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## **The Saint and the Swan: Animal Interactions in the Hagiography of Hugh of Avalon**

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*Animals in medieval hagiography typically appear in conjunction with saints who practice withdrawal from normal human society or are otherwise socially marginalized, such as hermits, outcasts, or mendicant friars. The association of these figures with animals emphasizes the saints' status on the social margins; for these saints, interaction with animals is a substitute for participation in human society. An exception to this pattern is Hugh of Avalon, bishop of Lincoln in the late twelfth century. An animal companion, the swan of Stow, appears prominently in all three hagiographical accounts of Hugh's life and is the most recognizable characteristic of his iconography. Yet Hugh was far from the socially marginal saint usually associated with animals. Animals in Hugh's hagiography function to recognize and legitimize Hugh's sanctity, raising broader questions about animals' capacity for moral judgment.*

Among the ranks of medieval saints associated with animals, one figure stands out: Hugh of Avalon. Except for Hugh, saints associated with animals predominantly exist outside normal human society. But in contrast to the withdrawal from society practiced by figures such as the desert fathers and other hermits and, later, the mendicant friars, Hugh was deeply involved in secular politics and wielded significant worldly power. Yet Hugh's association with an animal, the swan of Stow, is profound: the swan is consistently present in Hugh's iconography, and it appears in all three hagiographical accounts of his life.<sup>1</sup> The presence of the swan in Hugh's hagiography, as well as his other interactions with animals, serves to align him with an eremitic and socially marginal model of sanctity, counterbalancing Hugh's prominence in secular society.

Animals are a common iconographic attribute of medieval saints. The desert fathers are frequently ministered to by lions, as in the case of Cyriacus, who lived in the company of a lion that guarded his herb garden.<sup>2</sup> Farther north, the lions are left behind, but the

1 Walter-Meikle, *Medieval Pets*, 21.

2 Ševčenko, "The Hermit as Stranger in the Desert," 81.

link between saints and animals remains, as in the case of the sixth-century Irish missionary monk Gall, who was attended by a bear, or the twelfth-century English hermit Robert of Knaresborough and his miraculously tamed deer.<sup>3</sup> The later Middle Ages produce in the fourteenth-century St. Roch, an intercessor against plague who is never depicted without his loyal dog, and at the turn of the thirteenth century Francis of Assisi, the saint most strongly associated with animals in the present day.<sup>4</sup>

All the figures I have named, and the overwhelming majority of other saints who are closely associated with animals, are hermits, outcasts, or mendicant friars. That is, they all exist outside of normal human society. The role of animals in the hagiography and iconography of these saints is closely linked to the saints' marginal status. For these saints, interaction with animals is a substitute for participation in human society. The desert in hagiography does not function as an empty space.<sup>5</sup> The hermit, in fleeing human society, does not live in perfect isolation; instead, the saint's separation from human society is met with a corresponding entry into the society of animals. The association of saintly figures with animals thus emphasizes the saints' status on the margins of human society.

Yet, one saint prominently associated with an animal is Hugh of Avalon, bishop of Lincoln in the late twelfth century. Three hagiographical accounts of Hugh's life survive today. The earliest, written while Hugh was still alive, is part of Gerald of Wales' *Vita Sancti Remigii* (*Life of Saint Remigius*); Gerald was personally acquainted with Hugh and also wrote the *Vita Sancti Hugonis* (*Life of Saint Hugh*). Hugh died in the year 1200, and textual evidence suggests that the final version of the *Vita* was composed in the spring of 1214.<sup>6</sup> The third source, Adam of Eynsham's *Magna Vita Sancti Hugonis* (*Great or Long*<sup>7</sup> *Life of Saint Hugh*), was likely finished

3 Bottomley, "Saint Robert and the Deer," 27-31.

4 Walter-Meikle, *Medieval Pets*, 21-3.

5 Ševčenko, "The Hermit as Stranger in the Desert," 75-6.

6 Loomis, "Introduction," *Life of St. Hugh of Avalon*, lii.

7 The *Magna Vita* is the longest hagiographical treatment of Hugh.

during or before the year 1214.<sup>8</sup> Adam of Eynsham's source draws on the depiction of Hugh in the *Vita Sancti Remigii* but is much greater in length than either of Gerald's depictions. Adam was Hugh's personal chaplain during the last three years of Hugh's life, and he describes the later years of Hugh's episcopate in much more detail than the earlier.

As the bishop of Lincoln, Hugh controlled a populous and politically significant diocese. Gerald of Wales, in the *Vita Sancti Hugonis*, presents Hugh as a mediating figure between the Church and the Crown. Hugh was close to both Henry II and his successor, Richard I, and on several occasions acted as the English king's representative in diplomatic affairs. Yet Hugh's close relationship with the Angevin kings did not mean that he complied with every royal wish; he represented English bishops during disputes with the Crown, and his harsh rebukes earned him the nickname "hammer of kings".<sup>9</sup> Gerald writes the following in the *Vita Sancti Hugonis* regarding Hugh's relationship with the Crown:

It was also because he was so acceptable<sup>10</sup> to the king<sup>11</sup> in everything and so pleasing to him that he could do this<sup>12</sup> so much. For the king knew and was not unaware of the holy man's intense concern for God. He regarded many actions of his as permissible and privately winked at several things<sup>13</sup> that if done by another might have provoked great indignation in him.<sup>14</sup>

This passage emphasizes Hugh's close relationship with secular authority and portrays Hugh's political involvement as fundamentally

8 Farmer, "The Author and Contents of the *Magna Vita*," xxi.

9 Latin *regum malleus*; *Magna Vita Sancti Hugonis* vol. 1, 56.

10 Latin *acceptus*; also "dear".

11 Henry II.

12 Refers to Hugh's prioritization of religious over secular matters.

13 Loomis' translation is accurate in sense though highly idiomatic; Latin *plurimaque sub dissimulacione pertransiit*.

14 Loomis, *Life of St. Hugh*, 23.

connected to his office as bishop.

Hugh's closeness with the Crown presented problems for his hagiographers, as did his very position as a bishop. Hugh was a member of the Carthusian monastic order, which is characterized by silent contemplation and withdrawal from society. A Carthusian bishop, then, seems a contradiction in terms. In this respect, however, Hugh was not without precedent. Hugh of Grenoble, at the turn of the twelfth century, was a Carthusian as well as a bishop, as were the four subsequent bishops of Grenoble.<sup>15</sup> Yet although Hugh of Avalon's status as a Carthusian bishop was not wholly unprecedented, it was unusual; Hugh was the first English bishop to be a Carthusian. Unlike Hugh of Grenoble, who diligently maintained the customs of Carthusian life during his term as bishop, Hugh of Avalon at times dispensed with Carthusian regulations in favor of the customs of the see of Lincoln, as when he allowed women to eat at the bishop's table despite contact with women being prohibited for Carthusian monks. Hugh's acts as bishop of Lincoln thus at times came into conflict with the Carthusian ideal.

While other saints associated with animals existed on society's margins, Hugh was deeply involved in worldly concerns. Yet Hugh's hagiography is peppered with accounts of his interactions with animals. In the *Vita Sancti Hugonis*, Hugh is depicted interacting with wild animals during his days living as a monk:

[Hugh] showed himself so simple and kind in all things that he even tamed little birds and domesticated the forest rodents commonly called squirrels...[they] had somehow discovered the natural kindness and innocence of his soul and so were not afraid to be tame with the simple and harmless man.<sup>16</sup>

The key factor in this account is the animals' recognition of Hugh's saintly status. They are able to judge Hugh's character, and Gerald presents their trust of Hugh as evidence for his sanctity. The same pattern of recognition appears in accounts of Hugh's interactions with the swan of Stow:

15 Cowdrey, "Hugh of Avalon, Carthusian and Bishop," 48-50.

16 Loomis, *Life of St. Hugh*, 11.

[A]s by small birds at both Witham and the Grande Chartreuse, so too when he became a bishop, his compassionate and innocent kindness was somehow quickly recognized, not by a small bird but by a large and royal bird<sup>17</sup>...about the day or the day after Bishop Hugh was welcomed and enthroned at Lincoln, a swan not seen there before flew in at the bishop's manor near Stow...immediately, the bird took and ate bread from his hand<sup>18</sup> and stayed with him so like a pet<sup>19</sup> that for the time being it seemed to have shed all its wildness.<sup>20</sup>

Gerald's account emphasizes that Hugh's interaction with the swan is the continuation of a pattern of recognition begun during Hugh's time as a cloistered monk. In the *Magna Vita*, Adam of Eynsham reinforces the swan's recognition of Hugh's sanctity when he recounts that it customarily attacked anyone who approached it except for Hugh (including Adam himself!).<sup>21</sup> These two aspects of Hugh's animal interactions, recognition and continuity, provide the key to understanding the role played by Hugh's association with animals in the context of his hagiography.

The swan of Stow is described in all three hagiographical accounts of Hugh's life. Much of the description of the swan in the *Vita Sancti Hugonis* and the *Magna Vita* is actually quoted directly from the *Vita Sancti Remigii*, with a few additions in each text. The account of the swan is therefore consistent across the three texts, and Adam's quotation in the *Magna Vita* of Gerald's words in the *Vita Sancti Remigii* indicates agreement between the authors regarding the major points of the swan narrative.

Evidence within the hagiographical texts, including detailed descriptions of the swan's appearance and behavior, suggest that there was in fact a historical swan that took a liking to the historical

17 Latin *ave grande et regia*.

18 An evident Eucharistic parallel.

19 Or "on such friendly terms"; Latin *quam familiariter*.

20 Loomis, *Life of St. Hugh*, 33. Most of this passage is quoted essentially verbatim in the *Magna Vita* (vol. 1, 104-5).

21 *Magna Vita* vol. 1, pp.107-8. Adam's annoyance with the swan is palpable in this passage and is akin to that of a person whose close friend owns an excitable dog.

Hugh. But the historical veracity, for lack of a better term, of the swan narrative within Hugh's hagiography is beside the point of this paper. Instead, I focus on the function of the swan as a literary element in constructing Hugh's sanctity within the hagiographical texts.

One way of reading the swan within the text is as an allegorical mirror for Hugh's own qualities. In the *Vita Sancti Hugonis*, Gerald of Wales offers an allegorical interpretation of Hugh's association with the swan:

For it could not lack mystery that a white bird that announces its impending death by song should, as if by God's design, be given to that pure and holy innocent man who had no fear of the threats of death.<sup>22</sup>

The swan is also explicitly described as a chaste bird:

By its greater size, the bird overpowered and killed all the many small swans it found there, except for one female which it spared for the pleasure of companionship, not procreation [*ad societatis solacium, non fecunditatis augmentum*].<sup>23</sup>

This explanation focuses on the symbolic implications of the swan. This reading fits with the traditional view of scholars that the only positive function of animals in medieval theology was as symbols.<sup>23</sup> Many of the swan's traditional symbolic associations are connected to Hugh's own qualities, here his courage and chastity. But it does not address Hugh's earlier interactions with animals during his time as a cloistered monk, nor the broader associations of this pattern of animal interaction. The swan has a role in the text beyond the purely allegorical.

One function of the swan in Hugh's hagiography is that it affirms consistency between Hugh's time as a cloistered monk and his term as bishop. At the time Hugh's hagiographers wrote, animals had long been and would continue to be associated with saints on the social margins, and his hagiographers made use of this

<sup>22</sup> Loomis, *Life of St. Hugh*, 35

<sup>23</sup> Fossier, *The Axe and the Oath*, p. 195.

association to characterize Hugh's sanctity. Hugh's work on the worldly administration of his diocese and his involvement in secular politics seem to conflict with the ideal of silent contemplation and withdrawal from secular society that is central to Carthusian spirituality. However, the swan's recognition of Hugh's sanctity is explicitly cast as a continuation of the recognition by other animals that occurred while Hugh was still participating in the traditional Carthusian monastic lifestyle; the Latin word used in the comparison between the two animal interactions is *sicut*, a strong form of "just as".<sup>24</sup> By demonstrating Hugh's sanctity in the same way during his tenure as bishop as during his time as a cloistered Carthusian, the animal interactions in Hugh's hagiography create a consistent image of Hugh's character despite his dramatic changes in lifestyle. The qualities of the ideal Carthusian, recognized by birds and squirrels early in Hugh's life, are implied to be retained by Hugh the bishop through the recognition of his sanctity by the swan.

Crucially, Hugh's hagiographers explicitly present Hugh's interactions with the swan as non-miraculous. In the *Vita Sancti Hugonis*, Gerald writes the following passage:

[Hugh]'s subduing and nearly miraculous [*quasi miraculo*] taming of these large and small birds should seem less extraordinary to anyone [*minus admirari debet quisquis*] who at Thornholm in Lindsey has seen the small birds called titmice [*Mesenges*] that emerge here and there from woods and parkways and, afraid of nothing, sit on the outstretched hands, shoulders, and heads of the canons of that place.

Why would Gerald minimize the potentially miraculous nature of Hugh's relationship with the swan? I argue Gerald does not present the taming of the swan as a miraculous show of power because to do so would be to minimize the agency of the swan itself, and thus to undermine the effect of the swan's judgment of Hugh's character.

For context, let us compare Hugh's interaction with the swan to Robert of Knaresborough's interaction with the deer. Robert of Knaresborough was another twelfth-century English saint, a hermit.

<sup>24</sup> Loomis, *Life of St. Hugh*, 32.

His hagiography gives an account of his miraculous taming of a pair of deer. The deer have been eating the crops of Robert's garden. Robert is miraculously able to tame the deer and harnesses them to a plow as if they were oxen.

Robert's taming of the deer differs from Hugh's interaction with the swan in two crucial ways. First, the deer do not in any way seek out Robert or feel an affinity toward him as the swan does for Hugh; indeed, the deer are at first harmful to Robert. Second, the deer, once tamed, are explicitly said to behave contrary to their nature – they behave like oxen – and this tame state is not restricted to their interactions with Robert.<sup>25</sup> They cease to be wild animals. In contrast, although the swan behaves affectionately toward Hugh, it does not do so in an un-swan-like way, and its behavior toward others is not tame in the slightest, as Adam of Eynsham recounts. Hugh does not tame or train the swan, or the other wild birds and squirrels with which he interacts, for any human purpose. The accounts of the deer and of the swan function in fundamentally different ways within the two hagiographical traditions. While Robert's taming of the deer is a display of holy power, the swan's actions in Hugh's hagiography serve as a means of conveying aspects of Hugh's moral character. It is not Hugh's power over the swan, but rather the swan's recognition of Hugh's sanctity, that is essential.

This instinct is not based on the swan recognizing characteristics in Hugh that it possesses itself. While Gerald's brief allegorization of the swan in the *Vita Sancti Hugonis* is based on characteristics shared by Hugh and the swan, the swan's recognition is of Hugh's "compassion and kindness" – qualities the swan, which "overpowered and killed" many smaller swans, is not described as possessing. Yet even as the swan exhibits behaviors that would be monstrous in a human being, it retains an innate sense of moral judgment with authority beyond its own qualities.

This function of the swan and other wild animals as judges of human character within Hugh's hagiography raises broader questions about the perception of animals in twelfth- and thirteenth-

<sup>25</sup> Bottomley, "St. Robert and the Deer," 29.

century England. The swan and the other animals with which Hugh interacts are depicted as having a non-rational moral sense: their recognition of Hugh's gentleness and simplicity does not seem to be based on a rational evaluation of his actions, but rather on an instinct which Hugh's hagiographers can neither explain nor satisfactorily describe.

Much work has recently been done on medieval ideas about the moral treatment of animals, and at what times and in what situations animals were and were not judged according to moral standards,<sup>26</sup> but situations in which animals are portrayed as passing moral judgment, as in Hugh's hagiography, for the most part have yet to be investigated. What does it mean for an animal to pass judgment on a saint? Examining the role of animals in hagiographical texts like those discussing Hugh has the potential to deepen our understanding of human/animal relations as conceptualized in medieval theology.

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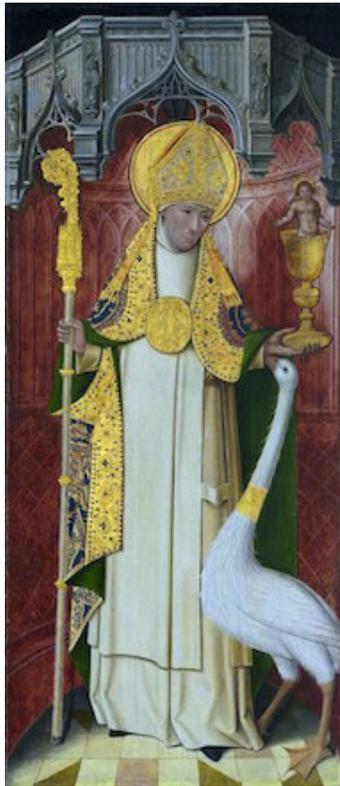
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<sup>26</sup> Toivanen, "Marking the Boundaries."

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*St. Hugh of Avalon*

*Altarpiece, Charterhouse of Saint-Honoré (c. 1490-1500)*