

Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them: the Romanesque Capitals of St Kyneburgha's Church, Castor, and the Local Landscape

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*Situated at the heart of an early 12th-century rural Northamptonshire church – St Kyneburgha's church in Castor – a beautiful set of Romanesque capitals depicts an array of creatures, encompassing both the natural and supernatural worlds. This paper attempts to identify the inspiration behind elements of the scheme, to assess the myriad ways in which it might be interpreted, and to place it firmly within its landscape context. Traditional readings of the images, largely inspired by scripture, are assessed alongside supplementary interpretations found within didactic texts, in particular Isidore of Seville's *Etymologia*, one of the key texts on animal lore in this period. These readings are then set against the expectations and experiences of local people in the surrounding landscape, both during and preceding the time the capitals were constructed, as elucidated in contemporary written texts. Minor landscape names created by local peasants provide further evidence that the iconography was to some extent chosen to reflect its landscape setting. Taken together, the evidence allows us an insight into how one early 12th-century rural community perceived its environment. It is suggested that elements of the scheme operate on a number of levels. It was – in part, at least – designed to remind locals that the demonic and ungodly could be found within commonplace spaces, and that those commonplace spaces were recognisable as the environment immediately outside the church door, in the fields, meadows, and woodlands of medieval Castor.*

Introduction

The parish church is venerated as one of England's most celebrated buildings, and as such it has become as much a potent symbol of the English landscape as it is a representation of religious faith. Assessing ecclesiastical ornamentation within the post-Conquest English parish church, it is possible to identify symbolic representations of the demonic and ungodly in a number of guises. In itself, this is nothing new. Through the study of a set of early 12th-century capitals in Castor in rural Northamptonshire, this paper attempts to place the iconography inside the church within its landscape context. It is suggested that, to a large extent,

elements of the capital scheme adopted here are as much a reflection of their environment as they are a depiction of important medieval religious allegories.

At the time of the Domesday survey, Castor formed part of the Soke of Peterborough in Northamptonshire – its territory corresponding to the double hundred of Upton, or Upton Green (Round 1902, 296).¹ Between 1888 and 1965 the Soke was separated from Northamptonshire, becoming part of Huntingdonshire. Since 1974 it has been part of Cambridgeshire. The parish of Castor includes the townships of Ailsworth and Milton, and until 1831, Upton and Sutton (Serjeantson and Adkins 1906, 472). The Norman church was constructed between the end of the eleventh and the first

quarter of the 12th century, being dedicated by 1124; its original form was an aisleless cruciform, with an apsidal east end.² Peterborough Abbey held Castor at the time of the Conquest, but by at least 1070 a number of knights' fees had been created, and the advowson of the church was held by a minor Norman knight named Turolf of Castor, before being granted back to Peterborough Abbey in 1133 by one his heirs (King 1969, 99; King 1973, 28-31). There is no mention of a church in Castor in Domesday Book, however, the 12th-century chronicler of Peterborough Abbey, Hugh Candidus (c. 1095 – c. 1160), wrote about the 'much ruined church at Cyneburgh-caster' during the abbacy of Ælfsy between 963-1013. This early church may have become derelict following a reputed Danish attack on the settlement

in either the late ninth or the early 11th century, and despite Domesday Book's deficiencies, we can be certain that a church stood in Castor before the Conquest (Mellows and Mellows 1966, 12 and 27; Dallas 1973, 17). Cyneburg, to whom the Norman church is dedicated, was the daughter of Penda of Mercia, and it is generally considered that she founded a monastery in Castor in the 7th century after the death of her Northumbrian husband, Alhfrith (McClure and Collins 2008, 144).³ In the 12th century, abbot John de Séz recorded that the altar dedicated to Cyneburg within Peterborough Abbey had been destroyed by the Danes in the 9th century (Sparke 1723, 18). So, even during the short period in which the advowson of Castor church was held by the Turolf family, Peterborough Abbey had

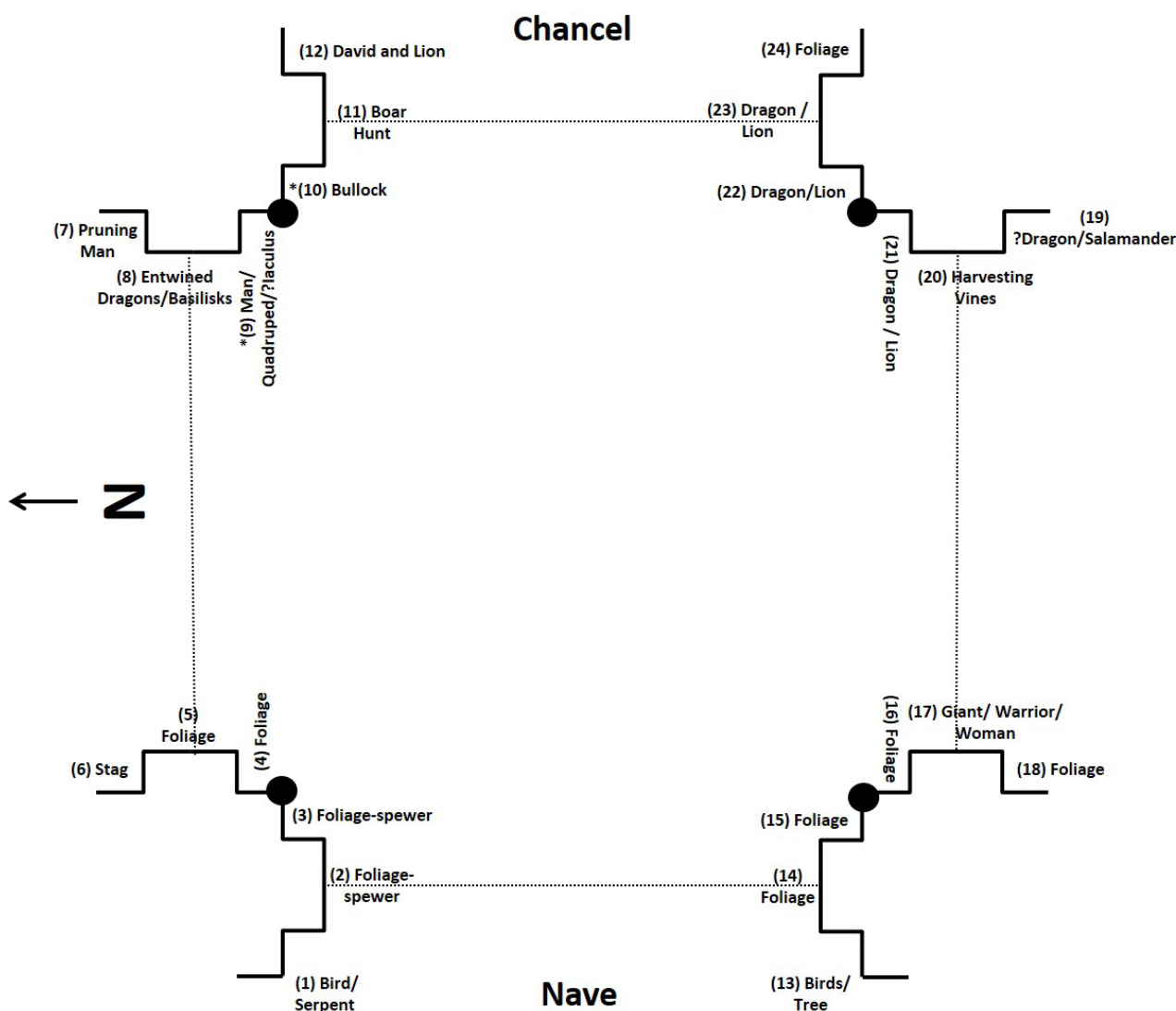


Fig 1 Capital scheme, St Kyneburgha's Church, Castor (numbers in brackets in-text are referring to the capital's location in this schema)

a strong connection to the church, demonstrated through its reverence toward Cyneburg. Certainly, a quick glance at the magnificence of the Norman church suggests that its construction could not have been funded in its entirety by a minor knight, and so it seems likely that Peterborough Abbey was one of the principal patrons.

Pevsner describes the church as ‘the most important Norman ... church in [Northamptonshire]’, although this paper concentrates on the capitals situated in the crossing, at the base of the tower, and which were completed by 1110 (Pevsner 1961, 143; WS1). The scheme consists of twenty-four capitals, outlined in Fig 1. It remains difficult for scholars to interpret the central space between the chancel and the nave within three-cell and cruciform churches, although Barnwell argues that during this period, it may have contained the altar (Barnwell 2004, 50-51). Nevertheless, it seems likely that much of the scheme would have been visible from the nave. The capitals predominantly feature scenes from what can be broadly interpreted as the natural world, alongside foliate capitals, rural scenes and one capital that has hitherto been interpreted as the legend of St Cyneburg (Jenkins 1999, 292). Some of the capitals on the northern side of the tower are now obscured from view by the church organ – (6) and (7) – and although they are difficult to access, they have been seen and photographed by the author (see Fig 2). Two of the capitals – (9) and (10) – have been renewed, and it appears that at one time, a square beam was placed against the centres of capitals (11) and (23).⁴ In the following discussion of individual capitals, the numbering scheme follows that of Fig 1.

The discussion falls broadly into three sections: the first section focuses on fauna associated with hunting; the second section considers the supernatural creatures, which feature an array of serpents, including dragons and basilisks; and the third section continues with the supernatural theme to consider briefly a capital featuring what appears to be a giant. Each section will first outline possible interpretations of the imagery for individual capitals, followed by a discussion on the landscape context for each group. This examination of the capitals focuses exclusively on certain elements of the scheme that, it is argued, can be firmly associated with the surrounding contemporary landscape. Unfortunately, there is insufficient space to include the many foliate capitals here, despite their potential usefulness within a discussion focused on landscape. There is a distinct possibility that supplementary analysis would provide further reflections on locals’ interactions with the rural landscape, and this sub-set of material would certainly merit a complementary study.

It has been suggested that ecclesiastical Romanesque sculpture was in part designed to help communicate knowledge to a largely illiterate laity, and that animals in particular – both real and cryptozoological – were useful in this regard (Wood 2017, 12-13). The standard authority on animals until the 13th century was Isidore of Seville – in particular book twelve of his *Etymologia* (Klingender 1971, 164). Isidore was influenced by *Physiologus*, the earliest form of bestiary writing, dating from between the 2nd and 4th centuries. These two works, alongside the bible and Pliny the Elder’s *Naturalis historia*, provided the basis for the animal allegories found within the bestiaries of the 12th and 13th centuries (Barber 1999, 8-9; Jones 2013, 76). Collectively, they provide the foundations for contemporary elite interpretations of faunal images prior to the dissemination of the later medieval bestiaries from the late 12th century onward – and therefore in the period during which the capitals were constructed (Clark 2006, 93-4).

The Hunting Environment

If we are to consider the most obvious connections between the local landscape and the capital scheme, there are a number of creatures that would arguably have been familiar to those living in medieval Castor. Castor’s late Anglo-Saxon environmental resources included several hundred acres of woodland, and some of the capitals feature fauna associated with hunting.⁵ Capital (6) features a browsing stag; capital (11) a boar hunt; and capital (9) possibly depicts a wolf.

Capital 6: Stag (Fig 2)

There are many possible interpretations for the image of the stag. The most frequent association with the stag in an ecclesiastical setting is taken from the Book of Psalms 41:2; the passage ‘as the hart panteth after the fountains of water, so my soul panteth after thee, O God’ has been firmly associated with the rites of baptism, and also with representations of Christian believers more generally (Blum 1976, 220; WS2). However, Schiller, who suggests that stags depicted in churches are unequivocally representative of baptism, only notes stags on fonts or within baptisteries (Schiller 1971, 131 and 140), and as such capital (6) may also have other associations. Within the bestiary tradition, the stag, which represents Christ, is considered to be the enemy of the dragon, which seems significant since



Fig 2 Stag (6)

so many dragon-like creatures feature within the capital scheme in Castor church. In this allegory, the dragon hides in a cleft within a rock, whilst the stag drinks copiously and emits the water into the cleft, forcing the

dragon out, at which point it is trampled by the stag. This in turn is sometimes associated with Isaiah 2:20-21 in which idolaters 'shall go into the clefts of the rocks, and into the holes of stones' to hide from God at the end of time (the dragons within the rock), but the rising of God, or in the New Testament Christ as judge, would shake their refuge (as the stag flushes out the dragon (Evans 1896, 171-2; WS2). Baxter argues that bestiary interpretations for church sculpture are not always valid (Baxter 1998, 2-3). However, this allegory is recounted by Isidore in his *Etymologia*, and is also recorded in the 11th-century version of *Physiologus*, attributed to Theobald of Monte Cassino, and so these are ideas that would have been in circulation, at least in learned circles (Barney *et al* 2006, 248; Rendell 1928, 77; Clark 2006, 93-4).

Capital 11: Boar Hunt (Fig 3)

This capital shows a detailed hunting scene. Stylistically, the Castor image is very similar to an example from the 13th-century MS Bodley 764 (Fig 4). The sculptor has captured the action at the point at which the huntsman, supported by his dogs, is about to kill a charging boar. One of the dogs has been



Fig 3 Boar Hunt (11)

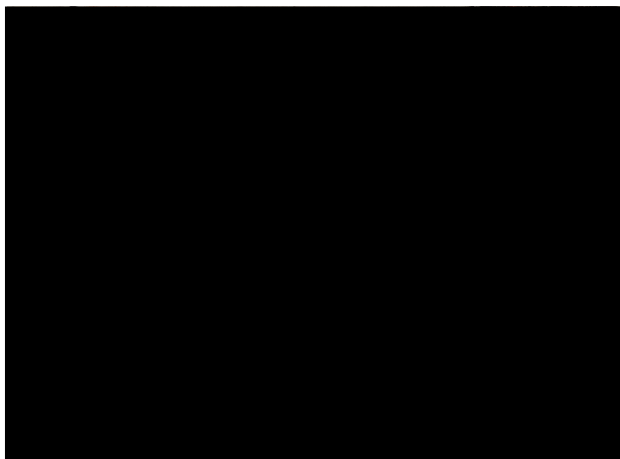


Fig 4 Boar Hunt, MS Bodley 764, Bodleian Library, Oxford

cleaved in two by the boar's tusks: its hindquarters are airborne, and its head and shoulders are in the foreground. More dogs are depicted chasing up the rear. A typical reading of this image would suggest it is a direct reference to the Book of Psalms, 80:12-15, which outlines God turning away from the Church (WS2). The Church, represented by a vineyard, is described as having been destroyed: 'the boar out of the wood hath laid it waste: and a singular wild beast hath devoured it'. Thus, it represents evil; by the later 12th century, bestiary writers saw the boar as synonymous with the devil (Barber 1999, 87). The boar is associated with lust and lechery by Boethius, transmitted into the 14th century by Chaucer, a trait that it shares with the wolf (Rowland 1971, 77 and 104).

The bestiary image post-dates the capital, and the Peterborough Bestiary is even later, and so this cannot have provided the original inspiration. There is a description of a boar hunt in Ælfric's 10th-century *Colloquy*, which matches the Castor sculpture: 'the dogs drive [the boar] towards me, and I stick it quickly, standing there in its path' (Garmonsway 1991, 25; Hooke 1989, 122). Did the sculptor model his image on a written description like this, or had he seen a pattern-book containing images that were later used to create illuminations in medieval bestiaries? Rita Wood suggests that the later 12th-century bestiary compilers may have been influenced by church sculpture that was integral to the edification of the lower orders of society (Wood 2004, 96). In the 10th century, Peterborough Abbey library held a copy of the *Physiologus*, the earliest known bestiary; and by the early 12th century it is believed to have held a copy of Isidore of Seville's *De natura rerum*, one of a range of texts that provided

inspiration for the scribes of later medieval bestiaries (Friis-Jensen and Willoughby 2001, 6 and 12).⁶ Whilst there were contemporary illuminated bestiaries, such as Bodleian Library MS. Laud Misc 247, it is uncertain whether the abbey's copy of the *Physiologus* was illustrated. Nevertheless, senior abbey personnel are likely to have been aware of contemporary trends in bestiary illumination (Jones 2013, 78).

Capital 9: Man, Quadruped and ?Iaculus (Fig 5)

This capital is a later replacement (WS1). It shows a biped on the back of a four-legged creature, the latter having its jaws held shut by a man. It is possible to see this animal more clearly in a high-resolution image than it is with the naked eye. The beast has extremely sharp, jagged teeth, and what appears to be one of its ears, next to a set of ridges. At first glance, it is not easy to discern what this creature might be, and



Fig 5 Man, Quadruped, and Iaculus (9)



Fig 6 Wolves, Aberdeen Bestiary, University of Aberdeen

so explanations taken from the bestiary have been explored. There are a number of quadrupeds that were depicted with sharp teeth in these texts, and those bearing the closest resemblance to this creature include the lynx and the wolf. Emanating from Isidore's *Etymologia*, most bestiaries suggest that if a man sees a wolf without it having been aware of the observation, then it becomes docile, and unable to retreat (Barney et al 2006, 253; Barber 1999, 70).⁷ This may explain the apparently passive nature of what is clearly a fearsome beast, and the lack of concern shown by the man holding its jaws shut. Isidore suggests that this was a popular or folkloric reading. It seems possible, then, that this capital depicts a wolf, which was associated with the devil. Clark suggests that of those animals selected as metaphors within medieval sermons, the wolf was a favoured symbol of evil, alongside foxes and serpents (Clark 1996, 10). The beast on the capital is certainly canine in appearance, and an image in the 13th-century Aberdeen Bestiary featuring two wolves shows them with thick, shaggy coats, which give the appearance of ridges, shown in Fig 6 (WS3; *The Aberdeen Bestiary*). These may explain the odd ridges on the Castor beast's back. The positioning of the biped, which seems likely to be an iaculus, a kind of serpent (see Capital 9 below, for a detailed discussion), on the creature's back may also help to illustrate another wolverine trait recorded in the bestiary: that wolves cannot turn their heads (Barber 1999, 69).

Discussion – The Hunting Landscape in Castor

Although these capitals can be interpreted from a metaphorical perspective, they also fit perfectly within Castor's landscape context. Castor contained extensive woodland in the post-Conquest period, amounting to more than 400 acres before assarting began in earnest in the early 13th century. Several pre-1215 field-names reference hunting in Castor: *abbotishauue*, *rohaue*, *ashaue*, *baketeshauue* and *wulfhauue* (King 1973, 173). The generic Old English element *-haga*, 'hedge, enclosure' can denote an enclosure associated with hunting (Hooke 1998, 157; Wiltshire and Woore 2011, 207); although Kitson suggests that *-haga* names qualified by animals, such as *wulfhauue*, represented hedges erected to keep animals out of fields (Kitson forthcoming;⁸ see also Wager 2017). An early 13th-century survey of Castor's woodland confirms a hunting connection in this context. Two of these

enclosures – *rohaue* and *wulfhauue* – were described as covert at that time (survey reproduced in King 1973, 173). These two enclosures, alongside an area known as *thinferdesland* comprised almost 79 acres in 1215; and *abbotishauue* alongside the woods of *estrys* and *jungeuuode* enclosed an area of 120 acres, and so these hunting enclosures were clearly sizeable (King 1973, 173; BL Cotton MS Nero C. vii/14). Furthermore, as will already have been evident, one of these enclosures suggests that wolves were either present or believed to be present in the landscape at the time the name was coined. The name *rohaue* is more problematic to define, but one of its possible etymologies is 'roe-deer-enclosure', and David Hall suggested that archaeological remains discovered in Castor's woodland may in fact be a medieval deer-enclosure (Kilby forthcoming; Hall 1979, 8; Hall 2001, 29). These surviving medieval field-names in Castor indicate that there were woodland enclosures held by Peterborough Abbey, the lords of the knights' fees, and a number of prominent free tenants. Elsewhere, scholars have suggested that some medieval ecclesiastical sculpture can be shown to reflect the local environment in addition to its allegorical meaning, and propose that a wide range of source material should be used in order to interpret sculpture of this nature, including bestiaries, encyclopaedias and the local landscape (den Hartog 1996, 30; Thurlby 2000, 10). Clark suggests that the bestiaries of the later 12th century onward, and in particular their imagery, were designed to educate the lower orders (Clark 2006, 98). If it was the case that the dissemination of bestiary allegories post-dated the production of the Castor capitals, then it seems most likely that local parishioners would have interpreted the images based on what they knew – from within a local landscape context.

The Supernatural Environment

Although images like these that were selected to ornament churches have predominantly been considered to have biblical connotations, art historians like den Hartog and Thurlby are increasingly considering the landscape context as an important factor in understanding the layers of meaning imbued within sculpture of this nature. From a modern perspective, stags, boars, and wolves are readily identifiable as animals that might belong in a medieval landscape associated with hunting. But there are other creatures within the Castor scheme that can also,

arguably, be identified as appropriate representatives of this early 12th-century environment.

Assessing Fig 1, it is immediately clear that within the capital scheme serpents of one form or another are the dominant fauna depicted. In the Isidorean tradition, “serpent” is the term for the family of all snakes’, which encompassed reptiles of all kinds, including snakes and lizards, and some amphibians, such as salamanders (Barney *et al* 2006, 255). This categorisation continued into the 13th century through scholars like Albertus Magnus (Kitchell and Resnick 1999, 1716-1738). Isidore included within this group creatures that modern scholars would recognise as supernatural, like dragons and basilisks. Traditionally, scholars suggest that the concept of supernature was not apparent within pre-12th-century texts, and therefore medieval society did not recognise any division between natural and supernatural phenomena (Jolly 1993, 221-252; Neville 1999, 2-3; Bartlett 2008). Simply put, elves and dragons were thought to be as much a part of the natural environment as sheep and wheat. However, for others, whilst they acknowledge the absence of explicit terminology to describe unusual phenomena, they nevertheless argue that from at least the late Anglo-Saxon period society had a means of distinguishing what was deemed foreign or strange (Watkins 2007, 18-19; Hall 2009, 11-12). Using early texts, Watkins and Hall emphasise this in a variety of ways: through Old English vocabulary; on account of the placement of certain monstrous beings like *Beowulf*’s Grendel outside accepted society; and by virtue of the clear concept that God was beyond nature itself, thereby introducing the idea that some phenomena were located beyond the boundaries of what was considered natural, and therefore normal.

The Castor capitals feature eight ‘serpents’ in all, carved onto seven capitals: a range of flying serpents, comprising basilisks, dragons; what appears to be an iaculus standing on the back of a quadruped; and what may be either another dragon or a salamander (Figs 7-12). Wood argues that most 12th-century capital schemes represent the biblical idea of heavenly Paradise (Wood 2017, 5). She suggests that the snake as a symbol has a duality, and can either represent good or evil.⁹ This is undoubtedly true, however, the dragon as a symbol in this period is unambiguous, and always represents evil. In order to circumvent this problem, Wood suggests that many Romanesque images categorised as dragons within English parish churches are in fact wyverns, and that wyverns were a symbol of goodness (Wood 2017, 65). There are a

number of problems with this suggestion. The first and most problematic issue is that the word wyvern is not recorded in the English language before *c.* 1374, and then only in its pre-modern form *wyuere*, at which time Chaucer describes it as a ‘wikked wyuere’ (WS2).¹⁰ The word developed from Latin *vipera* ‘serpent’, and Sayers suggests that Norman French and Anglo-Norman French are the probable sources for what became Middle English *wiver*, *wivere* (Sayers 2008). The earliest French sources within which the cognate French word is recorded date to the middle of the 12th century, and in all of them, the nature of the *guivre* – the contemporary French term – is unequivocally fearsome (Sayers 2008, 458-9; WS3; WS4). This suggests that this was not a word in circulation in England at the time the capitals were carved. Nevertheless, occasionally, minor landscape names are found in manorial documents or charter material that overturn the earliest attestation of some words recorded by the OED. Despite a reasonable quantity of medieval settlement and field-names featuring Old English *draca* ‘dragon’, there are none that include Middle English *wiver*, *wivere* currently recorded within the Survey of English Place-Names produced by the English Place-Name Society.¹¹ Finally, none of the principal medieval sources for animal lore, outlined above (in Introduction) feature the name in any form, despite Isidore listing numerous types of serpent, extending across several pages. It seems, then, that the wyvern in either its early modern or modern sense was unknown in 12th-century England, and that it remains correct to identify winged serpents as dragons or basilisks.

Capital 1: Bird and Serpent; Capital 13: Birds and Tree (Fig 7 and 8)



Fig 7 *Bird and Serpent (1)*



Fig 8 *Birds and Tree* (13)



Fig 9 *Entwined Basilisks* (8)

Capital (1) is not straightforward to define, and it seems that there are two plausible interpretations. From a biblical perspective it may be likened to Christ, as eagle, overcoming Satan, as serpent, outlined by Pseudo-Ambrose, and possibly referencing the Book of Deuteronomy 32:11 (WS5) with God the Father protecting Jacob; however, it has been suggested this is rarely discussed in Christian theological literature until relatively recently (Wittkower 1939, 293-325). The bird on capital (1) has a long, sharp-looking beak, and gives the appearance of attacking the serpent lying directly below it, a trait attributed to storks in the bestiary tradition, and by Isidore of Seville (Barney et al 2006, 264). The *c.* 1200 Aberdeen Bestiary describes the stork as ‘the enemy of snakes ... the stork strikes snakes with its bill, as the righteous check evil thoughts or reprimand their wicked brothers with penetrating rebukes’ (WS6); whilst the 13th-century bestiary MS Bodley 764, which was based on a 12th-century exemplar, suggests that storks ‘pursue snakes and draw off their poisons’ (Barber 1999, 132). It is possible that cranes were the local equivalent of storks, and one of the Castor field-names – *cornhay* – probably references cranes (NRO F(M) Charter 194).¹² The only other birds within the capital scheme, on capital (13), stand in opposition to the bird and serpent (1), at the western-most point of the group, facing into the nave. If considered in combination, the birds in (13) might be viewed as doves sitting in a peridens tree, also known as a peridexion tree, which, according to medieval bestiary tradition is patrolled by a dragon, who devours any dove that flies away from the tree or falls from its safety. MS Bodley 764 suggests that ‘the dragon ... fears the tree ... and it can approach neither the tree nor its shadow ... If it finds a dove outside the shadow of the tree, it kills it’ (Barber 1999, 180-181) Nevertheless, Wood suggests that these birds are



Fig 10 *Dragon (in opposition to Lion)* (21)

eating grapes from a vine, and represent ‘the blessed in paradise’, and it is possible that these two capitals – the two most visible from the nave – may work together to remind viewers that those who choose to fight evil may be rewarded in heaven (Wood 2004, 85).¹³

Capital 8: Basilisks; and Capitals 21-23: Dragon and Lion (Figs 9-11)

Capital (8) has been associated with typical Scandinavian sculptural tradition, and similar carvings



Fig 11 Dragon and Lion (23)

can be seen in cathedrals and churches of comparable date (Zarnecki 1951, 21). The crest visible on the heads of these mirrored creatures suggests that they may in fact be basilisks, although it is possible to find illuminations featuring dragons with crests and basilisks without them. There are three Castor capitals in which lions and dragons appear in opposition (21-23). This image type has been variously described by art historians: it can represent the trampling of the beasts, outlined in the Book of Psalms 91:13, although the image of Christ (or Mary) is usually present in these instances; or it can symbolize the battle between good versus evil – Christ, the lion, in opposition to Satan, the serpent (WS5; Schiller 1971, 108; Weir and Jerman 1993, 36; Thurlby 2000, 45 and 51). An 11th-century psalter made in the scriptorium at Peterborough Abbey contains an illumination of Christ trampling a lion and dragon (WS7; James 1921, 33).¹⁴ Although the illuminated lion and dragon do not precisely match those depicted in Castor, there are similarities in at least one capital and it is possible that this psalter provided inspiration; it is also worth noting

that Cyneburg features in the kalendar and litany within this manuscript. This strengthens the idea that Peterborough Abbey might have exercised an influence on the construction of the church. Klingender argues that artistic patronage can only be established where there is a proven documentary link to illuminations that may have been used as models, and the psalter provides, if not definitive proof of Peterborough's involvement, perhaps at least food for thought (Klingender 1971, 328-9).

Capital 9: Man, Quadruped and ?Iaculus (Fig 5 and Fig 12)

Within the Corpus of Romanesque Sculpture in Britain and Ireland (CRSBI) this capital has been interpreted as a 'man ... holding the jaws of a quadruped with horns on its head'; and in this paper, it has been suggested that this beast is a wolf (WS1; above). The assessor seems not to have noticed another small creature upon the animal's back, which shares characteristics with the serpents in the church, possibly seeing it as the tail of the quadruped. This beast has similar facial features to a number of the other Castor serpents, especially in the manner in which its mouth curls back on itself (see Figs 9, 10 and 12). It also appears to be a biped, typical of some serpents, but this may simply be because its back is against the edge of the capital. It is shown here with its tongue on the quadruped's back. The iaculus is a flying serpent that throws itself upon its prey from above, usually lying in wait in a tree. The image of this serpent in MS Bodley 764 in which the iaculus stands on the back of its prey, biting at its neck, is strikingly reminiscent of this capital (Barber 1999, 192; WS8).



Fig 12 Iaculus (9)

Capital 19: ?Dragon / ?Salamander (Fig 13)

This capital shows a four-legged creature with a ridged body and a bifurcating tail, which is usually the way in which salamanders are shown in medieval bestiaries. Wood suggests that this figure is a lion, however, the CRSBI lists this creature as a ‘wingless dragon’ (Wood 2004, 82-4; WS1). The capital shares two key features with the dragons/basilisks on capital (8). First, the heads are extremely similar, with a curling feature extending from the back of the neck, and curled back lips, which are also reminiscent of the dragon on capital (21) (Fig 10). Secondly, this creature’s front legs extend into bird-like claws. Lizards and salamanders were frequently depicted as dragon-like in illuminations, and were categorised as serpents. Lizards (which included salamanders) are said to have turned toward the east when going blind, in order to receive the light (Barney et al 2010, 257; Barber 1992, 194). Here, the viewer faces east as they observe the image, and the lizard turns its head to look behind, due east. MS Bodley 764 describes the salamander as ‘the most poisonous of all poisonous creatures ... If it crawls into a tree, all the apples are infected with its poison ... in the same way, if it falls into a well, the water will poison those who



Fig 13 Salamander (19)

drink it (Barber 1999, 194). It is uncertain whether it is a dragon or a salamander, but in the Isidorean tradition, it can undoubtedly be classified as a ‘serpent’.

Discussion – Serpents, Dragons, and the Castor Landscape

The date of the sculpture at Castor – c. 1110 – is an important marker, placing the creation of the capitals before the key changes in thinking about the natural world in learned circles, and in particular, the separation of the supernatural from the natural associated with the 12th-century renaissance. The point to emphasise here is that as far as the inhabitants of 12th-century Castor were concerned, there was no separation, and invisible beings such as dragons and basilisks were considered to be an integral part of the natural world, even though they would nevertheless have been viewed as ‘other’. Indeed, these learned ideas would not have filtered through to the rural secular world for a very long time.

The idea that the landscape was populated with invisible beings is clearly acknowledged by the Church as exemplified by field prayers, such as this 10th-century example, associated with a Northumbrian monastic community:

‘Holy Lord, Father omnipotent, eternal God, send forth your Holy Spirit with the archangel Panchiel that he may defend our crops from worms, from winged things, from demons, from lightning bolts, from all temptations of the devil, by the invocation of your holy name, Jesus Christ, who reign with the Father and who live with the Holy Spirit, forever and ever.’ (Jolly 2006, 96)

A second prayer from the same manuscript also mentions ‘demons and flying things, worms and ... venomous animals’ and several of these are likely to have been broadly interpreted as serpents of one kind or another. During the late Anglo-Saxon period, Ball suggests that associations with OE *wyrm* ‘serpent, reptile’ are usually negative, as evidenced in these prayers (Ball 2017, 21 and 33). The most well-known field prayer is the 11th-century *Æcerbot*, which also uses powerful Christian language to eradicate ‘every known fiend’ from the landscape. Scholars have suggested that these Christian rituals were conscious attempts by Benedictine reformists to address local concerns, and to ensure that the response was delivered through the agency of the Church (Jolly 1996, 102 and 115;

Arthur 2014, 5 and 9). Jolly's suggestion that one of the objectives of the Church at this time was to integrate popular material within the Christian world-view reaffirms the sense that for rural communities perceived perils, often invisible and including serpents and 'flying things', were a significant problem (Jolly 1985, 279).

Summer was seen as an especially troublesome time, and the 10th-century *Bald's Leechbook* explains that in summertime 'the air is full of venomous flying things' (Jolly 2006, 111). This of course was especially challenging, since in the rural calendar this was a season associated with the ripening of crops, just before harvest. This idea continued to hold sway into the 12th century, as emphasised within a handbook of liturgical rituals outlining the practice of lighting bonfires at midsummer to ward off dragons because they:

'fly in the air, swim in water and walk on land, and sometimes when in the air they became aroused by lust, whence they often emitted semen into springs and rivers and because of this a deadly year ensued.' (Bartlett 2008, 71)

MS Bodley 764 likens both dragons and basilisks to the devil:

'[The] dragon is like the devil, the fairest of all serpents ... the air glows because of him, because the devil rises from his abyss and transforms himself into an angel of light, deceiving fools with hopes of vainglory and human pleasures. The dragon has a crest because the devil is the king of pride ... the basilisk signifies the devil, who openly kills the heedless sinner with his venom ...' (Barber 1999, 182-185)

Dragons were considered monstrous precisely because they did not conform to the archetypal model of order in the natural world. According to contemporary scientific thought, the cosmos – the macrocosm – was made up of four elements – fire, air, water, and earth; and man – the microcosm – was also made from a balance of these elements. The world was arranged according to a strict natural scheme which was linked to the idea of elemental order: each creature, including man, should occupy its rightful place (Conger 1922, 32; Glacken 1967, 198). Hence, man walked the earth; fish were of the water; birds of the air; and angels occupied the firmament and were associated with fire. Williams argues that those creatures that eventually became associated with the term 'supernatural' were considered monstrous (Williams 1996). This included serpents, the majority of which were both earthly and amphibious. Thus, the dragon, able to occupy all four realms, was considered the most monstrous of all

(Williams 1996, 177-9 and 202). This is encapsulated by the encyclopaedist, Bartholomew the Englishman, writing in the late 13th century:

'... And [the dragon] ... ryseth up into the ayre ... and somtyme he setteth the ayer afuyre by hete of his venyme so that it semeth that he bloweth and casteth fuyre out of his mouth ... [And he] wonyeth somtyme in the see and somtyme swymmeth in ryveres and lotyeth somtyme in caves and in dennes ...' (Seymour et al 1975, 1184-6)

Like the worms and venomous creatures of the field prayers and the 12th-century ritual, another of the creeping creatures, the salamander, as described by Bartholomew, had the ability to kill crops and foul water by touch alone. He describes it as a *worme*, medieval shorthand for any serpent-like creature, and suggested that 'what it toucheth is corrupte ... [it] is a pestilence beste and most venomous ... [and it] infecteth fruyte of trees and corrupteth water ...' (Seymour et al 1975, 1243). The idea that these creatures might affect the harvest is also mirrored in the writings of Albertus Magnus in the 13th century, who suggests the basilisk also burned everything, destroying crops and infecting the air (Kitchell and Resnik 1999, 1720). Blessing fields against the myriad threats that resulted in crop failure continued to be important into the later Middle Ages. Medieval people called upon priests to sprinkle holy water on the fields and on their agricultural implements in order to drive out evil, represented most manifestly by serpents – particularly dragons; and there is also tentative evidence for the ritual deposition of ampullae, which contained substances from shrines and holy wells, onto agricultural land (Anderson 2010, 197-200; Gilchrist 2012, 171).

Seemingly, then, serpents and dragons were considered to be a commonplace part of the natural world at the time of the creation of the capitals in Castor church. They dominate the faunal images at Castor, and were clearly front-of-mind for those selecting the images for the capitals. Archaeologists writing on the significance of barrows in the early medieval period have noted their importance, implied through the tendency to name barrows, and the shifting perceptions of these features across the medieval period, from their re-use for burial in the early period, following which from the 7th century they began to be seen as evil, and associated with dragons and supernatural spirits (Davidson 1988, 19; Semple 1998, 109-112). Barrows, then, could be a source of fear locally, and named barrows were especially significant, suggesting a continued awareness

and demarcation of these features in the landscape (Whyte 2003, 6). In medieval Castor, there were as many as eleven named barrow sites in the surrounding fields, some of which can be definitively associated with scheduled mounds. The E version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, written at nearby Peterborough, sheds some light on local experience in the late 11th and early 12th centuries. It recounts that 1086:

‘was very disastrous, and a very vexatious and anxious year ... because of a pestilence among livestock; and corn and fruits were at a standstill ... what great misfortune was caused by the weather: so violent was the thunder and lightning that many were killed. Things steadily went from bad to worse for everybody. May God Almighty remedy it when it shall be his will!’

The problems continued unabated through 1087, with widespread fatal fever, storms, and famine: ‘so fever-stricken lay the unhappy people in those days that they were never far from death’s door, until the pangs of hunger finished them off’. Similar accounts of poor harvests, bad weather and disease were noted in 1089, each of the four years between 1095-8, and in five of the years between 1103-1112 (Garmonsway 1962, 217-243). The years 1095-8 are of particular note. Even short-term weather fluctuations affected peasant living standards enormously, and so four years of continuous struggle must have had an enormous impact upon clergy and laity alike (Dyer 1998, 266). It seems reasonable to suggest that the Peterborough scribes would have drawn – at least in part – on local experience in writing up their account. These events may help in determining the rationale behind the link between Castor’s landscape and the church, because they also coincided with the construction of the capitals.

Furthermore, in 1127 both the *Peterborough Chronicle* and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* recount a monstrous portent: a wild hunt was witnessed at night for the entire period of Lent:

‘... throughout the woodland and plains, from the monastery as far as Stamford ... there appeared ... hunters with horns and hounds, all being jet black, their horses and hounds as well, and some rode ... on goats and had great eyes and there were twenty or thirty together. And this is no false tale, for many men of faithful report both saw them and heard the horns.’ (Mellows and Mellows 1966, 54-5)

The direction taken by the demonic hunters from Peterborough *en route* to Stamford would have

ensured they passed through the woodlands of Castor. Assessing the evidence of the actual experience of local peasants tilling the soil in settlements in the Soke of Peterborough in the early 12th century, it is clear that crops were failing, famine and pestilence had been frequently experienced, and strange events were recorded as occurring in the heart of the landscape. From the field-prayers of the 10th and 11th centuries through to the writings of 12th- and 13th-century scholars and chroniclers, we also know that dragons and other serpents were often blamed for just these misfortunes. But the capitals featuring serpents are not the only potentially demonic symbols within the scheme: capital (17) depicts what appears to be a giant fighting a warrior, whilst a woman looks on (Fig 14).

Capital 17: Giant, Warrior, and Woman (Fig 14)

Besson has noted similar French capitals from the same period, and suggests that the protagonists are fighting over the woman, and that continental carvings of this type are often coupled with scenes showing a man fighting a monster (Besson 1987, 114-119). At Castor, this capital has generally been interpreted locally in the modern period as a pictorial rendition of the legend of St Cyneburg, in which she is attacked in the fields alongside the River Nene by at least two, possibly three, men. Modern versions of the story suggest that the men are either swallowed up by a fissure in the earth, which appears miraculously as they reach Cyneburg; or that they become entrapped by thorns, the flowers in the saint’s basket having undergone a magical metamorphosis (Morton 1712, 511; Serjeantson and Adkins 1970, 473; St Kyneburgha’s Castor: a Souvenir Guide 2006, 9). A detailed analysis of this reputed event



Fig 14 *Giant, warrior, and woman (17)*

including both landscape and archaeological contexts is considered in depth elsewhere (Kilby forthcoming), and so only a brief outline is offered here. It is clear from the capital that the two male figures are fighting one another, with the smaller figure standing with his back to the woman, thus giving the appearance of defending her. Assessing the capital closely, the larger warrior appears to be a giant.

Discussion – The Giant and the Castor Landscape

Returning to the landscape associated with this event, an 18th-century account of this tale written by John Morton describes Cyneburg’s escape route as being ‘miraculously mark[e]d out’ and that it was ‘distinguishable from the rest of the field ... by its being barren[er] than the ground on both sides of it’ (Morton 1712, 511). In short, this was (and remains) a path that is only visible during drier periods, and hence, the kind of path that might become woven into local legend. Indeed, today, the path is most clearly seen from the air, as outlined in Fig 15. Morton further notes that locals named this path *Kinneburga’s Way*. It continued to be known well enough locally for



Fig 15 Normangate Field, Castor, showing the line of St Cyneburg’s path

the 19th-century archaeologist Edmund Artis to map its location (Morton 1712, 511; Artis 1828, plate 1). The path, a former minor Roman road, is situated in medieval *normangate* field, one of the later medieval open fields, and its name is synonymous with the major Roman road Ermine Street, which intersects with ‘Cyneburg’s’ path.¹⁵

The path crosses *normangate* field, passing what was once a medieval furlong called *denchemor* (NRO F(M) Charter 10; NRO F(M) Charter 248). The low-



Fig 16 Normangate Field, c. 1828, showing Ermine Street, ‘Lady Connyburrow’s Way’, and the approximate location of medieval thirspitt. Artis, ET, 1828, *The Durobrivae of Antoninus*, London

lying nature of this field, in the floodplain of the River Nene means that *mor* in this instance can be read as ‘marsh’ (Gelling and Cole 2000, 58). The variant spellings of the first element of this name mean that we can be certain that by the time it was written down in the 13th century, locals understood this name as ‘marsh associated with Danes or Norsemen’. Further back, directly alongside the line of the *normangate*, or Ermine Street, lies a medieval furlong called *thirspitt*, which means ‘giant’s, or demon’s pit’ (Fig 16) (BL Cotton MS Nero C. vii/14). The name *normangate*, ‘road or way associated with Scandinavians’ references a road associated with Scandinavians rather than Normans, suggesting that in the eyes of the residents of late Anglo-Saxon Castor, the road had a strong connection with Vikings (WS9; Kilby, forthcoming).¹⁶

The earliest medieval name for the road as it ran through Castor and the adjacent township of Ailsworth was *irthonhegg* – ‘earthen hedge; earthen bank’ – which clearly described the Roman agger (BL Cotton MS Nero C. vii/14). Referring back to the suggestion above (see Introduction) that Castor was sacked by the Danes in the pre-Conquest period, at which time Cyneburg’s church became ruinous, might the church capital reference an event that reputedly took place in Castor, but was then conflated with a more modern story about Cyneburg, which subsequently became embellished? Parts of Northamptonshire were undoubtedly sacked by the Danes, including Stamford in 1013, which lies ten miles north of Castor, along Ermine Street. The field-names may well memorialize an event in which Danes entered Castor via the *normangate*; the switch from the generic element *hecge* or *hege* to *gata* ‘way, path, road or street’ strongly suggests that the Castor community saw this as a routeway in the late Saxon period (Neilson 1942, 58; Smith 1956, 196). Thus, the capital perhaps shows a local warrior defending the weaker members of the community, represented by the woman, against a Danish warrior. The Peterborough chronicler Hugh Candidus described the Danes as ‘servants of the devil’, and so the image of a giant, synonymous with the devil in this period, is perhaps fitting (Mellows and Mellows 1966, 12). The positioning of *thirspitt*, beside the Roman Road *normangate* is also intriguing. To the Anglo-Saxons, pits and other deep holes in the ground were thought to be dangerous places populated by demons (Semple 2010, 29). The coalescence of these unusual, and in the case of *thirspitt*, rare, field-names in the very location in Castor that is most deeply connected with its supernatural past may be coincidental, but it nevertheless demands attention.

Conclusion

The 12th-century capital scheme in Castor combines the prosaic and the extraordinary. In amongst all the alarming threats represented most obviously by the serpents, but also glimpsed through additional demonic symbols like the giant, the wolf, and the boar, we see an opposing image, that of an ordered, visible world in which men hunt, or engage in agricultural activity, such as pruning (7) and harvesting vines (20); where animals graze (10), and where beautiful plants grow (Fig 1). Taken as a whole, there is both tension and calm within this scheme. These images were deliberately designed to convey multiple messages, and they were almost certainly not intended to be defined narrowly. To medieval artists and their patrons, the generation of manifold meanings would have been seen as a distinct advantage rather than a problem (Klingender 1971, 328; Mâle 1972, 32-3; Camille 1992, 29; Thurlby 2000, 10). The scheme encompasses clear representations of the local landscape, from the more obvious images reminiscent of local hunting, through to the ever-present albeit unseen serpents that occasionally wreaked havoc, causing crop failure, famine and pestilence. To the modern mind, the hunting scenes perhaps characterise the local landscape most obviously. Nevertheless, Castor’s early 12th-century inhabitants would have recognised that the serpents were also fitting representatives of their local environment. Furthermore, if the ‘giant’ capital can be connected with possible events in *normangate* field, then this too also offers a valid representation of part of Castor’s late-11th-to-early-12th-century landscape. It has long been recognised that the landscape was (and remains) a repository for history, legend and folklore (Whyte 2007, 168; Walsham 2011, 44). An examination of a range of evidence associated with Castor, including both written material and the capitals, suggests that the sculpture worked in tandem with the landscape and the field-names to preserve the memory of events – both real and perceived – experienced by Castor residents.

The 12th-century St Albans Psalter, which was probably written by Roger the hermit, contains a passage outlining the importance of ‘two levels of symbolic expression – one subtle and esoteric ... addressed to a minority of *illuminati*, the other, transparent and designed for the edification of the faithful’ (Klingender 1971, 331-3). This means of dissemination to the unlearned was best achieved through images. Scholars have suggested that the power

of late Anglo-Saxon charms and field prayers was vested within their words, words that were of course strongly associated with Christian ritual and worship. Fundamentally, this constituted a superior power to the invisible opposing forces of evil (Jolly 1989, 173; Jolly 1996, 99; Arthur 2014, 9). Ritualized Christian words were undoubtedly perceived to be powerful, however, as Roger the hermit attested, images were also a powerful reminder for the illiterate, which would have included many of the 12th-century congregation of Castor. Was this set of images deliberately placed at the heart of the church to demonstrate the Christian God's ability to neutralize the power of the demonic?

Klingender outlines two key tropes found in church sculpture: 'Christ as shield', alongside 'man pursued by Satan', ideas easily disseminated to the laity through imagery of this type (Klingender 1971, 334). However, for local parishioners, these were unlikely to have been seen merely as a set of potentially frightening reminders that demonic forces could be found hiding in plain sight. Given local experience in the years prior to the construction of the Castor capitals, it seems likely that both those commissioning the work and local people viewing it during their regular church attendance would have recognised elements of the scheme as representative of their environment: the more characteristic animals typically associated with a woodland landscape, set comfortably alongside the devilish and unseen forces that were considered to be responsible for their subsistence crisis, represented most obviously by the myriad serpents. Semple has suggested that 'people's communal identity ... may have been bound up with the ways in which they used and perceived the landscape' (Semple 2010, 42). In Castor, the capital scheme provided a material interpretation of local people's perceptions of their environment, positioned at a focal point in one of the most important community spaces in the village.

Taking the local landscape into account, using the field-names that best represent what the late-Anglo-Saxon peasant population felt was particularly notable about Castor, and given the continued use and transmission of the field-names into the post-Conquest period the capital scheme can be interpreted as representing issues of local import. Ultimately, it is difficult to be certain about the agency behind the Castor scheme, but two factors suggest the evidence is weighted more heavily in favour of a clerical commission. First, the capitals were carved at the time of the construction of the Norman church, pre-dating the fourth Lateran council of 1215, and

therefore supporting the idea of a seigneurial – in this case ecclesiastical – sponsor.¹⁷ It is also known that Peterborough Abbey held, and had access to, erudite manuscripts including bestiaries and encyclopaedias. Are we perhaps witnessing an attempt to create an apotropaic device in the heart of the church: neutralizing the demonic by placing their images in a sacred, powerful space, whilst simultaneously reminding parishioners that evil can be defeated by choosing a Christian path? Or, was the scheme simply a reminder to local peasants that the landscape was full of invisible dangers? Perhaps ultimately it signifies both: an attempt by the Church to challenge the power of the more demonic elements of the supernatural world, by taking the focus away from their 'natural' habitat of the fields and into the heart of the church, whilst at the same time providing a reminder to local people of the inherent dangers of provoking God.

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Photographs

All of the photographs of the capitals were taken by Colin Hyde, except Figs 2 and 12 which were taken by the author. The aerial photograph of Normangate Field (Fig 15) was kindly supplied by Dr Stephen Upex; Stephen also allowed the author to photograph his copy of Edmund Artis' map (Fig 16). Thanks are also due to both the Bodleian Library, Oxford (Fig 4), and the University of Aberdeen (Fig 6) for supplying manuscript images.

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Endnotes

- 1 Domesday Book lists the Soke of Peterborough as the hundred of Upton Green; this later became Nassaburgh hundred, although the territory had changed slightly: Serjeantson, RM, and Adkins, D, 1906, *The Victoria County History of Northamptonshire*, Vol. II, London, p. 421
- 2 The dedication lunette is difficult to interpret, and could read either 1114 or 1124. The CRSBI website seems to favour 1124 (WS1).
- 3 The Anglo-Saxons knew her as Cyneburg, but the modern spelling of the church dedication is Kyneburgha. When referring to the saint, I shall use Cyneburg, and when referencing the church, I will use St Kyneburgha.
- 4 I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for alerting me to the last point.
- 5 Outlined in *Domesday Book*. It is also possible to piece together the size of Castor's woodland from a disafforestation survey of 1215, reproduced in E. King, *Peterborough Abbey 1086-1310* (Cambridge, 1973), pp. 172-179, although this requires knowledge of Castor's medieval landscape and community (see Kilby, forthcoming).
- 6 Baxter suggests that the 10th-century Peterborough manuscript was in fact a *Liber Bestiarum*: R. Baxter, *Bestiaries and their Users in the Middle Ages* (Stroud, 1998), p. 176
- 7 Evans notes that some bestiaries claim that if the wolf was seen by a man with its mouth closed, then it lost the ability to open it, but this may be a mis-translation: E.P. Evans, *Animal Symbolism in Ecclesiastical Architecture* (London, 1896), pp. 150-151
- 8 This text was seen at the Institute for Name-Studies at the University of Nottingham.
- 9 Although Clark suggests that even the lower orders would have understood some basic symbols, including that serpents were synonymous with the devil (Clark 2006, 22).
- 10 The first written English form of 'wyvern' is noted in 1610 (WS6).
- 11 Modern place-names which in part resemble *wyvern*, such as Wiverton Hall in Nottinghamshire, have early spellings which confirm alternative etymologies: J.E.B. Gover, A. Mawer and F.M. Stenton (eds), *The Place-Names of Nottinghamshire* (Nottingham, 1940), pp. 230-1.
- 12 Serjeantson suggests fenland as a key habitat for cranes, and Castor lay on the edge of the Fens: D. Serjeantson, 'Extinct birds' in T. O'Connor and N. Sykes (eds), *Extinctions and Invasions: a Social History of British Fauna* (Macclesfield, 2010), p. 149
- 13 I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for suggesting this alternative and very plausible way of interpreting these capitals.
- 14 James argues that the manuscript belonged to Peterborough Abbey, however Dockray-Miller has labelled it the Crowland Psalter, but suggests that it was made in Peterborough: M. Dockray-Miller, 'The evangelist symbols in the Judith of Flanders gospels: devotion, prestige and cultural production' in A.L. Kaufman, S.F.D. Hughes and D. Armstrong (eds) *Telling Tales and Crafting Books: Essays in Honour of Thomas H. Ohlgren* (Kalamazoo, 2016), p. 275
- 15 Ermine Street was known in modern times as the Great North Road, now the modern A1.

- 16 Place-name scholars argue that terms like these, that seem to reference specific ethnicity (in this case Danish or Norwegian) were generally understood to mean ‘Scandinavians’ more generally: J. Carroll, ‘Identifying migrants in medieval England: the possibilities and limitations of place-name evidence’ in J. Story, W.M. Ormrod and E.M. Tyler (eds), *Migrants in Medieval England, c. 500-1500* (forthcoming).
- 17 Following this council, the lord was responsible for the upkeep of the chancel, and the parishioners the nave.

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