Medieval illuminated chronicles, breviaries, codices, psalters and manuals include a wealth of texts and images in which dogs play an important role. Here is the story.

**BONDSMEN, FARMERS, NOBILITY AND CLERGY**

Historians count the Middle Ages as between the 5th and 15th centuries. The development of agriculture, rise of towns, extension of markets and trade; the position of bondsmen, farmers, nobility and clergy; and the evolution of secular art from the heritage of religious art were important events during these centuries.

But at the same time, pestilence, famine, endless dissensions, and bloody wars made it a dark time in medieval Europe.

In the early Middle Ages, the nobility had complete authority over a mass of commoners. Farmers had to turn over most of their output to the landowners, and respect their privileges, including hunting, fishing and judicial rights.

The contrasts were huge. While commoners lived in miserable circumstances, the nobility and clergy lived in luxury.

Images of medieval dogs show an almost exclusive relationship with the highly placed. Bondsmen, serfs and farmers had no belongings; they were themselves someone’s possession.

**SOURCES**

The sources I referred to for this article are diverse: handwritten manuscripts, printed books, books of hours, breviaries, bestiaries and how-to books for the medieval upper class. The *Rochester Bestiary* is an outstanding example of a manuscript with many pictures of dogs. It is almost unbelievable that, at the beginning of the 13th century, artists could create such a beautiful and accurate work.

In the Middle Ages, dogs were depicted on parchment or vellum – as central figures in manuals and hunting books, or in marginalia, as decorations for the text – but also on walls, tapestries and implements.

The hunting scenes on The *Bayeux Tapestry*, made in the 1070s, and the *Devonshire Hunting Tapestries*, made between 1430 and 1450, are well-known, as is a series of seven tapestries, the *Unicorn Tapestries*, thought to have been woven in Brussels between 1495 and 1505. They depict a group of noblemen, hunters and dogs searching for the elusive unicorn.

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**DIVERSE MANNER OF HOUNDS**

In the period between the 8th and 15th centuries, there were no purebred dogs as we know them today, but there were certainly differences among the varieties. These differences reflected the work they were used for: hunting, guarding, herding, and little lap dogs for the ladies. There were also mongrels and stray dogs.

*The Booke of Saint Albans*, a treatise for hunting, falconry and heraldry printed in 1486 by Dame Juliana Berners, prioress of St. Mary’s Convent in Sopwell, Hertfordshire, is an important book in medieval literature. As Johnnes Caius would 80 years later in *Of Englishe Dogges* (1570), Juliana enumerates the then-present “diverse manner of hounds: greyhound, bastard, mongrel, mastiff, lymer, spaniel, rache, kenet, terrier, butcher’s hound, mydding dogges, trundle-tail, prick-eared cur and small ‘laydes poppees’ that bear away the fleas.”

The author Kathleen Walker-Meikle translated “bastard” as “greyhound cross.” Maybe she meant a lurcher. In her book *Medieval Dogs*, there is no further explanation concerning the mongrel.

**LAYDES DOGGES**

The lymer (or limer) hunted by scent. In the Middle Ages, the lymer was used for hunting big game. Its type was more or less similar to the present-day Bloodhound. Other names were lyam hound or lime hound, “lyam” being the Middle English word for “leash.”

“Rache,” meaning scent hound, is another word that has passed into disuse. The rache hunted in a pack and killed the exhausted prey. The kennet was a small hunting dog, and mydding dogges guarded the farm. A trundle-tail was a dog with a curled tail, and the prick-eared cur was a short-coated shepherd dog with erect ears.

Lastly, Dame Juliana Berners lists, “small laydes poppees that bear away the fleas.” Yes, the ladies’ fleas.

When William Alnwick, Bishop of Lincoln, visited Daventry Priory in 1442, he was shocked to discover that the monks kept dogs that were fed leftovers destined for the poor.

The Benedictine nuns in the convents of Chatteris and Ickleton in Cambridgeshire, had dogs as pets and hid them under the choir stalls. In 1440, Lady Audley, who occupied rooms in the priory, was the subject of complaints by the prioress: “Lady Audley, who is boarding here, has a great many dogs, so many that when she comes to church, her twelve dogs follow, who make great noise in church, stopping the nuns in their psalms, and by this, the nuns are terrified.”

**OF ENGLISHE DOGGES**

In *Of Englishe Dogges* (1570), Johnnes Caius divides the hunting dogs into: harrier, terrier, bloodhound, gazehound, greyhound, lurcher, tumbler and stealer; and the fowling dogs into: spaniel, setter, water spaniel and fisher.

A lurcher is a cross between a sighthound and non-sighthound. Gazehound was another word for sighthound, and the stealer was the *Canis furax*, a dog that did not bark. Farmers called him a...
“night cur” because this type worked in the dark. Caius states that he knows of no fisher dogs in England, unless beavers and otters were considered fish. Or dogs.

In his group of “rustic” dogs – shepherd’s dog and bawdy dog – Caius mentions the mastiff, keeper, butcher’s dog, messenger, mooner, water-drawer, tinker’s cur and defending dogs. Almost every name shows what kind of work the dog was used for. The mastiff was a large-game hunter that also guarded the flock against wolves and the premises against intruders.

The messenger dog carried messages concealed in its leather collar. The mooner barked at the moon and the water-drawer turned a wheel to draw water from a well.

According to Caius, lapdogs were, “sought for to satisfy the delicateness of dainty dames... instruments of folly for them to play and dally.” Mongrels and rascals included the turnspit, a short-legged, long-bodied dog that worked in the kitchen turning the spit, and the dancer, a dog for entertainment.

A type Caius did not mention is the Alaunt, a robust, mostly white hunting mastiff. In *Le Livre de Chasse* (1405-10; Count Gaston III de Foix), the Alaunts have heavy, studded collars.

**BREATHTAKING MINIATURES**

Thanks to medieval illustrations, we can match the types of dog to the various written descriptions. It’s also interesting to read about the dog’s position in the Middle Ages. How were they treated? Where did they sleep? How were they cared for when ill? How were they trained?

First of all, there is *Le Livre de Chasse*, a complete hunting manual, a medieval strip book with 87 breathtaking miniatures dating from the beginning of the 15th century. This manuscript was made by order of the French nobleman Count Gaston III de Foix (1331-91), better known as Phoebus. One miniature shows the care of dogs, with eight dogs and caretakers pictured. The ninth person on the left, dressed in red, could be Phoebus himself. Another miniature shows servants feeding the dogs and preparing their bedding.

In *The History of Fox Hunting* (1975; ISBN 0333181344), Robert Longrigg wrote: “The 11th-century huntsman had big... dogs (alaunt or mastiff); sonorous-voiced scenting hounds, more or less influenced by the blood of St. Hubert’s breed; greyhounds; much smaller hounds of various local breeds; and mongrel terriers for digging.”

**GLOVE BEAGLES**

In the early Middle Ages, hunting in Europe was provided for in the *Leges Barbarorum*. According to these laws, large dogs – probably molosser and mastiff types – could be used for hunting bears or aurochs.

A beautiful 13th-century book about falconry, *De Arte Venandi cum Avibus* (*The Art of Hunting with Birds*), was written by Emperor Frederick II von Hohenstaufen (1194-1250) who, returning from a crusade, had brought falcons and falconers from the Near East. Gradually, European kings, noblemen (and women) and clergy fell under the spell of the noble sport of falconry. Several types of dogs were used, for example spaniels to find and flush game.

Net hunting was popular in the Middle Ages. A beautiful miniature in Phoebus’s *Le Livre de Chasse* shows net hunters, four dogs, and a wolf caught in the nets. Dogs drove the prey – wolves or foxes – into the nets so the hunters could kill it. There is a beautiful depiction in *Le Livre de Chasse* of wolf hunters on horseback with five dogs – hound type – pursuing the wolf.
Scenthounds and sighthounds were used for hare hunting, a good combination of nose and eye. It’s said that beagling was known in the 1400s when the dogs worked in packs to hunt rabbits and hares. Fourteenth- and 15th-century English monarchs Edward II and Henry VII owned packs with “glove beagles” that were reportedly so small they could sit on a glove. King Edward III (1312-77) owned a pack of 120 hare hounds that he took to the battlefields in the Hundred Years War, a series of conflicts between England and France. It seems that between battles, the king wanted to relax with his dogs.

SELECTION, TRAINING AND CARE

According to German philosopher and theologian Albertus Magnus (ca. 1200-80) in his book De Animalibus (On Animals), the best puppy is the first one in the litter to open its eyes, or the first to be carried by the bitch. A bitch in whelp, Magnus wrote, should be fed milk, whey and butter, with a little bread and cooked meat. Training for hunting, “should start once the dogs are a year-and-a-half old, and they should be exposed to exercise gradually. To train a guard dog, it should be encouraged to attack a man covered in advance with thick hide. The man should fall down and let the dog bite him. Guard dogs should be tied and locked up all day, and only released at night.” And about spoiled dogs “… a dog constantly petted by people makes a poor hunter.” Some believe this observation is still valid today!

The 13th-century Bestiary of Pierre de Beauvais (France), was published before 1218. The author wrote, “Dogs are unable to live without men. There are several kinds of dogs: those that guard their master’s property; those that are useful for hunting wild animals or birds; and those that watch over sheep. A dog cures its own wounds by licking, and a young dog bound to a patient cures internal wounds. A dog will always return to its vomit. When a dog is swimming across a river while holding meat in its mouth, if it sees its own reflection it will drop the meat it is carrying while trying to get the meat it sees in the reflection.”

A SPECIAL RELATION

At the beginning of the 14th century, Roch of Montpellier (who became a Christian saint) was infected with the plague and expelled from the town of Piacenza, Italy. In a forest, he met a dog that supplied him daily with bread and licked his sores, healing them. There are several medieval depictions showing an infected Saint Roch, and a dog licking his sores. The dog was owned by a nobleman named Gothard, who noticed his dog coming to the table to take a loaf of bread in its mouth.

In her Liber simplicis medicinae (1533), a book of observations about botany and biology, German abbess Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179), who was also a composer and philosopher, described the characteristics of four-footed animals. According to Hildegard, some of them have a special relation with humans in that they embody moral qualities. She wrote that, “dogs would demonstrate love and loyalty toward a deserving owner, but if the owner or someone one in the house was disloyal or a thief, dogs would growl and gnash their teeth.” The author also claimed that if dogs wagged their tails, the future would be bright, but when they howled, terrible events would happen.

GOAT’S MILK

Between 1406 and 1413, Edward, 2nd Duke of York (ca. 1373-1415), translated most of Phoebus’s work and published it as The Master of Game. Some typical French hunting methods were omitted and Edward added five that were typically British. The Master of Game is the oldest British book on hunting. Sometimes it’s difficult to imagine how many dogs a medieval nobleman would own. From one of his campaigns, King Edward
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III of England (1312-77), for example, brought 60 pair of staghounds (for hunting deer) and a pack of harriers back from France. Bought or stolen? The story does not say. Phoebus, the man behind Le Livre de Chasse, could have owned 600 hounds of various types for hunting hares, stags, birds and big game.

The Master of Game included information about dog care. For dogs that could not keep down their food, “the best medicine is to let them go wherever they will, and let them eat all that ever they will.” The author also recommended “finely cut meat put in broth or goat’s milk, and in small portions.” Seven centuries ago, dog fanciers knew that goat’s milk was good for dogs that could not keep down their food.

RABIES

In the Middle Ages, bread was the main meal for dogs – in Latin, panes pro canibus, bread for the dogs. The Master of Game had peculiar medical advice – “rubbing the juice of greater celandine, ginger powder, and pepper into the dog’s eye” – but also tips that are still in use today, for example about cleaning a dog’s ears.

KENNEL BOYS

In 14th-century dog breeding, stamina, intelligence, trainability and courage were more important than appearance. The types were selected based on working ability – hunting dogs for large and small game, guard dogs, tracking dogs, cattle dogs, and sheepdogs were kept separate. Medieval nobleman spent fortunes on their dogs, their game-keepers, dog trainers and kennel boys, who slept in the kennels so they could keep an eye on the dogs and intervene when a dog became ill or got into a fight. Early in the morning, they went into the fields searching for fresh game tracks, so their masters would know where to start the hunt.

It took me some time to find out where dogs slept in the Middle Ages. Apart from a miniature in Le Livre de Chasse, medieval texts have barely any information on the subject. Other than in kennels (fenced areas), dogs slept in baskets, on the ground and… in bed. The English poet John Gower (ca. 1330-1408) mentions the bedroom of his mistress: “I play with her little hound, Now on the bed, now on the ground.”

SOURCES

• Of Englishe Dogges, Johnnes Caius (available to read online at gutenberg.org)
• The Master of Game, Edward, 2nd Duke of York (available to read online at archive.org)
• The Medieval Bestiary, Animals in the Middle Ages (bestiary.ca)
• Die Jagd von der Urzeit bis heute, Michael Brander (1978; ISBN 3405111382)
• Various bestiaries, chronicles, Books of Hours and other medieval texts are available online.