A spectacular illustrated medieval bestiary manuscript from the Bodleian Library

The Ashmole Bestiary. England, ca. 1210. 11 1/8 inches x 8 inches (283 x 203 mm), 222 pages, 134 illuminations.

The legendary science of the medieval bestiary is the product of an age with very different notions from modern society of the possible and the impossible, of the known and the unknown. Where every act of god might find its symbol in the phenomena of the terrestrial globe, the Christian mind could discover a moral lesson in any natural history observation (real or imagined). In the bestiary, familiar animals are often furnished with fanciful characters and extraordinary habits. Imaginary animals have real attributes — a unicorn, after all, is no more improbable than a giraffe. There was no set text for a bestiary: the various versions incorporate many diverse elements from the Jewish, Indian, and Egyptian legends fused in the second-century Physiologus, with later additions from such encyclopedic works as the Etymologiae of Isidore of Seville.

The bestiary became something of an English specialty, attaining the standard form familiar to readers of T.H. White’s Book of Beasts and a level of luxury that is breathtakingly evident in this manuscript, Ashmole MS 1511 at Oxford’s Bodleian Library. This early thirteenth-century work is one of the most spectacularly illustrated English manuscripts of the period. It includes six full-page illuminations, with smaller illuminations on a hundred other leaves, all set on heavily burnished gold backgrounds. Here the antelope, camel, raven, bat, stork, and lion frolic with the satyr, siren, basilisk, amphisbaena, manticore, and phoenix.

This treasure from the Bodleian Library at Oxford is in a recent binding of soft white leather with wide turn-ins. The spine has blue stitching across the head and foot as well as five raised bands. The book has a number of brief marginal notes in English and Latin in a hand of the very late Middle Ages. The earliest actual ownership inscription is a partially erased note from 1550 indicating that it was owned by William Wright, vicar of “Chipping Wycombe,” now High Wycombe, Buckinghamshire. It is likely that this
volume belonged to a monastery suppressed by Henry VIII in the 1540s and that it was given to or acquired by Wright soon afterward. Nearly sixty years later (1609) it was signed by Sir Peter Manwood (1571–1625), a judge, knighted at the coronation of James I in 1603, who was sheriff of Kent (1602–3), mayor of Canterbury (1605), and a member of the Society of Antiquaries. The next sighting of the volume is a 1638 reference to it in the possession of John Tradescant the Elder (d. 1638). Tradescant was one of the first great collectors of plants in England, and he formed an extraordinary private botanical garden and a museum of antiquarian curiosities known as Tradescant’s Ark, which was continued by his son, John Tradescant the Younger (d. 1662). In 1664 the Ark was acquired by Elias Ashmole (1617–1692), an Oxford astrologer and antiquary who had catalogued parts of the collection in the 1650s. Ashmole incorporated it into his own private museum (Ashmolean Museum), the contents of which he began to distribute to the University of Oxford in 1675. The Bestiary was transferred with other manuscripts from the museum to the Bodleian Library in 1860.

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