

The teacher and the healer: two aspects of the Medieval Swallow.

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We have conducted research on the swallow's image during the Middle Ages in Western Europe. We have learnt that people mostly had a good attitude toward these birds, and we especially found out that the swallow also symbolized the mentor. Several conclusions were made based on our study of the literature.

Introduction

While there has been much research on various bestiaries' animals, few researchers have taken the swallows into consideration. The main purpose of our paper is to explore the two peculiarities of the swallow that were mentioned in the bestiaries (Hassig, Debra. 1999. *The Mark of the Beast*. New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., Green, Ashleigh. 2019. "Cultural responses to the migration of the barn swallow in Europe." *ANU Historical Journal II* Number 1 (10): 87-107, Klingender, Francis. 2020. *Animals in art and thought to the end of the Middle Ages*. Edited by Evelyn Antal and John Hartham. Abingdon: Routledge). That is:

1. The swallow symbolizes the relationship between the disciples and a teacher and if so why?

If the first hypothesis proves to be correct another question arises:

2. Could the swallow be seen as mentors only for their chicks or for other birds too?

Main part

Our study uncovered that the image of the swallow in the Middle Ages is poorly researched, and there's not much information about it in the secondary sources. To find the answers to our questions, we therefore turned to primary sources.

We compared a number of bestiaries and from the similarities we drew the fact that in the Middle Ages the swallow, in fact, was associated with the figure of a mentor or a teacher. Since it is said "the swallow, therefore, a discerning teacher; by the swallow's young, the teacher's disciple, crying out; by the cry, a contrite heart"(Sloane MS 278¹, The Aberdeen Bestiary²). This assumption was further confirmed by another primary source.

There seems to be a connection between the text of the Aberdeen Bestiary chapter 'On the swallow' and the writings of Hugh of Fouilloys³ in terms of the relationship between a student and a teacher. In this book, the previous citation is quoted verbatim.

The Aberdeen Bestiary follows Hugh in calling the swallow a "doctor" and a "magistro". Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short (1879) *A Latin Dictionary*, Oxford: Clarendon Press gives the following definition of the words "doctor" and "magistro": doctor *m* (*genitive* doctōris, *feminine* doctrix or doctorissa); *third declension*

1. teacher, instructor quotations
2. (*Ecclesiastical Latin*) catechist (plural catechists) - (Christianity) One who practices catechesis, i.e., catechizes catechumens; a teacher who instructs students in the doctrines of a particular Christian denomination typically in preparation for confirmation.

magister *m* (*genitive* magistrī, *feminine* magistra); *second declension*

¹ Sloane MS 278: f.29r (The [source](#) was consulted on the 17.01.2021)

² The Aberdeen Bestiary: f.48r (The [source](#) was consulted on 17.01.2021)

³ The Medieval book of birds: Hugh of Fouilloys's Aviarium / edited and translated by Willene B. Clark: 209

1. teacher
2. master; a title of the Middle Ages, given to a person in authority or to one having a license from a university to teach philosophy and the liberal arts

All sources reveal a student-teacher relationship only among swallows, so we have a question: could swallows be mentors for other birds?

The presenter Karl Steel with the topic "Talking Animals: Medieval Fables and Robert Henryson's 'Preaching of the Swallow'"⁴ indicates once again that the swallow was often treated as a wise bird that is trying to share said wisdom with the other birds. Acting therefore as a teacher or a mentor. The tale goes like this: Some of the birds gathered together saw the man sowing the linseed, but thought nothing of it. The swallow, however, understood what this meant. She called an assembly of birds and explained that it was a totally dangerous situation, but the other birds just laughed at her. When the flaxseed sprouted, the swallow again warned the birds, "It's something dangerous; let's go pull it up. If we let it grow, the people will turn it into nets, and we won't be able to get out of the traps they made up." The birds scoffed at the swallow's words and scorned her advice⁵.

The position of a swallow as a preacher in this tale is quite easy to grasp, the other birds then are the lost souls it was trying to warn, and failed. We might speculate that this was a kind of interpretation of the swallow-teacher's relationship with the other birds, represented as disciples who did not hear the teacher's call and were ruined by their foolishness. But does this mean that only the swallow's chicks can accept the swallow's wisdom and therefore hear it?

There are two other versions of this fable: from Marie de France (12th century) and from Robert Henryson. However, the ending and the moral remained unchanged: the other birds would not listen to her, consequently, we can assume that the swallow could only be a teacher to her chicks.

We were hooked by an interesting detail in the illustration of the last version. In the manuscript from British Library in London⁶ the swallow is represented as a human creature. Another birds are listening on the tree. This is a further proof that the swallow was a preacher; it was wise, as if it were not a bird but a man.

Conclusion

In our paper we hope to explore both of our hypotheses, namely: the swallow symbolizes the relationship between the disciples and a teacher and if so why; could the swallow be seen as mentors only for their chicks or for other birds too? Most of our conclusions are drawn from the primary sources we have analyzed, and are fully supported by the information found in secondary sources. Nevertheless, during our research we have discovered a lot more than we have previously hoped for and further investigation on the topic is recommended.

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⁴ Karl Steel, Brooklyn College and the Graduate Center, CUNY, "Talking Animals: Medieval Fables, and Robert Henryson's "Preaching of the Swallow""(2020)

⁵ Aesop's Fables, Bibliothèque Nationale de France, fr. 15213, 1325-1350

⁶ Harley MS 3865, f.43v