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► **To cite this version:**

Thierry Buquet. Preventing “Monkey Business”. Fettered Apes in the Middle Ages. 2013. halshs-00845267v2

HAL Id: halshs-00845267

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00845267v2>

Submitted on 30 Mar 2016

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APES & MONKEYS / CAPTIVITY / PETS

Preventing “Monkey Business”. Fettered Apes in the Middle Ages

BY THIERRY BUQUET · JUNE 23, 2013

The practice of keeping monkeys and apes in captivity during the Middle Ages, mainly as pets, is well known. Janson, in his classical study, *Apes and Ape lore in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Janson 1952), dedicates a chapter to this topic (“The Fettered Ape”, chap. V, p. 145-162). He has a symbolic approach (“captive ape as a symbolic figure”, p. 145) and a study on the iconography of these fettered apes. His book is not dedicated to the material culture or to the study of the presence of apes in medieval menageries or as pets. This short paper aims to give some examples of the material aspects of keeping and controlling tamed but still savage animals, to prevent them from creating a mess in the home.

Keeping apes at home

Keeping apes at home as pets was known from Antiquity (Pliny, *Natural History*, VIII, 80, 216, p. 151), and during the Middle Ages, we have testimonies from the 11th century. The first account is found in Peter Damian who lived in 11th century Italy. According to Damian, Count William, in the district of Liguria, owned a male monkey called a “maimo” in vernacular Italian. The animal was so intimate with the count’s wife that he was suspected of having had intercourse with her! (Peter Damian, *Letters* 86, 296-297).

Guillaume le Clerc, in his *Bestiaire divin* (253-254, v. 1845-1850), explains that high-ranking lords have a great affection for the monkeys (“Donc les

hauz homes font chiertez”) even though this animal is unpleasant and ugly. Alexander Neckam, at the beginning of the 13th Century, writes that one could find domestic apes at the court of the rich (*De naturis rerum*, 208, cap. 128).



Mâcon, Bibliothèque municipale, Ms 1, f. 211, 15th Century

In a sermon attributed to Hughes of Saint-Victor (Paris, BnF, Ms. Latin 14934, f. 82), it is written that even clerics like to keep them in their house: “even though the ape is a most vile, filthy, and detestable animal, the clerics like to keep it in their house and to display it in their windows so as to impress the passing rabble with the glory of their possessions” (Janson 1952, 30 and 57, note 4). In the thirteenth century, canons of Notre-Dame of Paris still kept monkeys in the cloister (*Cartulaire de Notre-Dame de Paris*, t. II, p. 406). Thus, kings, nobles and higher clergy loved to have them at court, as a diverting pet and also as a demonstrable sign of wealth.

Monkey business, or pets going ape

Petrarch criticizes the possession and the search for exotic animals; about monkeys he adds that they are ugly animals and create a mess at home by destroying and scattering whatever they find (Petrarch,

Remedies for Fortune I.61: 180). Some mediaeval documents show us more precisely the damage that apes could do. Alexander Neckam relates that a monkey destroyed and tore pieces of leather with a knife he stole from a cobbler, after gaining entry to his empty house through an open window (*De naturis rerum*, 209, cap. 129).

A monkey destroyed a charter at the court of Robert, Duke of Burgundy in the year 1288. The chancery of the Duke had to copy some original letters of his ancestor Eudes, dated from the beginning of the 12th century, because Robert’s monkey had torn the documents. And even worse, the copy charter relates that the animal completed his crime by separating the seal from the letter (Guyotjeannin 2001, 211–219). Apes therefore had to be prevented from carrying out their “monkey business” of tearing charters or leather into pieces.

Collars and leashes

You can keep apes and monkeys in cages, but medieval texts and images report that monkeys actually lived rather freely in houses and castles. The monkeys were also attached to leashes like dogs as you can see in this painting by Lorenzetti.



*Pietro Lorenzetti. Flagellation of Christ (detail: Ape with children and mother) circa 1320, Fresco,
Lower Church, San Francesco, Assisi*

They were different types of hand-leashes, which can sometimes be used to attach the animal to a wall as in the famous image by Durer of the *Virgin with a monkey*. Leashes were attached to a collar fasten around the neck or directly to the neck or belly.



Detail of a miniature by Attavente. Missale, end of 15th Century, Lyon, Bibliothèque municipale, Ms. 512, f.

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Collars were sometimes made of rich red leather with iron fittings, as mentioned in the accounts from the court of Isabeau of Bavaria, Queen of France, in the 15th century (Chartier, *Chronique de Charles VII*, III: 283).



Two apes with red collars, chains and belts. Detail from Gentile da Fabriano, Adoration of the Magi, 1423. Tempera on wood. 173 × 200 cm. Florence, Offices, Inv. 1890 n. 8364.

Bowls, blocks and chains

The 13th Century encyclopaedist Bartholomew of England says that the ape, which is a fierce and malicious beast, may be tamed thoroughly by violence using whips and chains. He adds that wooden blocks (*trunco sive blocco*) are attached to monkeys to prevent them from going anywhere they want to and to suppress their insolence (*De*



*Den Haag, Koninklijke Bibliotek, Ms. 135 K40, f. 14,
15th century*

proprietatibus rerum, XVIII, cap. 94, cf. Janson 1952, 82). Pierre Bersuire mentions this information and adds a Christian moralization: linking the monkey to the wooden block symbolises the self-enslavement of the rich to their own avarice – his description may really be an attack against that strange pleasure of wealthy people to keep such awful and devilish beasts like monkeys! (*Reductiorum morale*, lib. X, cap 90, 9, p. 413 § 13)

Instead of keeping monkeys all day on leashes or chaining them to walls, people used to restrain their movements using an heavy block or bowl, like human prisoners. We have a few testimonies about these blocks, in documentary sources and in iconography.

In the accounts of Jean de Berry, in the year 1376, it is said that Jehan d’Estampes was paid for making a rounded wood bowl and an iron chain for the duke’s monkey. The same year, John of Berry paid Henry, a locksmith from Paris for another iron chain for securing his monkey (Guiffrey 1899, 75). Queen Isabeau of Bavaria had a monkey that was chained to a wooden bowl that turned within an iron circle (Chartier, *Chronique*, III, 283).



Detail of the Tapestry of the Lady and the unicorn, Musée de Cluny, Paris, circa 1500

In the Palace of Jacques-Cœur, in the city of Bourges, capital of the Dukes of Berry at the end of the Middle Ages, one can find a curious monkey ballet sculpted in the stone of a chimney and dating to the end of the 15th and the beginning of the 16th century. Monkeys are attached to wooden blocks by ropes.



Palais Jacques-Cœur, Bourges, 15th-16th Century.

Concluding remarks

We always need to keep in mind that some of the animals found in art may also reflect real animals in courtly life. If symbolic patterns are often obvious, we have to remember that monkeys were REALLY chained, fettered and linked to blocks, to prevent “monkey business”. Keeping apes and monkeys at home was part of everyday courtly life, and the chains, bowls and leashes used to restrain them, were part of the material culture of living with exotic pets. While all these objects used to constrain the monkey’s mobility was, on the one hand, part of the animal’s life it could sometimes also be hurtful and cruel. Not only did the heavy block represent a symbol of evil pleasures, complacency, habit and the heavy burdensome affairs of the human condition for Christian scholars (Janson

1952, 147), but for the ape these restrains were an everyday reminder of their captivity and the very limited freedom allowed to them.

N.B.: *This paper was given at the International Medieval Congress (Leeds, 2011), during a round-table (Session 424, July 11th 2011 : Monkeys: Attractive and Repelling – A Round Table Discussion), organized by the Medieval Animal Data Network and sponsored by the Central European University of Budapest.*

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N.B. We would like to mention the work of a young French scholar, Amandine Gaudron, student at the Ecole nationale des Chartes (Paris). She is a student of Prof. Michel Pastoureau, and she just has finished her MASTER's thesis on the medieval monkey: *Le singe dans l'Occident médiéval*. Amandine Gaudron presented her very interesting work in François Poplin's seminar on March 27, 2013 in Paris. In the same seminar, Frédéric Gerber presented a very well-documented study on the history of monkeys and apes in classical Antiquity, beginning with recent finds of Gallo-Roman remains of monkey bones from a funeral context in Poitiers.

Update (05-16-2014): For the story of the destruction of a charter by a monkey (with a photo of the charter), see:

- Rey, Coraline, “Une charte lacérée par un singe”, *Lateus diaconus* (blog on Hypotheses.org), May 5th, 2014.
<http://laetusdiaconus.hypotheses.org/1029>

To cite this post : Thierry BUQUET, “Preventing ‘Monkey Business’: Fettered Apes in the Middle Ages”, *Medieval Animal Data Network* (blog on Hypotheses.org), June, 23th, 2013. **[On line]**
<http://mad.hypotheses.org/37>



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