

Human-Fish Relationship in Medieval Literature for Younger Audiences

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Abstract

The present chapter analyses the representations of water-borne animals (which all were categorised as 'fish' in the pre-Linnean taxonomies) appearing in medieval literature for younger audiences. While childhood and children's literature have been traditionally perceived as later societal constructs, this article demonstrates that certain narratives were considered suitable and were potentially consumed by younger audiences. The article starts by addressing the current academic discussions on medieval childhood and which medieval sources can be identified as narratives potentially intended for children. It then argues that three types of dynamics are visible in the representations of fish in medieval stories for young audiences. First, fish are portrayed as food. Second, fish are represented as containers carrying objects, which are sent to humans by God. Finally, fish can be shown as imaginary monstrous creatures. The article analyses these narratives within the contexts of medieval Christian worldview and modern research into human – nonhuman relationships.

Keywords

Environment, Non-Human, Fish, Ecosystem, Animal, Medieval, Children

INTRODUCTION

Today we know a lot about the practical side of human–non-human relationships in the medieval world, such as rearing, hunting, or cooking various nonhuman animals (hereafter: animals), as well as making them work or using their skins, fur, and bones as material. Studies of human perceptions of various animals, including their symbolic roles, have started to appear only in recent years (Pastoureu 2004; Steel 2019). Understanding an animal's influence not only upon medieval individuals' economic lives, but also upon their minds and mentalities allows us to create a more accurate picture of medieval relationships with and perceptions of their environment. Researching animal representations in the literature intended for children is especially relevant. As Daniel Kline (2003, p. 3) has pointed out, children's literature is created and used with the aim to teach young individuals values, attitudes, and information which would help them survive and prosper in their environment and their society. In other words, the literature which is supposedly read by children contains the information which the previous generation considered important enough to be passed on early within the limits of what is considered age-appropriate in a given society. The unwanted or irrelevant knowledge is potentially filtered out.

The present article aims to investigate and analyse the ways in which medieval literature intended for or used by children represented the relationship between humans and fish. Animals tended to have various symbolic roles in medieval narratives, from fables to bestiary entries. The research question is therefore which roles were fulfilled by fish in the medieval texts supposedly intended for children. The

article will also bring forward a discussion of the medieval literature for children as a genre.

Medieval children's literature as a genre

The existence of children's literature as a genre in the Middle Ages is a subject of debate. This largely results from the fact that the existence of children as a separate societal category in the Middle Ages until recently has been debated as well. Philippe Ariès has argued that 'there was no place for childhood in the medieval world' (Ariès 1962, p. 33), meaning that children were not distinguished from adults (p. 129). For example, Ariès has written that 'people could not allow themselves to become too attached to something [implying young children] that was regarded as a probable loss' (p. 38). He has further claimed that young children were buried without baptism: 'he [a child] was such an unimportant little thing, so inadequately involved in life, that nobody had any fears that he might return after death to pester the living' (p. 39). However, a more thorough investigation of the texts produced in the Middle Ages demonstrates that Ariès's vision was not entirely accurate. Thus, medieval ghost stories feature the spirits of even prematurely born infants, who were described as unable to find rest without baptism, implying that this practice, if occurred, was discouraged.¹

While Ariès's argument has received some critique (see Hanawalt 2002, p. 440–41 and 450; Clifton 2003, p. 9; Kline 2003, p. 1), it illustrates several misconceptions which both scholars and general public might have about medieval childhood. Such misconceptions lead to further underrepresenting of

medieval literature, which could be intended for, or used by children. Historians of the genre often quote Harvey Darton's definition arguing that children's literature is 'printed works produced ostensibly to give children spontaneous pleasure' (Darton 1982, p. 1). Darton's definition therefore immediately excludes the possibility of medieval children's literature since he does not consider the manuscript culture. In addition, Darton focuses on pleasurable reading, ignoring didactic literature (Clifton 2003, p. 10). Echoing Darton, Peter Hunt has stated that texts produced prior to the eighteenth century should not be considered as having been written for children (Hunt 1996).

At the same time, Nicole Clifton (2003) has made a persuasive case arguing that medieval children's literature can be viewed as a separate genre. As Clifton has pointed out, we can find evidence that certain texts were intended specifically for younger audiences. For example, a work could contain a statement that it was intended to be used by a child or children, such as Chaucer's treatise on how to use an astrolabe written for his son Lewis (Skeat 1872). Like *A Treatise on Astrolabe*, other didactic works can be counted as those meant for children (Kline 2003, p. 9). These include language textbooks and the so-called 'mirrors' – texts instructing children on how to behave appropriately (Shaner 1992, p. 14). In addition to Latin texts, employed for teaching, one can find examples of vernacular narratives aimed at children. For example, Edinburgh, National Library of Scotland, Advocates MS 19.3.1. contains romances revised for young readers along with a selection of courtesy texts, also intended for children (Clifton, p. 10).

A separate category from the didactic texts are narratives which would be likely to interest younger audiences. These could include narratives featuring children or animals as main characters, or texts written in a child-friendly way, for example without complex words or syntax structures (Orme 1999, p. 219). In this case, as Lynnea Brumbaugh-Walter has pointed out, one needs to be careful, as child-friendly content today may not correspond with what could be considered child-friendly in the Middle Ages (Brumbaugh-Walter 2003, p. 31–32). For example, stories dealing with aspects of sexuality – often in the context of 'sin' – could be seen as well appropriate for children.

Corresponding to the above criteria, fables were used as both didactic and entertaining literature for children. Brief narratives in prose or in verse with a moral message, fables feature non-human animals, inanimate objects, or generalised personifications such as the Old Man or the Youth as protagonists. In the Middle Ages grammarians employed fable collections to instruct students, who had mastered a certain level of Latin grammar, but were not ready to read more complex works of Horace, Ovid, or Virgil (Hodapp 2003, p. 13–14).

Obviously, fables form a rich ground for studying human perceptions of the non-human. In fables animals are ascribed symbolic roles, which can be

associated with the (perceived) traits of their behaviour (Pastoureau 2004). As these traits are usually human-like (a sly fox, an angry wolf), fables are practically inseparable from anthropomorphism. The style of this genre is still employed today for educational purposes. For instance, in his foreword to Vinciane Despret's monograph *What Would Animals Say if We Asked the Right Questions?* (2016) Bruno Latour compared Despret's work to Jean de La Fontaine's (d. 1695) fables, which featured animals as their protagonists, and were largely based on medieval narratives. While the style of medieval tales is employed today by authors such as Despret for communicating scientific knowledge about animals to wider audiences, medieval fables are also valuable for providing anecdotal evidence about animals and human approaches towards them in the past.

Another genre featuring animals was medieval bestiaries – compilations of moralising animal tales, which were produced between the tenth and the sixteenth centuries, and flourished as a genre in the thirteenth (Hassig 2000, p. 1). While Ron Baxter has argued that bestiaries were predominantly owned by male religious houses (1998), Willene Clark has proposed that bestiaries were intended to be used by children and untutored adults (2006). Bestiaries, which were categorised by M. R. James as 'the second family' (produced between the twelfth and the sixteenth centuries) contain glosses and annotations, which also appeared in contemporary schoolbooks (James 1928; Kay 2015, p. 39–40). Overall, second-family bestiaries are often single and portable books suitable for use in a classroom. For example, MS Kk4.25, produced in London around 1230, is one of the eighteen texts which were intended to be bound together to form a large miscellany. As the strictly didactic nature of these texts indicates, the bestiary was used as a teaching tool in a cathedral school or monastery. Carolyn Van Dyke further suggested that bestiaries were employed by upper-class mothers to educate their children (2018).

Not all medieval stories, which were intended for children, were circulated in a written form. Medieval literature was produced by the learned elites and for the learned elites – the group of people who could read and write in vernacular or in Latin. There has been no agreement among scholars as to what extent the learned culture borrowed and recorded the oral narratives, which were circulated by the popular culture – people who could not read or write. For example, Jacques Le Goff argued that there was a cultural split in the medieval society between the unlearned masses and the elites with the learned ecclesiastical culture refusing to accommodate elements of popular culture (Le Goff 1982). For Schmitt medieval society was multipolar, with different groups of beliefs interacting with each other, but still dominated by a church-populace divide (Schmitt 1988). John Van Engen believed that written clerical culture absorbed a lot from popular religious culture (Van Engen 1986). Most recent scholarship has developed Van Engen's argument further, rejecting the notion of a dual religious culture

altogether. Carl Watkins has argued that parish priests, drawn from the peasant communities ensured cultural exchange between the learned elites and the unlearned masses (Watkins 2004). Hillary Powell has stated that the concept of 'common people' is inapplicable to medieval society, as social elites and masses shared the same practices (Powell 2010). For Powell, stories easily moved back and forth between oral and written expression.

It is not the purpose of the present article to contribute to the debates about the relationship between the learned and the popular cultures throughout the Middle Ages. However, outlining different scholarly opinions on the subject is important to highlight the importance of oral narratives in the medieval period, including their potential influence upon the written sources. The stories which were circulated orally were no children's literature in Darton's understanding. They were delivered as public performances of various forms (Orme 1999, p. 234). At the same time, as Hunt has pointed out, in the Middle Ages children could be 'part of the audience in a primarily oral and aural society' (Hunt 1990, p. 15). Indeed, even aristocratic reading was done out loud, due to the relative scarcity of books and variable degrees of literacy (Orme 1999, p. 229). Yet this is the very reason to include oral culture in the scope of the medieval narratives which we consider as intended for children, for otherwise a maimed representation would be created. Modern children, like their medieval counterparts, often receive stories being read or retold to them (Stahl et al. 2003).

An important part of medieval Christian life was public sermons, which included *exempla*. *Exempla* were short moralising stories, anecdotes intending to teach the audience the appropriate Christian behaviour. While not all sermons were intended for children, it can be assumed that if a preacher was aware that his audience would include children, he would select more child-friendly *exempla* (Clifton 2003, p. 10). The moralising message of the bestiary stories and entertaining animal metaphors provided good material for preaching (Baxter 1998). The unlearned populace might therefore have been well familiar with the bestiary stories and could have seen representations of the bestiary animals in the shape of church carvings (Druce 1919).

To summarise, while there might not have been a demarcated genre of children's literature in a modern sense, certain types of narratives from various genres could have been intended for or consumed by children in the Middle Ages. Whether or not a certain written or oral narrative was suitable for children, was likely determined by its contents rather than its genre, as the above section has suggested. Particular criteria include the didactic nature of the source, its age-appropriate contents, as well as its entertaining value and the presence of young protagonists. Medieval literature for children, therefore, was a composite concept including texts and oral stories from diverse sources created with diverse purposes.

Fish in medieval children's narratives

The role of fish in medieval children's narratives was selected as a case study for researching the ways in which past individuals engaged with knowledge about an animal which is hard to observe. Not only do fish occupy an environment where humans cannot survive, their body language is difficult for a mammal brain to recognise and understand (Elder 2014, p. 23). It is not surprising therefore that medieval sources contain a lot of false knowledge about fish, falling within Dan Sperber's category of representational beliefs of semi-propositional content – when a person who holds a belief is not fully persuaded and does not possess enough information to fact-check (1985, p. 54–60). Examples of such medieval fish representations are analysed in the present article from two theoretical perspectives. First, they are considered within the context of medieval Christian symbolism. Second, these representations are considered from the standpoint of modern anthropological and ethological research. Particular focus is on the sources' engagement with anthropomorphism and neoteny. Anthropomorphism is the use of human characteristics to describe or explain animals (Garrard 2012, p. 154–170). Today anthropomorphic comparisons are used to describe animal behaviour and emotions to non-specialist humans in terms which the latter can relate to. Inaccurate as it is, anthropomorphism to date remains nearly the only way of making animal emotions and behaviour accessible to general audiences (Bekoff 2000; Murray & Heumann 2016). Neoteny is a process involving a genetic delay so that adult species maintain juvenile characteristics, such as large head, big eyes, chubby cheeks, and short and thick limbs (Garrard 2012, p. 155). Both anthropomorphism and neoteny help humans to empathise better with animals. To summarise, the present article analyses the ways in which medieval literature for children engaged with religious symbolism, anthropomorphism, and neoteny, to create a certain image of fish.

FISH AND MEDIEVALISTS

To date extensive research has been performed on medieval industrial fishing, fish trade, and the consumption of fish, drawing on charters, chronicles, censuses, and excavated deposits of fish bones (Barrett & Orton 2016). However, these works consider only species consumed by humans, and fish is discussed exclusively as a source of food. Whereas there have been attempts to approach animal histories focusing on animals' experiences rather than the human point of view, no such work has been done concerning the history of fish and historians generally prefer to focus on terrestrial megafauna (Taylor 2018).

Angling, which implies more careful observation of fish habits and behaviour, has received far less scholarly attention than industrial fishing (with the exception for Hoffman 1985 and Locker 2018), and the absence of scholarship on the history of pet fish

further points at a general reluctance to approach fish as a creature that can be more than food, but a companion to humans in a historical discourse. Few inquiries have been made into the representations of aquatic organisms in medieval sources. Karl Steel (2019) has discussed human-animal relationships in various medieval narratives, though among water-borne creatures he has written only on oysters. There are even fewer studies about non-consumable species. An article investigating ancient and medieval knowledge about *lolligo* (cuttle fish) was published in 1966, arguing that due to the Biblical prohibition to eat cuttle fish, European knowledge about them kept diminishing over the centuries (Gerhardt 1966). A paper dedicated to *serra* (a sea monster which allegedly raced against ships and can be tentatively identified as swordfish, flying fish, or marlin) is dated 1919 and is mainly descriptive. Another article on *serra* was produced a century later by Jacqueline Leclercq-Marx (2022). Marine mammals, including whales, have also been mainly studied in the context of them being the resources for humans, although there have been some investigations into the medieval cultural representations of whales (Szabo 2008). Overall, the history of aquatic organisms reflects the general bias towards species which are valuable for humans as resources, as well as towards mammals and megafauna. The situation appears to be better in the field of medieval history of Islam. Over the past years interest in fish among scholars studying medieval Islam seems to have grown (Moradi 2016; La Rosa 2019), culminating in the recent special issue of *Mediévales* (2021) dedicated to marine animals in Islamic sources.

An analysis of human-fish relationship as represented in a medieval romance – potentially read by or to children – has been provided by K. Steel and P. McCracken (2011). A fourteenth-century chivalric romance *Perceforest* features a knight named Betidés, who encounters anthropomorphic monstrous fish warriors on a mysterious island. By looking into Betidés's changing attitudes from eating to refusing to eat the fish knights, Steel and McCracken have examined the perceived borders between the human and the non-human. Medieval literature can therefore provide us with valuable insights into how medieval individuals understood and represented their relationships with aquatic ecosystems, even when it features imaginary creatures.

FISH AS FOOD

We can suppose that medieval individuals were quite knowledgeable about various fish species, as evidenced by Aelfric's *Colloquy*. *Colloquy* was produced in the eleventh-century England with the aim of teaching Latin to school children at the age of seven and above (Garmonsway 1939; Harris 2003). Consequently, it contains Latin text written in parallel with Anglo-Saxon. Like many modern language textbooks, *Colloquy* is composed in the form of a dialogue, where representatives of various crafts and trades converse with their master, whom they ask to

teach them proper Latin. Aelfric thus introduces the students to the vocabulary specific for each of the professions along with Latin grammar. Due to its focus on the stereotypes associated with various trades, the *Colloquy* is thus an important source for studying Anglo-Saxon mentalities (Harris 2003, p. 112).

In the section where the master converses with the fisherman, *Colloquy* lists twenty names of various freshwater and marine organisms. Crucially, these are all creatures that the fisherman catches – or – in the case of the whale – could have caught if he did not fear it. This didactic piece therefore is a good illustration for the perceptions of fish in medieval society. The prohibition of flesh consumption was enforced by the Catholic church in sum for thirty-five per cent of the year (Walker Bynum 1988). During this period, fish – which was not considered to be 'flesh' – was consumed instead. In contrast to terrestrial creatures – including species living in close proximity to humans, such as domestic animals and pests – fish was not easy to observe in its natural habitat. Medieval individuals did not pick up many behavioural traits of fish, which could form the basis of a narrative – such as, for example, the greediness of a fox or the loyalty of a hound. Consequently, the role of fish in medieval (children's) narratives was largely reduced to being the source of food. For instance, three centuries after *Colloquy*, Walter of Bibbesworth composed another didactic work – *Le Tretiz* (Kennedy 2003). Written in Anglo-Norman verse, *Le Tretiz* was intended for Lady Dionysia Mouchensey the duchess of Pebroke to assist her in teaching her family the French language, which then was a requirement for the English nobility (Kennedy 2003, p. 131). The work has a rather adorable section dedicated to the sounds which different animals make. Fish do not produce any sounds which can be easily heard and recognised by the human ear. Hence, fish is introduced only as a prey to a fisherman: 'The fisherman fishes in a river. Now with his net, now with his hook' – *Li peschour en viver pesche. Ore de sa rey, ore de son hesche* (Kennedy 2003, p. 138; Bibbesworth 2009, p. 13).

Consequently, fish are often featured in fables and *exempla* suitable for younger audiences as a dead animal. For example, the plotline can revolve around a particular way to consume a fish because of its shape and colour. Plaice has a dark upper side and a white belly, which became the subject of an anecdote retold in the twelfth century by Alexander Neckam in his work *On the Nature of Things* – a natural history treatise (Neckam 1863, p. 152–54). An emperor forbade his courtiers to eat plaice with its dark side turned up. As one man forgot the plaice rule and flipped the fish to the wrong side, he was sentenced to death. However, the man's clever son found a way to save him. Less dramatic examples include household debates over fish. There are husbands stealing the best parts of cooked fish from their wives. There are monks punished by the devil for not appreciating the fish they have received to eat, or abbots who take advantage of their position and start consuming

larger and nicer fish (further sources summarised in Ward 1883 and Herbert 1910).

Even in fables, which portray anthropomorphised animals, and thus give animals their own voices and consequently more agency, fish are shown to talk about themselves in terms of their own dietary value. Thus, in one of Avianus's fables a lamprey 'humiliates' a fish by saying that lampreys are tastier and therefore more expensive (Duff & Duff 1934, p. 740–43). Avianus composed his fables around 400 CE, but they stayed in circulation and remained popular throughout the Middle Ages (Hodapp 2003). The fables were first circulated in Western Europe in Latin prose and verse versions. From the twelfth century onwards, they started to appear in vernacular languages. The fables were also used as texts to be translated by male students learning Latin. Thus, the verse version was commonly studied in schools up to 1300 and appears in late medieval English school manuscripts (Orme 1999, p. 230). All in all, Avianus's work survives in sixty-one manuscripts throughout Europe, and inspired imitations, for example, by the twelfth-century scholar Alexander Neckam (Hodapp 2003, p. 17).

William Hodapp has pointed out that Avianus's fables may have appeared appealing to children, for not only the fables feature children, they also occasionally describe them to outwit adults (Hodapp 2003, p. 19). Unfortunately, not all interactions between a child and an adult in Avianus's collection end well for the child. In the fable titled 'About the fisherman and the fish' a fisherman catches a small fish (*exigui piscis*) in a lake. The fish then begs the fisherman to let it go, reasoning that the fisherman can catch it again later, when it grows bigger – thus implying that the fish is still a child. The fisherman refuses.

Even when fish is described as more human-like, it still ends up eaten. In *Perceforest* the knight Betidés finds himself stranded on a barren winter island (Roussineau 1991, 273; Bryant 2011, p. 362). There he discovers a bunch of unusual fish coming out of the water to the shore. These fish have four legs, fur, and resemble terrestrial animals – oxen, sheep, deer, and even bears! Since Betidés is starving, he slaughters several 'fish beasts', and immediately gets attacked by four new fish coming out of the sea. These fish look like miniature knights fused together with their armour. Their heads are shaped like helmets, and are tipped with long horns, which the fish use as swords; they also have shields integrated into their backs. Upon defeating the four fish knights, Betidés removes this shield from one of them, and feasts on the fish's sweet white flesh.

The story of Betidés appears rather child-friendly, featuring anthropomorphic animals and concluding with a happy ending: the human knight befriends the king of the fish knights. He even teaches the fish folk new combat techniques!

Betidés's initial cruelty can be explained by the general lack of compassion that human beings tend to feel towards fish. Environmental scholars and

ethologists have for a while studied the reasons for such an occurrence (Elder 2014).² An important role in how humans perceive other animals is played by neoteny. The feeling of attachment in human beings is increased by the cuddliness of a creature, such as the presence of fur and fuzziness, and by the ability to lift the corners of the mouth in resemblance to a smile. Because fish do not possess these traits, they tend to invoke less empathy among humans in comparison to mammals (Elder 2014, p. 23–24). In addition, scientists such as James Rose (2002) and Bryan Key (2016) have argued that fish are not capable to process pain on a conscious level because they lack neocortex. Rose's and Key's articles have spurred the so-called 'fish pain' debate, with several scientists criticising Rose's and Key's argument, and pointing out behavioural evidence that fish indeed respond to pain on a conscious level – in other words, are capable of suffering (Sneddon 2015; Sneddon et al. 2018; Brown & Dorey 2019).

While Elder has accused modern public of thinking about fish as 'swimming protein' (Elder 2014, p. 26), in the Middle Ages fish were indeed considered something in between an animal and a vegetable. Pre-Linnean taxonomies arranged animals in a linear progression culminating in the human being as the perfect creature, 'the pot of gold at the end of the evolutionary rainbow' (Balcombe 2010, p. 164). Fish occupied the least important place in this animal hierarchy. Thus, in bestiaries entries dedicated to fish and snakes often concluded the list of animals and were followed by plants. One of the most prominent medieval scholars, Thomas Aquinas, explained:

Scripture, therefore, does not call fishes 'living creatures', but 'creeping creatures having life'; whereas it does call land animals 'living creatures' on account of their more perfect life, and seems to imply that fishes are merely bodies having in them something of a soul, whilst land animals, from the higher perfection of their life, are, as it were, living souls with bodies subject to them.

Et ideo pisces vocat, non animam viventem, sed reptile animae viventis, sed terrena animalia vocat animam viventem, propter perfectionem vitae in eis, ac si pisces sint corpora habentia aliquid animae, terrestria vero animalia, propter perfectionem vitae, sint quasi animae dominantes corporibus (Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Q. 72).

In other words, whereas modern scientists have argued that fish have imperfect brains, for medieval thinkers fish had imperfect souls.

In their analysis of the story, Steel and McCracken have argued that Betidés's journeys from feeling no compassion towards fish knights to recognising their sentience (Steel & McCracken 2011).³ Indeed, in the narrative's conclusion Betidés refuses to eat a fish knight offered to him as a sacrifice. Represented as first and foremost food in medieval sources, even

anthropomorphic fish had to go to great lengths in order to deserve human compassion. At the same time, the story appears to question the human position among the non-humans. Betidés's own nickname 'the White Knight' invites parallels between his own flesh, and the white flesh of the fish knights, making us question Betidés's own nature.

FISH AS A MAILBOX

One common feature of fish behaviour, which was noticed by medieval narrators was swallowing small inedible things. Hence another role of fish occurring in medieval stories potentially suitable for children is swallowing meaningful objects and later delivering them to humans. For example, one *exemplum* narrates about a householder, who gives his last penny to a beggar. Later a stranger comes and presents this man with a fish, inside which the householder finds a piece of gold (British Library, MS Harley 268). In another *exemplum* a fisherman receives a communion on Easter. However, being guilty of some sin, he does not dare to swallow the host. Instead, the fisherman gives the host to a fish. Ten years later the fisherman finally gets brave enough to confess his sin, and the fish swims to him with the host in its mouth (British Library, MS Royal 15 D). This motif appears not only in *exempla*. There is a lengthy story in *Gesta Romanorum* ('The Deeds of the Romans') about Pope Gregory – not one of the actual popes, but a completely fictional character (Bright 2019). A collection of entertaining stories which in fact have nothing to do with the Romans, *Gesta Romanorum* was compiled in thirteenth-century England and widely circulated both in England and in Europe. The stories featured in the collection come from a wide variety of sources, including episodes from chronicles and saints' lives, the available Classical materials, Eastern tales, fables, and folk stories (Brumbaugh-Walter 2003, p. 29). Both entertaining and moralising, these stories often feature young protagonists, meaning that they were probably interesting to the young audiences. Modelled on Oedipus, the story tells about the life of Gregory – the child born from the incestuous relationship between a brother and a sister. Ashamed of her sin, Gregory's mother casts him away. Years later, Gregory meets his mother again and marries her, neither realising they are related. Discovering the truth, Gregory goes on a pilgrimage to do penance for his parents' and for his own sins. He ends up on an island where he chains himself to the rocks and throws the keys into the sea. Seventeen years later, when God decides that Gregory has suffered enough and should become a pope instead, a fisherman discovers the keys to Gregory's chains while gutting a fish (Keller 1842, 124–34). In these examples fish act like some kind of God's mailboxes, transferring his gifts to people, becoming a medium connecting two worlds. In most cases – except for the *exemplum* when the fish carries a host in its mouth – the fish sacrifices its life to deliver an object to humans. As fish were gutted while still alive in the Middle Ages (and

the practice continues today), the whole experience of delivering an object to humans becomes rather tortuous for the fish.

I am arguing that the reason why in these examples God is described to elect fish as His messenger is connected to more abstract Christian ideas including representing Jesus Christ through the symbol of a fish. In the medieval European religious context Christ was of course the most famous person, who allegedly transferred God's message to people and was tortured to death. Jesus is frequently represented by the symbol of a fish, and the Greek word for fish – ἰχθύς – has been designated to stand for Ἰησοῦς Χριστός, Θεοῦ Υἱός, Σωτήρ meaning 'Jesus Christ, Son of God, Savior'. Fish thus became one of the earliest symbols to represent Jesus due to the Egyptian, Mesopotamian, and Syrian influences, as these cultures employed fish as a symbol of life and hopes for immortality (Edmondson 2010). In addition, fish metaphors appear throughout the scripture and were employed by later commentators (Derrett 1980). In the Bible, Jesus addresses two fishermen – Simon (future apostle Peter) and Andrew: 'Come with me and I will make you to become the fishers of men' (Mark 1:16–17). Another reason for making connections between Jesus and fish in medieval culture is the Eucharistic interpretation of the feeding of five thousand – one of the miracles performed by Jesus, when the multitude of people was fed on five loaves of bread and two fish. One of the Church Fathers, Tertullian, in his work 'On Baptism', compared all Christians to fish swimming in the water of baptism:

But we, little fishes, following our ἰΧΘΥΣ Jesus Christ, are born in water, nor are we safe other than by permanently being in water.

Sed nos pisciculi secundum ἰΧΘΥΣ nostrum Iesum Christum in aqua nascimur, nec aliter quam in aqua permanendo salvi sumus (Tertullian, *De baptismo*, cap. 1).

Following these metaphors, medieval bestiaries painted a positive image of fish. Bestiaries described these creatures as an example of parental love and compassion, apparently referring to the types of fish which carry their offspring in their mouth:

What human affection can imitate the compassion of fish? Kisses are sufficient for us. For them it is not sufficient to open internal organs, and to swallow the newborn and still return them whole.⁴

Quis humanus affectus hanc piscium pietatem possit imitari? Oscula nobis sacietati sunt, illis non satis est aperire viscera, natosque recipere, ac revocare integros (Aberdeen University Library MS 24 fol. 74^r – 74^r).

Bestiaries also connected fish to sexual restraint, as it was believed that fish breed only with their own kind

and therefore do not commit fornication, in contrast to donkeys and horses, or indeed humans:

Then how pure and unspoiled succession is, with no creatures mingling outside of their own species.⁵

Tum deinde quam pura et inviolata successio, ut nullus sed generi suo misceatur (Aberdeen University Library MS 24 fol. 74^r).

Therefore, on top of being a symbol for Christ, fish were also perceived a representation for innocence and freedom of sin in the animal kingdom. In light of these examples, one can speculate about parallels between the Biblical story of Jesus carrying God's message to humans and being tortured and executed, and an innocent creature – fish sent by God to carry an object to humans and also being tortured and executed while delivering this object.

FISH AS A MONSTER

Fish found in rivers, lakes, and close to the shores were represented as harmless commodities. It is probably because these water bodies themselves were relatively safe environments controlled by humans. At the same time, the more dangerous sea was also seen as a home to dangerous monstrous creatures (Fälton & Ignatova 2025). The fisherman from Aelfric's *Colloquy* indeed related that he did not dare to go after whales for it was dangerous: *Quia periculosa res est capere cetum* (Garmonsway, p. 29 – 30). In bestiaries whales – categorised as 'fish' within medieval taxonomies – were associated with the devil, as they were described to lure fish into their mouth with a pleasant smell, much like the devil lures naïve souls into his snares:

The nature of the beast is such that when it is hungry it opens its mouth and exhales some sweet-smelling odour from its mouth, and when the smaller fish scent this sweetness they congregate in its mouth.⁶

Natura belue est talis quando esurit aperit os suum, et odorem quendam bene olentem exalat de ore eius, cuius dulcedinem ut sentiunt minores pisces, congregant se in ore eius (Aberdeen University Library MS 24, fol. 73^r).

A popular motif appearing in multiple medieval sources, including bestiaries, features a whale (*balena*) which gets mistaken for an island. Once the sailors dock their ship and start a fire on top of the whale, the beast, being disturbed by the heat, dives to the depths in order to cool itself down, drowning the ship and the crew (For example, Cambridge, University Library, MS Ii.4.26, fols. 54^v – 55^r). Another marine monster frequently appearing in bestiaries is the *serra*, described in the following way:

On the beast called *serra*. There is a beast in the sea called *serra*, it has enormous wings. When it sees a ship under the sail in the sea, it raises her wings above water and competes in sailing against the ship for thirty or forty stadia, and not sustaining the labor it gets exhausted and lowers the wings and draws them towards herself. Indeed, the waves of the sea soon carry it tired back to its own place in the depth. This beast represents the world. The ship indeed is the example of the righteous, who without danger and the shipwreck of faith move through the midst of the world's storms and tempests. But the *serra* is a beast which is not strong enough to sail along the ship, it bears the image of those who in the beginning choose to start with good deeds, then not persevering in those, they are conquered by different kinds of vices which just like the fluctuating waves of the sea plunge them all the way to hell. Because the prize is promised not to those who begin but to those who persevere.⁷

De belua que dicitur serra. Est belua in mari que dicitur serra, pennas habens immanes. Hec cum viderit navim in pelago velificantem, elevat pennas suas super aquam et contendit velificare contra navim stadiis triginta vel quadraginta, et non sustinens laborem deficit, et deponens pennas ad se attrahit eas. Unde vero maris iam lassam reportant ad locum suum in profundum. Hec belua figuram habet seculi. Navis vero iustorum habet exemplum, qui sine periculo et naufragio fidei transierunt per medias huius mundi procellas et tempestates. Serra vero id est belua illa que non valuit velificare cum navi, figuram illorum gerit, qui in initio ceperunt bonis operibus insistere, postea non permanentes in eis, victi sunt diversis viciorum generibus que illos tanquam fluctuantes maris unde mergunt usque ad inferos. Non enim incipientibus sed perseverantibus premium promittitur (Aberdeen University Library MS 24 fol. 73^r).

Stories about marine monsters are notable because, in contrast to 'ordinary' fish, 'monstrous' creatures – the *balena* and the *serra* – were frequently represented in manuscript illuminations. Not only stories about them were more exciting for the reader. Both these creatures were also portrayed to demonstrate a greater amount of sentience. The *balena* responds to the burning pain caused by the fire by diving into the deep cold water – this narrative certainly resonates with modern 'fish pain' debate and the researchers' focus on the aquatic organisms' behavioural reactions to noxious stimuli. The *serra* engages in a playful race against the ship. Manuscript illuminations portraying this creature depict it in a more lively manner in comparison to 'ordinary' fish, which are also depicted to accompany the *serra*. For example, an illumination

found in a fourteenth-century bestiary Kongelige Bibliotek, GKS 3466 8° (fig.1) shows two *serrae*, with one of them assuming a playful canine pose and looking at the ship, as if trying to make eye contact with the humans. As Ryan Denson (2023) has demonstrated, the sea monsters described in ancient Greek sources possessed canine features due to the blurred or entirely absent distinctions between the notions of sea monsters and 'sea dogs' in that culture. The dog-like appearance of marine monstrosities continued within the Graeco-Roman tradition and was transmitted via not only textual but also pictorial sources, influencing later representations of fantastic creatures. In agreement with J. J. Cohen's first thesis of monster culture, marine monsters' bodies were the reflections of medieval cultural perceptions of animals (Cohen 1996 p. 4). Not only they reflected an earlier tradition, but they also appeared to engage with the nonhuman sentience. As mentioned in the introduction, the didactic nature of the bestiaries suggests that they could be used to teach successive generations. We can therefore assume that the purpose of the marine monsters was not only to terrify and entertain, but also to encourage some empathy towards the non-human creatures.



Figure 1 Kongelige Bibliotek, GKS 3466 8°, fol. Reproduced with permission.

To summarise, the present article aimed to identify which roles were fulfilled by fish in the medieval texts supposedly intended for or consumed by children. For this purpose, I also highlighted what contemporary research considers to be medieval children's literature. While there was no such genre in the Middle Ages, there were child-friendly types of narratives found across various genres, including both textual and oral transmission. Stories suitable for younger audiences therefore could be found in language textbooks, as well as among fables, *exempla*, chivalric romances, and bestiary entries.

Within a selection of such sources, I have identified three dimensions of representing fish. Namely, they

were represented as food, as a messenger, and as a monster. Given the difficulty in neotenising fish and employing anthropomorphic comparisons to describe these creatures, it is not surprising that medieval tales often represented fish as objects rather than living creatures: they are dead and are ready to be eaten. Even a living fish was portrayed to live with an understanding that it will one day become food. Language textbooks taught young readers the names of the fish, suitable to be caught and consumed. Alternatively, a fish was shown to carry a precious object inside its body. On the surface it appears that fish's value was reduced to delivering an object sent by God to a human through being gutted. However, the use of fish as a reference to Christ, together with the generally positive representation of these creatures in bestiaries points at the possible influence of Christian symbolism upon such narratives. While these meanings might be lost on us, they could have been picked up by younger audiences in the highly religious medieval Europe. Finally, fantastic monstrous fish which were described to inhabit the seas subverted the first two motifs. Not only monstrous fish were described as more dangerous and therefore difficult to capture. They were also represented as creatures capable of manifesting their agency and sentience. Even though this exact terminology was not employed in the Middle Ages, narratives about monstrous fish potentially allowed (younger) audiences to engage with relevant ideas. Further research is required to investigate the relationships between complex and always contradicting representations of fish in medieval (children's) narratives.

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¹ For example, late medieval English ghost stories, transcribed by M. R. James (1922).

² Nowadays manifested through industrial fishing and fish farming practices. Maximilian Elder has observed that methods for fish slaughter would be considered cruel or illegal if applied to terrestrial animals (Elder, p. 23). See also Mood, 2010.

³ Sentience can be defined as the ability to feel and experience emotions such as joy, pleasure, suffering, and fear.

⁴ Author’s translation.

⁵ Author’s translation.

⁶ Author’s translation.

⁷ Author’s translation.