Prius Invisa Animalia. Attitudes towards Animals in Late Medieval Travel Accounts

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This article is based on a close reading of four fifteenth-century travel accounts, written by travellers who started their journey in the Burgundian Low Countries and visited Jerusalem. We analyse what the representations of animals in the travelogues of Guillebert de Lannoy, Bertrandon de la Broquière, Anselm Adornes, and Joos van Ghistele tell us about medieval travellers, their experiences, cultural backgrounds, curiosity, and self-images. First, we question the attitude of travellers towards animals they were familiar with, many of which they found useful for humans, while others were considered rather harmful. Secondly, we look at how earlier texts, stories, and learned knowledge shaped travellers' attitudes towards both observed and unobserved animals. Finally, we study how the confrontation with strange animals compelled the authors of travel accounts to creatively describe the unfamiliar and the unknown.

> *[…] in quo vidimus duo prius invisa animalia, scilicet unam gasella, quod est animal parvum ad modum juvenis cervi. Habet duo cornua ex fronte erecta, tibias multum subtiles et minutas; quod inter animalia quadropeda velocissimum arbitratur.* — […] there we saw two animals that we had never seen before, one of which was a gazelle, i.e. a small animal resembling a fawn. It has two horns rising from its front, fine, small legs, and it is considered the fastest of all quadrupeds.[1]

The visit of Anselm Adornes and his fellow travellers to Sousse (Tunisia) was quite thrilling. Following a violent storm of three days they entered the coastal city and were received by two Genoese merchants. Both men showed the travellers around. When they entered a *funduq*, Adornes and his company saw, for the first time in their lives, ostriches and gazelles. In his travelogue, John Adornes, Anselm's son, compares the "previously unseen" gazelle to a young deer and emphasises its remarkable speed. In the short passage quoted above, two worlds come together: European travellers in North Africa, exploring places of interest, encounter a captive animal that has been taken from its native desert, possibly on its way to a Mediterranean menagerie.[2] Through his comparison, the author connects species and continents, while his remark about the gazelle's speed must have been based on local knowledge or existing texts.

Travel accounts, describing distant lands through a personal lens, can offer unique

[1] Jean Adorno, *Itinéraire d'Anselme Adorno en Terre sainte: 1470–1471*, eds. Jacques Heers and Georgette de Groer, Sources d'histoire médiévale (Paris: Éditions du Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1978), 142–44.
[2] Olivia Remie Constable, *Housing the Stranger in the Mediterranean World: Lodging, Trade, and Travel in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 274.

information about cities, religion, food, transport, human societies, etc. Precisely because these accounts are the result of outsiders' perceptions and interpretations, they are often used by historians to study the influence of pre-existing knowledge and stereotypes on the perception of foreign countries, cities, and communities or to analyse attitudes towards other religions.[3] At the same time, such analyses also result in a better understanding of the ways in which descriptions of the foreign Other indicate travellers' self-image.

Despite the conviction of the French historian Robert Delort that travel accounts offer "the largest repository of information on ancient animals",[4] academic interest in the occurrence of animals in these sources remains rather rare. While animals were ubiquitous in medieval society, and while bestiaries, encyclopaedias and religious texts on animals have been widely studied,[5] the genre of travel writing has received less attention within animal studies. Some scholars devote a general discussion to animals and the natural world when discussing travel accounts.[6] Others have used travelogues, in combination with other sources, to study menageries.[7] However, large scale research into the significance of animals in travel writing is still lacking. This is unfortunate since travel accounts contain information on animal usage, the relationship between man and animal and attitudes towards animals that cannot be found in any other type of source. Such accounts allow us to unveil the personal attitudes of travel writers towards animals, thereby giving insight in both

[3] See for example: Christine Bousquet-Labouerie, "La ville de l'autre," *Medieval Encounters* 11 (2005): 37–49; Kim Overlaet, "Zo comt men ter stadt van Alkayeren: een analyse van de representaties van Cairo in laat vijftiende-eeuwse reisverhalen uit de Nederlanden," *Stadsgeschiedenis* 5 (2010): 1–18; Stefan Schröder, "The Encounter with Islam between Doctrinal Image and Life Writing: Ambrosius Zeebout's Report of Joos Van Ghistele's Travels to the East 1481–1485," in *Fear and Loathing in the North: Jews and Muslims in Medieval Scandinavia and the Baltic Region*, eds. Cordelia Heß and Jonathan Adams (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 83–106; Jaroslav Svátek, "L'idéal du souverain oriental dans le récit de Bertrandon de La Broquère," *Publications du Centre Européen d'Études Bourguignonnes* 56 (2016): 61–72; Alexia Lagast, "Polémique ou neutralité? La représentation de Mahomet dans les récits de voyage de Josse de Ghistelles (1481–1485) et de Bernhard von Breydenbach (1483–1484)," *Publications du Centre Européen d'Études Bourguignonnes* 56 (2016): 175–89; Marian Coman, "Experiencing Otherness. Bertrandon de La Broquière's Pilgrimage to Jerusalem (1432)," *New Europe College Yearbook* 15 (2008): 87–120; Nissaf Sghaïer, "Les voyageurs occidentaux à la découverte de l'altérité musulmane au bas Moyen Âge: l'exemple de Bertrandon de la Broquière," *Frontières* 1 (2019): 35–44; Jaroslav Svátek, *Prier, combattre et voir le monde. Discours et récits de nobles voyageurs à la fin du Moyen Âge* (Rennes: Presses universitaires de Rennes, 2021).

[4] Robert Delort, *Les animaux ont une histoire* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1984), 55.

[5] For example: L. A. J. R. Houwen, "Animal Parallelism in Medieval Literature and the Bestiaries: A Preliminary Investigation," *Neophilologus* 78 (1994): 483–96; F. D. Klingender, *Animals in Art and Thought to the End of the Middle Ages* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1971).

[6] For example: Jean-Claude Faucon, "La représentation de l'animal par Marco Polo," *Médiévales* 16 (1997): 97–117; Jeannine Guérin-Dalle Mese, *Egypte: la mémoire et le rêve, itinéraires d'un voyage, 1320–1601* (Florence: L.S. Olschki, 1991); Svetlana Kirillina, "Representing the Animal World of the Ottoman Empire: The Accounts of Russian Orthodox Pilgrims (Sixteenth-Eighteenth Centuries)," in *Animals and People in the Ottoman Empire,* ed. Suraiya Faroqhi (Istanbul: Eren, 2010), 75–98; Jaroslav Svátek, "Discours et récit de noble voyageur à la fin du Moyen Âge (Ogier d'Anglure, Nompar de Caumont, Guillebert de Lannoy, Bertrandon de la Broquière)," PhD dissertation, Université Charles De Gaulle-Lille 3, 2012.

[7] Thierry Buquet, "Les menageries arabes et ottomanes," *SSMOCI (Société Suisse Moyen-Orient et Civilisation Islamique) Bulletin* 38 (2014): 16–19; Thierry Buquet, "*Animalia extranea et stupenda ad videndum*. Describing and Naming Exotic Beasts in Cairo Sultan's Menagerie," in *Animals and Otherness in the Middle Ages: Perspectives across Disciplines*, eds. Francisco de Asís García García, Monica Ann Walker-Vadillo and María Victoria Chico Picaza (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2013), 25–34.

human-animal interaction in the Middle Ages and in the travellers' own mental perceptions of the world.

In this article, we develop an in-depth analysis of four fifteenth-century travel accounts. All four are written by travellers who started their journey in the Burgundian Low Countries and visited Jerusalem, but whose social backgrounds, reasons for travelling, and routes to the Holy Land differed considerably.[8] Guillebert de Lannoy (1386-1462) was a knight and ambassador in the service of Duke Philip the Good (r. 1419-1467). During his career, he travelled to Poland, Russia, Egypt, Jerusalem, and other countries to fulfil diplomatic and military missions. Shortly after his death, his personal travel notes and reports were compiled by his chaplain in the *Voyages et ambassades* (1462), an overview of all his journeys with concise information about the regions he had visited, the people he had met, and the military information he had collected.[9] Bertrandon de la Broquière (d. 1459) was also a "pilgrim with military eyes"[10] in the service of Philip the Good. His *Voyage d'Outremer* (1455-1457) recounts his adventures during a secret espionage mission in Turkey (1431) to prepare Philip the Good's never-materialised crusade against the Ottoman Empire, launched at the famous Feast of the Pheasant (1454).[11] Bertrandon first travelled to Jerusalem, accompanied by others, and then continued his journey to Constantinople on his own and in disguise. When he returned to Philip the Good, he was still dressed in Ottoman garb (Fig. 1). While these first two sources were written in the context of military missions, the other two are transmitted by curious pilgrims. Anselm Adornes (1424-1483) undertook a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in 1470, the account of which was written by his son John (1444-1511) in the *Itinerarium Terrae Sanctae* (1475). Adornes was a merchant and politician in Bruges with Genoese roots. Together with four other notables from Bruges, father and son travelled from Genova across Tunisia, Egypt, and Sinai towards Palestine, and then back home past Damascus, Cyprus, Rhodes, and Brindisi. The account of their travel describes at length the landscapes, cities, holy places, animals, and peoples they encountered.[12] The fourth source analysed in this article is the Middle Dutch *Tvoyage van Mher*

[8] For a thorough analysis of this kind of literature: Peter Stabel, *Beholden beholders. Visions of the world in late medieval pilgrim narrative from the Low Countries* (forthcoming).
[9] Ghillebert de Lannoy, *Œuvres de Ghillebert de Lannoy, voyageur, diplomate et moraliste*, ed. Charles Potvin (Leuven: Imprimerie de P. et J. Lefever, 1878), 9–178. On the relative absence of devotional motivations in Guillebert's travels: Jaroslav Svátek, "Le pèlerinage dans les *Voyages et ambassades* de Guillebert de Lannoy," in *Écrire le voyage au temps des Ducs de Bourgogne. Actes du colloque international organisé à l'Université Littoral Côte d'Opale, Dunkerque*, eds. Jean Devaux, Matthieu Marchal and Alexandra Velissariou (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), 57–65.
[10] Arjo Vanderjagt, "Burgundian Pilgrimage," in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Pilgrimage*, eds. Larissa J. Taylor et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 65–68, here 67. See also Marie-Christine Gomez-Géraud, "Lire le voyage à la fin du XVe siècle. Comment situer le *Voyage* de Bertrandon de la Broquière ?," in *Écrire le voyage au temps des Ducs de Bourgogne. Actes du colloque international organisé à l'Université Littoral Côte d'Opale, Dunkerque*, eds. Jean Devaux, Matthieu Marchal and Alexandra Velissariou (Turnhout: Brepols, 2021), 23–31.
[11] Bertrandon de la Broquière, *Le voyage d'Outremer de Bertrandon de La Broquière, premier écuyer tranchant et conseiller de Philippe le Bon, duc de Bourgogne*, ed. Charles Schefer (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1892).
[12] Adorno, *Itinéraire d'Anselme Adorno*. See also Noel Geirnaert, "De Adornes en de Jeruzalemkapel. Internationale

Joos van Ghistele written in the late fifteenth century by the cleric Ambrosius Zeebout, possibly a Carmelite residing in Ghent. Zeebout combined the travel notes of the Ghent alderman and knight Joos van Ghistele (1446-1516) with more than 70 other sources to create a text that is both a travel account and an encyclopaedic work with ethnographic, religious, and geographic information.[13] Eager to visit all kinds of holy places in the Middle East and to discover the land of the legendary Prester John, Joos van Ghistele and his companions had travelled from 1481 until 1485, visiting among other countries Egypt, Aden, Syria, and Iran.

While, of course, these four selected sources all show specific particularities, we will approach them together as an unusually rich reservoir of mentions and descriptions of animals. They contain over a thousand occurrences of creatures. Sometimes these can be retrieved in general terms when for example "animals" or "fishes" are discussed. Yet in most cases occurrences take the form of specific mentions of both well-known species such as horses, sheep, chickens, etc. and exotic animals such as giraffes, crocodiles, tigers, and so on.[14] The aim of this article, however, is not to merely describe the historical meaning of these animals, but to analyse what these descriptions of animals tell us about medieval travellers, their experiences, cultural backgrounds, curiosity, and self-images. Based upon an exhaustive inventorying of mentions and descriptions in the four selected sources, we propose a distinction between three different approaches to dealings with animals in the travel accounts. This distinction also structures the argumentation of this article. First, we focus on the utilitarian aspect of animals, as perceived by travellers. What was the attitude of travellers towards animals they were familiar with, some of which they found to be more or less useful for humans, while others were considered rather harmful? Secondly, we look at how earlier texts, stories, and learned knowledge shaped travellers' attitudes towards both observed and unobserved animals. Finally, we study how the confrontation with strange animals compelled the authors of travel accounts to creatively describe the exotic and the unknown. Which mental strategies were developed in such situations? Together, these three approaches encompass the frequent and multifarious presence of animals in late medieval travel accounts and provide more insight into how travel writers perceived the natural world during their journeys.

Describing Familiar Animals

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contacten in het laatmiddeleeuwse Brugge," in *Adornes en Jeruzalem. Internationaal leven in het 15de- en 16de-eeuwse Brugge. Brugge, Jeruzalemkapel, 9–25 september 1983. Catalogus*, eds. Noël Geirnaert and André Vande Walle (Brugge: Stad Brugge, 1983), 11–49.

[13] Ambrosius Zeebout, *Tvoyage van Mher Joos van Ghistele*, ed. R. J. G. A. A. Gaspar (Hilversum: Verloren, 1998).

[14] The dataset Thijs Temmerman, "Animal mentions in the travel accounts of Guillebert de Lannoy, Bertrandon de la Broquière, Anselm Adornes and Joos van Ghistele" is available on URL https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.5655510.

De là, à Cividal par terre, où je achetay des chevaux et vins au long du païs de Friol jusques aux Allemagnes. — From there by land to Cividale, where I bought horses and wine, while passing through the land of Friuli until the German lands.[15]

Item, lendemain que je fus venu à Damas, je y veis entrer la carvane qui venoit de la Mecque et disoit on qu'ilz estoient trois mil camelz et mirent près de deux jours et de deux nuitz à entrer à Damas. — Also, the day after I came to Damascus, I saw the caravan that came from Mecca enter there, and it was said that they were three thousand camels and it took them almost two days and two nights to enter Damascus.[16]

Invenimus illo mane locum in montem jocundissimum, virgultis et arbustis cum quibusdam arboribus fultum, in quo currebant lepores, perdices silvatice […] — That morning we found a place on a very pleasant mountain, vegetated with bushes and shrubs and with some trees, where hares and wild partridges ran […][17]

Ende naer dat zij ghereden hadden ghenouch eenen langhen, verren wech, zo vonden zij neghen of tien logisten van Arabianen, […] met hemlieden hebbende groote menichte van beesten, als coeyen, paerden, scapen, gheeten, kemels, mulen, ezels ende andere dieren daer zij bij leven naer hare maniere. — And when they rode down a long, far road, they found there nine or ten encampments of Arabs […] with a huge mass of beasts with them such as cows, horses, sheep, goats, camels, mules, donkeys, and other animals with which they lived according to their manners.[18]

Robert Delort once argued that the authors of medieval travel accounts showed little interest in animals they already knew from their Western background. Because of their ordinariness, they would barely mention them in their narratives and only show genuine interest in unfamiliar animals with exotic charms.[19] However, the four travelogues we examined contradict this assumption. Most of the descriptions in these texts just deal with familiar animals. They bear witness to the animals that the travellers used, bought, or observed. Usually, however, these animals were only briefly mentioned. Familiar animals such as horses, cows, sheep, fish, deer, hares, pigeons, lice, or even camels required little explanation. They functioned primarily as familiar elements with which to textually shape the experience of unfamiliar environments. Yet some differences can be identified in the way this wide range of familiar animals were described. It is possible to distinguish roughly five

[15] Ghillebert de Lannoy, *Œuvres de Ghillebert de Lannoy*, 177.
[16] Bertrandon de la Broquière, *Le voyage d'Outremer*, 55.
[17] Adorno, *Itinéraire d'Anselme Adorno*, 222.
[18] Zeebout, *Tvoyage*, 137.
[19] Robert Delort, "Les animaux en Occident du Xe au XVIe siècle," *Actes de la Société des historiens médiévistes de l'enseignement supérieur public* 15 (1984): 11–45, here 18.

categories of descriptions, each of which also indicates something about different human-animal relations.

The first category includes descriptions of those animals that were essential for travellers, namely mounts and beasts of burden. In every travelogue, horses, camels, mules, and donkeys feature frequently. These domesticated animals were bred and trained to be as useful and reliable as possible. They had to combine strength, stability, and speed to facilitate travel along difficult roads and paths, over mountains, and through deserts. Travellers maintained a close relationship with their riding animals. Horses and mules were not just economic products that could be bought in markets or rented temporarily. They were also fellow travellers to be cared for and fed to stay strong and healthy, and they also provided companionship. Some travellers hired drivers for their camels and donkeys, but someone like the solitary traveller Bertrandon de la Broquière had to look after his horse himself. His account clearly shows his concern for his animal when he describes his passage through Turkish Taurus Mountains:

> *Et celle nuict, neyga tresfort entre ces montaignes et couvry mon cheval d'un capinat qui estoit ma robe de feutre que je avoye en guise d'un manteau.* — And that night it snowed very hard between those mountains, and I covered my horse with a *capinat*, i.e. the felt robe that I used as a coat.[20]

Secondly, we can distinguish a category of observations of other domesticated livestock that were not used during travel itself, but were of benefit to humans as food, for animal products, or as local draught animals. Our sources report on livestock such as cows, sheep, and oxen, observed in fertile fields or used to run irrigation mills or plough the land. The relationship between such livestock and travellers remains much more distant. Their description is usually very brief: they are more likely to be mentioned as part of the characterisation of landscapes travelled through, or of foreign communities with their own culture, such as nomadic Arabs.[21]

The third category includes descriptions of wild animals hunted or caught by humans. Both hunting and fishing were obviously important economic and social activities during the Middle Ages. All four travellers under study were familiar with the prestige of hunting. Guillebert de Lannoy is the only one from whose testimony we can deduce that he also took part in a hunting expedition himself — through this he saw bears, boars, deer, and aurochs in Poland and Lithuania

[20] Bertrandon de la Broquière, *Le voyage d'Outremer*, 102. A *capinat*, as the author explains elsewhere (77), "*est une robe de feutre tresdelié blanc, que la pluie ne perche point*", see *DMF: Dictionnaire du Moyen Français*, version 2020 (DMF 2020) (ATILF-CNRS & Université de Lorraine – URL http://www.atilf.fr/dmf/definition/capinat, accessed 22 November 2023).
[21] Ghillebert de Lannoy, *Œuvres*, 116; Zeebout, *Tvoyage*, 279, 348.

— while the three others witnessed hunts by elites in Tunisia, Cyprus, and Turkey.[22] Testimonies of fishing are found when the travellers report on their adventures on the Mediterranean, in coastal towns, by lakes and rivers. Here it is striking how scarce detailed information on different species of fish is. As we can note in Bertrandon's narrative, the travel accounts tend to simply speak of "fish" and focus mainly on quantity and size:

> *Cette ville de Segading […] est moult fertile de tous vivres, par especial de poissons, des plus grans que j'aye point veu prendre sur nulles autres rivyeres*. — This city of Szeged [Hungary] […] is very fertile with all kinds of food, especially fish, the largest I have ever seen caught in any other river.[23]

Not all wild animals were hunted or captured: some posed a danger or nuisance to travellers. The fourth category of descriptions concerns animals mentioned by medieval authors in very negative terms, such as snakes, mosquitoes, flies, and wasps. When John Adornes recalls his stay in Tunis, he paints a picture of a city riddled with flies and wasps. All inhabitants carried a fan to ward off the insects, especially during lunch and dinner: "Otherwise no one could live due to the nuisance of flies" (*Alias non posset quis propter muscarum vexationem vivere*).[24] More fearsome than insects were wolves. Guillebert de Lannoy recounts a thrilling encounter with these animals in the forests of present-day Ukraine. He and his fellow travellers were surprised in the middle of the night by a pack of wolves that chased the horses away. Their *forte aventure* had a happy ending when a brave Tatar called Gzooyloos retrieved the horses.[25]

The fifth category we distinguish stands somewhat on its own. It does not contain representations of living animals, but descriptions of derivative products that illustrate the omnipresence of the primarily utilitarian appreciation of animals in travel narratives. This category thus encompasses descriptions of commonplace products like meat, eggs, and wool, as well as mentions of luxurious silk fabrics and furs that were worn at courts or exchanged as gifts. Additionally, it covers references to more specialised animal-derived items that held significant importance for travellers, such as leather drinking pouches. References to the animals at the origin of such foodstuffs and commodities remain virtually absent. Sometimes such descriptions do involve a certain amount of wonder, for example when Adornes explains the dietary habits of Muslims, or when Zeebout explains how people in Persia used inflated animal skins to build special cargo rafts, the so-called *kelleks*.[26]

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[22] Ghillebert de Lannoy, *Œuvres*, 41, 65.
[23] Bertrandon de la Broquière, *Le voyage d'Outremer*, 232–33.
[24] Adorno, *Itinéraire d'Anselme Adorno*, 118.
[25] Ghillebert de Lannoy, *Œuvres*, 61–62; Nicole Chareyron, *Globe-trotters au Moyen Âge* (Paris: Imago, 2004), 70.
[26] Zeebout, *Tvoyage*, 328; Adorno, *Itinéraire d'Anselme Adorno*, 83.

What these five categories have in common is that they are all particularly telling of the distinctly utilitarian perception of animals that prevailed in the Western Middle Ages. They therefore endorse the anthropocentric conviction that we already find strongly formulated by the influential thirteenth century Franciscan encyclopaedist Bartholomeus Anglicus, who stated:

> *Omnium animalium tam iumentorum quam reptilium & bestiarum genera creata sunt propter optimum hominis usum*. — All types of animals, domestic and wild beasts as well as reptiles were created for the best use of man.[27]

Indeed, the most general image of animals that emerges in the travel narratives is that they should help mankind (as mounts and draught animals), feed it (meat, fish, dairy products, eggs), entertain it (hunting), or remind it of its vulnerability and of the power of God.[28]

Even when authors do not confine themselves to simply mentioning animals in their texts and dedicate longer descriptions to them, these passages denote that same conviction that animals are not valued primarily as living creatures in their own right, but that they should be of benefit to humans. Zeebout talks about "good" fish when referring to specimens that are found tasty by his protagonist Joost van Ghistele.[29] For both Adornes and Bertrandon de la Broquière, horses deserve all praise when they excel as useful animals:

> *[…] et sont moult bons cheyaulx et courent longuement, et sont de petite despense, car ilz ne menguent que de nuit ung pou d'orge et de la paille piquadée, et ne boivent jamais qu'il ne soit après midy.* — […] and these are very good horses that run a long time, and they require little expense, because they eat only a little barley and chopped straw at night, and they never drink until after noon.[30]

Another reason why certain otherwise familiar animals enjoy longer descriptions in travelogues is when they are used in a context that exudes otherness. John Adornes writes at length about animal sacrifices during Eid al-Adha in Tunis, because this custom was foreign to him.[31] Both Adornes and Joos van Ghistele marvel at the use of carrier pigeons in Egypt, praising the efficiency

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[27] Cited by Esther Cohen, "Animals in Medieval Perceptions: The Image of the Ubiquitous Other," in *Animals and Human Society: Changing Perspectives*, eds. Aubrey Manning and James Serpell (New York: Routledge, 1994), 60–61. See Bartholomeus Anglicus, *De genuinis rerum coelestium, terrestrium et infernarum proprietatibus, libri XVIII*, ed. D. Georgius Bartholdus Pontanus (Frankfurt, apud Wolfgangum Richterum, 1601), 985.
[28] Cohen, "Animals in Medieval Perceptions," 60–61.
[29] Zeebout, *Tvoyage*, 286, 288.
[30] Bertrandon de la Broquière, *Le voyage d'Outremer*, 62.
[31] Adorno, *Itinéraire d'Anselme Adorno*, 76.

of this communication system.[32] Such fragments thus show travellers' curiosity towards the unknown, but in their descriptions of animals, the emphasis remains on their usefulness, rather than on the animals themselves.

Finally, and somewhat related to the above discussion, we can point out that the animal was also simply useful to man on a phenomenological level, that is, to highlight man's exceptionality by regularly invoking the human-animal distinction. Such "othering" was not only peculiar to medieval theology, but pervaded casual comparisons and metaphors in travel accounts, where we see confirmed how the human-animal distinction traditionally relied on criteria such as reasonable *vs* unreasonable, clothed *vs* naked, being able to speak or not, to make fire or not, etc.[33] While passing through Syria, John Adornes lamented that he and his company were not received "as men but as beasts or unreasonable animals" (*non veluti homines sed quemadmodum belue sive bruta animalia recepti sumus*).[34] When Joos van Ghistele visited the slave market in Cairo, he noted that slaves there were dehumanised, as it were, since they were "often undressed to show that they had no defects, and sometimes they were made to run and trot as if they were beasts" (*ende dicwilt ontcleetmense naect omme tooghene dat ze gheen ghebrec en hebben, somtijts doen zijse loopen ende draven ghelijc oft beesten waren*).[35] But, equally, the authors themselves compared others to animals in order to denounce and dehumanise them in this way, such as when Adornes calls the Arabs "treacherous dogs" (*canes perfidissimi*).[36]

The Impact of Existing Stories

> *Item onttrent meer dan ten halven weghe van deser zelver rivieren, wat naerder der zee dan der stede, zo ghebuerdet dat in tijden voorleden Sente Eustacius verloes zijn wijf ende zijn twee kinderen, meenende die over dwater te draghene, danof deen wart ghenomen van eenen leeu ende dander van eenen wulf, ghelijc daer af breeder gheroert es in zijne legende.* — Also, about somewhat more than halfway along this river, closer to the sea than to the city, it happened a long time ago that Saint Eustache lost his wife and two children. When he thought he could carry the latter across the water, one was taken by a lion and the other by a wolf, as is amply told in his legend.[37]

Late medieval travel accounts, however, do not only contain observations of familiar animals that travellers had encountered during their wanderings. They are also laced with references to animals

[32] Adorno, *Itinéraire d'Anselme Adorno*, 160; Zeebout, *Tvoyage*, 218.
[33] Joyce E. Salisbury, *The Beast Within: Animals in the Middle Ages* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 167–68.
[34] Adorno, *Itinéraire d'Anselme Adorno,* 350.
[35] Zeebout, *Tvoyage*, 175.
[36] Zeebout, *Tvoyage*, 107; Adorno, *Itinéraire d'Anselme Adorno*, 244.
[37] Zeebout, *Tvoyage*, 286.

about which the authors were informed through stories they knew from earlier texts or heard during their travels. In the above quote, for example, in which both a lion and a wolf are featured, Zeebout draws on the legend of Saint-Eustache, known from James de Voragine's *Legenda aurea*, to evoke a sense of recognition in his readers. Three distinct narrative traditions appear to have significantly shaped the portrayal of animals in late medieval travel narratives. First, there are a number of written texts, usually with a religious content and known to both authors and their readers, featuring familiar animals. Then there is the tradition of new exemplary stories that travellers picked up during their adventures and included in their own accounts. Again, these are stories in which familiar animals play a leading role. Lastly, travel account authors exhibited a keen interest in tales of enigmatic, hitherto unknown monstrous creatures that they hoped to see or were informed about during their travels.

Authors of travel narratives not only relied on their own observations and experiences in their accounts, but also liked to show off their erudition. By referring to religious texts, they demonstrated their knowledge and piety and could simultaneously convey a higher level of reliability.[38] Moreover, since all four accounts we study here constitute the result of a journey that led to Jerusalem, it is little wonder that the Bible is the source most commonly alluded to. After all, pilgrims wanted to visit the places where events known from the Old and New Testament had taken place. The Holy Land interested them less because of its contemporary spaces and locations, inhabitants and curiosities, than because of its "sacred geography".[39] The places that attracted them primarily had religious significance, linked to ancient stories. As Nicole Chareyron clearly put it, "the pilgrim has come, above all, to resurrect biblical memory".[40]

It is in the intertwining of symbolically significant places with biblical stories that also a number of biblical animals show up in the travel narratives. In Zeebout's account of Joost van Ghistele's journey, Feirân and St Catharine's Monastery in the Sinai desert are associated with the idolisation of the golden calf (Ex. 32).[41] Guillebert de Lannoy links Jaffa to the story of Jonah and the whale (Jon. 2:1-10),[42] while according to Zeebout it was at Akko that the prophet was vomited out by the big sea mammal.[43] At Bethlehem, Adornes recalls the (apocryphal) story of the ox and the ass and refers to the thirteenth-century Christmas hymn in which the line "The ox and the ass knew that the Child was the Lord" (*Cognovit bos et asinus*) is sung.[44] Adornes also identifies the

[38] Jean Richard, *Les récits de voyages et de pèlerinages* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1981), 39–46.
[39] Aryeh Graboïs, *Le pèlerin occidental en Terre sainte au Moyen Âge* (Brussels: De Boeck Université, 1998), 103–16.
[40] Nicole Chareyron, *Pilgrims to Jerusalem in the Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 71.
[41] Zeebout, *Tvoyage*, 242–45.
[42] Ghillebert de Lannoy, *Œuvres*, 93.
[43] Zeebout, *Tvoyage*, 75–76.
[44] Adorno, *Itinéraire d'Anselme Adorno*, 287. See also Michel Pastoureau, *Bestiaires du Moyen Âge* (Paris: Seuil, 2011), 104–07.

spot on Mount Zion where Peter had heard the rooster crowing after he had denied three times that he knew Jesus (Matt. 26; Mark 14; Luke 22, John 13 & 18).[45] The number of examples of references to animals from biblical stories, as well as from well-known saints' lives and other religious texts, could easily be multiplied, especially on the basis of Zeebout's work, which made most use of existing texts. However, such mentions of known animals serve mainly as mnemonic tools to connect well-known stories and locations. The stories themselves did not need to be retold, nor did the symbolism, use, or perception of the animals mentioned in such contexts require further explanation.[46]

However, during the Middle Ages, oral traditions had also generated a new story world related to the places with biblical or Christian significance. These stories bore witness to the divine presence that was believed to continue to surround these locations. They linked the biblical with the contemporary world. The famous sacred sites were thus not merely remnants of a distant sanctified past, but places where miraculous power was still present. Travellers were very eager to hear these stories and passed them on to their readers. We also regularly come across descriptions of animals in such narratives. These contain more than mere mentions of animals, but offer real *exempla* in which animals take centre stage. A good example is the story of the oxen in the balsam garden of El Matareya near Cairo, which was heard by both Anselm Adornes and Joos van Ghistele:

> *In eo fonte due rote lignee currunt seu volvuntur per traxionem duorum pinguium boum, quibis rotis aqua per terreas ollas in hortum effunditur. Nollent boves aquam trahentes ad fontem Christi pro rigando balsamo propter quamcumque punctionem vel flagellationem a vesperis sabbati usque post vesperas dominice diei laborare. Id nobis christiani de centuria in secreto retulerunt.* — In that fountain, two wooden wheels run or revolve through the traction of two stout oxen, pouring the water into the garden through earthen pots. The oxen that pull the water from the fountain of Christ to water the balsam would refuse to work from the Vespers of Saturday evening until the end of those of Sunday, even when punctured or whipped. Christians from that area have told us this in secret.[47]

El Matareya was a place that Mary and Joseph were believed to have passed through during their flight to Egypt. The little Jesus allegedly planted there the twigs that would have grown into balsam trees. Central to this excerpt is not the usefulness of the animals, but their miraculous behaviour, for they follow the Christian ban on Sunday work, despite the alleged cruelty of their Muslim masters. The sanctity of this place was thus supposed to be so strong that even animals felt

[45] Adorno, *Itinéraire d'Anselme Adorno*, 276.
[46] Ken Stone, "Animating the Bible's Animals," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Narrative*, ed. Danna Nolan Fewell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 444–55.
[47] Adorno, *Itinéraire d'Anselme Adorno*, 194.

it. Similar stories were told at St Catherine's Monastery,[48] where only a miracle could explain the absence of any vermin, at Bethlehem, where a snake was said to have destroyed the marble tiles of the Church of the Nativity so that the Egyptian sultan could not steal them, and at the Castle of St Peter in Bodrum, where the dogs of the Order of St John were said to have rescued Christian refugees and attacked the Turks.[49] The animals in such stories are admired and praised for being vessels of God's power and resisting Muslim rulers. They transcend their usefulness and become symbols of religious zeal.

Of a completely different order, finally, are the monsters and mythical animals that are also known to appear regularly in pre-modern travel accounts and descriptions of distant lands, usually on the authority of circulating stories.[50] The four texts studied here contain no first-hand descriptions of monsters, but two travellers, Bertrandon de la Broquière and Joos van Ghistele, appear to have picked up stories about them along their journeys. Bertrandon met a Neapolitan merchant near Constantinople who claimed to be an ambassador of the mythical Prester John.[51] He details in his account the information he would have drawn from this conversation, including descriptions of the animals of which the Neapolitan claimed that they lived in Ethiopia:

> *Et me dist qu'il y a moult d'estranges bestes comme lyons, elephans, sçarafes, licornes et goristes ainsi que ung homme sauvaige, excepté qu'ilz ont bien deux piez et demi de queue et est moittié blanc et moittié noir. Et si y a d'autres bestes moult merveilleuses. Par especial, il dist qu'il y a serpens qui ont cent et L braches de long et sont moult perilleuses bestes et quant ilz veullent, ilz portent la teste bien v toyses hault et le corps est ainsi que l'arbre d'une carraque et porte un esperon dessoubz la queue que, qui le porte en guerre, son ennemy ne peut avoir durée contre luy. —* And he tells me that there are many strange beasts, such as lions, elephants, giraffes, unicorns and goristes, which resemble a wild man, except that they have two and a half feet tail and are half white and half black. And there are other very wonderful beasts. In particular, he says that there are serpents which are 150 arms long and are very dangerous beasts, and when they want to, they carry their heads thirty feet high, and their body resembles the beam of a carrack and under their tail there is a spur, which, carried into battle, would defeat the enemy in a short time.[52]

[48] See also R. M. Dawkins, "The Process of Tradition in Greece," *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 37 (1937): 48–55.
[49] Adorno, *Itinéraire d'Anselme Adorno*, 232, 372; Zeebout, *Tvoyage*, 246–47, 102, 366.
[50] John Block Friedman, *The Monstrous Races in Medieval Art and Thought*, Medieval Studies (Syracuse, N.Y: Syracuse University Press, 2000).
[51] This man was possibly Pietro Rombulo Da Messina, see Carmelo Trasselli, "Un Italiano in Etiopia Nel XV Secolo. Pietro Rombulo Da Messina," *Rassegna di Studi Etiopici* 1 (1941): 173–202; Matteo Salvadore, *The African Prester John and the Birth of Ethiopian-European Relations, 1402–1555* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2017), 130–31.
[52] Bertrandon de la Broquière, *Le voyage d'Outremer*, 144.

The Burgundian knight thus proved to be fascinated by lions, elephants, unicorns, goristes,[53] and in particular by monstrous serpents. At the same time, he also remained wary, as he prefaced his account of the Neapolitan's testimony by saying, "Whether he tells me the truth or not, I stick to what he says and will not make anything better" (*s'il me dist verité ou non, je m'en rapport à ce qu'il en est et n'en fais riens bon*).[54] The story of the Neapolitan is recognisable as an illustration of the penchant for the strange, the unknown and also sometimes the terrifying in the texts of medieval travellers, in which, for once, animals too are not simply seen as useful but as fascinating. Yet Bertrandon remained cautious: without his personal observation, these animals remained primarily mysterious to both himself and his readers.

Bertrandon's account relied on a chance encounter, but Joos van Ghistele is believed to have actively looked for mysterious animals and "wild men". In the introduction to *Tvoyage of Mher Joos van Ghistele*, Zeebout writes that his noble protagonist went in search of the wonders of the world to "see by his own experience what he had heard about and read and found in various books" (*by experiencecien te siene dat zij ghehoort ende in diverssche boucken ghelesen ende vonden had*).[55] However, his hunger for curiosities could not be completely satisfied when his expedition to Ethiopia ended in the port of Aden, at the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula. Disappointed, the traveller resorted to conversations about distant lands with guards and locals:

> *Dus over en weder wandelende, diverssche plaetsen visiterende ende besouckende, seyden toot den ghonen die met hemlieden ghinghen, dat zij tanderen tijden hadden hooren zegghen dat in die maertsen ende landen waren diverssche monstren ende ooc wilde lieden, vraghende watter waer af wesen mochte. Men seyde hemlieden datmer daer niet af en wiste te sprekene noch noynt ghehoort en hadde […]* — So as they walked back and forth and visited different places, they said to those going with them that they had once heard that in these marshes and lands lived various monsters and wild men, and they asked what was true of this. The others told them that they knew nothing about it and had never heard anyone talk about it […][56]

A man in Aden could only tell him about baboons, monkeys that look somewhat like humans but are still animals. When he asked a similar question about wild men and monsters in Turkmen Tabriz, he got only a negative answer.[57] The widespread belief in monsters and wild men shaped Joos van

[53] The name and description as a wild man "half white and half black" could make this fragment one of the only medieval mentions of a silverback gorilla. James Newman, "Discovering Gorillas: The Journey from Mythic to Real," *Terrae Incognitae* 38 (2006): 36–54, here 36–40.
[54] Bertrandon de la Broquière, *Le voyage d'Outremer*, 143.
[55] Zeebout, *Tvoyage*, 1.
[56] Zeebout, *Tvoyage*, 257.
[57] Zeebout, *Tvoyage*, 257, 342–43.

Ghistele's curiosity, but his experiences and conversations could neither confirm nor deny their existence. Travel writers finally had to satisfy their interest in the unknown by describing real animals that they themselves observed.

The impact of very diverse narrative traditions on the perception of animals in travel accounts clearly demonstrates the hybrid nature of late medieval travel writing. Personal adventures and one's own observations were not the only things that shaped the travelogue. Prior knowledge and information and expectations acquired along the way, based on both written and oral sources, also had an impact on the resulting text. Such pre-existing discourses ensured that animals found a place in travelogues not only because of their physical presence during the travel experience. Animals also figured in biblical reminiscences that gave meaning to the sacred landscape, they were charged with religious symbolism, or functioned as indicators of a mysterious, unknown world because of their strangeness or monstrosity. Yet even in such alternative descriptions, the fundamentally anthropocentric perspective of medieval authors persisted. Biblical animals figured in the stories in which the leading roles were played by God and by his chosen ones, while the orally transmitted exemplary stories about animals showed the influence of God in a Muslim environment. Only when travellers described animals they had never seen before did their utilitarian gaze fade into the background, and were such creatures described for the sake of their own particularity.

Familiarising the Unknown

> *Hemlieden waren ooc ghetoocht twee geraffen, dat alte schoone ende vremde dieren zijn, vooren hooghe van halse ende van beenen wel twee mans lingden, maer achter en zijn nauwe also hooghe als een cleen paerdekin, hebbende een cleen ront steertkin, thooft ende de voeten ghenouch ghelijc den herten, met twee cleenen hoorenkins omtrent een vierendeel lanc, maer en zijn niet ghetact. Dese dieren zijn wat ruachtich ende van coluere ghelijckende den leeuwen, maer hebben groote ronde plecken als een ghepomeleert paert.* — To them were also shown two giraffes, which are very beautiful and strange animals. In the front they are tall of neck and legs, about twice the length of a man, but their hind parts are hardly as tall as a small horse, with a small, round tail. The head and the feet resemble those of deer, with two small horns about a quarter ell long, but without branches. These animals are somewhat rough and have a colour similar to that of lions, but with large, round spots like a piebald horse.[58]

Joos van Ghistele was deeply fascinated by two giraffes that were shown to him at the market in

[58] Zeebout, *Tvoyage*, 256.

Aden. These animals were not only strange to him, but also to the readership that Zeebout, the editor of Joos's travel notes, had in mind. To describe the giraffes, Joos's travel story employs a combination of comparisons to articulate their size, body parts, and colour. This passage also reflects a different perspective on animals than what we have often observed so far: here, wonder and curiosity take precedence over utilitarian considerations.

In this third part of our analysis, we delve into the strategies employed by authors of travel accounts to describe unfamiliar animals, and how these descriptions, inspired by wonder, contributed to guiding the reader into a world that was even less familiar to them than to the traveller. However, when can we effectively speak of animals that were perceived as exotic? Thierry Buquet rightly points out that the term "exotic" was rarely used before the sixteenth century, and that sensitivity to what is understood by the modern notion of "exoticism" cannot be readily projected back on the medieval period. Latin texts from this era, as Buquet suggests, used many other terms to qualify the strangeness of certain animals.[59] This finding certainly applies to the travel narratives we are studying here, whether in Latin, French, or Dutch. We already came across the *prius invisa* gazelle and ostrich and the *vremde* giraffe. Yet many descriptions of unknown animals do not contain such explicit emphasis of their alterity. The key indicator that travellers considered them strange and unfamiliar appears to be their need to describe these animals' physical characteristics, since simply naming them appeared to be insufficient. From such often detailed descriptions, we can also derive various degrees of otherness in comparison to other more familiar animals, which, at the same time, remain the primary reference points.

The most concise descriptions of foreign animals, which also exhibit less unfamiliarity, pertain to unknown breeds or varieties of well-known animal species. Angora goats, fat-tailed sheep, or mountain hares are new to the travellers, yet their similarity to their European counterparts results in straightforward depictions.[60] The travel writers first introduce the already familiar (species) name of the newly discovered animals and then proceed to elaborate on how they differ from their known relatives. This method is exemplified, for example, when Bertrandon de la Broquière expresses his admiration for the sighthounds of Turkish soldiers:

> *Et pareillement ai je veu de leurs levriers couvers, desquelx ilz ont de tres beaulx et bons, fors qu'ilz ont longues oreilles pendans et grandes queues feuillies et la portent bel.* — I have also seen their dogs covered in the same way, of which they have very beautiful and good ones, except that they

[59] Buquet, "*Animalia extranea et stupenda*," 27.
[60] Bertrandon de la Broquière, *Le voyage d'Outremer*, 85–86; Zeebout, *Tvoyage*, 279, 317, 342; Ghillebert de Lannoy, *Œuvres*, 35.

have long hanging ears and large leafy tails, which they carry gracefully.[61]

Bertrandon clearly describes salukis, a dog breed that was popular at Middle Eastern courts.[62] By first mentioning the name of the animal, the author creates an image of a sighthound in the reader's mind; through his description of the distinctive ears and tail, that image transforms into a saluki. In observations like these, the authors do not use comparisons: the foreign animals are dogs, goats, sheep etc. distinguished by particular physical features.

However, the stranger the animals that travellers encountered along their journey, the more they had to base their descriptions on actual comparisons. This was the case with creatures that were not true variants of familiar animal species but still had recognisable physical features of animals that were known in medieval Western Europe. To create a comprehensive description, authors often had to combine characteristics from different known animals. This resulted in what has been referred to as *animaux composites*[63] or a "semantic and zoological puzzle."[64] The unfamiliar animal is, in a way, broken down into body parts that bear resemblances to various other animals. In Joos van Ghistele's travel account, for example, the height of the giraffe's rear end is not greater than that of a horse, while its head resembles that of a deer, and its colour is like that of a lion. The travel writer thus searches for suitable, recognisable comparisons to convey his observations realistically and reliably. To describe the black francolins he sees in Cyprus, that same Joos van Ghistele, in the words of Zeebout, combines features of three familiar birds, allowing him to provide a comprehensible representation of the size, plumage, colour, and head of these birds, which today belong to the *phasianidae* family (Fig. 2):

> *[…] ooc zijnder francolinen, dat alte schoone voghelen zijn, vander groodtten der pertricen, met roode becken ende voeten, de plumen up den rugghe ende inden steert ghelijc der pertricen, de borst zwart met witten spotten, de vederen vanden vlueghels ghelijc den sneppen, thooft ende den hals ghelijc den faisant met eenen rooden rijnghe anden hals, […]* — […] also, there are francolins, which are very beautiful birds, as large as partridges, with red beaks and feet, the plumes on their back and in the tail resembling those of partridges, the breast black with white spots, the feathers of the wings similar to snipes, the head and the neck like pheasants with a red ring at the neck […][65]

Although the francolin is new to Joos, this bird does not differ all that much from species he is familiar with, and he manages to keep his description quite simple and the number of comparisons

[61] Bertrandon de la Broquière, *Le voyage d'Outremer*, 218–19.
[62] Thomas T. Allsen, *The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 55–56.
[63] Guérin-Dalle Mese, *Egypte: la mémoire et le rêve*, 366–70.
[64] Buquet, "*Animalia extranea et stupenda*," 31–32.
[65] Zeebout, *Tvoyage*, 179.

limited.

However, when an animal looks so strange that there is no easy equivalent to be found in Europe, more creativity is required in combining features from the most diverse animals. A prime example are the crocodiles on the banks of the Nile, once again observed by Joos van Ghistele:

> *Daer zijn andere manieren van dieren diemen daer dicwilt vanct, die ghenaemt zijn coccodrullen — de heydenen namense themissa — dat al te wonderlicke dieren zijn, ende schijnen recht serpenten, ghenouch ghelijckende der lacerten, maer zijn wel zo groot dat zij in swelghen zouden een kint van vijf oft zes jaren, zoot daer dicwilt wel ghebuert, hebbende thooft ghenouch draecwijs, met wijden kinnebackenen, tfautsoen van grooten snoucken, met cleenen, blauwen hoogskins, de tanden steercker ende langher dan wulven, met corten, dicken beenen met vele keerven ende ploeyen serpentwijs, ende met grooten, langhen naghelen als beeren, maer hebben de voeten ghesloten zo de eentvoghelen doen, en hebben den steert lanc alavenant naer haerlieder grootte, tfautsoen vander lacerten, ende zijn in haerlieder steert zeer steerc, zo dat zij daer mede eenen man wel zijn been in sticken smijten zouden, ende zijn ghepreckelt boven lancx den steerte toot half den live ghelijc de baersen zijn hier int land; van desen vintmer daer zo groote menichte, datmer dicwilt ziet te samen up de boorden vanden heylanden die inde riviere zijn, achtien, twintich te samen, ende es hendelic een afgrijselic dier om sien.* — There are other kinds of animals that are often caught there, called crocodiles — the heathens call them themissa [*timsâh*] — which are all too wonderful creatures, resembling true serpents, very much like lizards, but they are so large that they could easily swallow a child of five or six years, as it often happens there. They have heads almost like dragons, with wide jaws, somewhat like large pikes, with small, blue eyes, teeth stronger and longer than wolves, short, thick legs with many carves and folds serpent-like, and large, long nails like bears. But their feet are closed like those of ducks, and they have a tail quite long in proportion to their size, similar to that of a lizard, and their tails are very strong, so that they could easily break a man's leg with it, and they are prickled on their tail and half of their body, like perches here in the country. There are so many of them there that one often sees together on the banks of the islands in the river, eighteen, twenty at a time, and it is truly a horrible animal to look at.[66]

The intricacy of this description is remarkable: it requires the use of features of eight different animals (including a dragon) to construct an image of the unusual and dangerous crocodile.

The names of animals encountered in travelogues may not always have corresponded to our contemporary zoological nomenclature. Authors might have, whether intentionally or by mistake, used a familiar name to designate a different animal. Their composite comparative descriptions may leave us uncertain about whether they really had in mind the same animal that we understand today

[66] Zeebout, *Tvoyage*, 193–94.

by that name.[67] Sometimes, travellers came across animals for which they had no name at all, neither from local informants nor from learned knowledge. As a result, some descriptions do not contain any animal name. In medieval Europe, animal names were not only labels for a species but also a crucial aspect of the belief in the divinely ordained position of man in relation to animals. In the Judeo-Christian creation story, animals appeared twice: first when God created them (Gen. 1:24), and then when Adam bestowed names upon them (Gen. 2:19-20). This name represented all knowledge and values associated with the animal and was essential for making the animal world controllable.[68]

While most descriptions of exotic animals start with their specific names, descriptions of nameless animals often begin with a broad category (fish, animal, beast, bird), frequently preceded by expressions like "*eene maniere van*" ("a kind of..."). This is evident in descriptions of certain animals seen by Joos van Ghistele in the Nile: "*eene maniere van dieren die int water woonen, tfautsoen hebbende van cleenen paerdekins*" ("a kind of animals living in the water, having the appearance of small horses").[69] He might have seen young hippos, but the provided information remains insufficient. A similar case is found in John Adornes' description of standing birds at Lake Tunis:

> *In eo reperitur quedam multitudo avium, quemadmodum ciconiarum; non tamen sunt, sed parum ab illis differunt. Vidimus enim ex illis per mille simul in aquis natantes, vel circa littora, ubi non esset magna profunditas, stantes*. — In that place, there is a certain multitude of birds, similar to storks; however, that is not what they are, but they differ slightly from them. For we saw a thousand of them swimming together in the water, or standing on the shores where there was not much depth.[70]

Adornes probably saw flamingos, birds that still live at the lake today.[71] While giraffes and elephants were easily recognised based on prior knowledge from the learned tradition or through human intermediaries, some wild animals remained shrouded in mystery. Not only were they unknown before the journey, even the information acquired during the travels remained insufficient to give them a name.

However, not all previously unknown animals remained equally enigmatic, even if they

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[67] Thierry Buquet, "Le guépard médiéval, ou comment reconnaître un animal sans nom," *Reinardus* 23 (2011): 12–47; Richard Trachsler, "What's in a Noun? A Short Caveat Regarding the Difficulties of Identifying Medieval Animals in Texts," in *Medieval Animals on the Move*, eds. László Bartosiewicz and Alice M. Choyke (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 151–66.
[68] Delort, *Les animaux ont une histoire*, 133; Delort, "Les animaux en Occident," 23.
[69] Zeebout, *Tvoyage*, 193.
[70] Adorno, *Itinéraire d'Anselme Adorno*, 107.
[71] Michael Hutchins et al., eds., *Grzimek's Animal Life Encyclopedia*, Vol. 8, *Birds I* (Farmington Hills, MI: Gale Group, 2002), 304–8.

were unnamed. Sometimes, their descriptions were so accurate that it is not difficult to identify them today. This is the case, for example, when Joos van Ghistele observes two species of animals in Tabriz, which are kept for their olfactory secretions: civets and musk shrews. He describes the civets as follows:

> *Item men siet daer ooc eeneghe manieren van beestkins oft catten waren, schijn hebbende van hare ghelijc den vos, die een maniere van substancien in hare lendenen draghen zeer wel rieckende, jubette ghenaemt, ende alsmen datte hebben wilt, dan vanctmen dese beestkins ende steect hemlieden int fundament zeker instrumenten oft lepelen waren, ende zo trectmen de substancie uute, dat daer zeere diere es, want men ne vindt daer niet vele van dien beestkins.* — Also, there one can see some kinds of small animals being like cats, having the appearance of a fox, which carry a certain substance in their loins, very fragrant, called *jubette*, and when one wants to obtain it, they seize these little animals and insert certain instruments as if it were spoons into their lower part, and thus extract the substance from it, which is very precious over there, for there are not many of these little animals to be found there.[72]

Although Joos does not give a name here, this animal is clearly a civet: the Middle Dutch text calls its fragrant secretion *jubette*, in which we can recognise the word "civet," and from which the animal actually derives its name. The fragment reflects a double sense of wonder about the creature: on the one hand about its appearance, which resembles a hybrid of a cat and a fox, and on the other hand about the remarkable method of collecting civet using spoon-like tools.[73] Both characteristics are thus made understandable through comparisons.

The confrontation with strangeness and otherness is a central feature of travel experiences. Historical travel literature demonstrates how travellers ascribed meaning to unfamiliar environments. It allows us to examine which encounters they found intriguing and what they completely disregarded, how they fuelled their curiosity and fascination for everything new, and which mental strategies they employed in the process.[74] As we have just observed, this was particularly the case when describing animals that were unknown to themselves or their readers, requiring them to cultivate a special creativity. Simply providing a species name was insufficient because their readers lacked a mental image to associate with it, as in the case of horses, sheep, deer, or chickens. Beyond a certain degree of unfamiliarity, observed animals were mentally dissected

[72] Zeebout, *Tvoyage*, 341.
[73] On the related genet, which became better known from the fifteenth century in late medieval Western Europe, in iconography, heraldry, and because of its fur, see Virginie Mézan-Muxart, "Geinette et janette: devises de Jeanne de France au XVe siècle", *Reinardus* 22 (2010): 104–25; Virginie Muxart, "Essai sur la valeur symbolique de la genette dans la littérature et l'art médiéval occidental", in *L'animal symbole*, eds. Marianne Besseyre, Pierre-Yves Le Pogam, and Florian Meunier (Paris: Éditions du Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques, 2019), 355–69.
[74] Tim Youngs, *The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 10.

into different body parts that found equivalents in those of known animals. These comparisons were somewhat systematic: first, the species that most resembled the new animal was named, and then the limbs and other body parts were individually compared to those of other animals. The travellers' subjective experiences of strangeness were reflected in the length and complexity of their descriptions: the stranger the animal, the more comparisons were required.

To transform their observations into descriptive accounts, authors of travel narratives did not rely solely on their visual experiences and imaginative powers. They, of course, also sought information from local interlocutors, guides, experienced travel companions, etc. and, once again, from circulating stories and scholarly knowledge from the ancient tradition, bestiaries, and older travel literature. Hence "unseen" did not necessarily mean completely "unknown" to them. The accuracy of the specific comparisons that Joos van Ghistele develops to describe a crocodile, for example, is not solely the result of personal, keen observation. Ambrosius Zeebout, the actual author of his travel narrative, clearly drew upon existing travel accounts of John Poloner,[75] who had journeyed to the Levant in 1421-1422, and Anselm Adornes[76] to supplement the firsthand information he had received from Joos.

In their captivating accounts of exotic animals, the authors of travel narratives also echoed centuries-old tales and beliefs. We can think of convictions such as the idea that ostriches could digest iron or that elephants were afraid of mice that crawled up their trunks.[77] Regarding the latter superstition, Zeebout refers briefly to Saint Ambrosius' *Hexameron* and, as is often the case in his text, to Pliny's *Naturalis historia*, although neither author explicitly referred to that folk explanation.[78] However, Zeebout dismisses at the same time the popular belief that elephants cannot bend their knees as untrue.[79] In John Adornes' description of a cockatrice — a mythical beast with the body of a two-legged dragon, the wings of a bat and the head of a rooster — we encounter yet another curious anecdote, concerning the symbiosis between this monster and the plover bird:

> *Ideo natura, omnium rerum magistra, aves quasdam parvas habentes spinam acutam in capitibus, qui os cocatricum ingrediuntur, cibos consumptos superfluos edentes, ordinavit. Hiis avibus per naturam subtilis spina in capitibus ordinata est, ne a cocatricibus devorentur quia, timentes ledi a*

[75] Johannes Poloner, "Descriptio terrae sanctae," ed. Titus Tobler, in *Descriptiones Terrae Sanctae ex saeculo VIII. IX. XII. et XV. S. Willibaldus* (Leipzig, J.C. Hinrichs, 1874), 225–81, here 278. See Zeebout, *Tvoyage*, 195 n. 81.
[76] Adorno, *Itinéraire d'Anselme Adorno*, 180
[77] Zeebout, *Tvoyage*, 225, 226 n. 224, 256, 257 n. 6; Adorno, *Itinéraire d'Anselme Adorno*, 144. See also Buquet, "*Animalia extranea et stupenda*," 29–30; Cora E. Lutz, "Some Medieval Impressions of the Ostrich," *The Yale University Library Gazette* 54, 1 (1979): 18–25, here 22–23.
[78] See Ambrosius Mediolanensis, *Hexaemeron*, VI-6, *Patrologia Latina*, 14 (Paris: J.P. Migne, 1882), 123–274, here 255; C. Plinius secundus, *Naturalis historia Libri XXXVII. Liber VIII. Naturkunde. Lateinisch-deutsch. Buch VIII. Zoologie. Landtiere*, VIII-10-29, ed. Roderich König (Düsseldorf: Artemis & Winkler, 2007), 34.
[79] Zeebout, *Tvoyage*, 256.

> *spina, ora aperta tenent quoad evolaverint. Mirus est ordo nature.* — Therefore, nature, the mistress of all things, has ordained certain small birds with a sharp spine on their heads to enter the mouths of cockatrices and consume excessive food. To these birds nature has given a delicate spine, naturally placed on their heads, so that they are not devoured by the cockatrices. Since fearing harm from the spine, they keep their mouths open until they have flown away. The order of nature is wondrous.[80]

This story, once again, is not an original observation by Adornes but is part of a long literary tradition. Its earliest version can be traced back to the fifth century BCE, when Herodotus described how plovers helped crocodiles by eating the leeches from their mouths.[81] The anecdote can also be found in Pliny's works.[82] From the twelfth century onwards, however, there was a shift in the story, when the crocodile was replaced by the newly invented cockatrice.[83] But Adornes likely meant the crocodile, as evidenced by his actual description and by adding that the Moors called this animal "*themesa*", which is indeed Arabic, تِمْساح, for crocodile. As we saw earlier, Zeebout too adopted this reference to Arabic, definitely as a borrowing from Adornes' description. Modern biology has since completely debunked the tale of the crocodile and the plover: Egyptian plovers (*Pluvianus aegyptius*) live near crocodiles because the reptiles' leftovers — carcasses and the insects they attract — constitute an easy source of food for the birds, but there are no observations of plovers going in and out of a crocodile's mouth.[84]

Of course, there were also animals of which the characterisations could not build upon existing knowledge, especially those for which the authors did not even know the names. In the descriptions dedicated to these creatures, representing the real unknown, we come closest to the original thoughts of the authors within travel stories. They described what they saw without knowing what they were seeing. Some of these observations never led to relatively reliable identifications; these creatures therefore remained shrouded in mystery.

However, what stands out for almost all less-known or unknown animals is that their descriptions primarily focus on their exceptional existence as living creatures rather than on their qualities of useful animals or carriers of religious significance. Such strange animals fall outside the utilitarian, anthropocentric spectrum: their strange, mysterious physiologies are reason enough for special attention. Even though we can also find anthropocentric beliefs in the treatment of some exotic animals — giraffes were captured and traded, francolins were hunted and eaten, etc. — it is

[80] Adorno, *Itinéraire d'Anselme Adorno*, 180–83.
[81] Herodotus, II-69, ed. and transl. A.D. Godley London, The Loeb Classical Library (London: W. Heinemann: 1920–1925), vol. 1, p. 357
[82] Plinius, *Naturalis historia Libri XXXVII. Liber VIII*, VIII,37,90, 72
[83] See Laurence A. Breiner, "The Career of the Cockatrice," *Isis* 70 (1979): 30–47.
[84] Thomas R. Howell, *Breeding Biology of the Egyptian Plover, Pluvianus Aegyptius* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 3–5; R. I. G. Attwell, "Possible Bird-Crocodile Commensalism in Zambia," *Ostrich, Journal of African Ornithology* 37, 2 (1966): 54–55.

clear that it was primarily because of their otherness that they elicited fascination and the need for description.

Conclusions

In this article, we analysed the representation of animals by four fifteenth-century travellers, journeying from the Low Countries to the Holy Land. Our objective was to gain more insight into the significance of animals to medieval people and to better understand what the attitude towards animals can tell us about these people themselves. It is important to note that the travel accounts of Guillebert de Lannoy, Bertrandon de la Broquière, Anselm Adornes, and Joos van Ghistele primarily provide a window into the unique and personal experiences of these individuals. Each of them was motivated by distinct reasons for embarking on their respective journeys, they followed diverse routes, were accompanied by different fellow travellers, and had specific motivations for documenting their travel experiences. Furthermore, their perceptions were influenced by their individual cultural backgrounds, self-perceptions, ideas, and knowledge, and, in the case of Anselm and Joos, also by those of the authors who recorded their adventures, namely John Adornes and Ambrosius Zeebout. Despite the notable disparities in these travel accounts, our research centred on several common features regarding the attitudes toward animals within the context of late medieval travel experiences. We explored three distinct themes: first, the anthropocentric view of familiar animals as observed by these travellers; second, the impact of prior knowledge and circulating stories on their interest in animals during their journeys; and third, the travellers' curiosity and fascination with exotic animals, leading to the creation of vivid and imaginative descriptions. Our analysis concludes with the following overarching findings.

A first and unsurprising observation is that all four authors were deeply ingrained with the typical medieval anthropocentrism. This led them to generally develop a strong utilitarian perspective in their descriptions of animals. Stemming from the Judeo-Christian belief that animals were subordinate to humans, they often assessed animals primarily based on their utility to humans: as a source of food, as loyal companions, as a means of transportation, as creatures to be hunted etc. They could appear in exemplary stories and religious lessons and serve as symbols of evil or cruelty. Nonetheless, journeys to unknown regions created situations in which utilitarian anthropocentrism gave way to pure curiosity and fascination when travellers encountered creatures they had never seen before. Animals such as crocodiles, giraffes, or flamingos were primarily admired for their physical presence, rather than for their utility or lack thereof. They challenged the authors of travel narratives to meticulous observations and descriptions, enabling them to give their best to make the wonders of the unknown known to those who were not present themselves.

Secondly, and in line with this last remark, we have been able to determine how writing a travelogue is also an exercise in familiarising the reader at home with foreignness and otherness.[85] Both simple mentions and more elaborate descriptions of animals serve this purpose: known animals appeal to the recognition of the familiar in a foreign environment, while unknown animals are described through comparisons with familiar ones. This approach also contributed to emphasising the reliability and expertise of the authors of travel stories. These qualities were important for their credibility, regardless of the specific motivations behind their accounts.

Finally, we can assert that our corpus undeniably testifies to a time and society in which animals were omnipresent, both in everyday life and in thought. Esther Cohen characterises medieval animals as "the ubiquitous Other".[86] That is precisely what we learn from travel narratives. Journeying through new regions, travellers found themselves not only captivated by different cultures, customs, cities, monuments, and flora, but particularly by animals. More than bestiaries, fables, or treatises, travel narratives show us how attitudes towards animals — both familiar and exotic ones — were developed from lived experiences. They reveal how personal observations were mixed with third-party information, circulating stories, and scholarly knowledge. Just as Jonathan Saga recently argued, the omnipresence of animals in our sources is by no means indicative of their banality, nor does it imply a lack of historicity.[87] Further research, based on accounts from other periods and contexts, should make it possible to obtain a more vivid understanding of this historicity, and shed light on how and why attitudes towards animals could also be subject to change.

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[85] Antonello Gerbi, *Nature in the New World: From Christopher Columbus to Gonzalo Fernandez de Oviedo*, trans. Jeremy Moyle (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 1985), 6.
[86] Cohen, "Animals in Medieval Perceptions," 59, 76.
[87] Jonathan Saha, *Colonizing Animals. Interspecies Empire in Myanmar* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 7.

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Captions

Figure 1: Bertrandon de la Broquière, upon returning from his mission in the East, presents a translation of the Quran to Philip the Good. Miniature by Jean Le Tavernier in Bertrandon de la Broquière, *Voyage en la terre d'Outremer* (after 1455), Paris, BnF Mss. fr. 9087, fol. 152v. Courtesy Bibliothèque nationale de France.

Figure 2: Clockwise: black francolin, common pheasant, common snipe and grey partridge. Photo credits: Elşad İbrahimov (*Francolinus francolinus*), Charles J. Sharp (*Phasianus colchicus*), Martin Mecnarowski (*Gallinago gallinago*), K. Pitk (*Perdix perdix*). All photos published on Wikimedia Commons and licensed under the CC BY-SA 3.0 Deed and the CC BY-SA 4.0 Deed licenses.