

A LEOPARD OR A PANTHER? The Pairs of the Stag and the Predator in Vittore Carpaccio's *Meditation on the Passion*

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Abstract

The current paper will suggest an interpretation of two pairs of animals featured in Vittore Carpaccio's *Meditation on the Passion*, i.e., a stag and a predator of the *Felidae* family, which in one case devours the stag, and in the other – follows it. The paper will attempt to answer the question why did Carpaccio choose to paint the same motif twice, and why in two differing variations?

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the research of the iconography of Job, and to the research on animal symbolism in art, and particularly the ongoing effort to decipher Carpaccio's *Meditation on the Passion*. Its specific and unique contribution will be to suggest a new interpretation to the peaceful predator, presented on right-hand side in Carpaccio's *Meditation*, seeing it in a new light – not as a wild animal tamed by a religious transformation, as suggested in previous literature, but rather as an inherently positive one. This reading will be informed by primary sources, which will be connected here with the stag and their predators in Carpaccio's *Meditation* for the first time.

Keywords: Vittore Carpaccio, *Meditation on the Passion*, animal symbolism, stag, tiger, panther

1. Introduction

The current paper suggests an interpretation of two pairs of animals featured in Vittore Carpaccio's *Meditation on the Passion* (fig. 1),¹ which depicts Dead Christ seated on a broken throne, flanked by two saints – St. Jerome on the viewer's left side, and Job on the right, surrounded by animals scattered about.

The paper will focus on the stags and the predators of the *Felidae* family, described differently each time – once, while the predator is attacking the stag, and once again, while following it peacefully. The paper will address the question why did Carpaccio choose to paint the same motif twice, and why in two differing variations?

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the research of the iconography of Job and to the research on animal symbolism in art, and particularly the ongoing effort to decipher Carpaccio's *Meditation on the Passion*.² Its specific and unique contribution will be to suggest a new interpretation to the predator presented on right-hand side in Carpaccio's *Meditation*, seeing it in a new light – not as a wild animal tamed by a religious transformation, as suggested in previous literature, but rather as an inherently positive one. This reading will be informed by primary sources, which will be connected here with the stags and their predators in Carpaccio's *Meditation* for the first time.



Figure 1. Vittore Carpaccio (Italian, ca. 1464-1525/6), *Meditation on the Passion*, ca. 1490-1510, oil and tempera on wood, 27 ¾ x 34 ½ in. (70.5 x 86.7 cm), New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

1.2 Carpaccio's *Meditation on the Passion*

A detailed description, literature review and a review of the scant information known concerning the provenance of Carpaccio's *Meditation on the Passion* have been published recently.³ Therefore, the main characteristics of the painting will be referred to in a very concise manner. As mentioned above, Carpaccio's *Meditation on the Passion* features three figures: on the left, St. Jerome, in the center – Christ, and on the right – Job. Numerous animals are dispersed throughout the painting. Among them, there are three stags: One is seen while grazing (fig. 2), and the others appear with predators from the *Felidae* family; on the left-hand side, above St. Jerome's head, a predator attacks the stag on the rock (fig. 3), whereas on the right-hand side, between Job and Christ, a predator is following another stag (fig. 4).



Figure 2. The stag eating grass. Vittore Carpaccio, *Meditation on the Passion*. Detail



Figure 3. The tiger devouring a stag. Vittore Carpaccio, *Meditation on the Passion*. Detail



Figure 4. The tiger – or panther – following a stag. Vittore Carpaccio, *Meditation on the Passion*. Detail

The painting combines several artistic traditions. The *Pietà*, the iconography of St. Jerome,⁴ as well as a group of artwork, created in Venice during that period, featuring the figure of Job, including *Job and St. Francis*, the marble in the portal of the Church of San Giobbe by Pietro Lombardo; Giovanni Bellini's *San Giobbe Altarpiece* and *Sacred Allegory*; Vittore Carpaccio's *Dead Christ*; and Marcello Fogolino's *Madonna and Child between Saints Job and Gothard*.⁵ Nevertheless, the painting can be related to yet another group. Carpaccio included animals in many of his paintings, and depicted them symbolically. The best known are two enigmatic paintings – *The Christian Knight* and *Two Venetian Ladies*, both of which are characterized by an abundance of animals scattered throughout the paintings, much like the *Meditation*.⁶ Together, the symbolic interpretations of these animals create a consistent meaning, deciphered several years ago by Simona Cohen (2008). In *Two Venetian Ladies*, the symbolic animals convey a message referring to marriage and to the chaste behavior expected from the young bride, and *The Christian Knight* combines the traditions of the "Christian Knight" and the tradition of the *Psychomachia* to create an analogy between the interpretation attributed to the animals and the characteristics of the Christian knight.⁷ Hence, *The Meditation on the Passion* also seems to belong to this small group, combining several ideas while utilizing the symbolic meanings of animals in an original manner devised by Carpaccio.

Thus far, however, no research has offered a satisfactory explanation to the motif containing the stags and predators and to the difference between the ways it was rendered. The current paper will try to suggest an answer to this enigma and thus to contribute to the effort to decipher this mysterious painting.

1.3 Literature Review

Earlier authors referred to the animals in Carpaccio's *Meditation on the Passion* as symbolic ones; however, not in a detailed manner which explained the symbolism of each one of these animals. Some have referred to the difference between the feral left side of the painting, where St. Jerome sits, and the peaceful one, where Job sits.⁸ Various authors connected this difference to primary written sources. Heidi Hornik (2002) connects the peaceful animals on Job's side of the painting with the verse "And the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee";⁹ and Herbert Friedmann (1980) connects the "negative" animals with St. Jerome's biography and iconography,¹⁰ based on a letter sent by St. Jerome to his friend Eustochium in 384 A.D., where he writes: "I had no companions but scorpions and wild beasts".¹¹

A few authors have briefly addressed the symbolic interpretation of the pairs consisting of the stag and *Felidae* predators in Carpaccio's *Meditation*. They explain the difference between the two scenes relying on the interpretation of the stag as the human soul, subjected to different conditions. While the stag on the left-hand side, being killed by the predator, symbolizes the soul prior to the Coming of Christ, the stag on the right, walking towards the water and followed by the feline predator – symbolizes the soul following the Coming of Christ.¹²

There is, however, a problem concerning all those interpretations, seeing the right-hand side pair of animals (fig. 4) as a "tiger follows peacefully the stag", as described by Samuel Balentine (1999).¹³ Looking at the posture of right-hand side tiger, it seems like this tiger is not walking, but rather intends to leap and devour the stag, and thus the assumption of "peacefulness" is undermined by the facts and requires further consideration, which leads us to the next sections, explaining the hypothesis and the interpretation method, based on multiple readings.

1.4 The Hypothesis of the Paper

Supported by the assumption that Carpaccio was familiar with primary sources, mostly Christian literature, attributing various characteristics to animals,¹⁴ the current paper hypothesize that the identity of the right-hand predator in Carpaccio's *Meditation on the Passion* should be researched by consulting these primary sources, which might explain a positive reading of this predator. These sources might further establish the meaning of the difference between the two sides of the painting.

2. The Method

As mentioned above, no research thus far has offered the specific symbolic reading of the pairs of stags and their predators as suggested here, informed by primary sources. Below, we shall use primary sources, cited here for the first time within the context of the stags and their predators in Carpaccio's *Meditation*, in order to suggest a new, specific reading of the right-hand predator. Yet, it should be mentioned that these sources support the above-mentioned readings that view the different sides of the painting as describing life before and after the Coming of Christ. They also enhance the interpretation of Job as a prophet, prophesizing the Coming of Christ,¹⁵ based upon the words engraved on the cubic stone where Job sits, which was interpreted as alluding to the verse "my redeemer liveth".¹⁶

The research method employed in this paper is based on a time-honored method of Christian hermeneutics, interpreting each phrase and figure in the scriptures, including that of Job, in multiple levels of meanings, sometimes even contradicting one another.¹⁷ This method also existed, *the facto*, in the rich literature compounding fables and legends concerning animals, especially the Christian Medieval *Bestiary* literature, again, enabling contradictory interpretations

to coexist due to the fact the material included in them was compounded of various sources.¹⁸ Therefore, the suggested reading in this paper comes to add to previous interpretations, such as Hornik's (2002) and Friedman's (1980), and not to undermine them.

Thus, the current paper will look at the primary sources referring to animals and attempt to draw upon them as a means of interpreting the specific animals – the stag and the predators chasing, or following, it – and connect them with Carpaccio's *Meditation on the Passion*.

3. Findings: The Stags and the Predators From the *Felidae* Family

As mentioned above, there are three stags in *Meditation on the Passion*: one of which is grazing (fig. 2), and in the religious context it should be noted that a stag eating leaves in an effort to recover was associated with resurrection in the Christian tradition, and consequently with Christ's Resurrection.¹⁹ The other stags are paired with predators from the *Felidae* family; the one on the left hand side, above St. Jerome's head, is under attack by a predator (fig.3), whereas on the right hand side, between Job and Christ, is tracked by a predator (fig.4).

This repetition raises the question why did Carpaccio use the same subject twice – the stag and a predator from the *Felidae* family? Furthermore, why is this subject depicted on the right, allegedly, the peaceful side of the painting? Is it indeed, as Samuel Balentine (1999) suggests, that the "tiger follows peacefully the stag",²⁰ on the right side of the painting, or perhaps this predator, too, intends to prey on the stag? Moreover, if it does, then why so?

3.1 The Stag and Its Christological Interpretations

The stag has a wide range of symbolic interpretations in Christian tradition, and only a few of them, which are pertinent to the stags featured Carpaccio's *Meditation on the Passion*, will be mentioned here briefly. The stag, *inter-alia*, is known as a symbol of Christ, especially during the Passion;²¹ the doe, too, is known as a symbol of Christ, his flesh, or the Church.²² In addition, the stag was associated with the Resurrection because of the way in which it renews its antlers.²³

It is also important to mention in this context the Christian exegesis to the verse "As the Hart panteth after the water brookes, so panteth my soule after thee, O God" (*Psalms*, 42:1).²⁴ The perception of the hart, or the stag, as the Christian soul yearning for the Lord and Christ, could be associated with the stag on the right side of the painting, moving towards the water. It should also be noted that this particular stag appears to be heading out of the painting, similar to the stag in Carpaccio's painting *Christian Knight*, which could be interpreted as penitence, an interpretation that would also be appropriate for the penitent St. Jerome in the desert, in the case of Carpaccio's *Meditation*.²⁵

Michael Bath (1992) addresses two interpretations of the stag that can be connected with Carpaccio's *Meditation* – one is St. Jerome's exegesis to the aforementioned verse from the *Psalms*, and the other is the exegesis of St. Gregory the Great to the verse "Knowest thou the time when the wild goats of the rock bring forth? Or canst thou mark when the hinds do calve?" (*Job*, 39:1).²⁶ Both of these commentaries have more to do with the victory of the stag over the snake, which they interpret as a victory over evil. Like other animals in this painting, such as the weasel and the panther, the stag too is associated in other sources with the victory over evil – usually snakes.²⁷ Although snakes are absent from Carpaccio's *Meditation*, the victory over evil could be implied by the assemblage of these animals together.²⁸

The stag attacked by the predator on the left-hand side could be also connected with the Book of Job, with Job's testimony as a protector of the poor, saving them from the predator's teeth: "And I broke the jaws of the wicked, and plucked the spoil out of his teeth".²⁹

As previously noted, in the method section, these multiple interpretations are not mutually exclusive, and can coexist even when contradicting each other.³⁰ Below, adopting the aforementioned reading of the stag as the human soul, without excluding all other possible interpretations, an attempt will be made to find the difference between the two scenes in light of their location in the painting and the difference between the species of the feline predators depicted therein.

3.2 The Predators From the *Felidae* Family and Their Traditional Symbolic Meanings

First, let us examine the characteristics traditionally attributed to predators from the *Felidae* family in primary sources. The species named in the *Bestiaries* *pard*, or *pardus*, is described by Isidore of Seville (Spanish, A.D. 560-636), followed by *The Aberdeen Bestiary* (England, ca. 1200), as "extremely swift and thirsts for blood; for it kills at a single bound".³¹ The leopard (*leopardus*) as well, is perceived in a highly negative fashion. Isidore of Seville writes, "The leopard is the degenerate offspring of the adulterous mating of a lion (*leo*) and a pard".³² Bartholomaeus Anglicus (English, ca. A.D. 1203-1272) argues that the leopard is "most cruel" and shrewd.³³ It is also seen as a symbol of the devil, of Anti-Christ and as a cruel and adulterous creature.³⁴ The tiger (*tigris*) also symbolizes the devil, and *-inter-alia-* delusion, hypocrisy and revenge.³⁵

Thus, we can see that the *Felidae* family members symbolize, in most cases, ultimate evil. In this light, it is possible, of course, to interpret the stag on the right side of the painting as a soul escaping towards redemption, towards the water – escaping from the tiger, an inherently negative animal, which represents the vices, or the devil, and this might be a quite acceptable interpretation.

3.3 The Panther - An Exceptional Member of the *Felidae* Family

Here, however, one arrives at the specific contribution of the current paper, suggesting a new reading of the right-hand side predator following the stag, a possible reading hitherto unnoticed by research. As mentioned above, as in many cases in which meaning is attributed to animals, the multiple interpretations given to these beasts of prey could be contradictory, both positive and negative. Thus, for example, the animal named 'panther' (*pantera*) in the Middle Ages and during the Renaissance was perceived in a completely different light than the other predators from the *Felidae* family, *i.e.*, as a positive animal; in fact, so positive that it became a symbol of Christ. Bartholomaeus Anglicus wrote:

[...] and when he hath eat enough at full, he hideth him in his den, and sleepeth continually nigh three days, and riseth after three days and crieth, and out of his mouth cometh right good air and savour, and is passing measure sweet: and for the sweetness all beasts follow him.³⁶

The Aberdeen Bestiary also tells the same story, with an addition of the Christian interpretation, which is self-evident from the usage of the phrase "three days":

Thus our Lord Jesus Christ, the true panther, descending from Heaven, snatched us from the power of the devil [...]

On the third day the panther rises from its sleep and gives a great cry, emitting a sweet odour, just like our Lord Jesus Christ, rising again from the dead; as David says: 'He awakened as one out of sleep and like a mighty man that shouteth by reason of wine.' (Psalms, 78:65) And Christ cried out in a loud voice, so that his sound was heard throughout the land and his words at the ends of the earth (see *Romans*, 10:18).

And just as the odour of sweetness comes out of the panther's mouth, and all the beasts which are near and those which come from afar follow it, [...]so [...] those from afar, [...] hearing the voice of Christ, follow him, saying with the prophet: 'How sweet are thy words unto my taste! yea, sweeter than honey to my mouth.' (Psalms, 119:103) And again of Christ: 'Grace is poured into thy lips; therefore God hath blessed thee for ever.' (Psalms, 45:2) And Solomon says: 'How much better is ... the smell of thine ointments than all spices!' (Song of Solomon, 4:10) And again: 'In the savour of thy good ointments ... we will run after thee.' (Song of Solomon, 1:3-4). And a little after that: 'The king hath brought me into his chambers.' (1:4)

We ought to hurry after the scented ointment of Christ's commandments as quickly as we can, like young souls, that is, souls made new by baptism; to quit earthly for heavenly things, that the king may lead us into his palace in Jerusalem, the city of the Lord of righteousness, on the mountain of all the saints.³⁷

This is also interpreted as victory over evil. The dragon is the only animal hiding underground because it is afraid of the panther.³⁸ Additionally, there are interpretations that attribute to the panther characteristics such as chastity and virginity,³⁹ and in fact view this feline predator as a symbol of the human Incarnation of Christ,⁴⁰ interpretations that might be particularly appropriate to Carpaccio's *Meditation*.

4. Discussion

Collectively, all these interpretations may suggest that the animal depicted on the right-hand side of Carpaccio's *Meditation* is not a tiger (The vices? The devil?), chasing the stag (Christ? The human soul?), and neither as a wild, ferocious animal (tiger? leopard?), tamed due to a redemption-derived transformation, as suggested by previous authors, but rather as an inherently positive animal, a panther (Christ), trying to capture the stag (the soul), just as Christ "snatched us from the power of the devil", according to *The Aberdeen Bestiary*. This reading is also supported by the posture of the predator on the right-hand side of the painting, looking as if it is about to leap and catch the stag. It is also consistent with the interpretation of the right side of the picture as a positive one, versus the wild, fierce, left side – *i.e.*, we have on the right a panther with benevolent intentions and a fierce leopard on the left.

In Medieval *Bestiaries*, the panther is depicted, according to the texts, as an animal whose sweet smell draws all animals towards it, except for the dragon.⁴¹ Sometimes the animals follow the panther, sometimes they walk towards it, and frequently, a stag is seen among these animals.⁴²

Yet, as far as could be found by the current author in the entries describing the panther in the available sources, there is

no precedent depicting the panther *following* the stag, as in Carpaccio's *Meditation*, which therefore should be referred to as an original creative invention of Carpaccio.

Thus, one can interpret the predator on the right-hand side of Carpaccio's *Meditation* as having a positive meaning, and see it as another reference to the prediction of the coming of Christ. This interpretation is also consistent with *Job* 5:23: "And the beasts of the field shall be at peace with thee".

One should be cautious, however, when undertaking this interpretation. Charbonneau-Lassay (1940) already observed the fact that Medieval and Renaissance artists did not discern between the members of the *Felidae* family and depicted them all in a very similar manner. He also noticed that the leopard was also perceived at times as a "soul hunter", compared with Christ. On the other hand, it should be added that since by the end of the fifteenth century, a change occurred also in the perceived meaning of the panther. The differences between the panther and the other *Felidae* family predators were obscured; thus, transforming the panther into a symbol of cruelty and treason, like the tiger (and the rest of the *Felidae* family).⁴³

Therefore, we have multiple suggestions to solving the enigma as to the identity of this predator – suggestions in which ambiguous, inconsistent and even contradictory interpretations coexist within the same painting, though it seems that the predator's positive meaning as a "soul hunter" can still be maintained whether one sees it as a leopard or a panther.

5. Conclusions

The multiple interpretations of the stag and the panther, or leopard, can contribute an additional layer to the understanding of this complex and enigmatic painting.

Thus, we can try to interpret the two pairs of animals in the painting in the following way. The stag and the tiger on the left may allude to Job as the protector of the poor, suffering Job, suffering Christ, or to the companions of St. Jerome, as well as the soul suffering before the coming of Christ. The pair of the stag and the panther on the right-hand side represent the resurrection and salvation, the "snatching of the soul" by Christ, as prophesized by Job in the verse "my redeemer liveth".

Knowing Carpaccio's creativity using the multiple interpretations of animals, it might not be surprising that he uses a highly unexpected meaning of the predator following the stag, which might acquire a positive facet in Carpaccio's *Meditation on the Passion*, and thus enrich its interpretations.

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List of Figures

1. Vittore Carpaccio (Italian, ca. 1464-1525/6), *Meditation on the Passion*, ca. 1490-1510, oil and tempera on wood, 27 ³/₄ x 34 ¹/₈ in. (70.5 x 86.7 cm), New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art
2. The stag eating grass. Vittore Carpaccio, *Meditation*. Detail.
3. The tiger devouring a stag. Vittore Carpaccio, *Meditation*. Detail.
4. The tiger – or panther – following a stag. Vittore Carpaccio, *Meditation*. Detail.

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Note

- Note 1. Vittore Carpaccio (Italian, ca. 1464-1525/6), *Meditation on the Passion*, ca. 1490-1510, oil and tempera on wood, 27 ³/₄ x 34 ¹/₈ in. (70.5 x 86.7 cm), New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art
- Note 2. For a literature review of the research concerning Carpaccio's *Meditation* – see Moscovich 2019
- Note 3. Moscovich 2019
- Note 4. For a detailed analysis – see Moscovich 2019
- Note 5. *Job and St. Francis*, a marble relief in the portal of the Church of San Giobbe by Pietro Lombardo (Italian, 1435-1515). Giovanni Bellini's (Italian, 1435-1518) *San Giobbe Altarpiece*, Ca. 1445-1487, ³/₈ in. x 8 ft. 6 in. (471 x 258 cm.), Venice, Galleria dell' Accademia. Giovanni Bellini's *Sacred Allegory*, ca. 1490-1510, oil and tempera on wood, 29 x 47 in. (78 x 119 cm.), Florence, Galleria degli Uffizi. Vittore Carpaccio's *Dead Christ*, 57 x 72³/₄ in. (145 x 185 cm.), tempera on wood, ca. 1510-1520, Berlin, Staatliche Museum, Gemäldegalerie. Marcello Fogolino's (Italian, 1470/1488?-1548) *Madonna and Child between Saints Job and Gothard*, 79⁷/₈ x 63 in. (203 x 160 cm.), oil on wood, ca. 1508, Milan, Pinacoteca Brera.
- Note 6. Vittore Carpaccio, *The Christian Knight*, 1510, oil on Canvas, 86x 56 in. (218 X 142.2 cm.), Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza; Vittore Carpaccio, *Two Venetian Ladies*, Ca. 1495, oil and tempera on wood, 37 x 25¹/₄ in. (94 x 64 cm.), Venice, Correr Museum
- Note 7. Cohen 2008, pp. 53-134
- Note 8. Borroughs 1911, p. 192; Friedmann 1980 p. 49
- Note 9. Job 5:23; Hornik 2002, p. 554
- Note 10. Friedmann 1980, p. 23
- Note 11. St. Jerome, *Letters*, 22:3
- Note 12. Hartt 1940, pp.30-31; Mason 2000, p. 13; Hornik 2002, p. 554
- Note 13. Balentine 1999, p. 283ff.
- Note 14. Cohen 2008; Moscovich 2019
- Note 15. For a review of interpreting Job as a prophet – see Hornik 2002, Moscovich 2019

Note 16. *Job* 25:19; Hartt 1940, p. 27

Note 17. See Smalley, 1964, *passim*; for applying this method on Venetian art depicting Job at this period – see Hornik 2002; Moscovich 2015, pp. 134-135

Note 18. For literature reviews referring to the *Bestiaries* – see Cohen 2008; Hassig 1995; Moscovich 2019

Note 19. Bath 1992, p. 258

Note 20. Ballentine 1999, p. 283ff.

Note 21. Cohen 2008, pp. 143 ff., 117-125; Charbonneau-Lassay 1940 (1990), pp. 117-125; Levi D'Ancona 2001, p. 92; for the stag as a symbol of the Passion – see Bath 1992, pp. 222-224

Note 22. Levi D'Ancona 2001, p. 92. For the stag in Carpaccio's *Meditation* as an incarnation of Christ, referring to the life-story of St. Eustace, see Moscovich 2019.

Note 23. Bath 1992, pp. 133, 216

Note 24. Cohen 2008, pp. 81-82, 142; Bath 1992, pp. 211 ff.; Charbonneau-Lassay 1940 (1990), pp. 123-124; Levi D'Ancona 2001, p. 92

Note 25. Vittore Carpaccio, *The Christian Knight*, 1510, oil on Canvas, 86x 56 in. (218 X 142.2 cm.), Madrid, Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza. On the stag walking out of the painting as a symbol of penitence, see Cohen 2008, p. 82.

Note 26. Bath 1992, pp. 213, 217

Note 27. Cohen 2008, p. 81, 143; Hassig 1995, pp. 41-45; Bath 1992, pp. 211-213, 217, 222, 249, 259; Charbonneau-Lassay 1940 (1990), pp. 117-118; Levi D'Ancona 2001, p. 92

Note 28. On the implied interpretation of victory over evil when the stag is depicted in art without the snake, see Bath, *ibid.*: 265-267, and the association of the stag with victory over evil might have been known to the Venetians in light of the relief of the deer eating a snake, in St. Mark's Church (Bath, 1992, p. 266)

Note 29. *Job*, 29:7; see also Moscovich 2015, esp. p. 138

Note 30. Smalley, 1964: *passim*; Hornik 2002; Moscovich 2015, pp. 134-135

Note 31. Isidore of Seville 1911, Book 12, 2:10-11; *The Aberdeen Bestiary*, fol. 8v

Note 32. Isidore of Seville 1911, Book 12, 2:11

Note 33. Bartholomaeus Anglicus, 1979, Book 18

Note 34. Levi D'Ancona 2001, p. 152

Note 35. Levi D'Ancona 2001, p. 209

Note 36. Bartholomaeus Anglicus 1979, Book 18

Note 37. *The Aberdeen Bestiary*, fol. 9r-v; Charbonneau-Lassay 1940 (1990), pp. 129, 131

Note 38. For the panther as a symbol of Christ overcoming evil, see also Charbonneau Lassay 1940 (1990), pp. 129, 131; Hassig 1995, pp. 50, 158 162;

Note 39. Charbonneau-Lassay, 1940 (1990), pp. 130

Note 40. Levi D'Ancona 2001, p. 169, cites a later source, Picinelli, *Mundus Symbolicus*, Lib. V from the seventeenth century. Further research is required to ascertain whether this idea occurred in earlier sources.

Note 41. Hassig 1995, figs. 162-171

Note 42. For examples of animals following the panther – see Hassig 1995, figs. 162, 164, 166, 167; For examples of animals walking towards the panther – see Hassig 1995, figs. 168, 170, 171

Note 43. Charbonneau-Lassay 1940 (1990), p. 131; Levi D'Ancona 2001, p. 170

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