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# PEREGRINATIONS

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## Heavenward Gaze, Earthly Ambitions: The Political Commentary of the Vercelli Map's Ostrich

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Animals decorate the borders of manuscripts. Rabbits joust, eels squirm, and birds gaze at the heavens, to note but a few of the quirky border decorations adorning medieval manuscripts. Certain genres of text move these sly creatures from the edge of the page to the very center, both *mise-en-page* and topically.<sup>1</sup> Bestiaries center the animal prominently creating a visual-verbal amalgamation that both describes the animal's physical appearance and provides a Christian moralizing interpretation of the beast. Medieval maps, however, float between these two descriptors by including popular literary tropes (animal and otherwise) in the heart of the document; they invite the reader to consider them seriously. The startling image of the king of France riding an ostrich on top of a mountain in North Africa, found on the Vercelli *Mappa Mundi*, should be considered in this light. These animals, including this particular ostrich,

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<sup>1</sup> Thank you to Dr. Sarah Blick for her kind and thorough editing of this article. Her thoughtfulness helped bring my ideas forward and shape my arguments much more clearly. Any errors are, quite obviously, my own.

participate in the rich network of connections between geography, literature, history and religion that define medieval *Mappae Mundi*. (Fig. 1)



**Figure 1** Vercelli Mappa Mundi, c. 1191-1218. Vercelli, Archives, Biblioteca Capitolare.  
Photo: after MSI.

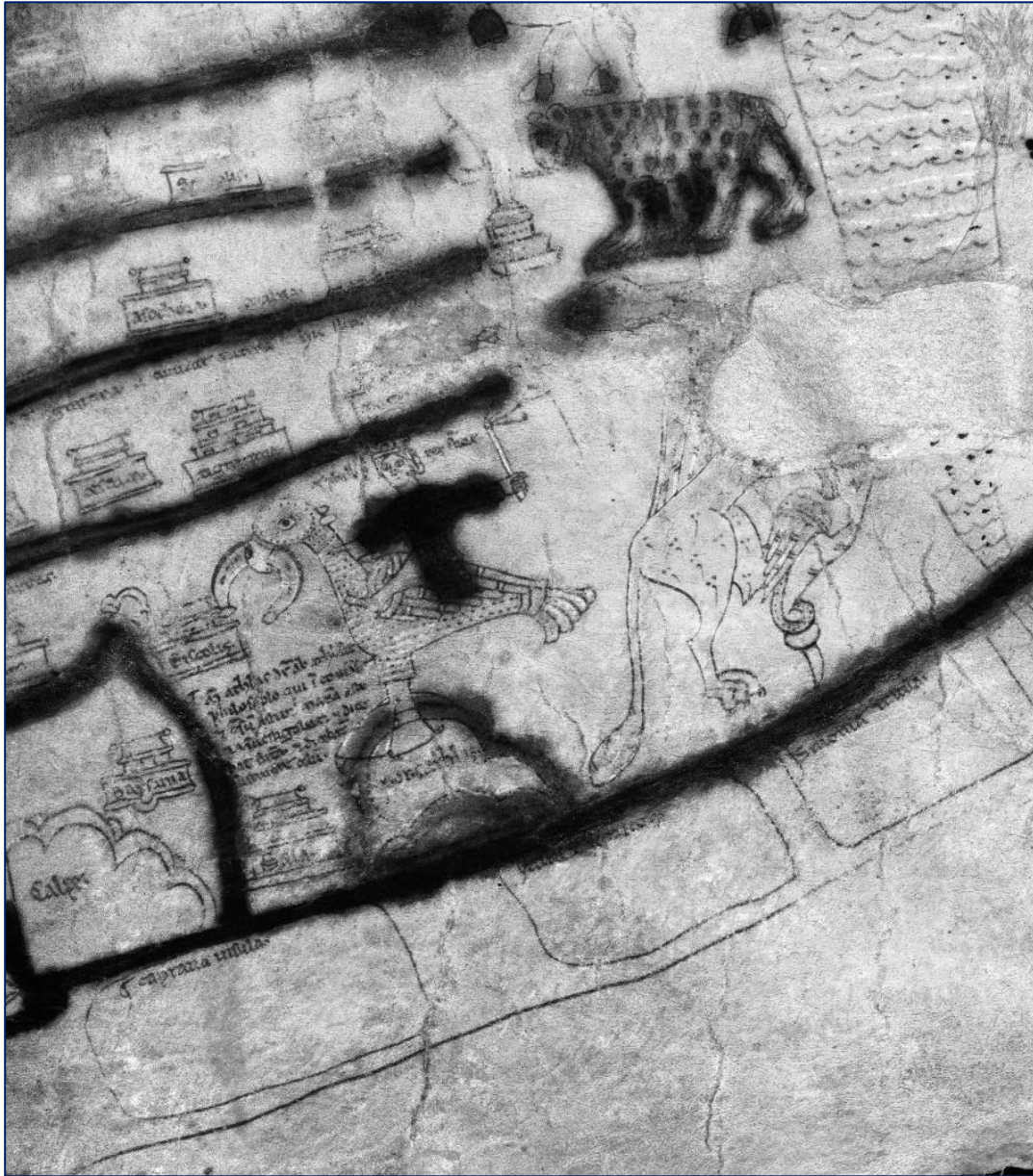
The same complex medieval worldview shown on these cartographic documents which obfuscate modern notions of geography has the richest potential for interpretation and animals provide an under-explored point of entry into these documents. This article takes up the idea that animals on medieval maps do more than haphazardly fill-in blank spaces on the map in an effort to dispel the last, lingering remnants of the notion that medieval cartographers were just confused.<sup>2</sup> I argue, in line with trends in the growing field of animal studies, that the animals on the map should be interpreted as vitally important characters defining the pictorial narrative of these documents.

As a case study, I examine one particular ostrich on the Vercelli Map and the positionality of Philip *Rex Francie* who rides an ostrich on top of a mountain in North Africa. The choice of an ostrich as King Philip III's mount on the Vercelli *Mappa Mundi* offers a unique intersection of religiosity and political symbolism.<sup>3</sup> (Fig. 2) The placement of a figure, clearly labeled as a French leader appearing in North Africa,

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<sup>2</sup> Wilma George eloquently describes this neglect “The geographer attributes this to the desire for decoration or to fill in the otherwise blank space of unknown continents and usually dismisses ‘those mythical monsters’ without further comment.” *Animals and Maps* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1969), 21.

<sup>3</sup> The identity of the Phillip mentioned on the map is a matter of some controversy. As stated in footnote 67 below, I follow the voice of many notable Italian scholars who believe this Phillip to be Phillip III not Phillip II. The later king was also the only French king by that name to visit North Africa during the relevant century. His ascension to power through the death of his father in that location marks its significance for his reign. Dr. Heather Wacha has argued in a recent conference paper for a more nuanced date for the map of between 1270, the accession of Philip III and 1285-1300, the surrender of the crusader fortresses of Gibelet and Margat.



**Figure 2** Detail of Philip III on an Ostrich, Vercelli Mappa Mundi, c. 1191-1218. Vercelli, Archives, Biblioteca Capitolare. Photo: after MSI.

demonstrates the map's awareness of larger geopolitics and a potentially aspirational political hegemony. The pedagogical nature of the Vercelli Map encouraged instructors to navigate the multifaceted interpretations of political and religious allegories

embedded in animals such as the ostrich and to adapt their lessons to the symbolism's inherent ambiguity. Numerous medieval sources alongside the Vercelli Map, make it clear that the portrayal of the ostrich and the animal's multifaceted medieval symbolism also delivers a subtle critique of potential hypocrisy and political warning regarding Philip III's kingship.

Our understanding of the ways in which history, literature, and art interact with the geographical underpinnings of medieval maps has undergone a revolution in the last few decades. Wilma George's *Animals and Maps* remains a valuable, detailed analysis, but the strong recent uptick in cartographic and animal studies have contributed significantly to our understanding of the topic.<sup>4</sup> George focuses primarily on the accuracy of animal depictions, arguing that these are more scientifically correct than previously understood. Susan Crane, too, argues persuasively that the integrated, close-quartered living experience of medieval people and animals shaped their understanding of the animal so strongly that literary and imaginative creatures should not be dismissed as any less important than human characters.<sup>5</sup> Maps are open to

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<sup>4</sup> George, *Animals and Maps*; Asa Simon Mittman, *Maps and Monsters in Medieval England* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Naomi Reed Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought: The Hereford Paradigm* (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Susan Crane, *Animal Encounters: Contacts and Concepts in Medieval Britain* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012).

interpretation and are not simply inaccurate if they do not comply to a modern “scientific” display.<sup>6</sup>

Yet the animals on medieval maps still represent places and symbolize locations. The classical textual framework which supports most medieval maps, provides a precedent for associating animals with place, acting as a stand-in for that place or event or as a mnemonic device. This is how medieval *mappae mundi* function, as visual encyclopedias, collecting and organizing small images and icons to represent larger stories, narratives, places, and events.

Where these animals were placed made a difference to how they were perceived. For example, on the Hereford *mappa mundi*, the selected animals, although generally situated in their supposed indigenous locations were especially concentrated in “places” exotic and distant from England and the European world.<sup>7</sup> Past scholars believed that the animals filled the part of medieval maps which were left blank from a lack of geographical knowledge<sup>8</sup> in part because animals do occur in the places that have fewer cities and geo-political markers in them. Yet the animals are not merely filling empty space; they are strategically positioned following cartographic traditions

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<sup>6</sup> For larger discussions of how we should understand the scientific accuracy, neutrality, and rhetoric of maps see John Brian Harley, “Deconstructing the Map,” *Cartographica: The International Journal for Geographic Information and Geovisualization* 26, no. 2 (1989): 1-20.

<sup>7</sup> Harley, “Deconstructing.”

<sup>8</sup> For a complete discussion of this trope: Wilma George, *Animals and Maps*, 21-22.

that either relegate these animals to the edge of the map or to specific locales.<sup>9</sup> This placement is often influenced by historical, classical, or mythological texts that associate these animals with those regions, thereby leading the animals to symbolize or represent the very essence of the places themselves.<sup>10</sup> The animals do not exist in these places due to an absence of information or general ignorance, instead, these animals fulfill a significant cultural, interpretive, and pedagogical role.

### Medieval Maps and Data Organization

Although medieval maps were designed to help students learn and remember how the world was organized and *Mappae mundi* provided information about the physical world, they did not pretend to portray an exact correspondence with an external physical reality as many modern maps do. Instead, they reflected a complex medieval worldview that integrated visual and literary genres and compiled vast storehouses of cultural information organized around geographic nodes. Medieval

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<sup>9</sup> Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 217, <https://search-ebscohost-com.libproxy.uccs.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=92079&site=ehost-live>.

<sup>10</sup> For instance, Elephants on medieval maps seem to be placed largely in India. These depictions are tied to the *Alexander Romance* and related historical texts. While African elephants were known, and in despite Hannibal's famous movement of Elephants through the Alps, the African elephant seems to have had less mental impact on medieval cartographers. The Elephant begins to stand in for India itself. This idea will be explored further in an upcoming article that investigates the Mediterranean propagation of Indian war elephant imagery from antiquity to the Middle Ages in collaboration with Dr. Jenna Rice.



maps functioned as memory aids to help one learn and recall vast amounts of literary and textual material.

The Vercelli, Hereford, and related maps built upon the structure found in the original T-O maps and their schematic understanding of the world. These simplified diagrams of the world show a T in the middle of a circle in which each space between a bar of the T represents a continent. Europe and Africa are on the bottom of the circle, and Asia occupies the space above the crossbar of the T.<sup>11</sup> They would add to the simplified designs with geographic descriptions found in works ranging from the classical to contemporary medieval authors. Layering information on location, they used the structures found in other medieval mnemonic and pedagogical devices to help viewers remember.

The increased complexity of 13<sup>th</sup>-century wall maps fits a broader pattern of intellectual development at the time. Timoty Leonardi noted that the 12<sup>th</sup> century saw a rise in complex diagrams as a genre, not just cartographic diagrams. These diagrams created visual representations of complicated or dense information found in texts. For instance, the *de archæ noe* diagram at the Vercelli Chapter Library also structures “cosmic, historic, and moral” readings of Noah’s Ark’s significance in the medieval

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<sup>11</sup> In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Isadore of Seville wrote one of the most complete compendia of information in the Middle Ages. Following this, the wide-spread manuscript tradition frequently includes a simple T-O map. Stephen A. Barney, *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), translated by J. A. Beach, Oliver Berghof, Stephen A. Barney, and W. J. Lewis. For more on the T-O map see Evelyn Edson, *Mapping Time and Space: How Medieval Mapmakers Viewed Their World* (United Kingdom: British Library, 1999), 4-5.

Christian understanding of history and the world.<sup>12</sup> These diagrams, particularly those in Vercelli, seem to have a pedagogical purpose.<sup>13</sup> Viewing this map as a sub-genre of diagram rather than an isolated type of visual manuscript allows us to see more clearly the pedagogical root underpinning the organizing structure in medieval manuscripts. *Mappae Mundi* is similarly visually organized world history and geography.

### Medieval Art of Memory

Medieval *Mappa Mundi* also displays images, animals or other symbols, to represent entire stories. They use of small images or symbols as concise representation of a larger narrative, a visual shorthand that encapsulates extensive stories or concepts. Sometimes the map contains a line or two describing the image to cue the reader into the significance of the depiction. However, it remains up to the reader to supply the entire remainder of the narrative to which the image alludes. For example, on the Vercelli map, next to an image of a giant sheep, an inscription reads: “This is the Colchis Kingdom. Here [there] was a ram that had golden fleece, which Jason, with the other Argonauts, seized. The king of this land was called Aeëtes.”<sup>14</sup> The reader must fill in all

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<sup>12</sup> Timoty Leonardi and Marco Rainini, introduction to *Ordinare il Mondo: Diagrammi e Simboli nelle Pergamene di Vercelli*, ed. Timoty Leonardi and Marco Rainini (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2019), xii.

<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Shurville, “Visions of Order and Apocalypse: Text and Image in Thirteenth-Century Vercelli” (PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 2018), 144.

<sup>14</sup> The Latin reads “Hic est regnum Colchorum. Hic fuit aries qui habuit aureum vellus, quam Jafon cum aliis Argonautis rapuit. Rex istius terre dicebatur Oeta.” Heather Wacha and Helen Davies, eds., “Vercelli Map (Vercelli,

of the remaining narrative details about the story of Jason and the Argonauts' search for the golden fleece. These compact depictions require the map's reader to actively engage in interpreting and supplementing the narrative, drawing upon their own knowledge and imagination to fill in the broader context. This process transforms the map into an interactive medium, where the viewer plays a crucial role in unfolding the complete story at which each symbol or image merely hints. The map works to organize these larger stories into a visual reference which may be used to teach these works to the next generation through supplying mnemonic touchstones and a visual schematic familiar from classical memory techniques.

The medieval art of memory allowed an individual to train their mind to effectively become a walking library. A single mind could contain vast numbers of volumes, memorized in their entirety.<sup>15</sup> The memory of the individual, the mnemonic impression of the text, and the pedagogical potential of these individuals to act as interpreters and fonts of knowledge were prioritized over material objects. A process of *translatio*, of course, occurred: as information moved from written text to memory object and possibly back again, as the text moved forward in time leaving behind its

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Archivio Capitolare di Vercelli, Rot. Fig. 6)," in *Virtual Mappa*, edited by Martin Foys, Heather Wacha, *et al.* (Philadelphia: Schoenberg Institute of Manuscript Studies, 2020), <https://sims2.digitalmappa.org/36>.

<sup>15</sup> Mary Carruthers relates how Charlemagne prioritized bringing Alcuin to France rather than collecting manuscripts, because Alcuin had texts in his head and could recall and interpret them for students. "Mechanisms for the Transmission of Culture: The Role of 'Place' in the Arts of Memory," in *Translatio, the Transmission of Culture in the Middle Ages*, ed. Laura Hollengreen, Arizona Studies in the Middle Ages and Renaissance (Turnhout: Brepols, 2008), 1–26.

archaeological wrapper, and as the text moved along the oral-written spectrum (and back again). Yet any given text itself was expected to retain its essential contents through all these changes in mode and form. Kline has argued that T-O maps, as schematic representations of the earth, bear a striking similarity to medieval *rotae* and function in a similar way, helping to organize vast amounts of information.<sup>16</sup> The circular *Rotae* often feature simplified concepts such as the winds, the seasons, and geographical features, and more.<sup>17</sup> The Vercelli Map and its related cartographic cousins relied on this process to understand the levels of nuance in each symbol and image on the map. Larger textual traditions shaped the reader's understanding of the images as these larger narratives unfurled shades of meaning in each picture not obvious through the representation alone.

The larger 13<sup>th</sup>-century world maps such as the *Vercelli Mappa Mundi*, build upon these mnemonic and didactic functions found in the smaller schematic T-O world maps, presenting image nodes keyed into a larger network of stories, that layered cultural, literary, religious, and mythological information within the context of geography within a known medieval memory device. The inherently pedagogical nature of the maps'

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<sup>16</sup> *Rotae* are circular schematic designs of various phenomena that functioned as didactic and mnemonic devices. Naomi Reed Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought: The Hereford Paradigm* (Rochester, NY: Boydell Press, 2001), 10.

<sup>17</sup> "Medieval *mappae mundi* share with medieval *rotae*," writes Kline, "the circular format as containers of diverse information." Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought*, 10-22, esp. 13.

design, through its roots in medieval *rotae* and *ars memoria*, supports a different reading of the animals on medieval maps. They are not just classical representations of a place or medieval representations of the bestiary tradition, but instead are a complex signifier of place and medieval moralizing interpretation. The map organizes these interpretations, plays upon them, and invests meaning into these animals through an elaborate web of associations.

## **Bestiary**

The largest collection of animal depictions and the most widely distributed manuscripts on animal lore were the bestiaries. Depictions of any animals in the 13<sup>th</sup> century were likely understood within the context of the bestiary which, drawing on a wide variety of sources, presented them in the context of Christian moralization.<sup>18</sup> Each entry featured a physical description, a moral, and frequently an illustration. The intriguing creatures helped the reader more easily recall the moral, becoming an important pedagogical tool that reflected the societal norms and values of the time.<sup>19</sup> Understanding the depiction of animals in medieval bestiaries is essential for

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<sup>18</sup> Carolynn Van Dyke, "Entities in the World: Intertextuality in Medieval Bestiaries and Fables," in *Reading Literary Animals: Medieval to Modern*, eds. Karen L. Edwards, Derek Ryan, and Jane Spencer (New York: Routledge, 2019), 13-14.

<sup>19</sup> Carmen Brown, "Bestiary lessons on pride and lust," in *The Mark of the Beast: The Medieval Bestiary in Art, Life, and Literature*, ed. Debra Hassig (New York: Routledge, 2013), 54.

comprehending their portrayal on medieval maps. The reader, informed by stories from bestiaries, approaches the map's visual depictions of animals, allowing these narratives to shape their understanding and perception of the animals illustrated. Additionally, given that medieval cartography frequently drew upon contemporary texts to inform and determine the embedded representations of various elements, from geographical locations to symbolic illustrations, the influence of widely popular bestiaries cannot be overlooked. These texts are integral in appreciating the rich nuances and embedded symbolism in the portrayal of animals on maps, providing crucial context to their placement and significance within the medieval cartographic narrative. The interpretation of animals on these large-scale *mappae mundi* would not be complete without accessing the interpretation encouraged through medieval bestiaries. With similar goals in mind, the line between bestiaries and maps was blurred. For example, a bestiary scene was included in the painted chamber at Westminster, a room also thought to have had a *mappa mundi* as part of its decorative scheme,<sup>20</sup> and so medieval maps regularly featured images of creatures placed around their borders.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> "History of the Manuscript," *The Aberdeen Bestiary*, accessed March 5, 2020, <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/history.php>; Matthew M. Reeve, "The Painted Chamber at Westminster, Edward I, and the Crusade," *Viator* 37 (2006): 189–221, note 6.

<sup>21</sup> David A. Sprunger, "Parodic Animal Physicians from the Margins of Medieval Manuscripts," in *Animals in the Middle Ages*, ed. Nona C. Flores (New York: Routledge, 2016), 67-81.

While medieval maps and bestiaries were not explicitly part of the same tradition, they did influence one another, as Kline writes “although the map did not substantially depend upon the Bestiary’s texts its imagery and subject matter were closely allied with the medieval bestiary.”<sup>22</sup> Animal imagery was to be found throughout medieval art, in spaces such as marginalia, but how their were interpreted, particularly within bestiary traditions took on a variety of forms.<sup>23</sup> So rich was this layered meaning, that even the small image King of France riding on ostrich on top of a mountain in North Africa on the Vercelli *Mappa Mundi* suggested to the viewer a world of complex and often provocative meanings. .

## **Ostrich**

The medieval symbolism of ostriches stands in stark contrast to our modern comical image of the bird with its head in the sand. Instead, the understudied-medieval image of the ostrich focuses on its concentrated heavenward gaze that results in the ostriches ignoring their young and abandoning their eggs in the sand and so are seen as emblems of hypocrisy, but in an often nuanced, polyvalent series of connotations. Yet,

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<sup>22</sup> Kline, *Maps of Medieval Thought*, 100.

<sup>23</sup> Sprunger, “Parodic Animal Physicians,” 77.

as Augustine encourages us to take joy in multifaceted symbols,<sup>24</sup> this paper will investigate its symbolism to understand its unexpected depictions in art, literature, and maps.

### **Bestiary Reading of the Ostrich**

There are a startling number of places where ostriches pop up in medieval sources, as such this article will sample a number of different manuscripts, building a representative, rather than comprehensive, view of ostriches in medieval popular texts.

For example, Hugh of Fouilloy's influential *Aviarium*, written before 1152, remained popular through the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, with seventy-eight surviving manuscripts. The text, designed as a teaching tool for monastic lay brothers, was frequently incorporated into bestiaries.<sup>25</sup> It characterizes the ostrich as a hypocrite because it has feathers. but lacks the ability to fly, dissembling that it can do something which it cannot. The *Aviarium* repeatedly notes the ostrich's unsuccessful imitation of others with higher virtues (symbolized by other species' ability to fly), "so surely are all the hypocrites, who, while they feign a life of good deeds [and] imitate a holy

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<sup>24</sup> "For what more liberal and more fruitful provision could God have made in regard to the Sacred Scriptures than that the same words might be understood in several senses." Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Generic NL Freebook Publisher, 2020), Book 7.

<sup>25</sup> Willene B. Clark, "The Illustrated Medieval Aviary and the Lay-Brotherhood," *Gesta* 21, no. 1 (1982): 63.



appearance, yet do not possess the truth of holy action."<sup>26</sup>

The tone of the *Aviarium* changes when interpreting the ostriches' treatment of their young, "although they [ostriches] are always busy doing evil things because hypocrites still continue to speak virtuously, by their eloquent speech they still create sons in faith or conversion, but they are not able to nourish them by [an example] of righteous living."<sup>27</sup> Although the hypocrite, lacking a righteous character, will be unable to raise children for whom they have set a good example, still their words may encourage their children to be better than their parents. Despite the offsprings' abandonment in the ground, "the Lord warms the eggs left in the dust."<sup>28</sup>

Yet one cannot assume a stable reading of any animal across bestiaries, even among contemporary works.<sup>29</sup> An edition of a 12<sup>th</sup>-century bestiary, Cambridge University Library MS 11.4.26,<sup>30</sup> also notes the disconnect between the physical appearance of the bird and its physical abilities, commenting, "this bird has really got

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<sup>26</sup> Willene B. Clark, *The Medieval Book of Birds: Hugh of Fouilloys' "Aviarium"* (Binghamton, NY: Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, State University of New York, 1992), 189. Clark provides the Latin "Ita sunt nimirum omnes hypocritae qui dum bonorum vitam simulant, imitationem sanctae visionis habent, sed veritatem sanctae actionis non habent." Cited after this as *The Aviary*.

<sup>27</sup> *The Aviary*, 193. Clark provides the Latin "quia vero hypocrite, quamvis perversa semper operentur, loqui tamen recta non desinunt, bene loquendo autem in fide vel conversatione filios pariunt, sed eos bene vivendo nutrire non possunt."

<sup>28</sup> *The Aviary*, 193. Clark quotes the Latin "Ova ergo Dominus in pulvere derelicta calefacit."

<sup>29</sup> Brown, "Bestiary lessons," 54.

<sup>30</sup> For full discussion of the manuscript: White, *Bestiary*, 230–231.

wings, but it does not fly.”<sup>31</sup> Yet its moral reading shifts interpretation from the *Aviarium*. Instead of being weighed down by sin for its lack of flight, instead, it is handicapped as a creature tied to the community of the faithful. Its flightlessness now shows that ostriches are not distracted by outside temptation, and, as such, it now becomes a symbol for a pure life. As the cloistered may not escape the confines of their life, the ostriches do not escape the confines of the ground.

This text also notes the ostrich’s forgetfulness but interprets it differently. The ostrich lays its eggs in the ground and instantly forgets their location,<sup>32</sup> yet it is interpreted as “Now if the Ostrich knows its times and seasons, and, disregarding earthly things, cleaves to the heavenly ones — even unto the forgetting of its own offspring — how much the more should you, O Man, strive after the reward of the starry calling.”<sup>33</sup> This reading aligns with the ancient precedent of bestiaries, the *Physiologus*, where the ostriches’ negligence of their offspring is seen as virtuous because the bird keeps its gaze on heaven rather than on earthly trifles.

Another interpretive variant of the *Aviarium*, the 12<sup>th</sup>-century *Aberdeen Bestiary* is linked to the former by having both texts bound in the same codex. That the *Aviarium* was the text being copied is reflected in how the *Aberdeen* and *Ashmole Bestiaries* contain

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<sup>31</sup> White, *Bestiary*, 121.

<sup>32</sup> White, *Bestiary*, 121.

<sup>33</sup> White, *Bestiary*, 122.

identical copies of its text.<sup>34</sup> Despite this, their differences are noteworthy. The *Aberdeen Bestiary* begins with a positive interpretation of the ostrich, while the *Avarium's* description is largely negative. This reflects two separate beliefs regarding ostriches circulating at the same time. It does not appear to have mattered to the texts' compilers that the material within these manuscripts was at times complementary and at other times contradictory.

For example, the *Aberdeen Bestiary* builds on and repackages the ostrich tropes in new ways, describing it as staring at the heavens and forgetting mundane distractions, while also laying quickly forgotten eggs based on heavenly signs.

If, therefore, the ostrich knows its time and forgets its young, and pursues heavenly things to the exclusion of earthly ones, how much more, O man, should you strive for the prize of the summons from on high, you for whom God was made man, to deliver you from the power of darkness and set you together with the princes of his people in his kingdom of glory.<sup>35</sup>

Instead of the ostrich's behavior indicating hypocrisy or sinfulness, here, humanity is encouraged to be more like the ostrich; the bird's affinity of staring at the heavens makes it an admirable creature.

In contrast, the *Aberdeen Bestiary* ostrich repeats the *Avarium's* and *Physiologus's* description of the bird as a hypocrite in its own body. Because the bird has wings, but

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<sup>34</sup> *The Aviary*, 73.

<sup>35</sup> "The Ostrich," *The Aberdeen Bestiary*, fol. 41, accessed March 5, 2020, <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/ms24/f41v>.

cannot take flight, so too, does its physical appearance promise abilities that the ostrich's body cannot deliver. Although it almost repeats the *Aviarius* verbatim,<sup>36</sup> more details are added about the ways in which hypocrites and negligent parents can negatively affect children versus a teacher who matches words with action. "Lest they grow inactive and insensitive through neglect, therefore, they must be cherished by the diligent instruction of teachers, until they are able to live by their own capacity for understanding and take flight on the wings of contemplation."<sup>37</sup> The ostrich's offspring may hatch in the sand and physically survive, but the neglect of the parent still harms the children. They do not have "diligent instruction" until they are ready to "take flight on the wings of contemplation." The parental neglect harms the ostrich's offspring on a spiritual level as well endangering its physical wellbeing.

The *Aberdeen Bestiary's* aggregate descriptions can be contradictory. It praises the ostrich for abandoning its eggs in the dust so it can gaze upon the heavens, yet in the latter part of the same description, it reminds the reader that "the ostrich also forgets that the beast of the field will destroy its eggs just as the hypocrite does not care at all if the devil, raging in this world, snatches the young who are the product of the edifying

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<sup>36</sup> "The Ostrich," *The Aberdeen Bestiary*, fol. 41, accessed March 5, 2020, <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/ms24/f41v>.

<sup>37</sup> "The Ostrich," *The Aberdeen Bestiary*, fol. 42, accessed March 5, 2020, <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/ms24/f42v>.

association.”<sup>38</sup> The earlier positive trait has been recast as a negative one in the same passage. The compiler certainly had no compunction in combining these positive and negative readings of the bird.

### **Bayeux Tapestry**

A similar polyvalent visual representation of an ostrich can be found in the Bayeux Tapestry’s border, pictured just below William the Conqueror as the Normans enter England to begin battle.<sup>39</sup> Although the ostrich is easily identifiable with its long neck, what was of greater import is the star depicted above the bird. This illustrates the Pleiades, the star which appears in the sky when the ostrich goes to lay its eggs in the sand (mentioned in the bestiary section above).<sup>40</sup> J. Bard McNulty’s work on the animal border states that the ostrich being placed directly underneath William the Conqueror draws a connection between the two figures.<sup>41</sup> The ostrich’s supposed ability to digest anything (including iron) similarly implied that William had a “strong constitution.” Much later, Federico da Montefeltro and Leonardo da Vinci associated the ostrich with

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<sup>38</sup> “The Ostrich,” *The Aberdeen Bestiary*, fol. 43, accessed March 5, 2020, <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/ms24/f43v>.

<sup>39</sup> J. Bard McNulty, *The Narrative Art of the Bayeux Tapestry Master* (New York: AMS Press, 1989), 128 for the image.

<sup>40</sup> McNulty, *The Narrative Art*, 1.

<sup>41</sup> McNulty, *The Narrative Art*, 1.

military endeavors, and this could be an early version of this symbolic meaning.<sup>42</sup> Here the ostrich might refer to the military preparations on the eve of the battle of Hastings. Or, like some of the texts studied above, this might also suggest that Harold has been neglectful of his children, emphasizing the ambiguity of the image.<sup>43</sup> The bird can be read as a symbol of praise, strength, piety, and of condemnation. and the ostrich underneath a figure may suggest that William, as a pious king riding to battle and also raise questions about those (newly?) under his care.

The ostrich of the Bayeaux Tapestry subverts larger declarations of kingship and rule, encouraging the reader to question the image. This unusual bird draws the viewer into these images and texts, perhaps providing a subtle critique or warning to the king associated with these birds, prompting us to rethink two otherwise seemingly noble images of a king that appear in important maps of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

## Medieval Maps with Ostriches

### Contemporary *Mappae Mundi*

Three major maps survive from the larger 13<sup>th</sup> century large wall map tradition: the mappa mundi at Hereford, Ebstorf, and Vercelli, and all three contain images of the

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<sup>42</sup> McNulty, *The Narrative Art*, 2.

<sup>43</sup> McNulty, 19-21.

ostrich. The Hereford Map displays it in a slightly unexpected place – north of its natural territory.<sup>44</sup> It is accompanied by the inscription *Ostricius, capud auce corpus gruis, pedes uituli; ferrum comedit* “The Ostrich, head of a goose, body of a crane, feet of a calf; it eats iron.”<sup>45</sup> While the visual depiction of the ostrich simply shows the bird, its unexpected placement, along with the description breaks down the components of the bird in a manner familiar from bestiaries, even referring to their claim that the ostrich eats iron.

The Ebstorf Map places the ostrich in North Africa at roughly the same spot as the Vercelli Map, appearing in proximity to the Atlas Mountains.<sup>46</sup> This bird does not have any larger textual description directly associated with the image describing the place, the mountains, or the figure, bearing only the Latin word for ostrich. It stands alone, lacking any iconography associated with the ostrich in many other medieval visual representations: no stars, eggs, eating iron, or staring towards the heavens. Instead, the map makers expected the viewer to supply any and all background knowledge.

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<sup>44</sup> George, *Animals and Maps*, 34.

<sup>45</sup> English Translation: The Ostrich, head of a goose, body of a crane, feet of a calf; it eats iron.; Both Latin and English from “Ostricius,” *Hereford Map, Virtual Mappa*, accessed March 5, 2020, <https://sims2.digitalmappa.org/36>

<sup>46</sup> The Atlas Mountains are the location for the unusual image of the king of France riding an Ostrich on the Vercelli Map. Additionally, the real-world physical location approximates where King Phillip III of France ascended to the throne when his father passed away on the Tunis Crusade.

## Portolans

The 14<sup>th</sup> century saw the rise of accurate sailing maps in the form of Portolan charts. These more practical cartographic diagrams limited the number of additional mythological, classical, and religious figures shown on the documents as compared to the earlier *mappae mundi*. Nonetheless, the more elaborate charts in this tradition continued to include certain extra elements. The Dulcert Potolan (1339) depicts an ostrich near the Atlas Mountains. While no one rides the ostrich, a human figure is shown nearby leading a camel and an ostrich on a leash. No description or caption accompanies the images. Instead, as Hamy describes the scene “They lead a camel and an ostrich, drawn quite precisely, on a leash.”<sup>47</sup> By the 14<sup>th</sup> century, these two animals had become synonymous with and markers of Africa on maps.

This detailed overview of the historical symbolism and cartographic placement of the Ostrich can allow us to understand the intriguing image on the Vercelli *Mappa Mundi* in a new light. As discussed above, the map fits amongst other visual diagrams which translated complicated textual arguments for an educational setting. Placing the Vercelli *Mappa Mundi* in this educational setting encourages scholars to view the document in a new light, but also strengthens the importance of the images contained

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<sup>47</sup> “ils conduisent en laisse un chameau et une autruche assez exactement dessinés”. Ernest-Théodore Hamy, “La mappemonde d’Angelino Dulcert, de Majorque (1339),” in *Études historiques et géographiques* (Paris: E. Leroux, 1896), 419-428.



within this world map. The images here helped shape the understanding of the next generation(s). The ostrich on the Vercelli *Mappa Mundi* contains so much more than just the marker of Africa on the portoloan maps. The French king riding an ostrich with a horseshoe in its mouth on top of a mountain does not only represent a location to the students (though it certainly does do that), but it embeds the depiction with a level of not only propaganda, but of critique.

### **The Vercelli *Mappa Mundi* and the Ostrich**

This context leads to a greater understanding of the intriguing depiction of the ostrich on the Vercelli *Mappa Mundi*. Here, a crowned figure wearing armor holding a flail sits astride the ostrich, under an inscription which reads “Philip(us) Rex F(ra)ncie.” The ostrich strangely carries a horseshoe in its mouth while standing on a mountain labelled “mons atlas.”<sup>48</sup> As Bonnie J. Erwin writes about animals in medieval romances, this animal figure asserts its status as an animal and forces the reader to engage with it

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<sup>48</sup> Throughout the Middle Ages, ostriches were thought to eat (or at least be able to digest) iron. The assertion appears throughout the bestiary tradition, and it is even stated explicitly on the Hereford *Mappa Mundi* as stated above. The tradition likely started with a description in Pliny “have the marvelous property of being able to digest every substance without distinction”. Pliny the Elder, *The Natural History*, ed. John Bostock, M.D., F.R.S., and H.T. Riley, Esq., B.A., Book 3, Chapter 1 (London: Taylor and Francis, 1855), accessed November 19, 2023, <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.02.0137%3Abook%3D10%3Achapter%3A1>. The remarkable longevity of this idea can still be seen in Shakespeare’s *Henry VI*, part 2 “I’ll make thee eat iron like an ostrich.” William Shakespeare, “*Henry VI, Part 2*,” in *Folger Shakespeare Library*, ed. Barbara Mowat and Paul Werstine, Act 4, Scene 10, line 25, accessed November 19, 2023, <https://www.folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works/henry-vi-part-2/read/4/10/?q=eat%20iron%20like%20an%20ostrich#line-4.10.25>. On the Vercelli Map, the horse shoe serves to ensure that the bird which the king rides can be identified as an ostrich. The horseshoe functions as part of the bird’s iconography.

as such.<sup>49</sup> The image, partly through the iron horseshoe and partly through the location in North Africa, forces the reader to wrestle with the unusual identity of the king's mount.

Few scholars have examined this unusual image partially because many have avoided this particularly damaged *mappa mundi* in their study of the genre due to its state of illegibility.<sup>50</sup> The last full length study of the map, now published over fifty years ago, contains a number of errors.<sup>51</sup> There have been a number of shorter articles focusing on specific aspects of the map, but not much more, mostly because a detailed transcription of all of the inscriptions is needed for a more comprehensive examination.<sup>52</sup> Anna-Dorothee von den Brincken, in 1990, examined the paleography of the map, confirming the poor state of legibility of the document.<sup>53</sup> More recently, in 2019, Asa Mittman published two book chapters shining a much-needed spotlight on this significant document. He provides a thorough analysis of the contradictory state of scholarship on the map, updates the description and argues that scholars should study

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<sup>49</sup> Bonnie J. Erwin, *Zöopedagogies: Creatures as Teachers in Middle English Romance* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 3.

<sup>50</sup> Anna-Dorothee von den Brincken, "Monumental Legends on Medieval Manuscript Maps: Notes on Designed Capital Letters on Maps of Large Size (Demonstrated from the Problem of Dating the Vercelli Map, Thirteenth Century)," *Imago Mundi* (1990): 9.

<sup>51</sup> At my last count, 30% of the transcriptions recorded in this study were wrong or marked "unreadable."

<sup>52</sup> Dr. Heather Wacha and I are currently producing a new edition of the Vercelli *Mappa Mundi* for *Digital Mappa*.

<sup>53</sup> von den Brincken, "Monumental Legends."

the artifact that we have with all of its damage and deterioration.<sup>54</sup> Jennifer Shurville's dissertation and forthcoming book promise to expand our understanding of the map in context of other Vercelli manuscripts with her focus on the Ecclesia scroll.<sup>55</sup>

Nonetheless, this larger cartographic murkiness has meant that the image of the King of France and his ostrich has not received much analysis until very recently.<sup>56</sup> In 2021, Mordechay Lewy published an article on the topic.<sup>57</sup> I agree with Lewy's assertion that:

On the contrary, the king riding an ostrich is now understood more fairly as a reminder of the young Philip's personal courage in taking an active part in the siege while not yet fully recovered from his own illness and so soon after the death of his father Louis IX in 1270. The drawing on the Vercelli map was far from intended as a caricature of a legitimate ruler.<sup>58</sup>

Keeping in mind the ambiguity of the literary understanding of the ostrich, I believe that the depiction is one of neither strictly praise nor strictly criticism. It commemorates the moment Philip III came to power and offers a cautionary warning, an implied

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<sup>54</sup> Asa Simon Mittman, "Reexamining the Vercelli Map," in *Ordinare il Mondo: Diagrammi e Simboli nelle Pergamene di Vercelli*, eds. Timoty Leonardi and Marco Rainini (Milan: Vita Pensiero, 2019); Asa Simon Mittman, "The Vercelli Map," in *A Critical Companion to English Mappae Mundi of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*, eds. Dan Terkla and Nick Millea (Woodbridge, UK: Boydell Press, 2019), 127-146

<sup>55</sup> Jennifer Shurville, "Visions of Order and Apocalypse: Text and Image in Thirteenth-Century Vercelli" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Oxford, 2018).

<sup>56</sup> This article was originally drafted before the 2021 release of Lewy's *Imago Mundi* article. Mordechay Lewy, "The French King and the Ostrich: Reflections on the Date of the Medieval Vercelli Map of the World," *Imago Mundi* 73, no. 1 (2021): 64-72.

<sup>57</sup> Mordechay Lewy, "The French King and the Ostrich"; Helen Davies, "Multispectral Imaging of the Vercelli Mappamundi: A Progress Report," *Imago Mundi* 72, no. 2 (2020): 181-191.

<sup>58</sup> Lewy, "The French King and the Ostrich," 68.

critique. The multivalent meaning of the ostrich on the Vercelli Map carried a political warning while also serving as a valuable interpretive tool in a pedagogical setting. Each of these symbols would have held layers of meaning for a medieval reader: the ostrich, for example, belonged to a rich web of interconnected meanings found in popular poetry, bestiaries, the Bible, and visual culture.

We overlap in interpretations, though each was generated from different evidence. This circumstance should be thought of as reproducibility, like in the sciences, rather than redundancy. My analysis stems from a literary understanding of the symbolism in this image, enhanced by multispectral imaging data. The further flexibility and affordances of working with multispectral imaging and its resulting digital data allows more granular interpretations than the black-and-white images.

Multispectral imaging has created the opportunity to digitally recover the severely damaged Vercelli Map. The Vercelli Map was photographed by The Lazarus Project in twenty overlapping tiles to ensure high resolution for the entire 65 x 82 cm document.<sup>59</sup> I have now processed these tiles to create high-resolution multispectral images of the document that reveal previously unreadable details and reverse the ravages of time and chemical reagents.<sup>60</sup> In the summer of 2022, I went back to Vercelli

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<sup>59</sup> If one pulls the camera further away from an object to obtain a photograph that encompassed an entire large document within the frame, the resolution of the image decreases. To avoid this loss of quality, we shoot several smaller images, known as tiles, which can later be stitched together.

<sup>60</sup> The Lazarus Project, under Gregory Heyworth (formerly Associate Professor of English at the University of Mississippi, now Associate Professor of English at the University of Rochester), with Ken Boydston (CEO

to capture new MSI data. Katie Albers-Morris and I have processed this data to recover several illegible inscriptions (still indecipherable after the previous Lazarus data and the Kamal images) for the new digital edition on Digital Mappa with Dr. Heather Wacha.<sup>61</sup> This new edition will offer the opportunity for greater interactivity than the confines of print allow. Because these documents function as mosaics of information in which the richness of miniature detail builds a larger image, print images of medieval maps are challenging to work with. A digital surrogate enhances a document's functionality by allowing a modern viewer access to the multiple layers of interpretation which a medieval user would have found in this document. Through the recovery of the Vercelli Map's missing data and its study through the medium of digital surrogacy, this paper offers a fresh interpretation of one scene in particular: Philip and the ostrich.

In a striking image, newly visible on the Vercelli *Mappa Mundi*, "Philip(us) Rex F(ra)ncie" sits atop a mountain, riding an ostrich with a horseshoe in its mouth.<sup>62</sup> Philip and his ostrich are of particular importance to this document, as his identity holds the key to establishing the map's date and to understanding the political symbolism of the

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of MegaVision), Roger Easton (Professor in the Center for Imaging Science at Rochester Institute of Technology), and students from the Sally Barksdale Honors College at the University of Mississippi, carried out multispectral imaging of the Vercelli Map in 2013–14. The Lazarus Project previously imaged the renowned Anglo-Saxon Vercelli Book (Vercelli, Biblioteca Capitolare, MS CXVII).

<sup>61</sup> <https://www.digitalmappa.org/>

<sup>62</sup> Lewy traces the various transcriptions of this inscription, but here I follow the new transcription provided by Dr. Heather Wacha for our forthcoming edition. Mordechay Lewy, "The French King and the Ostrich," 67.

Vercelli Map.<sup>63</sup> As previously discussed, the ostrich was a well-known symbol of hypocrisy in the medieval period, casting a level of ambiguity onto this depiction of Philip's reign.

Its location also adds to its potential ambiguous meaning. Like the Herford and Ebstorf Maps, the Vercelli Map has a number of animals decorating its surface. George confirms that "apart from the elephant and the camel, these animals are very considerably more formalized and more difficult to identify than those of the Ebstorf and Hereford maps."<sup>64</sup> The most accurate animal depictions on the Vercelli Map are in Northern Africa alongside the ostrich. This is even more remarkable when one considers that the Vercelli Map depicts a one-humped Camel, the species of Camel actually native to North Africa, for the first time on a medieval map.<sup>65</sup> While the majority of the map's animals are stylized, the creatures in North Africa are easily identifiable and bear a marked resemblance to reality. The ostrich should be viewed in light of this context. It is purposefully placed there for a reason and exists as part of this

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<sup>63</sup> My goal here is not to redate the map or to argue which Philip is depicted here. I do agree with Lewy's assertion (building on earlier work) that this shows Philip III not Philip II. Several notable Italian scholars, among others, have asserted that the map as a whole dates from that range rather than Philip III, being a later addendum to a much earlier map. See Carlo Errerà, "Un Mappamondo Medievale Sconosciuto nell'Archivio Capitulare de Vercelli," *Atti della R. Accademia delle Scienze di Torino* 46 (1910): 8–11; Anna-Dorothee von den Brincken, "Monumental Legends"; Mirella Ferrari, "I Rotoli figurati di Vercelli: Aspetti Bibliologici e Paleografici," in *Ordinare il Mondo: Diagrammi e Simboli nelle Pergamene di Vercelli* (Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 2018), 125-143.

<sup>64</sup> George, *Animals and Maps*, 36.

<sup>65</sup> George, *Animals and Maps*, 36.

more realistic set of animals. Therefore, where it departs from reality and leans into stylized medieval tropes, the symbolism must be considered even more exceptional in comparison to the other North African animals in this context.

In the symbolism it uses, the Vercelli Map creates a paradigm of interpretation and warning for Philip. The unusual mount of the king, the ostrich, functions as a warning to the viewer about the potential for Philip to lose his throne. Though the ostrich was a complicated symbol in the Middle Ages that, over time, came to embody many different associations though its most common meaning in contemporary medieval bestiaries was as a symbol of hypocrisy and neglect. When the ostrich bears a king, then those symbolically under the creature's care include far more than biological offspring. The *pater patriae* in the person of the monarch may be corrupt, but the children – the people of France – can choose a different life. They can benefit from the moral instruction of the king, even if the king himself is not a good person. The Lord will still care for those children who have been neglected in the mundane dust of life.

If one reads the passage in the *Aberdeen Bestiary* describing an ostrich associated with a king, then it looks like a fairly clear condemnation of that ruler. The phrase “because hypocrites are hard of heart, they do not recognize their children in a dutiful fashion with love” speaks volumes about the neglect a people may feel from their

king.<sup>66</sup> Recognizing Philip in light of this symbolic meaning does not suggest that the king did not care for his subjects, but rather, that he loved the heavens or the idea of the church more. This may be particularly interesting if we associate the Philip in question with one of the crusading Philips of the 13<sup>th</sup> century; then, perhaps the king abandons his subjects and loves the idea of the Holy Land or Christendom more. The ostrich on the Vercelli Map stands as a warning to such a king and a reminder of what happens to great leaders who ignore the cries of their metaphorical children.

Yet, another passage in the *Aberdeen Bestiary* stands out starkly when considered in conjunction with a crusading king: “now, because the hypocrite represents himself as holy, he keeps his thoughts to himself, as if folding his wings against his body in humility.”<sup>67</sup> Because the Vercelli Map depicts a king associated with the Crusades riding an ostrich indicate that the king was not, in fact, holy? Does this indicate that the creator of the map thought that the king was only acting holy in a most hypocritical fashion? The ambiguity built into the symbolism of the ostrich reflects the potential for interpretation. These questions also show the way in which the ostrich may stand in as a critique and a warning for the Philip in question.

The ostrich on the Vercelli Map, then, reflects its symbolism back onto its rider.

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<sup>66</sup> “The Ostrich,” *The Aberdeen Bestiary*, fol. 41, accessed March 5, 2020, <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/ms24/f41v>.

<sup>67</sup> “The Ostrich,” *The Aberdeen Bestiary*, fol. 44, accessed March 5, 2020, <https://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/ms24/f44r>.



Philip and his mount appear beyond the borders of France, creating an image of political hegemony in North Africa. Through his position, the figure of Philip expands the imagined borders of his kingdom and of the Christian West. Still, the inclusion of the ostrich (given its symbolic associations with hypocrisy) prompts one to simultaneously question this image.

As is fitting of a pedagogical object, the scenes on the Vercelli Map provoke queries and connections for viewers while functioning as a mnemonic device for literary stories as well as a pictorial representation of the earth. Large-scale *mappae mundi* frequently included an interpretive figure, such as a teacher, standing in front,<sup>68</sup> the static image providing multiple interpretations depending on the lesson. In manipulating the interpretation of the image for students, the instructor could emphasize certain connotations of the ostrich in that moment.

In an idealized, propagandistic interpretation of the figure of Philip, showing a king riding an ostrich emphasizes his tendency to forsake worldly goods and look to the heavens. This particular reading of the image gains strength through the location of the ostrich on the mountain, Atlas, which was believed in myth to hold up the sky. The king is already positioned between heaven and earth: he is in an even stronger position

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<sup>68</sup> The Hereford Map famously asks all who “see, read or hear” the map to pray for the map’s compiler. The “hear” clause has long been understood as an interpreter standing in front of the map explaining the pictures and contents to a watching audience.

to forsake the earth below him and gaze towards the heavens. While many medieval kings (particularly those with a history of crusading) would be interested in appearing pious, the heavenly gaze of the ostrich also indicates a negative side. It is not just that the ostrich represents piety through watching the heavens, but this action also denotes negligence, as these birds had a reputation for forsaking their children through their stargazing. This propagandistic image may also contain a warning that Philip ought not to repeat the mistakes of his father or to abandon his children in the role of *pater patriae*. The Vercelli Map resists a simple reading – its polyvalent symbols provide space to the viewer to interpret the image as they see fit.

There is also an element of exoticization that underlies this image. The King of France is not portrayed in his own realm, but instead appears in Northern Africa. While this culturally laden bird existed in the region, it was not usually shown being ridden in this manner. As maps establish hierarchical relationships through spatial arrangement, the arrangement of unusual figures, such as the King of France riding an ostrich, represents an effort at cartographically ordering them.<sup>69</sup> Even semi-mythical figures – characters that transcend the mundane experience – are established as part of the known world through their ordering on a map. The image of Philip on the map elevates him as something more than a mortal man, placing him in this pantheon of mythical

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<sup>69</sup> Mittman, *Maps and Monsters*, 50.

and allegorical figures.

Things that can be depicted and labeled can be ordered and controlled.<sup>70</sup> As such, the placement of unusual figures is intentional. This depiction and mastery of space comes at a moment that France was trying to consolidate political and geographical power. The French crown sought to impose rule over towns beyond the Ile de France and throughout the notoriously independent regions of France.<sup>71</sup> That same movement and political impetus expanded outside the country's borders as it sought to expand the lands under the control of Christendom. This figure of King Philip is a visual representation of a contemporary French political ideal, positioned pictorially to assert French dominance beyond the boundaries of his realm in the same way his French army sought to do so militarily. Through his placement, France asserts a cognitive imperialism beyond the boundary of Philip's own lands in a mental geography and understanding of the world. Philip ascended to power when his father died on crusade in North Africa. Philip's depiction deeply reflects this connection between place, political power, and rule. Simultaneously, his ride, the ostrich, serves as a warning and a coded symbol of the hypocrisy of kings.

One must briefly wonder if this image of Phillip on his ostrich is something

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<sup>70</sup> Mittman, *Maps and Monsters*, 41.

<sup>71</sup> Charles Petit-Dutaillis, *The Feudal Monarchy in France and England: from the Tenth to the Thirteenth Century*, trans. Charles Petit-Dutaillis (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 314–319.

resembling a medieval political cartoon. How much of this image is to be taken seriously rather than mocked? Building from the work on medieval marginalia and medieval animal trials, it is important to remember that things which may seem silly to the contemporary reader are not to be treated as irrelevant asides. Esther Cohen, for example, has shown the deadly seriousness of animal trials.<sup>72</sup> Similarly, Carmen Brown argues for the medieval bestiaries adherence to Horace's maxim that art should both delight and instruct. These animal-based images are not any less insightful nor any less important pedagogically, however much they delight.<sup>73</sup> Lewy's article also dismisses the claim of childishness in the image. In the new MSI images, one can see even more clearly the relevant aspects of this drawing including the item which Lewy rightly points out is a flail not a toy in the king's hand.<sup>74</sup> This image contains many layers of meaning, and none of them should be dismissed simply for the startling nature of the King of France riding an ostrich. In the way of the best political satire, this vignette stops to make you think, may raise a smile, and certainly provokes further questions.

It is worth noting that the archaeological record seems to indicate an increased connection between high status nobility and birds during the High Middle Ages. A

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<sup>72</sup> Esther Cohen, *The Crossroads of Justice: Law and Culture in Late Medieval France*, (Leiden: Brill, 1992); Bruce Holsinger, "Of Pigs and Parchment: Medieval Studies and the Coming of the Animal." *PMLA: Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 124, no. 2 (2009): 616-623.

<sup>73</sup> Brown, "Bestiary lessons on pride and lust," 53.

<sup>74</sup> Lewy, "The French King and the Ostrich," 6.

growing number of bird remains are found at high status sites throughout this time period.<sup>75</sup> While these remains are not typically ostrich remains, one must wonder if associating a king with a bird, particularly a rare bird to European eyes, would be remarkably striking. Recall that the *Aberdeen Bestiary* uses the phrase “prince of his people,” while not surprising in this Christian moralizing context, perhaps hints towards a previously unexplored growing connection between this bird and royalty, such as the ostrich feathers in the heraldry of the Prince of Wales since the early 14<sup>th</sup> century, occurring about 50 years after the map was made.

Medieval maps organize a myriad of information visually connecting texts, images, and geography. While many have overlooked the animal imagery on medieval *mappae mundi*, this examination of the medieval ostrich shows how studying the multifaceted reputation of an animal can help illuminate the symbolism on the map. It opens the door to a new realm of interpretation and can help provide new insights into confusing images such as the King of France riding an ostrich in North Africa. The animal is not to be mocked or dismissed as silly, but instead reflects a sophisticated encapsulation of ideas. The political interpretation of a human figure compared to an animal one may just have been understood as a difference in degrees rather than a

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<sup>75</sup> Colin Duval and Benoît Clavel, “Birds as Status Symbols in Northern France: Boves Castle during the High Middle Ages, in its Regional Context,” *Quaternary International* 626 (2022): 113-120.

difference in kind.<sup>76</sup> Therefore, this new interpretation of the ostrich on medieval maps allows modern readers a new insight into the political allegory, symbolism, and meaning behind the King of France's unusual mount. Medieval cartographers deliberately placed these animals in specific locations as part of these interconnected webs of information. This detailed analysis of the ostrich's placement, symbolism and connection to the French king on the Vercelli *Mappa Mundi* allows the reader to understand this image in a new light emphasizing the political caution embedded in this symbol. The pedagogical nature of this document would allow a guide to tease out different nuanced readings of the animal. A larger study on the social understandings embedded in animals on medieval maps may lead to surprising new findings and insights into the medieval world view. 🐪

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<sup>76</sup> Juhana Toivanen, *The Political Animal in Medieval Philosophy: A Philosophical Study of the Commentary Tradition C. 1260-C. 1410* (Boston: Brill, 2020), 237.