

## Medieval views on “harmful animals”

**Field of Study :** Literature

**Mandatory training needed to apply for this research topic :** Good knowledge of French, both written and spoken.

### SUPERVISORS

	First name	LAST NAME	University	Research Unit
<b>Supervisor</b>	Cécile	Rochelois	UPPA	ALTER
<b>Co-Supervisor</b>	Paola	Cifarelli	UNITO	STUDIUM

### KEYWORDS

Literature, French studies, Middle Ages, animals, biodiversity, nature

### ABSTRACT

In France, the list of ESODs (Espèces Susceptibles d'Occasionner des Dégâts - species likely to cause damage) is set out in decrees that are regularly updated: because they are considered a threat to human health and safety, to the conservation of wild flora and fauna or to agricultural activities, hunting is encouraged.

How did people in the past view animals such as weasels, rats and ravens, which are now considered “harmful animals”? The very idea that there are evil beasts whose destruction benefits man deserves to be questioned: does it not run counter to the medieval vision of nature and creatures as manifesting divine power through their diversity? What attitudes were advocated towards “harmful animals”? The relevance of this category in the Middle Ages is questionable: were they the same species as today, and are any variations due to changes in the fauna and human ecosystem, or to changes in representation?

Philological, linguistic and ecocritical tools will be used in order to investigate the human-nature relationship embodied by these animals. Literature is understood in the medieval sense, including narrative (tales, fables, novels) and poetic works, as well as scientific and technical texts such as encyclopaedias and treatises on hunting and agronomy.

## Research aims and methodology

The aim is to map the presence of species now considered “harmful animals” in medieval French literature in order to understand how literary texts deal with problems related to human interactions with nature and if environmental issues are addressed. A corpus will be defined using lexicographic tools, existing databases and other digital humanities research tools. This identification will provide a first approach to the cultural object under study.

This will be followed by a more detailed definition of the object, taking into account the necessarily anachronistic nature of the criteria used initially. The list of animals studied and the definition of the category to which they belong will be refined, in particular on the basis of a lexicological study. We will examine the names of the species under consideration and the adjectives applied to them, taking into account, where necessary, the phenomena of translation from Latin into French, the competition between different names and changes in the lexicon during the Middle Ages. For example, while the case of the *goupil* becoming the *renard* is fairly well known, that of the *mustelle* and the *tesson*, known today as the *belette* and the *blaireau* respectively, has been less studied.

In order to analyse and interpret the discourse on harmful species in the Middle Ages, we will apply the methods of philology, taking into account the historical, literary (genre, relationship to tradition, register), social and ecological context in which the texts were produced. Depending on the direction chosen, the study may be limited to texts already published or include work on manuscripts; it can also be focused on works in Middle French or extended to the whole medieval period. A comparative approach with works in Latin or Romance languages other than French can be considered.

The aim will be to determine the heuristic value of this modern category of *animaux nuisibles* (“harmful animals”) applied to medieval texts, in order to measure the points of convergence and the gaps between the representations of the past and our own: can the way in which these animals are viewed provide us with keys to understanding the medieval ontology of nature we have inherited?

## Relevance and added-value of the proposed research in relation to the current state of knowledge

This research project continues the work on the history of representations of the animal world initiated by Robert Delort (*Les animaux ont une histoire*, 1984) and developed for the medieval period from the perspective of historical anthropology by researchers such as Michel Pastoureau and Pierre-Olivier Dittmar. The many and varied animals that populate the texts have long attracted the attention of specialists in medieval literature in Latin and other European languages, as demonstrated by the annual publication since 1988 of the international journal *Reinardus. Yearbook of the International Reynard Society* (John Benjamins Publishing Company). Reinforced by animal studies, which first developed in the Anglo-Saxon world, interest in the relationship between humans and animals has had a major impact on medieval literary studies in the last decade or so (see, for example, Sarah Kay, *Animal Skins and the Reading Self in Medieval Latin and French Bestiaries*, 2017; issues of the journal *Rursuspicæ* devoted to the *Physiologus* (2019), knowledge of aquatic animals (2021) or learned entomology (2022); Yoan Boudes, 'El bestiaire a mult a dire,/ Bele essample e bone matire' *Formes et langages du discours zoographique en français médiéval*, 2022).

These questions also take on new relevance in the context of collective reflection on the evolution of the relationship with nature during the Middle Ages. Since the publication of Lynn Townsend White's *The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis* in 1968, the idea that the current ecological crisis has its roots in the Christian Middle Ages continues to stimulate the scientific debate (Fabrice Mouthon, *Le Sourire de Prométhée. L'homme et la nature au Moyen Âge*, 2017; Mathieu Arnoux, *Un monde sans ressources. Besoin et société en Europe (XIe-XIVe siècles)*, 2023) and encourages researchers, both in history and in literature, to take seriously hitherto little-studied themes and texts.

What is original and innovative in this research project? Firstly, it asks a topical ecological question about



ancient texts. Secondly, it envisages a diverse corpus, including texts of different genres and intentions. Finally, it draws attention to animals that are often relegated to the background: weasels, badgers, rats, wild boars, magpies and starlings, for example, are not among the stars of the medieval bestiary, like bears and wolves. The relative discretion of the sources with regard to species that were undoubtedly part of people's daily lives in the Middle Ages makes their mention all the more significant.

### Interdisciplinary nature of the research together with the alignment with the CHORAL programme and complementarity expertise of the teams

The perspective of this doctoral project, like all work on animals in the Middle Ages, will necessarily be interdisciplinary. Combining different approaches is essential in order to contextualise and interpret the works under study, avoiding anachronisms wherever possible: confronting the discourses with what we know of contemporary realities through the research of historians of practice or archaeozoologists, and taking into account the contributions of historical anthropology or art history in relation to images.

The philological approach to interpreting the medieval discourse on the animals under study will be based on linguistic analysis, in particular historical lexicology, knowledge of the history of science and technology, and an ecocritical perspective.

The doctoral student recruited will benefit from high quality supervision in the two supervising universities. The supervisor at UPPA, Cécile Rochelois, is a specialist in medieval scientific French and has published several works on the representation of animals in medieval scientific and literary texts. The research carried out will fit the work of the "Arts et savoirs" (Arts and Knowledge) team in the research laboratory ALTER ('Arts/Langages : Transitions & Relations'), which is organising two programmes linked to the project:

- the continuation of the research project resulting in a double colloquium on literature and rurality (Antiquity-XXIth century) co-organised by Cécile Rochelois and Dominique Vaugeois (Université Rennes 2) in 2022, the proceedings of which will be published by Droz in 2025 under the title *Le Soc et les lettres*.

- the programme "L'École des bêtes" (School of beasts): several one-day seminars, scheduled between 2016 and 2024, by Guylaine Pineau, Cécile Rochelois and Baptiste Laïd.

The ALTER laboratory is also a candidate to organise the 26th Colloquium of the International Reynard Society in September 2026.

The co-supervisor at UNITO, Paola Cifarelli, is a specialist in French diachrony, and in particular in the study of Middle French texts, working from an interdisciplinary perspective combining historical linguistics, philology, literature and codicology. The texts she studies belong mainly to the short genre, such as the esophic fable, the short story and the *facétie*.

At UNITO, the research will be integrated into the doctoral programme in the Humanities, which includes specific modules on French studies and cross-disciplinary modules on the comparative method, as well as courses on digital humanities, workshops on research funding and seminars of other curricula (historical linguistics, classical languages and literatures, semiotics, etc.). The doctoral student will be supervised by the "Comparative Studies" team within the StudiUm department and will be able to take part in the organisation of the international colloquium of the AIEMF (Association Internationale d'Etudes sur le Moyen Français) in June 2025, the annual doctoral seminar "La littérature française médiévale à l'épreuve de l'imprimé" (Universities of Turin, Milan and Siena) and will contribute to the Review section of the scientific journal *Studi Francesi* (peer-reviewed, Fascia A of the Italian MUR). He/she will also take part in the various initiatives regularly organised in collaboration with the Biblioteca nazionale universitaria, which preserves a very rich collection of French manuscripts.



## Output plan including publication and dissemination activities

### September 2025-August 2026

Bibliographic work on the state of the art and the definition of the corpus within the ALTER "Arts and Knowledge" team at UPPA.

March 2026

Participation in the "La thèse de ma marraine/mon parrain" competition organised each year by UPPA (teamwork with a pair of high school students to introduce them to the world of research).

Between February and May 2026, depending on the progress of the work and the requirements: four weeks of research in libraries in Paris, Bordeaux, Poitiers or Toulouse;

### September 2025-August 2026

During the second year, a one-month research stay can be organised at the Universities of Zurich (Romanic Seminar, Prof. Richard Trachsler) and/or Louvain-la-Neuve (Faculty of Philosophy, Literature, Arts - School of History, Art and Culture, Prof. Baudoin Van den Abeele), where specialists in Romance philology and the history of ideas working on animal literature will be able to provide additional training to the doctoral student.

### September 2026

Participation in the organisation of the international reardian conference Reynardus 2026, in partnership with the Château de Pau.

### October 2026-August 2027

Research stay at UNITO.

Late 2026: Submission of a publication in the international journal *Reynardus* to John Benjamins Publishers.

### September 2027-August 2028

Writing the thesis March 2028

Participation in the 'Ma thèse en 180 secondes' and/or 'My thesis in 3 minutes' competition (UNITA)

## Estimated schedule

September 2025-September 2026: establishment of the corpus and state of research

June 2026: first report to be submitted to the co-supervisors and the Thesis Supervisory Committee

June 2027: second report to be submitted to the co-supervisors and the Thesis Supervisory Committee

Autumn 2028: thesis viva voce

