

An Alphabet of Queries (4)

How can one tell a Basilisk from a Cockatrice if they are not the same? They both have a cock's head, the wings of either may be feathered or scaly and spiny like a dragon's, and the body can be feathered or scaly with a tail either of a serpent (smoothly pointed) or of a dragon (spiked and barbed). These variations may apply to either type. It was the habit of some mediaeval artists to put a second little head at the end of the tail of serpents and dragons (and indeed of demons and devils, with a face on their backsides—surely a symbol of double-dealing and wickedness) and some authors maintain that this is the distinguishing feature of the Basilisk, as seen here in the arms of Edward Ockwell. Margaret Young, writing on "The Baleful Cockatrice" in *The Heraldry Gazette* (Dec. 1995), states that this is the case, and it may indeed be a convention accepted by some modern heralds, but artists have seldom been consistent, and two examples from naval ships' badges leave us where we started.



Mr. Ernest Arthur Ockwell of Calgary, Canada, not only has a basilisk on his shield but for a Crest as well.

HMS BASILISK (a destroyer of 1930 that was lost off Dunkirk in 1940, the tenth of the name, which was first used in 1695, but the first with this badge) and HMS COCKATRICE (a minesweeper of 1942 broken up in 1963, the eighth of this name which dates from 1781) have almost identical monsters on their



badges, the former on a red field (drawn by Charles ffoulkes) and the latter with a deep blue background (submitted by Sir Arthur Cochrane, Clarenceux King of Arms, but drawn by one of the artists working at the College of Arms). It seems that the only sure way to tell them apart is to get close enough to read the label.



Patterned in 2000 by Ralph Brocklebank

Issued St David's Day 2002 from Orland, Clent, Stourbridge, Worcs DY9 9QS

Dragonlore

The Journal of The College of Dracology

Number 20 St Christopher's Day 2000



Nicobar Islands: 'Men and women of that isle have heads like dogs, and they are called Cynocephales.'



Indo-China: 'There grows a kind of fruit as big as gourds, and when it is ripe men open it and find inside an animal . . . like a little lamb.'



Sri Lanka: 'There are also wild geese with two heads . . .'



India: ' . . . in the wilderness are many wild men with horns on their heads; they dwell in woods and speak not.'

Woodcuts from the 1481 edition of *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*

The College of Dracology for the Study of Fabulous Beasts

The Travels of Sir John Mandeville, first published around 1356, was one of the most popular books in the Middle Ages but later came to be dismissed as a mixture of superstition and fantasy, in such a surge of scepticism that even genuine reports of flying fish and men living in trees were totally discounted as mere “travellers’ tales”. Some of the strange creatures described by Sir John from the mysterious East (*see our cover pictures*) can now be explained in the light of our more recent knowledge—Cynocephales could well have been dog-faced baboons, the little lamb bush could have been a cotton plant, the geese with two heads were probably temple-carvings of the Garuda Barunda, and even the Indian horned men might have been folk with exotic head-dresses.

Recently the travel writer and historian Giles Milton has written a fascinating account of his researches, *The Riddle and the Knight: In Search of Sir John Mandeville* (London 1996), following up as many clues as possible; for instance, he looks into his family heraldry with a visit to the College of Arms where he meets “a gentleman who prefers to be known as Bluemantle Pursuivant” (although the list of acknowledgements includes one Robert Noel whom we know also as a practising dracologist). Milton visited the places Sir John described—Constantinople, Cyprus, Syria, Jerusalem and St Catherine’s Monastery in the Sinai desert—looking for evidence, and he concludes that Sir John did indeed visit all these places in the Near and Middle East, but suspects that his descriptions of India, China, Borneo and beyond were based on hearsay, including all the strange monsters that so intrigued the mediaeval people before the great voyages of exploration began. Indeed, Milton maintains that Mandeville’s real significance lies in the inspiration he provided for these early explorers, especially in his convincing argument that the world was round; Columbus took a copy of the *Travels* with him on his journeys.

Unfortunately, Sir John seems to have failed in his principal endeavour which was to preach tolerance of others. So many of the weird peoples he details with such affection are said to live peacefully and happily and in spite of their oddness could be taken as examples of a loving and forgiving way of life, in contrast to the quarrelsome and warlike Europeans, but he was accused of being an anti-papist and his views were discredited. Today it is the oddities in his book which appeal, and he is taken as the archetype of the traveller who tells tall tales. While noting and enjoying his monsters, let us hope that Milton’s book will help to restore Mandeville’s reputation as a progressive thinker and writer, as well as being an intrepid explorer and a true Christian.

St Christopher, the Patron Saint of Travellers, is celebrated every 25th July.

Fabulous Beasts in a Twelfth Century Bestiary

The mediaeval bestiaries were ultimately derived from the works of early Greek authors such as Aristotle who were trying to build a natural science based on observation. Their writings were collected during the 2nd to 5th centuries in the city of Alexandria, then the greatest centre of learning in the world, and in the 6th century the compilation was translated into Latin and given the title *Physiologus*, a name later supposed to be that of the author. By this time, the idea of observing nature as a guide to truth had been completely overtaken by the need to refer to a written authority, and writers would faithfully copy nonsense from an earlier respected work while the actual state of affairs would parade unnoticed outside the window. At the same time the whole of creation, the work of God, was seen as carrying a message for mankind and, since scholars were all clerics, successive authors such as Isidore of Seville in the 6th century and Rabanus in the 8th, while copying from earlier authorities, each added their own gloss to the matter, giving biblical references and drawing morals. All creatures were seen as an embodiment of good or of evil, sometimes both, according to circumstances, and the carefully handwritten copies would be illustrated with little painted pictures, again often faithfully copied from older exemplars. Some of these manuscripts produced between 1220 and 1250 have been translated and published in a splendid volume: **BESTIARY: Being an English version of the Bodleian Library, Oxford M. S. Bodley 764 with all the original miniatures reproduced in Facsimile**. Translated and introduced by Richard Barber (The Folio Society, London 1992). Over 130 beasts are named and described and for most their meaning is explained. Some 30 are fabulous, as we think today, but all are treated as equally real, even though some of the tales told about genuine animals seem quite preposterous. So, along with the Antelope sawing down the trees with its serrated horns, and the Tiger, when chasing her stolen cub, being deceived by seeing her reflection in a glass, we find the Unicorn leaping like a young goat into the lap of a virgin and the Gryphon hating horses and attacking them at every opportunity. We see the Panther emitting beguiling scents, the Amphisbaena with two heads, “one in the right place, the other on its tail”, the Bonnacon, the Satyrs, the Manticore, Centaurs, Sirens, Basilisk, Salamander and other old favourites as well as a few not previously encountered such as the **Crocote** (hybrid offspring of Hyena and Lion), the **Leucrota** (a strange creature from India “swifter than all other wild beasts”), the **Parander** (an Ethiopian monstrosity, perhaps just one of Africa’s unusual fauna) and the **Aspidochelon** (the monster that temporarily swallowed Jonah, more of a giant turtle than a whale). Nearly all the serpents are shown with dragon-shaped heads and often with little wings and legs, so that the Dragon is described as “larger than all the rest of the serpents” but is not otherwise distinguished from them. This beautiful book leaves us admiring mediaeval piety but despairing at their gullibility.