

# They Don't Ceno-bite: Monasticism, Animals, and Discernment from the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> Centuries

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## Background

### The Medieval Bestiary

- A medieval bestiary is a text which contains descriptions of various animals (and sometimes plants and stones).
- Though not factual, bestiaries allegorize the traits they describe to teach different virtues and vices.
- The most popular form of the medieval bestiary is the *Physiologus* (from Greek *physis*, nature; *logos*, word).

### Monasticism

- In the third and fourth centuries, a tradition developed in which individual Christians went out into the desert to live a rigorous life of prayer and fasting.
- These desert hermits formed communities in Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean, and these spread to Western Europe.
- The customs of religious communities became standardized through different desert fathers.

### What's the connection?

- These monks, who deny the gratification of their 'animal' instincts, often have custody of this widespread literature that turns to animals and their natures to understand how to be holy.
- These desert monks often had friendly and fantastical friendships with animals.

### Primary Texts

- John Cassian, *Conferences*
- Sulpicius Severus, *Dialogues*
- Benedict of Nursia, *Rule of St. Benedict*
- Theobald's *Physiologus*

## Desert Life

### John Cassian, 360-435; Egypt, Gaul

- Cassian writes about three different types of monks: cenobites, anchorites, and sarabaites.
- Cenobites receive their name from the Greek *koinos bios*, 'common life,' because they live together in community.
- Anchorites live alone in the desert.
- The sarabaites reside in their home or in a city, not in a community (cenobium), and they are not looked upon kindly.

### Cassian and Discernment

- Cassian considers discernment (*discretio* in Latin) to be imperative for a monk or hermit.
- The wisdom of elders is tantamount in discernment to prevent falling into the "empty philosophy of the world and earthly vanity" (*Conferences* II.24.2).

### Sulpicius Severus, 363-425; Aquitaine

- Sulpicius Severus writes about desert ascetics from his own experience in the East.
- Several of his stories explain the relationships that desert anchorites and cenobites had with animals:
  - One heals a lioness' blind cubs and receives the pelt of a prize animal as a thank you gift.
  - An ibex helps an anchorite to discern the correct roots to eat in the desert.
  - "The beast used its mouth to scatter those plants that were poisonous, and then selected those that it knew were harmless" (*Dialogues* I.16.3).

### Benedict of Nursia, 480-547; Italy

- Benedict of Nursia's *Rule of St. Benedict* became the *de facto* text for religious communities in the centuries after he wrote it.
- His rules detail the types of monks (which he inherits from Cassian), how to select an abbot, and the different ranks of monks.

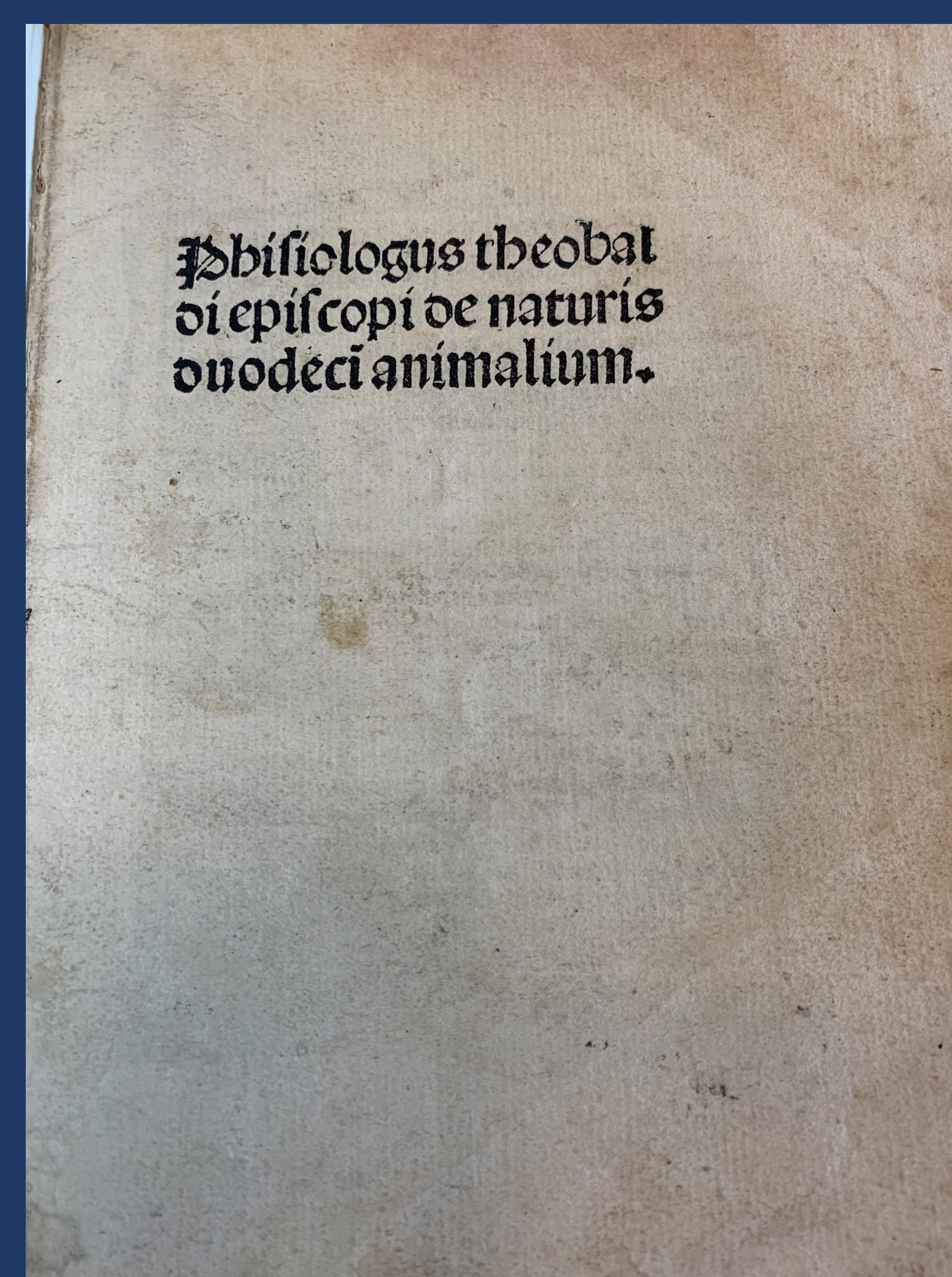
## Theobald's *Physiologus*

### Why study this one?

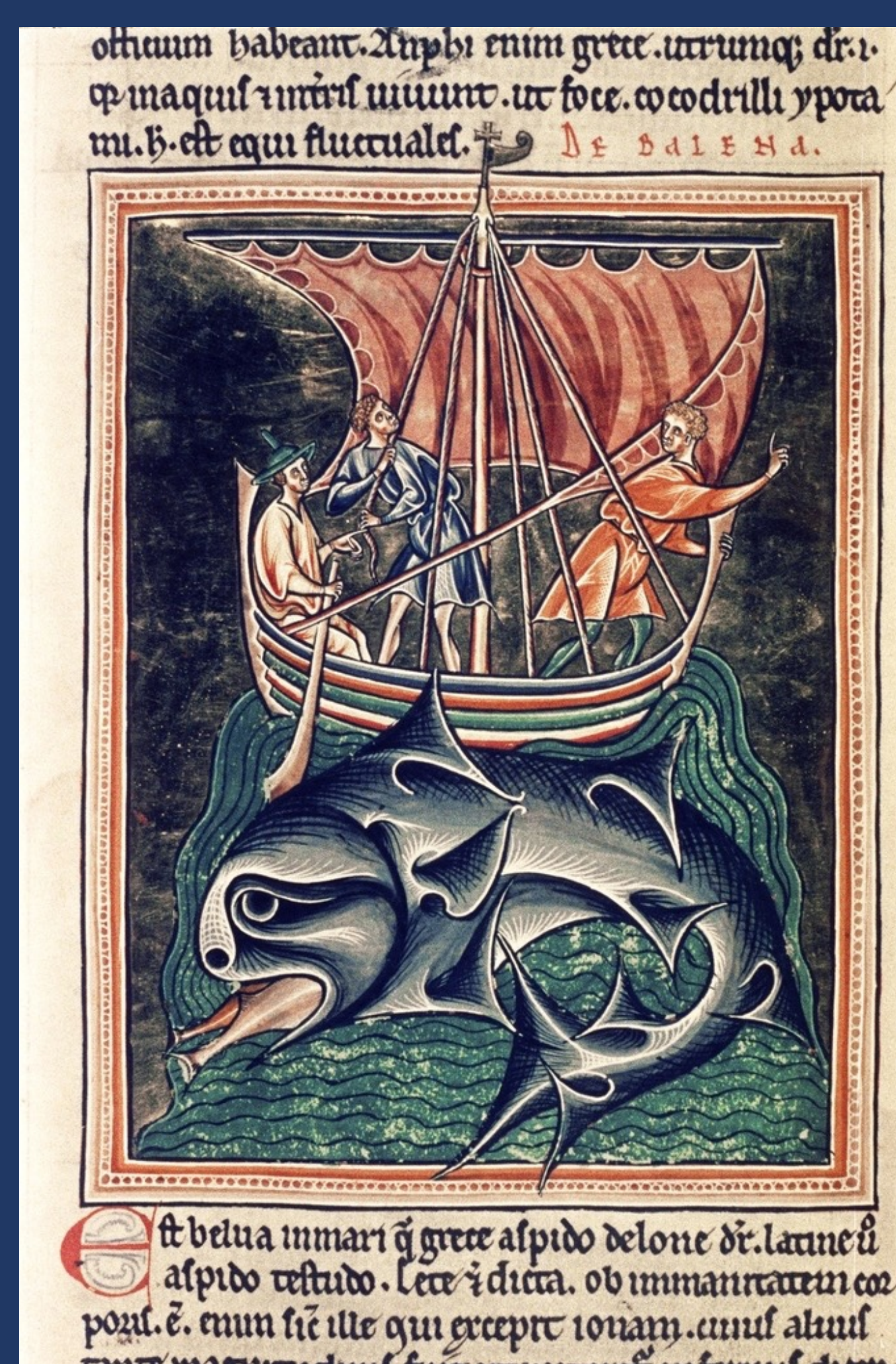
- The *Physiologus theobaldi episcopi de naturis duodecim animalium* (PT) is an eleventh-century redaction of the *Physiologus* that contains just twelve animal descriptions and allegories.
- It was wildly popular because it was easy to reproduce—no extant copy has illustrations.
- The certain Theobald whose name is ascribed to the PT is thought by many scholars to be the eleventh-century abbot of a major Benedictine monastery in Italy.

### Contradictory Traits: An Ecosystemic View

- In the PT, the whale emanates sweet breath that lures krill into its mouth, and this is allegorized as temptation.
- The panther, on the other hand, has a sweet breath from its mouth that draws all the animal kingdom to itself, which is allegorized as the words of the Gospel.
- Rather than reading the PT as twelve disjointed animals, it is an ecosystem that invites a discerning mind to learn when a trait can be helpful or harmful.



The title page from the *Physiologus theobaldi* in an early printed book from 1484 in Cologne (Source: Raynor Library, PA 8440.T3, personal photo of Noah Smith).



The whale, whose size deceives sailors into making land on its surfaced body before plunging them to their death. (Source: Oxford, Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 1511, fol. 86v; public domain).



The ibex, an animal that teaches discernment to a desert hermit in Sulpicius Severus' *Dialogues*. (Source: Zürich, Zentralbibliothek MS C 54 fol. 23r; public domain).

## Conclusion: Discernment as Connection

- The concept of discernment is the connecting tissue between the development of monasticism and the evolution of the medieval bestiary.
- The monks and hermits emphasize discernment in their daily life to recognize divine work and remain humble.
- In the PT, traits like the breath of whales and panthers of animals, are allegorized in different ways and underscore the need for discerning the time and place for one's own charisms.