

Zeitschrift: Beiträge zur nordischen Philologie
Herausgeber: Schweizerische Gesellschaft für Skandinavische Studien
Band: 59 (2017)

Artikel: The analogous ape of physiologus
Autor: Malm, Mats
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-858055>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 04.04.2026

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

The Analogous Ape of *Physiologus*

MATS MALM (GÖTEBORG)

One particularly fascinating item in the Arnamagnaean collection is AM 673, which among other things contains parts of two different translations of *Physiologus*. Both manuscripts are early, dating to ca. 1200, and contain amazing illustrations. AM 673a I 4to portrays five *Physiologus* beasts and, in addition, has illustrations of a number of other wonderful creatures. AM 673a II 4to portrays 19 beasts, one of which is *simia*, the ape. The text reads:

Simia hefir líkneski djöfuls; því at svá sem api hefir höfut en engi hala, en þótt hún sé öll ljót, þá er hún aptr miklu óskírlegri ok ljótari; svá hefir ok djöfull höfuð en eigi hala. Þá er hann var í upphafi engill á himnum þá hafði hann höfuð; en fyrir því at hann var flærðari innan, glataði hann höfuð sitt; en fyrir því [hefir hann] eigi hala at hann fyrfórsk í upphafi í himnum, ok mun svá vera án enda.

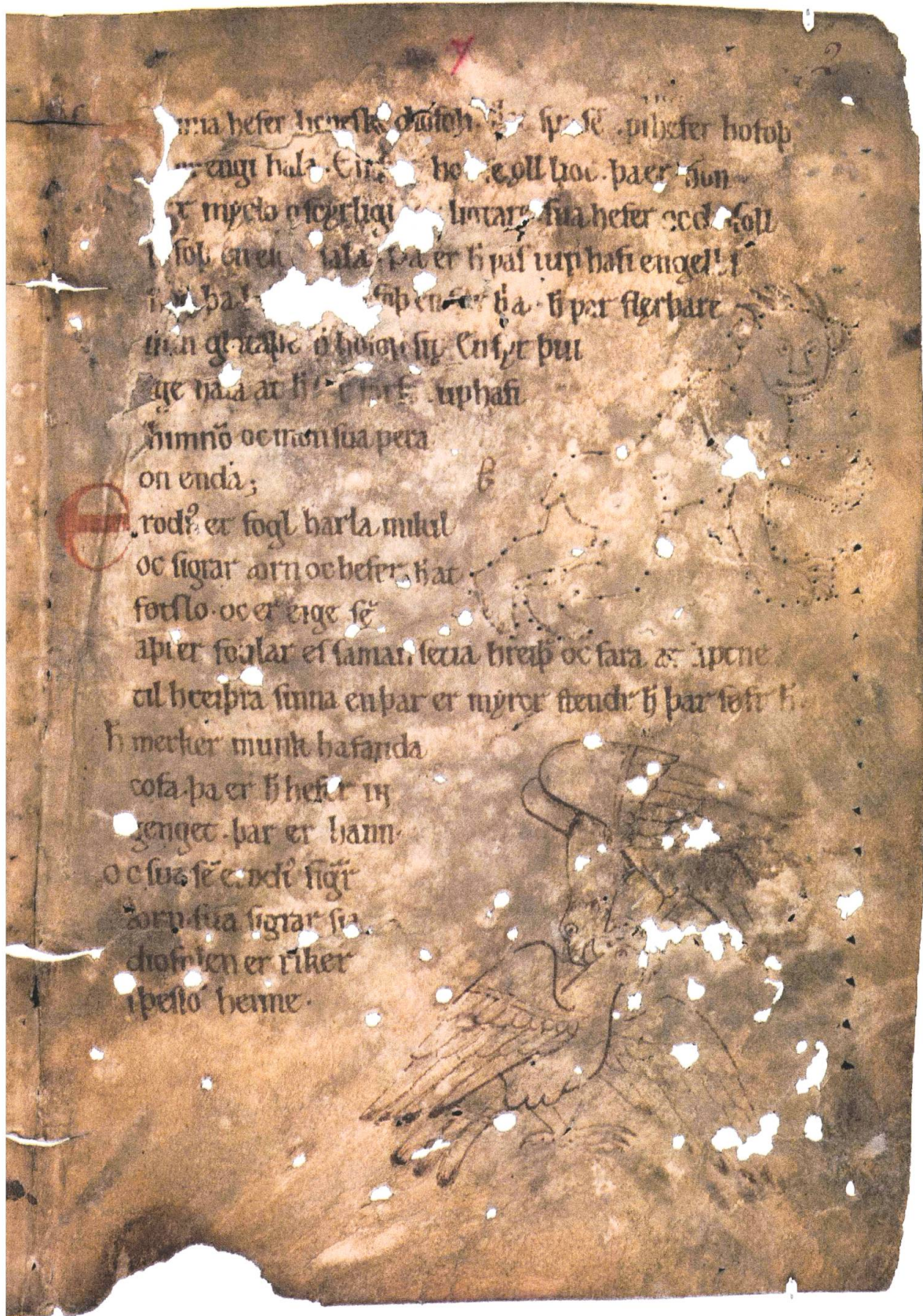
(*The Icelandic Physiologus*, 18)

Simia has the likeness (spiritual significance) of the devil, for as the ape has a head but no tail, and though it is entirely ugly, it is nevertheless from behind much more horrible and ugly, so also has the devil a head and no tail. When he was in the beginning an angel in heaven, then he had a head; but because he was inwardly a traitor, he lost his head; and he has no tail because of the fact that he perished in the beginning in heaven, and so he will be without end.

(*The Old Icelandic Physiologus*, 238)¹

The connection between the ape and the devil is difficult to grasp: why is having no tail ugly, and how did the devil become devoid of tail by being lost in heaven in the beginning? Turning to the parallel Latin version, which is probably close to the one used by the Icelandic translator, one may see that the tail is explicitly identified with 'end', that is, a wordplay has got lost in the translation. Still, the Latin version is also confusing:

¹ I render the last words differently. Cf also <https://handrit.is/is/manuscript/view/AM04-0673a-II>. The following translations from the Latin and Greek are my own.



The ape of Physiologus, AM 673a II 4to, 2r
(© Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum)

Similiter et simia figuram habet diaboli: sicut enim simia caput quidem habet, caudam uero non habet; et licet totus turpis sit, tamen posteriora eius magis turpia et horribilia sunt. Sic et diabolus caput quidem habuit, caudam uero non habuit; hoc est, initium habuit cum esset angelus in caelis, sed quia hypocrita et dolosus erat intrinsecus, perdidit caput; nec caudam habet, id est sicut periit ab initio in caelis, ita et in fine totus peribit, sicut dicit praeco veritatis Paulus: Quem Dominus Iesus interficiet spiritu oris sui.

(*Physiologus Latinus*, 38)²

The ape has the figure of the devil: the ape has a head, but it has no tail, and although it is entirely foul, its behind is much more foul and horrid. So the devil had a head but had no tail, that is, he had a beginning when he was an angel in heaven, but since he was a hypocrite and insidious inwardly, he lost his head. And he has no tail, that is, as he perished in the beginning in heaven, so he will in the end entirely perish, as the preacher of truth Paul says: whom the Lord Jesus will overthrow with the breath of his mouth.

In the Latin version, “tail” (*cauda*), thus equates “end” (*finis*), and “head” (*caput*), equates “beginning” (*initium*), in a more consistent manner. The analogy between the devil’s perishing in the beginning and at the end of time, that is, Judgement Day, as underlined by the quotation from 2. Thessalians 2.8, is reduced in the Icelandic to his eternal perishing in the beginning. The analogy between body parts and time derives from a wordplay, which only becomes clear when one turns to the Greek.³

καὶ ὁ πίθηκος δὲ τοῦ αὐτοῦ διαβόλου πρόσωπον λαμβάνει· ἔχει γὰρ ἀρχήν, τέλος δὲ οὐκ ἔχει, τουτέστιν οὐράν, ὡς οὐδὲ ὁ πίθηκος μὴ ἔχων τέλος καλόν, ἐν τῇ ἀρχῇ εἰς ἣν τῶν ἀρχαγγέλων, τὸ δὲ τέλος αὐτοῦ οὐχ εὐρέθη καλόν, ὡς οὐδὲ ὁ πίθηκος μὴ ἔχων οὐράν ἐστι καλός· ἄμορφον γὰρ ἐστι τῷ πίθηκῳ τὸ μὴ ἔχειν οὐράν.

(*Physiologus. Physiologi Graeci*, 139-140)

Also the ape takes the figure of the devil: it has a beginning but no end, that is, tail. Like the ape has no beautiful end, so in the beginning the devil was one of the arch-angels, but found no beautiful end. So, the ape, who lacks a tail, is not beautiful, since the lack of tail makes the ape deformed.

The Greek plays with the words “tail” (*οὐρά*), and “end”, (*τέλος*), contrasting them with the word for “beginning” (*ἀρχή*), but without introducing a word for the bodily head. The wordplay evinces enough by the explicitation of its meaning: “that is, tail”. The Latin version adds the bodily equivalent of “beginning” (*initium*) – “head” (*caput*) – and thus pushes the description toward physical appearance. While the Latin version retains the interpretative marker “that is” (*hoc est*), it creates a parallel explanation: the devil lost his head because he was an insidious fraud.

² This tradition accords with the one adduced in *Physiologus i to islandske bearbejdelser*, 1889.

³ This was pointed out by Jan Retsö at a seminar on the *Physiologus*, while Antoineta Granberg added other important points.

The other bearing element of the Greek wordplay is based on the meaning of *καλός*, meaning both “beautiful” and “good” in a moral and philosophical sense. This moral aspect is to some extent retained in the Latin *turpis*, but diffused in Icelandic *ljótr*. Following the Latin accentuation of bodily parts, the Icelandic translation then loses its grip on the connection between physical appearance and moral value – beautiful tail -> good end – and recreates the process so that the devil meets his end not at the end but at the beginning, which further reduces the possibility of double *entendre*.

However, there is reason to believe that the Icelandic translator did appreciate that something essential was getting lost: the last words about the devil, “and so he will be without end” (*ok mun svá vera án enda*), re-create a duplicity of meaning close to that of the original.

The Icelandic translations as a rule diminish exegetical interpretation and focus more on physical description, and the images of the *Physiologus* came into other uses than illustrating the text of the *Physiologus*. The fragment is fairly corroded, but if one looks closely, one will notice that only a portion of the many holes in the manuscript is the work of hungry creatures. The outline of the image of the ape itself is marked by a range of smaller holes, deliberate punctuations. None of the other *Physiologus* images are marked in that manner. The reason is to be seen from the manuscript context: AM 673 contains, apart from the two *Physiologus* fragments, *Plácitús drápa*, two sermons and the so-called *Teiknibók* which has a number of images used as matrices for copying. It has been demonstrated that both *Teiknibókin* and *Physiologus* were used as matrices for a manuscript in Dublin, L. 2.33. That manuscript treats a number of animals from other, more zoological aspects than those of the *Physiologus* and was made in the 17th and probably 18th centuries. The use of *Teiknibókin* and *Physiologus* as matrices explains the composition in which the collection reached Árni Magnússon. Images were copied through two methods: either by punctuating the outlines and thus marking an underlying material with dots, or by following the contours with a hard object and thus transferring the whole outline to an underlying material. Both these methods have been used in the *Physiologus* and in *Teiknibókin* (Guðbjörg Kristjánsdóttir, 2014: 183-202). *Teiknibókin* is considerably later than the *Physiologus* fragments, so it is not likely that it influenced the actual production of the Icelandic *Physiologus*. Curiously, in the Icelandic *Physiologus*, the method of punctuating has only been used on the ape, while the *calcare*-method has been used for other images.

We will probably never know how this change of method came to be, nor will we know whether the *Physiologus* was used for such purposes before the 17th century. The extant manuscripts were the results of textual transmission, probably with images attached, and became the source for image transmission where text and original content does not appear to have mattered. The ape’s original function as an allegorical image waned first through textual, translation transmission and then further through image transmission.

References

Editions

Old Icelandic:

<https://handrit.is/is/manuscript/view/AM04-0673a-II>

The Icelandic Physiologus, cited from Halldór Hermannsson, ed. 1938 (reprint 1966). *The Icelandic Physiologus*, Facsimile Edition, Islandica XXVII (Ithaca/New York: Cornell University Press).

The Old Icelandic Physiologus, cited from James Marchand, trans. 2000. “The Old Icelandic Physiologus”, in *De Consolatione philologiae: Studies in Honor of Evelyn S. Firchow*, ed. Anna Grotans et al., 2 vols. (Göppingen: Kümmerle), vol. 1, pp. 231-244.

Physiologus i to islandske bearbejdelser, udgivet 1889 med indledning og oplysninger af Verner Dahlerup (Cod. Bern. 233) (Kjøbenhavn: Gyldendal).

Latin:

Physiologus Latinus. Éditions préliminaires versio B, ed. Francis J. Carmody 1939 (Paris: Droz).

Greek:

Physiologus. Physiologi Graeci. Singulas variarum aetatum recensiones codicibus fere omnibus tunc primum excussis collatisque, ed. Franciscus Sbordone 1936 (Milano etc.: Mediolani).

Secondary Literature

Guðbjörg Kristjánsdóttir. 2014. “Fyrirmyndabókin Physiologus (AM 673 a II, 4to)”, in *Handritasýrpa. Rit til heiðurs Sigurgeiri Steingrímssyni sjötugum 2. október 2013*, ed. Rósa Þorsteinsdóttir (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árna Magnússonar í íslenskum fræðum), pp. 183-202.