

MEDIEVAL PETS

Dr Kathleen Walker-Meikle

Having a furry, feathered or scaly friend isn't new. Even in the Middle Ages people kept pets as domestic companions. Boydell's new publication *Medieval Pets* is the first comprehensive account dedicated to pets in the Middle Ages. The author, Dr Kathleen Walker-Meikle, has researched how they were acquired, kept, fed, exercised, displayed and what problems they could cause. We asked her some questions which reveal more about this fascinating subject.

Dr Kathleen Walker-Meikle, you are a Wellcome Trust Research Fellow at the University of York, specialising in medieval animals and medicine. How did you first become interested in the subject of animals in the Middle Ages and what inspired you to embark on this book project?

I've always been interested in how people in the past understood the natural world, and their interactions with the animal kingdom. Apart from pets, I've researched the use of animal body parts in medieval *materia medica*, and my current project examines the medical treatment of animal bites (mainly rabid dogs and snakes) in the High and Late Middle Ages. Dogs biting their owners (with the added possibility of giving them rabies) is a rather interesting contrast from the multitude of loyal dogs I found when researching pets!

Was 'pet' in medieval times defined as we understand the concept of a pet today?

Well, they didn't use a specific noun such as the English 'pet' but rather referred to the animals individually by species (or at least by location, such as animals being kept in a house). I usually identified pets if they were kept mainly as companion animals, had names, and usually kept indoors. On the specific animal front, they are all the furry kind, with dogs, cats, squirrels, and rabbits being the most popular (although there are some pet badgers and a royal marmot in the book). No reptiles, amphibians nor fish I'm afraid.

What sources did you use for your research and which were the most useful?

I searched through a huge variety of sources, from letters and poems to accounts and chronicles. Pets seemed to be everywhere in iconography, particularly when the subject was an aristocratic woman. In fact, I could put only a tiny fraction of the iconographic references in the book. As pets (and animals in general) are often not an indexed term in published sources, it did involve a lot of flicking through pages and following hunches. Some sources are just richer for pets than others.

Visitation records are packed with records of monks and nuns keeping pets and the rather censorious reprimands of the practice. Perhaps it's the nature of research, but I seemed to find pets everywhere!

You researched for your subject in various European countries; did the most common pet differ in different parts of Europe?

My research focused on Western Europe from 1200-1500, and the most common pet throughout is the dog. In fact dogs are the most popular pet by a mile, followed by cats, caged birds and squirrels.

What were the more uncommon (or what we consider uncommon today) pets in the Middle Ages?

Squirrels (Red ones naturally)! They were popular among ladies. Many of the sources (visitation records, iconography, accounts, plays, etc.) mention the use of leash and collar on squirrels. There are mentions of squirrels being taken out for walks, carried on the shoulder or under the arm in accounts, plays and they feature in iconography. It's intriguing, because the few references I've found to keeping them as pets in the 20th century give the impression that they would make terrible pets!

Is there any evidence of people giving pets names?

Yes, pets given names. In fact it's one of the possible clues that the animal is a pet. There are generic names for pets (tomcats being called Gilbert and Tibert, sparrows called Phillip), and individual names, from dog called Jakke, Whitefoot, Sturdy, Hardy, Bo, Dymant, Dyamant, Satinn, Trynket, Zaphyro and Bellina to cats called Mite, Martino, Belaud, Pangur Bán and Méone and Cruibne ('little meow' and 'little paws' in Old Irish) among many others!

Nowadays pet holders across the world spend millions on grooming, dressing and buying luxurious items for their animal friends. Did people in the Middle Ages do similar things?

Oh yes! There is a lot of conspicuous consumption among elites on pets...whether it be collars made from leather, cloth or precious metal, bird cages, cage covers, squirrel collars, little jackets, or exotic seeds and spices for parrots and monkeys. In fact the stereotypical medieval pet dog is usually decked out in a fancy collar with tinkling bells and is invariably overweight, lavished with milk, bread and meat. There is an entire subheading on fat little dogs in the book, with preachers complaining how fat pets were compared while poor people were hungry or source discussing recipes to stop your fat little dog from dying from constipation (feed it porridge).

What is the most astonishing find you came across during your research?

Too many to count. I was particularly fond of some of the elaborate dog collars I found in French royal accounts, such as one for a dog made with blue cloth, decorated with golden fleur de lys and gold bells with a gold buckle, or one for a squirrel embroidered with pearls. But my favourite was probably the elaborate mourning rituals for dead pets at the Gonzaga court in Mantua, which include funerals (which other court pets would 'attend' in the company of their owners), tombs and a deluge of Latin elegies and epitaphs.

Do you have a pet yourself?

People always ask me this question! It's not as if scholars of medieval warfare are asked if they set trebuchets and mangonels against their neighbours' fences on the weekend! But yes, when you work on the history of animals, people do get the impression that you must be very soft on animals. Anyway, on the question itself, I don't have a pet at the moment due to living in a garden-less flat but there is a late lamented dachshund who is commemorated at the end of the Acknowledgements in a little Latin epitaph...

Many thanks.



Medieval Pets

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