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Towards an Aesthetic Foundation of the Medieval Imaginary: the Bestiary

With respect to the study of the aesthetics of animals in the *medievo*, the bestiary is perhaps the most typical and accessible class of sources. Bestiaries, along with encyclopedias, provide the best means of ascertaining both what was known and what was believed about animals in the Middle Ages. The methods, vocabulary and conceptual frameworks employed by medieval writers who touched upon the world of nature were shaped by a plan loftier than the empirical study of animals, plants and minerals. As a result, medieval natural history might be compared to a scrapbook. In the Middle Ages, animal stories were immensely popular throughout Europe, North Africa, and the Middle East. The people of the time were, of course, dependent on wild and domestic animals for their survival, and so had an obvious interest in the animals around them. But there is more to it than just a requirement for knowledge of the animals they knew and used; there is a distinctly spiritual and even mystical aspect to the animal lore of the Middle Ages.