Wolves and Sheep in Medieval Semiotics, Iconology and Ecology:

a Case Study of Multi- and Inter-disciplinary Approaches to Human-Animal Relations in the Historical Past

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Introduction

The launch of the Medieval Animal Database (MAD) at the Central European University in Budapest represents a pioneering collaboration between archaeologists, historians, literary historians and art-historians, with the aim of extending communication between the disciplines and enabling individual scholars and research teams to increasingly adopt an inter-disciplinary approach.[1] The use of multiple sources – a multi-disciplinary approach – is nothing new in medieval studies; particularly in archaeology where many published site reports tend to include specialist contributions on relevant written, architectural and cartographic sources, alongside archaeological aspects. The perspective of the specialist is essential because of the detailed insights available from an intimate familiarity with particular materials, languages, cultural contexts and theoretical perspectives. After all, 'each source has its strengths, weaknesses and *lacunae*'.[2] As the number of focused studies increases, inter-disciplinary synthesis becomes an increasingly feasible and realistic goal for individual research projects.[3] This differs from a multi-disciplinary approach in that it integrates multiple sources and perspectives to answer specific research questions, rather than presenting a series of conclusions pigeon-holed according to discipline. But why adopt an inter-disciplinary approach? This paper aims to answer this question with a brief case study focusing on two animals paired in human thought and expression in medieval western Europe; wolves and sheep, exploring the evidence for people's 'physical' and 'conceptual' experiences of these animals in England from the late eleventh to fifteenth century. It focuses on the problematic

[1] A pilot version of the database can be found online at: http://www.imareal.oeaw.ac.at/mad/.
[2] Clark 1989, 168.
[3] Pluskowski 2002.

relationship between traditions of imagery, both visual and verbal, and lived experience – how we can relate the painted lamb inside the church to the increasingly dwindling wolf packs traversing the wooded fringes of the fields outside, and why we should even contemplate these connections. Sub-dividing human responses between 'physical' and 'conceptual' is of course a useful but artificial analytical tool, and the ultimate aim is to integrate the two within an understanding of the 'total environment' within which humans interacted with other species in their shared environments. Indeed, whilst this case study draws on inter-disciplinary research into human-wolf relations in medieval northern Europe,[4] its conclusions regarding contrasts and comparisons between 'conceptual' and 'physical' realities are necessarily generic, thus illustrating the potential value of multi-disciplinary databases in enabling more ambitious research agendas to be pursued with increasing precision.

Wolves and sheep 'inside the church': medieval semiotics and iconology

The lamb (or sheep) is one of the earliest Christian symbols, appearing from the first century in association with Christ the 'Good Shepherd' on catacomb paintings and sarcophagi,[5] and from the mid-fourth century as the *Agnus Dei* and the Lamb of the Apocalypse; individual animals removed from a pastoral context as visual metaphors for Christ and his passion – in one painting even performing the miracle of the multiplication of the loaves.[6] From the sixth century, this Christological identity was emphasized by representations of the lamb with a pierced side, blood streaming into a chalice recalling the wounds of Christ. A sacrificial motif inherited from the Judaic tradition – indeed early Christian writers regarded the eating of the lamb at Passover as prefiguring Christ's passion – the lamb became incorporated into the decorative schemes of early Christian Basilicas, sometimes accompanied by flocks of sheep representing the apostles,[7] and invoking the *Agnus Dei* had become a fixed part of the Roman Mass by the late-eighth century.[8] The lamb exemplified the significance of shepherding which permeated Christian thought and was employed as a metaphor bridging the role of the earthly Church and its heavenly counterpart. The Christian community/innocent was envisaged as a flock of sheep and the Church/Christ as their shepherd, offering guidance and protection. The central role of lambs and sheep in early Christian thought and expression ensured their use and proliferation in the decorative schemes of stone churches, rebuilt across Western Europe from the latter half of the eleventh century.

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[4] Pluskowski 2003.
[5] Kinney 1992, 202.
[6] Jensen 2000, 141-3.
[7] Ibid.
[8] Atkinson 1977, 5.

In England, the lamb could be found on church exteriors from tympana to corbels, and within, featured in prominent wall paintings and altar pieces, as well as artefacts central to religious ceremony and display, such as liturgical vessels, altar and reliquary crosses, crosiers, furnishings such as baptismal fonts, tucked away in the margins and even appeared as graffiti, as at Carlisle Cathedral.[9] From the thirteenth century it was found in the new wave of popular artistic media including stained glass, painted ceilings and various portable images expressing private devotion, such as alabaster heads of John the Baptist who had beheld Christ as 'the lamb'.[10] The Baptist was sometimes depicted with the *Agnus Dei*, particularly in late medieval art, and from the mid-fourteenth century was himself represented by the lamb in the material culture of the Hospitallers, who employed the motif on the fifteenth-century badges recovered from excavations in London.[11] The *Agnus Dei* was also found on a number of late medieval amulets, taking the form of a wax disc made in Rome from the Paschal candle and encased in silver or gold. It was worn by (affluent) women to protect them during pregnancy.[12] This proliferation of sacred lambs in medieval English material culture can be sampled in the catalogues produced by Zarnecki, Holt and Holland (1984) Alexander and Binski (1987) and Marks and Williamson (2003) covering the period 1066-1547.

To those 'super-readers' armed with sufficient knowledge to discern multiple levels of meanings in individual images,[13] the lamb could be envisaged as a theologically complex symbol, and although its basic 'naturalistic' form was the most frequently represented in both early and medieval Christian art, there are occasional variants hinting at this complexity, most noticeably in the slain lamb described in *Revelation* (5-6) with seven horns and seven eyes which would open the seven seals. A complex Christological symbol where each of its individual features could be related to the context of a particular narrative, such as the number seven representing wholeness, it was more commonly found illustrating Apocalyptic manuscripts, although a rare extant example of the monstrous lamb decorating the church building in England can be found amongst the late-fourteenth-century cycle of apocalyptic wall paintings in the chapter house at Westminster Abbey. In both of these cases, viewing and understanding was restricted to specific audiences and although the presence of this apocalyptic animal in more publicly 'accessible' contexts such as tympana can be noted, it appears that artisans and patrons were usually content with the basic representation of the lamb, accompanied by some or all of its diagnostic attributes – the chalice, flag and halo. This is not to say the role of the apocalyptic lamb in broader medieval culture was limited – in literature it was associated with mar-

[9] Pritchard 1967, 65-66.
[10] Cheetham 1984, 320-1; Binski 2003, 54.
[11] Mitchiner 1986, 184.
[12] Cherry 2001, 157-160.
[13] Matthews 2000.

tyrs and virgins, especially dead children, probably because *Revelation* 14 was read at the Feast of the Holy Innocents.[14]

The primary opponent of the apocalyptic lamb (Christ) was the dragon (Satan), but alongside this agonistic relationship the New Testament introduced the predatory association between wolves and sheep as a metaphor for false prophets leading Christians astray (*Matthew* 7:10), as well as illustrating the mission of the apostles (*Matthew* 10:16) and the responsibility of the Good Shepherd towards his flock (*John* 10:12), although the two animals had already been paired in literature by Classical fabulists. Their relationship remained a popular metaphor throughout the Middle Ages, and was often used by ecclesiastics in sermons, commentaries or exchanges to refer to opponents of the Church from heretics to political adversaries.[15] In high medieval England this was exemplified in accounts of Thomas Becket following his murder – he was both the *Agnus Cantuariensis*, the Lamb of Canterbury,[16] and 'a worthy shepherd' protecting his flock from wolves.[17] The broad appeal of pairing wolves and ovines is further underlined by its use in secular literature, drawing on both classical and Biblical sources, such as Marie de France's mid-twelfth-century fable 'the wolf and the lamb' and the use of the predatory relationship in the popular thirteenth-century *Roman de la Rose*.[18] The bestiary *lupus* was added to the core menagerie drawn from the Greek *Physiologus* in the first third of the twelfth century,[19] and where illustrated typically represented a wolf creeping up on sheep to highlight his role as a *figura diaboli* and the flock as 'the innocent and simple among Christ'.[20] This situation would be resolved at the apocalypse, and not simply in the victory of Christ, but in the reversion of predators back to the peaceful world of original innocence as expressed in *Isaiah* 11.6 and 65:25: 'and the wolf shall also dwell with the lamb … . They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain, saith the Lord'.[21] But individual wolves, let alone those paired with sheep, are extremely difficult to find in English religious art, and even on the Continent, motifs combining both animals such as 'the wolf at school' are limited to a handful of examples.[22] They are otherwise represented by the odd scattered representation such as the thirteenth-century wolf grabbing a sheep by the throat decorating the central portal of the west front of San Marco, Venice, amidst other predatory vignettes (fig. 1).[23] The few examples of the isolated bestiary *lupus* show it biting its paw. There was no need to represent

[14] Emmerson 1992, 326.
[15] Pluskowski 2003, 176-7.
[16] Binski 2004, 8.
[17] Robertson 1875-1885, 82.
[18] Pluskowski 2003, 177.
[19] Baxter 1998, 88.
[20] *Ashmole Bestiary*; Barber 1999, 78.
[21] Ryken and Wilhoit 1998, 958.
[22] Bagley 1993.
[23] Demus 1995, 120.

a sheepfold since viewers familiar with the motif would certainly know that wolves 'punished' their paws in this way when approaching prey; here signifying the Devil 'circling the sheepfold of the faithful of the Church'.[24] Whilst some representations of infernal predation were prominent in the church, such as hellmouths in 'doom wall' paintings above the chancel arch, lupines appear to have been confined to the margins.

Fig. 1: Wolf and sheep from San Marco, Venice, 13th century
(photograph by author).

Yet although wolves are rare in religious art, their persistent paring with ovines in a range of literary contexts suggests their commonality in medieval semiotics: the motif was recognized at all levels of society. In other cultures, the proliferation of a particular animal or group of animals within religious or ritu-

[24] Aberdeen University Library MS 24, f. 17r.

alistic contexts can at times be related to special ecological or economic significance. One approach employed by those working with prehistoric societies is to compare the iconographic prevalence of an animal with its presence, absence and abundance in other contexts such as kitchen refuse, graves and workshops.[25] Adopting a similar hermeneutic approach to medieval societies is not as straightforward as it may seem, and this is due to the volume of material that would have to be cross-referenced, even within relatively restricted spatial and chronological contexts. The study of fauna poses particular problems, for archaeological, written and artistic evidence would have to be supported by broader environmental perspectives obtained from sources ranging from climatic data through to legal documents. Furthermore, in order to 'animate' the animals in the medieval landscape, to acknowledge their roles as agents with varying levels of dependence on other organisms in their shared environments, including humans, it is essential to incorporate ecological and ethological perspectives based on modern scientific understandings. This must be combined with an appreciation of medieval taxonomies: after all, numerous written and artistic sources document the behaviour of animals (even if this was not their main intention) derived from observation, perception, imagination or a combination of all three, and one cannot simply map modern scientific paradigms onto these systems.[26] In this light, a multi-disciplinary database would be an extremely useful tool for the developing field of medieval animal studies. This becomes increasingly clear when exploring the relationship between the appropriation of animals in medieval semiotics and their treatment in other, what may be termed 'physical' contexts.

Wolves and sheep 'outside the church': ecological and cultural trends

Drawing on the multiplicity of sources it becomes apparent that there is no straightforward correlation between 'conceptual' and 'physical' realities in medieval England, or indeed other parts of Europe, and that even within this block of time referred to as 'the Middle Ages', there is discernable complexity and diversity. Meat consumption was divided between cattle, pig and sheep/goat, the three mammal species dominating all medieval English faunal assemblages. On this basis alone it can be argued that the butchered remains of these species represented fundamental elements of daily life across the country. However, detailed analyses of animal remains from a variety of contexts, alongside surveys of manorial records, indicate that sheep farming was only prevalent and significant in some regions, and that sheep were primarily kept for their secondary products, specifically wool. The Domesday survey (1086) indicates the presence of over a million sheep in demesne flocks in England, a figure rising to

[25] Cooke 2004, 125.
[26] Pluskowski 2005c.

at least 12 million by the early fourteenth century.[27] Comparative studies of urban and rural faunal assemblages indicate that extremely young animals were slaughtered for consumption at the farm, whilst the majority of sheep were kept until they had produced at least two annual crops of wool, and perhaps as much as eight before being driven into towns to be sold and slaughtered,[28] converted into meat and bone products, and sometimes even parchment.[29] Sheep also appear to have been used in ritualistic deposits – two halves of a sheep's lower jaw carefully placed on a horizontal beam in the foundation of a fourteenth-century quay on the Thames at Trig Lane, draw attention to an undervalued body of data that would benefit inter-disciplinary syntheses.[30] But irrespective of post-mortem usage, sheep were predominantly raised for wool, the chief raw fibre used for textiles in medieval England and regional variations in its texture, colour and quality reflected differences in climate, pasture and husbandry.[31] The biogeography of flocks – their distribution in the landscape – can be related to local environmental as well as social factors, not all land was suitable for pastoral farming, and some was more suited to cattle rather than sheep. And whilst herds would be moved seasonally, sheep rearing was concentrated in the north and west of England, regions which included wolf territories into the thirteenth century. However, wolf attacks on livestock of any kind, let alone sheep, are rarely recorded.

In studies of modern wolf populations, biologists have observed that where a diverse range of wild ungulates are present, wolves will tend to ignore livestock and focus their hunting efforts on their preferred prey.[32] This observation is being incorporated into present and future conservation strategies for managing wolf populations in various regions of Europe, and can inform our understanding of predator-prey relations in the Middle Ages.[33] An assemblage of roe deer bones discovered in Rawthey cave (Cumbria), and dating no later than 1300, has been interpreted as being accumulated by wolves,[34] and hints at a likely cause for the wolf's extinction in England. Here, wolf hunting in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries was predominantly conducted by specialist hunters, focusing on sustained efforts in royal forests (fig. 2); a trend that can be related to royal management of wild ungulates – wolves' natural prey – in England from the late eleventh century.[35]

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[27] Dyer 2002, 98, 165.
[28] O'Connor 1982, 24; Bond and O'Connor 1999, 416.
[29] Reed 1972, 129.
[30] Merrifield 1987, 118.
[31] Crowfoot 1992, 15.
[32] Meriggi and Lovari 1996.
[33] Pluskowski 2003, 84-5.
[34] Hedges *et al.* 1998, 440-1.
[35] Pluskowski 2005a; forthcoming.

Fig. 2: Wolf hunting and biogeography in 13th-century England; a synthesis of archaeological (left) and documentary (right) data.

○ Roe deer assemblage in Rawthey Cave, Cumbria; radiocarbon dated to 13th c. (not later than 1300) and interpreted as collected by wolves.

● Only reports of wolf remains. (a single bone) from 13th-c. English contexts.

O Last reliable record of English wolves

○ Wolf depredations recorded by Royal forest courts in the 13th c.

Counties where wolf extermination was ordered by King Edward I in 1281.

Following the Norman Conquest, written and archaeological sources point to the construction of a unique seigneurial hunting culture, developed as an expression of Norman identity.[36] Both wolves and various groups of people had been hunting deer up to this point, but now only select individuals could indulge in this predation – all others were designated poachers. There is no evidence that wolf packs began depredations on livestock with the development of this new hunting culture, indeed the enclosed park was effectively a larder for any passing lupines, and in 1290 wolves allegedly destroyed deer in a park at Farley.[37] This is not to say that wolves never attacked livestock, but effective shepherding practices in England combined with healthy ungulate populations would have reduced the possibility dramatically – in fact livestock were threatened not so much by wolves as people and disease. The slaughter of entire herds is sometimes documented during episodes of political instability, for example, in 1223 over a thousand sheep belonging to Margam Abbey were burnt by a hostile

[36] Sykes 2001, 270-1.
[37] Harting 1994, 30.

group.[38] In Wyresdale (Lancashire), there are odd references to sheep losses attributed to wolf predation but murrain was responsible for nine times as many casualties.[39] The decline of wild ungulate populations in many Continental regions in the late medieval period, probably due to overexploitation and reflected in late and post-medieval faunal assemblages, may have prompted increasing depredations on livestock, in turn resulting in increasing and sustained wolf persecution. By then, the only wolves in England were confined within the royal 'menagerie' in the Tower of London.[40]

Clearly these physical realities were accommodated within the world-view(s) of medieval English society, but they were not clearly reflected in verbal and material semiotics. Many representations of daily life have been noted particularly in the margins of church buildings, and include seemingly familiar activities such as animal husbandry and hunting.[41] Some have interpreted these as straightforward reflections of human-animal relations in local landscapes, and others ascribe multiple meanings to these scenes ranging from the cosmological to the fabulous. There are certainly differences between scenes of sheep-shearing and representations of divine animals although surely all were accommodated within a shared world view, sometimes even constructed by the same artisan or workshop. The lamb – more often victor than victim – proliferated on spaces and artefacts central to the mass and could be juxtaposed with scenes of predation; the early-thirteenth-century painted nave ceiling of Peterborough cathedral includes the *Agnus Dei* as well as four lions circling a fish; here most likely employing a comparable predatory relationship – the fish representing human souls (cf. *Matthew* 4:17) and the lions as the Devil 'seeking whom he may devour' (*Peter* 5:8).[42] The relationship between the two and its significance would be conveyed with words, perhaps reinforced by the mnemonic function of images.

Some have drawn links between the Biblical wolf and ecological realities in Palestine during the early first millennium AD.[43] These may well be related, but its proliferation in medieval European semiotics as a predator threatening sheep is a product of different cultural and ecological contexts, and, as has been demonstrated in the case of medieval England, the physical landscape and its inhabitants were not simply reflected in the social and spiritual microcosm at the heart of every community – the church.[44] We must remain sensitive to these differences, even when acknowledging the common elements that define Christian thought and expression. There is no simple or even consistent link between

[38] Williams 1984, 16, 247.
[39] Higham 2004, 115.
[40] Pluskowski 2006.
[41] For the most comprehensive listing of misericord motifs to date see Remnant 1969, revised 1998.
[42] Binski 2003, 54.
[43] Feliks 1962, 35.
[44] Andrén 1999.

those species depicted in a church or monastery, and those experienced or exploited in the surrounding landscape (or seascape); artists drew on 'sight, insight and image-making' for their representations of the natural world.[45] The lion has been described as 'indigenous' to Europe because of its virtual omnipresence in religious and heraldic art,[46] but encounters with images were different to those with living animals. Experiencing the lamb inside the church was different to managing it in the pastoral landscape, or slaughtering it for consumption at the farm. Nonetheless, these physical experiences informed the numerous representations of the Annunciation to the Shepherds (*Luke* 2:8-15), of Christ the Good Shepherd and perhaps even the iconic *Agnus Dei*. Likewise experiences (or perceptions) of wolf depredations may have informed the iconography of predation.[47] In this respect, the appropriation of fauna within medieval religious contexts blended contemporary reality with Biblical, historical and mythological pasts. This manipulation of the past expressed in material culture as much as literature is not particular to medieval societies; the Lozères department in southeast France actively preserves and promotes within its bounds the older region of Gévaudan, famously associated with 'la bête', a predator that stalked the landscapes of the Auvergne and south Dordogne, killing (and sometimes eating) 98 people between 1764-1767. At the time the killings were popularly attributed to wolves although this controversial identification has fuelled a popular mythology, expressed in monuments constructed in recent decades representing various incarnations of 'la bête', some more lupine than others (fig. 3). The modern promotion of such phenomena collapses the gulf between past and present, between physical and conceptual realities, dislodging them from their original historical, social and ecological contexts. When approaching human-animal relations in historical societies – observing contrasts and similarities between how people *used* animals and how they *thought* about them – it is essential to maintain the contextual integrity of each source, but equally essential to recognize that only when brought together will we begin to open windows onto multiple, contemporary experiences of animals and their shared environments.

[45] Givens 2005, 173.
[46] Pastoureau 1999, 23.
[47] Camille 1993, 48.

Fig. 3: The sculpture designed by Philippe Kaeppelin celebrating the demise of 'la bête de Gévaudan', Auvers, Lozères, France (photograph by author).

However, in order to thoroughly investigate the link between the physical and the conceptual, between the world inside and outside the church, it would be necessary to cross-reference numerous variables on a regional basis – faunal remains, documentary sources, environmental data, public and private iconography, placenames and so on. Only then, would it be possible to grasp the 'total environment' within which people constructed and transformed relationships with other species. Even this brief case study has drawn on the tireless work of numerous specialists. It illustrates the potential time and effort required to bring all of this information together, and the enormous benefits that a multi-disciplinary database would contribute, not only in terms of accessibility and time-saving, but by enabling inter-regional and inter-chronological research projects to aspire to new and more ambitious levels of precision. Such integration of sources and perspectives must maintain a critical awareness of context; literary *topos* cannot simply be blended with documentary statements or pictorial representations. In this respect, an inter-disciplinary synthesis resembles not so much a complete fusion of evidence as a series of observations focused on a single research question, highlighting trends relating to specific research objectives.

Conclusion

Evaluating the archaeological, written and artistic sources for economic systems in medieval Italy, Gillian Clark urged that 'these data, must now, however be brought together'.[48] This sentiment can surely be extended beyond the study of economics to numerous other aspects of human-animal relations.[49] Specialist and multi-disciplinary studies will continue to contribute to our understanding of countless aspects of the natural world in the Middle Ages. Indeed, they are essential pre-requisites for inter-disciplinary syntheses, and the Medieval Animal Database, a range of sources which can be accessed and cross-referenced from a single interface, is effectively a multi-disciplinary tool enabling inter-disciplinary research agendas to be pursued. Its aim is not only to offer archaeologists, historians and art-historians accessibility to what may be rare and unusual complementary sources but also to stimulate their inclination to integrate these into inter-disciplinary research agendas. The CEU database is currently focused on Central Europe. Similar databases need to be established for other regions and, once integrated, they will make it possible to identify and explore significant cultural and ecological trends across Europe, providing more specific spatial and chronological contexts for the detailed work of specialists, and dramatically expanding our understanding of a fundamental aspect of medieval societies – the multiple, integrated relationships between people, animals and their shared environments.

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[48] Clark 1989, 164.
[49] See also Baker and Clark 1993; O'Connor 1992; Pluskowski 2002.

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Preface

Over the last two decades, interests in animals and the relationship between humans and animals in the past have increased decisively. This is also true particularly for the research into the Middle Ages. A variety of perspectives and approaches can be traced concerning

- the questions asked;
- the used source evidence: zooarchaeological, textual, visual;
- the embedding of the analyses into the wider fields of the study of the history of nature, environment, economy, religion and theology, signs and symbols, social history, and so on;
- the degrees and levels of the application of interdisciplinary and comparative methods;
- the level of consciousness of the diversities of use and functions of animals in medieval society, on the one hand, and of the contextualized networks of their meanings, on the other hand.

Such a consciousness of animal diversities and, at the same time, of animal networks has been the basis for this volume of collected essays. They originate from a number of international research collaborations, communications, and presentations at international meetings, such as the annual Medieval Conferences at Kalamazoo and Leeds. All the contributors have aimed to show individual aspects of human-animal relations and have also been interested in the social contexts animals occur in. Therefore, the book is meant to represent *Animal Diversities* but certainly also, in particular, the indispensable *Animal Contexts* and *Contextuality*: from zooarchaeological evidence to zoocephalic females in visual representations of Ashkenazi Jews; from the economic function of animals in Cistercian houses to the role of their representations in Gothic misericords; from animals in chronicles or hagiographical texts to their images at different levels of late medieval visual public space.

Some recently initiated projects, two of them introduced in the volume, others referred to in the contributions, will hopefully also open up possibilities for new insights into the variety of roles and functions that were played by and constructed for all kinds of fauna in the Middle Ages.

"Zoology of the Middle Ages" may then perhaps be seen, in general, as one of the model fields for representing the importance of relations and connections between the sciences and humanities, economy and theology, daily life

and symbolic meaning, nature and culture, intention and response, as well as construction and perception, …

December 2005 Gerhard Jaritz

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