

0. PEOPLE and ANIMALS in MEDIEVAL EUROPE - Story
Preface

1. PEOPLE and ANIMALS in MEDIEVAL EUROPE

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This engraving depicts "The Trial of Bill Burn under Martin's Act." Engraving by Charles Hunt after a work by P. Mathews published, in London, by Ackermann & Co., sometime in the second quarter of the nineteenth century (but after August 1838).

For more than a thousand years, animals in Medieval Europe were put on trial. Their offenses ranged from killing children (which pigs apparently did, on occasion) to destroying crops (which insects still do, from time to time).

The first recorded trial - in 824 - took place when moles did something wrong in the Valley of Aosta (near today's Italian-Swiss border). Found guilty, the offending moles were excommunicated from the Catholic Church.

During the Middle Ages, people and animals lived in very close proximity. We can take a virtual trip to England's Wharram Percy - where extensive archeological excavations reveal much about medieval life - to see the layout of a 14th-century family home. People and animals - including pigs and cows - often shared the same space.

Then there were the sheep.

English villages began to disappear when wealthy landowners converted village-and-farm land into pasture land. Thomas More (who ultimately loses his head for not supporting Henry VIII's efforts to make himself head of the Church of England) bemoans this situation - and accuses the sheep in rather pointed terms - in his book, *Utopia*:

... your sheep that were wont to be so meek and tame, and so small eaters, now, as I hear say, ... become so great devourers and so wild that they eat up and swallow down the very men themselves.

Actually, the sheep did more than that - if ever they really did "eat up and swallow down the very men themselves."

Tracts of land, formerly used for farming, were turned-into pastures. While farming required hundreds of people to work the land, only a few shepherds were needed to manage the sheep. When entire villages disappeared - historians estimate there were more than 3,000 of those in England alone - out-of-work people had few options.

In *Utopia*, a work of fiction with references to real life, More (who eventually lost his own head for refusing to acknowledge Henry VIII as head of the church) notes:

They [the sheep] consume, destroy, and devour whole fields, houses, and cities ... much annoying the weal public [the public good], leave no ground for tillage [farming], they [the wealthy landowners] enclose all into pastures; they throw down houses; they pluck down towns, and leave nothing standing, but only the church to be made a sheephouse.

And as though you lost no small quantity of ground by forests, chases, lands, and parks, those good holy men turn all dwelling-places and all glebeland into desolation and wilderness. (*Utopia*, by Thomas More, pages 33-34.)

Was this type of upheaval a reason why people blamed animals for various criminal offenses?

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/PEOPLE-and-ANIMALS-in-MEDIEVAL-EUROPE-Animals-as-Defendants>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/PEOPLE-and-ANIMALS-in-MEDIEVAL-EUROPE-Animals-as-Defendants>



Aosta Valley - Animals as Criminal Defendants

Photo of the Aosta Valley by Tinelot Wittermans, online courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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Sir Thomas More - Execution

Clip from the 1966 film, "[A Man for all Seasons](#)," with Paul Scofield as Sir Thomas More. Copyright, Highland Films/Columbia Pictures, all rights reserved. Clip provided here as fair use for educational purposes.

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