony may be practised every spring.” In Lupton’s third book of “Notable Things,” and in Hill’s “Natural and Artificial Conclusions,” other methods of making artificial mandrakes
are described.

The medieval naturalists speak of the mandrake as being a remedy for all diseases “except death.” It was most celebrated for its aphrodisiac virtues, for its supposed efficacy in removing barrenness, and for its power as a soporific. The juice or decoction of the root taken as a drink, the apples eaten, or even if only placed under the ear in bed, were said to produce deep sleep. This quality is frequently alluded to in the old writers, such as Shakespeare (“Antony and Cleopatra,” act i. scene 5):

“Cleo.—Ha! ha!
Give me to drink mandragore!
Char.—Why, madame?
Cleo.—That I might sleep out this great gap of time.”

And Massinger (“The Unnatural Combat”):

“Here’s music
In this bag shall wake her, though she had drunk opium,
Or eaten mandrakes.” [182]

As a specimen of other still more extraordinary virtues ascribed to this plant, we may quote a story told by the writer of an English herbal of the fifteenth century, in MS. Arundel (Brit. Mus.), No. 42, fol. 31, v°., who says:—“Whanne y was yongere, y knew a man of age passyng 80 yer: opynyon of hym fleyh that wonder he was in gold, and that a mandrage rote he hadde in shap of man, and that every day he fond a fayr peny therby. This opynyon was rif of hym. Thre yonge men and y, only for the opynyon, on a nyght hym absent, privyly that non wiste but we, brosten the lok of a strong litel cheste of his, and mo suche vessels had he noght, and we fonde ryght noght ther-yn but a clene lynen clowt, and ther-yn wondyn an ymage nerhand fot long, havyng alle lyneamentys and here in alle placis and privy membris and al that verre man hath, saf flessh, bon, and lif, and a faire peny therby; more other thyng founde we non. Wel we assayden and provedyn and foundyn and knewyn that it was a rote: wel we sette oure marke on the ageyn another tyme, but myght we nevere after sen the cheste ne no swuche thyng of that man mor.”

The Saxon Herbal in the Cottonian Manuscript to which we have alluded above, is interesting as the earliest treatise of this kind in our language. It is full of drawings of plants, which, considering the age, are not ill-executed; and these are intermixed with drawings of venemous insects and reptiles, against the bites of which the different plants were believed to be efficacious remedies. The great
number of cases of this kind would seem to shew that in those early times our island abounded more in noxious insects and reptiles than at present. Among the former our older writers mention not unfrequently the *attercop*, or spider, as it is generally interpreted. The Saxon Herbal furnishes us with the figure of an *attercop*, which we give in the margin. It can hardly be considered as an attempt to represent a common spider; and as our native spiders are not of the dangerous character under which the attercop is represented, we cannot help supposing that the latter name belonged to some species of the insect now unknown. A collection of miracles of St. Winefred, printed by Hearne from a manuscript apparently of the end of the fourteenth century, tells us how “In the towne of Schrowysbury setan iij° men togedur, and as they seton talkyng, an atturcoppe cum owte of the wowz (walls), and bote hem by the nekkus alle thre, and thowgh hit grevyd hem at that tyme but lytulle, sone aftur hit roncoled and so swalle her throtus and forset her breythe, that ij. of hem weron deed, and the thrydde was so nygh deed that he made his testament, and made hym redy in alle wyse, for he hoped nowghte but only dethe.” He was, however, cured by the application of water in which the bones of St. Winefred had been washed! [183]

Our next cut, taken from MS. Egerton (in the British Museum), No. 613, fol. 34, v°., represents an imaginary bird, called by the medieval naturalists the *caladrius*. According to the Latin bestiary of the Harleian manuscript already quoted, the caladrius was a bird entirely white, which loved to frequent the halls of kings and princes. If it were brought to any one labouring under a dangerous illness, it would turn its head from the patient in case there was no hope of recovery; but if the man were not fated to die, then the bird “looked him in the face, and, by so doing, took his infirmity upon itself, and flew into the air towards the sun, and burnt his infirmity and dispersed it;
and so the sick man would be cured.” The manuscript from which our woodcut is taken contains the Anglo-Norman metrical bestiary of William the clerk, composed at the beginning of the thirteenth century, which gives the following account of this bird:

“Kaladrius est uns oiseals
Sor toz autres curteis e beals,
Altrési blanc com est la neifs.
Mut par est cist oiseals curteis.
Aucone feiz le trove l’em
El pays de Jerusalem.
Quant home est en grant maladie,
Ke l’em desespeire de sa vie,
Donc est cist oiseals aportez;
Se cil deit estre confortez
E repasser de cel malage,
L’oiseal li torne le visage,
E tret à sei l’enfermeté.
E s’il ne deit aver sauté,
L’oiseal se torne autre part,
Jà ne fra vers li regart.”

“Caladrius is a bird
Courteous and beautiful above all others,
As white as is the snow.
Very courteous this bird this.
Sometimes one finds it
In the country of Jerusalem.
When a man is in great sickness,
That one despairs of his life,
Then this bird is brought;
If this man is to be solaced
And to recover from his disease,
The bird turns to him its face,
And draws to itself the infirmity.
And if he is not to recover his health,
The bird turns the other way,
It will not give a look towards him.”

Among the monsters of the deep one of the most remarkable was the serra or serre. It is described as having the head of a lion and the tail of a fish, with wings to fly. When the serre sees a ship, the bestiaries tell us, it flies up, and as long as it can keep above water near the ship it holds off the wind, so that the ship cannot move. When it can support itself no longer in the air it dives into the water, and the ship is then freed from the unnatural calm. Our cut is taken from MS. Egerton, No. 613, fol. 33, v°.

“The whale,” says Philip de Thaun, “is a very great beast. It lives always in the sea; it takes the sand of the sea, spreads it on its back, raises itself up in the sea, and lies still on the surface. The sea-farer

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* Et assumit omnem ægrietudinem hominis intra se, et volat in aera contra solem, et comburit infirmitatem eius, et dispergit eam, at sanetur infirmus.—M S. Harl. No. 4751, fol. 40, r°.
sees it, and thinks that it is an island, and lands upon it to prepare his meal. The whale feels the fire, and the ship, and the people, and will dive and drown them all if it can.”

It is added, as another “nature” of the whale, that “when it wants to eat it begins to gape, and, at the gaping of its mouth, it sends forth a smell, so sweet and so good that the little fish, who like the smell, will enter into its mouth, and then it will kill them and swallow them.” Our cut is taken from MS. Harl. No. 4751, fol. 69, v°. It is further illustrated by an incident in the curious legend of St. Brandan. “And than they sayled forth, and came soone after to that lond; but bycause of lytell depthe in some place, and in some place were grete rockes; but at the laste they wente upon an ylonde, wenynge to them they had ben safe, and made thereon a fyre for to dresse theyr dyner; but Saynt Brandon abode styll in the shyppe. And whan the fyre was ryght hote, and the meet nygh soden, than this ylonde began to move; wherof the monks were aferde, and fledde anone to the shyppe, and left the fyre and meet behynde them, and mervayled sore of the movyng. And Saynt Brandon comforted them, and sayd that it was a grete fysshe named Jasconye, whiche laboureth nyght and daye to put his tayle in his mouth, but for gretness he may not.” A year afterwards the adventurers return to the same spot, “and anone they sawe theyr caudron upon the fysshes backe, whiche they had left there xii. monethes to-fore.” This story appears to have come from the East. Every reader will recollect the similar incident in the history of Sinbad in the “Arabian Nights.”
The syren of the middle ages was a mere copy of the poetical being of the ancients, and had little in common with the nixes and mermaids of northern popular mythology. The representation of this creature given in our margin is taken from one of the illustrations to a Latin bestiary in MS. Sloane, No. 3544. According to the legend, when the weather was stormy the mermaid began her song, the sweetness of which lulled the sailor who heard it to sleep, and thus he perished in the tempest.

We have given but a few specimens of the fables relating to animals which are scattered over the bestiaries and other writings of the middle ages, but we have not space to continue the list. The subject is worthy of attention, not only because it forms a curious chapter of the history of the development of knowledge and intelligence, but because, if the strange beasts which are sculptured with so much profusion among the architectural ornaments of the middle ages have, as some suppose, a symbolical meaning, it is in these bestiaries that we must look for their interpretation, for, as we have observed at the beginning of this article, in these each animal is made the subject of a moralisation. Thus the unicorn is said to represent the Saviour, and the maiden the Virgin Mary; the male and female elephants signify Adam and Eve; the caladrius is typical of Christ, who took upon himself the sins of those who are to be saved; the serre and the whale both represent the devil; and the syren is symbolical of the riches of this world, which allure men to their destruction. In this manner the whole range of animal nature was made to be full of spiritual instruction.

The popularity of these wonderful stories had a powerful and injurious influence in retarding the advancement of science. Fable was more acceptable to the general reader than truth, and it was long before even scholars themselves could emancipate their minds from this intellectual thraldom. Even serious and (in general) accurate writers, like William de Rubruquis, were led astray. The earliest medieval account of such monsters is contained in a supposititious letter from Alexander the Great, during his Indian expedition, to his master Aristotle, which appears to be derived from some Eastern original, and of which there is an Anglo-Saxon translation. It was from this circumstance that the fabulous accounts of monsters supposed to
have been seen and overcome by this great hero found their way into the Romance. The belief in them was in the fourteenth century riveted on people’s minds by the no less extraordinary adventures of Sir John Maundevile.