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DOCTORAL THESIS

(Abstract)

**MEDIEVAL WESTERN BESTIARY, BETWEEN FACT AND
TEMPTATION OF FANTASTIC**

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Abstract

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A particularly important aspect for the medieval mentality is represented by the image, as a component of symbolic thinking. In similar circumstances, the medieval collective memory of the Europeans gave birth to authentic images and beliefs, springing from deep spiritual realities. Although they are identified in the area of the supernatural and the imaginary, they often result in a shared body, including visible reality, suppressing the boundary between reality and fantasy. In our situation, the visual archives we focused on represents a series of book miniatures from medieval encyclopedias of the bestiary type, made in Central Europe, led by England and France. Moreover, the period in which we are interested lies between the 11th and 14th centuries. Most of these images can be found in the collections of the Bodleian Library (Oxford), Morgan Library (New York), Bibliothèque Nationale de France, but also of other prestigious institutions that have chosen to digitize the collections of miniature documents to support this type of advanced research. However, this does not mean that we are completely distancing ourselves from the previous cultural and imaginary contexts, often seen as foundations for my research paper.

The present research paper was born around these concepts and images, that justifies its contribution to this literary genre, through a series of approaches that support the research. First of all, we should consider the interdisciplinary approach, focused on a comparative analysis between image and text. In this manner, we can find too few similar debates in our literature. Otherwise, in this documentary category, there are many translations and analytical approaches focused on literature, criticism or other texts regarding various topics of socio-cultural history. Therefore, the personal contribution in the research results is given by this type of academic approach. The originality of the work is maintained through this type of comparison, that is meant to highlight the cultural elements of a supernatural, fantastic, bizarre order or, in any case, by a certain absurdity of the natural data. These are casually interposed in the collective perception of many of the animals. Thus, the zoomorphic dowry of immediate reality is often loaded with symbolic, mystical or bizarre undermeanings which truly constitutes an intellectual delight in reading the literary-encyclopedic subgenre represented by the texts of

bestiaries. On the basis of the writings, but especially of the images, these wonderful notions comprise a field insufficiently explored in the local literature. Even these sources from the western medieval bestiary have infused Romanian literature, the miniature ensembles remain largely neglected.

Another argument to support the authenticity of my approach involves in interpreting many of the relationships between animals and their association, following different links established at distinct levels. The aforementioned aspects thus constitute a fragmentarium of medieval symbolic thinking molded to animal images. These symbols were common in the allday context of the analyzed European space, as in other places. Animals present in everyday life, justify their representational frequency also by the economic status of feudalism, that made the Europe of those times to base its economy on agriculture. The zoomorphic figure also imposed itself as a model in which man could read the will of God. However, these ideas are not only biblical legacies, but also legacies of the late ancient Christian mentality. This one was responsible for the appearance of the moralizing texts from the end of Antiquity. We mention here the *Physiologus*, one of the most beloved and wide-spread texts in the Middle Ages.

In the second chapter, we chose to place the reader in the context of the establishment of the European Middle Ages, by exposing a brief history of events, which also reflects the differences in mentality between the West and the East. We also recall that the weakening defensive force of the Romans was the basis of the decline of the Western Roman Empire. With its collapse, in 476, we can affirm that the time of medieval Europe begins.

Chapter 2, *The Middle Ages, the last stage in the evolution of symbolic mentality* begins with the immediate context following the officialization of Christianity, followed by the settlement of a deeply spiritualized vision of medieval life. The rise of the ecclesiastical institution, the gradual gain of control over thought, brought some new ethical and aesthetic models an opposite spiritual context to the old one, although many notions are taken from here. I have thus justified the detailing of concepts that legitimize the notions and concepts underlying medieval aesthetics.

From a philosophical perspective, the original way of perceiving beauty, mixed with different aesthetic categories are assessed and correlated in chapters 3 and 4. Among them, the wonderful, the miraculous and the bizarre are intertwined with other aesthetic categories related to a mystical vision of nature. All these concepts comprise the aspects around which we have articulated the present research, supported by the analyzed literary and imagistic documents.

Subchapter 4.3 discusses the evolution of the animal imaginary, through the apocalyptic view and circumstances that generated such a vision. The birth of encyclopedias marks the most noticeable moment for the medieval mentality, as well for the apparition of an appropriate imaginary. The biblical tradition, vigorously employed by the Western Church, has fully contributed to the realization of this visual perception of the world and life. Such a context favored a gradual approach to the Apocalypse. The tension was supported even more by the conflicts in the Iberian Peninsula, in the 8th century. The invasions and dominations of the Islamic peoples in those areas led to the Mozarabic art, the prerogative of an isolated Christian community in the mountains of Cantabria. The *Commentary on the Apocalypse* by Beatus of Liebana (730-785) is related to this context. His reluctant attitude toward Islam will gradually encompass the collective mind. Subsequent miniatures that will accompany the text, open the way for the Merovingian illumination art, remarkable for the *entrelacs* type latrines and for the abundant ornamentation, in which we glimpse a multitude of monstrous inventions. The appearance of writings dedicated to monsters interfered with other bizarre *compendia* of creatures, known as *Liber monstorum*. They appear and spread between the seventh and ninth centuries, from the British island to various parts of Europe. The thesis subchapters *The Mozarabic Codexes and the Apocalyptic Imaginary*, respectively the *Beatin Apocalypse and the Bestiary of a Christian Imaginary Universe* gave me the opportunity to study different scientific fields. We notice especially the geography, which in turn acquires symbolic statuses. At the same time, a category of mystical cattle is being born, matured only since the 11th-12th centuries.

In the beginning of the 12th century, the European perspective on Arabic culture is rejudged. These novel contributions reflect the expansion of the cultural horizons of medieval Christian Europe. Gradually, scientific value will take the place of religious value. The variety of solid notions that enter the field of naturalism, anatomy and especially astronomy, have brought changes meant to re-evaluate the perception both on life and man's own identity.

The fifth chapter gradually introduces the mentioned analytical approach through a case study dedicated to the collection of illuminated manuscripts from Bodleian Library, Oxford. This stage highlights the importance of the digitized collection, which includes many miniated texts, as subject of research.

Chapter 6, *The Miniature Between Real and Fantastical Sign, symbol and artistic achievement* imbues the analytical approach itself. It also represents the central part of the research, in which we initially set out to emphasize the evolution and importance of the

encyclopedic genre. The chapter's structure contains a limited number of animals, based on which we were able to establish relationships of similarity on various levels. I also tried to maintain accuracy in the manner of portrayal, although in some cases proved that to be difficult. Later, based on imagistic and literary analysis, I found that symbolic thinking manifests itself intensely around often unrealistic images and concepts in the moralizing texts of bestiaries. In the Middle Ages, this type of literature, originally based on the tradition of ancient culture, developed with the contribution of first-rate medieval authors such as Pliny the Elder, Isidore of Seville, Vincent de Beauvais, Albert the Great, Bernardus Silvestris, Bartholomaeus Anglicus and others, representative of the encyclopedic and theological culture of the time. By going through these stages, I noticed that formal and substantial interpretations shed light on a way in which the world is perceived in collective memory that is much better supported in terms of symbolic norms and interpretations, than at the formal level. For example, in our case, a creature represented somewhere as a horse and elsewhere as a cow with a horn on its forehead, can equally be considered, regardless of its construction, a unicorn. To the medieval mind, the symbolic charge is far more precise than the formal variations under which it may appear.

The analytical chapter concludes with a comparative display of two large collections of manuscripts: Bodleian Library, Oxford, and Morgan Library, New York. The share of sources from the two major libraries especially warranted such a detailed presentation, with an emphasis on the documentary advantage that was offered. The search and correlation of the unusual aspects on the text-image chain opens a door to the universe of creativity, quite frequently marked by such exceptions, and the canons of representation are suppressed in many of the cases. Sometimes the imagination and creativity of illustrators gives them the opportunity to distance themselves quite a bit from certain rules. There are enough iconographic references in the pages of the bestiaries, in this regard: the hedgehog (Ms. M.81, fol. 10v, Morgan Library), the hyena (Ms. Laud. Misc. 247, fol. 15v, Bodleian Library), the asp (Ms. Sloane 1975, Fol. 43r.), The bonasus bull (Ms. Ms. KB KA 16, fol. 47v, Kongelige Bibliotek), the dragon (Ms. Lat. 6838B, fol 30v, BNF) or the unicorn (Ms. Douce 167, fol4v, Ms. 254, pp. 17r, Fitzwilliam Museum). Such remarkable imagistic variations are occasional aspects, highlighted by strikingly rare associations. We deduce from this the fact that, in spite of iconographic strictness and an alleged relational obedience between text and image, gifted miniaturists often assumed a varying degree of freedom.

The last chapter is dedicated to zoomorphic landmarks that appear in heraldry. Here, I focused my attention on how this way of perceiving the world gave rise to a codified language,

in the service of reaffirming many identity systems. For the proposed research, zoomorphic images were very appreciated as heraldic patterns. They enter the language of the coat of arms thanks to the cultural and spiritual dowry, with which they were especially endowed by the bestiaries, and other adjacent sources. Among these, fantastic representations appear less frequently than in bestiaries, due to the ratio between the invented and the known ones. However, there are some such chimerical figures that appear frequently in heraldry as well. Griffins, unicorns or dragons are the most beloved figures.

During the research, I found that the image of the beast was imprinted in the medieval collective mind, primarily thanks to the spread of two large sources from late antiquity. It is about the *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder (1st century) and the anonymous Alexandrian *Physiologus*, the mentioned Christian text from the border of the 3rd-4th centuries. These well-known sources have been revised, reinterpreted, or added since Isidore of Seville (7th century). Isidore's work *Liber Etymologiae* was in turn the basis for moralizing or purportedly scientific texts that appeared especially after the twelfth century. They are also the basis of bestiaries, whether we are talking about simple series of animals, with a quasi-scientific character (Anglicus), or we are talking about texts in verses with an ethical purpose (Ambrosius, Folieto, Beauvais, LeClerc) or love (Fournval). This genre has spread to other cultures in Northern and Eastern Europe, such as the Icelandic version of the *Physiologus*, and translations from Greek and later Slavonic.

Romanian literature has known these texts just from the 17th century. Among them, we mention the copied manuscripts of the scribe Costea Dascălul from Braşov, Andronachi Berhecianul or Serafim from Bistriţa (which text is also the most widespread Romanian variant of *Physiologus*). The mentioned literature had an ample moral and especially pedagogical character, as is the case of the compiled manuscript of Costea Dascălul from Şchei.

From the perspective of the visual arts, we conclude that the miniature dowry of the beasts came to us through interpretations, but also through the contact between foreign and local painters. These exchanges of ideas, knowledge and visions gave rise to highly refined plastic decodings. For example, in the painting of monasteries in northern Moldavia, the development of painted bestiary was interpreted on the basis of semiotic and hidden at first sight relations, but it proves certain reflections of nature exposed in the analytical chapter. Regarding the genre of miniature, it is especially typical for the medieval period. After the second half of the 15th century, it will decline, probably due to the appearance of the print

technology, in 1455. The miniature image in traditional techniques will fade from its original importance and will no longer fulfill the same hermeneutical and aesthetic functions.