Carvings in the Nave, a 'Sermon in Stone'

Unlike the carvings in the clerestory, those mounted at the springers of the arches of the nave are hard to miss. Near the eastern end of the arcades are the heraldic shields of Bishop John Marshall, who died in 1495, and facing it, on the northern side, that of the de Roos surmounted by the peacock emblem of de Roos (later adopted by the Earls of Rutland). Right at the eastern end are a woman (or a priest?) to the south and a king on the northern side, gazing at each other while their bodies seem to be sliding down the stonework.

The other figures in the nave are all of monstrous creatures. Although today we might look at these as works of art in their own right, this was not the objective of their creators. They were there to provide moral guidance for medieval viewers. They are literally "sermons in stone" intended to demonstrate the belief that the world itself was the Word of God, and that every living thing has its own special meaning within Creation, a book of nature designed by God as a source of instruction for humanity. This idea was partly based upon biblical studies but mostly upon one of the most popular of medieval books, the *Bestiary* or *Bestiarum Vocabulum.*

This two-headed 'amphisbaena', spits and snarls from between the 2nd and 3rd arches of the north arcade.

An Amphisbaena, from the 13th century bestiary text "Summa de vitiis" in the British Library, Harley MS3244 Folio 62.

The head of a woman (or is it a monk?), on the eastern pilaster of the southern arcade.

The image of John Marshall, Bishop of Llandaff, which stands on top of the carving of his shield above the first pillar of the south nave arcade.

The head of a king, on the eastern pilaster of the northern arcade.

Mounted above the first pillar of the north nave arcade, a shield bearing the de Roos arms, surmounted by a helmet (or a Cap of Maintenance) and the Peacock resplendent, the emblem of both the de Roos and Manners families.

This animal, on the north arcade of the nave, may be a wolf, a she-wolf or perhaps a hyena. All represent forms of evil.

The Biblical text which was most important as an inspiration for medieval sculpture was taken from the Book of Job which in the King James Bible says:-

But ask now the beasts, and they shall teach thee; and the fowls of the air, and they shall tell thee: Or speak to the earth, and it shall teach thee: and the fishes of the sea shall declare unto thee. Who knoweth not in all these that the hand of the Lord hath wrought this? Job (12:7-10)

Within the medieval mind the interpretation of this text, that God's design of the universe can provide literal moral guidance, was reinforced by the studies of the ancient Greek *Physiologus,* a 2nd Century Alexandrian text which summarized Aristotle's *Historia Animalium* and other classical authors. David Badkeon in his definitive website *The Medieval Bestiary* (*http://bestiary.ca/index.html*) writes:-

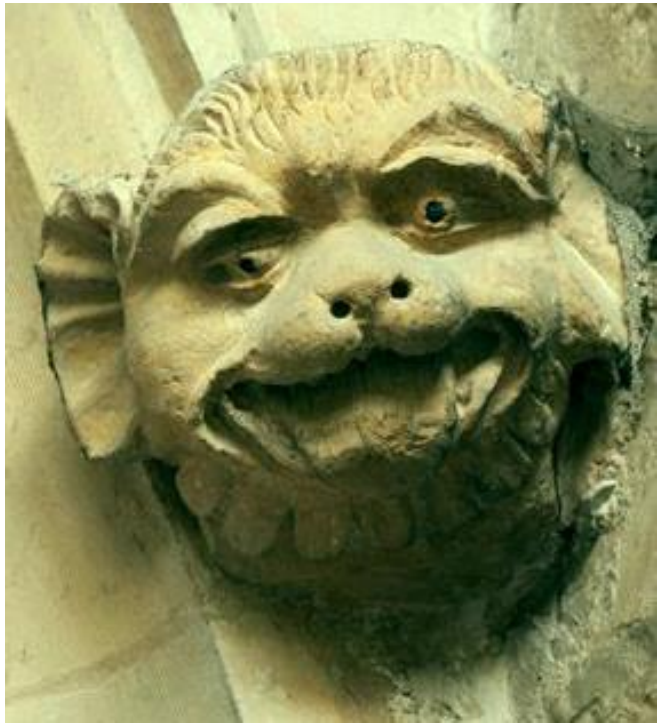
"The bestiary, or "book of beasts", is more than just an expansion of the Physiologus, though the two have much in common. The bestiary also describes a beast and uses that description as a basis for an allegorical teaching, but by including text from other sources it goes further; and while still not a "zoology textbook", it is not only a religious text, but also a description of the world as it was known.

The bestiary manuscripts were usually illustrated, sometimes lavishly, as for example in the Harley Bestiary and the Aberdeen Bestiary; the pictures served as a "visual language" for the illiterate public, who knew the stories - preachers used them in sermons - and would remember the moral teaching when they saw the beast depicted. Bestiary images could be found everywhere. They appeared not only in bestiaries but in manuscripts of all kinds; in churches and monasteries, carved in stone both inside and out, and in wood on misericords and on other decorated furniture; painted on walls and worked into mosaics; and woven into tapestries."

The Dragon and related mythical and actual animal carvings inside and outside of St Mary's can be seen as illustrations of the moral lessons of the Bestiary, but what then of the Angels? An explanation can be found in the writing of St.

We believe this to be an ape, representing deceit, an evil creature seen at the western end of the north nave arcade.

We believe this to be a lion, with its tongue sticking out, a virtuous creature seen at the western end of the south arcade.



Bernard of Clairvaux, the 12th century monk who was a major reformer of the Cistercian order. St Bernard seems, perhaps, to have anticipated some of what was later to become the Reformation Protestant suspicion of religious imagery, in 1127, when he wrote in criticism of bestiary type carvings :-

"What profit is there in those ridiculous monsters, in that marvellous and deformed comeliness, that comely deformity? To what purpose are those unclean apes, those fierce lions, those monstrous centaurs, those half men, those striped tigers, those fighting knights, those hunters winding their horns? Many bodies are seen under one head, or again many heads to one body. Here is a four-footed beast with a serpent's tail; there a fish with a beast's head. Here again the fore-part of a horse trails half a goat behind it, or a horned beast bears the hind quarters of a horse. In short, so many and marvellous are the varieties of shapes on every hand that we are tempted to read in the marble than in our books, and to spend the whole day wondering at these things rather than meditating the law of God. For God's sake, if men are not ashamed of these follies, why at least do they not shrink from the expense?"

One hypothesis which would explain the presence of such a wide variety of creatures in church carvings is that in the medieval period (indeed right up to the 18th century) *the description of the world as it was known* was that nature was organised according to a system known as The Great Chain of Being. Whereas we have an evolutionary model of natural history (that life began with simple animals which gradually evolved into more complex forms) they had a devolutionary model which argued that descending down from God through the Stars and Planets, and into and through mankind to the animals was a great system, the Great Chain, which linked all Creation in a harmonious unity.

One of the organizing principles of The Great Chain of Being was the Principle of Plenitude, which argued that every single link in the chain had to be filled for the system to function. For many Medieval thinkers there were gaps in the devolutionary chain, as for example between Men and Apes, which were too large for the Principle of Plenitude to work properly.

Mythical man-like creatures, including a Cyclops (bottom let). Copyright of the Dean and Chapter of Westminster, reproduced by kind permission.

They sought intermediate 'missing links', men or animals, to fill in those spaces. These were St Bernard's "*monstrous centaurs, those half men, Many bodies are seen under one head, or again many heads to one body. Here is a four-footed beast with a serpent's tail; there a fish with a beast's head. Here again the fore-part of a horse trails half a goat behind it, or a horned beast bears the hind quarters of a horse.*" Many bestiary books have pages of illustrations of intermediate people perhaps for this reason. Some of the carvings at St Mary's seem to have been designed to illustrate the system of descent through the Great Chain, including intermediate or composite figures and animals. An example is the carving of a single eyed Cyclops-style face from just below the chancel arch of St Mary's. This can be compared with an illustration from the c.13th century Westminster Abbey Bestiary, which shows a similar Cyclops figure on the bottom left, along with many other variations on the human form. Other examples are the carving of double figures, perhaps depicting the good and evil sides of human nature, on the north outer clerestory.

An illustration of the Great Chain of Being, from Llull (1304, published 1512).

A Manticore gapes and snarls from between the 3rd and 4th arches of the north arcade. David Badkeon describes it thus:- "*The Manticore is a composite beast from India, with a lion's body, the face of a man with blue eyes, and a tail resembling the sting of a scorpion. It can leap great distances and is very active. It eats human flesh. Its voice is a whistle that sounds like a melody from pipes. Some say it can shoot spines from its tail.*" The illustration, from a Bestiary called the *Summa de vitiis* which dates from the 2nd or 3rd quarter of the 13th century, and is in the British Library, shows a naked man being mauled by a Manticore. The tail of our St Mary's Manticore has perhaps been damaged and may once have shown the full scorpion style stinger.

In contrast to the Manticore, the Lion was seen as a benevolent creature. Lions were frequently carved with their tongues out in a licking posture, as in the two examples from the south nave arcade and the northern springer of

A manticore devouring its victim. British Library, Harley 3244 Folio 43v

The 'manticore', an evil creature with the body of a lion and head of a man, though with sharp fangs, gapes and snarls from the northern nave arcade.

the Chancel arch. The illustration from an early 12th century Bestiary perhaps explains why, as it says in the British Library caption for the illustration:- " *Two adult lions lick their cubs. The lioness gives birth to dead cubs, which remain inanimate until their father arrives after three days and breathes in their faces. Many characteristics of lions link them allegorically to Christ, and this particular trait symbolises Christ's resurrection on his third day in the tomb. The image of the lions licking rather than breathing upon their cubs may draw upon Pliny's 'Historia naturalis', which states that lions' cubs are born unformed and must be licked into shape."*

The carving on the south arcade of a rather mournful-looking lion.

Lions licking their new-born cubs into life. British Library Royal MS12CXIX Folio 6

Looking eastwards through the chancel arch into the chancel itself, with its tombs and the east window.

The blind doorway that once gave access to the rood loft.

The faces of a cyclops and a lion, between the rood loft door and the chancel arch. The lion's tongue is sticking out, suggesting a link to the lion carvings in the nave (p.54).

Trumpeters and saints at the Day of Judgement

St Andrew wielding the sword.

A repentant sinner before the mouth of Hell

The dead reborn, rising from their graves

The 'Doom' painting

Removal of plaster from the chancel arch revealed traces of a Doom painting. The central part, with Christ enthroned, has been lost, but a large part of the lateral parts were uncovered, though in poor condition. It was examined in 1967 by Mrs Eve Baker and Mr Douglas Betts who considered it to have been painted post-1450 and pre-1525. Angels sound the trumpets, resurrected souls rise from their graves, St Michael weighs souls, St Andrew wields the sword to keep the devil at bay. At the extreme right hand side demons goad condemned souls into the gaping Leviathan mouth of Hell.

A demon pushes sinners into Hell