

Bestiaries and Lapidaries

By L. Oscar Kuhns

in

Library of the World's Best Literature Ancient And Modern

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**Connoisseur Edition
Vol. IV.
1896**

Introduction to the Digital Edition

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*Title: Library Of The World's Best Literature, Ancient And Modern, Vol 4
Author: Charles Dudley Warner*

*Release Date: August 19, 2004 [EBook #13220]
Language: English
Character set encoding: ISO-8859-1
URL: <http://www.gutenberg.org/etext/13220>*

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One of the marked features of literary investigation during the present century is the interest which it has manifested in the Middle Ages. Not only have specialists devoted themselves to the detailed study of the Sagas of the North and the great cycles of Romance in France and England, but the stories of the Edda, of the Nibelungen, and of Charlemagne and King Arthur have become popularized, so that to-day they are familiar to the general reader. There is one class of literature, however, which was widespread and popular during the Middle Ages, but which is to-day known only to the student,—that is, the so-called Bestiaries and Lapidaries, or collections of stories and superstitions concerning the marvelous attributes of animals and of precious stones.

The basis of all Bestiaries is the Greek Physiologus, the origin of which can be traced back to the second century before Christ. It was undoubtedly largely influenced by the zoölogy of the Bible; and in the references to the Ibex, the Phoenix, and the tree Paradixion, traces of Oriental and old Greek superstitions can be seen. It was from the Latin versions of the Greek original that translations were made into nearly all European languages. There are extant to-day, whole or in fragments, Bestiaries in German, Old English, Old French, Provençal, Icelandic, Italian, Bohemian, and even Armenian, Ethiopic, and Syriac. These various versions differ more or less in the arrangement and number of the animals described, but all point back to the same ultimate source.

The main object of the Bestiaries was not so much to impart scientific knowledge, as by means of symbols and allegories to teach the doctrines and mysteries of the Church: At first this symbolical application was short and concise, but later became more and more expanded, until it often occupied more space than the description of the animal which served as a text.

Some of these animals are entirely fabulous, such as the siren, the phoenix, the unicorn; others are well known, but possess certain fabulous attributes. The descriptions of them are not the result of personal observation, but are derived from stories told by travelers or read in books, or are merely due to the imagination of the author; these stories, passing down from hand to hand, gradually became accepted facts.

These books were enormously popular during the Middle Ages, a fact which is proved by the large number of manuscripts still extant. Their influence on literature was likewise very great. To say nothing of the encyclopaedic works,—such as ‘Li Tresors’ of Brunetto Latini, the ‘Image du Monde,’ the ‘Roman de la Rose,’—which contain extracts from the Bestiaries,—there are many references to them in the great writers, even down to the present day. There are certain passages in Dante, Chaucer, and Shakespeare, that would be unintelligible without some knowledge of these mediaeval books of zoölogy.

Hence, besides the interest inherent in these quaint and childish stories, besides their value in revealing the scientific spirit and attainments of the times, some knowledge of the Bestiaries is of undoubted value and interest to the student of literature.

Closely allied to the Bestiaries (and indeed often contained in the same manuscript) are the Lapidaries, in which are discussed the various kinds of precious stones, with their physical characteristics,—shape, size, color, their use in medicine, and their marvelous talismanic properties. In spite of the fact that they contain the most absurd fables and superstitions, they were actually used as text-books in the schools, and published in medical treatises. The most famous of them was written in Latin by Marbode, Bishop of Rennes (died in 1123), and translated many times into Old French and other languages.

The following extracts from the Bestiaries are translated from ‘Le Bestiaire’ of Guillaume Le Clerc, composed in the year 1210 (edited by Dr. Robert Reinsch, Leipzig, 1890). While endeavoring to retain somewhat of the quaintness and naïveté of the original, I have omitted those repetitions and tautological expressions which are so characteristic of mediaeval literature. The religious application of the various animals is usually very long, and often is the mere repetition of the same idea. The symbolical meaning of the lion here given may be taken as a type of all the rest.

THE LION

It is proper that we should first speak of the nature of the lion, which is a fierce and proud beast and very bold. It has three especially peculiar characteristics. In the first place it always dwells upon a high mountain. From afar off it can scent the hunter who is pursuing it. And in order that the latter may not follow it to its lair it covers over its tracks by means of its tail. Another wonderful peculiarity of the lion is that when it sleeps its eyes are wide open, and clear and bright. The third characteristic is likewise very strange. For when the lioness brings forth her young, it falls to the ground, and gives no sign of life until the third day, when the lion breathes upon it and in this way brings it back to life again.

The meaning of all this is very clear. When God, our Sovereign father, who is the Spiritual lion, came for our salvation here upon earth, so skillfully did he cover his tracks that never did the hunter know that this was our Savior, and nature marveled how he came among us. By the hunter you must understand him who

made man to go astray and seeks after him to devour him. This is the Devil, who desires only evil.

When this lion was laid upon the Cross by the Jews, his enemies, who judged him wrongfully, his human nature suffered death. When he gave up the spirit from his body, he fell asleep upon the holy cross. Then his divine nature awoke. This must you believe if you wish to live again.

When God was placed in the tomb, he was there only three days, and on the third day the Father breathed upon him and brought him to life again, just as the lion did to its young.

THE PELICAN

The pelican is a wonderful bird which dwells in the region about the river Nile. The written history¹ tells us that there are two kinds,—those which dwell in the river and eat nothing but fish, and those which dwell in the desert and eat only insects and worms. There is a wonderful thing about the pelican, for never did mother-sheep love her lamb as the pelican loves its young. When the young are born, the parent bird devotes all his care and thought to nourishing them. But the young birds are ungrateful, and when they have grown strong and self-reliant they peck at their father's face, and he, enraged at their wickedness, kills them all.

On the third day the father comes to them, deeply moved with pity and sorrow. With his beak he pierces his own side, until the blood flows forth. With the blood he brings back life into the body of his young.²

THE EAGLE

The eagle is the king of birds. When it is old it becomes young again in a very strange manner. When its eyes are darkened and its wings are heavy with age, it seeks out a fountain clear and pure, where the water bubbles up and shines in the clear sunlight. Above this fountain it rises high up into the air, and fixes its eyes upon the light of the sun and gazes upon it until the heat thereof sets on fire its eyes and wings. Then it descends down into the fountain where the water is clearest and brightest, and plunges and bathes three times, until it is fresh and renewed and healed of its old age.³

The eagle has such keen vision, that if it is high up among the clouds, soaring through the air, it sees the fish swimming beneath it, in river or sea; then down it shoots upon the fish and seizes and drags it to the shore. Again, if unknown to the eagle its eggs should be changed and others put into its nest,—when the young are grown, before they fly away, it carries them up into the air when the sun is shining its brightest. Those which can look at the rays of the sun, without blinking, it loves and holds dear; those which cannot stand to look at the light, it abandons, as base-born, nor troubles itself henceforth concerning them.⁴

THE PHOENIX

There is a bird named the phoenix, which dwells in India and is never found elsewhere. This bird is always alone and without companion, for its like cannot be found, and there is no other bird which resembles it in habits or appearance.⁵ At the end of five hundred years it feels that it has grown old, and loads itself with many rare and precious spices, and flies from the desert away to the city of Leopolis. There, by some sign or other, the coming of the bird is announced to a priest of that city, who causes fagots to be gathered and placed upon a beautiful altar, erected for the bird. And so, as I have said, the bird, laden with spices, comes to the altar, and smiting upon the hard stone with its beak, it causes the flame to leap forth and set fire to the wood and the spices. When the fire is burning brightly, the phoenix lays itself upon the altar and is burned to dust and ashes.

Then comes the priest and finds the ashes piled up, and separating them softly he finds within a little worm, which gives forth an odor sweeter than that of roses or of any other flower. The next day and the next the priest comes again, and on the third day he finds that the worm has become a full-grown and full-fledged bird, which bows low before him and flies away, glad and joyous, nor returns again before five hundred years.⁶

¹ The reference here is probably to the 'Liber de Bestiis et Aliis Rebus' of Hugo de St. Victor.

² There are many allusions in literature to this story. Cf. Shakespeare,—“Like the kind life-rendering pelican, Repast them with my blood.”—‘Hamlet,’ iv. 5. “Those pelican daughters.”—Lear, iii. 4. Cf. also the beautiful metaphor of Alfred de Musset, in his ‘Nuit de Mai.’

³ “Bated like eagles having lately bathed.”—‘I Henry IV.,’ iv. I.

⁴ “Nay, if thou be that princely eagle's bird, Show thy descent by gazing 'gainst the sun.”—‘3 Henry VI.,’ ii. I.

⁵ “Were man as rare as phoenix.”—‘As You Like It,’ iv. 3.

⁶ “But as when The Bird of Wonder dies, the maiden phoenix, Her ashes new create another heir.”—‘Henry VIII.,’ v. 5.

THE ANT

There is another kind of ant up in Ethiopia, which is of the shape and size of dogs. They have strange habits, for they scratch into the ground and extract therefrom great quantities of fine gold. If any one wishes to take this gold from them, he soon repents of his undertaking; for the ants run upon him, and if they catch him they devour him instantly. The people who live near them know that they are fierce and savage, and that they possess a great quantity of gold, and so they have invented a cunning trick. They take mares which have unweaned foals, and give them no food for three days. On the fourth the mares are saddled, and to the saddles are fastened boxes that shine like gold. Between these people and the ants flows a very swift river. The famished mares are driven across this river, while the foals are kept on the hither side. On the other side of the river the grass is rich and thick. Here the mares graze, and the ants seeing the shining boxes think they have found a good place to hide their gold, and so all day long they fill and load the boxes with their precious gold, till night comes on and the mares have eaten their fill. When they hear the neighing of their foals they hasten to return to the other side of the river. There their masters take the gold from the boxes and become rich and powerful, but the ants grieve over their loss.

THE SIREN

The siren is a monster of strange fashion, for from the waist up it is the most beautiful thing in the world, formed in the shape of a woman. The rest of the body is like a fish or a bird. So sweetly and beautifully does she sing that they who go sailing over the sea, as soon as they hear the song, cannot keep from going towards her. Entranced by the music, they fall asleep in their boat, and are killed by the siren before they can utter a cry.⁷

THE WHALE

In the sea, which is mighty and vast, are many kinds of fish, such as the turbot, the sturgeon, and the porpoise. But there is one monster, very treacherous and dangerous. In Latin its name is Cetus. It is a bad neighbor for sailors. The upper part of its back looks like sand, and when it rises from the sea, the mariners think it is an island. Deceived by its size they sail toward it for refuge, when the storm comes upon them. They cast anchor, disembark upon the back of the whale, cook their food, build a fire, and in order to fasten their boat they drive great stakes into what seems to them to be sand. When the monster feels the heat of the fire which burns upon its back, it plunges down into the depths of the sea, and drags the ship and all the people after it.

When the fish is hungry it opens its mouth very wide, and breathes forth an exceedingly sweet odor. Then all the little fish stream thither, and, allured by the sweet smell, crowd into its throat. Then the whale closes its jaws and swallows them into its stomach, which is as wide as a valley.⁸

THE CROCODILE

The crocodile is a fierce beast that lives always beside the river Nile. In shape it is somewhat like an ox; it is full twenty ells long, and as big around as the trunk of a tree. It has four feet, large claws, and very sharp teeth; by means of these it is well armed. So hard and tough is its skin, that it minds not in the least hard blows made by sharp stones. Never was seen another such a beast, for it lives on land and in water. At night it is submerged in water, and during the day it reposes upon the land. If it meets and overcomes a man, it swallows him entire, so that nothing remains. But ever after it laments him as long as it lives.⁹ The upper jaw of this beast is immovable when it eats, and the lower one alone moves. No other living creature has this peculiarity. The other beast of which I have told you (the water-serpent), which always lives in the water, hates the crocodile with a mortal hatred. When it sees the crocodile sleeping on the ground with its mouth wide open, it rolls itself in the slime and mud in order to become more slippery. Then it leaps into the throat of the crocodile and is swallowed down into its stomach. Here it bites and tears its way out again, but the crocodile dies on account of its wounds.

⁷ References to the siren are innumerable; the most famous perhaps is Heine's 'Lorelei.' Cf. also Dante, 'Purgatorio,' xix. 19-20.

⁸ "Who is a whale to virginity and devours up all the fry it finds."—'All's Well that Ends Well,' iv. 3.

⁹ "Crocodile tears" are proverbial. Cf: "As the mournful crocodile With sorrow snares relenting passengers."—'2 Henry VI.,' iii. 1. "Each drop she falls would prove a crocodile."—'Othello' iv. 1.

THE TURTLE-DOVE

Now I must tell you of another bird which is courteous and beautiful, and which loves much and is much loved. This is the turtle-dove. The male and the female are always together in mountain or in desert, and if perchance the female loses her companion never more will she cease to mourn for him, never more will she sit upon green branch or leaf. Nothing in the world can induce her to take another mate, but she ever remains loyal to her husband. When I consider the faithfulness of this bird, I wonder at the fickleness of man and woman. Many husbands and wives there are who do not love as the turtle-dove; but if the man bury his wife, before he has eaten two meals he desires to have another woman in his arms. The turtle-dove does not so, but remains patient and faithful to her companion, waiting if haply he might return.¹⁰

THE MANDRAGORA

The mandragora is a wild plant, the like of which does not exist. Many kinds of medicine can be made of its root; this root, if you look at it closely, will be seen to have the form of a man. The bark is very useful; when well boiled in water it helps many diseases. The skillful physicians gather this plant when it is old, and they say that when it is plucked it weeps and cries, and if any one hears the cry he will die.¹¹ But those who gather it do this so carefully that they receive no evil from it. If a man has a pain in his head or in his body, or in his hand or foot, it can be cured by this herb. If you take this plant and beat it and let the man drink of it, he will fall asleep very softly, and no more will he feel pain.¹² There are two kinds of this plant,—male and female. The leaves of both are beautiful. The leaf of the female is thick like that of the wild lettuce.

The following two extracts are translated from 'Les Lapidaires Français du Moyen Âge,' by Leopold Pannier, Paris, 1882.

SAPPHIRE

The sapphire is beautiful, and worthy to shine on the fingers of a king. In color it resembles the sky when it is pure and free from clouds.¹³ No precious stone has greater virtue or beauty. One kind of sapphire is found among the pebbles in the country of Libya; but that which comes from the land of the Turk is more precious. It is called the gem of gems, and is of great value to men and women. It gives comfort to the heart and renders the limbs strong and sound. It takes away envy and perfidy and can set the prisoner at liberty. He who carries it about him will never have fear. It pacifies those who are angry, and by means of it one can see into the unknown.

It is very valuable in medicine. It cools those who are feverish and who on account of pain are covered with perspiration. When powdered and dissolved in milk it is good for ulcers. It cures headache and diseases of the eyes and tongue. He who wears it must live chastely and honorably; so shall he never feel the distress of poverty.

CORAL

Coral grows like a tree in the sea, and at first its color is green. When it reaches the air it becomes hard and red. It is half a foot in length. He who carries it will never be afraid of lightning or tempest. The field in which it is placed will be very fertile, and rendered safe from hail or any other kind of storm. It drives away evil spirits, and gives a good beginning to all undertakings and brings them to a good end.

¹⁰ "Like to a pair of loving turtle-doves, That could not live asunder day or night."—'I Henry VI.,' ii. 2.

¹¹ "Would curses kill as doth the mandrake's groan."—'2 Henry VI.,' iii. 2.

¹² "Not poppy, nor mandragora, Nor all the drowsy syrups of the world."—'Othello,' iii. 3.

¹³ Cf. the exquisite line of Dante, 'Purgatorio,' i. 13:—"Dolce color d'oriental zaffiro."