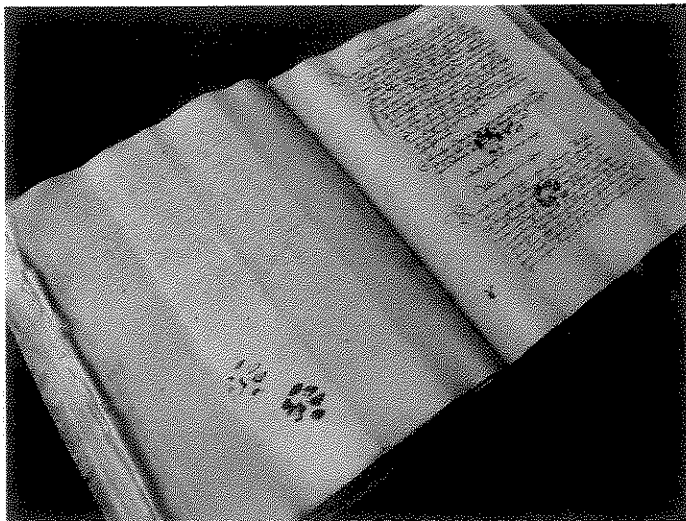


PAWS, PEE AND PESTS: CATS AMONG MEDIEVAL CENTURY MANUSCRIPTS

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Everyone who has ever owned a cat will be familiar with their unmannerly feline habit of walking across your keyboard while you are trying to type. About a year ago, historian Emir O. Filipović (@EmirOFilipovic) made a picture of paw prints in a fifteenth-century medieval manuscript in the archives of Dubrovnik (Croatia), which revealed that this is nothing new. The picture, retweeted by book historian Erik Kwakkel (@erik_kwakkel), went viral and made headlines in various countries. The Dubrovnik-manuscript is, by no means, the only trace cats have left among medieval manuscripts.

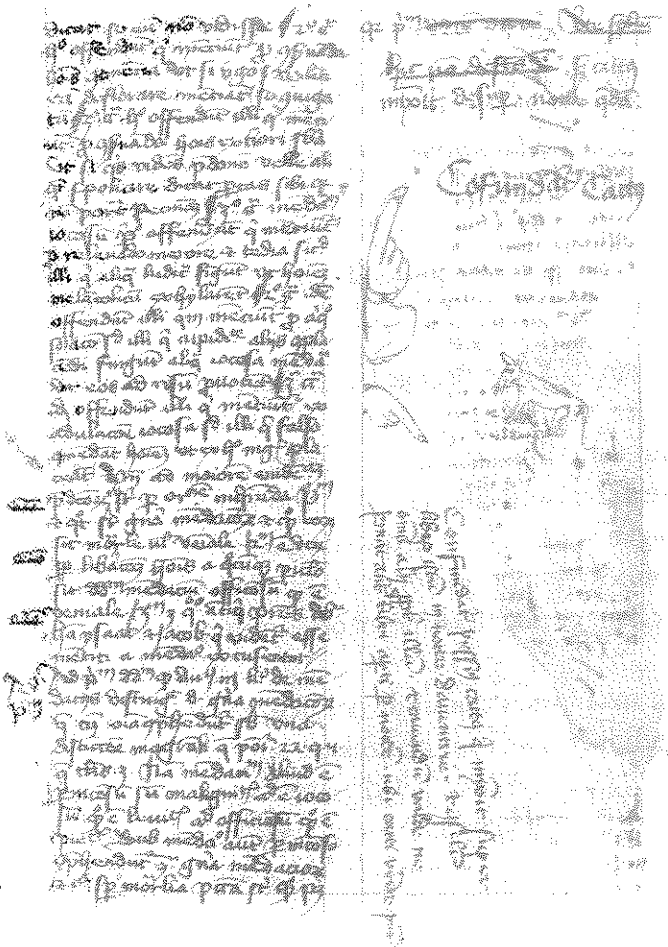


Cat paws in a fifteenth-century manuscript (photo taken at the Dubrovnik (Croatia) State Archives under the signature: *Litterae et commissiones Levantia*, Volume 13., by @EmirOFilipovic). Permission given by Vesna Rimac, Arch. Spec.

Although the medieval owner of the Dubrovnik-manuscript may have been quite annoyed with these paw marks on his otherwise neat manuscript, another fifteenth-century book reveals that he got off lucky. A scribe from Deventer (The Netherlands), writing around 1420, found his manuscript ruined by a urine stain left there by a cat the night before. He was forced to leave the rest of the page empty, drew a picture of a cat and cursed the creature with the following words:

“Hic non defectus est, sed cattus minxit desuper nocte quadam. Confundatur pessimus cattus qui minxit super librum istum in nocte Daventrie, et consimiliter omnes alii propter illum. Et cavendum valde ne permittantur libri aperti per noctem ubi cattie venire possunt.”

[Here is nothing missing, but a cat urinated on this during a certain night. Cursed be the pesty cat that urinated over this book during the night in Deventer and because of it many others [other cats] too. And beware well not to leave open books at night where cats can come.]

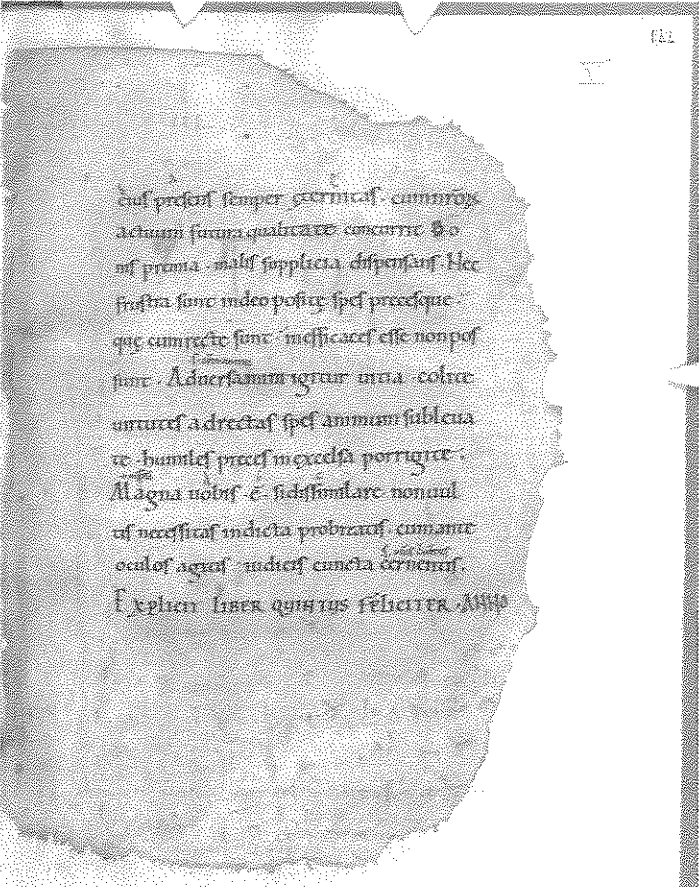


Cursed be this cat for peeing over my book! (© Cologne, Historisches Archiv, G.B. quarto, 249, fol. 68r)

Given their inclination to defile beautiful books, why were cats allowed in medieval libraries at all? A ninth-century poem, written by an Irish monk about his cat “Pangur Bán”, holds the answer:

*I and Pangur Bán my cat,
'Tis a like task we are at:
Hunting mice is his delight,
Hunting words I sit all night.*

The cats were there to keep out the mice. For good reason, because a medieval manuscript offered a tasty treat for the little vermin, as a picture of an eleventh-century copy of Boethius's *De consolazione philosophiae* illustrates. The manuscript has been all but devoured by rats and mice; every page shows the marks of their teeth.



A mouse ate my Boethius! (© Corpus Christi College Cambridge, MS 214, fol. 122r)

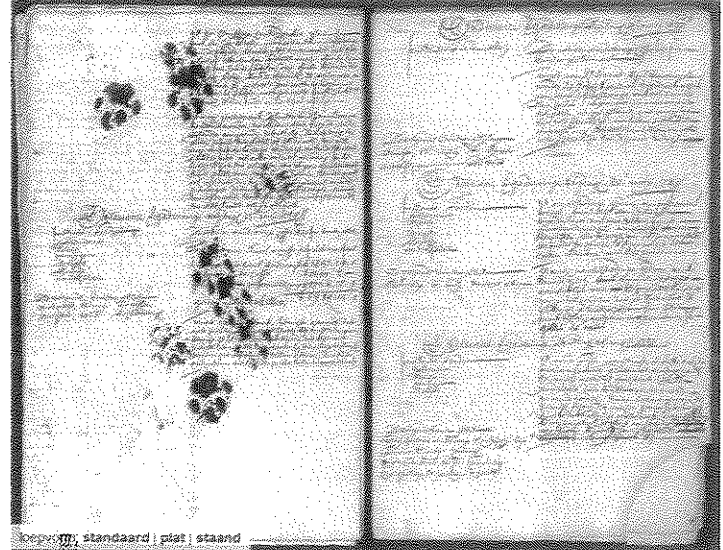
Aside from their book-endangering eating habits, mice could be an annoying distraction, as illustrated by the twelfth-century scribe Hildebert. The illustration shows how a mouse has climbed up Hildebert's table and is eating his cheese. Hildebert lifts a stone in an apparent attempt to kill the mouse. In the book that he was writing, we find a curse directed at the cheese-nibbling beast:

“Pessime mus, sepius me provocas ad iram: ut te, deus perdat” [Most wretched mouse, often you provoke me to anger. May God destroy you!]



Hildebert distracted by a mouse. (© Prague, Capitular Library, codex A 21/1, fol. 153r)

So, while at least two cats are responsible for leaving their unwanted marks on manuscripts, the cat's mouse-catching abilities may have saved a large number of manuscripts from ending up in a mouse's belly and may have enabled many a scribe to focus on his work, knowing that his lunch would remain untouched.



Zeeuws Archief—Historica on Twitter: In 18th-century Middelburg, too, a cat walked over the minutes of the Middelburgsche Commerce Compagnie, inventory number 1.7

More information:
 More about the Dubrovnik-manuscript with paw marks: <http://theappendix.net/blog/2013/3/of-cats-and-manuscripts>

More about medieval manuscripts:
<http://medievalfragments.wordpress.com/>