

# Man-Eating Manticores in Manuscripts: The Spread of Antisemitic Iconography in Relation to Jewish Expulsions

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## Abstract

Manticores were ascribed physical features that are considered stereotypically Jewish and behavioral traits that reflect late medieval fears of Jews. My research focuses on the presence of this iconography in manuscripts, and how it spread across western Europe coinciding with the Jewish expulsion of 1290 in England. The 13th century saw an increase in anti-Jewish literature and imagery, followed by legislation targeting Jews. Reasons for this increase can be attributed to complex, interrelated political, religious, and economic conflicts contributing to the popular sentiment that Jews, heretics, lepers, and other minoritized individuals were a source of contamination to the Christian majority. The depiction of Jews in 13th-century medieval art reflects beliefs of Jewish greed, blood libel, and blame for the crucifixion of Christ. Using folio 25r from MS Bodley 764 as a case study, the antisemitic iconography present in this depiction of the manticore can be compared to other bestiary depictions of the manticore across England and western Europe as expulsions occur. Inspired by the research of antisemitic medieval imagery in relation to monstrosity and hybridity by Debra Higgs Strickland and Asa Simon Mittman, I argue that the Bodley manticore is directly influenced by a variety of factors preceding the English expulsion of Jews in 1290, such as increasingly violent rhetoric against Jews, economic policies affecting the Church, and the Second Barons' War.



## Medieval Bestiaries

The Latin bestiary is a product of the Greek Physiologus text and other works of natural history dating as early as the 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. Bestiaries were created for a western European medieval Christian audience, especially monks and private elite readers, featuring detailed illustrations of animals and fantastical beasts accompanied by descriptive text on their appearance and behavior and placed within Christian allegorical context (Strickland, 1).

## Anti-Jewish Rhetoric in 13<sup>th</sup>-century England

The rhetoric of blood libel was particularly popular during this period, especially in England, as seen in both literature and imagery. It was already an established belief that Jews participated in blood-related ritual sacrifice by the 13<sup>th</sup> century, but a formal accusation in 1255 fanned the flames of this already pervasive rumor (Heng, S55). A young boy in Lincoln, England drowned in a cesspool next to a Jewish home where a wedding was being held. The Jews of Lincoln were blamed for this and accused of ritually murdering the boy. The situation resulted in the imprisonment of 91 Jews and the execution of nine others (Heng, S55). All remaining Jews were ousted from Lincoln, followed by the expulsion of Jews from the entirety of England 35 years later (Heng, S56).

## The Church and the Second Barons' War

During the early to mid-13<sup>th</sup> century, there were baronial civil wars between the kings of England and the barons. These conflicts inspired pogroms against Jewish communities in both the First Barons' War (1215–1217) and the Second Barons' War (1264–1267) (Jahner, 179). After a bout of violence against Jews and political unrest during the Second Barons' War, Henry III restored many protections to the Jewish population of England (Mundill, 46). However, Henry III and his successor Edward I were becoming increasingly aware of the Church's dissatisfaction with the Jews following the Provisions of 1269, which no longer allowed the Church to benefit from a partnership with Jews for land mortgages (Mundill, 46). The general public perspective on English Jews was changing, and both kings knew it was critical to firmly delineate the role of Jews in England to prevent violence and allow the kingship to assume social control (Mundill, 46). The 1275 Statute of Jewry marked a turning point in English legislation regarding control of Jewish behavior and moneylending practices, enforcing a ban on Jews lending money with interest, which in turn further decreased Jewish profitability to the crown and reduced motivation for the king to protect the Jews (Tolan, 169–170).

## Case Study: Folio 25r, MS Bodley 764

MS Bodley 764 is a medieval English bestiary made in the second quarter of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, currently housed in the Bodleian Library at Oxford University. Folio 25r in this bestiary depicts a manticore, a creature with the body of a lion and the head of a man. The illustration is rich in color, outlined by a red outer frame and a blue inner frame, allowing the vividly red body of the manticore to stand out from the gilded gold background with a patterned blue central panel. The hybrid creature takes up the majority of the space within the frame, raising his front legs with his head turned towards the rear of his body, allowing for a profile view. With this view, it is evident that the manticore has a severed leg in his mouth, baring his sharp teeth in a menacing manner. The manticore has a bearded face with a prominent, hooked nose and his head is adorned by a hat with a curved peak. Overall, the illustration in folio 25r provides a frightening representation of the manticore, invoking fear from the viewer by highlighting not only his monstrous appearance, but also his monstrous proclivity for anthropophagy—human eating.

This illustration is unique from other depictions of manticores across medieval bestiaries. While some manticores appear with more animalistic features, such as a lion's head, others appear in a more hybrid fashion with a human head. The hybrid manticores with human heads are more often ascribed with features a medieval reader would be able to identify as Jewish, such as a hooked nose and a beard or headwear known as a Phrygian cap. There are instances of anthropophagy in only three other bestiary manticores: Harley MS 3244 (London, British Library), MS 711 (Douai, Bibliothèque Municipale), and Cod. II.1.2<sup>o</sup> 109 (Augsberg, Universitätsbibliothek Augsburg). However, none of these manticores are accompanied by both the identifying Jewish features and Phrygian cap present in the MS Bodley 764 manticore. This iteration of the manticore is idiosyncratic in its usage of racialized physical features associated with Jews, identifying headwear, and anthropophagy.



Harley MS 3244 (London, British Library)



MS 711 (Douai, Bibliothèque Municipale)



Cod. II.1.2<sup>o</sup> 109 (Augsberg, Universitätsbibliothek Augsburg)

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