Heretical Cats: Animal Symbolism in Religious Discourse

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Centuries before their more familiar association with the early modern witch craze, cats were sometimes regarded as symbols of suspect religious (and wider social) behaviour. Where they were represented as deviant animals, cats were particularly connected with heretics and idolaters in the high Middle Ages. In iconography one finds representations of cats in the context of demonology and devil-worship, or as the idol allegedly worshipped by Waldensians, Cathars, or the Templars. In this article, I will trace the origins of using cat symbolism in the denunciations of heretics, as well as examining some possible backgrounds for these beliefs in notions about cats in medieval natural philosophy and science.

Attitudes to animals in general during the Middle Ages could be informed by a strictly utilitarian approach. For instance, in the early fourteenth century, Henri de Mondeville described it as a characteristic sign of peasant stupidity that they would lavish care, love and affection on a decrepit, old and useless dog.[1] Cats were defined through their usefulness as rodent catchers, even so far that an alternative name for the more common label *catus* was *musio* because it was the enemy of the mouse (*mus*), according to the *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville. This was a text which defined the relations of animals to humans primarily as creatures rendering service to people, based on the "presumed dominion bestowed by Adam's naming" of the beasts.[2] Cats seem to have been ubiquitous inhabitants of urban and rural areas, at least by the thirteenth century, if one follows the logic in Salimbene's remark that where some farmsteads near Imola had been burnt down, 27 fugitive cats were snared in that area alone[3] – each af-

[1] Henri de Mondeville was a notable and famously arrogant surgeon. He used the animal analogy in his *Chirurgie*. Marie-Christine Pouchelle, *The Body and Surgery in the Middle Ages* (Oxford: Polity Press, 1990), 56.

[2] Joyce E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 7; cf. *Isidori Hispalensis Episcopi Etymologiarum sive Originum Libri XX*, ed. Wallace Martin Lindsay (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1911, repr. 1985) XII,i,1 and XII,ii,38.

[3] Edward A. Armstrong, *Saint Francis: Nature Mystic: The Derivation and Significance of the Nature Stories in the Franciscan Legend* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: Univer-

fected farm must have had more than one cat, and Salimbene assumes that these "large and beautiful" animals, captured to be skinned by a furrier, must have been the housecats of those farms during peacetime.[4] In the medieval bestiaries, in contrast to many other types of text and contexts where cats are given more of a symbolic aspect, they were "usually depicted performing their domestic duty of chasing mice."[5] Bestiary entries on the cat always precede those on *mus*, and the animal is almost invariably called *musio* rather than *catus* in such texts. Furthermore, "the [bestiary] texts say nothing about the cat's relationship" with people.[6] So cats could be useful mousers while alive, and providers of pelts when dead.[7]

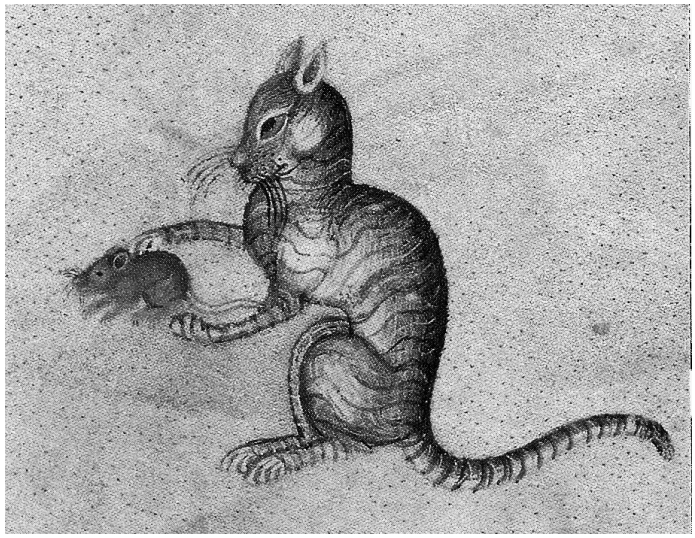

Fig. 1: Cat with mouse, Luttrell Psalter, c.1330 (British Library MS Add. 42130, f. 190). From: Juliett Clutton-Brock, *The British Museum Book of Cats: Ancient and Modern* (London: British Museum Press, 1988), 43

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sity of California Press, 1973), 104; cf. George G. Coulton, *From St Francis to Dante* (London: Nutt, 1906), 56.

[4] Laurence Bobis, *Die Katze. Geschichte und Legenden* (Leipzig: Gustav Kiepenheuer, 2001), 65.

[5] Debra Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries: Text, Image, Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1995), 175.

[6] Wilma George and Brunsdon Yapp, *The Naming of the Beasts: Natural History in the Medieval Bestiary* (London: Duckworth, 1991), 115. Perhaps the different naming patterns of the cat – the *musio* of the bestiaries and the *catus* of other texts – reflect the context in which the animal occurs. For instance, *musio* with its connotations of utilitarian mousing is appropriate for a bestiary where the main concern is natural history as the Middle Ages knew it, while *catus* appears more often in religious texts where a connection can be made with the Cathars (see below). Another possibility is that *catus* is more of a vernacular description (most European languages have a word for cat derived from *catus*, which in Latin appeared around the 4th or 5th century), while *musio* is the name educated elites used – reminiscent of our common names and scientific classifications today.

[7] For some of the numerous references to cat skinning see, e. g., the archaeological evidence from Sweden; cf. Bengt Wigh, "Animal Bones from the Viking Town of Birka, Sweden," in *Leather and Fur: Aspects of Early Medieval Trade and Technology*, ed. Esther Cameron (London: Archetype, 1998), 86.

But even the totally utilitarian aspect of mousing could be turned into a symbolic act. Cats feature in the moralising *Parables* of Odo of Cheriton, written after 1219, fables which were drawn from and inspired by classical sources, and were modified to mirror and criticise ecclesiastical society. The story of the country mouse "who would rather eat simple fare in safety than rich food in the presence of a cat," was reinterpreted to make a criticism of the "simoniacs and usurers" who eat their "unjustly acquired morsel" in the presence of the Devil, "the cat who devours souls."[8]

From the thirteenth century onwards the cat toying with a captured mouse becomes a simile often employed by preachers. Pierre de Limoges used this simile to illustrate the notion of the devil playing a while with the sinner before he damns him forever.[9] An *exemplum* in the *Alphabetum Narrationum* of Arnold of Liège, originally composed 1308, compared the devil stalking the human soul to a cat playing with a mouse. In a collection of *exempla*, *Ci-nous dit*, from about 1318, the cat is lurking to catch a mouse but is tricked by a fox, as a metaphor for someone with a bad temper oneself being tricked by the devil.[10] The *Summa de exemplis* of the Dominican Johannes of San Gimignano (†1323) states that the cat chases the mouse, just as the devil harasses a person.[11] Dan Michel's *Ayenbite of Inwyt* (c. 1340) employs the motif of the cat playing with a mouse to warn of the temptations with which the fiend is trying to divert us from our repentance.[12] Finally, William Caxton picked up this analogy and mentioned it in his Royal Book (1484): "The devyl playeth ofte with the synnar, lyke as the catte doth with the mous."[13] In certain art contexts the figure of a cat jumping on a mouse or rat, as featured in a carving on the font in the church at Hodnet, Shropshire, can also be a symbol of the devil trying to pounce on an unwary soul;[14] a similar carving is found at the church in Kirkburn, East Riding of Yorkshire.[15] Nevertheless, the cat's symbolic representation of the Devil was varied when used didactically so that "to medieval preachers the cat was either Satan

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[8] Joyce E. Salisbury, "Human Animals of Medieval Fables," in *Animals in the Middle Ages*, ed. Nona C. Flores (New York and London: Routledge, 2000), 63; cf. *The Fables of Odo of Cheriton*, transl. J. C. Jacobs (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1985), 87-8.

[9] Bobis, *Die Katze*, 121; cf. the text in Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS lat. 15971, fol. 41.

[10] Bobis, *Die Katze*, 121.

[11] Ibidem; cf. *Summa de exemplis et rerum similitudinibus locupletissima ... Fr. Joanne a S. Geminiano* (Venice, 1584), V, 39, 138-40.

[12] Bobis, *Die Katze*, 121; cf. *Dan Michel's Ayenbite of Inwyt*, ed. R. Morris (London: Early English Text Society, 1866), 179.

[13] Malcolm Jones, *The Secret Middle Ages: Discovering the Real Medieval World* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2002), 38-9; cf. Gertrud Blaschitz, "Die Katze," in *Symbole des Alltags. Alltag der Symbole*, ed. eadem et al. (Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1992), 589-615.

[14] M. W. Tisdall, *God's Beasts: Identify and Understand Animals in Church Carvings: The stories that give point and purpose to over one hundred varieties of animal and other figures in our church carvings* (Plymouth: Charlesfort, 1998), 42 and photo.

[15] Ibidem, 173 and photo.

seeking to catch the mouse (the soul), or the wicked priest who wished to devour his parishioners."[16]

Caesarius of Heisterbach (1180-c. 1240) mentioned the story of a rapacious priest who rushes to attend the death of a rich man in the hope of obtaining some money, while an upright deacon attends the death of a poor widow. The deacon observes the Virgin Mary surrounded by an angelic choir in the ramshackle house of the widow, but then at the bed of the rich man he sees the dying man surrounded by black cats.[17] In a manuscript of the fourteenth century the illuminator Remiet depicted this scene of the contrasting deaths. He shows the rich man surrounded by panderers and flatterers in the shape of cats, while the poor widow is tended to by the Virgin and two angels (Fig. 2).

Fig. 2: Death of a rich man surrounded by cats and death of a poor widow (Remiet, Miroir historial, Remiet, last quarter 14th c. (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, MS fr. 312, f. 334v).
From: Michael Camille, *Master of Death*
(New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1996), 157

[16] Beryl Rowland, *Animals with Human Faces: A Guide to Animal Symbolism* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1974), 52.
[17] Bobis, *Die Katze*, 166-7.

However, the appearance of these cats may be more like wild cats, if compared with how cats are depicted in the hunting book of Gaston Phoebus, Comte de Foix, written before 1391 (Fig. 3).

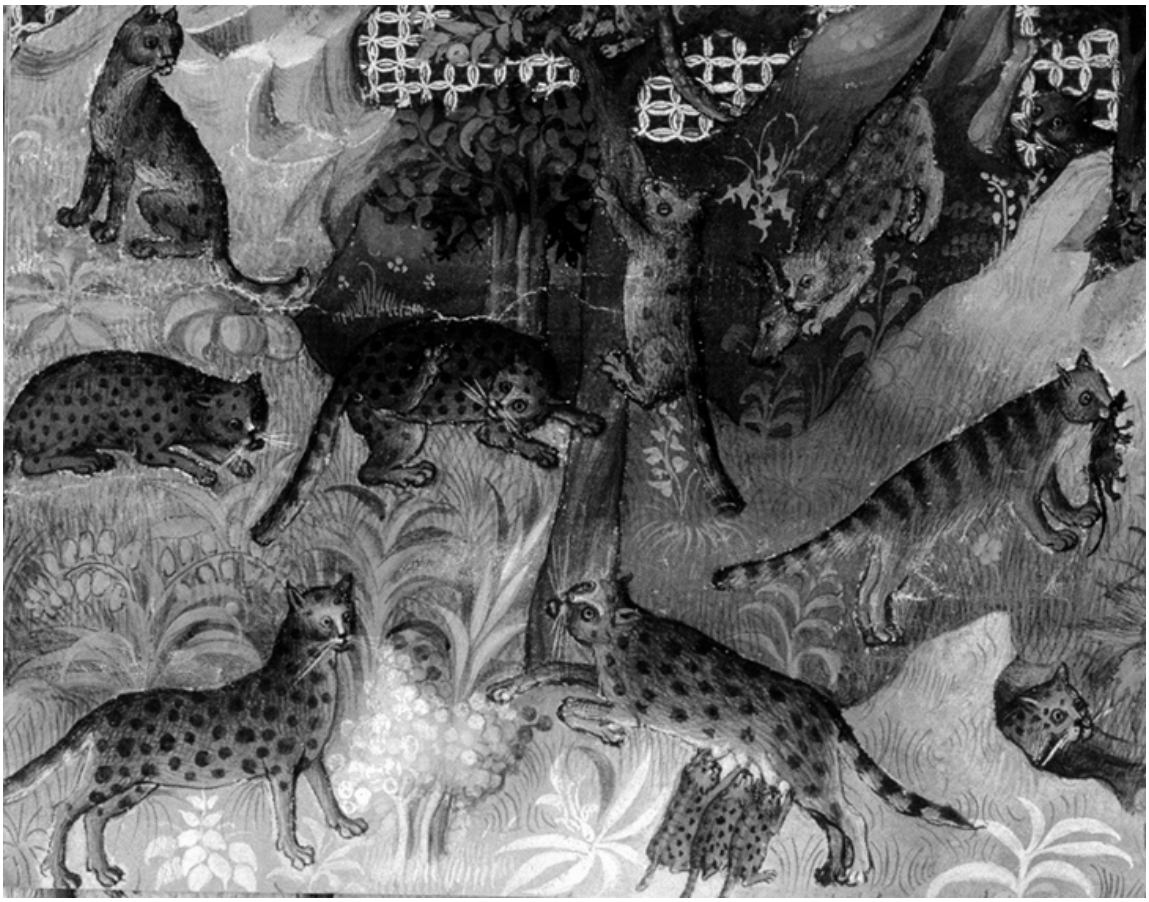

Fig. 3: Wild cats as beasts to be hunted in their natural habitat (Hunting Book of Gaston Phébus, c. 1400, Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale). From: Claude d'Anthenaise (intro.), *The Hunting Book of Gaston Phébus* (Dallas: Hackberry Press, 2002), 22

An English translation of this book was made 1406-13 by Edward, second Duke of York, who wrote additional material concerning hunting specific to England: "Of common wild cats I need not speak much, for every hunter in England knows them, and their falseness and malice are well known. But one thing I dare well say that if any beast has the devil's spirit in him without doubt it is the cat, both the wild and the tame."[18] Here the cat is again put in place of comparison with the "common bestiary depiction of a cat catching mice to represent the devil's taking of human souls."[19]

[18] Cited by Juliet Clutton-Brock, *The British Museum Book of Cats: Ancient and Modern* (London: British Museum, 1994), 43-5, after the transcription by William A. and Florence Baillie-Grohman, *The Master of Game by Edward, Second Duke of York* (London: Ballantyne, Hanson and Co., 1904).

[19] James I. McNelis, III, "A Greyhound Should Have 'Eres in the Manere of a Serpent': Bestiary Material in the Hunting Manuals *Livre de Chasse* and *The Master of Game,*" in *Animals and the Symbolic in Mediaeval Art and Literature*, ed. Luuk A. J. R. Houwen (Groningen: Egbert Forsten, 1997), 71.

The cat as diabolical animal occurs predominantly in two varieties: as allegory of the devil catching souls, and as direct manifestation of the devil, as an animal worshipped by heretics or later on by witches in subverted Sabbath ceremonies.

At the end of the twelfth century the cat appears for the first time as an individualised demon in an episode from the life of St Bartholomew of Farne, a hermit from Northumbria. He regularly fought against the devil in the shape of a mouse, lion or bull, but, in particular, as an ape or a cat. Prefiguring later associations of cats with heretics, the author of this *vita* explains that it is perfectly understandable that the devil who wanted to usurp divinity took on the shape of a catcher of mice, that is, a cat.[20] This represents a word game on the meaning of *captor*, which Isidore of Seville had already remarked on, deriving the name *catus* from *captura*.[21] The devilish cat featured in *De nugis curialium* of Walter Map (written about 1180) through involvement in satanic rituals. Walter Map "describes how the Devil descends as a black cat (*murilegus niger*) before his devotees. The worshippers put out the light and draw near to the place where they saw their master. They feel after him and when they have found him they kiss him under the tail."[22]

A pictorial representation of the alleged worship of a monstrous black feline can perhaps be identified in an image from the late twelfth-century Winchester Bible. The frontispiece to the Book of Maccabees depicts Mattathias beheading the idolatrous Jew, while another idolater has already suffered that fate, his severed head lying on the altar on which a cat-shaped idol was worshipped (Fig. 4).

Heretics and Jews were often attributed with the same derogatory symbolism which can be seen in the following image: A miniature in a *Bible Moralisée* made at Paris in the 1220s[23] contains a roundel depicting the Antichrist being adored by two Jews and two heretics (a pair of each are on either side of him). The Jews may be identified as such by their conical hats, while the two heretics each hold up a cat toward the Antichrist – the cat functions here as visual identifier for the heretic (Fig. 5).

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[20] Bobis, *Die Katze*, 179; cf. *Vita sancti Bartholomaei eremitae Farnensis*, in *Acta sanctorum* IV, 836 (24 June).

[21] Bobis, *Die Katze*, 180; cf. note 2.

[22] Beryl Rowland, *Blind Beasts: Chaucer's Animal World* (Kent OH: Kent State University Press, 1971), 70; cf. Walter Map, *De nugis curialium*, ed. Montague Rhodes James, Anecdota Oxonensia XIV (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914).

[23] Österreichische Nationalbibliothek (Vienna), MS 1779, f. 101v; cf. Sara Lipton, "Jews, Heretics, and the Sign of the Cat in the *Bible Moralisée*," *Word and Image* 8 (1992): 362-77; Sara Lipton, *Images of Intolerance: The Representation of Jews and Judaism in the Bible Moralisée* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 83-111; also Suzanne Lewis, *Reading Images: Narrative Discourse and Reception in the Thirteenth-Century Illuminated Apocalypse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 43-4.

Fig. 4: Cat-headed demon and idolater beheaded by Mattathias
(Winchester Bible, f. 350v, late 12th c., Winchester Cathedral MS).
From: Malcolm Jones, *The Secret Middle Ages* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2002)

Fig. 5: The adorers of Antichrist include heretics holding cats
(Bible Moralisée, Paris, 1220s, Vienna, Österr. Nationalbibliothek MS 1779, f. 101v).
From: Debra Higgs Strickland, *Saracens, Demons & Jews: Making Monsters in Medieval Art*
(Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003), 218

Also in the early thirteenth century, William of Auvergne stated in his *Tractatus de fide et legibus* that the devil can appear to his followers in the shape of a black cat or a toad.[24] Some heretics, notably Cathars and Waldensians, were accused of worshipping the Devil in the shape of a black (tom) cat, according to Pope Gregory IX in 1233, in rituals where "the devotees kissed the Devil's feline posterior."[25] At a certain point in the heretics' ceremony "a black cat (*gattus niger*), the size of a small dog, with an upright tail descends backwards down a statue which is usually at the meeting," and the participants take turns to kiss "the cat's rear."[26] Later on, a "shining man" appears, his upper shining body like Lucifer but his lower body "hairy like a cat (*hispidus sicut gattus*)."[27] In the protocols of the canonisation of St. Dominic which took place in the summer of 1233 at the initiation Pope Gregory IX, one witness, a certain woman Bérengère, testifying against the Cathars, swore under oath that back in 1206/7 at Fanjeaux she had seen how Dominic exorcised nine noble ladies who had been possessed by the devil in the shape of a large black cat.[28] At this time, the epitome of anxiety about cats, especially black cats, had been reached and Pope Gregory IX issued the bull *Vox in Rama* in which he urged the German bishops in particular to give their full support to the papal inquisitor, Conrad of Marburg, to stamp out this heresy.[29] Although the inquisitors were exhorted to draw their attention especially to black cats, also frogs or toads were allegedly kissed, with geese or ducks also present at the initiation rituals ascribed to heretics in this text. This shows that the cat as outward appearance of the devil is just one of his many animal manifestations: "Medieval devils were polymorphous and polychromatic. Their bodies took on the forms ... [of] a whole bestiary that became increasingly diverse over the course of time."[30]

In 1236 Stephen of Bourbon, acting as inquisitor, was called to Clermont by Bishop Hugues de la Tour to judge a group of heretics, probably Waldensians. Among them was a woman who participated in secret gatherings where Lucifer was called upon and a dreadful cat appeared, descending down a lance

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[24] Erhard Oeser, *Katze und Mensch. Die Geschichte einer Beziehung* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 2005), 88; cf. Guillaume d'Auvergne, *Opera Omnia* (Orléans 1674).

[25] Rowland, *Animals with Human Faces*, 51.

[26] Quoted in Donald Engels, *Classical Cats: The Rise and Fall of the Sacred Cat* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), 184-5.

[27] Quoted in ibidem, 185.

[28] Oeser, *Katze und Mensch*, 88-9; Bobis, *Die Katze*, 183; cf. *Acta canonizationis sancti Dominici*, ed. Angelus Maria Walz, in *Monumenta Ordinis Fratrum Praedicatorum Historica* XVI, fasc. II (Rome: Institutum Historicum FF. Praedicatorum, 1935), 186.

[29] Cf. the text in *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, *Epistolae Seculi XIII e Registris Pontificum Romanorum Selecta*, vol. 1, (Berlin, 1883, repr. Munich: Monumenta Germaniae Historica, 1982), part 1, 432-4, n. 537.

[30] Michel Pastoureau, *Black: The History of a Color* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2009), 47.

that had been rammed in the ground. The cat sprayed those present with water, using its tail to flick the water in a mockery of the actions of a priest blessing with holy water.[31] Suspicious Waldensian rites feature in a fourteenth-century tract, in which they were charged with similar acts: a demon appeared to them in the shape of a cat which they kissed beneath its tail.[32] At another indictment of the Waldensians in 1387 in Turin and Pignerol, one Antonio Galosna said that Martin, an accused heretic, would hold a black cat of the size of a lamb in his arms, and at feasts of the heretics this Martin would feed the cat as if it was one of the guests and said that it was the best friend he had in all the world.[33]

Last but not least, at their various trials between 1307 and 1311, the Templars, like the Cathars and Waldensians before them, were accused amongst other things that a cat sometimes appeared at their congregations, which they worshipped: *Item, quod adorabant quemdam catum sibi in ipsa congregatione apparentem quandoque.*[34]

Alan of Lille (c. 1182-1202) was the medieval author who first linked cats with one group of heretics in particular, the Cathars, with the help of etymological reasoning.[35] Cat (Latin *cattus*) is supposedly related to Cathar. He thought that the Cathars worshipped Lucifer as a cat with the rite of bottom-kissing: *Vel Cathari dicuntur a cato, quia, ut dicitur, osculantur posteriora catti, in cujius specie, ut dicunt, apparet eis Lucifer*.[36] However, Alan of Lille also derived Cathar from two other sources, namely the Greek *catha* – 'set apart' and the Latin *casta* – 'chaste'. His use of the phrase *ut dicitur* implies that he rather cautiously asserted cats as (the third) origin of the Cathars' name.[37]

Popular thought in Germany nevertheless was influenced by Alan's etymology, since besides the educated word *Häretiker* (heretic), the vernacular word *Ketzer* was used, traced back to *Kater* (tom cat).[38] In the popular imagination, then, those committing heresy – *Ketzerei* in German – are conflated with those committing unspeakable acts with tom cats – *Kater*. Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm had already pointed out that *Ketzer* as well as 'Cathar' stem from the Greek *catharoi* – 'the pure', but that this origin must have been forgotten quite early. Instead it was brought into an uncertain association to 'cat' ("Der ursprung musz aber früh vergessen worden sein, man brachte das wort in eine un-

[31] Oeser, *Katze und Mensch*, 90, citing Albert Lecoy de la Marche (ed.), *Anecdotes historiques, légendes et apologues tirés du recueil inédit d'Etienne de Bourbon, dominicain du XIIIe siècle* (Paris: H. Loones, 1877), 322-3, note 367.
[32] Cited by Rowland, *Blind Beasts*, 71.
[33] Oeser, *Katze und Mensch*, 90; cf. *Processus contra Valdenses in Lombardia superiori, anno 1387*, ed. G. Amati, *Archivio storico italiano*, vol. II, part I (1865), 5.
[34] Rowland, *Blind Beasts*, 71.
[35] Jones, *The Secret Middle Ages*, 39-40; on Alan of Lille and cats cf. Nicholas J. Saunders, *The Cult of the Cat* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1991), 69.
[36] Rowland, *Animals with Human Faces*, 51, cf. Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 210, col. 366.
[37] Bobis, *Die Katze*, 187.
[38] Rowland, *Animals with Human Faces*, 51.

gewisse beziehung zu katze").[39] A heretic is also referred to as a *katzenküsser*, that is, a 'cat kisser' by Berthold von Regensburg: "cat kisser from which the heretic (Ketzer) is called heretic, since he is similar in his ways to cats (in their falsity)."[40] A commented translation of the Pseudo-Albertus Magnus' *De secretis mulierum* into German, dating from the third quarter of the fifteenth century, also makes the lexical link between cat (*Katze*) and heretic (*Ketzer*) speaking of "katzen glauben und Deuscherey [modern German *Täuscherei* – 'deception']."[41] Heresy, then, is cat belief.

Fig. 6: Cat idol at Witches' Sabbath (Martin le Franc, *Le Champion des Dames*, end of 15th c. Bibliothèque municipale de Grenoble, MS 875, fol. 346v). From: Bobis, *Die Katze*, 184

Although most associations of satanic cats were made with heretics during the Middle Ages, there are occasional mentions of cats and witches in the same context. Martin le Franc, provost in Lausanne, wrote an allegorical text *Le Champion des Dames* (c.1440), in which old women were accused of holding a

[39] *Deutsches Wörterbuch* von Jacob Grimm und Wilhelm Grimm. 16 Bde. [in 32 Teilbänden] (Leipzig: S. Hirzel 1854-1960), *sv* Ketzer.

[40] Ibidem.

[41] Bettina Bildhauer, *Medieval Blood* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2006), 36, note 52, referring to the unpublished edition of *Pseudo-Albertus Magnus,* "*Secreta Mulierum cum Commento, Deutsch*: Critical Text and Commentary," ed. Margaret Rose Schleissner, doctoral diss., University of Princeton, 1987, lines 924-6 and 2449-61; cf. Georg Friedrich Benecke, Wilhelm Müller and Friedrich Zarncke (ed.), *Mittelhochdeutsches Wörterbuch*, 3 vols. (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1854-61), vol. 1, col. 792.

Witches' Sabbath (Fig. 6). This text followed the earlier descriptions of so-called 'Waldensian witches', that is, women worshipping the devil in the form of a black cat or goat.

A popular story concerned the idea that wounds inflicted on shape-shifting women while they were cats were still visible once they had returned to their human shape. The tale originated c. 1211 with Gervase of Tilbury, who wrote on witches who flew by night and who could change their shape, preferably into that of a cat. In the process, "women have been seen and wounded in the shape of cats by persons who were secretly on watch."[42] This story of metamorphosis was repeated by the authors of the infamous *Malleus Maleficarum*, c. 1486, and from there found its unstoppable way into subsequent witch folklore. It may come as no surprise that Sprenger and Institutoris, the authors of this text, were Dominicans, the Dogs of the Lord, and therefore metaphorically the sworn enemies of the cat.[43] Also in 1486, Pope Innocent VIII used his authority to announce that the cat was the devil's favourite animal and the idol of all witches.[44] Thus, the cat had by then assumed its role as the special protective spirit of the witch.

To recapitulate, cats became associated with heretics and the devil during the later twelfth century, increasingly so at the turn of the twelfth to thirteenth centuries, while the diabolical cats as familiar of witches started to make their appearance during the fourteenth century.[45] What were the origins of these beliefs and stereotypes?

Cats are not truly domestic animals. Some breeds of cats are intermediate between domestic animals, that is, animals which have been moulded by human interference into their livelihood and breeding, and domesticated animals, that is, animals where individuals "have been made more tractable or tame but whose breeding does not involve intentional selection."[46] The semi-wild nature of cats was recognised and moralised on in medieval texts.

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[42] *Scimus quasdam (feminas) in forma cattarum a furtiva vigilantibus de nocte visas ac vulneratas in crastino vulnera truncationesque membrorum ostendisse*, Gervase of Tilbury, *Otia imperialia*, I, c. 93; cited in Jones, *The Secret Middle Ages*, 40; cf. Douglas Gray, "Notes on Some Medieval, Magical and Moral Cats," in *Langland, the Mystics and the Medieval English Tradition: Essays in Honour of S. S. Hussey*, ed. Helen Phillips (Woodbridge: Brewer, 1990), 185-202, esp. 189.

[43] Bobis, *Die Katze*, 197, notes that it is only as part of the fight against heresy that the antagonistic pair cat/dog is born, which also ushers in a change in medieval concepts of animals, since until then only the notion of the pair cat/mouse existed ("Erst im Kampf gegen die Häretiker ist dieses antagonistische Paar geboren worden, was auch eine Wende in der mittelalterlichen Vorstellung von der Tierwelt ankündigt, die bis dahin nur das Paar Katze und Maus kannte.").

[44] Stefano Zuffi, *Katzen in der Kunst* (Cologne: Dumont, 2007), 14.

[45] Bobis, *Die Katze*, 177.

[46] Juliet Clutton-Brock, *Domesticated Animals from Early Times* (London: British Museum, 1981), 104.

A definition of wild animals is given at the beginning of a mid-thirteenth century English Bestiary: “They are called beasts because they possess their natural freedom and act as they themselves have willed. Their will is indeed free and they range hither and thither; where their instinct leads them, they go."[47] This description could also be applied to the domestic cat, since as any cat owner knows, one does not actually ‘own’ a cat, and unless locked in cats will wander as they please. Rudyard Kipling's more recent story of the *Cat that Walked by Himself* and the thirteenth-century text ring strangely familiar.[48]

The very behaviour of cats that makes them such useful pest controllers is also the behaviour that is normal for wild cats.[49] The ideal cat in the Welsh law code of Hywel Dda (around 945) is thus: “Her qualities are to see, to hear, to kill mice, to have her claws whole, to nurse and not to devour kittens.”[50] Even the description of the house cat by Bartholomaeus Anglicus is not altogether that of a totally domestic animal: “He is a full lecherous beast in youth, swift pliant and merry ... and is led by a straw and playeth therewith: and is a right heavy beast in age and full sleepy, and lyeth slyly in wait for mice. ... In time of love is hard fighting for wives, and one rendeth the other grievously with biting and with claws. And he maketh a rueful noise and ghastful, when one proffereth to fight another; and unneth is hurt when he is thrown off an high place ...”[51]

Medieval people may have wanted to restrict cats to the function of animated mousetraps, for the very reason that the cat “stands at the threshold between the familiar and the wild.”[52] “Cats were intruders into human society. They could not be owned. They entered the house by stealth, like mice, and were suffered because they kept the insufferable mice in check.”[53] This causes a kind of conceptual tension. While the cat possesses the characteristics of a good hunter it is useful, “but as long as it does it remains incompletely domesticated.”[54] Heretics, too, in a transferred sense, are not completely domesticated, since by challenging orthodox thought and roaming freely hither and thither in their interpretation of religious beliefs they resemble the bestiary definition of

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[47] Richard Barber, *Bestiary: Being an English Version of the Bodleian Library, Oxford MS Bodley 764* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1999), 23.

[48] Rudyard Kipling, *Just So Stories for Little Children* (1902; repr. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing 2004), 220-1: "He will kill mice, and he will be kind to Babies when he is in the house, just as long as they do not pull his tail too hard. But when he has done that, and between times, and when the moon gets up and night comes, he is the Cat that walks by himself, and all places are alike to him. Then he goes out to the Wet Wild Woods or up the Wet Wild Trees or on the Wet Wild Roofs, waving his wild tail and walking by his wild lone."

[49] Salisbury, *The Beast Within*, 14.

[50] Clutton-Brock, *The British Museum Book of Cats*, 41.

[51] Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *De proprietatibus rerum*, written about 1230 (English translation form Latin in 1397 by John de Trevisa), cited by Francis Klingender, *Animals in Art and Thought to the End of the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971), 358.

[52] Bobis, *Die Katze*, 125.

[53] John Nash, *Cats* (Themes in Art) (London: Scala, 1992), 9.

[54] Salisbury, *The Beast Within*, 14.

wildness. As symbolic animals, then, cats may be the heretical animal par excellence.[55]

Fig. 7: Cat and dog fighting beside the bed of a patient; detail from the fresco 'Care of the Sick' (Domenico di Bartolo, Ospedale di Santa Maria della Scala, Siena, 1440). From: Timothy Hyman, *Sienese Painting* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2003), 194

Dogs, in contrast to cats, have been and still are regarded as the loyal animal per se. Not for nothing is Fido a popular name for a pet dog. So, it comes as no surprise that the dog is on the side of orthodoxy and order in medieval minds. The well-known comparison of the Dominicans with *domini canes*, the watch dogs of the Lord, is a case in point. The notion of the dog guarding and even admonishing the sinner is sometimes represented graphically, in counterpoint to the cat which was "often used as a symbol of heresy."[56] The dog facing a cat with its back arched, ready to fight each other, are but details on a scene showing the interior of the patients' ward at a hospital in Siena (fig. 7), but in an analogous interpretation they are the two rival parties of physician and priest fighting over the patient, the dichotomy of body and soul symbolised in animal allegory. Perhaps the sculpture of a cat fighting with a dog carved in the lower

[55] For cats as occasional signifiers of heresy cf. Edward E. Armstrong, *St Francis: Nature Mystic. The Derivation and Significance of the Nature Stories in the Franciscan Legend* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1973), 104.

[56] Janetta Rebold Benton, *The Medieval Menagerie: Animals in the Art of the Middle Ages* (New York: Abbeville Press, 1992), 93.

triforium of Prague cathedral (fig. 8),[57] is to be interpreted in a similar allegorical fashion.

Fig. 8: Cat and dog fighting, sculpture in lower triforium, St Vitus cathedral Prague (c.1375/85, workshop of Peter Parler). From: author's collection

Finally, in its most expressive form, cat and dog symbolism may be found on a frieze depicting a variety of dangers that may threaten the faithful, in the cloister of Notre-Dame, Le Puy (Fig. 9). One of the scenes there depicts a man transformed into an animal because he was "defeated by his temptations".[58] He has the head of a cat and sports a tail, which significantly the faithful dog is biting into viciously, causing the cat-headed sinner to scream in pain. "Here the dog protects the church from heretics."[59] Interestingly, with a twelfth-century origin, this frieze antedates the founding of the Dominican order.

A little coda, one could say, a cat's tail, should be added. There were, in fact, also cat-lovers during the Middle Ages. Just two examples from opposite ends of the period may be mentioned. There is anecdotal evidence that before he became pope, Gregory I (the Great) kept a cat as his constant companion during

[57] Mentioned by Georg Wacha, "Tiere und Tierhaltung in der Stadt sowie im Wohnbereich des spätmittelalterlichen Menschen und ihre Darstellung in der bildenden Kunst," in *Das Leben in der Stadt des Spätmittelalters: Internationaler Kongress, Krems an der Donau*, Sitzungsberichte der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, philosophisch-historische Klasse, 325 (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1977), 229-60.

[58] Benton, *The Medieval Menagerie*, 93.

[59] Ibidem.

his years as a monk in the late sixth century.[60] He would carry the cat on his chest, frequently stroking it.[61] In the fourteenth century, the poet Petrarcha was also fond of his pet cat. When he died, the cat was put to death and embalmed. In the late eighteenth century, the cat's mummified body was seen by William Beckford lying in a niche adorned with a marble cat in Petrarcha's home in Arquá, with the following inscription: "I was the greatest passion, second only to Laura."[62]

Figure 9: Cat-headed person being bitten by a dog.
Relief from the cloister of Notre-Dame, Le Puy, 12th c.
From: Benton, *The Medieval Menagerie*, 93

Herein own may see a problem. Too great a devotion to one's companion animal could be severely criticised for religious and moralising reasons. Already during the early ninth century, Ermoldus Nigellus cited the story of a cat-loving hermit who lost his ability to see God, because the stronger his love grew for the cat, the less he was able to see Christ.[63] Goscelin, in his *Liber confortatorius*, a monastic rule of 1082/3, condemned the practice of keeping pets: "Take neither a cat nor birds nor a small animal or any other senseless creature as pet to be

[60] Howard Loxton, *99 Lives: Cats in History, Legend and Literature* (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 1998), 108.

[61] This reference can be found in the "Life of Pope Gregory" by John the Deacon (c. 874); cf. Madeline Swan, *A Curious History of Cats* (London: Little Books Ltd., 2005), 53; Bobis, Die Katze, 52.

[62] Swan, *A Curious History of Cats*, 62. The English traveller William Beckford was on his Grand Tour in 1780, described the scene and stated that in the poet's parlour "a niche in the wall contains the skeleton of his favourite cat, with a Latin epigram beneath, of Petrarch's composition;" cf. Katharine MacDonogh, *Reigning Cats and Dogs* (London: Fourth Estate, 1999), 187.

[63] Oeser, *Katze und Mensch*, 86-7; Bobis, *Die Katze*, 53. Ermoldus Niger's text is *Carmen exulis in honorem Pippini regis*, cf. Jacques Voisenet, "Animalité et mépris du monde (Ve-XIe siècle)," in L*'animal exemplaire au Moyen Age Ve-XVe siècles*, ed. J. Berlioz and M. A. Polo de Beaulieu (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 1999), 33.

with you. Be withdrawn and alone with God."[64] He criticised love for an animal for removing the human being from God and the animal from its proper duties. A revelation of purgatory which occurred in 1422 to a mystic nun mentions that the soul of a man was tormented and was seen being followed by a little dog and a cat, because "this dog and this cat shall always gnaw at you while you are here, because you loved them so beyond reason when you were alive."[65] In other words, people should beware of being punished for too great an affection for their pets.

In 1260, the General Chapter of the Franciscans at Narbonne made it official policy for the order that "no animal be kept, for any brother or any convent ..., except cats and certain birds for the removal of unclean things."[66] Female religious were also allowed to keep cats as only pets when all other animals were excluded, as the *Ancrene Wisse* states: "You, my dear sisters, unless you are forced by necessity and your director advises you to, must not keep any animal except a cat." (*Ye, mine leoue sustren, bute yef neod ow driue ant ower meistre hit reade, ne schulen habbe na beast bute cat ane.*)[67] One should note the exception granted to cats – the utilitarian value of them is greater than any dubious symbolic association with heresy.

Examining animals in hagiography and romance, David Salter asked whether medieval authors "respond to the animals they wrote about in experiential terms, bringing their knowledge of the dogs, cats, and horses that they saw around them to bear upon their portraits of the animals' imaginary counterparts, or did the conventional and symbolic associations of such beasts take precedence over quotidian experience?"[68] The answer, I think, is a bit of both, depending on the context in which an animal features in a particular text. Context is everything; or, as Nicholas Saunders put it, the territory of the cat "encompasses several overlapping physical and psychological landscapes, with each affecting the other by virtue of the ability of the human imagination to see connections and make analogies between the activities of people and those of

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[64] "Nimm weder eine Katze noch Vögel noch ein kleines Tierchen oder ein anderes vernunftloses Wesen als Haustier bei dir auf. Sei zurückgezogen und allein mit Gott." Cited by Oeser, *Katze und Mensch*, 87.

[65] Cited by Elizabeth Spearing (ed. and intro.), *Medieval Writings on Female Spirituality* (London: Penguin, 2002), 212, based on the purgatory vision of a text in a mid-fifteenth century MS in Lincoln Cathedral.

[66] James Serpell and Elizabeth Paul, "Pets and the Development of Positive Attitudes to Animals," in *Animals and Human Society: Changing Perspectives*, ed. Aubrey Manning and James Serpell (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), 133.

[67] *Ancrene Wisse*, part 8; see Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (ed.), *Medieval English Prose for Women: Selections from the Katherine Group and Ancrene Wisse* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 134, lines 18-19, and 135 for modern English.

[68] David Salter, *Holy and Noble Beasts: Encounters with Animals in Medieval Literature* (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001), 7.

cats. A black cat, for instance, may be regarded as a good 'ratter', an affectionate pet, a transformed witch or a symbol of bad, or perhaps good, luck."[69]

Although it might be stating the obvious, it should, therefore, always be remembered that cats are not just one category of animal. Cats are multifunctional, and functional aspects influence the categorisation cats come under. Cats, both medieval and modern, have been functioning as purely utilitarian animals (the mouser), as companions (pet, playmate for children) and as symbolic animals (heretical cats, proverbial cats).

[69] Saunders, *The Cult of the Cat*, 27.

M E D I U M A E V U M

Q U O T I D I A N U M

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KREMS 2009

HERAUSGEGEBEN
VON GERHARD JARITZ

GEDRUCKT MIT UNTERSTÜTZUNG DER KULTURABTEILUNG
DES AMTES DER NIEDERÖSTERREICHISCHEN LANDESREGIERUNG

niederösterreich kultur

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Inhaltsverzeichnis

Vorwort

Das vorliegende Heft von *Medium Aevum Quotidianum* widmet sich erneut vorrangig einem Themenbereich, welcher bereits in früheren Bänden unserer Reihe als besonders wichtig für eine Alltagsgeschichte des Mittelalters und der frühen Neuzeit erkannt wurde: der Rolle von Tieren und verschiedenen Varianten der Mensch–Tier-Beziehung (vgl. vor allem Sonderband XVI: *Animal Diversities*, 2005, den Beitrag von Helmut Hundsbichler in *MÆQ* 51, 2005, sowie den Artikel von Gertrud Blaschitz in *MÆQ* 53, 2006). Grigory Bondarenko beschäftigt sich mit dem Schweinehirten im keltischen Irland und Irina Metzler untersucht die Bedeutung und symbolische Funktion der Katze in religiösen Diskursen. Schweine und Katzen repräsentieren zwei Säugetierfamilien, welchen augenblicklich auch besonderes Interesse im internationalen „Medieval Animal Data Network (MAD)“ entgegen gebracht wird, welch letzteres vor einigen Jahren am Department of Medieval Studies der Central European University (Budapest) ins Leben gerufen wurde und das von Alice Choyke kurz vorgestellt wird.

Von den gebotenen Buchbesprechungen ist im Besonderen die sehr ausführliche Auseinandersetzung von Rainer Welle mit der neuen Lieferung des Katalogs der deutschsprachigen illustrierten Handschriften des Mittelalters zur Quellengruppe der „Fecht- und Ringbücher“ hervorzuheben.

Gerhard Jaritz