



The Marvelous Beasts of the *Secrets of Natural History*¹

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Abstract. The paper examines some marvelous bovids, remarkable birds, and beings half human, half animals such as the werewolf as an illustration of certain key changes in source reception taking place in late medieval geographic writing. These creatures are found in a Middle French compendium titled the *Secrets of Natural History*, which for convenience here is called *SNH*. An anonymous work, probably compiled about 1380, it exists in four illustrated French luxury manuscripts made in the mid to late fifteenth century, as well as in several incunabule and early printed editions. Though there are hundreds of creatures mentioned in the *SNH*'s seventy-three chapters, taken largely from Pliny's *Historia Naturalis* and Solinus' *Collectanea*, we will be concerned here only with those that are non-Plinian and more "local" in origin as part of the pattern of larger changes in scientific observation from a sole reliance on antique authority to a greater use and incorporation of popular or folk culture received from contemporary, often named sources. Miniatures from the four known manuscripts of the *SNH* illustrate points in the argument.

Keywords: Marvelous Creatures, Metamorphosis, Pierre Bersuire, Travel writing, Medieval geography, Werewolves.

[es] Las bestias maravillosas de *Secretos de Historia Natural*

Resumen. El artículo examina algunos bóvidos maravillosos, aves notables y seres mitad humanos, mitad animales, como el hombre lobo, como una ilustración de ciertos cambios clave en la recepción de la fuente que tienen lugar en los escritos geográficos medievales. Estas criaturas se encuentran en un compendio francés medio titulado *Los secretos de la historia natural*, que por conveniencia llamamos aquí *SNH*. Esta obra anónima, probablemente compilada alrededor de 1380, existe en cuatro manuscritos ilustrados de lujo franceses realizados a mediados y a finales del siglo XV, así como en varios incunables y ediciones impresas antiguas. Aunque hay cientos de criaturas mencionadas en los setenta y tres capítulos de la *SNH*, tomados en gran parte de *Historia Naturalis* de Plinio y de *Collectanea* de Solinus, nos ocuparemos aquí solo de aquellos que no son plineanos y más "locales" en su origen como parte del modelo de cambios más grandes en la observación científica desde una dependencia exclusiva de la autoridad antigua para un mayor uso e incorporación de la cultura popular recibida de fuentes contemporáneas, a menudo nombradas. Las miniaturas de los cuatro manuscritos conocidos de la *SNH* ilustran algunos puntos en el argumento.

Palabras clave: Criaturas maravillosas, metamorfosis, Pierre Bersuire, escritos de viaje, geografía medieval, hombres lobo.

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Summary. 1. Introduction. 2. Pierre Bersuire and the *Secrets of Natural History*. 3. Medieval Geographic Writing and Natural History. 4. The Illustrative Tradition of the *SNH*. 5. Miracles and Marvels. 6. The Manuscripts of the *SNH*. 7. Resident Marvelous Animals. 8. Metamorphic Marvelous Animals. 9. Werewolves. 10. Conclusions. 11. Sources and Bibliography

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1. Introduction

The present paper examines some marvelous bovids, remarkable birds, and beings half human, half animal such as the werewolf as an illustration of certain key changes in source reception taking place in late medieval geographic writing. These creatures are found in a Middle French compendium titled by scholars the *Secrets of Natural History*, which for convenience here is called *SNH*. An anonymous work, probably compiled about 1380, it exists in four illustrated French luxury manuscripts made in the mid to late fifteenth century, as well as in several incunabule and early printed editions.³

As the *SNH* is little known to students of exotic geography and natural history illustration, the purpose of these remarks is to introduce some of the remarkable creatures wholly or partially drawn from folklore to be found in its chapters. Though there are hundreds of creatures mentioned in the *SNH*'s seventy-three chapters, taken mainly from Pliny's *Historia naturalis* and Solinus' *Collectanea*, we will be concerned here only with those that are non-Plinian and more “local” in origin as part of the pattern of larger changes in scientific observation from a sole reliance on antique authority to a greater use and incorporation of personal experience and stories from popular or folk culture, received from contemporary, often named sources, such as a mysterious but “religious and prudent” friar Jean de Sara who spoke about the wonders of the naturally occurring petroleum by-product naphtha to the compiler of the *SNH*'s Latin original.

2. Pierre Bersuire and the *Secrets of Natural History*

Like a great many learned or scientific works of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the *Secrets of Natural History* is not an original compilation but a translation from

³ As this work is sometimes also called *Les Merveilles du Monde*, it should not be confused with the travelogue of Marco Polo, known as *Le livre des merveilles du monde*, and whose best-known illustrated manuscript version is Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fr. 2810, with eighty-four miniatures from the workshop of the Boucicaut Master. See François Avril, Marie-Thérèse Gousset, Marie-Hélène Tesnière, et al., eds., *Marco Polo. Das Buch der Wunder: Handschrift Français 2810 der Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris = Le Livre des merveilles: manuscrit français 2810 de la Bibliothèque nationale de France*, Facsimile commentary (Luzern: Faksimileverlag, 1996). The *SNH* (BnF MS fr. 22971) has been studied by Anne-Caroline Beaugendre, *Le 'livre des merveilles du monde' ou 'Secrets de l'histoire naturelle,' premier tiers du XVIe siècle, Édition critique*, Diss. Paris, Ecole Nationale des Chartes, 1992, 5 vols.; John Block Friedman, “Secrets of Natural History” in John Block Friedman and Kristen Figg, eds., *Trade, Travel, and Exploration in the Middle Ages: An Encyclopedia*. (NY: Garland Publishing Company, 2000; Paperback ed., NY: Taylor and Francis, 2016), pp. 545-546; and in John Block Friedman, Kristen Figg, and Kathrin Giogoli eds. and trans., *BOOK OF WONDERS OF THE WORLD SECRETS OF NATURAL HISTORY MSfr: 22971 Original held in the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris. Studies and Translation of the Facsimile Edition* (Burgos: Siloé, In Press). All translations from the *SNH* are by Figg and Friedman from the *Book of Wonders*, and quotations will be given by chapter and page number from the edition cited in this note.

Latin into a vernacular, here Middle French. Though the translator, who appears to have been a Picard or Northern French speaking cleric, possibly a canon with access to an excellent cathedral library, does not identify his source, he does speak in a Prologue found in one manuscript of abbreviating a much larger work to make his own. This much larger work was the Benedictine (originally a Franciscan) humanist, translator, and encyclopedist Pierre Bersuire's *Reductorium Morale*, an enormous preaching manual, whose fourteenth book was devoted to wonders of each country, island, or region of the known world, alphabetically arranged and extensively moralized.

Bersuire (1290-1362),⁴ who was part of the papal curia at Avignon, had access to the rich international culture and the remarkable library there⁵ and used it extensively for his exempla, which are, as one might expect, heavily indebted to classical sources. Yet, surprisingly, a considerable number of the wonders he details are gleaned not from ancient authorities but rather from his own observation or hearsay, especially from his childhood in the Poitou in France, and from contemporary folklore of travelers, probably to the papal court, and even residents there, such as his patron Cardinal Pierre de Près of that curia, a former bishop of Clermont in the Auvergne.⁶ Additionally, Bersuire poses an interesting question in medieval natural history writing, for he is not fully comfortable with the theological implications of some of his folkloric material, especially relating to human metamorphosis or transformation, yet he is fascinated by it for intellectual reasons and attracted to it for sentimental and nostalgic ones.

Moreover, as a humanist, he felt a tension between the authoritativeness of classical history and mythology and the "verisimilitude" of contemporary popular culture, especially that which he himself witnessed. The fifteenth book of the *Reductorium* is devoted to moralizing –while retelling– the fables of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, and

⁴ All quotations from Pierre Bersuire's work are drawn from *Petri Berchorii Opera Omnia: Reductorium Morale super totam bibliam* (Venice: Haerendum Hieronymi Scoti, 1583), https://archive.org/details/bub_gb_JLLf3O-9aGAKC/page/n0, accessed October 1, 2018. Fundamental for the study of Bersuire's life and work is Charles Samaran and Jacques Monfrin, "Pierre Bersuire, prieur de St. Eloi de Paris," *Histoire Littéraire de France* 39 (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1900, Rpt. 1962), pp. 259-450. See also Joseph Engels, "Berchoriana I: Notice bibliographique sur Pierre Bersuire, Supplément au *Repertorium Biblicum Medii Aevi*," *Vivarium* 2 (1964): 62-124. Studies focusing on Bersuire's classical Humanism are those of René-Adrien Meunier, "L'humaniste Pierre Bersuire (fin du XIIIe siècle–1362)," *Bulletin de la Société des antiquaires de l'Ouest* (1948): 511-532, and Jane Chance, *Medieval Mythography from the School of Chartres to the Court at Avignon 1177-1350* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2000). Chance offers extensive bibliography, primarily relating to Bersuire's Book Fifteen of the *Reductorium Morale*. See more recently, Kimberly Rivers, "Another Look at the Career of Pierre Bersuire O. S. B.," *Revue Bénédictine* 116 (2006): 92-100 and her *Preaching the Memory of Virtue and Vice: Memory, Images, and Preaching in the Late Middle Ages* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2010), Ch. 7. For the *Reductorium*, see Ralph Hexter, "The *Allegari* of Pierre Bersuire: Interpretation and the *Reductorium Morale*," *Allegorica* 10 (1989): 51-84, and Marie-Hélène Tesnière, "Le *Reductorium morale* de Pierre Bersuire," in *L'encyclopédisme médiéval. Actes du Colloque San Gimignano, 8-10 octobre 1992* (Ravenna: Longo, 1993), pp. 225-242 as well as her "Pierre Bersuire, un encyclopédiste au XIV^e siècle," *Plein Chant* 69-70 (2000): 7-15.

⁵ See Denis Hùe, "Espace et paysage chez Pierre Bersuire et quelques Avignonnais," *Cahiers de recherches médiévales* 6 (1999): 41-57; and Maurice Faucon, *La Librairie des papes d'Avignon, sa formation, sa composition, ses catalogues (1316-1420) d'après les registres de comptes et d'inventaires des archives vaticanes* [Bibliothèque des écoles françaises d'Athènes et de Rome, fascicules 43,50] (Paris: E. Thorin, 1886-1887). See also Marie-Henriette Jullien de Pommerol and Jacques Monfrin, *La Bibliothèque pontificale à Avignon et à Peñíscola pendant le grand schisme d'occident et sa dispersion. Inventaires et concordances* [Collection de l'école française de Rome 141] (Rome: Ecole française, 1991), 2 vols.

⁶ See René-Adrien Meunier, "Le Livre des Merveilles de Pierre Bersuire," *Annuaire de l'Université de Poitiers*, 2e série, 3 (1951): 1-8, especially pp. 7-8 on direct reportage of marvels told to Bersuire; and the same author's "Le fonds auvergnat, provençal et alpestre dans les 'Recréations impériales' de Gervaise de Tilbury et le '*Reductorium morale*' de Pierre Bersuire," *Annales de l'Université de Poitiers* (1952-1954):151-161.

Bersuire's interest in classical antiquity, its history, gods, myths, and ancient religious practices, is everywhere apparent in his works such as his translation of Livy's *Decades*.⁷ Accordingly, there are fifteen places in the *SNH* where Ovid's myths are offered in illustration of a point and there are many other neutrally presented references to the worship of pagan deities in various temples in Greece and Rome, which reveal quite a surprising tolerance on the part of a Benedictine monk.

This said, of the three sources cited as "Doctors" on which the structure of the *SNH* is built, while two are classical or late antique, Pliny's *Historia naturalis*, and the *Collectanea* of Solinus and thus in keeping with Bersuire's humanist tastes,⁸ the third is a relatively new and somewhat unexpected type of source, the *Otia Imperialia* of Gervaise of Tilbury (1150-1220), a collection of largely local wonders intended to amuse a ruler that relies heavily on contemporary natural history and folklore. Its geographical settings are not mainly those of ancient Greece and Rome, and its marvels are not moralized. The author, an Englishman long resident in Provence, had much the same kind of curiosity, wide travel, and contact with travelers as had Bersuire, and like the Benedictine, used much material from Provençal folklore.⁹

The first thirteen books of Bersuire's *Reductorium* closely follow the arrangement of Bartholomaeus Anglicus' nineteen-book encyclopedia *De proprietatibus rerum*, which should not be surprising, since Bersuire was originally a member of the Franciscan order.¹⁰ Thus, Bersuire bases his own Book Fourteen, *De naturae*

⁷ Book Fifteen of the *Reductorium* has been much studied by scholars interested in medieval mythography. The most important of these works are listed here: Joseph Engels, ed., *De Formis figurisque deorum. Reductorium morale, liber XV cap. 1:1* (Utrecht: Institut voor Laat Latijn der Rijksuniversiteit, 1966) and *Reductorium morale, liber XV, cap. ii-xv: Ovidius Moralizatus* (Utrecht: Institut voor Laat Latijn der Rijksuniversiteit, 1966); his "L'édition critique de l'*Ovidius moralizatus* de Bersuire," *Vivarium* 9 (1971): 19-24; and more recently, Frank T. Coulson, "A checklist of newly discovered manuscripts of Pierre Bersuire's *Ovidius moralizatus*," *Scriptorium*, 51:1 (1997): 164-186, and Robert Levine, "Exploiting Ovid: Medieval Allegorizations of the *Metamorphoses*," *Medioevo romanzo* 14 (1989): 197-213.

⁸ For Pliny, see H. Rackham, W. H. S. Jones and D. E. Eichholz, eds. and trans., *Pliny-Natural History*, (Cambridge, MA: Loeb Classical Library, 1938-1962) 10 volumes. The work was enormously popular in the Middle Ages as an authoritative treatment of science, botany, mining, and other subjects. Over two hundred medieval and Renaissance manuscripts of this work survive, some illustrated, though these were of Renaissance provenance. See H. N. Wethered, *The Mind of the Ancient World: A Consideration of Pliny's Natural History* (London: Longmans Green, 1937); Roger French and Frank Greenaway, eds., *Science in the Early Roman Empire: Pliny the Elder, His Sources and Influence* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes and Noble, 1986); and John F. Healy, *Pliny the Elder on Science and Technology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). See more recently Hubert Zehnacker, ed. and tr., *Histoire naturelle / Pliny l'Ancien* (Paris: Belles Lettres, 2004). See, on Pliny, Mary Beagon, "Situating Nature's Wonders in Pliny's Natural History," in Ed Bispham and Greg Rowe, eds., *Vita Vigilia Est: Essays in Honour of Barbara Levick* (London: Institute of Classical Studies, 2007), pp. 19-40 and Mary Beagon, trans., *The Elder Pliny on the Human Animal: Natural History: Book 7* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Aude Doody, *Pliny's Encyclopedia: The Reception of the Natural History* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010). For C. Julius Solinus, see T. Mommsen, ed., *C. Julii Solini Collectanea Rerum Memorabilium* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1958).

⁹ For Gervaise, see Sheila E. Banks and Jonathan W. Binns, eds. and trans., *Gervase of Tilbury Otia Imperialia: Recreations for an Emperor* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). All quotations from Gervaise will be drawn from this edition. For Gervaise's use of popular or folk materials, see C. C. Oman, "The English Folklore of Gervase of Tilbury," *Folklore* 55.1 (1944): 2-15.

¹⁰ The literature on Bartholomaeus Anglicus is extensive; the selection offered here is only of recent and especially useful items. Nathalie Bouloux, "Ressources naturelles et géographie: le cas de Barthélemy l'Anglais," *Médiévales* 53 (2007): 11-22; Heinz Meyer, "Die illustrierten lateinischen Handschriften im Rahmen der Gesamtüberlieferung der Enzyklopädie des Bartholomäus Anglicus," *Frühmittelalterliche Studien* 30 (1996): 368-395; and his "Bartholomäus Anglicus, *De proprietatibus rerum*. Selbstverständnis und Rezeption," *Zeitschrift für deutsches Altertum und deutsche Literatur* 117 (1988): 237-274 and *Die Enzyklopädie des Bartholomäus*

miribilibus, on the Fifteenth book of *De proprietatibus rerum* devoted to “regionibus et provinciis.” The 174 areas named there in more or less alphabetical order Bersuire reduced to only fifty-six countries, provinces and regions, real or imagined, which mimic Bartholomaeus closely in detail and use of marvels, as for example that of the wind sellers of Vinlandia who reappear in the *SNH* chapter 56 “Ululande.” Only a detailed comparison of Bersuire and Bartholomaeus, however, will show the many additions to his Franciscan source drawn from his more extensive reading in classical and contemporary medieval writing, such as Gervaise and Gerald of Wales. Not only does Bersuire augment from books but he adds, especially in the parts of Book Fourteen relating to France and Spain (where he lived for a time) a good deal of local and folkloric material from his personal experience and from tales told to him by travelers at the papal court. Besides the reduction in number of geographical sites, Bersuire also omits, as we will see with Bohemia, some details of individual countries in order to heighten the impact of other details.

An additional layer of complexity is added to the content of the *SNH* and its relationship to Bersuire’s *Reductorium* because of the Translator’s own concealed attitudes. Probably because of his suspicion of the overtly pagan character of local legend and its association with “natural” religion, the French translator cuts out much of Bersuire’s local and hearsay material, such as a story of a peasant being bathed by his wife and suddenly vomiting as a werewolf pieces of infant flesh. He sometimes even substitutes a classicizing source that Bersuire did not use as an attribution to give an “authoritative” character to the stories. In other instances, he reshapes and adds material. Thus, for an exact sense of how the *SNH* presents its marvelous animals, it is necessary to navigate between Bartholomaeus Anglicus’s *De proprietatibus rerum*, Bersuire’s Latin text and the Translator’s more clerical French adaptation. To be clear then, while the *SNH* broadly adheres to the structure of the Latin *De proprietatibus rerum*, it shows many amplifications and abbreviations, particularly in matters of verifying support for the stories told in the accounts of individual countries and regions.

Indeed, on certain topics, for example relating to the vexed matter of gender transformation, the Translator is as much a silent adaptor as he is a translator. Bersuire attests, as he often does, to the truth of a marvel he has heard, in this case from an “honest” Dominican, who vouches for an event in a field near Catalonia, where an eighteen- year- old girl changes gender and lives a long time that way after being

Anglicus: Untersuchungen zur Überlieferungs- und Rezeptionsgeschichte von ‘De proprietatibus rerum’ [Münstersche Mittelalter-Schriften, 77] (München: Fink, 2000); Baudouin Van den Abeele and Heinz Meyer, eds., *Bartholomaeus Anglicus, De proprietatibus rerum: texte latin et réception vernaculaire – Lateinischer Text und volkssprachige Rezeption: actes du colloque international – Akten des Internationalen Kolloquiums*, Münster, 9.-11. 10. 2003 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2005); Michael C. Seymour, *Bartholomaeus Anglicus and his Encyclopedia* (Aldershot: Variorum, 1992); Michael Twomey, Oxford On-Line Bibliography on Bartholomaeus (2017); Baudouin Van den Abeele, “Bestiaires encyclopédiques moralisés. Quelques succédanés de Thomas de Cantimpré et de Barthélemy l’Anglais,” *Reinardus* 7 (1994): 209-228; and Baudouin Van den Abeele, Heinz Meyer, and Bernard Ribémont, “Éditer l’encyclopédie de Barthélemy l’Anglais: vers une édition bilingue du *De proprietatibus rerum*,” *Cahiers de recherches médiévales* 6 (1999): 7-18; Johannes B. Voorbij, “Purpose and Audience: Perspectives on the Thirteenth-century Encyclopedias of Alexander Neckam, Bartholomaeus Anglicus, Thomas of Cantimpré and Vincent of Beauvais;” and Eva Albrecht, “The organization of Vincent of Beauvais’ *Speculum maius* and of some other Latin encyclopedias,” both in Steven Harvey, ed., *The Medieval Hebrew Encyclopedias of Science and Philosophy: Proceedings of the Bar-Ilan University Conference* [Amsterdam Studies in Jewish Thought, 7] (Dordrecht, Boston and London: Kluwer, 2000), pp. 46-74 and 31-45.

married.¹¹ The Translator makes the subject of the verb “dit” not the “honest” source but Solinus, one of Bersuire’s Late Antique authorities, who had been cited in connection with the sex of the hyena earlier in the paragraph, instead of the unnamed Dominican. Thus, in the French there is no longer Bersuire’s contemporary mendicant source to attest to the truth of the story. But this willful shift in grammatical subject is consistent with the Translator’s practice of associating disturbing stories of transformation with antique rather than contemporary sources in order to detract from their reality and immediacy, or in some case as with the vomiting peasant werewolf narrative, dropping them altogether.

3. Medieval Geographic Writing and Natural History

The genre of medieval geographic writing in which an observer travels outside his cultural comfort zone to observe the wonders of another society for reasons of curiosity or religious zeal can be traced to classical writers on paradoxography such as Ktesias the Cnidean (5th century BC). Such a traveler often used the trope of fulfilling a royal mission or directive to gain information. For example, Alexander the Great’s supposed order to Aristotle to record all important phenomena in India and the resultant *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle*—a key source in many geographical treatises including the *SNH*—lies behind such texts.¹² These travel writers belonged to the larger tradition of Aristotelian inquiry that led to the development of analytic natural philosophy in the Middle Ages, particularly with the work of Albertus Magnus. As Daston and Park observe about the unusual or fanciful in natural history, “wonders as objects marked the outermost limits of the natural... register[ing] the line between the known and the unknown”¹³. Saint Augustine and others, meditating on the wonders of the universe, disassociated them from the paradoxographers’ primary focus on novelty and made them key steps towards powerful emotional states of generalized religious awe and a greater appreciation of God’s complex creation. Such books often have a first person observer or narrator who points out particulars on the journey. But the *SNH* has no narrative voice; the Translator, however, does appear from time to time to criticize or comment, often from a moralizing perspective. For example in talking about paleolithic structures like Stonehenge or the Giant’s Dance, he takes the opportunity to criticize gratuitously the immorality of dancing.

By about the Carolingian period onward, Late Antique geographic writing came to be joined to the clearly defined pilgrimage itineraries and accounts that included a certain amount of information about flora and fauna seen on the way to or found in the Holy Land. Jacques de Vitry’s *History of Jerusalem*, Johannes Witte of Hesse’s *Itinerarius*, the *Travels of John Mandeville*, and the *Evagatorium* of Felix Fabri come to mind here as variants on this genre.¹⁴

¹¹ Friedman *et al.*, *Book of Wonders* Chapter 57, p. 302. *Reductorium*, Book 14, Chapter 59, p. 656, “et circa hoc a quodam religioso honesto viro de ordine praedicatorum audiui...”

¹² See Joseph Roisman *et al.*, *Brill’s Companion to Alexander the Great* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

¹³ See Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature 1150-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), p. 13.

¹⁴ Felix Fabri, *Evagatorium in Terrae Sanctae, Arabiae et Egypti peregrinationem*, in Jean Meyers and Nicole Chareyron, eds., *Les errances de Frère Félix* (Montpellier: Université Paul–Valéry, 2000); Scott Westrem, ed. and tr., *Broader Horizons: A Study of Johannes Witte de Hese’s Itinerarius and Medieval Travel Narratives* (Cambridge,

There is a sameness to some of the descriptions of wonderful creatures, human and animal, to be found in the distant parts of the world given by many such writers, and this is because they are often heavily indebted to Pliny's encyclopedia *Historia naturalis* and Solinus' *Collectanea*. Pliny in particular provided the authoritative descriptions often much elaborated by later writers, of the monstrous races of men who were believed to live in Africa and India and when these regions were visited by critical observers, then thought to be located in northern Asia or even in Scandinavia.¹⁵ And from the Greek *Physiologus* came a staple of wonderful animals, birds and reptiles,¹⁶ rehandled in the vernacular bestiaries.

Many of these creatures, Pegasus, the Phoenix of Arabia and the like, then are fairly standard, and are as much the stuff of classical myth as of natural history. By about the mid thirteenth century, however, a new interest in wonderful but more purely local creatures developed in Europe. Now folklore and hearsay from travelers became an important source of natural history, and the direct personal observation of German animals such as that of Albertus Magnus in the *De animalibus* already noted comes into play, where Albert gives the vernacular names of animals such as the badger in his discussions of them. And now local wonders came to have as much importance and credibility as those of antiquity. This change coincided with and was closely related to the rise in the cult of regional saints, who often worked miracles with animals. Saint Eustache (Placidus) and the deer with a speaking cross between its horns in the window at Chartres Cathedral (Bay 43) come to mind here. By the mid-fourteenth century it was now common to find in travel narratives animals from a different tradition, one more responsive to Celtic and Germanic folklore and purely native to the geographical region being discussed.

4. The Illustrative Tradition of the *SNH*

The *SNH* is arranged in two parts (though they are not discontinuous in the manuscripts): The first, in fifty-six chapters, is geographical; focusing on characteristics of nations, regions, or discrete places such as large islands, some real, some imaginary. These chapters are presented alphabetically, each treating one country, region, or island. Sometimes a single region is divided as in the case of "Upper" and "Lower" Egypt. Places of particularly interest to Bersuire, Provence and the Poitou, have their own chapters outside of Gaul. Only this geographical portion of the *SNH* is illuminated in all of the manuscripts. The second part of the *SNH*, in seventeen chapters, treats the non-geographical nature of things, elements, and created beings, such as the human body, fire, birds, waters, trees, stones, poisons, monsters, ancient buildings such as the Coliseum, and prodigies or portents. This section is un-illustrated in all of the manuscripts.

MA: Medieval Academy, 2001); Rosamund Allen, ed., *Eastward Bound: Medieval Travel and Travellers 1050-1500* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004); Josephine Brefeld, *A Guidebook for the Jerusalem Pilgrimage in the Later Middle Ages* (Amsterdam: Hilversum, 1994); Nicole Chareyron, *Pilgrims to Jerusalem in the Middle Ages*, trans. Donald Wilson (NY: Columbia University Press, 2005); Evelyne Berriot-Salvadore, ed., *Le Mythe de Jérusalem du Moyen Age à la Renaissance* (St. Etienne: Publications de l'université de St. Etienne, 1995); Dee Dyas, *Pilgrimage in Medieval English Literature 700-1500* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2001); and E. D. Hunt, *Holy Land Pilgrimage in the Later Roman Empire, A.D. 213-400* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1982).

¹⁵ See John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought* (Syracuse NY: Syracuse University Press, 2000).

¹⁶ See Hanneke Wirtjes, *The Middle English Physiologus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).



Fig. 1. Wonders of Spain. Master of the Geneva Boccaccio. Chapter 24, *The Secrets of Natural History*, MS formerly in the possession of Jean de Charnacé, Paris. ca. 1450.

Folio 32v. Author's photo.

Each chapter of the *SNH*, accompanied by an illustration crowding into a single visual field many or all of the wonders mentioned in the text, gives memorable information on crops, marital and courtship customs, religious and burial practices, forms of habitation, and commercial practices of a region or country. I call this visual arrangement a menu picture since the miniature is a sort of menu for what the user will find in the chapter. Key among these features of the individual land or region, Iceland, Spain, Pygmy, Provence, Amazonia and the like, are the unusual races of men and bodies of water, monuments, cemeteries, mines, *fata morgana*-like parallel landscapes, plants, animals, birds, fish, and insects to be found there (Fig. 1). For example, in this illustration for Spain, the story of mares that conceive from the wind blown over stallions is given a prominent place through size and placement of the two mares. Other wonders are the marvelous and ever renewing mountain of salt near Cardona, shown being dug up by a man with a pick; a body of water with devils in the bottom, by which Peter of the Table mourns for his lost child, held captive by the lake-devils; and a bronze Muslim idol on a pedestal allegedly erected in Al-Andalus or Moorish Spain.

5. Miracles and Marvels

It should be noted that the *SNH* differs markedly from the collections of miracles usually associated with particular saints or shrines or appearing in their *vitae*. While it often refers to places where miraculous events occurred, the miraculous is not its primary focus, though admittedly, the occasional use of hagiographical material, such as the silencing of frogs that interfere which a holy man's contemplation, or of a girl who believed she was a mare until brought to her senses by Saint Hillary of Poitiers obviously blurred or made more porous the boundary between the miraculous and the marvelous. Miracles cannot, of course, be completely divorced from marvels in Christian culture, but the majority of marvelous events, places and things referred

to in the *SNH* are secular, though that secularity ultimately led, for the Translator and for Pierre Bersuire his source, to a consideration of the divine creation and to an uneasy awe of some of its stranger facets. In contrast, marvels are generally tied to specific geographic locations and features such as mountains, caverns, springs, large bodies of water, and extremes of climate; thus, each marvel in the *SNH* is more or less peculiar to the region being discussed.

Oddly, though one of Bersuire's major sources, Gervaise, distinguishes quite clearly and in some detail between miracles and marvels, and to some degree Bersuire does this as well, the Translator does not do this, at least openly, but is simply content to record them and does not constantly point up their awe-inspiring nature. For example, Gervaise said in the Preface to Book III of the *Otia Imperialia*, that since the human mind "is always keen to hear... novelties, the oldest things will have to be presented as new, natural things as miraculous, and things familiar to us all, as strange."¹⁷

Gervaise goes on to offer four criteria for marvels: originality, recentness, rarity or strangeness. Thus, anything that is newly created gives pleasure by reason of the working of nature. Anything that has only just happened causes excitement, less if it happens often, more if it is rare. When anything strange is observed we seize upon it, partly because of the inversion of the natural order, which surprises us, partly because of our ignorance of the cause, whose working is a mystery to us."¹⁸

Gervaise then distinguishes marvels from miracles: "From these causes arise two things, miracles and marvels, though they both result in wonderment." A miracle, he says, is the result of divine power, such as the raising of Lazarus from the dead. In contrast, "marvels... are beyond our comprehension, even though they are natural: in fact the inability to explain why a thing is so constitutes a marvel."¹⁹ Examples he gives are the salamander that lives in fire without harm and the ever-burning but undiminished mountains of Sicily, one of the wonders mentioned in *SNH*. The contemplation of these things brings with it the pleasurable sensation of wonder, and, as Bersuire would add, the sense of God's power over the universe. So, too, the taste for geographic marvels may be linked to the rise of the romance as a literary genre in the twelfth century, introducing an imaginative landscape through which the hero travels that brought with it a variety of marvels: giants, dwarves, sword bridges, wonderful salves and the like. Through these poems, the courtly world and eventually urban elites came especially to relish the accounts of wonders that challenge the laws of causality.

While *Mandeville's Travels* and similar works had, in fact, focused on exotic locations, on the extreme edges of the world, as places of monstrous races of men, strange trees, and events contrary to nature, the *SNH* looked closer to the center for these things, since as many of its marvels were found in Continental Europe and the British Isles as were located in remote India or Scythia. In its willingness to treat marvels closer to home, the *SNH* differed, then, from works of real or ostensible pilgrimage and made it more geographically probable that the reader could verify, at least in theory, the stories offered from personal experience or hearsay. For example, Bersuire, followed in most cases by the Translator, alludes to marvels from places in his past life, as for example, the Poitou is cited eight times and Provence sixteenth

¹⁷ Banks and Binns, ed., *Otia Imperialia* III, p. 539.

¹⁸ Banks and Binns, ed., *Otia Imperialia* III, p. 539.

¹⁹ Banks and Binns, ed., *Otia Imperialia* III, p. 561.

times. He also mentions the exceptional “purity” of named Avergnat and Provençal monasteries and abbeys from noxious insects.²⁰

What might be called this “widening” of cultural perspective, and the attendant fascination with wonders from romances, travel narratives, and contemporary accounts of visits to the marvels of Rome, gave rise to an increased appetite for visual depictions in vernacular works of wonders and marvels of a geographical, botanical, and biological sort and a powerful upsurge in artists’ depictions of a variety of animals, plants, minerals, and even simple natural substances. For example, at the same time that the artists were illustrating the *SNH* for elite owners and users, there was a parallel movement in France to add to the herbal tradition and illustrate it with miniatures of non- botanical substances such as the mundane soot, sulfur, coral, amber, ambergris, bitumen, and mummy or the powdered bodies of corpses, and to show the processes by which these were found, mined from the earth, or manufactured.²¹

If the acceptance of both wonders and marvels requires a level of credulity that we would consider naïve today, there was an important class difference in audience. Books of wonders found their reception mainly among the elite, while miracles seem to have appealed more to the little traveled and the illiterate in medieval society. As book ownership records of mid- fourteenth or mid- fifteenth- century courts and princes like Jean de Berri indicate, the nobility was now especially interested in works of travel and in the things and creatures to be found in exotic places, as the various embassy-to-princes moments recounting them in works like *Mandeville’s Travels*—itself found in the magnificent illustrated travel compendium BnF MS fr. 2810 already mentioned—will attest. Though it would be some time before the rise of Renaissance princely *cabinets*, certain of the objects often found in these later collections—magnets, ostrich eggs, and the like—do appear among the wonders referred to in the *SNH*.

6. The Manuscripts of the *SNH*

The *SNH* and its dramatic illuminations belong, then, with a great number of French versions of Latin works, the plays of Terence, the *Sayings of Philosophers* of Valerius Maximus and the like, that were beginning to appear in popularized and illustrated form from commercial ateliers in the mid to late fifteenth century. They provided both specialized knowledge and in many cases, as with the manuscripts of the *SNH*, the opportunity for conspicuous display of the owner’s taste and wealth through goodly numbers of magnificent miniatures.

Of the four known manuscripts of the *SNH*, the oldest, dated in the colophon March 1427 (1428 new style) is Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fr. 1377-1379, In the two later manuscripts from around 1450-1460/1470—New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M. 461, and a defective copy, formerly in the collection of the late Baron Jean de Charnacé, Paris, and now of uncertain whereabouts—the illuminations of the first manuscript were copied almost identically. Bibliothèque nationale de

²⁰ See Meunier, “Le Livre des Merveilles de Pierre Bersuire”, pp. 108-110 and the same author’s “Le fonds auvergnat, provençal et alpestre dans les ‘Recréations impéiales’ de Gervaise de Tilbury et le ‘Reductorium morale’ de Pierre Bersuire,” pp. 152, 159, especially on Bersuire’s clarification of the silk-worm industry.

²¹ See John Block Friedman, “The Humour and Folly of the World in Odd Places: A Fifteenth-Century Manuscript Herbal,” In Dana Stewart, ed., *Science and Literature at the Crossroads: Papers from the 34th CEMERS Interdisciplinary Conference, Mediaevalia* 29.1 (2008), pp. 207-235.

France, MS fr. 22971 (dated 1480-1485) is similar to the other three in text and layout but differs markedly in the style of its illuminations.

The oldest known manuscript of the *SNH* Eberhard König has attributed to the Master of Marguerite d'Orléans, an artist named after his main work, the magnificent book of hours once in the possession of Marguerite d'Orléans, now Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS lat. 1156B. As a traveling artist he was active in different French cities such as Bourges, where he illuminated the *SNH* around 1428.²²

This Master apparently thought the best way to present the many details in the individual chapters in a mnemonic fashion was through the use of the heavily packed “menu” pictures already noted in the form of frameless and banner-like miniatures extending across the full width of the text-box. In this rectangular image area, mostly presented from an overhead or frontal perspective at an angle of forty-five degrees, many scenes corresponding very closely to the details of the chapter are placed side by side, partly separated by natural landscape features such as hills and mountains. It is this visual style that unifies all of the MSS of *SNH*, though the pictures may vary in individual detail.

Of the four manuscripts of the *SNH* only MS fr. 1377-1379, can be precisely dated, as it contains a somewhat rubbed-out colophon at the end of the first volume which states that the book was “escrit pour maistre Renaud marchant demourant a Bourges et fut escrit en ladictte ville de Bourges au mois de Mars [de lan mil] CCCC vint sept.” The remainder of the colophon with the scribe’s name is illegible. As this appears to be the oldest of the four surviving manuscripts, it can be regarded as the archetype from which the other three were copied.

Nothing is known of the commissioner, the obviously well-to-do but not noble “maistre Renaud,” who may have been one of the purveyors of food stuffs or other materials for some time at the court at Bourges, the first patron’s home and the capital of the duchy of Berri—renown for its manuscript collections—as well as being temporarily the royal residence of King Charles VII, crowned in 1429. There were noble patrons for manuscripts there, men like the famous and influential merchant Jacques Coeur, who took a trip to the Orient in 1432 and became an important confidant and financier of King Charles VII, as well as the Limbourg Brothers who met a high artistic standard under Jean, Duke of Berri, before their deaths in 1416.²³ From its original owner the bourgeois Renaud, the manuscript next moved to the library of the important bibliophile and diplomat Count Philippe de Béthune (1565-1649), where the binder so unfortunately divided its quires in a disorderly way into the present three thin volumes.

Deriving from Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fr. 1377-1379 are two known copies that reproduce not only the text but also the illuminations. Both of these copies are attributed to the Master of the Geneva Boccaccio, active from 1440 to 1475/80, possibly in Nantes, Brittany, and quite likely also in Angers. The first of the two, executed about 1450-1460, though a different scribe wrote the text, is the fragmentary codex once in the possession of the Charnacé family in Paris. This manuscript

²² See Eberhard König, *Les Heures de Marguerite d'Orléans: reproduction intégrale du calendrier et des images du manuscrit latin 1156B de la Bibliothèque nationale* (Paris: Editions du Cerf: Bibliothèque nationale, 1991), especially pp. 83-86, and *Catalogue général des manuscrits au fonds français* (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1868), Vol. I, p. 220.

²³ On Bourges as an artistic center see Michel Mollat, *Jacques Coeur, ou, L'esprit d'entreprise au XV^e siècle* (Paris: Aubier, 1988); and Alain Collas, “Les gens qui comptent à Bourges au XV^e siècle. Portrait de groupe des notables urbains,” *Annales de Bretagne et des Pays de l'Ouest* 103. 3 (1994): 49-68.

was defective, consisting only of sixty-five leaves with chapters 23 to 54, Germany to Thrace, and had rectangular miniatures extending the full width of the text box, done in a pale watercolor or wash, in 1973 at the time I photographed it at Jean de Charnacé's home.²⁴ After Jean de Charnacé's death in 2004, the codex seemed to have passed for a time into the hands of a consortium of American rare manuscript dealers including a book-breaker, the late Bruce Ferrini, but its present whereabouts are unknown.

BnF MS fr. 1377-1379 was apparently also recopied as another manuscript now New York, Pierpont Morgan Library MS M. 461, dating from about 1460. It is the handsomest of the four codices from the point of view of calligraphy and fineness of parchment. Its miniatures are also the work of the Master of the Geneva Boccaccio. The presence of a Prologue, detailed Index, and a made- to-order, though generic, author portrait of the Translator at work (creating a fifty-seventh miniature) suggests that the book was not just a routine project but a deluxe copy for a noble commissioner, possibly King René d'Anjou. This artist came in contact with the work of the Limbourg brothers whose miniatures influenced his artistic understanding, as did those of Barthélemy d'Eyck later on, when the Master of the Geneva Boccaccio worked for René or his entourage.²⁵

The latest known manuscript of the *SNH* is Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, MS fr.22971, apparently commissioned by Charles d'Angoulême, the father of King Francis I. It was illuminated by Robinet Testard, a painter in the employ of Charles and his wife Louise de Savoie for many years. It has been the subject of two facsimiles.²⁶

7. Resident Marvelous Animals

Let us, then, begin to examine those creatures in the *SNH* that have a primarily local and folkloric rather than a literary or classical provenance. They are of two main types. Many are resident in the country or region being described and might be considered as part of the fauna of the place. At any time, the text implies, the traveler there could

²⁴ It was first attributed to the Jouvenel-Master by Jean Porcher, *Les manuscrits à peintures en France du XIII^e au XVI^e siècle* (Paris: A. Tournon, 1955), no. 274, p.131. See also Carl Nordenfalk, "Französische Buchmalerei 1200-1599," *Kunstchronik* 9.7 (July, 1956): pp.179-189 and figure 4. The location of this manuscript is at present unknown and some authorities on the international market for medieval manuscripts who wish to remain anonymous have offered conflicting theories of its present ownership.

²⁵ See Christian de Mérindol, *Le roi René et la seconde maison d'Anjou: emblématique art histoire* (Paris: Léopard d'Or, 1987), p. 340, and François Avril and Nicole Reynaud, *Les manuscrits à peintures en France 1440-1520*, exhibition catalogue (Paris: Flammarion, 1993), p. 404. See most recently König, "Le livre des secrets d'histoire naturelle" in Marc- Édouard Gautier, *Splendeur de l'enluminure: le roi René et les livres*, exhibition catalogue (Angers: Ville d' Angers, Arles: Actes Sud, 2009), no. 35, p. 324. Eberhard König, *Das Provost-Stundenbuch. Der Meister der Marguerite d'Orléans und die Buchmalerei in Angers* [Illuminationen. Studien und Monographien, ed., Heribert Tenschert, IV] (Ramsen and Rothalmünster: Antiquariat Bibernmühle AG, 2002) dated it a little later, about 1460-1470, p. 184.

²⁶ Henri Omont, et al., *Catalogue général des manuscrits français. Anciens petits fonds français* (Paris: Leroux, 1902), Vol. II, pp. 22-23. The manuscript was displayed in the exhibition of 1955 organized by Jean Porcher. See Porcher, *Les manuscrits à peintures en France du XIII^e au XVI^e siècle*, no. 342, p. 161. It was shown again at the great exhibition in Paris, 1993/1994; see Avril and Reynaud, *Les manuscrits à peintures en France 1440- 1520*, no. 228, p. 404. It has also been discussed briefly by Jean Porcher, "Les secrets de l'histoire naturelle," *L'oeil* 72 (1960): 42-47. The facsimiles are *Libro de las Maravillas del Mundo (Secretos de Historia Natural)* (Burgos: Siloé, 2011) and (partial facsimile) Anne-Caroline Beaugendre, *Les Merveilles du Monde ou Les Secrets de l'Histoire naturelle* (Paris: Anthèse, 1996).

see the creature in question. The second type of marvelous animal is one that results from metamorphosis or transformation, a process just as wonderful as the final result. Bersuire was particularly interested in this topic and as I noted earlier, the fifteenth book of the *Reductorium* is a moralized version of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, frequently detached, illustrated, and standing alone as a single mythographic work. Little or no explanation is offered for such transformations in the *SNH* and it is also unclear if these are continuing processes so that any traveler there is likely to witness them.

Among the many wonders of Africa are certain resident cows that seem to have evolved in an unusual way. Ascribing this story to Solinus, though it is in fact not there, the text says that livestock such as

steers and cows graze in the field with the head turned to the side, one eye towards the ground and the other towards the sky. Thus they hold their throats sideways. The reason is that their horns are bent backwards and stretched out towards the earth and thus their horns prevent them from grazing on the grass with their heads right to the ground. And it is necessary for them to turn their heads to graze or else they could not eat and they would have to die of hunger.²⁷

Related physiologically to these African cattle are some bovids found in the chapter on Germany (Fig. 2), who are also said to come from Solinus' *Collectanea* but may have other more local or folkloric roots. These are the "Nesontes":

which cannot be domesticated or tamed, and they are in appearance like oxen or cattle. But they have large horns above and nostrils so very long and broad that they seem like a long and capacious boot. And for this reason, when they are in the field, they cannot graze on the grass unless, when they have their heads lowered to the ground, they walk backwards, or otherwise they can neither find their feed nor eat it.²⁸

The Master of the Geneva Boccaccio, in illustrating this scene from Germany in the Charnacé codex, shows himself somewhat baffled by the text, which speaks of the "nesontes" and then, apparently for comparative purposes, mentions that in Africa is a somewhat similar animal with rigid knees the "alderdes." The artist has made both the actual German bovid and the African creature wonders of the same region, perhaps not understanding that the Alerdes was solely introduced for the sake of comparison. And in his menu picture he drops the third wonder of Germany, shining birds, altogether. Though the *SNH* was quite detailed about the boot-like muzzles of the Nesontes and also their rather specialized method of grazing, the artist simply shows them as horned cattle with perfectly normal muzzles. And they are not grazing.

Belonging also to the class of bovids is another marvelous animal, the Loz, who resides in Bohemia, the modern Czechoslovakia. It has in Czech folklore many names besides the one given in the *SNH*, such as leoz, boez, leor, lomi and lomís.²⁹

²⁷ Friedman *et al.*, *Book of Wonders* Chapter 1, p. 177.

²⁸ Friedman *et al.*, *Book of Wonders* Chapter 23, p. 230.

²⁹ On the Loz, see René Wellek, "Bohemia in Early English Literature," *The Slavonic and East European Review. American Series* 2, No. 1 (1943): 114-146, especially p. 114.

In this region [Bohemia] there is a savage beast that is named, according to the language of the place, the “loz.” And it is of such a condition and nature that it bears under the throat a great bladder like a sac. And when this beast is pursued and chased by hunters and dogs, it retreats into a river or a pond and drinks so much that it fills this sac completely with water, and then as it runs, it warms the water beyond boiling. Then this beast turns sharply to run directly towards the dogs and hunters, and it vomits and spews this very hot water in the sac from its throat and gullet onto the dogs and hunters that it finds in its way. And the dog and hunter who is struck by this water that is so hot is punished and harmed irretrievably. And the result is that on the spot where this hot water has touched, the skin and the flesh will fall away permanently because it is so hot and poisonous. And by this means the wild beast retreats into the woods to wherever he pleases, free, calm, and delivered from the danger and peril of dogs and hunters. And by his special ability, knowledge, and natural condition, he makes all flee and disappear before him. And because of this, it seems to me that this wild animal has greater freedom and greater ability for the defense of its body than has any other wild beast.³⁰



Fig. 2. Germany. Master of the Geneva Boccaccio. Chapter 23. Remarkable cattle. *The Secrets of Natural History*, MS formerly in the possession of Jean de Charnacé, Paris. ca. 1450. Folio 32. Author's photo.

This creature may be distantly related to one of the standard legendary animals in the bestiaries, the Bonnacon, or *bonasus*, European Bison, noted from Solinus onward for spraying a stream of dung, so hot it catches trees on fire, at pursuers approaching it from the rear.³¹

³⁰ Friedman *et al.*, *Book of Wonders* Chapter 8, pp. 189-190.

³¹ See Wilma George and Brunson Yapp, *The Naming of the Beasts. Natural History in the Medieval Bestiary* (London: Duckworth, 1991), pp. 75-76 and for a good picture Janetta Rebold Benton, *The Medieval Menagerie*:

The Loz as described here comes directly from the chapter on Bohemia in the *De proprietatibus rerum*, and there it is clearly a horned bovid “oone as moche as an ox... and hath grete hornes and large.”³² In Bartholomaeus, Bohemia’s description is replete with natural landmarks such as bordering nations, high mountains and features such as thick and tall woods, with many plains and meadows rich in grain and fruit. The land was rich in gold, silver, and tin. Its particular rivers, the Albia (Elbe) and the Multa (Mulde) flow to Prague, called the royal seat. On the mountains grow a variety of conifers and many animals such as bears and deer are found there; among these is one that is especially remarkable, called in the language of the region Lom.

All of these natural features Bersuire drops to focus on the singular beast now called Loz and its behavior towards its pursuers. He also cuts the naturalistic description of it as horned to make it even more difficult to classify, and heighten the interest in its unusual means of defense. The last part of the entry, praising the Loz and commenting on its place in natural history is purely the Translator’s contribution, as Bersuire launches immediately into a moralization after describing the dangers of the Loz’s water squirting.

Artistic treatments of this scene in the *SNH* are of two distinct types. The chapter is missing in the Charnacé codex so that how the artist handled the Loz there is unknown. The oldest manuscript miniature (Fig. 3) supplies the sparse trees mentioned in the text but not the pond or river water necessary to the story.



Fig. 3. Loz. Bohemia. Master of Marguerite d’Orléans. Chapter 8, *The Secrets of Natural History*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France MS fr. 1377. 1428. Folio 11v. Photo Courtesy Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Animals in the Art of the Middle Ages (NY and Paris: Abbeville Press, 1992), pp. 72-74.

³² M. C. Seymour, ed., *On the Properties of Things. John of Trevisa’s Translation of Bartholomaeus Anglicus De Proprietatibus Rerum* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1975) Vol.2, Book 15, c. 30, p. 742.

Neither the huntsman nor the dogs are fleeing or apparently injured by the Loz's spray. The animal has goat-like horns and the prominent dewlap or sac (Fig. 4). Morgan 461's miniature is an exact copy of the older scene but with more trees. It adds the detail of a flinching or injured dog (Fig. 5). Testard, in MS fr.22971 gives a much more elaborate and detailed scene with a dead dog, fleeing hunters and other dogs, and a thick partially deforested woodlot. There is, however, still no water.



Fig. 4. Loz. Bohemia. Master of the Geneva Boccaccio. Chapter 8, *The Secrets of Natural History*. New York, Morgan Library MS M. 461. ca.1460. Folio 13r. Photo Courtesy Morgan Library.



Fig. 5. Loz. Bohemia. Robinet Testard. Chapter 8, *The Secrets of Natural History*. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France MS fr. 22971, ca.1480. Folio 9. Photo Courtesy Bibliothèque nationale de France.

8. Metamorphic Marvelous Animals

As noted earlier these unusual beasts are resident in their countries; the process by which they became marvelous is not discussed but presumably they came into existence at some more or less Biblical age of animal creation. Some of the marvelous animals in the *SNH*, especially those in the avian kingdom, however, become more wonderful in the process of hatching than in their later, fledged, existence. Two such have well developed folkloric histories, which seem to reach back into Bersuire's childhood. The first is a bird called a "craven"(cravant) found in the Poitou.

There is a small region situated in the great province of Gaul where many marvels occur, of which Solinus speaks and says that in the region of Poitou, on the seashore, are conceived and engendered certain birds that the inhabitants of the country call cravens, which birds are not propagated or laid or brooded by either father or mother, but are born and are conceived and engendered in the corruption and rot of old wood and timbers of old ships and old masts and old sails, which rot on the shore of the sea. And they are engendered in this way. When this old nautical timber that is in the harbor of the seashore is quite rotten and corrupted by the sea's moisture; and from this rot there develops in the wood a kind of sludge, which is sticky and gluey like slime-out of this sludge are formed and created birds which hang by their beaks against this old wood for a period of fully two months and more, and when it happens that they are all covered with their feathers and they are large and fat, then they fall into the sea. And thus God in his grace gives them natural life and they become beautiful and pleasing birds and they have black plumage. And they fly around over the sea and everywhere they wish, just as other birds do. And they have flesh just as white and as tender and just as tasty to eat as the flesh of a wild duck.³³

The Translator is seemingly specific about the genesis of these cravens, the particular region, the marshy Poitou, the particular type of rotting wood, nautical remains, and the period of gestation, two months, and their new home, the sea, on which they float in maturity in the manner of a brant or other sea dwelling duck. Moreover, the text implies that these birds are then hunted for their flesh and eaten in the Poitou as a matter of course by anyone who can catch them. In fact, however, Bersuire was far more concrete and experiential about this than the Translator indicates. He opens the story in his own voice "Igitur dico" speaking of a "certain most delicious meat of an animal in the form of a bird named the cravant, which comes, they say, from the metamorphosis of a mollusk with some sea-wrack," and identifying the region as a specific place in the Poitou, around the contemporary Abbey of Saint-Michel-en-l'Erm, information minimized by the Translator. Moreover, he personally attests to the excellence of the meat: "sicut ego possum perhibere testimonium, qui comedi."³⁴

Somewhat similar in form of gestation are the very widely known "barnacle geese, which Bersuire attributes to an account in Gervaise but which are so familiar

³³ Friedman *et al.*, *Book of Wonders* Chapter 42, pp. 268-269.

³⁴ The passage on the cravant is discussed by Meunier, "Le Livre des Merveilles de Pierre Bersuire," pp. 108-10. Bersuire, *Reductorium*, Book 14, Chapter 41, pp. 641-42.

in folklore that he could have got their life story from a number of contemporary literary sources which had been transformed into natural history.”

Gervaise says that in England in the county of Kent near the Abbey of Faversham on the shore of the sea are certain small trees formed in the manner of willows on which, when springtime comes, there geminate and engender on their branches small buds, which afterwards grow to the point where they become flying birds. And some say that the buds that fall from these small trees into the sea become fish. And also the buds that fall on land become birds that resemble small geese and are covered with feathers of many colors.³⁵

The location and germination from a non-avian or non-piscine source here is very similar to the account of the cravens. And the extreme specificity of this wonder, a particularly county in Great Britain near a famous abbey suggests that anyone visiting the island could see this process in the spring.

We close our study of the *SNH*'s marvels with accounts of men turned into storks somewhere in France and of the werewolves of the Auvergne, another region in France, where we can see most clearly both Bersuire's and the Translator's somewhat differing attitudes towards the folkloric tradition, with Bersuire eager to use such material and the Translator rather less so.

In the chapter on Ethiopia, to Gervaise is wrongly attributed a story—in fact it comes from the *Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* mentioned earlier-- of how some monstrous men are changed into storks.

Gervaise tells that along the banks of the river Brixon that descends from Ethiopia into Egypt are certain savage beasts that have a human form and appearance, but they have legs twelve feet long and other members in proportion. And they have arms and shoulders white as snow, a round head and a large and long nose. And he says that according to the common opinion of people there, these people are changed and transformed into storks. And every year they come to certain parts of that place in order to lay eggs and brood them.³⁶

As Aelian on animals and other ancient sources also mention this annual transformation and migration of otherwise monstrous men, the story is quite well known outside of Gervaise's *Otia Imperialia*, and it has a long classical and Islamic history, though Pliny speaks only of annual and mysterious stork migration with no reference to transformation.

As if recognizing the popular character of Gervaise's folktale-like account of metamorphosis “according to the common opinion of people there,” yet wishing to add to it something relatively contemporary from his own personal experience, Bersuire speaks as if he was just reminded of, “and apropos of this”³⁷ the following narrative of enchantment, which really has nothing to do with Ethiopia, but which is interesting in its right. As the Translator presents this interruption, it is chronologically and geographically jarring:

³⁵ Friedman *et al.*, *Book of Wonders* Chapter 42, p. 269.

³⁶ Friedman *et al.*, *Book of Wonders* Chapter 18, p. 217.

³⁷ *Reductorium morale*, Book 14, Chapter 19, p.621. (Bersuire and the *SNH* do not agree in all particulars as to Chapter numbers).

the story is told that happened in the time of the good Robert who was king of Athaye when the brother of the Duke of Burgundy, by means of the marriage between the two lands, became heir to the land of Athaye. Then to this prince was presented a priest who was dressed in stork feathers, and in fact he seemed actually to be one, having affirmed that he had been changed into a stork by a woman sorceress and enchantress by means of a lace of silk she had put around his neck while he was sleeping. And with the other storks he had flown into those parts of France. And it happened one day that the other storks rose up against him angrily and beat him, and one broke the silk lace with his beak and gave him such a great blow that it removed and carried away the lace altogether. Then he left off being a stork and regained his human face. And because the breaking of the lace of silk around his neck occurred too suddenly and the time of the spell and enchantment was not fully accomplished and completed, for this reason there remained on his body the feathers of a stork, even though he had the face and appearance of a man. (my emphasis)³⁸

In fact, Bersuire's illustrative story of the enchanted priest is introduced a little differently, for while the Translator uses a passive impersonal construction "est recitee," denying any specific source, Bersuire has actually given the example from his own experience of a specific teller, "audiui circa tempus regis Roberti in Achaia accedisse."³⁹ The accession, then, was an event of recent memory in Bersuire's lifetime.

Yet the Translator actually augments his material by clarification while suppressing Bersuire's attempt at verisimilitude. For the Translator also offers an identifying adjective "bon," "the story is told that happened in the time of the good Robert;" a common enough adjective of the period, even if it is not in Bersuire. Though "Athaye" in the manuscripts is actually a misreading for the Frankish principality of Achaia or the Morea in southern Greece, apparently the Translator had an idea of the identity of King Robert and tried to make him more recognizable by calling him by one of his titles Robert the Good of Naples or of Anjou (1275-1343) and bringing more sharply into play a controversy and historical event which had resonated at the papal curia at Avignon. More clearly stated the passage should read "in the time of the good Robert who was king of Achaia when the brother of the Duke of Burgundy (Louis of Burgundy) by means of the marriage between the two lands (between Achaia and Burgundy) became heir to the land of Achaia."

Louis became prince of Achaia when Robert of Naples or of Anjou gave him and his wife Mahaut of Hainaut the principality. Mahaut's mother, Isabella of Villehardouin, had bequeathed it to her, but Mahaut needed a husband to ensure that it remained hers, and so married Louis of Burgundy. At Louis's death, Robert attempted to marry Mahaut to his younger brother Count John of Gravina or of Durazzo. Her refusal of the match invoked the intervention of the papacy; it is likely that Bersuire may have heard this story from Robert and John's envoys to Avignon, and their entourage. Probably, the court of Burgundy under Louis and Mahaut, though of very short duration, 1313-1316, may be meant as the place for the story of the stork

³⁸ Friedman *et al.*, *Book of Wonders* Chapter 18, p. 217.

³⁹ *Reductorium morale*, Book 14, Chapter 19, p. 621.

transformation through the silk lace because of the claim “and with the other storks he had flown into those parts of France.”⁴⁰

The tale, then, that Bersuire incorporates into the account of Ethiopia combines several folk elements, one of which appears in two of the werewolf narratives we will shortly examine. Stork transformation—as the earlier part of the Ethiopian story shows—goes in both directions. The version given in the *Reductorium* is similar to a story of human enchantment into the bodily form of a stork which occurs in a folk-tale published in German in 1826 by Wilhelm Hauff, *Kalif Storch*, where a Caliph and companion change into storks through a magic snuff box and then only with extreme difficulty change back again. Hauff was writing at a period of very great interest in Middle- Eastern folk tales in Germany, and he undoubtedly took the germ of his story from the wide collection of pre-existing Moroccan narratives of persons of high position, judges, wealthy men, and saints in Marrakech, which abounds in storks. These men are punished for misdeeds, such as putting soap on a stair to make people fall down or blaspheming from a minaret and so being transformed into storks in punishment. Such legends also contain the account of the men from afar who change into storks and then return later to their own country.⁴¹

To this is added the idea of enchantment through a silk lace which when broken undoes the enchantment. Two stories Bersuire tells about werewolves, one involving a man who takes off his clothes to sunbath and is changed into a werewolf, and the other a man changed into a werewolf who has his paw cut off and the effusion of blood changes him back to a man seem closely related to motifs in the stork story. How all of this got translated to the court of Louis of Burgundy is unclear.

9. Werewolves

We close this inquiry into marvelous beasts with a legend of very great interest to the author and translator of the *SNH*, the story of transformations of humans into werewolves. Throughout Bersuire’s *Reductorium* werewolves are discussed more frequently and in greater detail than any creature save the lion and the elephant and the stories are longer than those of other transformations. There are five different

⁴⁰ Bersuire seems to allude to the brief period when Louis of Burgundy, younger son of the duke of Burgundy, was Prince of Achaea, July 1313-August 1316. In 1318 Robert, king of Naples, gave the title to Achaea to Louis’ widow Mahaut de Hainaut (who was already princess) and his brother John of Gravina, whom he was forcing Mahaut to marry in order to secure the Anjou claim to Achaea. Through his connection with Mahaut John called himself prince of Achaea until Mahaut died in prison in 1331. It is then probable that the stork story occurred during the reign of Robert 1309-1343 and perhaps at the court of Louis of Burgundy, because of the reference to storks returning to France. See on Mahaut and John, see Welbore St-Clair Baddeley, *Robert the Wise and his Heirs 1278-1352* (London: William Heinemann, 1897), pp.167-175, and more recently, Antoine Bon, *Recherches historiques, topographiques et archéologiques sur la principauté d’Achaïe* (Paris: De Boccard, 1969). On Achaia and John of Gravina see James Rennell Rodd, *The Princes of Achaia and the Chronicles of Morea. A Study of Greece in the Middle Ages* (London: Edward Arnold, 1907) 2 vols. where John of Gravina is discussed pp. 134-176. See generally Anne Van Arsdall and Helen Moody, eds. and trs., *The Old French Chronicle of Morea: an Account of Frankish Greece after the Fourth Crusade* (NY: Routledge, 2015).

⁴¹ See, for a collection of these Moroccan legends, Edward Westermarck, *Ritual and Belief in Morocco* (NY: Routledge, 2013), Vol. II, pp. 329-330. Bersuire’s story adds the common folktale element of a lace around the neck to enchant someone which, when broken allows retransformation, and is similar in concept to that of the werewolf Bisclavret who could not return to human form when his clothes were stolen through his wife’s agency in Marie de France’s *Lai* of that name.

versions of werewolf transformation in *SNH*, one of these deriving from the first story in Book I of Ovid's *Metamorphosis* of King Lycaon who was turned into a wolf in punishment for his cannibalism and impiety. Three stories occur in the chapter on Gaul. One story (of the sunbather) is from the *Satyricon* of Petronius though the events are relocated to France, another is about werewolves in Scythia; it is attributed to Solinus. Bersuire implies that he is picking the stories from among an array of similar examples known to him "infinita alia sunt exempla" he says. And indeed, Bersuire has an additional story that is not included by the Translator and presumably deleted by him, that described how a French peasant, being bathed by his wife, vomited up pieces of a child's flesh and revealed that he had been a werewolf⁴²

The Scythian example (Fig. 6) shows how one artist illustrated the idea of werewolf transformation in that land, showing among other wonders of the region at upper left two men eating another, and below a human-headed wolf. Some of these werewolves are full time and some part time, where the naturalistic explanation of temporary werewolves assumes their condition results from some tremendous mental shock such as loss of loved ones or economic disaster.⁴³



Fig. 6. Scythia. Werewolves. Master of the Geneva Boccaccio. Chapter 47, *The Secrets of Natural History*, MS formerly in the possession of Jean de Charnacé, Paris. ca. 1450. Folio 62. Author's photo.

⁴² This story is mentioned in Meunier, "Le Livre des Merveilles de Pierre Bersuire," p.106n.

⁴³ See John Block Friedman, "Werewolf Transformation in the Manuscript Era," *The Journal of the Early Book Society* 17 (2014): 35-93 for an extensive bibliography on medieval and Renaissance werewolves and their transformations.

Two of these werewolf legends, however have neither antique source nor exotic location like Scythia, but seem purely examples of local folklore. The first, which does in fact come from Gervaise, (Bersuire says “ponit Gervasius”),⁴⁴ is the story of an historical person, Pons de Chapeuil (1160-1220), of Chapeuil in the Auvergnat diocese of Clermont, a troubadour (Fig. 7) (shown here in a Provençal chansonnier as a crusader) important for the development of the Auvergnat dialect as a literary language.⁴⁵ He was not so distant from Bersuire’s lifetime, and would be of cultural interest for both Gervaise and Bersuire. He supposedly disinherited a knight, Rambault de Pulet, who went mad as a result, and roamed the mountains of the Auvergne attacking people. A woodsman cutting off his paw brought him back to human state.



Fig. 7. Troubadour Pons de Chapeuil. Chansonnier. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France MS fr. 12473, ca. 1275. Folio 5. Photo Courtesy Bibliothèque nationale de France.

⁴⁴ *Reductorium*, Book 14, Chapter 23, p. 623.

⁴⁵ See Albert Dauzat, “Les parlers Auvergnats anciens et modernes. Bibliographie critique,” *Revue de linguistique romane* 4 (1928): 62-117. On Pons as a poet, see Jean Perrel, “Le troubadour Pons, seigneur de Chapeuil et de Vertaizon: son temps, sa vie, son oeuvre,” *Revue d’Auvergne* 90.2-3(1976): 89-199 and, more recently, Elizabeth Wilson Poe, “Old Provençal *Escars/Escas*: ‘Poor’? Reconsidering the Reputation of Pons de Capdoill,” *Tenso* 4, 2 (1989): 37-58. The historical Pons did in fact dispossess someone of a castle but the castle belonged not to a knight but to a bishop of Clermont. See also Meunier, “Le fonds auvergnat, provençal et alpestre dans les ‘Recréations impériales’ de Gervaise de Tilbury et le ‘*Reductorium morale*’ de Pierre Bersuire,” p.152.

This story is introduced in Gervaise with an element of causation “One thing I know to be of daily occurrence among the people of our country: the course of human destiny is such that certain men change into wolves according to the cycles of the moon.”⁴⁶ This, interestingly, is sharper than Bersuire’s own rendition; he says more vaguely of the transformation “certo tempore” at a certain time. The word “lunatio” or its Old French counterpart “lunaison” seems to indicate the power of the moon over humans on certain critical days during the new and full moons. For example, such a lunar transformation occurs in the *Vita* of the Breton saint Ronan, where the saint is accused of changing himself “per interlunia” into a werewolf.⁴⁷ There the word seems to mean “at the moment of the new moon” or “under the moon’s influence.”

The translator, however, softens Gervaise’s lunar causation to “at certain times of the year,” retaining, however, the Avergnat setting but dropping the free-will assaulting idea of planetary influence. Then the *SNH* gives another entirely local story:

He says that it came about in Auvergne that a knight who was passing through a wood was attacked by an old wolf and two young cubs. It so happened that in defending himself, he killed the old wolf, and he continued onward and went on his way, and at the edge of the woods he met an old woman who was carrying some raw meat and other foods in her apron. The knight recounted his adventure to this woman with good will and with the intention that she should avoid the path of the two cubs. Then the good woman began to weep in great sorrow. And she said to the knight that this wolf he had killed was her husband and that the two cubs were her two children. And she said that at certain times they became wolves, as he had seen, to whom she would bring some food to eat.⁴⁸

This tale, though attributed by the Translator to Gervaise, “he says” is in fact a purely local one that Bersuire is at some pains to source: “infinita alia sunt exempla nam & ego audiui a quodam Arvernigena,”⁴⁹ much like the first person account of the stork story at the court of Louis of Burgundy. After the story of this werewolf family, Bersuire speaks again in his own voice “igitur cum per haec & alia exempla dicta mutatio appareat esse vera,”⁵⁰ therefore by this and other examples the said transformation appears to be true.” Again, the French translator blunts the force of Bersuire’s language “Gervaise tells us of another example on this subject” without offering a clear sense of just what aspect of the subject he means, reducing the sharpness of Bersuire’s account of transformation in general.

In rewriting the werewolf narratives, the Translator makes a number of interesting changes to them. He adds the general claim about the residents of the Auvergne “there are some men who are of very strange condition,” attributing this idea to Gervaise. Neither he, nor Bersuire, however, invokes the moon as a traditional cause of

⁴⁶ Banks and Binns, ed., *Otia Imperialia* III, p. 813.

⁴⁷ For the *vita* of St. Ronan story, see Gaël Milin, *Les chiens de Dieu: La représentation du loup-garou en occident (XIe-XIXe siècles)*, [Centre de Recherche Bretonne et Celtique: Cahiers de Bretagne Occidentale 13] (Brest: Université de Bretagne Occidentale, 1993), pp. 46-52 and a fuller treatment in Milin, “La *Vita Ronani* et les contes de loup-garou aux XII et XIII siècles,” *Moyen Âge* 97(1991):259-273.

⁴⁸ Friedman *et al.*, *Book of Wonders* Chapter 22, p. 226.

⁴⁹ *Reductorium morale*, Book 14, Chapter 23, p. 623.

⁵⁰ *Reductorium morale*, Book 14, Chapter 23, p. 623.

transformations, though Gervaise clearly states this (“perlunationes mutantur”). In his final story of the French local werewolves, the Translator adds the detail about the old woman’s apron, and fleshes out the story with a more logical explanation for their conversation, the knight’s desire to warn her about wolves in the woods, though this point is not in the Latin original. He also adds the final detail that she brought food to the werewolf family. Significantly, the Translator deletes from the stories the claim of apparent truth, the entire remark about the infinite number of examples, and the Auvergnat source for the werewolf family.

That both Bersuire and his French translator were troubled by the truth of the werewolf legends is clear from a comment in Chapter 22 introducing several points of view about them and trying to mediate among these. The textual explanation is in keeping with Bersuire’s humanistic approach to other mythological themes.

“Pliny addresses this question of transformation,” the *SNH* says “...entirely rebuking, reprehending, and dismissing Gervaise’s opinion; he says that it is impossible for a man to be changed from a man into an animal”⁵¹ the text then goes on to quote Cicero to give a moral explanation. They were not changed into animals but their behavior because of bad character was *like* that of wolves.

By this moral and metaphoric explanation Bersuire was able to use his love of classical learning and retain his Christian principles in dealing with this thorny topic. The Translator, however, is considerably more insistent than Bersuire on the fabulous quality of these stories. By removing the claims of hearsay truth from many stories and assigning the authority to such stories to a pagan, he diminishes the validity of many of the marvels in Bersuire’s text. In small ways, then, the Translator makes the folktale more dramatic and contemporary (the woman’s apron full of food) and interesting to the reader, while at the same time undercutting the truth of the transformation.

10. Conclusions

A study of some of the marvelous animals in the *SNH* shows that it reflects important changes that were going on in natural history writing in other forms and genres during the late Middle Ages. The wonders mentioned here, and others that could be adduced from other chapters, illustrate a new local or folkloric interest that complements Bersuire’s reverence for Greek and Roman history. Especially with regard to the treatments of animals in Pliny’s *Historia naturalis*, which was understood as the authoritative account of the natural world, even when the particular country or region in question was not actually discussed by Pliny.

Artists, as well, in illustrating some of the wonders of the *SNH* show the cultural ambiguity resulting from attempts to deal with this new folkloric material. For example, in the case of the depiction of werewolves, the Charnacé miniature (Fig. 6) shows one of the riverine figures wearing a hairy or wolf-skin like jerkin that is still distinctively a piece of human costume. This animal jacket illustrates the artist’s perception of the dual nature of the werewolf, he has not lost his humanity entirely nor had he yet fully assumed his animal condition during transformation; his animal nature can be taken

⁵¹ Friedman *et al.*, *Book of Wonders* Chapter 22, pp. 226-227.

on and off like a second skin. The illustration then, goes beyond merely showing a detail of the story; it actually interprets troubling aspects of the story.

In short, what the *SNC* reveals is that folkloric regional accounts of various phenomena in natural history told by contemporary travelers and sources have come to rival the accounts of antiquity, even if they bring with them troubling aspects arising from the contemporaneity and geographical immediacy of the story, whether local legend, or a travelers' tale, or through some other avenue of transmission.

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