

A Database of Animals in Medieval Misericords

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Introduction

The monks and canons of the medieval church had to stand in the choir stalls for long periods of time in daily prayer and devotion whilst reciting the divine offices,¹ and during the recitation of psalms, canticles and hymns in a service or mass. The need to stand for such long periods of time was no doubt tiring and in some cases difficult for any sick, weak or older members of the ecclesiastical community.

Over time, full or half seat ledges were fitted to the choir stalls of a church, cathedral or college, to offer relief, support and rest to the occupant of a stall (fig. 1).² The design of these choir stall ledges or seats enabled those in the stall to give the appearance that they were still standing, in some cases whilst they were really propped up, half sitting or fully seated depending upon the design of the misericord and the height of the occupier in the stall.

Misericord seat ledges could be smooth and blank, or more commonly they were made with their main carved image found on the underside of the ledge. The scenes depicted portray legends, romances and folktales that can be found in contemporary manuscripts, books and woodcuts of the period; the representation of biblical stories, allegories and proverbs; images of heraldry, humans and other secular themes from daily life; and carvings of identifiable species of flora and, of course, fauna (fig. 2).³

¹ Matins, Lauds, Prime, Terce, Sext, None, Vespers, Compline.

² Wildridge (1879) indicates these were in use as early as the 11th century.

³ Laird (1986) estimated this at almost a quarter of all themes, though he does not provide any calculations to indicate how this estimate was reached.



Fig. 1: Medieval choir stall in Durham Cathedral: seat ledge down (misericord not visible). Photograph: Sarah Wells 2004.

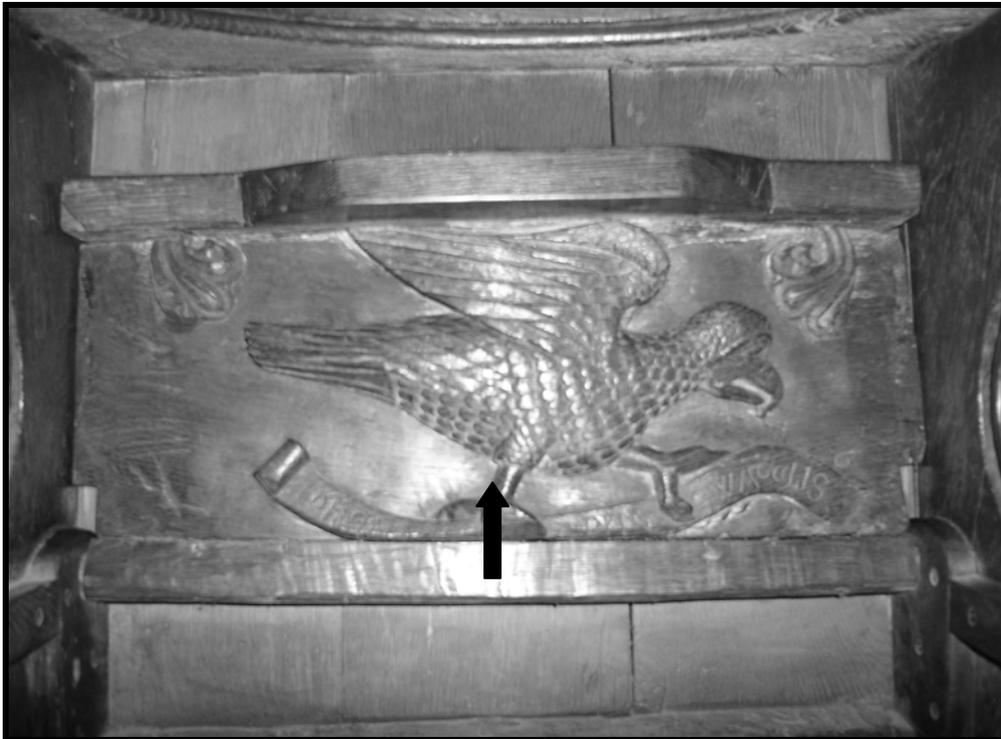


Fig. 2: Medieval misericord in Durham Cathedral: seat ledge raised (misericord visible). Photograph: Sarah Wells 2004.

Surveys and Catalogues of Misericords

There have been a variety of amateur and professional scholars who have shown a strong interest in misericordia over the last two centuries, including works by authors such as Bond, 1910; Druce, 1913-14, 1919-20, 1931, 1938, 1939; Anderson, 1935, 1938, 1951, 1954, 1955, 1959, 1960, 1963, 1967, 1969, 1971; Remnant, 1969; Laird, 1986; Tracy, 1986a, 1986b, 1987, 1988, 1990, 1997; Jones and Tracey, 1991; Block, 1991, 1992, 1995, 1998, 2003a, 2003b, 2004; and Grössinger, 1975, 1987, 1989a, 1989b, 1989c, 1991 and 1997. The publication of works on misericords can be found targeted at a variety of levels of consumer, from short pamphlets and popularist books, to catalogue volumes with academic analyses.

The largest number of available publications consist of qualitative or descriptive studies of misericords and illustrated survey works, with hand drawn sketches, black and white or colour photographs (refer to Phipson, 1896; Cox and Harvey, 1908; Howard and Crossley, 1917; Roe, 1927; Gardner, 1958; Cox, 1959; Smith, 1968 and 1974; Kraus and Kraus, 1976; Agate, 1980; Hayman, 1989; Harding, 1998; Wood and Curry, 1999; Jewitt, 2000). Many general, introductory or thematic works on misericords are helpful to explain the development of them, sources of misericord themes, meanings of their imagery, and even how to photograph misericords. However, the vast majority of works from Britain are regional studies and therefore focused on English churches and cathedrals,⁴ with a poor representation for those in Wales, and still fewer for Scotland and Ireland.

The representation of creatures as a theme for research in misericords has been a rather under-researched field. Prior to the development of this database, no quantitative, systematic or national survey of creatures in misericordia was available. Nevertheless, there were a number of articles or book sections which highlight the animals to be found in misericords (refer to Laird, 1986; Jones, 1989, 1991, 2002; or most recently in Mellinkoff, 2004). Beyond this, only a few publications were available for consultation specifically on a particular animal or bird found to be depicted in misericords. These include publications such as those on winged mammals, fowl and birds (refer to Wells, 2005a, 2005b), poultry (Hardwick, 2004), owls (Miyazaki, 1999), as well as cats (Block, 1991), the fox (Varty, 1967, 1999), and the representation of more exotic creatures such as the camel, elephant, rhinoceros and unicorn (refer to Wells, 2005c).

⁴ Examples of regional surveys include: Letts, 1886; Middleton, 1888-91; Henderson, 1891; Wolfgang, 1911; Harris, 1927; Clarke, 1920; Cave, 1953; Steer, 1961, 1963, 1973; Bennett, 1965; Morgan, 1966; White, 1974; Whittingham, 1981; Farley, 1981; Wiltshire, 1991; Chapman, 1996.

The Database of Animals in Misericords

In October 2000, a funded doctoral research project on ‘Animal Visual Culture in the Middle Ages’ commenced. The research included the development of a number of databases to collect and record details of animal representations within various types of visual material culture. A database of ‘Animals in Medieval Misericordia’ was one of those compiled, since there was no published quantitative data available on animals in misericords, nor any synthesis or national survey conducted of the creatures carved in them.

The ideal scenario in developing such a database would be to systematically travel around all the surviving medieval choir stalls that the United Kingdom had to offer and systematically make a full and accurate record of any animals that were carved.⁵ However, this was not a realistic methodology to be applied to a doctoral research project, in view of the wide variety of media to be investigated, and the limited time available to complete the research. Therefore, the misericord database was created utilising the existing published data on misericords.

The database was initially designed as an Excel spreadsheet. This enabled the published information on animal carvings to be extracted and recorded into a large number of categories. The categories or fields selected for recording, included: the type or types of creatures carved; the number of creatures depicted; and a description of the main carving and any supporting carvings of animals within a misericord ensemble. Any specific details of the animal’s individual identifiable characteristics, such as its age, health or physiology were also entered, along with the animal’s activities, and any objects, or figures that were associated with the scene.

Other columns of the database contained more general details about the misericord itself such as: the date the misericord was carved, and how this date was sourced, along with any details of patronage or donorship. In addition to this, the location of the carving was recorded by national grid reference, by regional county, by common name, by type of structure, and by internal location (setting/sequence/position) within the set of choir stalls, and by its orientation (e.g. north or south side) within the building. This information was invaluable in later analysis of the national distribution and frequency of animals over time (chronologically) from the 13th to 17th centuries; and space (geographically), representing a large number of animals carved throughout England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland.

⁵ To some extent this is being achieved by scholars such as Block (2003a, 2004) around Europe. However, this process has required around thirty years to conduct, and the photographic data for the UK is not yet complete, nor was it available at the time this contribution went to press.

The Data Recorded in the Animal Database

The core structure of the database was formed by information extracted from the 'Catalogue of Misericords for Great Britain', published by Remnant in 1969. This volume continued the work of Bond (1910) and provided records of surviving misericords from structures such as churches, cathedrals and museum collections. The catalogue was searched for any entries that contained reference to animals. This process enabled a basic list of over 100 different creatures to be compiled. However, a number of problems began to emerge in the use of the existing published material. Some of the entries in the catalogue were contradicted by sources of evidence from other authors who had published entries detailing some of the same misericords. The discrepancies related to the number of misericords that had survived, their position and sequencing within a choir stall, and most worryingly, in the identification of the animal depicted. Unfortunately, it was not stated in any of the published literature what criteria were used for the identification of the recorded animals. These factors were revealed following field assessments at a number of locations, made in order to check the published records of the surviving misericords at first hand. Nevertheless, this process enabled further confirmation of details of the animals, scenes or themes depicted.

It appears that none of the misericords were dated using any scientific methods (by archaeological standards). The criteria used to date misericords can be collated, and are more relative, subjective and tentative. The dating methods rely primarily on the identification of variations of shape of the choir stall and misericord seat ledges, stylistic details of foliage, armour or clothing, the finding of a carved date surviving on the misericord, the carved name of a patron or donor, or a carved crest, and coat-of-arms or cognizance known to have been in use during a specific period in time. It is difficult, therefore, to attribute an absolute date of carving to a large number of the misericords (in terms of approximate date of creation, finish and installation). This is because some of the misericords were not carved and completed during a single period of time but over a number of years, and indeed restored and replaced at later dates, and so there is some doubt as to whether all the carvings themselves are originals. To support the validity of misericord dating techniques, contemporary manuscripts, church archives, building accounts or wills can be used to establish an estimated date for the carved stall work (refer to Purvis, 1936, and Grössinger, 2002). Unfortunately, some carvings do not survive in complete clarity to enable period characteristics to be identified, nor do all have the required features that can be used for dating. This means that any data presented on misericord chronology should be regarded flexibly, understood along with its limitations, including an awareness that the dating is possibly inaccurate.

The Animals Represented in Misericords

There were over 1,500 instances of creatures appearing in the misericords from the United Kingdom.⁶ Of these, 90% were specifically named creatures, and only 10% were unnamed creatures.⁷ The species that were recorded by name included a large number of land animals (50% of all of the named creatures in the sample). The range of species that were represented are listed alphabetically and included: antelopes, apes, asps and bears (fig. 3); boars, bulls, calves, camels, dromedaries, cats, cows, deer, doe, and dogs (fig. 4). There were also a number of donkeys, elephants, foxes, frogs, fawns, goats, greyhounds, hares, harts, hedgehogs, hippopotamus, hog, hounds and horses (fig. 5); as well as animals such as hyena, kids, kittens, lambs, leopards (fig. 6), lions, lizards, and monkeys (fig. 7). Other creatures that were carved were mice, oxen, pigs, piglets, puppies, rabbits, rams, reptiles, rhinoceros, salamander, serpent/snakes, sheep, slugs, snails, stags, squirrels, tigress, weasel and wolves.



Fig. 3: A chained bear (?). Misericord in Durham Cathedral, UK.
Photograph: Sarah Wells 2004.

⁶ Approximate numerical data and calculations of statistics are available for consultation in the volume 'Animal Visual Culture in the Middle Ages' currently in preparation by the author.

⁷ The unnamed creatures were often catalogued but unidentified beyond a generic name such as bird (28%), or fish (6%), whilst the remaining creatures catalogued as animals, beasts, monsters or composite creatures accounted for the remaining proportion of the unnamed animals (66%). These could represent either real land animals or imagined creatures.



Fig 4: A dog misericord in Durham Cathedral, UK. Photograph: Sarah Wells 2004.



Fig. 5: A horse misericord in Durham Cathedral, UK.
Photograph: Sarah Wells 2004.



Fig. 6: A catalogued leopard (?) misericord in Durham Cathedral, UK.
Photograph: Sarah Wells 2004.



Fig. 7: A monkey funeral misericord in Lincoln Cathedral, UK.
Photograph: Sarah Wells 2004.

There were a good proportion of creatures of the air, which accounted for 20% of all the named animals. These included bats, blackbirds, chickens, cocks, cranes, doves, ducks, eagles (refer to fig. 2), falcons, geese, hawks, herons, a hoopoe, ibis, osprey, ostrich, owls, parrots, peacocks, pelicans, pigeons, plovers, raven, snipe, sparrow, stork, swallow, swans, teal, woodcocks and woodpigeon. In addition to these animals were a small number of sea creatures representing 2% of all the named instances, including conch, scallop and whelk shells, crabs (fig. 8), dolphins, salmon and eel. Finally, there were a variety of imagined (mind) creatures, which represented the final 28% of all named instances of animals. The mind creatures included the amphisbaena, basilisk/cockatrice, blemya, centaurs, dragons, griffins, the harpy, hydra, lindworm, mantichora, mermaids/mermen, satyrs, the serra, sirens, the sphinx, unicorns, the wodehouse and wyverns.



Fig. 8. A Carved Crab Misericord in Durham Cathedral, UK. Photograph: Sarah Wells 2004.

The types of land, air, sea and mind animals that are represented in these misericord carvings range from a single animal to groups of animals carved together, forming a scene. Obviously, the more complex the animal or theme was, or according to the use of the theme or story portrayed, this meant that a greater amount of carving space was required. However, there were limitations on the space into which scenes could be carved underneath the seat. This may have influenced the manner in which an animal image was presented as a misericord, for example the proportional size, dimension, direction, poise and stance in which the creature was depicted. A further consideration of the making and

carving of misericords was their decoration or colouration. Jones and Tracy (1991) discuss the trace of pigment on a stall end at Haddon Hall, which indicates that possibly misericords were painted. Other forms of woodwork were painted during the period (refer to Baxandall 1980), so it is quite possible that paint was applied to enhance the visual identification of species and add to the overall effect achieved.

Conclusion

It is hoped that the existence of the current animal misericord database will be further enhanced by additional finds of unpublished carvings and over time a complete photographic record of all carvings. This will strengthen the data available on medieval animals and details of their contexts of depiction, which can be utilised for further research and analysis. A CD ROM of all the data in the misericord database will be available within the volume *Animal Visual Culture in the Middle Ages*.

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ANIMAL DIVERSITIES

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ANIMAL DIVERSITIES

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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

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