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Taming the Beast: Images of Trained Bears in Twelfth-Century English Manuscripts

Amongst the surviving twelfth-century depictions of bears are two images which show the creature apparently being taught to speak. These images appear in manuscripts made in the Canterbury area; Cambridge, Trinity College, MS O.4.7 f.75 and Vatican Library, Rossiana MS 500, f.148. Both scenes are found in texts associated with grammar. The first is an alphabetical list of Hebrew names and the second a copy of Priscian's *Institutiones Grammaticae* (or *Grammatical Foundations*). Echoing the form of fables in which animals are used to critique human behaviour as teaching tools, these pictures provide a commentary on contemporary education. The choice of the bear as pupil suggests that children are like wild and dangerous animals, whose behaviour must be controlled. This echoes written and visual descriptions of the teaching, and particularly of the teaching of grammar, in which the art is associated with the acquisition of discipline as well as language. At the same time, in initials to Psalm One, bears sometimes represent evil being conquered by men. Thus in another English manuscript, the Winchester Bible (Winchester Cathedral Library f.218), an image of David killing a bear is coupled with a scene of Christ driving out a demon. It is possible that a third depiction of a man with a restrained bear, in a volume of Saints' Lives made at Canterbury (now London, British Library, Arundel MS 91, f.47v), may have been informed by such scenes of bears being taught and fought. This image of a bear, which is coupled with that of a man restraining an ass, is part of a *beatus* initial like those found in Psalm One. It opens the *Life* of Saint Leodegarius', a seventh-century bishop of Autun, which includes an account of his education as part of his exemplary existence. Thus these images, in books designed for educated readers, express the importance of the acquisition of discipline and knowledge, but also suggest that not all students were capable of mastering these skills. The bear in the British Library manuscript attacks his trainer, emphasising his dangerous nature, which cannot be fully overcome.