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A Traveler's Guide to Crocodiles in the Middle Ages*

Abstract. Medieval animal literature dealing with crocodiles is usually described as uninventive, mimicking, and based on copying authorities without any objectivity or critical thinking. This paper presents excerpts from medieval travelogues in order to show that objective descriptions of the crocodile are indeed possible to find, but that they depended greatly on the expectations of the audience. Felix Fabri wrote in two languages for two different types of audience and his works are used here as a case study to show that objectivity and critical thinking in describing crocodiles in the Middle Ages were applied when needed.

Key words: crocodile, travelogue, Felix Fabri, perception.

When thinking about how exotic animals were perceived in the past, particularly in antiquity and the Middle Ages, there are two aspects that emerge as leading, namely the perception of the physical shape of a given animal, and its symbolism. Needless to say, it is impossible to divide these two if one strives to fully grasp the complete image a given object had for its viewers, but according to the sources one was always more important than the other. It depends on the period and on the type of source which of the two was in the focus of the writer's attention – the physical appearance or the symbolic meaning.

The number of sources dealing with, or mentioning the crocodile, is perhaps unexpectedly high. For an audience inexperienced with the matter of animals in the past, the abundance and variety of contexts in which an exotic animal such as the crocodile can be found is probably striking. On the other hand, for experts in bestiaries and animal history, and for them only, most of the ancient and medieval references to the crocodile are actually mere commonplaces.¹

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¹ This is so even considering the fact that not many modern studies have been written

Medieval travelogues are one type of source literature which has not been investigated enough when crocodiles are in question, and especially given that some of them show a difference in perception. This paper will therefore focus on the representation of the crocodile in medieval travelogues, as opposed to its common description in earlier sources. The travelogue of Felix Fabri from the fifteenth century will be taken as an exemplary case study to show how a shift in perception occurred from medieval literature inherent of crocodiles, that is to say encyclopedias, bestiaries, etc. to this type genre, namely, travelogues. Baring in mind that not all readers of this article will be experts in animal history, the first short chapter is devoted to the general image of the crocodile in the European West before the time of Felix Fabri's travelogue.

The Commonplaces

As expected, one of the first Greek sources to make mention of the crocodile is Aesop in his fable about the fox and the crocodile.² It is not usual to find the crocodile in an exemplary function in ancient sources, but it is interesting to note that this is exactly the purpose the animal would serve in the Middle Ages. Also, already from such an early time, even when opposed to the fox, the crocodile had a negative connotation, just as it would have in the medieval literature. As for other ancient Greek and Latin sources, the crocodile appears, as expected, in Herodotus, Aristotle, and Pliny, followed by Aelian, Solinus, Strabo, Diodorus of Sicily and Ammianus Marcellinus. All of these, some to greater, some to lesser extent, deal mainly with the physical traits of the crocodile, its behavior and habitat. Aelian is the only source which deals with other some traits of the crocodile in that he sees some of the animal's actions as manifestations of its personal qualities. Still, when Aelian says that the crocodile is wicked and evil because it tricks its prey into being captured, he only refers to the nature of the animal, and does not compare it to the

which deal with the crocodile alone. There are a few studies devoted to some aspects of the crocodile, mainly in the Middle Ages. See: DRUCE 1909; RADOĞNA 1997; MALAXECHEVERRÍA 1981, and BURTON, 1978. More often the crocodile can be encountered in works dedicated to animals in general.

² HAUSRATH / HUNGER 1970, fable 20, *Ἀλώπηξ καὶ κροκόδειλος*.

human nature.³ On the other hand, similarities between crocodiles and humans are exactly what was emphasized in the medieval animal literature, due to the influence of Christianity.

Ancient works like those of Aristotle and Pliny can be compared with medieval encyclopedias since both use animals primarily as an object of study, with the exception of moralizing encyclopedias such as those of Alexander Neckam and Thomas of Cantimpré in the thirteenth century.⁴ Moralization, however, was the main characteristic of another genre of medieval literature, and this is the one under the influence of Christian thought, the *Physiologus*, and its derivatives – the bestiaries. The main difference between the encyclopedic literature and the bestiaries is that the first type of sources strives to show animals as what they **are**, as the second type shows what they are **like**.

As for the crocodile, what it was, in short, was a four-legged beast, yellow in color, with an immobile lower jaw which was filled with sharp teeth, it had a venomous bite, and no tongue; it had an impenetrable armored back, and lived in the waters and on the shores of the Nile where it laid eggs the size of those of a goose.⁵ What it was like, was evil, treacherous and deceiving, and above all, it represented hell and the devil. In connection to this last remark, in the medieval literature, the crocodile can always be found paired up with another animal, namely, the hydrus,⁶ which was a kind of water snake and a fierce enemy of the crocodile. In most of the bestiaries, as they always contain a moral on the

³ Ael. NA 5,23.

⁴ WRIGHT 1863; BOESE 1973.

⁵ These are standard entries in almost all of the sources in question, starting with Herodotus. The notion of the crocodile having yellow skin comes from Isidore of Seville, and it is an inevitable part of a crocodile's description throughout the Middle Ages. Aristotle mentions something resembling a tongue in the crocodile, and compares it to a fish tongue. This information appears in authors copying Aristotle. (See PA. 660b, 690b) The inverted jaw is a popular misconception which has its roots in ancient sources already. This, in my opinion, influenced the illuminators of bestiaries to sometimes show the crocodile with an inverted head. For a different opinion see DRUCE 1909. Druce tends to think that a passage from Pliny where he describes the people of the island Tentyrus riding on crocodiles' back (*Nat.* 8,93) is to be blamed for the strange imagery because of the unusual wording describing the crocodile turning its head to bite its attacker (*resupino capite*), but this passage was not at all that common in the Middle Ages.

basis of the Bible, the lemma which includes the crocodile uses the crocodile-hydrus relationship as a metaphor for Christ descending to hell. An example of such entry is shown on Figure 1.⁷

This is the most common type of reference to the crocodile in the Middle Ages, but the animal can also often be found in connection to the human being, as it is also represented in various images eating a human.⁸ It might be interesting to note that the expression “to cry crocodile tears” which is common to many modern languages has its

⁶ The hydrus does not always appear under this name, but it is mentioned in Greek sources already (ἰχθυόμων; ἔνυδρις), and originally it was seen as a type of Egyptian mongoose which destroys crocodile eggs. It is unclear how it evolved in source literature into a water snake which, among few other animals, can kill a crocodile, by bursting its entrails. For more information and additional literature, bestiary.ca is a good starting point.

⁷ The transcription and translation go as follows: *Aliud animal est in Nilo fluvio q[uo]d dicitur hydrus. Physiologus dicit de eo quod satis est hoc animal inimicu[m] cocodrillo et hanc habet naturam et consuetudinem: cum videt cocodrillum in littoribus fluminis dormientem aperto ore vadit et involvit se in limum luti q[uo]d possit facilius illabi in faucibus eius. Cocodrillus igitur de subito excitans vivu[m] transglutit eum. Ille autem dilanians omnia viscera eius exit vivus ex visceribus eius. Sic ergo mors et infernus figura[m] habent cocodrilli, qui inimicus est Domini Salvatoris n[ost]ri. Ideoq[ue] et D[omi]n[u]s n[ost]r[u]s Ih[esu]s Hr[istu]s assumens terrena[m] carnem n[ost]ram descendit ad infernu[m] et diru[m]pens om[n]ia visc[er]a eius eduxit om[n]es q[ui] ab eo devorati detinebant[ur] in morte sic[ut] testat[ur] ev[an]gelista. Et monum[en]ta ap[er]ta s[un]t et resurrexer[un]t multa corp[or]a s[an]c[t]o[r]um. Mortificav[it] [i]l[li]g[itur] ip[s]am morte[m] et ip[s]e vivens resurrex[it] a mortuis dicens p[er] p[ro]pheta[m]: O mors, ero mors tua. Mors[us] tuus ero inferne. — Of a different sort (different compared to the hyena, which is discussed in the paragraph preceding this one) is the animal which lives in the river Nile and is called the hydrus. The *Physiologus* says about it that this animal is quite an enemy of the crocodile, and that its nature and behavior are such that when it spots a crocodile on the banks of the river, sleeping with its mouth open, it goes and rolls itself in mud so that it can more easily slip into the crocodile’s throat. The crocodile then, having suddenly awoken, swallows it alive. And the hydrus exits through its entrails alive by tearing them all into pieces. This is how death and hell take the form of the crocodile, who is the enemy of Our Lord the Savior. In the same way Our Lord Jesus Christ, taking on our earthly flesh, descended into hell, and, tearing out all of its entrails, led out all who were devoured by it and held in death, just as the evangelist testifies. And the tombs opened and bodies of many saints resurrected. So he destroyed death itself and he himself was resurrected alive from the dead, saying through the prophet: “O death, I shall be your death! O hell, I shall be your sting!” (All translations are mine, unless otherwise specified.) — The Latin form of the name*

roots in ancient and medieval phraseology already. It is said that the crocodile is deceiving and a hypocrite because it sheds tears to express its sadness for having eaten a human being, but in some places the tears are interpreted as bait, in the sense that the crocodile cries in order to attract its human prey, because people would approach to see how it is possible that such an horrendous beast would cry.⁹

The above-mentioned physical characteristics of the crocodile, as noted, were part of ancient and medieval source literature alike. Aside from the yellow color and the inverted jaw, they do not differ that much from how one might describe the crocodile today. On the other hand, if one looks at the imagery of the crocodile through the centuries, he or she might be surprised to see that even though the written description remained more or less the same, the illustration pertaining to that description degraded significantly over time. Although there are no illuminated manuscripts from antiquity showing crocodiles, one can see on the basis of coins for example, that the crocodile is much more recognizable presented on pieces of material culture from earlier times (compare Figures 1 and 2). Obviously, the reason for this are stronger connections with Egypt during the period around the Roman conquest of Egypt, but it is astonishing how the crocodile continued to live with the Europeans even though they had almost no contact with it in the later period.¹⁰ It is

for crocodile here is *cocodrillus*. This is the most common form, but the spellings and forms of this word were almost as numerous and confusing as those of its little enemy. Unlike the names of the hydrus, whole studies are devoted to terms relating to the crocodile, See: BREINER 1979. For a detailed examination and search for the root of the original form and meaning and a firmly linguistic approach, see: GARCÍA TEIJEIRO 1975.

⁸ Only Richard de Fournival in his *Bestiary of Love* puts more stress on the human-crocodile relationship than on the one with the hydrus. He says he wishes his loved one to cry for him in the way the crocodile cries after devouring his victim. (BEER 1999)

⁹ Aelian in 10,21 is the first to refer to the crocodile crying, but in a different context. According to him, the crocodile would cry when the people of Apollinopolis catch it and hang it on a tree and then beat it with their sticks. This is probably in no connection with the well-known phrase, the origin of which is uncertain, but for which it is sure that became widespread in the West precisely through the bestiaries and moralizing encyclopedias.

visible from the work of Albert the Great¹¹ that he had actually seen a crocodile, but this had no influence on the animal being shown in imagery in all imaginable shapes and colors, probably because Albert was an exception rather than the rule when speaking of medieval Europeans who have seen a crocodile.¹²

The lack of “exactness” in the portrayal of the crocodile in the medieval manuscripts where the illumination often does not even respond to the text which it illustrates, is most certainly due to the fact that the texts were only copies of other texts based on reports of authorities such as Isidore of Seville, Pliny, Aristotle etc. The writers, scribes, and illuminators did not know exactly what it was they were describing, but this is mostly because they did not care to be anatomically precise. They needed the animal as an example and a metaphor to serve a higher purpose which is why they relied on their authorities and their imagination rather than on scientific research or originality in their descriptions. Many medieval texts, whether bestiaries or encyclopedias contain completely identical sentences which were taken over from previous works and they are, of course, traceable, but they do not give credit to their predecessors.¹³ From time to time one can encounter an unfamiliar sentence in a description of the crocodile,¹⁴ but the majority of texts, and especially bestiaries and moralizing encyclopedias were mostly compilations of convenient accounts. Some travelogues, although not all of them, present crocodiles in a different manner than the one medieval audience were used to, thanks to the repetitive nature of the customary literature dealing with crocodiles.

¹⁰ Pliny in *Nat.* 8,96. mentions that the first time a hippopotamus and five crocodiles were exhibited in Rome was at the time when Marcus Scaurus became aedile in the year 58 BCE.

¹¹ STADLER 1916.

¹² A number of images showing the crocodile was collected by David Badke and can be found at bestiary.ca/beasts/beastgallery146.htm.

¹³ The exception being e.g. Vincent of Beauvais who performed his duty as a compiler to perfection. (BELLERUS, 1624)

¹⁴ The above-mentioned Albert the Great did not blindly rely on reports found in other authors.

The Travelogues

1. Crocodiles and dragons

When looking at images of the crocodile from the medieval period, a modern observer might get the impression that the appearance of the crocodile was somehow confused with that of the dragon.¹⁵ However, the idea of the dragon one has today cannot simply be transferred back to the idea medieval observers had, and even if this were so, one could not claim that it was the image of the dragon exclusively. Although in some manuscripts the crocodile and the dragon might be presented in a very similar manner, in others, the dragon is completely different from the crocodile – as in the Meermann museum copy (Figures 3 and 4).

Besides from their visual appearance, which is not a solid base for drawing any conclusions, the stories about the dragon and the crocodile never crossed paths. The dragon is the enemy of the elephant, its strength is in its tail, and it cannot endure the smell left by the panther's breath.¹⁶ It could symbolize the devil as the crocodile did, but so did other animals such as the serpent or the frog, hyena, wolf, cat, etc. which brings us back to the point that a certain image or a certain piece of a story is not exclusive to one object, or in this case, one animal in particular. Therefore, one needs to be careful when making strict comparisons, as it is important on what basis one makes them – the modern perception or the medieval one.

In literature concerning animals, whether ancient or medieval, there was no confusion between the crocodile and the dragon. However, there is one genre of literature where references to the similarity between these two can be found, namely, travelogues. In the fourteenth century one can encounter entries in some travelers' reports from Egypt that link the crocodile to the dragon, but – not all of them do, and it is important to underline that none of them confuse the one with the other, but they only compare them.

¹⁵ A good example for comparison would be manuscript BnF Latin 6838 B parts of which can be found at mandragore.bnf.fr/html/accueil.html.

¹⁶ For a short description of the dragon and a large bibliography see bestiary.ca/beasts/beast262.htm.

2. Travelers

Most of the travel reports from various journeys to the Holy Land do mention crocodiles, but rather in passing, only to make a note of spotting the animal. One such early example is Antoninus Martyr, who made his journey in the second half of the sixth century: *Inde descendentes, in naviculis per stagnum venimus Alexandriam. In ipso stagno vidimus multitudinem crocodillorum.*¹⁷ [Descending from there in our little boats, through the swamp, we arrived in Alexandria. In that same swamp we saw a large number of crocodiles.] A somewhat longer entry from the seventh century is from the travels of Arculfus, written by Adamnan:

*Crocodili ut Arculfus refert, in Nilo fluvio aquaticae commorantur, quadrupedes bestiae non grandes, valde edaces, et in tantum valide, ut una ex eis, si forte equum vel asinum vel bovem iuxta ripam fluminis herbas carpentem invenire potuerit, subita irruptione emergens invadat, vel etiam, animantis unum pedem mordens et sub aquas trahens, penitus totum devoret animal.*¹⁸

Crocodiles, as Arculf reports, which dwell in the waters of the river Nile, are four-legged beasts not large in size, very voracious. And they are of such strength, that one of them, if it can find a horse, or a donkey, or an ox grazing near the bank of the river, suddenly bursts out emerging (from the water) and attacks it. Also, it can even completely devour the entire animal by dragging it under the water having caught it by its leg.

There is a vast difference between descriptions such as this one, based on experience, and the ones found in other types of sources such as above-mentioned ancient sources, or medieval bestiaries and encyclopedias. This quotation shows an independent observation which does not use authorities or knowledge acquired from typical books and stories, therefore it has no phrases or pieces of the phrases one normally encounters ever and again when reading other ancient or medieval sources about the crocodile. At this point it is unimportant whether the scene described in the quotation is a precise verbal repetition of something Arculf saw, meaning that he was the direct eyewitness, or whether it was someone else who saw the scene Arculf which Adamnan relates.

Little is known about this bishop, who set off upon his journey around the year 670, but for the purpose of this paper it is irrelevant who

¹⁷ TITUS / MOLINIER 1879, 117.

¹⁸ Ibid., 190.

he was or when he visited Egypt, or even if it was really him who saw the events described in the source. The point is that this description is emphasized as being an eyewitness report and is unburdened with previous knowledge the eyewitness might have had about crocodiles. Even if he did learn anything from Pliny or Aristotle, or came across a copy of the *Physiologus*, this did not influence his report about the crocodile in the Nile. Arculf is certainly not the only pilgrim to write in such a way. A stream of independent thought appears in travel reports, but it is of interest in this paper to see how the transition from mimesis to the autonomy of the author developed over time.

The existence of such a down-to-earth and “objective” perspective in a travelogue does not mean that all of the authors of the travelogues were a kind of medieval travel magazine correspondents, relating only events they themselves had experienced. Also, it is a known fact that not all the reporters had actually visited the places they were describing in their travelogues, like for instance Sir John Mandeville. Some reporters’ actual experience was somehow influenced or blurred by their previous knowledge on a certain topic wherefore they needed to reconcile their expectations with their newly gained experience, taking into consideration the expectation and knowledge of their audience. The crocodile report of Felix Fabri is a wonderful example of a coherent mixture of acquired knowledge and eyewitness report.

3. *Felix Fabri: A Case Study*

Felix Fabri, a Dominican theologian, undertook two pilgrimages to the Holy Land, in the years 1480 and 1483. He wrote about his experiences in both Latin and German for different types of audiences. The Latin report was meant for the educated members of the monastic community, and the German one was for the laypeople, and as it says in the title of the German work, it is meant to be entertaining and funny, so *kurzweilig* und *lustig*.¹⁹ The difference between these two is the greatest in that he does not use his previous knowledge almost at all in the German report, while the Latin one contains quite a lengthy description of the crocodile where the author combines what he saw and experienced with what he had read in the sources. The way in which he accomplishes this coherence is

¹⁹ FABRI Rar. 1777.

astonishing, since he combines in one sentence other authors' quotes and his own observations, while making everything sound as all of it were his own thoughts. In the Latin text there are, beside the expected commonplaces, other pieces of information regarding the crocodile which are outside of Fabri's main exposé about the creatures of the Nile. These bits are not burdened with anything beyond Fabri's own remarks, and it is precisely these remarks that have parallels in the German edition.

As far as I can tell, the parts in any travel report which contain the phrase "I saw," are the most telling. They can either lead the modern reader to think that the author never visited the place described, if the text is just a collection of habitual phrases, or they can speak in favor of the author reporting on basis of their experience, by means of his or her original observations. Fabri's work contains all of this, but the source references, it seems to me, serve an educational purpose, and possibly another agenda, discussed below. He would use a commonplace and elaborate on it in order to confirm its accuracy, or he would simply disregard it without refuting what could be considered a misconception. In the Latin version Felix Fabri introduces the crocodile from the eyewitness-only standpoint: *Eadem nocte vidimus cocodrillos, ingentes bestias de littore se in aquam praecipitantes seque in aqua revolventes, et audivimus eos sub aqua gementes et eructantes*.²⁰ [That same night we saw some crocodiles, giant beasts, throwing themselves from the bank into the water wallowing in it, and we heard them sighing and exhaling]. The German version of this sentence²¹ explains the verbs *gemere* and *eructare* as sounds produced by humans, and therefore allows a translation such as this one, instead of searching for onomatopoeic forms of the sounds crocodiles are supposed to make: *Viel Cocodrillen schwebten umb das Schiff unnd huben die köpffe uber das wasser auff und wenn sie also die meuler heraus streckten so thaten sie eben **als wenn ein mensch achzet** oder mit stim seuffzet*.²²

²⁰ HASSLER 1849, 109.

²¹ These sentences are not compatible in the sense of the place where Felix Fabri uses them, but they are compatible in meaning. There is another sentence in the German edition which is a part of the entry for the night of October 20, but it does not describe the sounds that the crocodiles make. It is quoted several lines later when speaking about the shape of the crocodile.

²² FABRI Rar. 1777, f181v.

The German text actually lacks a clear-cut descriptive passage about the Nile and its creatures which the Latin edition contains. However, other instances where the crocodile is mentioned are somewhat more elaborated in the German version, like the one when the fellowship of the pilgrims saw a baby crocodile. In the Latin text Fabri only says that a boy brought with him a little crocodile two palms long and that they were amazed at how such a small beast could become such a giant monster. The German text contains the whole story, which says that one of the pilgrims from his fellowship had purchased the said crocodile, and also something called an Egyptian mouse, which according to Fabri, had the size of a half-year old cat. Interestingly enough, the crocodile died the next day, and the mouse survived, but the pilgrim decided not to take it to Venice with them.²³

Although the ichneumon/hydrus is also known as the Pharaoh's rat it is not certain that this mouse is a reference to it especially as Fabri mentions the ichneumon/hydrus in the Latin text and treats it as a worm.²⁴ The reference point here, however, is not this bit, but the one where Fabri uses the word *draco* to designate the crocodile. The German text makes no mention of a dragon in this part, but in Latin Felix Fabri says: *...quod tam parva bestia in tam ingentem draconem proficit*.²⁵ This does not mean that he implies the crocodile looks like a dragon. In my opinion, the *draco* here stands for *bestia*, but since he uses the latter noun all the time to designate the crocodile, he just needed a stronger word to stress the monstrosity and atrocity of the animal. This is to say that the word *draco* in Latin did not necessarily mean *dragon* in the sense of a flying reptilian, as it does not mean this when Isidore of Seville describes the Lernean hydra as *draco multorum capitum*.²⁶ He says explicitly that the crocodile is of the same form as a lizard, but of a very different size: *Est...*

²³ In the Latin edition: page 111; German text: f 181v.

²⁴ *Nam inter herbas, quas vorat, latitat nonnumquam vermis, qui emdros (sic) dicitur, quem simul cum herbis devorat, qui interiora ejus radit et interimit et repletus exit illaesus.* [Namely, among the herbs it devours there lies quite often a certain worm, which is called *enidros*, which the crocodile devours together with the plants, and which perforates its bowels, kills it, and exits unhurt.] Latin edition, 134.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

²⁶ *Isid. Orig.* 12,4,21.

*formae aequalis lacertae, quantitate tamen multum dissimilis.*²⁷ On the other hand, the idea of a dragon-like creature being comparable to the crocodile is expressed in the German text: ...*unnd sind eben gestalt als Edexen oder Lindwürme denn das sie nicht flügel haben.*²⁸

Travelogues from the end of the thirteenth and the fourteenth century offer comparisons between the crocodile and the dragon. Hayton of Corycus, in his *Histories of the East*, and Symon Semeonis in his travel report about the Holy Land mention the crocodile briefly, and concerning its appearance they say it is similar to a dragon. In fact, these two works contain the same text, only in different languages, the point being that one could praise the Nile immensely if it were not for the awful beasts resembling dragons, namely, crocodiles, living in it.²⁹ And this is all they say about the animal.

Felix Fabri also reports about Gyrovagues³⁰ selling crocodile skins as if they were dragon skins. In connection to that, he speaks about the inhabitants of a certain island in the Nile, who are skilled in hunting the crocodile, and it seems to me quite obvious that this is comparable to Pliny's description of the Tentyritae:³¹

*Hanc insulam et ejus littora fugiunt cocodrilli, quia homines illius insulae illos capiunt et domant. Habent enim tuguria super littus fluminis et latitant in eis; si quando autem cocodrillus in aqua natans ibi appropinquat, mox homo repente de tugurio exsiliens in aquam super cocodrilli corpus saltat eumque ferro frenat et ducit quo vult...*³² *Aegyptii, praecipue in Delta insula, artem habent captivandi in aqua hanc bestiam, ut dictum est*

²⁷ Ibid. 133.

²⁸ Rar. 1777, f 181r.

²⁹ On pourrait louer sans réserve ce fleuve du Nil s'il ne contenait une sorte de bête, semblable à un dragon, qui dévore hommes et chevaux, dans l'eau ou sur la rive; cette bête est appelée crocodile, see: RÉGNIER-BOHLER 1997, 803-878. *His autem fluvius posset in multis aliis a predictis commendari, nisi esset quod quedam animalia pessima resident in eo, que sunt ad similitudinem draconis. Devorant quidem equos et homines in flumine si inveniant, et etiam super ripam devorare non postponunt. Et ista animalia cocatrix vulgariter appellunt,* see: ESPOSITO 1960, 66.

³⁰ *Gyrovagi* was originally the pejorative designation for wandering monks, later also for travelling salesmen with a bad reputation among the Christian community.

³¹ Compare Pliny, *Nat.* 8,91- 93.

³² Latin ed. 110.

fol. 113. *Captam autem excoriant et pellem, quae durissima est, vendunt. Has pelles circumferunt quandoque Gyrogavi (sic!), dicentes esse pelles draconum.*³³

The crocodiles avoid that island and its coasts, because the inhabitants of the island catch them and tame them. Namely, they have their cottages on the bank of the river, and they hide inside them, and when a crocodile swimming in the river would approach, the man would suddenly spring out of the cottage into the water and jump onto the crocodile's back, and bridle it by means of iron, and he would take it wherever he wishes... In Egypt, and above all on the island of Delta, they have a way of capturing the beast, as mentioned on folio 113. Having caught it, they strip off its skin which is extremely firm and they sell it. The Gyrovagues carry these skins around from time to time saying that they are dragon-skins.

This is all Felix Fabri says about dragons in connection to the crocodile. As for the skins, he makes a note in the German version that the fishermen who catch the crocodile sell the skins to merchants expensively.³⁴ The practice of crocodile hunting and drying became a more popular and more frequent entry in the travelogues of a somewhat later period. Until the fifteenth century, at least to my knowledge, stuffed crocodiles, especially those posed as dragons, were not really a commonplace. Authors dealing with the animal to any greater extent were still interested in its appearance, behavior, and habitat.

Bernard of Breydenbach, who made his pilgrimage in the same year as Felix Fabri, and whose work is similar to that of Fabri, devotes only a short piece of text to the crocodile when dealing with Egypt.³⁵ He provides much less information than Fabri. He does not provide general information, but rather speaks of their size, and horrible looks, mentioning in passing that they can only be found in the part of the river below Cairo, and in the Sea of Galilee.³⁶ He also mentions skins being sold to merchants by the fishermen as dragon-skins. Breydenbach's *Peregrinatio, which is the first printed* and illustrated travelogue, offers an image of

³³ Ibid. 134.

³⁴ *Die Cocodrillen fahen die Fischer un[d] verkeuffen die heutte thewer den kauffleuten.* Rar. 1777, f 181r.

³⁵ There is an old edition of Breydenbach's Latin text about Egypt only, accompanied with a French annotated translation. This bilingual edition is made on the basis of the 1490 edition, see: LARRIVAZ 1904.

³⁶ Felix Fabri has this part about the Galileian see also in his German version, but not in the Latin one. In the Latin text he says that crocodiles can only be found in the Nile.

the crocodile, among other creatures, “as they saw them in the Holy Land.”³⁷

It is difficult to put oneself into the position of a person who had never seen a crocodile and to imagine what they would have imagined after reading Breydenbach’s description:

... erantque aliqui grossi valde et longi ad staturam hominum duorum pertingentes. Aliqui etiam majores alii vero minores habentque bestie ille sordidos et horribiles aspectus, corpus vero durissimis squamis undique compactum atque contextum, in modum thoracis quarum forme sive figure alias lacertis in capite presertim caudibusque pedibus assimilantur.³⁸

... and some of them were quite large and long, reaching up to the height of two men. So, some of them larger and some again smaller, those beasts have foul and horrible looks and their body is made of and covered by extremely hard scales all over, just like armor, but otherwise they have the form of a lizard, particularly concerning the head, the tails, and legs.

Trying to read this piece of text as an impartial observer, to rid myself of any modern knowledge about the crocodile in order to imagine the creature Breydenbach is describing and not to accommodate his description to my vision of the crocodile, I realized it is not at all easy to put oneself outside of the framework of his or her own knowledge. It appears that Breydenbach was successful in separating his previous knowledge (assuming he had previous knowledge on the topic) from that newly acquired. Felix Fabri, however, tried to reconcile the two in the part unique to the Latin text, that is to say – the part for his learned audience. Strangely enough, some of the contemporary misconceptions remain in his report:³⁹

*Ova enim in terra fovet, quae sunt ovis anserum paullo majora, ex quibus procedentes vix habent palmae longitudinem, sed ab ea hora, qua vivere incipit, **crescit, semper proficiens in longum et latum quamdiu vivit** et, si viveret centum annis, semper cresceret, **pervenitque ad longitudinem XX cubitorum** quandoque, nec est aliquid aliud, ut dicit Albertus de animalibus, quod ex **tam parva origine in tam immanem bestiam proficiat. Dentium et unguium immanitate armatus est***

³⁷ Available at daten.digital-sammlungen.de/bsb00051699/image_268 (accessed December 2013).

³⁸ LARRIVAZ 1904, 27.

³⁹ Latin edition: 133-134. I bolded the bits of Fabri’s sentences which are common to known medieval reports about the crocodile.

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cocodrillus, quos adeo acutos habet, sicut serra ferrea, et ad apri modum habet culmos; tantam etiam habet cutis duritiem, ut, quamvis fortium lapidum ictus in tergo recipiat, nihil curare videatur. Est autem cutis rugosa grisei coloris, ad latera tamen ad croceum tendit colorem, ventrem habet valde mollem; ideo pisces, serratam cristam habentes, tenera ventris ejus desecant et ita interimunt. Oculos habet claros, profunde in foraminibus capitis jacentes, quibus acute videt. Rictus oris ejus est usque ad loca aurium et morsum habet venenosum. Gulosum animal est multumque comedit et in tantum se replet, quod jacet ructans et in aqua ructat ac si gemat. Crura habet breviora, ideo non multum velox est et homo expeditus praecurrit ei. Nocte in aqua manet, die vero in terra greditur, quaerens rapinam et pastum, in hieme vero se abscondit et nihil penitus comedit. Cibus suus in aqua sunt pisces et alia animalia aquatica, extra aquam vero herbas bonas quaerit, quas manducat. Hominibus maxime insidiatur et visum hominem insequitur, quem dum apprehenderit primo eum interficit et mox super infectum plorat et deploratum devorat. Lac ejus effusum induratur ut lapis.

It lays its eggs in the ground, and they are somewhat larger than those of a goose. When it hatches from these eggs it is barely the size of the palm of a hand, but from the time when it is born, it keeps growing, all the time spreading in length and width for as long as it lives, and if it lives for a hundred years, it still grows at times reaching up to twenty cubits. As Albert says in *De animalibus*, there is none other which originally so small, comes to be such a huge beast. The crocodile is armed by a force of nails and teeth which are as sharp as an iron saw, and it has tusk in the likeness of a boar. Its skin is so hard that however powerful a hit by a stone it receives, it does not seem to mind. Its shriveled skin is of grey color, but it becomes saffron on the sides. Its stomach is quite soft which is why some fishes that have a serrated fin cut into its soft belly and kill it in this manner. Its eyes are bright, lying deep in the dents of its head, and it sees sharply. Its mouth stretches up to its ears, and its bite is venomous. It is a gluttonous animal, it eats a lot and it fills itself up so much that it lies groaning, and it groans in the water so that he sounds like it is sighing. Its legs are short which is why it is not that fast and a man in good condition can outrun it. It spends the nights in the water, and the days on land searching for rapture and food, but during the winter it hides and eats almost nothing. In water it feeds on fish and other aquatic animals, and except for them it searches for nice plants and eats them too. It always lies in wait for humans, and it keeps its eye on the human whom when it catches, kills him and mourns the deceased, and once it had mourned him, it eats him. Its milk when drained becomes as hard as stone.

Considering that Fabri does use these clichés, it may be unexpected not to encounter a reference to the jaw of the crocodile or to the non-existing tongue. At first sight it seems that he chose to use only the non-disputed information, but everything else aside, he does say that the crocodile

resembles a boar which is inherent of Bartholomew of England. Actually, a great deal of this entry looks more like Bartholomew of England than like Albert the Great, whom he quotes. The sentence *culmos habet ad modum apri* is in all probability taken from Bartholomew.⁴⁰ I am not sure what to make of this comparison; unless some of the crocodile's larger teeth (like its fourth teeth in the lower jaw) are considered to resemble the tusk of a boar. However, comparing the crocodile to an ox is characteristic to Guillaume le Clerc, and the crocodile is often found in illuminations resembling an African wild beast rather than a reptile.⁴¹ Also, Felix Fabri does not avoid mentioning that the crocodile's bite is venomous. This is not a completely uncommon piece of information,⁴² but he might as well have skipped it, since he says nothing about the jaw, which means that he did make some kind of selection among his sources.

Considering that Fabri's German edition contains none of these spurious "facts" about the crocodile, it seems to me that the difference between the two types of audiences is in the audiences' expectations. The focus group of the German version being the uneducated laypeople, the potential readers did not have great expectations since they were not supposed to have any background knowledge of the topic, and it was the author's choice what to include in his report. On the other hand, the readers of the Latin version might have had some expectations. The same reason, expectations, that is, I believe lie at the roots of the almost unavoidable sentence in the travelogues making mention of the crocodile: "We saw a lot of crocodiles."

If people knew anything about Egypt, in all probability they knew that crocodiles lived there and that they were a typical symbol of Egypt. The likely question one would ask someone who had visited Egypt then, is whether they had seen a crocodile there. Therefore, when addressing a not-too-educated audience, it was important to say that there were in fact many crocodiles in Egypt, and possibly describe some impressions of the author's own choosing. In contrast, an educated audience had higher

⁴⁰ *Dentes habet horribiles ad modum pectinis sive ferre at culmos ad modum apri*. BARTH. Prop.

⁴¹ *Buef ressemble aques de facon*. HIPPEAU 1852, §19.

⁴² See, for example, Beauvais quoting Avicenna and Pliny on how to treat a crocodile bite: *Spec. Nat.* 17,106.

expectations as their knowledge was broader, therefore at the mention of Egypt, they would not only ask if the visitor had seen a crocodile, but also whether he saw how (not *if*) the animal is covered with scales, or if they saw some large crocodile eggs, and so on. Presumably none of the pilgrims to the Holy Land spent his or her days researching the crocodile's ways, so some of the information, if they wanted to include it, had to be supplemented on basis of their previous knowledge.

There is one more feature of Felix Fabri's report that deserves to be mentioned: crocodiles as proof of someone's sainthood.⁴³ Such stories had no place in medieval bestiaries or encyclopedias, and they can only be found in patristic literature or travelogues. This has nothing to do with perception in the *Evagatorium*, as it is rather a display of Fabri's erudition, but as Georgia Frank notices in her article about The History of Monks in Egypt, "In a work that combines biographical detail with travel descriptions, it is easy to forget that the ancient audiences would have read the History of Monks as a pilgrim's report."⁴⁴ Fabri simply relates two stories from the *Vitae patrum* which are connected to crocodiles. Both stories are comparable to Rufinus's translation of the *Historia monachorum*.⁴⁵ This *Historia monachorum* can really be seen as a piece of travel literature, as it was originally written by a Jerusalem monk upon his visit to several of the monasteries at the end of the fourth century.⁴⁶ The first of Fabri's retellings speaks of a group of monks travelling to Nitria, an Egyptian village, who, on their way, came across a number of crocodiles sleeping in the sun. They mistook the crocodiles for dead and approached. The awakened animals raging towards them were repelled by God's grace.

The first story is rather a proof of God's love for his children; the second one is really an example of crocodiles being tamed by holy men. I present here Fabri's version, which is essentially the same as Rufinus', but told in a somewhat different tone:⁴⁷

⁴³ This topic is dealt with in more length by ALEXANDER 2008. The mentions of the crocodile in this book, however, are rare.

⁴⁴ FRANK 1998, 483-505; 487.

⁴⁵ CPL 0198, 14, 387, 41.

⁴⁶ FRANK 1998, 484.

⁴⁷ For a comparison see: CPL 0198, 11, 9.6, 327.

Lucida intervalla 43 (2014)

Aliud legitur: quidam sanctus Aegypti monachus, dictus Helenus, de eremo venit in monasterium multorum monachorum, quod juxta Nilum erat, ut illo die, quia dominica erat, missam audiret, sed non erat sacerdos, qui celebraret, in monasterio. Qui dum de hoc miraretur et causam quaereret, dixerunt, quod sacerdos eorum haberet habitationem trans flumen nec venire posset propter metum magni et saevi cocodrilli, qui super littus Nili discurrit et omnibus nocere contendit, sed et non paucos occidit. Hoc audiens Helenus ad Nilum ivit, ut sacerdotem advocaret et ecce bestia quasi latro de fruticetis prodiens furiosa occurrit Heleno, quam ut homo Dei vidit, oravit et fiducia accepta ad bestiam intrepide accessit et super dorsum ejus insiliit et in aquam duxit, qui magistrum habere se sentiens cum tranquillitate eum ad aliam partem fluminis duxit. Adiit ergo Helenus ad domum presbyteri et hortatus eum rogare coepit, ut veniret ad dicendum missam dominicalem. Cum causaretur sacerdos de bestia et de naviculae carentia, dixit Helenus: nil verearis pater, sed veni securus et Deus providebit nobis de vehiculo. Sequebatur ergo sacerdos fratrem et dum ad aquam venissent, exclamavit voce magna Helenus, cocodrille veni. Qui ad hanc vocem festinus occurrit et dorsum placide praebuit. Prior ergo Helenus adscendit, invitavit presbyterum a longe stantem; ut consederet sibi in dorso bestiae, sed ille a bestia territus et miraculo consternatus appropinquare nulla ratione ausus fuit. Sanctus autem Helenus, sicut venerat in tergo bestiae, sic rediit. Sed ubi descendit, secum pariter in siccum bestiam eduxit dicens ei: melius est tibi mori, quam tot scelorum, tot homicidiorum involvi reatu. Ad haec verba protinus corruit et exspiravit. Multa talia in Vitis Patrum legimus.⁴⁸

Another story says that a blessed Egyptian monk named Helenus came from the desert to a monastery near the Nile, where there were a lot of monks, in order to hear the mass on that day, namely it was Sunday, but there was no priest in the monastery who would celebrate the mass. When, surprised by this, he asked why this was so, they said that their priest lives on the other side of the river, and cannot come for fear of the great and furious crocodile which runs to and fro along the beach and strives to hurt everyone, and they said it is not a small number of those whom it kills. When he heard this, Helen went to the Nile to call for the priest, and beware! the furious beast emerges like a marauder from the bushes and appears in front of Helen! And the man of God, when he saw it, he started to pray, and having received confidence, he approached the beast fearlessly, stood on its back and launched it into the water. The beast calmly realizing it has a master now, took him to the other side of the river. Helen went to the home of the presbyter and he started to encourage him and to ask him to come and say the Sunday mass. When the priest made a pretext about the beast and the lack of a boat, Helen said: "Do not fear, father, but come confidently, and God shall provide a vehicle for us." And so the priest started to follow the brother, and when they reached the water, Helen exclaimed loudly: "Crocodile, come!" The crocodile quickly came running on the sound of his voice and calmly offered its back. So Helen climbed up first and called the presbyter who was

⁴⁸HASSLER 1849, 134-135.

standing quite far away, to sit next to him on the back of the beast, but the priest dared approach by no means, terrified by the beast and shocked by the miracle. And the blessed Helen returned the same way he came – riding on the back of the beast. But when he got off, he led the beast to dry land telling it: “It is better for you to die than to be accused of so many crimes and homicides.” Hearing those words, [the crocodile] fell before him and passed away. We can read a number of similar stories in the *Vitae patrum*.

Fabri is right in suggesting that these are not the only examples of such stories. One of Pachomius’ lives, for example, relates how the saint repelled a crocodile,⁴⁹ and there is an example from the *Apophthegmata patrum* about a holy man being tested by his brother, who got a crocodile to lick his ankles.⁵⁰

Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, in her article about the crocodiles and saints of the Nile, notes that the hunt for crocodiles is in fact a novelty of the Christian era.⁵¹ As crocodiles were venerated during the Pharaonic era, this makes a great deal of sense. During the Middle Ages the Egyptians used to hunt them, and they used them for magic, and also for apotropaic purposes. Mayeur-Jaouen sees the saints appearing as vanquishers of the fierce beasts in Egypt as a Christian substitute for the pagan talisman which was believed to keep the crocodiles away from Lower Egypt, where apparently crocodiles are much rarer. She discusses Muslim and Coptic saints as well and provides a nice interpretation of the development of the crocodile’s status in Egypt in the post-Pharaonic era, all of which is not in the scope of this paper. The importance of the saint-crocodile relationship is used here for the purpose of taking at least a glance at the possible contexts in which the crocodile could appear in literature available to a Western European audience in the Middle Ages. Although not discussed here, there are other medieval travelogues mentioning the crocodile, like the accounts of Fetellus in the twelfth-century, and by the fifteenth-century Spaniard, Pedro Tafur,⁵² but it

⁴⁹ VOGÜÉ 1980.

⁵⁰ PL 73, 5,14,17.

⁵¹ MAYEUR-JAOUEN 2000.

⁵² Tafur’s report is refreshingly original, and the 1926 translation by Malcolm Letts is available at depts.washington.edu/silkroad/texts/tafur.html#ch8. He describes the hunting of the crocodile colorfully and vividly in the eighth chapter, and his description of the crocodile skin is so sincere and wonderful that it is impossible not

seemed a better choice for me to analyze more detail Felix Fabri's report, which combines all the various aspects and ways of approaching the topic of travel literature, than to list various other reports with similar characteristics.

Sixteenth- and seventeenth-century travelers to Egypt often mention the large numbers of dried, and also stuffed crocodiles that one could find almost anywhere in Egypt.⁵³ Mayeur-Jaouen also notes that the Egyptian custom of hanging the crocodiles on walls of their houses, or above the doors has disappeared only recently, but that one can still see stuffed lizards in some parts of Egypt as substitutes for the crocodile.⁵⁴ Some specimens of stuffed crocodiles reached Europe during this period, some possibly earlier, and had their own stories as royal gifts, designators of alchemist of pharmaceutical space, or actually played the role of a dragon in some local myths.⁵⁵

Conclusion

When one first comes to think about a crocodile in an ancient or medieval context, without previous knowledge of this topic, one would probably say, as people had said to me upon hearing about this topic: "What is there possibly be to be said about crocodiles in the Middle Ages?" Not only is there material to be looked at which has already been researched, but there are instances, like travel literature, which shed new light on the variety of contexts a crocodile can be found in. Although Europeans did not live with the crocodile in the physical sense in the Middle Ages, this animal was a part of their lives, and had a specific meaning for them. We cannot know how often mentions of crocodiles were in everyday life and speech, but even if we only take in account

to quote it here: "I was received with much honour by the Governor of Damietta, to whom I carried letters from the Sultan's chief interpreter, and I was sent to enquire if he had a crocodile skin to send to the King of Cyprus who had asked for it. He offered me one which had recently been killed, but it smelt very rank, so that for my part I would rather have carried away the Governor's pretty daughter who was there, than the skin of that crocodile." (LETTS 1926.)

⁵³ For the follow-up on the dried crocodiles see: TRIPPS 2006.

⁵⁴ MAYEUR-JAOUEN 2000.

⁵⁵ Take for instance the crocodile of Brno, and for more examples see Michal Ajvaz "Dragon Invasion" at riowang.blogspot.hu/search/label/Ajvaz%3B%20Michal.

people who produced the books the crocodile is found in (and not people influenced by these texts), we could conclude that the crocodile was something completely ordinary in the Middle Ages. The confidence with which it is described shows that they were certain about how the crocodile looks and how it behaves, even though some of the information might seem incorrect from a modern point of view.

Medieval literature such as bestiaries and encyclopedias might seem monotonous when one gets used to this type of texts, and it is obvious that the writers of these works were not great innovators, but rather took old information for granted. On the other hand, it is unfair to say that all medieval literature about animals was of a mimicking character, and I hope that I have shown that independent thinking was very much developed and used – only in those genres of literature where it was required. It is impossible to know how much influence such texts had on what we think constituted as general knowledge about the crocodile, but it is important to bear in mind that information, other than that found in bestiaries and encyclopedias, was indeed available.

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Figures



Figure 1. MS Royal 12 C XIX, ff. 12v, 13r, Bestiary. 1200-1210. The British Library. Public Domain.



Figure 2. Octavian's denarius. 28 BCE. Pergamon Museum, Berlin. Credit: Barbara McManus, 2005 (see www.vroma.org/images/mcmanus_images/indexcoins.html)



Figure 3. Crocodile. The Hague, MMW, 10 B 25, f 12v. Bestiary. c. 1450.

Figure 4. Dragon. The Hague, MMW, 10 B 25, f 39r. Bestiary. c. 1450.

Museum Meermanno-Westreenianum & Koninklijke Bibliotheek, Den Haag.
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Путовођа кроз крокодиле у средњем веку

Апстракт

Средњовековна литература која помиње крокодиле углавном се представља као неинвентивна, заснована на преписивању од ауторитета, без икакве објективности или критичког мишљења. У овом чланку се цитирају изводи из средњовековних путописа који сведоче о томе да је објективне описе крокодила могуће пронаћи, с тим што су они умногоме зависили од очекивања публике. Феликс Фабри је писао на два језика за две врсте публике; његова се дела овде користе као случај за изучавање, како би се показало да су се објективност и критичко мишљење у описима крокодила у средњем веку примењивали кад је требало.

Кључне речи: крокодил, путопис, Феликс Фабри, перцепција.