Bears in the Middle Ages

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Bears have captured the imagination of cultures across the world for centuries. Today, eight species of bear inhabit four continents. They have earned, often simultaneously within the same culture, feelings of fear and reverence as well as the status of iconic children's figure. This worldwide, long-term fascination with bears has very complex roots. It has been suggested that people have felt a connection to bears as creatures once considered rather humanoid. Indeed, up until more recent experiences with other primates, bears "most closely resembled a human being" for early Eurasian and American peoples. Their mysterious quasi-hibernation and its associated seasonal disappearance has also intrigued humans, leading several cultures to see a symbolic connection to death and rebirth in such behavior. Medieval people from the area now called Europe were no exception. Europeans in the Middle Ages built on bear lore from earlier traditions, often mixing it with Christianity, to include the bear in their own writings and give it their own meanings. Along with the literature and art on the subject, some medieval people also interacted with real bears through bloodsports or through their roles as gifts between rulers or as trained performers. Through all their functions as symbols and spectacles, bears left their tracks all over the Middle Ages.

Bestiaries are the sources which tell us the most about what medieval people believed about bears. In bestiaries, information about animals, real and imagined, was recorded and often incorporated into didactic moral lessons. Much of the information appears to the modern eye to be somewhat like a fable, but it is important to remember that "zoology was not a distinct field of study" yet, and the traditional beliefs about animals found in Aristotle or Pliny were accepted as fact. The classical sources often used animals in the service of philosophical concepts. Medieval writers built on this foundation, substituting Christian theology for classical ideas. Thus, bestiaries are "the best source of insight on medieval animal science" as well as "religious teaching and human behavior."

St. Isidore of Seville's work, The Etymologiae was an important medieval source for information on animals, including bears. Written between 615-630, much of what it said was repeated in bestiaries throughout the Middle Ages. St. Isidore recorded the belief that bears were born after only thirty days' gestation as unformed lumps of flesh which the mother bear then had to lick into shape. This is perhaps the best known of all medieval bear lore. St. Isidore claims that the bear, ursus in Latin, is so named because of this practice of forming the offspring with the mouth, ore suo being Latin for "own mouth," corrupted into orsus and finally ursus. He also writes that bears have weak heads, but strong loins and forelegs which make it easy for bears to stand upright.

Other bestiaries report a number of additional beliefs. If injured, bears are said to have the knowledge to heal themselves with medicinal herbs. They knew that consuming the mandrake plant was fatal to them, but that following it with ants would reverse the effects. The herb mullein was applied by bears to their sores and healed them upon contact. Bears' dens were supposedly divided into separate beds for the male and female bears who, furthermore, were

thought to have mating positions closer to those of humans than of other large mammals. When emerging from their dens in spring, bears were thought to become nearly blind temporarily from the shock of the light. It was also believed that bears dearly loved eating honey. However, according to Da Vinci, bee stings could distract a bear from his feast as "he wishes to revenge himself on all the bees that sting him," but this impossible task turns "into rage and he throws himself on the ground hopelessly, clawing the air with his paws."

T.H. White's translation of a twelfth century bestiary adds that bears are especially skilled at attacking bulls, knowing "by what parts to bring them down most readily." Bartholomew Anglicus, a thirteenth century scholar, wrote in his De Proprietatibus Rerum (On the Properties of Things) that a bear will "licketh and sucketh his own feet, and hath liking the juices thereof." Bartholomew Anglicus added details about the state of the newborn cub, stating that it has "neither eyes nor ears," but the beginnings of claws. He also mentions that bears possess the skill of tree climbing in order to reach honey located at the tops of trees.

All of this lore taken together paints a picture of a creature with some mysterious as well as startlingly human qualities. Yet, despite the lack of real scientific knowledge, medieval information about bears is not wholly incorrect. Medieval descriptions of the intensity with which bears pursue honey is really not much of an exaggeration and was surely based on observation. We know today that bears have a strong affinity for honey, reacting "immediately to the humming of bees." Bears in Siberia have even destroyed telephone poles because they mistook the vibration of telephone wires for the sound of bees and believed there was a beehive to be had at the top of the poles. Bartholomew Anglicus also gave an accurate account of polar bears. He wrote of white bears that could break ice and fish through the holes they made.

The value of bestiaries as moralizing or otherwise symbolic texts is immense. Depictions of animals in the Middle Ages "simultaneously charm, amuse, and instruct," and modern examinations of them can give one "remarkable insight into the medieval vision of the world." The sources on which bestiaries are based such as the Physiologus or the works of Aristotle are philosophical treatises. The changes made to these works in the Middle Ages replaced the philosophically-based moralizing content with a structure "based on the organization of the natural world as recounted in the Genesis creation myth." It was likely something of an easy transition for Christian writers. They were replacing one moral structure with another set in new, Biblical terms, and explanations of animal behavior lent themselves particularly well to such a substitution for "the origin of the animals was explained in Genesis." Thinking about animals specifically as God's creations made finding moral instruction in their behaviors quite logical.

One example is found in the oft-repeated belief that the mother bear had to form her offspring by licking them. It was interpreted Biblically to be related to the resurrection of Jesus. The way the bear "fashions her dead brood with her mouth" was considered parallel to "God restoring his Son to life." Sometimes the bear had a significantly less sanctified role and instead carried the "pejorative connotations" of lewdness and lust. In religious art of the Middle Ages, a restrained bear, possibly bridled or fixed to a post, may have represented lust under control. A restrained bear in some manuscript illuminations has been interpreted to represent the controlled lust of Mary Magdalene-- the "salvation achieved through penance and devotion implied in the immobilization" of a bear bridled and "firmly tethered to a post." Although, a medieval bear certainly does not always represent lust or other vices-- for "one beast can normally mean

various things."

The anecdotes in bestiaries, overtly religious or not, include "an explicit moral." Medieval beliefs about animals were somewhat open to the interpretation of the author who could take the "facts" about bears, or other animals, and use them to illustrate a moral point. They are something like relics of the creative process of the Middle Ages, worthy of study because they show "the interpretations and their underlying logic so explicitly on the page; they record the living choices of living persons," showing us "not simply the inventory of medieval fact, but the enduring process of mind at work." Bears surely afforded the medieval writer a multitude of qualities to explore and moralize in bestiaries and hagiography.

Bears appear in at least half a dozen saints' lives-- those of St. Romedius, St. Columbanus, St. Corbinian, St. Gallus, St. Claude, and St. Ursula. Several of the stories are much alike, and they all show the saint as being more powerful than the bear. As a young man, St. Romedius had his horse attacked and eaten by a bear while he had let the horse wander away to graze on his way to Trent. When it was discovered that his horse was dead, St. Romedius simply called for the bear to be saddled in the horse's place. The bear complied and carried St. Romedius on its back for the rest of the journey.

St. Columbanus was an Irish saint whose life story was written by a monk called Jonas of northern Italy. Jonas began St. Columbanus's biography just a few years after the saint's death. Columbanus dealt with bears on multiple occasions. The hagiography nearly suggests that he had some sort of special power over them. St. Columbanus forced a bear to leave its home after he discovered it inside its cave in the cliffs while he was out in the wilderness. The bear obeyed his request and did not "dare to return again." The saint later used the now empty cave for "mortifying the flesh with prayer and fasting." At another time, St. Columbanus found a bear who was about to eat a stag which had been killed by wolves. The saint commanded the bear not to harm "the hide which was needed for shoes" at which point the bear "became gentle, and...left the body without a murmur." During another stay in the wilderness, Columbanus survived solely on apples. When a bear came to the area and began to eat from the same apple trees, the saint merely directed a servant to set aside a portion of the trees for the bear. The bear obeyed the new division, and as long as St. Columbanus lived there, the bear "did not venture at all to take food from the prohibited part," eating only "from the trees that had been assigned to it." It may be argued that this last bear received the fairest treatment. Another version records that the saint tamed a bear and yoked it to a plow.

One of St. Columbanus's companions, St. Gallus (sometimes St. Gall or Gallen) was also connected to bears. St. Gallus is depicted in both art and stories as having been helped by a bear. In one source, he commanded a bear to bring firewood to him and it obeyed. Another source adds that this occurred at his hermitage in Switzerland. A ninth or tenth century ivory carving of the scene possessed by the St. Gallen Abbey Library of Switzerland (Figure 1) shows St. Gallus giving the bear a loaf of bread. Some versions state that he gave the bear the bread as a reward for obeying him while others state that the bear brought St. Gallus the logs in gratitude for the bread that was given to him.

Both St. Claude and St. Corbinian have experiences with bears much like that of St. Romedius. All three stories are part of the tradition of "rendering wild beasts harmless by imposing punishments to fit their crimes." A bear killed St. Corbinian's mule and for that he

forced it to carry his baggage in the mule's place the rest of the way. St. Claude made a bear stand in to pull a cart in place of the ox the bear had just killed. In some accounts, St. Claude's bear actually harnessed itself to the cart.

St. Ursula, whose entire legend is contested, but enjoys enduring popularity anyway, derives her name from the bear. St. Ursula supposedly defended eleven thousand virgins, earning her name. The primary sources on St. Ursula have the virgins all dying as martyrs. Another source tells that she is so named (Ursula meaning "little bear") because she defended the virgins from bears.

Some medieval stories regarding bears blur the lines between fact and fiction as well as between human and animal even more than the stories previously discussed. Numerous figures in the MIddle Ages carried on the tradition of tracing one's ancestry directly to bears. The Old English word beorn meant "bear" as well as "warrior," "hero," and "prince." Claiming to have descended from bears was a way to appropriate the associations of the animal for oneself and one's family. Such claims were still made in the tenth and and eleventh centuries. Earl Siward of Northumbria, who died in 1055, purported that his ancestors were bears, as did King Svend Estridsen of Denmark (ruled 1047-1076). Siward's father was called the son of a bear and reportedly even had bear ears.

Bears in the Middle Ages were not only literary and artistic figures. Real, historical bears appeared in medieval lives in fascinating ways. Throughout the Middle Ages and much earlier, "the custom of one's ruler presenting another with animals not found in the recipient's country" has been common. Bears were included in such exchanges, particularly polar bears. There is also a small amount of evidence suggesting a single instance of giant pandas appearing in Europe in the Middle Ages.

The polar bears of Iceland and Greenland have a distinctly long and captivating history. The first recorded polar bear export occurred in the late ninth century when Ingimundr the Old caught two polar bear cubs in Iceland and sent them to King Harold the Fairhaired of Norway. King Harold gifted Ingimundr a ship stocked with timber in return. Thus, Icelanders were aware from this point forward of the kind of value people elsewhere potentially attached to these great white bears.

Polar bears became connected in medieval Icelandic lore to relief from famine. An Icelandic annalist wrote in 1279 that it was believed "that God had sent the white bears and seals to alleviate the famine." In 1403, a story arose in which a polar bear moved into the home of an Icelandic widow and had cubs under the widow's bed. When the bear went out to fish it brought back not only enough food for her own cubs, but also food for the widow and her children. This unlikely, but amusing tale is a rather direct example of a bear assisting in famine relief efforts.

In both medieval Iceland and Greenland, trappers are the only people known to have caught polar bears "in order to train them and make pets of them." Indeed, some Icelanders did attempt to tame polar bears and keep them. There were laws on the books which provided for this practice. Icelanders were allowed to keep polar bears as long as they were prepared to pay for any destruction their pet bears might cause. It can be assumed that the practice was not terribly popular, and it likely stopped on its own. By 1280, the laws had changed to reflect this, stating that "a bear may be killed anywhere and that he who inflicts the first wound may claim the carcass." Their white pelts were highly valued and often used in churches. Later laws enacted

just after the Middle Ages actually mandated that all polar bear pelts must be offered for sale to royalty before anyone else. However, the association of the bears with royalty dates back much earlier.

The significance of polar bears in the Middle Ages is not common knowledge. The Book of the Miracles of St. Thorlak calls polar bears "animals which rulers esteem as the greatest treasures of this world." This is high, but obscure praise as "it is not generally known how eagerly the princes of Europe desired to possess polar bears." Polar bears proved extremely useful for elevating one's status for those who were in a position to give the rulers one of these much coveted gifts. The first bishop of Skalholt in Iceland attained his position in 1054, at least partly, by giving Emperor Henry III of the Holy Roman Empire a polar bear while he was seeking to found the bishopric. In 1123, Einar Sokkason was made a bishop in Greenland after he sent a bear to King Sigurd of Norway.

Once polar bears began appearing in Norway as gifts to its rulers, they were poised to spread to other parts of Europe. King Henry III of England owned a polar bear which he very likely obtained from King Hakon Haknarson of Norway whom he knew and was known to send him animal gifts. King Henry III housed his bear in the Tower of London and had allowed him to be fastened to a long rope in order to go fishing in the River Thames. He also required London sheriffs to provide six pence a day "to support our White Bear in our Tower of London."

King Hakon Haknarson of Norway also sent a polar bear to Emperor Frederick II of the Holy Roman Empire who essentially re-gifted the bear to the Sultan El-Kamil of Damascus in 1233 or 1234. It was described as "a white bear that used to dive for fish." There is no specific information regarding where else in Europe King Hakon Haknarson or other rulers may have sent polar bears, but Islamic writers have written "quite accurately" about "white bears." There are also records of polar bear furs making it as far as Spain and Egypt.

A polar bear in the Middle Ages was "an extremely valued and efficient instrument of diplomacy" which contributed to "the spreading of geographical knowledge concerning the lands" from whence they came. Their unique appearance could not help but invite questions regarding the bears' homelands. Thus, everywhere a polar bear went in the Middle Ages, he brought knowledge of places like Greenland and Iceland with him.

As rare as polar bears in medieval Europe were, panda bears were even rarer. It is likely that "at least two live specimens of...the giant panda may have reached Europe." The panda was not known in Europe until the 1869 discovery of them by Pere David, but an amazingly accurate description of a giant panda from the eleventh century suggests prior knowledge of the creatures. In the Latin romance Ruodlieb, likely written by a Bavarian monk, there appear two white bears with black legs and and paws who could do all sorts of tricks. A later version of the material written by Victor von Scheffel omits the strange coloring of the two bears, instead making the bears brown. Scheffel would not have known what a panda was as Europe was still fifteen years away from being introduced, or as this evidence suggests, re-introduced to the giant panda.

Medieval bears were not always honored guests. Bear-baiting in its most modern form originated in the Middle Ages. It was "an aristocratic pastime in the Middle Ages" which grew into "a commercial activity" by the end of the period. Bear-baiting participants were black and brown bears, generally smaller than average, and the dogs which the bears were pitted against.

The fights took place in a circular arena pit. The bear's claws and canine teeth were removed to make it more difficult for the bear to fight. The bear was anchored to a stake in the center of the pit and a pack of dogs was unleashed upon it. The dogs won the fight if one of them managed to bite the bear and hang on to it. If the bear was able to defeat all of the dogs, the fight would proceed with a fresh pack of dogs in a new round. Dogs died in every fight and frequently the bears died, too, although the bear's death was not the goal. Bear-baiting was enduringly popular into the late Middle Ages and beyond. It actually had such a strong following that multiple acts of the English Parliament in the 1600s failed to stop the events from being held.

The arenas were called bear gardens and have existed since the reign of King Henry II of England in the twelfth century. Later, bear gardens shared their space with acting companies though it was often "not a happy cohabitation for either side." Still, the association stuck in some ways and for a long time, though no longer, it was believed that "the first permanent public playhouses in London were modeled on bear-pits." The existence of bearbaiting through the seventeenth century and its inclusion in plays such as Shakespeare's Twelfth Night suggests much about the enduring popularity of the bloodsport. This popularity itself suggests even more about the relationship of medieval people to bears. The connection felt to bears in that they were once considered rather human-like creatures has been previously discussed. Almost the opposite perspective is used by Erica Fudge in her book Perceiving Animals: Humans and Beasts in Early Modern English Culture to approach bearbaiting. Fudge argues that the medieval fascination with cruelty to animals is related to the appeal of "blurring the lines dividing humans and animals." Essentially, that the weakened bear reminds the spectator of their own weaknesses, allowing them to identify with the tortured creature on one level. However, because the bear is discernibly not humanoid, baiting allows the audience to keeps its distance and feel superiority over the great beast, here reduced to man's plaything.

Another explanation for the popularity of bearbaiting relates to the tendencies already described here of the drive of medieval and earlier peoples to find deeper significance in the behaviors of animals. When considered in these terms, bearbaiting might reasonably have been fulfilling some of the same functions as bestiaries in terms of imbuing animal actions with moralizing meanings. Baiting supposedly made bears "objects of knowledge, exposing their inner natures to outward view." Their qualities were thought to be on display in a fight-- "the arena became a kind of psychological anatomy theater, revealing the courage, nobility, and artistry, the 'peculiar or proper' character of the animals." In this context, the choice of bears for such fights makes a great deal of sense. Aside from their obvious strength and size, it is almost perversely reasonable that medieval people would want to learn as much about the true nature of this great, mysterious beast. After all, this was the animal who appeared in the world as a lump of sodden, useless flesh, somehow grew to possess medical knowledge, and retreated from the world for a quarter of the year. Bear-baiting may have been a depraved vehicle for satisfying medieval curiosity. Very unfortunately for the bears, it was an oft-repeated experiment for centuries which hopelessly produced no real new knowledge, only more dead bears.

Less fatal, but still incredibly cruel, the practice of "taming" bears and forcing them to "dance" occured in the Middle Ages as court entertainment. Teaching a bear to "dance" could involve putting a ring through its nose for easier handling, or conditioning the bear to stand upright and jump around by placing it on an unreasonably hot floor while playing music. Such dancing bears

are represented in medieval art, particularly in the margins of manuscripts. The British Library holds a manuscript from the early 1300s that depicts a bear doing a handstand while his trainer brandishes a stick. (Figure 2) Oxford University's Bodleian Library has manuscripts from The Romance of Alexander, a French verse of the legends of Alexander the Great illustrated in the mid-1300s. Numerous dancing bears appear in the margins of those leaves. (Figure 3) These are but a few examples of dancing bears in medieval art.

Trained bears were not always dancers and were shown doing other things in manuscript illustrations as well. The Institute of Material Culture of the Middle Ages and Modern Times in Germany archives manuscripts online from the mid-1400s that show bears playing musical instruments. In one image the bear plays the bagpipes, (Figure 4) and in another, the bear plays a trumpet (Figure 5). Even stranger is an illustration from St. Jerome's commentary on Genesis belonging to the collection of the Trinity College Library at Cambridge which shows a man teaching a bear the alphabet. The man is shown saying the letters "ABC" and the bear repeats back to him the letter "A." (Figure 6)

Bears are captivating creatures that fascinated medieval people just as they fascinate us today. They appeared in the art and literature of the Middle Ages. They found themselves objects of spectacles, both bloody and not. Their role as royal gifts helped both to cement diplomatic connections and to spread geographical knowledge. The bear's place in the medieval world is more prominent than most would assume. Truly, they have left their tracks all over the cultural landscape of the Middle Ages.

(all footnotes have been removed. If you want to plagiarize this paper, you will at least have to dig up the sources yourself!)