

Medieval Pets

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Kathleen Walker-Meikle's book is a welcome addition to the increasing volume of research concerned with the roles animals played throughout history. This genuinely multidisciplinary subject has begun recently to attract attention, a sign that the intellectual market for animal-related topics is expanding among historians. One particular field, 'human-animal studies', is already strong in the USA and is growing in Europe as well. This trend is rooted in the realization that animals kept by people are not simply part of their material culture, but are worthy of study in themselves. Human-animal relations, however, also reveal hidden aspects of connections between humans themselves, indeed animals have been important sources of communication between people in most cultures. Attitudes toward animals convey messages concerning our (and their) complex identities (status, age, gender, religion etc.) and emotional disposition.

These largely anthropological aspects are relevant to all types of animals and have governed the 'practicalities' of meat consumption customs as well as far more complex forms of human behaviour. However, focusing on pets is a smart move by the author, as their frequent presence both in written and iconographic sources provides a sufficient body of information for an in-depth and educated historical inquiry. Discussing pets also tends to capture the brighter side of shared human-animal history: the majority of sources investigated illustrate the pleasant parts of animal keeping, describing the affectionate attitudes of humans towards animals. Passing references to animal familiars in witchcraft in this book, however, are a stark reminder of the multifaceted and often contradictory connotations associated with most animals. By keeping close to the topic of pets, the author shields us from the dark side of human-animal relationships in this book.

Last but not least, for many of us in the urbanized 'western' world, pets remain the only live animals that we have daily contacts with. Processed meat products tend to be devoid of any 'personal' signs of the once live animal, and metaphoric animal representations (such as children's toys) are lacking an important quality: the ability to respond. However, the medieval condition that '(t)he pet's status was wholly dependent on the human owner's perception of the animal's affection as genuine' (p. 108) has persisted remarkably throughout the centuries.

The potential readership of this book is very broad as this work synthesizes and presents the subject in a format aimed at researchers as well as the educated general audience with little prior knowledge of the topic. The author has identified an area in which public fascination with animals and burgeoning general interest in the past becomes synergetic. She explores this rich topic in proper detail, along multiple dimensions by which the various chapters of the book are organized.

A personal note is due here. This work should encourage those carrying out research in all cognate disciplines to increasingly address the complex roles animals have often played in history. Working as a zooarchaeologist myself (studying the bare skeletal evidence of past human-animal relations from all periods) I found Kathleen Walker-Meikle's endeavours to be complementary to my own. This book has not simply opened up new dimensions inaccessible to my own data and methods, but also helped me to reflect on the meaning and significance of my field at the intersection of zoology, written history and artefact-driven archaeological inquiry. I feel that other academics, entrenched in their own disciplines, would benefit from the broad perspective offered by the author.

The structure of the volume reflects its broad potential readership. The six chapters are proportionate and concise, usually 15–20 pages long, sub-divided into several shorter topical sections. This, especially when illustrations are provided, makes reading easy in spite of the underlying complexity of some of the issues raised. The language is clear, and jargon free, making the work accessible even to an international lay readership. Evidence for the scholarly quality of the book is discretely tucked away in no fewer than 499 end notes which illustrate the depth of original research required by such an apparently light-hearted looking treatise. This substantial body of information would have made reading awkward had footnotes been used on each page, given the small format of the book. The conventional numbering of end notes by chapter, however, makes the handling of almost 50 pages of notes difficult. As this is a valuable part of the work that enhances factual knowledge, I would have found it easier to orient myself among the hundreds of end notes if they were assigned a single serial number, rather than providing individual numbering for each six chapters. This conventionally accepted technical solution, however, does not diminish the pleasure of reading the eloquent main text.

The contents of the book range from the medieval concept of pets to their forms of representation in pictorial and documentary sources. Chapter one, 'The medieval pet', sets the scene by defining the subject matter, a step of fundamental importance given the potential latitude of discussion. Although dogs and cats dominate in historical sources, instead of providing a list of animal species as potential pets, the author takes a more sophisticated approach, by defining a niche for these creatures in their conceptual environment, pointing out that '[p]ets blur the boundaries between animal and human status' (p. 1). This idea permeates the entire book

and resurfaces during the study of detailed subjects such as the naming of pets and their uses as attributes in various settings. The duality in the perception of animals lacking souls according to Christian teaching, but still being treated as if they have a remarkable human dimension is clearly illustrated through the carefully documented examples of pet keeping by clerics. As pointed out by the author, ‘...saints and pets in general do not mix, in marked contrast to the earthly clerics, who throughout this book will be shown as great pet keepers’ (p. 23). In addition to the direct or indirect personalization of privileged pets, a strong emphasis is placed on the proxemics of their keeping: ‘Pets abounded in both public and private interior spaces...’ (p. 55). Consequently, pets have also been physically the closest to humans of all live animals, penetrating into the social and intimate spheres of their owners’ lives. These narrow spheres were not accessible to some other favoured outdoor animals partly for practical reason, and so, for example, cherished and valuable horses as well as high status falcons are excluded from further discussion in the book on this basis, helping the author to focus on animals that enjoyed a largely indoor lifestyle alongside their keepers during the Middle Ages. Pet keeping was typical of ladies and clerics. In this context, small raptors such as sparrow-hawks associated with priests and merlyon (merlin) with ladies (1) in the Book of Saint Albans (1486) could be considered borderline ‘pet’ cases since due to their small size they would have been relatively useless in practical falconry. According to an early 19th-century hunting book from Hungary, ‘Medieval ladies loved and caressed their falcons like they spoil their lapdogs nowadays’.(2)

Chapter two is devoted to the various ways pets could be acquired and lost during the Middle Ages. Given its average length, this is the most richly referenced chapter in the book. It is all the more interesting that the section on purchasing pets reveals one of the difficulties in any historical subject: ‘possibly ... few pets cost a great deal, and the sum was not worth recording’ (p. 26). When studying the past one must always try to consider the unrecorded, although negative evidence cannot be reliably interpreted in most cases. One may also argue that for a whole range of ‘priceless’ things it is impossible to attach financial value. Symbolic and emotional meanings, however, can only be inferred indirectly from data that is fundamentally different from quantifiable prices. Pets, understandably fall into this category, their commercial value not being commensurate with the bond they formed with their owners. Importantly, such human–animal connections must also have existed in segments of society whose life stories and long-forgotten beliefs never entered the written record (3): aside from high status self-representation, pets have filled an important emotional void in the lives of many people regardless of social status: ‘Affection and the desire for display could go hand in hand’ (p. 109). As shown by ethnographic examples, this emotional need is present in most human communities even if it remains formally unrecorded. A brief critical review of sources would have been interesting here. Another interesting issue raised in this chapter is the acquiring of pets by breeding. Although personally I do not see ‘breeding’ as a clear-cut working concept in the Middle Ages, many pets, especially miniature dogs, would not have survived without human support and propagation under the circumstances of traditional animal keeping. This means that they had to be cared for and bred specifically when they were in high demand. Bones of short-legged dogs, for example, become conspicuously frequent at urban sites during the Roman period and they likewise regularly occur in medieval archaeological deposits. It is reassuring to see parallel historical documentation for this phenomenon. The death of pets discussed in the same chapter also offers valuable information for the archaeologist, as in the absence of written records, medieval animal burials incompatible with Christian funerary rituals (4) would be very difficult to interpret. ‘Many of the rituals of pet keeping appear to point to an ambiguous animal–human status. Pets were given human names, allowed to roam indoors with as much freedom as humans, and rather intriguingly, at their deaths, were greatly mourned over’ (p. 108). Unfortunately, aside from animal remains that could be attributed to species kept as pets, little archaeological evidence of pet burials is known from the Middle Ages. Certainly the definition of pets as largely indoor animals would be of little use in trying to locate their graves unless known (e.g. royal) private gardens are excavated. Reconciling different bodies of data is of utmost interest from this point of view.

Chapter three contains a discussion of pet welfare and addresses the issue of pets partly in relation to other tokens of material culture. The feeding of these important animals as well as the moral lessons related to them becoming overweight raises important questions concerning their health that does not seem to be as richly documented in sources as other aspects of pet keeping. Notably, veterinary works have traditionally

dealt with horses since classical times, possibly inspired by the animals' high status, great utilitarian value and significance in warfare. However, archaeological finds, especially of dogs and cats, sometimes reveal pathological conditions that seem to be consonant with the descriptions of pet welfare in this chapter. The review of animal accessories provided by the author offers an unusually interesting glimpse at a rarely discussed group of artefacts.

Chapter four, on living with pets, elaborates on the already mentioned proxemics of pet keeping, chosen as a criterion underlying the definition of medieval pets in the first chapter. The characteristic indoor presence of pets in various spaces is reviewed ranging from the dining hall to the sleeping chambers. Broader social spaces include monasteries, convents and universities where these animals served both as companions and special attributes for the inhabitants. Pet keeping in cities is an important subject as it is unclear to what extent urbanism contributed to the widening and consolidation of pet keeping among the burghers of emerging medieval cities. Since, however, the systematic documentation of rural pet keeping by medieval lower classes is absent, it is difficult to decide whether pets in the urban landscape were a natural continuation of a little known popular tradition or the newly developed emulation of high-status pet keeping as seen in ruling circles. Along a different dimension, this dilemma shows the wisdom of the author in having included the spatial concept in the definition of pets at the beginning of the book: animals documented outdoors (whether in writing or in images) become more difficult to interpret as pets than those seen in bed or on top of the dinner table. Travelling with pets is also discussed in the book, offering an original insight into the meaning of space in pet keeping.

Chapter five is a designated review of iconographic sources, although much of the previous discussion was also based on pictorial evidence. In this chapter, however, depictions of pets are grouped by various genres of visual art from funeral effigies through seals and portraits of diverse personae including saints and scholars. Reviewing animals in these special artistic contexts helps understanding their roles as perceived attributes of their owners as well as the way the outside world saw pets as means of self-representation. This chapter has the smallest number of notes but it contains one quarter of the book's 20 black and white in-text pictures. Even so, some more illustrations would have been helpful in this chapter, as reading the analytical description of pictures without seeing the images themselves is somewhat tedious, even if the carefully selected pictorial material makes a decent general illustration.

Chapter six parallels the analysis of iconographic sources by looking at the perceptions of pets as reflected in literature. Special attention is paid to the complex roles ascribed to pets as symbols of love in courtly literature where they often serve as go-betweens in the service of lovers illustrating their role in human-human relationships. A direct emotional attachment to animals is shown by personal as well as court elegies written about pets which often reference antique literature and personalities. In addition to being merely stylistic exercises, many of these verses show personal affection toward animals. In some cases, however, the symbolic function of such animal poems may also lie behind the use of pets as a leitmotif. It is in this chapter where the fundamental nature of pets is shown to be perceived as almost transitional between the worlds of humans and those of ordinary, utilitarian domestic animals such as livestock.

Our understanding of human-animal interaction in the distant past tends to be coloured by our better knowledge of such interactions in more recent times, with its abundant and reliable iconographic and documentary sources. Bone remains recovered from archaeological sites offer a steady and omnipresent source of data on animal welfare, but interpretations can be ambiguous given the absence of multi-faceted complementary information such as that summarized in this book.

The volume by Kathleen Walker-Meikle is a useful addition to a growing body of specialist literature, and in addition, anyone who has ever owned a pet will find it fascinating.

Notes

1. Dame Juliana Berners, *The Boke of Saint Albans* (London, 1881), p. 26. [Back to \(1\)](#)

2. Dienes Pák, *Vadászattudomány* [Hunters' Science] (Buda, 1829), p. 188.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Márta Daróczi-Szabó, 'Pets in pots: superstitious belief in a medieval Christian (12th–14th c.) village in Hungary', in *Anthropological Approaches to Zooarchaeology: Colonialism, Complexity and Animal Transformations*, ed. **D. Campana, P. Crabtree, S. D. deFrance, J. Lev-Tov and A. Choyke** (Oxford, 2010).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. László Bartosiewicz, "'Stone dead": dogs in a medieval sacral space', in *The Ritual Killing and Burial of Animals: European Perspectives*, ed. A. Pluskowski (Oxford, 2011), p. 221.[Back to \(4\)](#)

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