

Salvador-Bello, Mercedes. 2024. *The History of the Physiologus in Early Medieval England*. Turnhout: Brepols. Pp. 453. ISBN 9782503598406.

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Mercedes Salvador-Bello's *History of the Physiologus in Early Medieval England* is an ambitious undertaking that brings an important late antique text with a complex transmission history under rigorous scrutiny.

The introduction provides a thorough overview of the text's relative scholarly neglect, historiography and notable gaps, points out important conclusions—that Theodore and Hadrian may have brought it to England, and that Aldhelm and his followers were clearly familiar with the text—and argues for “a rich, long-standing *Physiologus* tradition in the Anglo-Saxon period, a circumstance that can explain the proliferation of bestiaries in England in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries” (22). It goes on to provide useful overviews of the origins of the *Physiologus*, its lost Greek original and the three main Latin versions, noting two manuscripts that have never been studied. The enormous complexity of the manuscript history is evidenced by the amount of information Salvador-Bello fits into just a few pages, which are bolstered by many, in-depth footnotes. This section alone could easily have taken up a full chapter, but Salvador-Bello efficiently synthesises the information readers need to know and the resources to hunt down further information. Useful appendices laying out relational chronology and manuscripts support this section. Further overview sections outline other versions of the Latin *Physiologus*—the *Liber glossarum Dicta Chrysostomi* and *Physiologus Theobaldi*, the latter of which's date requires reconsideration, according to Salvador-Bello, due to parallels with Aldhelm—as well as the reception of the *Physiologus*, first as a heretical and prohibited text, and then as a popular part of the early medieval monastic curriculum in England and in Continental monasteries with insular connections.

The book is then divided into three parts. Part I covers the seventh and eighth centuries and comprises five chapters. Chapter 1 focuses on the School of Canterbury. It provides biographies of both Theodore and Hadrian, and delves into several examples from commentaries, the construction of a manuscript and a poem by Theodore that suggest a possible influence of the *Physiologus* at Canterbury. The evidence itself is fairly fleeting, but when taken together it helps

to support Salvador-Bello's suggestion that Theodore and Hadrian introduced to England a text that was already in fairly widespread circulation elsewhere.

Chapter 2 turns to the *Liber monstorum*, noting that it was composed by a writer learned in classical literature as well as Augustine and Isidore's work. Salvador-Bello suggests that the author may have been one of Aldhelm's circle due to links with his riddles and points to suggestions of Insular origins. The chapter discusses the five manuscripts of the *Liber monstorum* and then delves into specific parallels in descriptions of the lion, panther, elephant, salamander, viper, antelope/autolops, siren and onocentaur/hippocentaur that suggest the *Physiologus* as a potential source. Some of this evidence is light (e.g., a notable word here and there), while other evidence is firmly convincing, such as the direct and extended verbal parallels in the description of the antelope/autolops. There are also several references to *phisicis* (naturalists) in descriptions of the lion and viper, which scholars agree refer to the *Physiologus*. Based on this evidence, Salvador-Bello concludes that the writer of the *Liber monstorum* appears to have used several Latin versions of the *Physiologus*.

Chapter 3 examines Aldhelm's famous twinned work, *De virginitate*, and aims to provide evidence for his use of the *Physiologus* as a source. Salvador-Bello notes that scholars have suggested Aldhelm may have used this text as a source for his *Enigmata* (the topic of the next chapter), without providing direct evidence, and observes that no one has addressed *De virginitate* in a similar vein. Here, she provides brief but useful information about Aldhelm's biography and education, noting that he may have encountered the *Physiologus* as a student in Canterbury or on a trip to Rome. The chapter then introduces Aldhelm's *De virginitate*, both the prose and poetic versions, as well as their differences and the treatise's dissemination among monastic communities, before giving an overview of the surviving manuscripts. The specific evidence for the influence of the *Physiologus*, which is limited, relates to the pearl, diamond, siren and salamander. The pearl as a metaphor for virginity and for Mary circulated widely, as did associations between diamonds and Christly or saintly strength. Likewise, Aldhelm may have encountered sirens in the classical literature that he quoted so frequently. Passages from *De virginitate* that compare the attempted torture of martyrs to salamanders untouched by fire provide a more convincing link, although it would have been useful to compare these with Isidore's *Etymologies*, too.

Chapter 4 focuses on Aldhelm's *Enigmata*, introducing their inclusion in the *Epistola ad Acircium* (a metrical treatise for Aldfrith of Northumbria), addressing the riddles' survival in thirty manuscripts, offering a brief survey and touching upon important issues, such as the possibility that Boniface was one of the scribes of the St Petersburg codex. The chapter then turns to Aldhelm's sources, noting that his reliance on Isidore's *Etymologiae* may obscure his use of

the *Physiologus*, since Isidore himself made use of the text. The bulk of the chapter is devoted to close analysis of Aldhelm's riddles on the Lion (39), Eagle (57), Snake (88), Magnet (25), Diamond (9), Salamander (15), Nycticorax (35), Weasel (82) and Unicorn (60). For the first three of these riddles, Salvador-Bello points out verbal parallels with the *Physiologus Theobaldi*, which is usually dated considerably later, and argues that either Aldhelm had access to a version of it (so it should be re-dated) or that both he and Theobald used the same version of the *Physiologus* as a source. This chapter's strongest evidence for Aldhelm's use of the *Physiologus* occurs in the lion, eagle, weasel and unicorn riddles, which all include important features that are not found in Isidore. Salvador-Bello's reading of the unicorn riddle is especially adept. She argues that Aldhelm's interpretation of the *virgo* (virgin) who catches the unicorn as a *puerpera* (woman in labour) suggests the poet is referring to Mary, and thus invoking the *Physiologus*'s allegorical interpretation of the unicorn as a figure of Christ.

Chapter 5, one of the shorter chapters in the book, turns to Eusebius's *Enigmata*. It introduces the riddler of a collection that survives in two manuscripts, but about whom we know little. If he was the Hwætberht whom Bede refers to as Eusebius in his commentary on Samuel, then he was evidently an acquaintance of this more famous writer and potentially Boniface, too. From the riddles, themselves, it is clear that Eusebius borrowed extensively from Aldhelm and Isidore, the latter being his primary source for natural history. Only five of the twenty zoological riddles include animals or fantastic beings that appear in the *Physiologus*, and the bulk of this chapter is devoted to close readings of riddles on the Lizard (50), Chimaera (52) and Panther (44). The chimaera riddle is intriguing because it mentions *fisiologi* (natural historians), although this evidence is less conclusive because a) the word has been emended from *filologi* (lover of learning, scholar) in both manuscripts containing the riddles and b) Isidore himself mentions *Physiologi* in relation to the chimaera. Eusebius (or a later scribe) may well have simply garbled his Isidorian source, then. The panther riddle is more intriguing, due to Salvador-Bello's identification of, on the one hand, resonances with the Old English *Panther* poem and, on the other, Eusebius's focus on parents, progeny and especially fatherhood in the final logograph. The emphasis in the *Physiologus*'s allegorical section is on Christ as father of humankind, which may have influenced Eusebius.

Part II covers the ninth and tenth centuries and comprises a further three chapters. Chapter 6 discusses the versions of the *Physiologus* surviving in two Frankish manuscripts: Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud Misc. 129 and Arras, Bibliothèque Municipale, MS 636. Both manuscripts have potential Insular connections, but scholarship rarely engages with them. After providing introductions to the Laud and Arras manuscripts, Salvador-Bello undertakes an in-depth comparative analysis of their *Physiologi*. Her highly skilled close

reading and excellent attention to detail reveal substantial evidence for a relationship between these two manuscripts, across chapters on the piroboli stones, agate, pearl, pelican, nycticorax, phoenix, lion and unicorn. Evidence ranges from additions and omissions to lexical choices and orthographic similarities and peculiarities. This chapter makes a clear and compelling case for reading the two manuscripts together. Salvador-Bello also argues for a new group of *Physiologi* based on a revised *Versio Y* with elements of *Versiones B* and *C*, which was likely circulating as early as the eighth century. This version of the *Physiologus* has not been recognised in previous editions, but provides a significant backdrop to the Latin and Old English *Physiologi* that survive from early medieval England.

Chapter 7's topic is the Old English *Phoenix* from the Exeter Book, the first half of which is an adaptation of Lactantius's *Carmen de aue phoenice*. It is generally assumed that the *Physiologus* was also a source for the poet. The chapter begins with an introduction to the manuscript, scribal and compositional contexts, noting Fulk's dating of this poem to ca. 750–850. Salvador-Bello positions *The Phoenix* as important evidence for the ongoing influence of the *Physiologus* in early medieval England, not least because the poem is made up of two parts: a description (following Lactantius) and an allegorical reading of the phoenix. The evidence that Salvador-Bello interrogates includes key words, verbal resonances and spellings (e.g., *fenix* for *phoenix*) that are present or omitted in various versions of the *Physiologus*. Here, it would have been useful for comparative analysis to engage with Lactantius's poem, too. The chapter concludes that some of the more telling evidence points to a text similar to the Laud and Arras manuscripts examined in the previous chapter, and therefore the use of a *Versio Y*-derived text, although there are also hints of *Versio B*.

Chapter 8 focuses on the second half of the tenth century and the Benedictine reform. It begins with discussion of Bishop Æthelwold's donation of a *liber bestiarum* (book of animals) to Peterborough. This phrase is often used in the *incipit* of the *Physiologus*, and Salvador-Bello therefore argues that its inclusion alongside other essential texts aimed at learned readers points to its importance in the reestablishment of a curriculum after the losses Peterborough had taken during Scandinavian invasions. The chapter also demonstrates ties between the *Physiologus* and Æthelwold's networks on the Continent (in Corbie, Reims and Fleury), which would have provided good conditions for bringing manuscripts back to England. The rest of the chapter discusses the *Physiologus* excerpt that appears alongside Aldhelm's lion riddle (Enigma 39), in London, British Library, MS Royal 12 C XXIII, which was likely produced in Canterbury in the late tenth/early eleventh century. Salvador-Bello provides an edition, translation and close reading of the excerpt, and suggests that it was derived from a revised *Versio Y*, like the Laud and Arras manuscripts explored earlier in the book, with the

information about lion cubs being born blind potentially taken from an encyclopedia. Ultimately, links to both Canterbury and Peterborough suggest that the *Physiologus* had a role to play in the Benedictine reform's educational context.

Part III covers the two versions of the *Physiologus* from early medieval England and comprises a further two chapters. Chapter 9 is about the Latin Corpus *Physiologus*, which is preserved in Cambridge, Corpus Christi College, MS 448 (Part III) and Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Lat. th. e. 9. This *Physiologus* has not received a great deal of scholarly attention, even though it is the only complete Latin text to survive from the period. It includes a cycle of three animals—the lion, unicorn and panther—all of whom are linked to Christ. Salvador-Bello introduces each manuscript, emphasising the importance of the *Physiologus* in the Canterbury-school curriculum, before turning to detailed analyses of each animal. Her analysis concentrates on locating similarities or departures from the existing versions of the Latin *Physiologus*, as well as connections to the Continental Laud and Arras manuscripts. The chapter concludes that the Corpus *Physiologus* was based on the Continental revised Y-recension identified earlier in the book, from which this “idiosyncratic compilation” (300), with its potential links to the Easter liturgy, was purposely selected.

Chapter 10's topic is the Old English *Physiologus* in the Exeter Book. The chapter opens with Leofric and his donation, discussing the manuscript as a vernacular anthology of the most important poetic genres and arguing that the *Physiologus* continued to have an important place within the early medieval literary canon. Salvador-Bello then introduces the three animals of the Old English *Physiologus*—the panther, whale and phoenix—the latter of which is fragmentary and was formerly considered to be a partridge. She notes that, like the Corpus *Physiologus*, the three-part structure was likely intentional, but the choice of animals was governed by contrast instead of association. The chapter then goes on to explore each animal's description and allegorical interpretation in detail, thoroughly demonstrating that the Latin source was a revised Y-recension (with some borrowings from B and fewer from C), similar to the Continental model discussed in previous chapters, here blended with Old English heroic verse style. Notably, Salvador-Bello provides a raft of evidence for this source across all three animals, even though scholars have typically assumed *The Whale's* source to be *Versio B*. The chapter concludes with discussion of connections between the Exeter Book and Corpus *Physiologi*, especially a shared emphasis on the resurrection, which connects both to Easter.

A conclusion brings all the chapters' threads together to argue for the special importance of the *Physiologus* in Britain and the Insular world. This is followed by five appendices, including 1) a chronology of the *Physiologus* tradition, related

works and important manuscripts, alongside key cultural touchpoints like the foundation of the School of Canterbury, etc., 2) a chronology of manuscripts of the three main Latin versions and closely related texts, 3) the chapters Laud and the Arras *Physiologi*, in relation to *Versio Y*, 4) an annotated edition and translation of the Latin Corpus *Physiologus* and 5) several black and white manuscript images of the *Physiologus*.

It is exciting to see such extensive and rigorous analysis of the complex *Physiologus* tradition as it pertains to the early medieval world, the identification of a revised Latin recension and discussion of previously neglected manuscripts. Scholars of Latin and Old English languages, literature and manuscript studies, as well as late antique and early medieval history, will find all something in this book.

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