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*Crossing paths in the Middle Ages:
the Physiologus in Iceland*

Summary. The *Physiologus*, originally written down in Alexandria, Egypt, between the end of the second and the beginning of the third century A.D., became one of the most popular handbooks of the Middle Ages since its material dealing with real and imaginary animals, plants and stones, could be constantly manipulated to suit audiences and employed in instructing Christian believers.

The two Icelandic fragments, conventionally called *Physiologus A* and *Physiologus B*, are independent of each other and seem to have been written in about 1200. Scholars agree in thinking that their source is to be found in the Latin version conventionally called *Versio B*. Although this statement is true in a general sense, it acts as a screen which hides a much more complex reality: textual and iconographic features give evidence of their derivation from models whose origins lie in England. Moreover the analysis of the chapters dealing with onocentaurs highlights that the two Icelandic *Physiologi*, in which tradition and innovation mingle profoundly with each other, are original manipulations of the ancient matter.

While preparing for this Conference, it gave me great pleasure to reflect once more on the Icelandic *Physiologi* in order to be able to follow the paths that lead to this garden more precisely. I like to preserve the pleasant image of the Conference's title because it is in real accordance with the texts I shall examine here: the *Physiologus* too may be considered "un giardino (pieno di sterpi pungenti) dove si incrociano i sentieri del Testo e dell'Immaginario", as Corrado Bologna¹ writes referring to *Liber monstrorum de diversis generibus*. Here I shall consider only the *exempla* regarding the onocentaur leaving for a future occasion the analysis of the other chapters and the consequent definition of the Icelandic versions' place within the physiological tradition.

The manuscripts of the two Icelandic fragments, conventionally called *Physiologus A* and *Physiologus B*, were for many years preserved in Copenhagen; today they are again in Iceland, part of the Arni Magnusson Institute in Reykjavík. They are particularly precious because they represent the first illustrated manuscripts produced in Iceland now extant. The two versions are

¹ Cf. Bologna (1997: 27).

both derived from Latin models, but are independent of each other and seem to have been written in about 1200, probably copies of earlier ones about which, however, we have no information. So they are among the oldest literary writings in Iceland and although they may seem less important than other literary production of this period, they are, however, of great interest since they show how the Latin-Christian culture was soon assimilated and manipulated.²

MS AM 673 a I, 4^o, f. 1 *recto* and *verso* preserves the five paragraphs of *Physiologus A*: 1. The Phœnix, 2. The Hoopoe, 3. The Siren, 4. The Fly, 5. The Onocentaur, this being the only chapter without illustration. The hand that traced the four drawings of this *folio* is the same as produced the illustrations we can see in f. 2 *recto* and *verso*: although they are devoid of text it is generally acknowledged that they represent the fabulous nations which are mentioned in Bk. XI, 3 of Isidore's *Etymologiae*.³

MS. AM 673 a II, 4^o, preserves in its first six *folios* the nineteen *exempla* of *Physiologus B*: 1. The Hydra, 2. The Goat, 3. The Wild Ass, 4. The Monkey, 5. The Heron, 6. The Coot, 7. The Panther, 8. The Whale, 9. The Partridge, 10. The Onocentaur, 11. The Weasel, 12. The Asp, 13. The Turtle-dove, 14. The Deer, 15. The Salamander, 16. The Kite, 17. The Boar, 18. The Owl, 19. The Elephant. Each of them is illustrated with the exception of the deer; the elephant is represented in two different drawings, the second of which is devoid of text.⁴

It is not necessary to rewrite the general history of the *Physiologus* here, but it is sufficient to remember that it was originally written down in Alexandria, Egypt, between the end of the second and the beginning of the third century A.D. The first Greek version is known through later Byzantine manuscripts dating from the tenth century.⁵ This short book takes legends, myths, symbols common to ancient Eastern and Mediterranean cultures - particularly Egyptian and Indian - to spread Christian moral and religious teachings. As we all know, *Physiologus* is both the title of the book and the name of the author who is a special kind of 'naturalist' with a thorough knowledge of nature which he interprets in a Christian-allegorical key.⁶

² On the subject see, for example, Hermannsson (1935: 7-9); Hermannsson (1938: 1-4) and Marchand (1976: 501).

³ For more details concerning the *monstra* in the Middle Ages see Lendinara^a (2004) and Lendinara^b (2004).

⁴ On the history of the manuscripts and on their palaeographic characteristics cf. Del Zotto Tozzoli (1992: 17-26).

⁵ An extensive analysis of the *Physiologus* tradition and of its various translations and manipulations may be found in Dolcetti Corazza (1992).

⁶ Cf. Zambon (1984: 709-719).

The chapters of the *Physiologus* concern beasts - real or imaginary - stones and trees; the structure of each chapter is the same and has undergone little change over the centuries: one part is made up of quotations from the *Holy Scriptures* which deal with the contents of the *exemplum* and support the Christian symbolism; another gives an account of the 'nature' (φύσις) of the beast, the stone or the tree in question, and the last presents their allegorical interpretation (ἐρμηνεία).

At the end of the fourth century the Greek *Physiologus* began to spread to regions far removed from its place of origin and reached Russia in the east and Iceland in the west obviously in the course of many centuries. Its various translations or rewritings are usually divided into eastern (Ethiopian, Coptic, Syrian, Arabic, Armenian, Georgian, Slavic [Russian, Serbian, Bulgarian, Czech], Rumanian) and western (Latin). The Germanic (Old-English, High-Old-German and Icelandic) and the Romance versions (French, Provençal, Italian, Waldensian, Catalan) derive from Latin models. Thus the *Physiologus* gradually becomes a kind of best-seller and one of the most popular handbooks of the Middle Ages since its material can be constantly manipulated to suit audiences and employed in instructing Christian believers who were further acquainted with its beast, stone or plant symbology through sermons, sculptures, stained glass windows, paintings, illuminated manuscripts and so on.⁷

The path from Latin versions of the *Physiologus* to the Icelandic ones, leads through England which, as we are aware, fulfilled an important role in spreading written culture in Iceland.

There is no knowing when a Latin *Physiologus* came to England, but in the second half of the ninth century it was profoundly manipulated here and rewritten in alliterative form. The so-called *Anglo-Saxon Physiologus*⁸ is the earliest European vernacular version of the *Physiologus* and it gives clear evidence of the well-known cultural relations between England and the Continent - particularly France - and of the special English interest in the physiological matter. It appears as the mature and original composition of a poet

⁷ From the thirteenth century the most luxurious manuscripts of *Bibles*, *Psalters* and *Book of Hours* are often decorated with *marginalia*: "Sometimes, bestiary creatures were grouped together in the margins in a way that suggests that the viewer would have understood the significance of the grouping based on his or her familiarity with the bestiary texts and imagery" [Hassig (1997: 174)]. The marginal image which presents a pair of centaurs in love is particularly effective [*Isabella Psalter*, f. 11^r: cf. Hassig (1997: 179-180 and plate 23)]: it shows the female standing very close to the male and holding his hand in one hand and his chin in the other.

⁸ It is preserved in the *Exeter Book* (Exeter, Cathedral Library, MS 3501, ff. 95^v-98^r) which dates back to the second half of the tenth century.

who, from his source, chose only three animals: the panther, the whale and the partridge.⁹ Their symbolic meanings link the three poems to each other and are intended to guide Christians along a spiritual path leading to eternal Glory.¹⁰

Between the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries many illustrated Latin *Physiologi* and *Bestiaries* were written down in English *scriptoria*. Their manuscripts are often decorated with splendid miniatures¹¹ and they show very clearly how *Bestiaries* gradually evolved out of the *Physiologus*.¹²

No doubt the Icelandic *Physiologi* derive from models whose origins lie in England: some textual and iconographic features give evidence of this. Here I give only two examples chosen from among the clearest. The first regards the manuscript of *Physiologus A* and more specifically the presence of full-page pen drawings arranged on three rows which illustrate the Isidorian *monstra* (giants, pigmies, cyclops and so on). The presence of drawings of

⁹ The last poem of the *Anglo-Saxon Physiologus* is fragmentary: it concerns a bird whose name is not expressed, but the context suggests a very probable identification with the partridge: for more details see Dolcetti Corazza (1992: 109-114).

¹⁰ On the subject cf. Dolcetti Corazza (1992: 116-119).

¹¹ According to Muratova (1988: 183):

cette floraison [...] doit être liée aux particularités de la culture anglaise qui préserve les échos vivants du folklore celtique, très sensible aux merveilles de la nature. Cette culture prête d'autre part une grande attention au développement de la connaissance de la nature et du monde, formulant les premiers principes d'une méthodologie scientifique. Nulle part ailleurs qu'en Angleterre, le *Bestiaire* ne reçoit une telle importance en tant qu'œuvre indépendante, un si riche développement, une telle expression poétique, un tel décor luxueux.

On the relations between *Bestiaries* e Romanesque stone carving see Muratova (1987: 337-354). Particularly on the iconographic features cf. Boase (1953: 88-91); Klingender (1971: 382-400) and Kauffmann (1975:11-15). A more general presentation is to be found in Rickert (1961) who reproduces about sixty illustrations from illuminated manuscripts of *Psalters*, *Calendars*, *Bibles* and *Books of Hours*. For details on the important centres of *Bestiary* use in England cf. Baxter (1998: 169-181).

¹² In order to follow the variation and growth of *Bestiaries* we still refer to the system of *Bestiary Families* built on the works of James (1928: 5-25) and McCulloch (1962: 25-40): in short it is made up of a 'First Family' which is formed by the so called *B+Is* versions (that is manuscripts which follow the order and content of the *Versio B*, but which contain additions from Isidore), of a 'Second Family' whose manuscripts are characterized by the classification of the content following Isidore Bk. XII, the inclusion of many chapters with no moral interpretation and the addition of material from Solinus and Ambrose, of a 'Third Family' and of a 'Fourth Family' which contain ever-wider *Bestiaries* with chapters derived from the vast Latin mediaeval encyclopaedias. See also Yapp (1985: 7-11). On a critical revision of this system see Baxter (1998: 87-143). The division into families aims to clarify the evolution of the physiological matter, but obviously the manipulation and rewriting typical of these texts defy rigid classifications.

this kind in *Bestiaries* can be found in many English manuscripts of the first half of the thirteenth century which follow a different pattern: the drawings may precede or follow the text or may or may not be accompanied by a text.¹³ The second example shows a plainly English linguistic-textual influence. It is found in the chapter dedicated to the goat in *Physiologus B*: here the animal is called *gāt*, a word which compared with the Old-Icelandic *geit* clearly reveals its Old-English origin. The Icelandic compiler was evidently looking at a Latin manuscript which had come from England complete with Old-English glosses.¹⁴

Scholars agree in thinking that the source of the Icelandic *Physiologi* is to be found in the Latin version conventionally called *Versio B*.¹⁵ Although this statement is true in a general sense, it acts as a screen which hides a much more complex reality, even if it is justified by the great popularity enjoyed by the *Versio B* in Europe. In fact it is preserved in about twenty manuscripts: the most important is Berne, Burgerbibliothek, MS lat. 233, ff. 1^r-13^f (ninth century). According to Carmody's edition¹⁶ it presents thirty seven chapters traditionally dealing with beasts, stones and plants;¹⁷ however it shows some independence from its Greek model both in the sequence of the chapters and in their contents which appear manipulated and enriched with greater details concerning quotations from the *Bible* and moral teachings. Evidence of this may be found by comparing, for instance, the Greek *exem-*

¹³ See for example Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 88, ff. 68^r-116^v; Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, MS 254, ff. 1^r-48^r; Cambridge, University Library, MS Kk 4.25, ff. 48^r-86^f; London, Westminster Abbey Library, MS 22, ff. 1^r-54^r (of particular interest because a symbolic meaning - obviously negative - is given to these *monstra* too, in order to communicate moral messages); London, Sion College, MS Arc. L. 40. 2/L. 28, ff. 73^r-104^v, 110^r-112^v, 113^r-116^f (the *Bestiary*), ff. 117^r-120^f (the pictures of *monstra*): cf. Ker (1969: 283-284). For their description and more details cf. James (1928: 23-25), McCulloch (1962: 39), Friedmann (1981: 123-125), Morgan (1982: no. 53, 55), Morgan (1988: no. 172).

¹⁴ Cf. Dolcetti Corazza (1992: 196, 216).

¹⁵ Among the large number of the extant Latin manuscripts scholars have been able to distinguish different versions called *Versio A, B, C, Y*; the earliest surviving manuscripts date back to the eighth, ninth and tenth centuries: for more details see Dolcetti Corazza (1992: 49-56).

¹⁶ Cf. Carmody (1939). The English translation by Curley (1979) is based on this edition; he also took into account the *Versio Y* edited by Carmody (1941).

¹⁷ They are: 1. The Lion, 2. The Antelope, 3. The Fire Stones, 4. The Swordfish, 5. The Charadrius, 6. The Pelican, 7. The Owl, 8. The Eagle, 9. The Phoenix, 10. The Hoopoe, 11. The Ant, 12. The Siren and the Onocentaur, 13. The Hedgehog, 14. The Ibis, 15. The Fox, 16. The Unicorn, 17. The Beaver, 18. The Hyena, 19. The Hydra, 20. The Gazelle, 21. The Wild Ass and the Monkey, 22. The Heron, 23. The Panther, 24. The Whale, 25. The Partridge, 26. The Weasel, 27. The Ostrich, 28. The Turtle-dove, 29. The Deer, 30. The Salamander, 31. The Doves, 32. The Peridexion Tree, 33. The Elephant, 34. The Sycomore, 35. The Adamant Stone, 36. The Pearl, 37. The Lizard.

plum dealing with the siren and the onocentaur with the Latin version of the same chapter:

*On Sirens and Onocentaurs*¹⁸

The prophet Isaiah said: “Demons and sirens and hedgehogs will dance in Babylon” (*Is.* 13. 22). The Physiologus says about sirens and onocentaurs that sirens are murderous animals, and live in the sea, and with their melodious voices charm those who hear them so that they are led to sleep and even to death. Their upper half as far as the navel has a human appearance, the lower half is like that of a goose. Similarly centaurs have upper parts like those of a man, but its lower parts are like those of an ass.

Interpretation

Thus it is for “every man who is hesitant and uncertain in his designs” (*Jam.* 1. 8). There are men who gather in the church and have the appearance of pi-

¹⁸ Cf. Kaimakis (1974: 42a):

Περὶ σειρήνων καὶ ονοκενταύρων

Ἐλάλησεν Ἐσαΐας ὁ προφήτης ὅτι “δαίμονια καὶ σειρήνες καὶ ἐχῖνοι ὀρχήσονται ἐν Βαβυλῶνι. Ὁ Φυσιόλογος ἔλεξεν περὶ τῶν σειρήνων καὶ τῶν ονοκενταύρων, ὅτι αἱ μὲν σειρήνες ζῶα θανάσιμά εἰσιν ἐν τῇ θαλάσσῃ, καὶ μουσικαῖς ταῖς φωναῖς ἠδύνουσι τοὺς ἀκούοντας, ὥστε καὶ εἰς ὕπνον τραπῆναι μέχρι καὶ θανάτου. Τὸ μὲν ἥμισυ μέρος ἕως ὀμφαλοῦ ἀνθρώπου ἔχουσιν μορφήν, καὶ τὸ ἥμισυ ἕως ἕξω χηνός.

*Ὁμοίως καὶ οἱ ὀνοκενταυροὶ τὸ ἥμισυ μέρος ἔχουσι ἀνθρώπου, τὸ δὲ ἥμισυ ἕως ἕξω ὄνου.

*Ἑρμηνεία.

Οὕτως καὶ πᾶς ἀνὴρ δίψυχος ἀκατάστατος ἐν πάσαις τοῖς ὁδοῖς αὐτοῦς· εἰσὶν τινες συναγόμενοι ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ μόρφωσιν μὲν ἔχοντες εὐσεβείας, τὴν δὲ δύναμιν αὐτῆς ἀρνούμενοι· καὶ ἐν ἡ ἐκκλησίᾳ ὡς ἄνθρωποι εἰσιν, ἐπὶ δὲ ἐκ τῆς ἐκκλησίας ἀπολυθῶσιν, ἀποκτεθῶνται· οἱ τοιοῦτοι οὖν σειρήνων καὶ ὀνοκενταύρων πρόσωπον.

Hippocentaurs (centaurs) may be found instead of onocentaurs in some manuscripts of the Greek *Physiologus* [cf. Kaimakis (1974: 42a-42b)]. Onocentaurs are destined to prevail in the latter versions while hippocentaurs continue to be present in texts dealing with fabulous animals, where, however, onocentaurs also appear: see, for example, chapters 7 and 10 of *Liber monstrorum de diversis generibus*: [Bologna (1977: 44, 46)]. A centaur with a bow and arrows is Sagittarius – emblem of the homonymous constellation – which may often be seen in the illuminated manuscripts of medieval calendars: cf. Henkel (1976: 175, note 72) and Ohlgren (1986: 72, 81, 152, 250, 251). Onocentaurs too are often provided with bows and arrows as we can see, for example, in Cambridge, MS Sidney Sussex College 100, ff. 26^r-43^r, thirteenth century, [cf. George-Yupp (1991: 78-79), James (1928:11) and McCulloch (1962:32-33)] and in London, British Library, MS Sloane 278, ff. 44^r-57^r, thirteenth century, which preserves a version of *Dicta Chrisostomi* [cf. George-Yupp (1991: 78-79) and McCulloch (1962: 42)]; in Cambridge, University Library, MS Kk. 4. 25, ff. 48^r-86^r, thirteenth century, the hippocentaur shoots an arrow while the onocentaur brandishes a club [cf. George-Yupp (1991: 79-80) and James (1928: 23-24)].

ety, although they deny its power (*II Tim.* 3, 5). In the Church they are like men, but when they leave the church, they become beasts. They are like sirens and onocentaurs.

Sirenae et onocentauri (Versio B)

Isaias propheta dicit: Sirena et daemonia saltabunt in Babylonia, et herinacii et onocentauri habitabunt in domibus eorum [Esai. 13.22]. Unius cuiusque natura Physiologus disseruit: sirenae (inquit) animalia sunt mortifera; quae a capite usque ad umbilicum figuram hominis habent, extrema uero pars usque ad pedes uolatilium habent figuram; et musicum quoddam ac dulcissimum melodiae carmen canunt, ita ut per suauitatem uocis auditus hominum a longe nauigantium mulceant et ad se trahant, ac nimia suauitate modulationis prolixae aures ac sensus eorum delinientes in somnum uertunt. Tunc deinde, cum uiderint eos grauissimo somno sopitos, inuadunt eos et dilaniant carnes eorum, ac sic persuasionis uocis ignaros et insipientes homines decipiunt et mortificant sibi. Sic igitur et illi decipiuntur qui deliciis huius saeculi et pompis et theatralibus uoluptatibus, tragediis ac diuersis musicis dissoluti, et uelut grauati somno sopiti efficiuntur aduersariorum praeda.

Onocentaurus duabus naturis constare Physiologus asserit, id est: superior pars hominis similis est, inferiores uero partis membra sunt naturae ualde agrestis. Huic assimilantur uecordes atque bilingues homines informes; dicente apostolo: Habentes autem promissionem pietatis, uirtutem autem eius abnegantes [2 Tim. 3. 5]. Propheta Dauid dicit: Homo cum in honore esset, non intellexit: comparatus est iumentis insipientibus, et similis factus est illis [Ps. 48. 21].¹⁹

In order to go on with my considerations, it is time to introduce the Icelandic texts on the onocentaur:

Physiologus A

Honocentaurus heitir dýr þat vér kǫllum finngálkan. Þat er maðr fram en dýr aþtr, ok markar þat óeinarðarmenn í vexti sínum. Þat kallask at bókmáli rangt ok dýrum glíkt, ef maðr mælir eptir þeim, sem þá er hjá, þótt sá mæli rangt. Réttorðr skal góðr maðr of alla hluti ávalt, hvárt sem er auðigrí eða snauðr.²⁰

Honocentaurus is the name of the animal we call *finngálkan*. It is a man in its fore part and an animal in its hind part and symbolizes unfaithful men in its appearance. In the Holy Scriptures it is considered false and worthy of a beast for a man to flatter those who are near him, although they speak falsely.²¹

Good men, both rich and poor, must always be sincere.

¹⁹ Cf. Carmody (1939: 25-26).

²⁰ For the Icelandic texts see Hermannsson (1938: 17, 20). For a lithographic facsimile of the manuscript included in a diplomatic edition see Dahlerup (1889: 199-290, 8 facsimis.)

²¹ Cf. *2Tim.* 3, 5 e *Ps.* 48, 21.

Physiologus B

Honocentaurus hefir upp líking manns en niðr dýrs, ok hefir tvenn mál ok hefsk á teigum úti at mæla við menn.

Svá sem postoli mælir: 'Hafendr fyrirheit mildi, en krapt hans neitendr'; ok Davið propheta: 'maðr, þá er hann var í vegsemd, eigi skildi hann, ok er hann samvirðr óvitrum kykvendum ok er þeim orðinn glíkr.

Honocentaurus has its fore part like a man and its hind part like an animal, it has a double tongue and lingers in the meadows to talk with men.

So as the Apostle says: "He promises gentleness, but denies his force",²² and the prophet David: "Man, when he was in Glory, did not understand, and is considered to be like a foolish animal and has become similar to them".²³

If we compare the above quoted piece of the Latin text concerning the onocentaur with the two Icelandic chapters, we immediately realize that the latter are so concise that they cannot be in anyway considered 'translations' in the proper sense of the word. This characteristic is common to every *exemplum* of the Icelandic versions whose illustrations usually integrate what is omitted in the text.

Since no illustrated manuscripts of the *Versio B* are extant, it follows that it is necessary to look for other models within the Latin production originating in England. So in this case the transmission of the text and the transmission of the illustrative cycles interlace with each other in a complex way.²⁴ To understand the kind of relationship and dependence which links the Icelandic *Physiologi* to their sources – textual as well as iconographic – we must attempt to untie this knot.

In the physiological tradition the sequence of the chapters is an important feature in defining the interdependence of the different versions on each other. As regards this aspect, the two Icelandic *Physiologi* vary in differing degrees from the Latin *Versio B*. In fact the five *exempla* of the *Physiologus A* reproduce the order of chapters nine-twelve of the Latin version, but a very significant difference may be seen: the siren and the onocentaur are dealt with in two different paragraphs and are separated by the ant.²⁵ *Physi-*

²² Cf. *2Tim.* 3, 5.

²³ Cf. *Ps.* 48, 21.

²⁴ On the problem of relations between transmission of text and transmission of illuminations in English Bestiary manuscripts see Muratova (1994: 579- 605).

²⁵ See p. 224 and p. 227, note 17.

ologus B is much more independent of the Latin source and includes chapters about the heron, the kite and the boar which are absent in the *Versio B*.²⁶ The separate presentation of the siren and the onocentaur²⁷ breaks the more ancient physiological tradition where the two *monstra* occurred in the same chapter since they are both characterized by a bodily ambiguity which symbolizes false and deceitful behaviour.²⁸

The separation from the siren decided the future fate of the onocentaur: it may be intended, I think, as the prelude of its premature disappearance from the scene²⁹ in favour of the siren that enjoys great success throughout the Middle Ages (and beyond). In fact, while the onocentaur's physical appearance remains unchanged over the centuries, the siren is so dynamic that it undergoes important metamorphoses and feeds the fantasy of poets, writers, painters and so on.³⁰

²⁶ See p. 224 and p. 227, note 17. Both the Icelandic *Physiologi* lack chapters dealing with plants or stones.

²⁷ At first it may be found in versions derived on the whole from the Latin *Versio B-Is* and later in many *Bestiaries* written down especially in England as we can see in the Bk. II of *De Bestiis et aliis rebus* (twelfth century), incorrectly attributed to Hugo of Saint Victor [cf. McCulloch (1962: 30-31)], in the *Bestiaire* of the Anglo-Norman poet Philippe de Thaon [twelfth century; cf. Wright (1841: 23-24, 27-28)], in the *Bestiary* preserved in New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS 81 [twelfth century; cf. Kauffmann (1975: 126-127)], in a *Bestiary* of the thirteenth century [cf. Millar (1958: ff. 9^v, 14^f)]; here the onocentaur is called *monocentaurus!*, in the rhymed *Bestiaire* of the Norman poet Gervaise [thirteenth century, cf. Meyer (1872: 19-20)]. However, the siren and the onocentaur are still treated together, for example, in the *Physiologus* preserved in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Douce 167, ff. 1^f-12^f, thirteenth century [cf. McCulloch (1962: 29 and plate VIII, 2)].

²⁸ On the Christian symbolism of these *monstra* see Réau (1955: 118-120; 121-124).

²⁹ The onocentaur begins to be absent in the *Bestiaries* of the Second Family; see, for example, the *Bestiaries* preserved in the following manuscripts (twelfth-thirteenth century): Cambridge, University Library, MS li. 4. 26, ff. 1^f-74^f; Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 1511 and MS Bodley 764 [for short descriptions of manuscripts in the Bodleian Library cf. Pächt-Alexander (1973)]; London, British Library MS Add. 11283; Aberdeen, University Library, MS 24. Cf. Morgan (1982: no. 17, 21) and Morgan (1988: no. 98).

³⁰ In the chapter dedicated to the siren in *Libro della natura degli animali* or *Bestiario toscano* (thirteenth century) the siren seems to have 'absorbed' the centaur according to that process of contamination and accumulation which characterizes the physiological matter and which sometimes produces new *monstra*:

La serena si è una criatura molto nova, ché elle sonno di tre nature. L'una si è meço pescie e meça facta a similitudine de femena; l'altra si è meço uccello e meço femena; l'altra si è meço como cavallo e meço como femena.

Cf. Morini (1996: 444).

Now I will turn my attention to onocentaurs in order to redress the wrongs they suffered.

In the Icelandic *Physiologi* the onocentaur is present and it is actually the one animal that appears in both the versions,³¹ but only in *B* the relative illustration has been preserved (see Table 1). The chapters dealing with the onocentaur are concise in comparison with the Latin source and report just the essential features:

1. the Latin name *onocentaurus*; it is obviously a loan-word from the Gr. ὄνοκένταυρος which is first to be found in Aelian's *De natura animalium* Bk. XVII, 9,³² where the *monstrum* is described in this way: "[...] it is like a man in the face; [...] its back, flanks, belly, and hind feet resemble an ass, and it is of a grey colour as an ass, but under the belly (at the flanks) it approaches to white [...]"³³ As Druce noted,³⁴ the analogies with the ass caused it to receive the name of ὄνοκένταυρος on the model of ἵπποκένταυρος, a more appropriate word than κένταυρος for defining the physical aspect of this animal, half man and half horse. According to classical mythology centaurs are characterized by a great physical force and by violent and brutal behaviour: in consequence of this in the Christian sources they become symbols of evil passions and of Satan himself.³⁵
2. The physical description: half man, half animal, without any other details.
3. The symbolic meaning (falseness), obviously connected with the physical ambiguity.
4. The references to the *Holy Scriptures*.³⁶

³¹ See pp. 229-230.

³² Cf. Liddell-Scott (1992⁹: s. u. ὄνοκένταυρος). For Aelian's influence on the *Physiologus* see Sbordone (1936: 21-23).

³³ Cf. Druce (1915: 179).

³⁴ Druce (1915: 179).

³⁵ However, a part of this race shows positive qualities as, for example, Chiron, the well-known tutor of Achilles: Cf. Clébert (1971: 80-81) and Charbonneau-Lassay (1995: 503-510). Further details about centaurs as literary characters in Indo-European myths and religious rites, may be found in Dumézil (1929).

³⁶ The Icelandic versions do not report the quotation which in the *Versio B* introduces the chapter *Sirenae et onocentauri* (see p. 229) where the onocentaur is mentioned together with the siren [see also the Latin *Versio Y*: "*Syrene et onocentauri et daemonia et heranacii uenient in Babilonia et saltabunt*". Cf. Carmody (1941: 113)]. The passage refers to *Isaiah* 13, 21, 22 where we read the prophecy of the fall of Babylon: "But wild beasts shall rest there, and their houses shall be filled with serpents, and ostriches shall dwell there, and the hairy ones shall dance there, and owls shall answer one another there, in the houses thereof, and sirens in the temples of pleasure". Cf. Kaiser (2002: 39) and Blenkinsopp (2000: 280). In this dramatic description the names of the animals quoted may be different from version to version: in fact the onocentaur does not occur in the Hebrew *Bible*, but makes its entry into the Greek version (*Septuaginta*) where the term ὄνοκένταυρος 'translates' the Hebr. 'iyyim lit. 'those who howl'

These elements are common to both Icelandic chapters and bind them to tradition, even though to a different degree; other features introduce innovations which are not shared, however, by the two *Physiologi*. Their content, thus, appears different, but their catechizing and didactic purpose remains identical, and is even reinforced when compared with the source.

As regards *Physiologus A*, the compiler identifies the onocentaur with a native monster called *finngálkan*.³⁷ The etymological analysis of the word suggests that it was a *monstrum* provided with magic powers,³⁸ while literary sources give evidence of a dangerous, aggressive, half-human creature described in later sagas as a flying female monster.³⁹ We cannot assess this identification correctly since unfortunately the drawing is lost: however, I think that the reference to the *finngálkan* can be explained on the assumption that the author was not particularly interested in presenting a foreign monster with specific physical characteristics, but rather in presenting a creature which was known to behave badly. In this way the negative symbology represented by the onocentaur's 'nature' and the exhortation to avoid it (that is to avoid those who deceive by flattery) become easier for all to understand. This didactic purpose is confirmed by the final exhortation to be sincere which has not been suggested by the Latin *Versio B* where the description of the onocentaur's 'nature' and symbolism simply continue the items of the passage on the siren.

In *Physiologus B* the didactic purpose is equally as important, but is expressed in a completely different way. When the author writes “[the onocen-

that is 'jackals' [cf. Vigouroux (1895: 613); id. (1908: 821-822)]. In *Vulgata* it was substituted by *ululae* 'owls', as Jerome himself says in Bk. V of his *Commentary to Isaiah*: "*Pro onocentauris quoque, quos soli LXX interpretati sunt, imitantes gentilium fabulas, qui dicunt fuisse hippocentauros, tres reliqui interpretes ipsum posuere uerbum hebraicum IHIM, quod nos in ululas uertimus*" [cf. Gryson / Deproost (1994: 712)]. At this point it is evident that the compiler of the *Versio B* was acquainted with the possible presence of the onocentaur in this context [cf. critical *apparatus* concerning these passages in *Biblia Sacra* (1969: 68)] and made the right choice to cite this *monstrum* in the introduction to the chapter dealing with the siren and the onocentaur. The onocentaur also occurs in *Vulgata* in *Isaiah* 34, 14: "*et occurrent daemonia onocentauris [...]*" [cf. *Biblia Sacra* (1969: 136)]: the context is very similar to the one previously quoted since it concerns the ruin of Edom.

³⁷ In the various versions of the *Physiologus* I have had the opportunity to read, I have never found other examples of identification between fabulous creatures belonging to different cultures.

³⁸ For this problem cf. Dolcetti Corazza (1985-86: 147-150).

³⁹ Cf. Hermannsson (1966: 9). For what I am about to say I feel unable to share his hypothesis: “[...] I am inclined to think that he [= the author] conceived of the onocentaur as a bird-siren [...]”.

taur] lingers in the meadows to talk with men”, he resorts to a narrative feature which – as far as I am aware – does not appear in this form anywhere else. The novelty consists both in having placed the onocentaur itself standing in front of the men and in having indicated the meadows as the place where the dialogue takes place. In some Latin versions similar situations may be found, but the onocentaur is never the leading character. The leading characters are the men, those who speak in one way and behave in another – even though they go to Church⁴⁰ – or those who like to go to the theatre⁴¹ or take the *pulpita* (that is, the pulpits for preachers or the stages in a theatre).⁴² The didactic message of this chapter is emphasized by the relative illustration which, as it follows the text, is clearly subordinated to it (see Table 1).

In both the Icelandic *Physiologi* the pen drawings were inserted with the purpose of telling what the text omits:⁴³ they usually appear between chapters, unframed, but sometimes partially defined by a simple line. They are not of excellent quality and now very little of the original colouring can be seen. On the whole they appear as an example of one of the two styles of illustrating medieval *Physiologi* and *Bestiaries*, the other one being illumination. Here I cannot enter into details, but I might mention that these two styles are linked by definite connections – although sometimes difficult to single out – and both belong “to the same Carolingian revival of late ancient art that supplied the models for the Anglo-Saxon illustrators of scientific books”.⁴⁴

The two different styles are well represented by the two earlier illustrated Latin *Physiologi* that survive: the oldest is preserved in Berne, Burgerbibliothek, MS. 318 (ff. 7^r-22^v, ninth century) and is decorated with illuminations which point to a late Alexandrian model,⁴⁵ the second in Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, MS. 10066-77 (ff. 140^r-156^v, tenth century) where the chap-

⁴⁰ As may be read in the *Versio Y* with references to the *Holy Scriptures*: cf. Carmody (1941: 114).

⁴¹ As may be read in a passage of the chapter *De Syrenis et Onocentauris* in *Dicta Chrisostomi*: cf. Wilhelm (1960: 24).

⁴² As may be read in *Physiologus Theobaldi*: cf. Eden (1972: 62-63).

⁴³ Some exceptions may be found: they are caused by serious misunderstandings of the source as in the chapters dealing with the hoopoe and the ant; cf. Dolcetti Corazza (1992: 210-213). For some aspects of the complex relationship that links the verbal and iconographic features in medieval Germanic manuscripts see Saibene / Buzzoni (2001).

⁴⁴ Cf. Klingender (1971: 383). For the importance of the Carolingian revival in the development of Christian imagery cf. Lecouteux (1998²: 61-66).

⁴⁵ It belongs to the school of Rheims – probably it was illustrated at Fleury – and contains the so called *Versio C* regarded as the earliest Latin version (twenty-four *exempla* dealing with animals, stones and plants): cf. Steiger / Homburger (1964). For the relationship between text and image see Lund (1997).

ters in ff. 140^v-147^r are illustrated by pen drawings (spaces left blank lead to presume that a greater number of illustrations were intended). Unlike most bestiary illustrations, these show also the text's moralization.⁴⁶

The comparison between the illustrations of the siren and the onocentaur which appear in the two manuscripts quoted above (see Tables 2 and 3) reveals an obviously different technique, but above all it proves that they correspond to a different way of representing the text: the *Bernensis* 318 shows the traditional representation of the two *monstra* combined in the same miniature as they were described in the same chapter, while the *Bruxellensis* 10066-77 presents two separate drawings which are real narrative scenes enriched with new details, even though the text continues to reflect the tradition. The drawing of the onocentaur is placed after that of the siren and represents the monster in a very particular attitude: it is holding up a hare by its hind legs and piercing it with a spear.⁴⁷ The moralization is illustrated by the presence of two men wearing tunics, one also with a mantel fastened by a brooch on the right shoulder: their lively dialogue is emphasized by gestures. In this case it is evident that text and image follow two different traditions and originate from the contamination of different examples.

The earlier Latin *Physiologi* written down in England in the first half of the twelfth century and illustrated with line drawings follow the iconographic model of the *Bruxellensis*, but omit the moralization: they are the Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Misc. Laud 247 and the London, British Library, MS Stowe 1067⁴⁸ (see Tables 4 and 5).

⁴⁶ It was probably compiled in northern France and contains the so called *Versio A* which shows a composite origin with elements derived from *Versio Y* and *Versio B* (thirty-six *exempla* dealing with animals, stones and plants). For the commented edition of the text cf. Cahier / Martin (1951-56). The drawings of the *Physiologus* are very similar to those which decorate a copy of Prudence's *Psychomachia* preserved in the same codex, ff. 112^r-139^r: cf. Stettiner (1895: 61-69). Further details about these manuscripts may be found in Klingender (1971: 382-384), in Silvestre (1979: 140-143), in Muratova (1984: 384-390) and in Baxter (1998: 62-72).

⁴⁷ An onocentaur holding a hare in its right hand and a spear in its left may be seen in an illustrated copy of Cicero's *Aratea* preserved in London, British Library, MS Cotton Tiberius B. V., f. 43^r: cf. Ohlgren (1986: 252). In the physiological Christian context the hare's presence underlines the negative symbology linked to the onocentaur-hunter: in fact in Christian mentality hunting becomes the symbol of the struggle between good and evil. Thus the hunter represents the devil himself and hunted animals, such as deer, hares, doves, represent the souls he tempts and strikes. The same symbolism may be attributed to the snake held up by the onocentaur in one of the illustrations (f. 9^v) of the *Bestiary* preserved in the Library of Alnwick Castle: cf. Millar (1958) and Morgan (1988: no. 115).

⁴⁸ Cf. Kauffmann (1975: 75-76) and Baxter (1998: 83-100) where the author compares the two manuscripts. For further details see James (1928: 7-10); Klingender (1971: 384) and Mu-

In Laud 247 (f. 147^r) the onocentaur is combined with the siren who seems to beckon him. The two monsters are of course physically different, but they share two iconographic details: the belt connecting their human half to the animal, and the gesture of the beckoning finger which appears to establish some kind of contact between them, further emphasized by their glances. The onocentaur wears a pointed cap. These latter two features may be found in the drawing of the onocentaur in the MS Stowe 1067 (f. 1^v) even though here the cap has two points and the representation appears on the whole more complex (here the onocentaur is separated from the siren).

As I said above, the step from England to Iceland is a short one: the pen drawing representing the Icelandic onocentaur belongs to the same graphic tradition as these manuscripts, especially with regards to the details of the scene (see Table 1).

Here the monster is placed in a narrative scene which illustrates the text faithfully and effectually even though references to nature (the meadow, for example) have been omitted. It shows a dialogue situation where the monster and the men are on the same level and this very fact may be evidence that the illustrator wanted to emphasize the onocentaur's human part to the detriment of the animal. Obviously this choice might have been dictated by a lack of space, however I have never found this feature elsewhere. The onocentaur is bare-headed with some short hair on the nape of the neck. There is no trace of violence in its attitude, and indeed its face has a mild and persuasive look⁴⁹ while it is turning to the men with its arms open and its finger beckoning to them. Our attention is drawn by the large open right hand which might have a particular meaning since in medieval symbology large hands represent 'power' and when they belong to ancient pagan creatures, this 'power' has a negative quality.⁵⁰ The whole scene shows that the onocentaur has lost, so to speak, the abstract quality of its symbolism and has become a 'human' creature which appears exactly like the men who seduce by flattering words, but are deceptive in their actions.

ratova (1985: 1330-33). The same iconographic tradition is present in London, British Library, MS Additional 11283: cf. Rickert (1954: 76).

⁴⁹ On the contrary in some English *Bestiaries* the representation of the struggle between onocentaurs and men is accompanied by violent behaviour: see, for example, the *Bestiary* (late thirteenth century) preserved in the Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS 602 (ff. 1^r-36^r). Here the illustration shows a pair of onocentaurs which have caught a man, cut him in half and slung him across their flanks. The male is holding a sword while a man on the left is piercing it near the right shoulder. On the right the female is being pierced in the breast with an arrow shot by a man hidden on a tree. It is a fight scene which is completely independent from the text: cf. Druce (1915: 182), Morgan (1982: no. 54) and George / Yapp (1991: 78-79).

⁵⁰ Cf. Beigbeder (1989: 74).

The moralization is represented by the two men on the right who are listening to the words of the onocentaur; they appear to be on the defensive, perhaps afraid. One of the two figures is naked while the other is clothed and armed with a sword. I believe that this iconography is not meaningless, but has a deep symbolic significance: it indicates the contrast between he who is prey to flattery (that is to the devil) and he who succeeds, or has succeeded, in overcoming temptations. In fact many biblical passages demonstrate the infamy of nudity: I will mention only the episode of the Gadarene man possessed by the devil who is described as naked, but when he is rid of the devil, he is clothed (Lk. 8, 27. 35).⁵¹ Thus in the Icelandic drawing the clothed man symbolizes him who has been able to fight and win (see the sword) and his gesture of covering the naked man with his mantle as if he wanted to aid and protect him, may suggest and prefigure the triumph of good.

If my interpretation is correct, it follows that here the image and the text interact with each other profoundly and succeed in making very effective that didactic message the author was interested in communicating.

From the analysis of the chapters dealing with the onocentaurs in the Icelandic *Physiologi*, I am enabled to express some hypotheses which are not definite for the moment since they must be confirmed (or not) by the analysis of the other *exempla*. The two versions, although independent of each other, present however the common characteristic of being rewritings and manipulations of the physiological matter for which it is neither possible nor correct to indicate a single source. Their dependence on the Latin *Versio B* must be considered as nothing other than a distant landmark: other sources are to be taken into account even if they cannot be recognized precisely since, from the eleventh century onwards, the channels of transmission of physiological data show a tendency to increase in number and to cross each other. In all probability versions of these renewed Latin *Physiologi* – and from now on it is better to speak of *Bestiaries* – reached Iceland and became the model for the Icelandic fragments. Although they originate from an ancient tradition, each of them appears however to be characterized by the new features I underlined above; moreover, in both of them the narrative proceeds with a colloquial and moralizing tone which may not be found in the earlier versions of the *Physiologus*. Evidence for this prevailing didactic purpose may also be considered the omission of the biblical quotations which traditionally introduce the animals dealt with in each chapter, while

⁵¹ Even the onocentaur is depicted as naked and appears so in almost all artistic representations including sculptures which adorn Romanesque cathedrals: cf. Beigbeder (1989: 289-290).

the final biblical references have been kept since they exhort to good behaviour. Thus the two Icelandic *Physiologi*, in which tradition and innovation mingle profoundly with each other, became indispensable books for the local clergy in many occasions: they may be supposed to have been used for individual meditation, as schoolbooks for instructing novices, for being read aloud to an audience of monks and especially for preparing sermons for which their texts and illustrations provided a good deal of material.⁵²

⁵² For similar conclusions see the analysis of the chapter dealing with the kite (*Physiologus B* 16) by Faraci (1990: 108-126).

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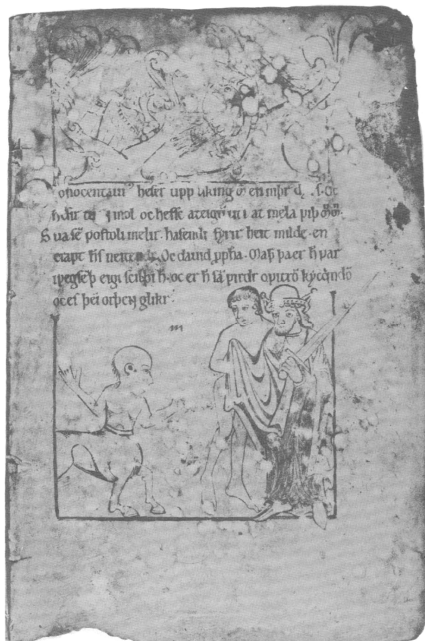


Table 1. Reykjavík, Árni Magnússon Institute, MS AM 673 a II 4°, f 4^r

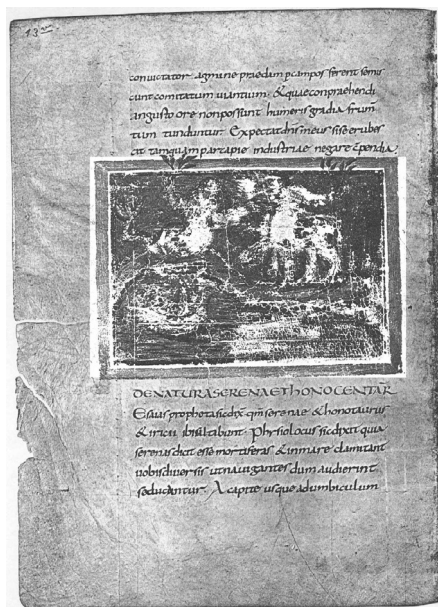


Table 2. Berne, Burgerbibliothek, MS 318, f. 13^v



Table 3. Brussels, Bibliothèque Royale, MS 10066-77 f. 146^v



Table 4. Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Laud 247, f. 147^r

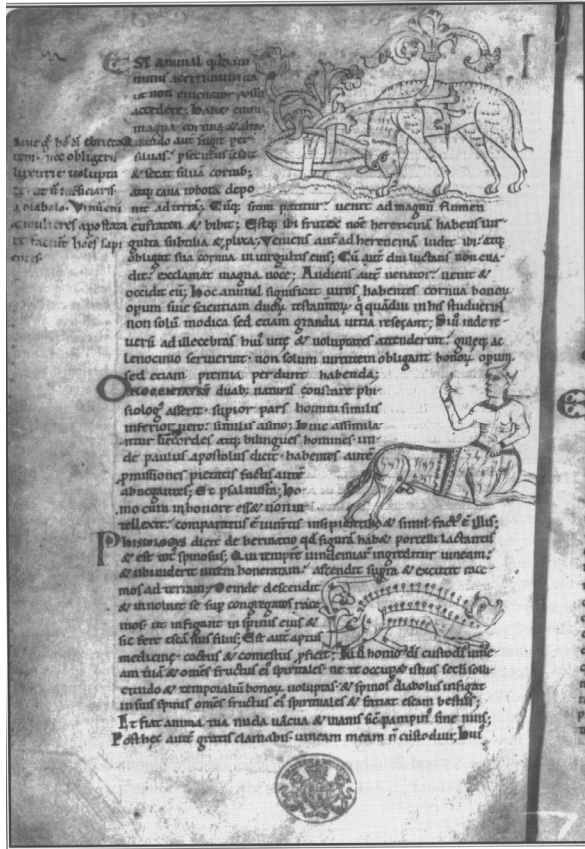


Table 5. London, British Library, MS Stowe 1067, f. 1v