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The Illuminated Bestiaries in the English Franciscan Culture

The author investigates the use of the Bestiary manuscripts in the Franciscan milieu in England of the XIIIth century. This type of manuscripts enjoyed a particular interest of various monastic communities and chapters still in the XIIIth century: Benedictines, Austin canons, Cistercian monks were especially interested in this moralizing work.

In the XIIIth century, with the diffusion in England of the Mendicant Orders, these communities demonstrate equally a rather developed interest for the illuminated Bestiary. Some of these manuscripts were Dominican commissions.

A particular interest represents a Franciscan attitude to the Bestiary. In fact, two outstanding English manuscripts of the second half of the XIIIth century could be connected with the Franciscan thought and are probably due to the Franciscan patronage.

The first one, the MS. 22 preserved in the Chapter Library of the Westminster Abbey in London, dated from 1270-ies, belonged to the Franciscan convent in York and was executed probably for the attention of this community, as shown by the inscription going back to the end of the XIIIth-beginning of the XIVth century (fol. 64v). The manuscript belongs to the so called Third family of the Bestiary manuscripts: the Bestiary text begins with the chapters describing domestic animals, following the order of the Book XII of the *Etymologies* of Isidore of Seville. Moreover, the manuscript contains other texts: those on Fabulous races and Monsters borrowed from Isidore of Seville, and passages from Bernardus Silvestris, John of Salisbury and other texts. The representations of real and fantastic animals in this manuscript have particular vigour and expressiveness.

An intriguing question is put by several moralizations included in the text of the Bestiary itself: they have several elements in common with Rabanus Maurus moralizations which accompany the texts on animals in his *De Universo*. These extracts, however, are already present in earlier manuscripts of this family produced probably in the London area. It can be tempting to connect this development and reelaboration of the Bestiary text with the Franciscan influence and thought. But there is no confirmation of the Franciscan provenance of these manuscripts, and there are no testimonies of any direct connexion of them with currents of the Franciscan thought in England.

Thus, this manuscript represents rather a case of the use by Franciscan teachers in England of the typically English Bestiary tradition.

A different case represents the ms. Fr. 14969 of the Bibliotheque nationale de France, the moralized and versified French Bestiary of Guillaume le Clerc, dated from 1260-ies. It is an example of a specific production of the English Franciscan milieu. The person who commissioned this manuscript was moved by a strong desire to glorify the Franciscan order and its virtues. In fact, its miniatures represent not only animals themselves but illustrate also the moral meaning of their behaviour. Among these illustrations there are many representations of Franciscan friars, always in a particularly noble and almost heroic attitude, in front of other ecclesiastical and secular personages. Thus, an exceptional role of the Franciscan order as an incarnation of moral purity and nobility opposed to the wicked world is rendered in the miniatures of this manuscript which gives an idea of an extraordinary role of the Franciscan order in England of the XIIIth century.

The both manuscripts show an importance which was given by Franciscans to the possibilities of the moral teaching of medieval Bestiaries.