

# The Medieval Magazine

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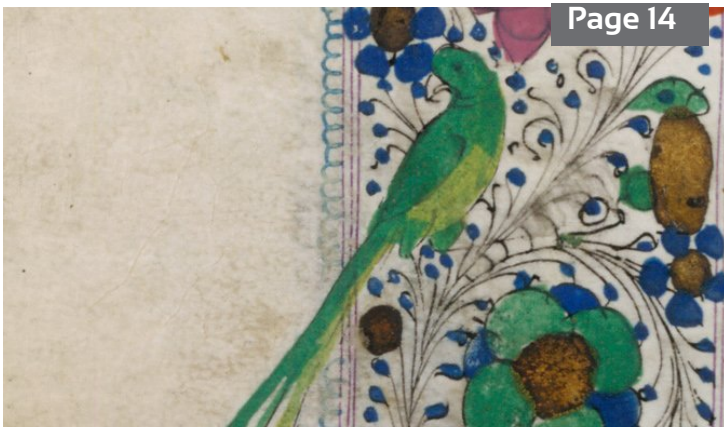
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Cover Photo: Wolf about to attack sheep -  
from British Library Royal 12 C XIX f. 19



**Medieval News**

# **1,000 year old silver treasure hoard discovered in Denmark**

Over 550 silver items have been discovered on the Danish island of Omø. The hoard is believed to date from around the reign of Sweyn Forkbeard (986–1014) and includes coins and pieces of jewellery.





**Coins discovered on the Danish island of Omø – Photos by Tobias Bondesson / Museum Vestsjælland**

The discovery was made by Robert Hemming Poulsen, an amateur archaeologist. He was on the island working to lay fibre optic cables when a local farmer mentioned having found as a boy a twisted silver ring in his fields. Poulsen agreed to check out the field with his metal detecting equipment and soon discovered some coins and silver items.

Local authorities were called in, and on October 24-25 Poulsen returned to the site with three more metal detectorists to make a thorough search. During that weekend they found hundreds of more items, including rare coins dating back between the years 975-980, which were minted by King Harald Bluetooth. Other coins that were discovered come from further afield, including England,

Germany, Poland, Czech Republic and even Arabic dirhams.

Also found were small pieces of silver jewellery – parts of bracelets and rings. No evidence was found that the a building once existed where the treasure was discovered, and it is believed that centuries of farming had probably disturbed the items.

The treasure is now on display at Museum Vestsjælland. Curator Hugo Hvid Sørensen explained to the *Copenhagen Post* that "A treasure like this is found once every 10-15 years. It contains many items and is extremely well kept because it has been buried in sandy earth."

# English Noble Family's heritage traced in study

The lineage of one of the longest-established noble English families could extend back as far as pre-Roman times, according to genealogy research at the University of Strathclyde.

The Berkeley family can trace their ancestry to the mid-11th century, before the time of the Norman conquest, and are generally recognised as one of only a handful of families who can reliably trace their ancestry back through the male line to before 1066.

At this time, their earliest known ancestor, Eadnoth the Constable, served as Royal official to King Edward the Confessor and King Harold. Eadnoth's grandson, Robert Fitzharding, was granted the Barony of Berkeley and his son Maurice married one of the Berkeley family, whose surname he took on.

Eadnoth was an Anglo-Saxon nobleman but DNA testing of his male line descendants, examined by the Strathclyde researchers, has shown that their origins may date back even further, to an ancestor belonging to a genetic group which arrived in the UK earlier than the Anglo-Saxons' settlement around the middle of the 5th century. The descendants tested were Julian Lennox Berkeley, middle son of the composer Sir Lennox Berkeley, and great grandson of George Lennox Rawdon Berkeley, 7th Earl of Berkeley (1827-1888); and Viscount Portman.

The results of the research have delighted members of the Berkeley family. Charles Berkeley, whose father, John, is the current owner of family seat Berkeley Castle, said: "It is very interesting to hear that, through recent DNA tests done on members of the Berkeley family, the origins of the male line of the family have been established as dating from

pre-Anglo-Saxon times. Although regarded as Anglo-Saxon, this research suggests that our ancestors were in England at an even earlier period.

"The study has been carried out by researchers from Strathclyde's Genealogical Studies Postgraduate Programme. A member of the project, Graham Holton, said: "Eadnoth's male line ancestor was a member of a people who appear to have travelled over a period of time from southern to northern Spain, some eventually arrived in Britain, possibly earlier than the Roman period.

"Another possibility is that the ancestor from the same genetic group was a Roman soldier, recruited in Spain, who settled in Britain during the Roman occupation, which lasted from the first to fifth centuries. Either scenario would suggest that Eadnoth's ancestor had settled in Britain before the Anglo-Saxon era.

"With the subsequent dominance of Anglo-Saxon culture, it would be almost inevitable that, over time, the family would adopt Anglo-Saxon names and become assimilated into the Anglo-Saxon culture. It is possible that the family maintained its status from the end of the Anglo-Saxon period into the Norman period - a very unusual occurrence - but may also have held this position from an even earlier Roman or pre-Roman period. This could be evidence of the longest period of noble status maintained in the male line by one family."

The Berkeley family has held the titles of Marquess of Berkeley, Earl of Berkeley and Baron Berkeley and still own Berkeley Castle in Gloucestershire, the county where they have been established since before the Norman Conquest.

The study originated in the connection with their Battle of Bannockburn Family History Project, run by the Genealogical Studies Postgraduate Programme to mark the 700th anniversary of the 1314 battle. A number of Berkeley family members fought in the battle.

# 14th-Century Birchbark Messages discovered in Russia



Photo courtesy Russian Academy of Sciences - Institute of Archaeology

Archaeologists from the Russian Academy of Sciences have discovered a letter written on birchbark that comes from the 14th century.

The letter was found in Moscow and is one of about a 1,000 such medieval documents that have been found in Russia since the 1950s.

The letter does not reveal who the author is - nor the recipient, who is referred to as 'Master' - but reveals that he and others were going to the city of Kostroma, which is north east of Moscow, when they were detained by someone, perhaps a local official.

The writer goes on to note that he had to make two separate payments for themselves to be released, leaving the group too poor to continue their journey.

Last year, the **New York Times** reported on the invaluable details on life from medieval Russia being found in these birchbark letters. They included the writings from a 6 or 7 year old boy named Onfim, who in 1260 used a piece of this bark to jot down school exercises and doodles. In another case, a man named Mikita wrote a love-letter to a woman named Anna saying, "I want you, and you me."

# 15th-Century Church discovered on the Cape Verde Islands

Archaeologists from the University of Cambridge have unearthed the earliest known European Christian church in the tropics on one of the Cape Verde islands, 500km off the coast of West Africa, where the Portuguese established a stronghold to start the first commerce with Africa south of the Sahara. This turned into a global trade in African slaves from the 16th century, in which Cape Verde played a central part as a major trans-shipment centre.

The earliest remains of the church of Nossa Senhora da Conceição date from around 1470, with a further larger construction dating from 1500. Extensions and a re-cladding of the church with tiles imported from Lisbon have also been documented.

This church is the oldest formal European colonial building yet discovered in sub-Saharan Africa, say researchers. It was found amongst the ruins of Cidade Velha, the former capital of Cape Verde, which at its height was the second richest city in the Portuguese empire; a city that channelled slavery for almost 300 years.

"It's a profound social and political story to which these new archaeological investigations are making an invaluable contribution," said Cambridge's Professor Marie Louise Stig Sørensen.

Archaeologists from the University and the Cambridge Archaeological Unit (CAU) have just completed the excavation and conservation of this building for public display, and have been working with the Cape Verde government and local partners on the

town's archaeology since 2007.

"We've managed to recover the entire footprint-plan of the church, including its vestry, side-chapel and porch, and it now presents a really striking monument," said Christopher Evans, Director of the CAU.

"Evidently constructed around 1500, the most complicated portion is the east-end's chancel where the main altar stood, and which has seen much rebuilding due to seasonal flash-flood damage. Though the chancel's sequence proved complicated to disentangle, under it all we exposed a gothic-style chapel," he said.

"This had been built as a free-standing structure prior to the church itself and is now the earliest known building on the islands – the whole exercise has been a tremendous success."

During the excavation several tombstones of local dignitaries were recovered. One enormous stone found in the side chapel belonged to Fernão Fiel de Lugo, a slaver and the town's 'treasure holder' between 1542





**Christopher Evans from Cambridge Archaeological Unit on site with some of the excavation team - photo courtesy University of Cambridge**

and 1557. "This is a place of immense cultural and heritage value. This excavation has revealed the tombs and graves of people that we only know from history books and always felt could be fiction," Cidade Velha's Mayor, Dr Manuel Monteiro de Pina, said.

The research team discovered a densely packed cemetery dug into the floor of the church, which they say will be of great importance for future academic investigations. It is estimated that more than 1,000 people were buried here before 1525, providing a capsule of the first 50 years of colonial life on the island.

Preliminary analysis of samples shows that about half the bodies are African, with the rest from various parts of Europe. An excavation is being planned to collect data for isotope analysis of more bodies to learn more about the country's founding population and its early slave history.

"From historical texts we have learned about the development of a 'Creole' society at an early date with land inherited by people of mixed race who could also hold official positions. The human remains give us the opportunity to test this representation of the first people in Cabo Verde," said Evans.

The significance of the discovery, a central feature of the Cidade Velha UNESCO World Heritage Site, has been widely acknowledged. Hundreds of people have visited the site since work began, and school groups have frequently been brought out to see the church. On his visit, the President Jorge Carlos Fonseca endorsed the contribution made by this project. "I can see the importance the site has for Cabo Verde to understand our history and our identity," he said.

"The hope is that the work will both encourage much-needed cultural tourism, and help the nation build a more nuanced

sense of its notable past," said Sørensen.

The ten small islands that make up Cape Verde are harsh volcanic rock, and were barren of people, mammals and trees until the Portuguese arrived in 1456. The Portuguese transformed the islands into one of the major hubs for the transatlantic slave trade, bringing with them crops, livestock and people in the form of traders, missionaries and thousands upon thousands of slaves. The slaves were funnelled through the islands where they were 'sorted' and sold before being shipped off to plantations across the Atlantic World.

The discovery of Brazil, in particular, and the establishment of plantations there, caused trade through Cape Verde to explode. "The islands were a focal point for the initial wave of globalisation, all built on the back of the slave trade," said Sørensen. "The excavation reveals these global connections as the finds include fine ware and faience from Portugal, German stoneware, Chinese porcelain and pottery from different parts of West Africa."

In addition to the excavated church, there were around 22 other churches in the small river valley where the old town of Cidade Velha sits, including a large cathedral built with imported Portuguese stones. It is clear the church had huge influence here – a mere 15 degrees north of the equator – from the late medieval period onwards, say the researchers.

Centuries later, pirate attacks plagued the islands. French privateer Jacques Cassard launched a devastating attack on Cidade Velha in 1712, from which it would never recover, and, as slavery began to be outlawed during the 19th century, the islands lost their financial basis and were neglected by the Portuguese. The islanders were left to the mercy of an inhospitable landscape with erratic rainfall that undermined agricultural activities and caused drinking water to be scarce.

Cape Verde, known as Cabo Verde in Portuguese, became a republic in 1975, and as an independent nation it is coming to terms with a heritage and identity rooted in slavery. The research team believe the new archaeological discoveries will prove integral to this process.

"Cabo Verde is a young nation in many ways, and it needs its history to be unearthed and accessed so it can continue to build its national identity," said Sørensen.

Evans added: "The finds so far clearly demonstrate the fantastic potentials of Cabo Verde's archaeology and the contribution they can make to the future of these Atlantic islands."

***Our thanks to the University of Cambridge for this article***



**Some of the tombstones revealed by the excavation.  
Photo courtesy University of Cambridge**

Isidore of Seville on...

# De animalibus

What did Isidore of Seville, the 7th-century Archbishop of Seville and author of *Etymologiae*, have to say about animals? Here are some excerpts from his encyclopedia:

**Livestock and beasts of burden (De pecoribus et iumentis)** Adam was the first to confer names on all the animals, assigning a name to each one at the moment of its creation, according to the position in nature that it holds. The different nations have also given names to each of the animals in their own languages – for Adam did not assign these names in the Latin or Greek language, or in any of the languages of foreign nations, but in that language which, before the Flood, was the language of all peoples, which is called Hebrew. In Latin they are called animals (animal) or 'animate beings' (animans), because they are animated (animare) by life and moved by spirit. Quadrupeds (quadrupes) are so called because they walk on four feet (quattuor pedes); while these may be similar to livestock, they are nevertheless not under human control – such as deer, antelopes, onagers, et cetera. But they are not beasts, such as lions, nor are they beasts of burden, which could assist the useful activities of humans.

**Deer (cervus)** are so called from the word *κέρως*, that is, from their horns, for 'horn' is called *κέρως* in Greek. They are antagonistic to serpents; when they sense themselves burdened with infirmity, they draw the serpents from their caves with the breath from their nostrils, and having overcome the malignancy of the poison, the deer are restored to health by eating the serpents. They were the ones to discover the herb dittany (dictamnus), for after they have eaten it, they shake out any arrows that have stuck in them. Moreover, they are fascinated by the whistling of reed pipes. They listen intently with ears pricked, but if their ears are lowered, they hear nothing. If ever they swim across great rivers or seas, they place their head on the haunches of the one in front of them, and with each one following the next, they feel no difficulty from the weight. Trigelaphi were named by the Greeks; while they have the same appearance as deer, nevertheless they have shaggy flanks like he-goats, and hairy chins with long beards. They are found nowhere except around the river Phasis.

**Wolf (lupus)** comes into our language derived from Greek, for they call wolves; and *λύκος* is named in Greek from its behavior, because it slaughters whatever it finds in a frenzy of violence. Others say wolves are named as if the word were *λεωπος*, because their strength, just like the lion's (leo), is in their paws (pes). Whence whatever they tread on with their paws does not live. It is a violent beast, eager for gore. Concerning the wolf, country folk say that a person loses his voice if a wolf sees him first. Whence to someone who suddenly falls silent one says, "The wolf in the story." Certainly if a wolf perceives that he is seen first, he puts aside his bold ferocity. Wolves do not copulate more than twelve days during the entire year. They endure hunger for a long time, and devour a large amount after a lengthy fast. Ethiopia produces wolves that have manes about the neck, and of such a variety of shades that people say that there is no color these wolves do not possess.



**Bear and a beehive - from British Library Harley 3448 f. 10v**

**Bees (apis)** are so named either because they cling to each other with their feet (pes), or because they are born without feet, for they develop feet and wings afterwards. These animals, skilful at the task of creating honey, live in allocated dwellings; they construct their homes with indescribable skill; they make their honeycombs from various flowers; they build wax cells, and replenish their fortress with innumerable offspring; they have armies and kings; they wage battle; they flee smoke; they are annoyed by disturbance. Many people know from experience that bees are born from the carcasses of oxen, for the flesh of slaughtered calves is beaten to create these bees, so that worms are created [from] the putrid gore, and the worms then become bees. Specifically, the ones called 'bees' originate from oxen, just as hornets come from horses, drones from mules, and wasps from asses. The Greeks name *costri* those larger bees that are created in the edges of the honeycomb; some people think they are the kings. They are so named because they rule the hive (*castra*). The drone is larger than a bee, and smaller than a hornet. And the 'drone' is so called because it eats what is produced by others, as if the word were *fagus*, for it eats food that it has not toiled over. Concerning it Vergil says: *They keep the drones, a lazy flock, from the hives.*

***The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville*** has been edited and translated by Stephen A. Barney, W. J. Lewis, J. A. Beach and Oliver Berghof, and was published by Cambridge University Press in 2006

**Click here to visit the Publisher's website for more details**

# Describing the Parrot in the Middle Ages

Medieval writers often examined the natural world, seemingly fascinated by the creatures they saw around them. In the following story from the late twelfth-century, Alexander Neckham describes how deceitful parrots could be.

Alexander Neckham (1157-1217) was an English scholar and abbot of Cirencester. He was interested in the natural sciences, and around the year 1190 wrote *De naturis rerum*, which examined topics like how sight and sound works, and what magnets are. He also has many passages about wildlife, including birds.

In the following section, Neckam writes about parrots, making use of ancient and Biblical sources, as well as what seems to be his own observations and stories that he heard.

The parrot, which is commonly called the poppinjay, that is, the main or noble jay, dwells on the eastern shores. And for that reason, Ovid speaks of "the parrot, fleet messenger to me from eastern shores." Or its name may be interpreted as "marvelous jay"; or "Wonderful!" is an expression of astonishment. But does an interjection enter into word-formation? And they say that a great multitude of parrots are given to building their nest in the mountains of Gilboa, because neither rain nor dew falls upon those mountains. This is said to have come about at the request of David, for it is well known that Saul and Jonathan were killed in those same mountains, upon which occasion, David, overcome with grief, prayed that neither rain nor dew should fall upon them. Now, the parrot speedily dies if its skin is frequently drenched with water. Thus, a nursling of Dryness, it takes itself off to the said place for the said reason.

The shape of its body to the mind, for a while, the falcon or hobby, but it is decked in plumes of most intense green. It is protected by a rounded breast and a hooked beak of such strength that, even when it is tame, when it is shut up in a cage, the little house is constructed of iron rods, for wooden rods could not withstand the hard blows and the gnawing of its beak.



### **A Parrot depicted in the 15th century Lisbon Bible - British Library Oriental 2626**

It has a thick tongue, and one apt for the formation of the sound of the human voice. It is wonderfully shrewd, and for summoning up a laugh, ought to be preferred to jongleurs. And it is so fawning that it frequently seeks, once it is tame, to kiss men known to it. Now, when a mirror is brought near it, like Narcissus it is deluded by its own image, and sometimes with something like a smile, sometimes with something like a frown, stretching forth loving gestures, it seems to want to mate. Now it has a character quite given to the invention of deceits, as the little tale subjoined will demonstrate.

Now, there was in Great Britain a knight who owned a parrot of great excellence, which he held in the most tender regard. But while the knight was travelling abroad in the vicinity of the mountains of Gilboa, he saw a parrot, and prompted by the memory of the one he kept at home, he said, "Our parrot, which is shut up in a cage and is very like you, salutes you." Upon hearing this salutation, the bird tumbled down as if it were dying. The knight, deceived by the fraud of a little bird, was troubled, and returning home on the completion of his journey, told of what he had seen. Now, the knight's parrot listened closely to his master's tale, and feigning grief, dropped as if dead from the perch on which it was sitting. The entire household marveled, lamenting the unexpected calamity. Now, the master ordered that it be laid out under the open sky to benefit from the salubrious air, raising to which occasion, the parrot quickly flew off, with no intention of returning. The master sighed, and all the household complained that he had been deceived. They recalled the many comforts which the parrot had used to afford them, and they frequently cursed the mountain bird that had invented so deep a deceit.

This translation comes from George Wedge's PhD Dissertation: *Alexander Neckam's De Naturis Rerum: A Study, together with representative passages in translation*, from the University of Southern California in 1967.

# Monstrous Fishes and the Mead-Dark Sea: An Interview with Vicki Ellen Szabo

*Monstrous Fishes and the Mead-Dark Sea: Whaling in the Medieval North Atlantic*, by Vicki Ellen Szabo, was published in 2008. The book examines how medieval people viewed whales. Drawing upon a wealth of legal, literary and material evidence, this work details the ways in which whales were sought out and scavenged at sea and shore, fought over in legal and physical battles, and prized for meat, bone and fuel. We interview Vicki Szabo, an Associate Professor at Western Carolina University, about her research.

**You begin your book by noting that until now medieval historians usually saw whales and whaling as a kind of fringe sideline activity, and thus not very important, but you argue something very different. Could you give us an outline of what you are writing about?**

For my first paper in graduate school in Anglo-Saxon history / archaeology, I chose to work on women's literacy and authorship. I was looking for examples of the aforementioned and came across a weaving sword with two inscriptions of a woman's name – the author contended that one hand was fine, the other rough. He thought the owner of the sword had practiced writing her name. But what stunned me was the material of the object – it was a whale bone weaving sword. I had never before thought about the use of whale bone in the Middle Ages, and I was hooked. What I found thereafter on this subject was minimal and largely assumption – whales

were used when stranded but not sought out. I wanted to know how and why we knew they were not hunted and sought out. So the project began. I compiled all references I could find, focusing on northern Europe. The greatest body of information came from Iceland – laws, sagas, etc. Not archaeology, though – the most whale bone objects I found were in Norse settlements across Scotland. So – my project came into existence. I decided to pursue an interdisciplinary project that sought to somehow quantify or explain whale use, beyond those very simple assertions that whales were just opportunistically used. That was my dissertation. I focused on five archaeological sites in the Orkney Islands as a case study, from which I tried (tried... Not sure how successful that was) to say a little something more about how whales were acquired.

The book was an extension beyond that. Not



The book was an extension beyond that. Not only were whales used and used in patterned and legislated ways, but whales occupied medieval minds in similar ways as other animals. Whales were conceived of in complex ways from antiquity through the Middle Ages. So—I needed to put whales both in natural and human contexts, conceptual, material, economic, etc.

The end result was what I hope is a fairly holistic and rounded approach to one resource in one corner of the medieval world.....

**Your work on this project took you into several fields of research - art, archaeology, ecology, ethnography, literary, legal, and historical sources – how did you go about working with all these approaches?**

Gradually. It was a blessing to be able to switch fields when I got fed up with bone analysis or textual analysis, but I tried to tread lightly and consult peers in other fields when approaching new information and disciplines. I was pretty broadly trained as an undergraduate, having studied history at college, but having spent summers on various archaeological sites in northern Michigan (colonial fur-trading fort Michilimackinac) or Scotland (Whithorn monastery, and a Norse site on the island of Westray). When I came to grad school at Cornell, I already approached the Middle Ages in an interdisciplinary way and I took courses in art, anthropology, history, literature, etc. My committee also consisted of a historian, a Maya archaeologist, an Anglo-Saxonist, and an Arctic archaeologist. While this is an approach that makes employment tricky (what dept. does an interdisciplinary scholar belong in???), it is a really sound and holistic way to approach the past, I think.

In practice, this approach involved a LOT of reading and the bibliography reflects some of that. One of my readers for my dissertation complained that my bibliography was

padding—it wasn't. I had to read really broadly to prep so many fields. One of my own Masters students here at Western Carolina made the same comment as she defended her thesis – she was shocked that her research on comparative Greek / Medieval prostitution took her to so many pottery studies, funerary studies, etc etc.

**You write that for medieval peoples whales “were not just part of nature, they transcended it.” Could you tell us a little more about how medieval (and ancient people) saw and imagined these creatures?**

I think today we are mystified by whales – medieval folk were certainly no different. The immensity of some species is just mind-blowing. Imagine even bigger whales, though – which we think swam the oceans in much greater numbers in the Middle Ages. The largest whales were hunted out of existence during industrial whaling, so imagine massive great Sperm whales maybe washing ashore. Medieval responses would have been in some ways the same as ours – awe and fascination especially. However, they would not possess the same sadness perhaps as we do. I conclude my book with an example of the Thames whale – the bottlenose whale that stranded a few years ago. I think that's perhaps the best example of different responses. While we tried to save the whale, they would have scrutinized it. They would have wondered whether it was a good or bad whale. Most likely they would have simply butchered it, fought over the bones and blubber, and then eaten it. It's tough to reconstruct theory and practice, I think. Theory – whales are invested with all kinds of meaning, as all animals were. They could be symbols, they could be divine or demonic, they could also represent submission to man's dominion (except of course when you're in their turf, so to speak on the sea and then they were clearly masters). But, in practice, did those ideas impact the way medieval people used whales – maybe, maybe not. Most people

whales – maybe, maybe not. Most people would have seen meat and fuel, whereas we see a smart, social animal that we have, as a human culture, largely anthropomorphised with human sentiment.

**One of the challenges for you in your research was to estimate the population of whales in the medieval North Atlantic. How did you approach working on this problem, when it is even difficult today to estimate current whale populations?**

This is not an especially eloquent response, but I simply used the extrapolated figures provided by the governing body of the international whaling commission (IWC). Whale population estimates are so controversial – whaling states (Japan, Norway, others) have their own data that is often, as you can imagine, extremely different than figures provided by the IWC. I typically defer to the IWC. But this raises an

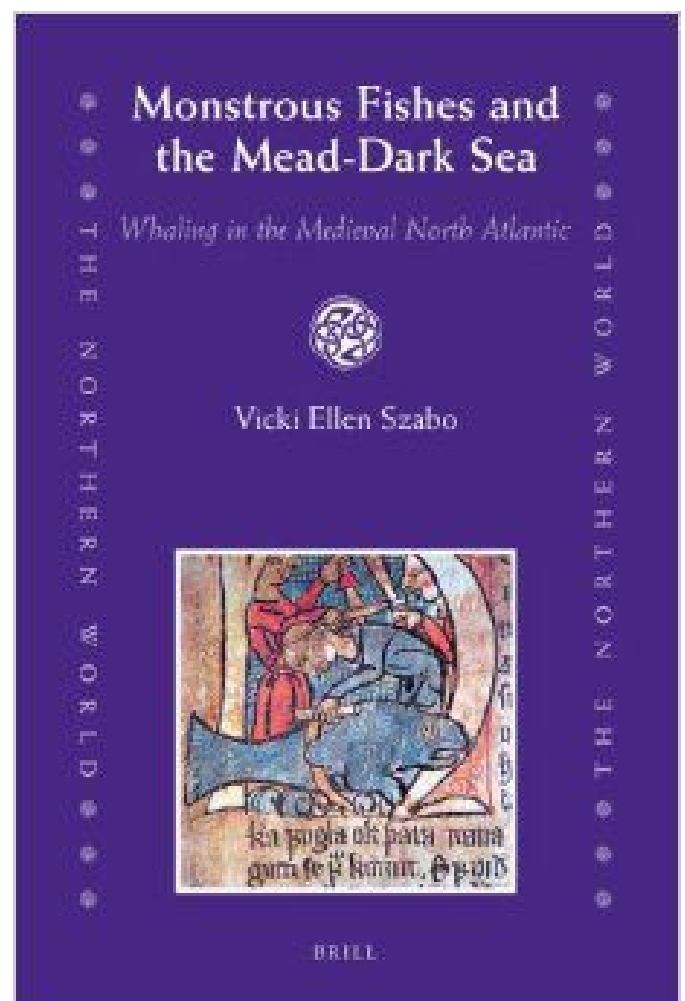
interesting question, which leads to my next project, which is called ORCA, the Online Resource for Cetacean Archaeology. A research partner in Wales (yes) and myself are trying to organize a working group consisting of us, ancient DNA specialists, biologists, zooarchaeologists, etc., to create a database of modern cetacean skeletons to use in reconstructing ancient populations. The real goal is to have a database to use for identification of species from archaeological worked bone, but we realized that once we identify those ancient species, we may be able to contribute something to preindustrial demographic reconstructions, too. I've applied for some grants to get this project started. It's another long term project, but would allow archaeologists not only to identify their materials, and maybe ascertain patterns in species acquisitions on sites, but also to contribute to a much greater project site by site to help reconstruct those early populations.

## ***Monstrous Fishes and the Mead-Dark Sea: Whaling in the Medieval North Atlantic***

**By Vicki Ellen Szabo**

**Published by Brill in 2008**

**Click here to visit the publisher's website for more details about this book**



# The Mad Norse King

What happens when the mental health of a medieval King of Norway declines and falls into madness? The story of Sigurðr the Crusader, who reigned for over 25 years, reveals a fascinating account of mental illness from the 12th century.



King Sigurðr depicted by Gerhard Munthe (1849–1929)

This topic was recently covered by Ármann Jakobsson, a professor in mediaeval Icelandic literature at the University of Iceland. His research appears in the article, "The Madness of King Sigurðr: Narrating Insanity in an Old Norse Kings' Saga", which was published last year in the book *Social Dimensions of Medieval Disease and Disability*.

Magnusson, who was King of Norway from 1103 to 1130. He is best known for leading the Norwegian Crusade – when about 60 ships and 5000 men sailed from Scandinavia to the Holy Land. Beginning in 1107, the four-year trip included taking part in battles in Portugal and the Mediterranean, and then assisting the Crusader King of Jerusalem capture the city of Sidon in present-day Lebanon.

The article focuses on the reign of Sigurðr

sJakobsson notes:

*The splendour of King Sigurðr's magnificent journey in his youth ends up standing in stark contrast to his life at home and his sad fate later in life. The dark side of this famous journey emerges when King Sigurðr returns from his voyages – eventually his sad fate as a lunatic on the throne, but immediately in the disruption he and his men cause upon their return. At first, King Sigurðr receives a hero's welcome, and the treasures he brings back with him cast glory on all of Norway. All hail King Sigurðr when he comes back, but soon his men start strutting around in their finery and thinking themselves above everyone who did not go on the journey, provoking a backlash from those who stayed home.*

As the reign continues, those around him begin to see signs of what they refer to as 'unsteadiness' or 'lack of control' in the king. This includes demanding meat be served on Fridays for his feasts, violating Christian law, and just the way he rolls his eyes while looking around the room in a strange fashion. One episode is reported in *Heimskringla*:

*When the king lay in the bath and the tub was covered by a tent, he thought that fish were swimming in the bath near him. The he began to laugh so loudly that unsteadiness followed and thereafter it happened very often to him.*

Jakobsson explains that "the narrative of King Sigurðr's madness in *Morkinskinna* is lengthy, graphic and striking." The saga, which was written around the year 1220, provides several stories where the king inexplicably strikes out violently at the people around him, including almost drowning one man after he hears what a good swimmer he is. On another occasion, he demands to divorce his own wife and marry another women, although his advisors convince him to abandon he idea.

Jakobsson adds that:

*It is remarkable how often Sigurðr mends his ways, never punishing his subjects for preventing him from fulfilling his misguided plans, but they remain very frightened of him*

*and at loss how the behave. On every occasion when he refuses to speak, people become afraid 'at þa myndi enn koma at honum vanstilli' (that another attack would come over him). The state of confusion that the mental illness initiates is graphically depicted in the texts, not least how baffling and terrifying the changes that come over the king appear to his court.*

Sigurðr is aware of his mental instability. In one episode, he talks about how his half-brother and son are vying for power and hoping to replace him. He says to his followers:

*You are badly off, you Norwegians, to have a crazy king ruling you, but I suspect that you would soon pay in red gold for me to be your king rather than either Haraldr or Magnus. The first is cruel, and the other foolish.*

The king was right – after he died in 1130, Norway would be plunged into civil war that would last for decades.

While the historical sources offer little information to why the king went mad – one chronicle suggests that he may have been poisoned, Jakobsson explains that they do provide some fascinating details:

*What it is possible is to say that Old Icelandic sagas demonstrate a sensitivity and an awareness of mental illnesses that today's scholarship might not expect from the 13th century North. Though the court society depicted in *Morkinskinna* offered no cure for King Sigurðr, the sympathy for his condition shines through. The madness was not explicable, and both king and subjects had to survive without those handy labels available to make people feel as if they understood what is happening.*

The article "The Madness of King Sigurðr: Narrating Insanity in an Old Norse Kings' Saga", appears in ***Social Dimensions of Medieval Disease and Disability***, edited by Sally Crawford and Christina Lee. It is the third volume of *Studies in Early Medicine* from the British Archaeological Reports International.

# **Medieval wonders of MAN in Madrid**

**By Danielle Trynoski**

Danielle Trynoski explores the medieval exhibits at the Museo Arqueológico Nacional.

The National Archaeology Museum, located in Madrid, offers a summary of the cultural history of Spain in 4 floors. The extensive collection is showcased in comprehensive, thoughtful exhibits, and the 2013 renovation is evident in the carefully applied technology and inclusive interpretation methods. The lovely displays of objects, craftsmanship, and Spanish lifestyle set the MAN apart as an archaeology, rather than an art, museum by showing beautiful items that affected peoples' daily lives, and reflected their beliefs and practices. The museum is set up to be chronological, with Prehistory at the ground floor, moving up through Roman, Medieval/Islamic, Age of Exploration, Industrial, and Modern eras. A gallery in the top floor explains the history of the museum and its collection. This transparency of the organization's practice is a bold and modern decision and should be an example in the museum industry. Other components also set a high standard, like the tactile exhibits created for blind or visually impaired visitors to touch their way through the description of a process like creating a pottery vessel.



The main entrance to MAN is this grand gate shared with the National Library

\*photos property of author



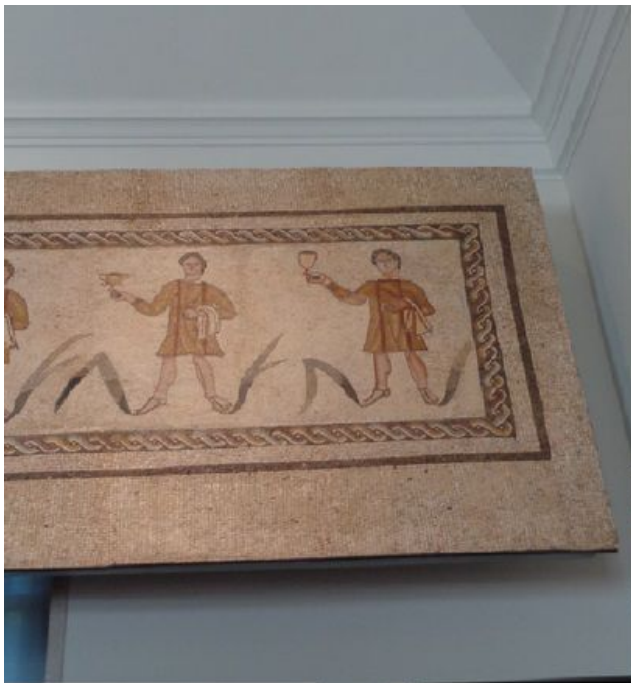
While the museum is a masterclass in modern exhibit design, let's get on to the good (medieval) stuff!

1st century statues of Livia and Tiberius watch over their handsome court full of Spanish sunshine

\*photos property of author



After passing through a great hall of Roman statuary presiding over a noble court, the transition from the Roman galleries to the Late Antique/Early Medieval exhibits is marked with an explanatory video and a delightful mosaic of early medieval drinking pals.



6th century mosaic  
documenting the historical  
practice of enjoying a good drink!

\*photos property of the author



The strong Roman presence in Spain is evident in the Roman techniques and style in the medieval objects. The (ahem) crown of the galleries are the Visigothic votive crowns, reconstructed and hanging to show off their full gem-encrusted glory. MAN's collection contains numerous examples of this strange object, including the Guarrazar Hoard with Reccevinth's crown, and the Torredonjimeno Hoard.

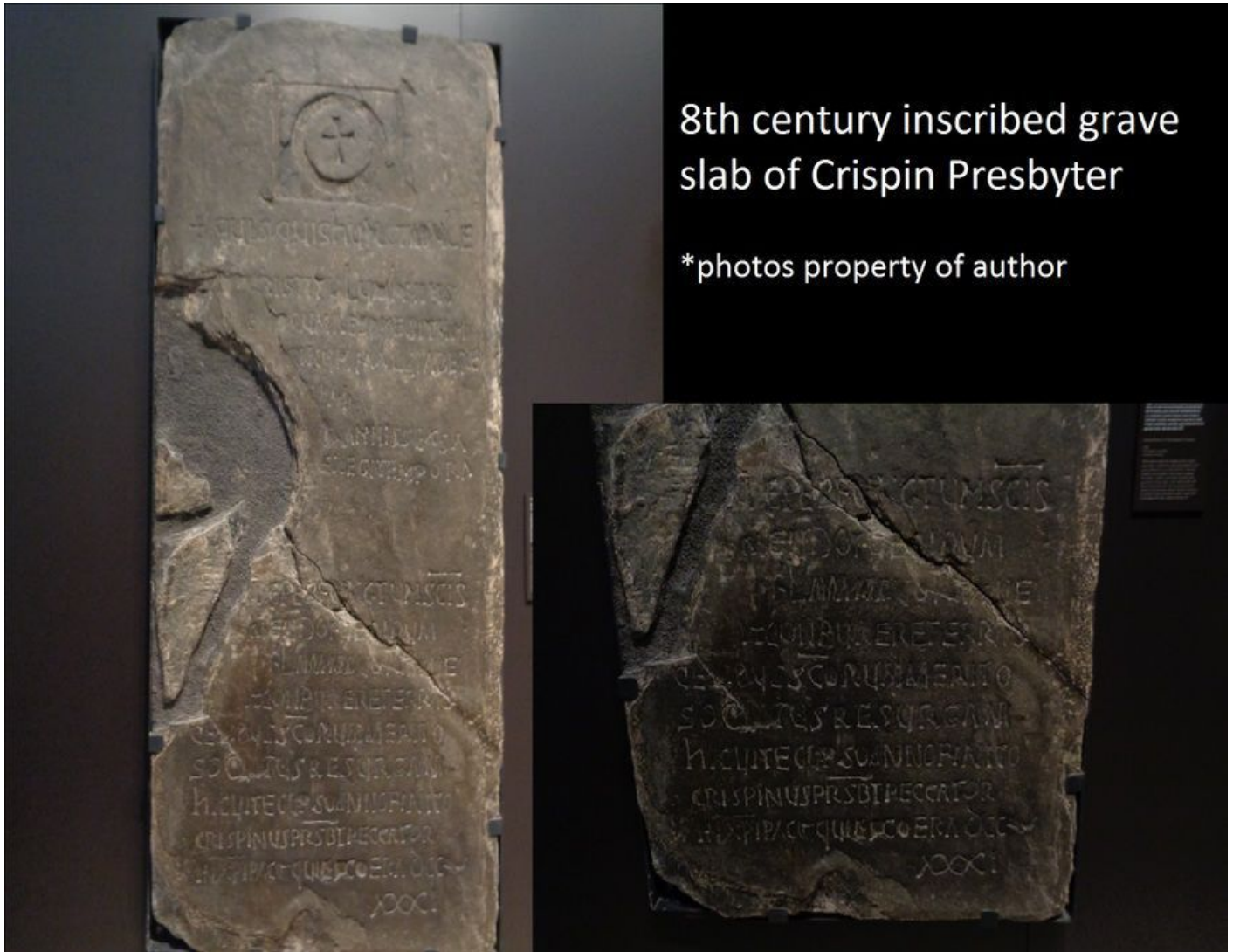
When created in the 6th and 7th centuries, they hung above church altars. They frequently incorporated older objects such as Roman jewels, intaglios, or Byzantine crosses. The individual object histories are just as fascinating as the objects themselves; some pieces of the Guarrazar and Torredonjimeno hoards were sold out of Spain in the 1800s and are still in international museums or are held in the royal treasury of Spain. To further complicate things, pieces of the hoards were "discovered missing" or stolen in 1921 and 1936. These pieces have never been recovered.



Discovered near the Guarrazar Hoard and displayed next to the votive crowns is an item which lacks the glitz and glitter, but is almost more interesting than the crowns: the grave slab of Presbyter Crispin from the 8th century. The simple piece of slate, measuring around six feet long, is completely covered by an early medieval Latin inscription. The inscription translates to: "Whoever reads the epitaph on this stone, take heed: consider the place and observe your surroundings. As a sacred minister, I chose to possess a sacred place. Sixty years I walked this earth; in death I commend



myself to the protection of the saints, to be resurrected with them in due time when the consuming flame comes to set the earth ablaze. His life having run its course, Crispin, presbyter, sinner, rested here in the peace of Christ. Year of the era 731." Grave slabs from this period are extremely rare, and the volume of text extant on this example is extraordinary. It provides information about craftsmanship, linguistics, local religious practices, and Crispin himself. It really is an example of the past speaking to us in the present.



A significant part of Spain's cultural identity is marked by its history as a part of the medieval Islamic empire. This museum, documenting the country's built and physical heritage, does a good job of showing the highlights of that heritage. The heavy influence of Islamic architecture is illustrated in a color-coded model of the Great Mosque of Córdoba showing how Romanesque, Byzantine, Visigothic, and Islamic styles co-exist in one structure. The model is a great way to reference a building that is integral to this part of Spain's history and built heritage without having access to the actual building. Its position in the gallery, suspended over a large part of square footage, also profiled it as a major piece while still allowing for the display of other objects. Other notable pieces include pottery with decorative slips and glazing, carved ivory chests, and hanging lamps. All pieces in the exhibit are examples of highly skilled craftsmanship, and the unique character of design stood out among the Roman, Early Medieval, and High Medieval in the adjacent galleries.



Between the Islamic exhibit and the Medieval galleries are three rooms that literally made my mouth drop open in wonder. These three rooms were covered in wood. Not just planks or furniture or carved objects, but sculpted and painted functional pieces. The level of detail was minute and the paint was in impeccable condition, allowing visitors to see minute elements of foliage, fauna, and figurines. The exhibit designers at MAN know how to use their ceiling space, and here they display multiple intact sections of ceiling coffers, domes, and decorations all made of wonderful wood! I still can't decide which component impressed me more, the carving or the painting. A section of altar stalls from the 14th century are across from Islamic joist supports, highlighting the refined techniques evident in both styles. My only critique is that one of the most impressive ceiling sections hangs right over another large display, making it impossible to stand under the ceiling section and study details in the center of it. I was so completely entranced by this piece that I don't even remember what was blocking my access in the display beneath it, but I wanted to examine the ceiling in closer detail. Perhaps some table-top mirrors would help visitors get closer to these magnificent pieces? In the adjacent rooms, the ceilings are equally magnificent with intricate cut-out details and intact paint.

(right) 14th century painted high-backed choir stalls from the Convent of Santa Clara

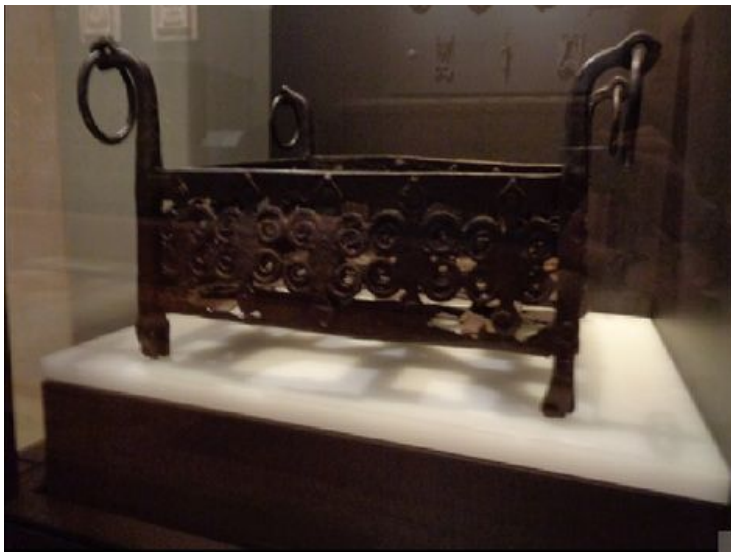
\*photos property of the author



(left) 14th century painted and carved paneled ceiling from the Palace of Cordoba (no longer extant), with Arabic script

The Christian Kingdoms (8th-15th centuries) galleries are a medievalist's delight. Objects from church, domestic, and industrial settings are all incorporated. An iron brazier was a particularly interesting domestic object. Items that were used on a regular basis rarely survive at all, let alone in complete form like this piece. This brazier was used to hold hot coals and help keep a room warm. The little dragon head finials on the corner uprights were nicely formed and were repeated on other metal items in the exhibit.

Painted wood crosses and figurines show the refined and talented nature of Spanish Catholic art. The vivid colors have survived in remarkable detail, and are shown in context with other related objects alongside an explanation of the role of the church in medieval communities. The 12th century Pillar of Lust was an entertaining object, with one particularly poor fellow stuck in a rather uncomfortable position for several centuries. Other figures featured women enjoying their own company and men being seduced by demons. 15th century statue Peter I of Castile shows the detailed craftsmanship practiced in medieval Spain. The minute carving of textiles, embroidery, chainmail, and bodily features such as hair and nails is extraordinary.



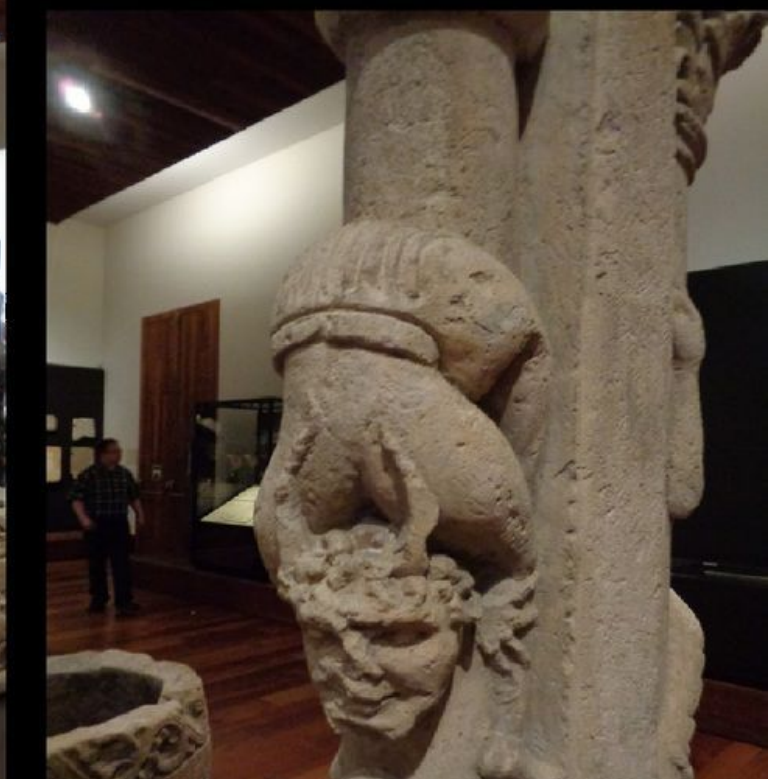
Medieval Spanish Ironwork  
14-15th century. Brazier, above  
left, with scrollwork.  
Doorknockers, above right and  
right, with dragon and shell  
details.

\*photos property of the author



Pillar of Lust, 12th century,  
Romanesque style.

\*photos property of the author



For information on the Museo Arqueológico Nacional, **check out their website**. Plan about three hours to explore the entire museum, or four to five if you're like me and need to read every single English/Spanish label, watch every video with English subtitles, trace every comparative chronological map, and push every interactive button.



Peter I of Castile, early 15th century,  
alabaster

\*photos property of the author

**Danielle Trynoski is the Los Angeles-based  
correspondent for Medievalists.net**

# Ring Out the Old: Medieval Bells in England

By Regan Walker

As the opening scene in my new medieval novel, *Rogue Knight*, was unfolding in my mind, I heard a loud church bell ringing as my heroine was striding down Coppergate in York in 1068. So, I wrote it into the scene and then I thought, "Wait... did they even have such bells in York at that time?" I hurriedly dove into the deep past of York and dusted off the books I'd piled up in the course of my research. Not many were helpful, but I did find one and some information online. I sighed in relief when I discovered that yes, indeed, they had such bells in England then and, since York was the second largest city in England with its own Minster, I was pretty confident it would have bells that would be tolled at regular intervals. Which, of course, got me to wondering about church bells in medieval England in general.



**Rabbit tolling church bells from the medieval devotional Book of Hours**

## **The Earliest Bells**

The Saxons installed large bells in church towers in England though none of the towers that remain today are older than the tenth century. The Romans used bells in London to mark the hours of the day.

A story told by Bede, a seventh century English monk in Northumbria, tells us that when the Abbess Hilda died at Whitby in 680, the death-knell could be heard thirteen miles away. And to the point of my own story, in 750, St. Egbert, the Archbishop of York, instructed the priests when to ring the church bells, which were apparently of some size. In the reign of William the Conqueror, Archbishop Lanfranc issued rules for the ringing of bells in Benedictine monasteries.

In 1035, King Canute in the last year of his reign gave two bells to Winchester and the Archbishop of York made similar gifts. In 1050, there were seven bells at Exeter Cathedral.

Some of the early church bells, both pre-Conquest and Norman, were housed in central towers for bells, such as the one at St. Peter's Church in Barton-upon-Humber. Its tower is Saxon at its base but the higher portion, in two different styles, is Norman, added in the 11th century.

Some of the bells cast during the Norman period were quite large. Prior Conrad gave Canterbury Cathedral five large bells, one of which required twenty-four men to ring. And some were quite small. Hand bells, believed to be the first bells, were used in worship services in the English church. And they were used at funerals. Pictured below is a portion of the Bayeux Tapestry. Note the dead bells held by the two acolytes below the deceased.



**The funeral procession of Edward the Confessor as depicted on the Bayeux Tapestry**

The larger bells first appeared during the late Saxon period. Bells were made using sheets of iron that were bent and riveted into a wedge and curve. After the shaping of the metal, the bells were dipped into molten copper in order to coat them so that they might toll with a more musical tone.

## **The Bells That Have Endured**

Since bell metal is an alloy of copper and tin, the melting point is below that of copper so the metal in bells will melt in the heat of an ordinary house fire. Hence, many of the early church bells burned along with the towers that housed them. Surely this is what happened to York Minster's bells in 1069 when a fire set by the Norman knights got out of hand and spread through the town to the Minster. (One of the scenes in *Rogue Knight*.)

Of the bells that survive, the oldest may be in St. Chad's Church in Claughton in Lancashire. The original church was built in 1070, though it has since been rebuilt. Its bell bears the date 1296 in Roman letters.





**The bells of St. Chad's Church, Claughton**

But in Caversfield in Oxfordshire there is a treble bell that may be much older. Bells are often dated by engraved dedications. The inscription (in Roman or Saxon letters) on the Caversfield bell says, "In honour of God and St. Laurence, Hugh Gargate and Sibilla his wife had these bells erected." Hugh Gargate died in 1219.



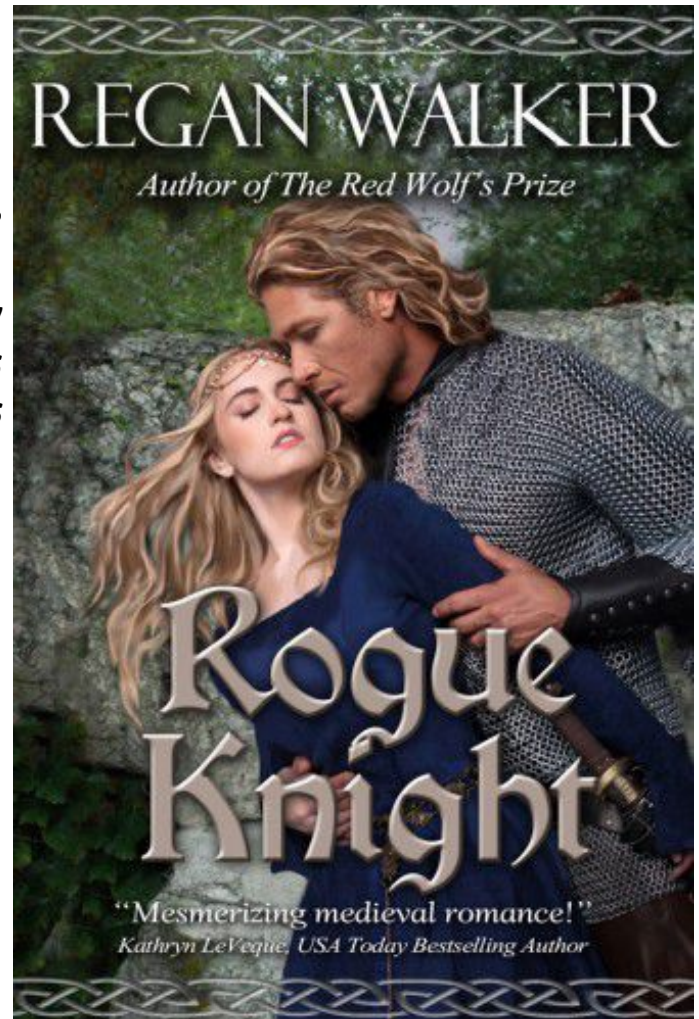
**St. Lawrence parish church in Caversfield**

The treble bell is believed to have been cast in about 1218 and is thought to be the oldest inscribed bell in existence in England.

So, you see, bells were a part of the medieval English churches and as you think about that time in England's past, you can imagine them ringing at regular hours, calling the faithful to services or prayer, or sounding the death knell of one who passed. And there was also the "curfew bell", rung at eight or nine in the evening, to tell everyone it was time to cover their fires and go to bed.

***Regan Walker is an award winning, bestselling author of Regency, Georgian and Medieval novels. She writes historically authentic novels, weaving into her stories real history and real historic figures so that readers experience history and adventure as well as love.***

**Click here to visit Regan's website**



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St. Lawrence parish church in Caversfield

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caversfield#Church\\_bells](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caversfield#Church_bells)

Curfew bells: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curfew\\_bell](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Curfew_bell)

# The Amusing Questions of Wynkyn de Worde

From the 'chicken or egg' question to age of a mouse, some of the riddles from England's oldest joke book.

Wynkyn de Worde had come to London in around the year 1476 to work for William Caxton, the first person in England to run a printing press. After Caxton died, Wynkyn took over the business and would go on to publish over 400 books over the late 15th and early 16th centuries. He published a wide variety of works, ranging from religious texts to romantic novels, and even children's books.

In the the year 1511 he printed a short book called *The Demaundes Joyous*, which can be translated as *Amusing Questions*. Considered to be the oldest joke book in England, it consists of riddle-type questions with (somewhat) funny answers. Here are sixteen of these questions:

***How many calves' tails would it take to reach from the earth to the sky?***

No more than one, if it be long enough.

***What is the distance from the surface of the sea to the deepest part thereof?***

Only a stone's throw.

***What is it that never was and never will be?***

A mouse's nest in a cat's ear.

***Why do men make an oven in a town?***

Because they cannot make a town in an oven.

***How may a man discern a cow in a flock of sheep?***

By his eyesight.

***Why does a cow lie down?***

Because it cannot sit.

***What is it that never freezes?***

Boiling water.

Which was first, the hen or the egg?

The hen, at the creation.

***How many straws go to a goose's nest?***

Not one, for straws not having feet cannot go anywhere.

***Who killed the fourth part of all the people in the world?***

Cain when he killed Abel.

***How would you say two paternosters, when you know God made but one paternoster?***

Say one twice over.

***Which are the most profitable saints of the church?***

Those painted on the glass windows, for they keep the wind from wasting the candles.

***Who were the persons that made all, and sold all, that bought all and lost all?***

A smith made an awl and sold it to a shoemaker, who lost it.

***Why does a dog turn round three times before he lies down?***

Because he doesn't know his bed's head from the foot thereof.

***What is the worst bestowed charity that one can give?***

Alms to a blind man; for he would be glad to see the person hanged that gave it to him.

***What is the age of a field-mouse ?***

A year. And the age of a hedgehog is three times that of a mouse, and the life of a dog is three times that of a hedge-hog, and the life of a horse is three times that of a dog, and the life of a man is three times that of a horse, and the life of a goose is three times that of a man, and the life of a swan is three times that of a goose, and the life of a swallow three times that of a swan, and the life of an eagle three times that of a swallow, and the life of a serpent three times that of an eagle, and the life of a raven is three times that of a serpent, and the life of a hart is three times that of a raven, and an oak grows five hundred years, and fades five hundred years.

These riddles from *The Demaundes Joyous* were edited and translated in The book of days: a miscellany of popular antiquities in connection with the calendar, by Robert Chambers, published in 1879. You can also find them in *The Demaundes Joyous : a facsimile of the first English riddle book*, edited by John Wardroper, and published in 1971.

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