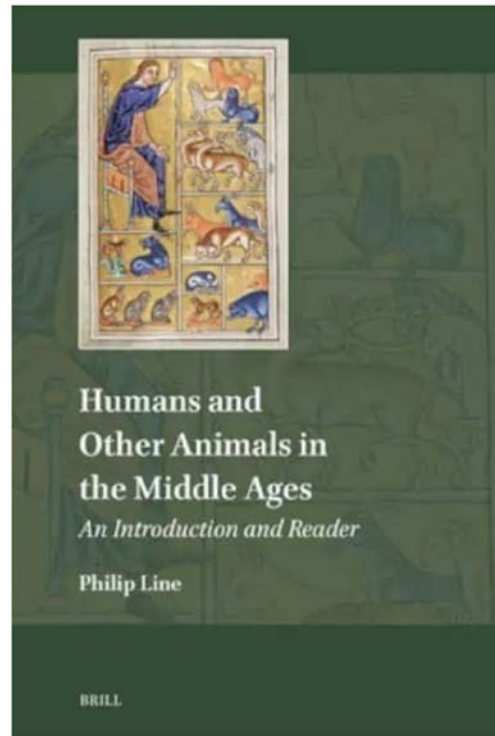


The fate and life of non-human animals during the Medieval times

Line, Philip: *Humans and Other Animals in the Middle Ages: An Introduction and Reader*. (Explorations in Medieval Culture 27.) Brill 2025

This voluminous work indicates the steady and ever-growing interest in the varying yet constant attitudes history. The historical animal studies delve into the roots of our cultural attitudes and treatment of other animals, with this book tracing them back to medieval times and partially to antiquity. For a non-medievalist (like the present writer), Philip Line's book is extremely useful because, as the title suggests, it is not merely a textbook (the word "Introduction" in the subtitle is too meekly put) but also a reader containing good translations of quite long text passages both from Latin and vernacular languages, mostly from already published works, with many also translated by Line himself. The quoted authors are helpfully collected with short biographies. A general index aids in navigating the vast scope of the work. Special mention should be made of the 29 high-quality il-



lustrations, mostly from medieval manuscripts, which are collected at the end.

The chronological and geographical parameters of the book are solidly justified in the Introduction. Line's chronological scope extends beyond the conventional periodization of the Middle Ages: it begins with late antiquity and concludes with the Reformation, comprising the years 300 CE to the 1520s CE. The geographical focus of the book is primarily on medieval Roman Catholic culture, with many passages drawn especially from Anglo-Saxon medieval literature. However, it also includes interesting excerpts from Icelandic and other Scandinavian sagas, which represent

pagan or semi-pagan literature. The Eastern Roman Empire, known as Byzantium, the medieval East, produced a remarkable body of literature, some of which pertains to animals, to which Line occasionally refers, such as the horse care and veterinarian manual, the *Hippiatrica* (p. 433) and the Byzantine Emperor's military treatise (p. 586). Although Line mentions that he has excluded medieval Arabic and Jewish literature – the former so influential for scholastic philosophy – he nonetheless provides some references to the former and, obviously, to the Old Testament. The book also includes excerpts from three Roman authors: Pliny the Elder's *Natural history* (1st c. CE) and from two authors of the 2nd century: Arrian's *Kynēgetika*, a manual for hunting with hounds (the Greek title is missing from the excerpt, p. 199; Arrian wrote in Greek) and Apuleius's *Golden Ass*, which tells the story of a man who was transformed into a donkey, a work that, as Line notes, was well known in the Middle Ages (p. 185). One excerpt is from Aristotle's *Politics* (p. 105), in which Aristotle defines human beings as more "political" (*politikos*) animals than bees. Aristotle wrote five books on animals, three of which were collectively known by the Latin name *De animalibus* during medieval times, when Aristotle was often referred to as "the Philosopher", as he was by Thomas Aquinas.

Line also emphasizes the value of zooarchaeological material for historical

animal studies. Although the focus of the book is on written sources, Line occasionally addresses archaeological findings, which could create discrepancies with the written evidence (such as the elite's practice of keeping swans, pp. 357–358). Moreover, he commendably emphasizes that "written works represent only a part of the story" and that "some aspects of the subject are poorly represented in written works" (p. 3).

In addition to the Introduction, the book consists of twelve chapters. The titles of the main chapters reflect the extensive and ambitious scope of the book. Chapter 1, "The Genesis of the Animals", analyses the two accounts of creation in *Genesis*, the tales of Noah's Ark, and the taxonomy of animals, among other topics. Chapter 2, "Animals in Medieval Natural Philosophy", outlines the ideas about animals and the animal soul in Aquinas's monumental work, *Summa Theologiae*, as well as in the works of other writers, like Nemesius's *On Human Nature* (in Greek) from the turn of the 4th and 5th century. Their ideas were based on the dominion over animals authorized by *Genesis* (1:26) on one hand, but, as Line points out, also on the concept of human beings as animals, albeit special ones, on the other.

Chapter 3, "Animals as Exemplars", charts the use of animals as moral exempla and the medieval idea of the "book of nature", with the task of humans to inter-

pret it and find God's hidden purposes, as in the portents, while Chapter 4, "Animals in Field, Park, and Forest", describes medieval practices regarding the keeping of animals, husbandry and livestock management. Chapter 5, "Hunting", presents various hunting methods, including hunting with hawks, which was not practised in antiquity. Chapter 6, "Animals and Law", analyses animals as commodities, the concept of "natural law", and the trials of animals, the peculiar medieval proceedings against animals. Chapter 7, "Beast-Humans and Human Beasts", explores the blurring of boundaries between human and other animals.

Chapter 8, "Animals as Food", which consists of ten subchapters, addresses the consumption of animals, dietary rules, and discusses, for instance, how abstaining from meat was seen as heresy by the early Church Fathers. In Chapter 9, "Animals, Disease and Medicine", Line presents medieval veterinary medicine and how animals were used as ingredients in many medicines for humans as well as descriptions of virulent diseases with high morbidity among domestic animals. Chapter 10, "Animals and Saints", reports on the saints' relationships with animals in hagiographies, modelling the prelapsarian harmony that prevailed in paradise. Chapter 11, "Animals for Show and Companionship", includes examples of animals kept as pets in the modern sense (also naming of animals),

as well as the often-cruel treatment and care of animals in menageries and shows. Finally, Chapter 12, "Animals at War", discusses war horses and other animals, like pack animals, in battles but also shows how domestic animals were pillaged by troops – a phenomenon already familiar from Homer's *Iliad*.

As the titles of the chapters suggest, Line's book focuses more on real-life animals, although the third and seventh chapters address how animals have been represented in literature. There is, of course, some overlap. Zoophilia (a subchapter in Chapter 7) is treated as equivalent to bestiality, which is also discussed elsewhere, particularly in relation to legislation (Chapter 6). Some chapters contain a brief survey of the written sources and literary genres relevant to the themes under discussion. Overall, the scope of the sources is vast, including the Bible and its commentaries, texts by Church Fathers and other theological works, official documents, law texts and decrees, philosophical texts, medieval zoology (e.g., Albert the Great), encyclopaedic works (like Isidorus' *Etymologiae* from the 7th century), treatises on veterinary medicine and animal husbandry, culinary guides, bestiaries, physiognomic tracts, and fiction, such as dialogues and poems (e.g., *Beowulf*) and fables.

One of the agendas of the book is to broaden the general picture of the treatment of and attitudes toward ani-

mals during the Middle Ages: it is not as “dark” as one may suggest (p. 1). Line presents many examples of empathy, even sympathy, toward animals among the medieval textual evidence (theriophily is mentioned on p. 541 but not pertaining to the Middle Ages). There is, for instance, an elegy for a pet sparrow named Philip, whose owner was a young nun (pp. 524–525). Line suggests that epitaphs, and even sermons, were not rare for the pet or companion animals of the aristocracy. The owner might have even received letters of condolence because of a lost companion animal (pp. 527–528)

As a Graecist, Greek words and titles naturally pop up in the text while I am reading, but a few errors, such as the name of Gregory of Nyssa’s work (p. 38 n. 21 and in the Bibliography), the chapter name of the military treatise (*Peri apliktōn*, p. 586) and the invalid transliteration of ‘fox’ (pro *alōpēx*) mentioned

along with *alopecia*, a disease named after the fox (p. 443), can be attributed to the publisher. The exact reference to Plato’s *Republic* pertaining to the metaphor of the *polis* as a ship of fools is 6.488b–c (p. 505 n. 21). Sextus Empiricus is not a “Roman cynic” (p. 129) but a Greek sceptic, an adherent of the Pyrrhonian school of scepticism. In Graeco-Roman studies, *metempsychōsis* is equivalent to reincarnation or the transmigration of souls after death. Line uses the term, *metempsychosis*, to describe a transformation of a character appearing in animal form in a Scandinavian saga (p. 314). A more fitting term would be *metempsychōmatosis*, which is, of course, a rare and ambiguous word.

Overall, the book is highly recommendable for anyone interested in the history of human interactions with animals.¹

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1 *Note on the use of AI:* No generative AI was used in the background work or writing of this review.