

# Medieval Codicology with Evan Pridmore

## Ologies Podcast

April 2, 2025

Oh hey, it's the bobby pin hiding in your hair overnight, Alie Ward. This episode is coming out in the middle of the night, sometime between April 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup>. Friends, it's not a prank; it's real. It's really a whole episode about medieval manuscript art with a focus on drawings of snails. This is why I make this show, this is why this was my dream job forever. I love this. And you will too as we cover what these golden, illuminated Middle Ages manuscripts were made of, and so much more with this expert who did their undergrad at the University of Winchester in Medieval and Renaissance Studies, a master also in Medieval and Renaissance Studies, and is working toward a PhD, but is currently a social media executive for a rare book dealer.

Now, you may be familiar with their work; hundreds of thousands of art history-hungry people follow them online, and they educate the public about historical texts and arts and snistory, which are medieval snail themes. Their bio simply explains, "Medieval snail historian. No seriously, that's what my thesis was on." And they seem to go viral whenever they mention Vincent van Gogh's work. ["*Vincent van Gogh...*" 'van Gogh' pronounced 'va-Hoh' with a very harsh H sound and repeated three times "...himself."] Okay, the hitch is they're Dutch! They speak Dutch. This is how Vincent van G, a Dutch, said his name in Dutch, and how everyone who speaks his native tongue of Dutch says it. So, they know what they're talking about, and they love doing it. So, when many of you asked me to get to the bottom of medieval gastropods, I moved swiftly. Here we are. I promise you there are many, many, many things relevant to your life and the world around us in this episode. You will never look at old manuscripts, snails, or even the news the same way. Have faith.

Now, on that note, thank you to everyone who leaves reviews for this show on your podcast apps, which I read. I harvest a fresh one each week, such as this one from TimM651, who wrote:

*Truly the best science podcast out there. Even when I find myself not interested in a topic, she makes it palatable. The worst thing about it is the show notes: you thought you were done, well, here's five more episodes you might like. Seriously, give it a listen.*

And yeah, check the show notes because we always link a bunch of episodes that you're going to like. Okay, Tim, thank you. Thank you also for wearing your *Ologies* merch, which you can get at [OlogiesMerch.com](https://OlogiesMerch.com). We keep it affordable so that ologites can find each other in the wild. Also, thank you to patrons at [Patreon.com/Ologies](https://Patreon.com/Ologies) for making the show possible and sending in your questions. You can join, if you like, for as little as one hot dollar a month. Also, if our regular episodes are too sexy and cool for you and you need some without swearing, we make a whole spinoff show called *Smologies*. You can find it in the show notes or wherever you get podcasts; just search for 'Smologies.' They are shorter, classroom-safe versions of our episodes for the kiddos.

Okay, let's get to it. So, codicology is the study of old, old, old books. In this case, we're looking at the Middle Ages and the drawings that crept up the margins and at the foot of the pages and between the letters of rare books. Also creeping among the imagery... tons of snails. Why? Let's talk about it. Who drew them? Why were people sometimes naked in them? Why did animals have creepy human faces? What art trends came and went and what does it say about our history and future? What happened if you messed up making a manuscript? What exactly is a Salisbury steak? With scholar, globally-known art history communicator, snistorian, and medieval codicologist, Evan Pridmore.

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**Evan:** Evan Pridmore and my pronouns are they/them.

**Alie:** And where, you're... You're in some sort of library with leather-bound books.

**Evan:** So, this isn't actually— It's not technically a library, but it's a set that we use for when we're doing videos, and podcasting, and things like that. [*Alie gasps*] The issue that I have is that these are all very old, rare historical books so sometimes they get bought, which means that we have to frantically search through them and then find something else to fill the set instead.

**Alie:** [*laughs*] And where is it? What is work for you?

**Evan:** So, I work at Peter Harrington, which is, I want to say, the top or at least one of the top rare book dealers in the world. So, we handle rare historical or otherwise significant books in general, which, of course, is where my study and paleography comes into play.

**Aside:** Paleography means old writing, which is cool.

**Evan:** So, some of the things we've recently handled last year was the first folio, Shakespeare's first folio.

**Alie:** What?!

**Evan:** So, very early 17<sup>th</sup>-century, several million pounds. Yeah, things like that, which are literal pieces of history you can hold in your hand. It's incredible.

**Alie:** Did you have to go through any history of if Shakespeare was real, or was five people, or anything like that?

**Evan:** Shakespeare was real, I can say that. Just based on current academic research. Shakespeare was real and our official stance is that, yes, Shakespeare was a real person. We're not buying into the conspiracy theories, unfortunately.

**Alie:** That's wonderful. I'm glad we cleared that up right off the bat, because that's the thing I forgot that I was wondering.

So, books and rare books. You came into my field of vision about literature's medieval snails. I need to know how your work steered in that direction. [*Evan laughs*] When did you start to notice snails or did somebody else notice snails? And you were like, "You're right." Does everyone know about snails in medieval literature or was this something that, going through old books, you started to see them?

**Evan:** Well, so I always grew up being quite a fan of history. I mean, especially British audiences, which is where I'm based. They'll know things like *Horrible Histories*, which is a book and TV series. [*"Are you Protestant? Are you vaguely related to Henry VIII? Is your name Lady Jane Grey? Then you've won our Star Prize, and you're going to experience what it's like to be Queen for nine days."*] It really caught my attention, made me sort of obsessed with history, frankly, to a concerning degree.

I think I started to veer towards the early-modern and medieval period, just because those seemed to be times that there was a lot of confusion and there's a lot of differing opinions and takes and research into it. And in the medieval period especially because a lot of our view of the Middle Ages is warped by Victorians. So, things like the Iron Maiden or other torture devices, a lot of them were invented later because the Victorians wanted to essentially show that they were more civilized than these medieval barbarians.

**Aside:** I was like, "What is this all about?" And yeah, the Dark Ages got a bad rap from Victorians, and they said all kinds of things about how brutal and uncivilized people were back then, even though some of the torture devices they said they used were not, in fact, a thing back then. But let's just clear up the timeline a little bit because it is kind of dark and murky.

So, classical antiquity; think ancient Rome, ancient Greece. We do have a whole episode about ancient Rome, as well as a few Egyptology episodes we'll link in the show notes. Classical antiquity spans from the 8<sup>th</sup> century BC to the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD. The Roman Empire, specifically, it started right before Christ, and it lasted about 500 years. And then we have the Middle Ages and the Dark Ages, that's the early part of those Middle Ages, from right after Rome fell to about 1000. Now, these whole Middle Ages, from 500 to 1500, that was also called the medieval period. After that, around 1500 on, we have the start of the modern era, with the capture and fall of Constantinople by the Ottoman Empire, the spread of the printing press, Columbus ambling west and getting lost, but changing the world history of colonization. And now, we have phones where we look at video of strangers getting their earwax cleaned. But yeah, the Dark Ages is the kind of out-of-date term for the early Middle Ages.

**Evan:** So, because of that, I was like, okay, well, what is the truth about the Middle Ages? Are they really this insane and bonkers? There was trial by cake where it was, [*Alie laughs softly*] if you were able to eat the cake without choking, you'd be found innocent. If you choked while eating the cake, you would be found guilty.

**Alie:** Oh no! What kind of cake was it? [*laughs*]

**Evan:** I honestly don't know. I'm going to imagine some sort of, like, fruit cake or mince pie or something along those lines.

**Aside:** I needed to know really quick; you needed to know. This was apparently called Corsned or the accursed or sacred morsel. And sadly, it was not a medieval apple fritter, but apparently it was unleavened barley bread with sheep milk made in the month of May. Very specific. It was also called alphetomancy, and it involved barley cake sometimes or slices of barley bread. And yeah, if you choked on that, you were toast. Keep in mind, if you had a bunch of holy figures watching you eat a piece of dry bread to determine if you lived or died, you would probably have sweaty palms and cottonmouth, meaning that you would probably choke. But I don't even think their justice system allowed for an appeal in the form of dessert. And yeah, it happened more than once, but I guess you got a free snack out of it.

**Evan:** Bit early for me, bit out of my specialty, but it's those sort of weird things that I just became obsessed with. And then, one day, I saw the art, which is weird. [*laughs*] I think a lot of people have seen this whole thing about medieval memes or, like, weird medieval art online. I'm sure you've seen them as well.

**Alie:** Yeah, yeah. And I love them.

**Evan:** Yeah, everyone loves them; they're great. And I was like, "Okay, surely that can't be all of it." Because we see how people were drawing in the Renaissance, and we see how people are drawing in the classical era. And so, there's this whole idea of in Europe, the Dark Ages — which is a term I hate — but this whole thing of the Dark Ages is why did it suddenly go downhill and then go back up? And the truth is that it didn't. It was just a very different style. So, one of my pet peeves is when people say, "Oh, they didn't know how to draw." I'm like, yes, they did! They just drew in a very different way to what we would understand.

**Alie:** Why do you think that is? Was it completely stylistically, or was it just once your brain sees something a certain way, then it interprets everything that it sees that way?

**Evan:** I think it was a little bit of both. I mean, it also depends on where you are because I'm looking predominantly at European sources. Even in Europe, the sources are quite varied. If you look at early medieval artwork versus late medieval artwork in Italy, it varies a lot, especially the amount of gold that they use. I think as Italy got richer, they started to just add gold into everything.

**Alie:** Is it real gold? Is it real gold leaf?

**Evan:** Gold leaf, yeah. A lot of it. And you still find many manuscripts today that still have gold leaf everywhere in them, and it's quite frankly, very tempting to steal them.

**Alie:** *[laughs]* Oh my god! I can't imagine how much money... Going back to that style of art, because we've seen medieval memes where it's, like, someone's holding someone's head and the head is dripping blood, and then the person holding the head also has a boner, maybe, and there's a dog lapping something up in the corner. Just [*“Chaos”*]. People seem like weird little cartoon figures. Everyone looks kind of like Mr. Burns from *The Simpsons*. Where is that style coming from?

**Evan:** Ooh. Okay, now you're getting into the real debate because there's a couple different perspectives of where it comes from. Because the thing is that there are several different types of manuscripts; you have things like Books of Hours, you've got Psalters, we've got things like anatomical or pharmaceutical texts, and we also have things like carvings or stone reliefs that would happen on churches or other buildings like that. And the artwork varies between all of them. Now, around the 9<sup>th</sup> century, the artwork started to sort of look similar, at least in terms of drawing. In sculpture, it actually still looked a lot more realistic, with the exception of, like, grotesques.

**Aside:** Just a side note, a grotesque, it's often mistaken for a gargoyle, but I guess a gargoyle has to have water spouting out of it. But in general, a grotesque is kind of a goofy, creepy monster sculpture on the side of buildings, sometimes churches, because it added a little funny pizzazz. But yeah, even those didn't look as weird as the manuscript drawings that Evan studies.

**Evan:** Those were still very much a thing. But if you look at sculpture on a medieval cathedral, for example, those people look a lot more realistic than the people do in manuscripts. The thing about the manuscripts is that these artworks, unless it was, like, a full illumination on a page that was meant to tie in with the text, is a lot of these were either marginal or just decorative. So, there wasn't as much necessity for realism, basically. You could be symbolic, you could be... Basically, you could have fun with it. [*“You wanna get weird? Let's get weird.”*]

**Alie:** And when you're talking about manuscripts, does that mean a manuscript is always handwritten? Does the nomenclature change as technology does? What kind of technology did they have in the medieval times?

**Evan:** So, manuscript, phonetically, you break it down into 'manu' and 'script'; it does mean handwritten. So, in the rare book trade, we still have things that are called manuscripts, but these would be things like a handwritten draft for a James Bond novel or something along those lines. Like, a manuscript letter would be a handwritten letter as opposed to a typed letter. It literally just means handwritten. So, when we say that in terms of medieval books, when I say a medieval manuscript, pretty much everything in the Middle Ages was a manuscript because the printing press, which already existed in China and Eastern Asia, did not exist in Europe at that time. It wasn't until the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, with the Gutenberg press, that it really became a thing, and by that time, the Renaissance and early modern period were already kicking off. So, if we're looking solely at the Middle Ages, they didn't have any technology other than handwriting.

There were some things like woodcuts that you could do, but they didn't have a press to do it, so it would have to be manually done each time, which is a very long process. Part of why incredibly detailed manuscripts, some would be written by one person and then illustrated by another, so it would kind of be, like, almost a production line of who was doing what.

**Alie:** And who was doing this? Was it all monks?

**Evan:** Well, I'd like to just add for the record that it was a lot of nuns as well.

**Alie:** Was it!?!?

**Evan:** Yeah, they often get forgotten. So, I'd just like to give a huge shout-out to my medieval ladies. Jeffrey Hamburger, which, first of all, great name, wrote an incredible book that's on nuns in medieval art and nuns as artists. It's a really good read. And it kind of was mostly them. There were scribes, there were schools that did this, but honestly, it was the main source of outcome for a monastery or a convent. Many of the people who went into monasteries and convents would be people like either third or fourth sons of lesser nobility, or certain merchants' children so they would already have somewhat of a background in painting and reading because it was expected of these children to learn that growing up, which meant that they could then, of course, teach classes to other people, including the lower classes coming in. And basically, yeah, they had the resources, they had the time, and they had the funding to do it.

So, for the most part, yes, there were other workshops and places doing it, but the majority of things that we know were either written by people of the monastic life or people who are in some way connected with religion.

**Alie:** And then did that fund the monastery as well? Did they get, kind of, commissions and then that all went into the pot?

**Evan:** Yes, definitely. We have a few cases of certain monks who actually became so famous that they were able to have their own workshop and places like that. So, there's one... Matthew Paris, for example. Matthew Paris was a Benedictine monk who became so well known that he actually was able to write all his own stuff, and we know that it's assigned to him. Now, whether that was him or whether it was a studio, that's a question. But essentially, yeah, these were just workshops with a bunch of men with tonsures.

**Aside:** No idea what a tonsure was. So, I'm here to tell you it's when clergy or monks shave a huge, unsexy bald spot, and they just rock the bangs and a mullet and then go commando at the top of the head. Also, a couple more things, fashion-wise, fun at the monastery; hairshirts woven from coarse goat bristles that sometimes featured scraps of metal or twigs, those were worn on the skin solely for the purpose of bad sensory vibes, to remind you to be good. And there were other forms of cilice used to repent via the pain and mortification of the flesh like rose thorn garters or metal spiked ones you could tighten, kind of like a prong collar for dogs, but it's you, and you're doing it for God.

Can you still get this stuff? Sure! I found such items as well as religious whips to hurt yourself on a devotional website for the low price of \$69.99. You can also find these things on Etsy. From what I gather... they're used in all kinds of recreation. You certainly don't need to live in a convent or a monastery to enjoy them.

But yeah, back to the dominant monk who was hot shit in his illuminated or illustrated manuscript studio.

**Alie:** Like, in his case, was he doing the lettering and the drawing? Or just the drawing? Or just the lettering?

**Evan:** So, in his case, he was, as far as we can tell, doing both or, at the very least, designing both. So, the thing about manuscripts that's different from modern books is that most times, there would only be one true copy of a manuscript because you'd have to rewrite it, rewrite it, rewrite it, rewrite it, and it just takes a long time, frankly. I don't know if you've ever tried completing an entire foot-sized book; it takes forever.

**Alie:** [laughs] It takes a minute.

**Evan:** It does. And also illustrate it and then do it completely identically in another one and another one. It's not possible. So, we know that he definitely designed and the words are his, but how much was him versus underlings or other studio members? That is something that is still up for debate.

**Aside:** So, he may have had a literal hand making and designing, but then people trained under him completed it.

**Evan:** Technically speaking, we say it's him because it comes from his studio in the same way that we would say a painting is by Raphael, even if some of his studio assistants worked on the painting as well.

**Alie:** Is he kind of like Stan Lee a little bit? Like a comic...?

**Evan:** Oh, very much so.

**Alie:** Really? *[laughs]*

**Evan:** Yeah, yeah, yeah. There's an incredible work that actually was recently digitized at Trinity College Dublin, which is where I did one of my master's. If you are ever bored, you need to look up *The Life of St. Alban* by Matthew Paris. There's an incredible piece where when St. Alban, spoiler alert, gets executed, the man who's executing him in the legend, his eyes fall out. So, there's an incredible piece of artwork where it's just this guy whose eyes are just falling out of his hand, and he's like, "What do I do?" *[Alie laughs]* And they kind of do read like comic books in a way, yeah. *["So comical."]*

**Alie:** What medieval memes are some of your favorites? Obviously, cupping your own eyeballs in each palm...

**Evan:** Mm, yeah, classic.

**Alie:** Solid. What are some that are going around right now that you really enjoy getting some light of day?

**Evan:** Ooh, okay. So, I'm actually going to preface this by saying I have somewhat of a pet peeve against the term "medieval meme" because it sort of trivializes what medieval motifs were. But on the other hand, in this digital age, I think it's very important to be able to translate things into a way that modern audiences or people who are less knowledgeable will be able to understand. So, it's more of a personal academic thing, but I do understand calling them medieval memes, and I'm guilty of calling them that myself. I would say nuns harvesting dicks off of trees, always a good one.

**Alie:** *[laughs]* What story was that telling?

**Evan:** It has to do, it's basically a symbol of fertility, et cetera. Yeah, it's a good one.

**Aside:** Take, for example, the 14<sup>th</sup>-century illustrations for a medieval love handbook called *Romance of the Rose*, which features a nun in a brown robe and a veil reaching upwards toward a branch to pluck a hefty dong from among the leaves; she's carrying a basket, it's also filled with dongs. It reminds me of, like, the opening credits of some celebrity cooking show; just our star walking through a sun-drenched orchard harvesting goodies, only it's a nun, and they're dicks. And this wasn't just in the *Romance of the Rose*, there was an absolute bumper crop of this imagery at the time.

**Evan:** There's an incredible calendar that you can get, like a wall calendar, that just has different medieval penis trees for every month. And frankly, I need that in wallpaper.

**Alie:** *[laughs]* Forget your books in the background.

**Evan:** Yeah, exactly. That's where it's at. *[laughs]*

**Alie:** We've got a better idea. What are some other ones going around?

**Evan:** So, one of my favorites, this always comes up, is medieval artists didn't know how to draw animals. And to be fair, a lot of the animals do look completely silly: medieval dogs, medieval cats. My favorite one is a medieval oyster because it just looks like... It has, like, a frowny face, which I didn't even think oysters had faces, but you know, interpretation, creative license.

**Aside:** Just in terms of mollusk features, we do have a snail episode titled Malacology and a Pectinidology episode all about scallops. But just a little trivia. So, Evan got their master's at Trinity, which is in Dublin, Ireland, where I visited two weeks ago. And I was told by everyone I encountered to take a tour of the Guinness Brewery. However, it turns out I don't like beer. But I did like that the brewery, in homage to some old advertising, features an animatronic oyster the size of a Maine Coon cat [*whistling of William Tell Overture fades in*] and it has rubbery, whistling lips.

**Evan:** I do like those. And while I can't go into detail about why some of them are like that, if you just look at them on the surface, yeah, they look hysterical, and they don't make any sense.

**Alie:** I feel like a lot of the animals have, like, human faces in a way that's unsettling. Maybe, I mean, to the point of oysters having mouths.

**Evan:** Yeah! Part of my research is why a lot of animals have human features and vice versa. And it was very much a common trend to assign animal features to or assign human behaviorisms to animals. Therefore, you would depict them that way. So, of course, we still have some of these things like peacocks being proud or lions for bravery, so things like that.

**Alie:** Well, let's talk about weird human faces on animals because that is one of my favorites when you see an old, old piece of artwork that depicts, like, a soul in an animal, ensouled in them. Where did that come from? Like, in what era did we start mixing the two?

**Evan:** So, fables especially became hugely popular in the Middle Ages because telling a bedtime story or a fantasy that had a moral message was a really great way of getting stuff across to an audience. So, think of *Aesop's Fables*, "Tortoise and the Hare," things like that. Eventually, this translated over into art, partially because it was already predominant in royal crests and noble crests of the time, so then it became desirable to have these animals represent you. Of course, then there are also animals that have a negative connotation.

**Alie:** How are snails on that scale? How did people look upon snails? I mean, they're slow, and they are gooey.

**Evan:** They are. They're slimy.

**Alie:** Yeah, they can retract, but they're also romantic; they toss darts at each other, that's sweet.

**Evan:** They do, yeah.

**Alie:** So, snails in medieval art, when did this become a motif?

**Evan:** So, first of all, as a preface, medieval art, a lot of it is symbolic or non-literal. Just to preface that. However, on the other hand, a lot of it is literal. In terms of just decorative borders, you get a lot of Books of Hours that have these really beautiful, like, leaf exteriors or strawberries and butterflies and snails. You still see them in the early modern and Baroque periods in still life; so you get, like, a snail on a leaf in a still life on a bouquet of flowers. It's always been sort of a thing that exists in nature, so they would add it if they're adding a decorative nature theme.

Now, the actual theme of snails being used as what we would call *bas-de-page* imagery, which means bottom of the page imagery, which is kind of where that marginal illumination really comes

into play, that and that whole theme of, like, grotesques or *drollery*, the sort of funny motifs didn't really start until around the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries and it didn't really take off until the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries. So, the 13<sup>th</sup> century, especially the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, 1270 to about 1320 was, like, *the* high period for snails. [*Alie laughs*] There's a lot of different reasons for that. But the main one, the most predominant theory and the one that's most widely accepted, is that it is, unfortunately, a xenophobic response to a group of people living in Europe at that time.

**Alie:** How were they depicted in that way? How did that signify a group of people, and what group?

**Evan:** The group is called the Lombards, so it's a group of people from the Lombardy region. There was a lot of sour grapes against them because they successfully sacked Rome multiple times to the point that they were only actually driven off by Charlemagne in the 9<sup>th</sup> century.

**Aside:** And a side note, the Lombards came from the small tribe of Germanic origin and between the mid 500s to late 700s, about 75 years after the fall of the Roman Empire, the Lombards absolutely kicked ass in what is now Italy.

**Evan:** So, because of that, a lot of people hated the Lombards. They were not legally allowed to own land, they were ostracized, and they were barred from most professions because they couldn't go into things like apprenticeships or schools, et cetera. So, one of the things that they were able to turn to was usury and moneylending, which was seen as a greedy, frowned-upon practice. In other words, they were slimy.

**Alie:** Got it. Where nowadays... wow, you charge interest on something. Why do people who broker student loans with, like, bonkers interest, Why aren't they...? What is that? Interest is definitely celebrated these days.

**Evan:** Bring back snails.

**Alie:** Right. [*laughs*]

**Aside:** No one was looking for a man in finance, 6'5, blue eyes, or whatever; that guy would be a snail. Wall Street dudes would leave trails of mucus, and not in a good way.

**Alie:** So, they were seen as slimy. And then were they depicted as such in the margins as doing things to someone else? Were they shown as perpetrators of evil, or were they shown as just unsavory to be around?

**Evan:** So, in the margins, it was mostly unsavory to be around or also satire. So, I say that the high time for these images was around 1270 to 1320, and that is true. But the high period of snails as an allegory for the Lombards, or for anything really, in terms of literature and writing was actually the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> century; so, it was about 100, 200 years earlier.

So, we have a lot of writings from people like John of Salisbury, Jacques de Vitry, Leroux, Desjardins, and some other people whose names I cannot pronounce, we have a lot of their writings, Odofredo, who wrote about the Lombard invasion and the slow and steady invasion that it was. It was not something that happened in a day; it was a slow, creeping invasion similar to how snails can infest a field of cabbage. There are a couple of early poems and just writings on the Lombard invasion, and these all were French and Italian poems.

In these literary depictions, the snails are, like I said, depicted as a sort of slow, creeping invasion, but also depicted as cowards who will hide back in their shells at any sign of a threat. But because snails aren't exactly what you would consider a threat themselves, it became a sort of satire to think of running away or a fear of snails as basically being a form of... It's basically being ridiculous.

Like, who would be scared of a snail? And John of Salisbury actually wrote quite literally, "The fear of snails is ridiculous," in one of his writings.

**Aside:** Hoo boy, I needed to know who John of Salisbury was and why they named a steak after him. So, John of Salisbury was English, lived in the 1100s, and was a philosopher and an author, and a bishop. He didn't get a ton of praise in his actual life, which is sad, but his work was discovered much later, and he's now considered this leading figure of his time. He was a big fan of education; he thought that education was a moral and not simply intellectual pursuit. And he believed in science. He also thought that the medical establishment at the time was more intent on making money than actually healing patients. So yes, he was very, very ahead of his time. Anyway, unshockingly, the king didn't like him, so John Salisbury became an expat. He was off. He was like, he bounced to France. High stakes, yes. But hi, steaks. What's up with the weird fried hamburger patty that we call the Salisbury steak?

Has nothing to do with John. Rather, it was named after some other dude, a Civil War-era doctor, James H. Salisbury, who, according to our friend Werkpedia, was known for his advocacy of a meat-centered, low-vegetable diet to promote health. It was possibly the earliest known fad diet. He called it muscle pulp of beef. Overpriced medical care, carnivore diets. Dang, the more things change, the more they stay the same. That should terrify you.

**Evan:** And at the time, it was actually a fairly political statement because the snails were already being associated with the Lombard people. It was essentially saying to him, these people aren't a threat. It was sort of what the woke mob would do nowadays with saying sort of things. But at the time, they really were seen as a representation of these people, and it only stuck around because the Lombards, like I said, they went into things like usury and moneylending, so they were seen as slimy. They also, because they couldn't own land and they were nomadic, so they had their house on their back in the same way a snail has its shell.

**Alie:** Oh, wow.

**Evan:** And they also would kind of do this slow and steady invasion where there would be a couple of them coming into a city, and then there would be some more coming into a city. This is how the xenophobia was perceived in the Middle Ages, this is how they viewed it. This was essentially an invasion of these outsiders coming in, taking their money, and making a nuisance of themselves.

Now, I'd like to reiterate that this is not 100% proven, but we do know that it was called the Lombard snail in literary text. And in the text that I mentioned, such as the Gorleston Psalter, it is explicitly stated that the Lombards are like snails.

**Alie:** How did the Lombards react to this? Were they looking at a lot of manuscripts too?

**Evan:** Not well. *[laughs]* The thing is that we don't have a lot of perspectives from Lombards in this time period simply because they were so ostracized, and anything that they might have written or published, anything along those lines would have been repressed.

They weren't very popular people, as I've mentioned, and we'll get into Jews as well because there was also some stigma with them, with Jewish expulsion and usury that they were involved in. But the Lombards essentially, as far as we can tell, were either very aware of this happening simply because they were so ostracized in general, and so they would basically get called slurs on the street or be chased out of places, which did happen. But whether or not they were able to politically maneuver themselves in terms of writing or illustration, we're just not sure because we don't have any extant records. I can imagine they weren't pleased, but we're not entirely sure.

**Alie:** And then, did those snail motifs start to be used in anti-Semitic statements, or did it evolve into that, and how long did that take before it was used to promote more xenophobia?

**Evan:** Okay, that's a really interesting one because essentially, the snail has always sort of represented relatively negative things. The overall interpretation of a snail is "Yuck," which I feel really bad for the snails about because they're just trying their best. So, when I've talked about the usury and this sort of thing, the Lombards were only really seen as a sort of threat in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries. By the time the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries had come around, which is when I said the height in art was, the threat or that people perceived specifically as xenophobic interpretation of it, was now on the Jews.

**Aside:** So, after a hundred years or so, the focus turned away from the Lombards and toward Jewish populations because the cultural enemy can be a moving target, but there's always a target.

**Evan:** And because the Jewish people at that time in Europe had pretty much the same rights as the Lombards did, practiced the same things, they were also seen as dark because they turned away from the light, AKA Jesus. They began to be ridiculed a lot in art and texts. So, when I say this high period was around 1270 to 1320, it really was because that was also the time when anti-Jewish sentiments and antisemitic sentiments were becoming hugely predominant in these countries. There were a number of Jewish expulsions, famously the English one in 1290, where they essentially evicted every Jewish person from England.

It was a horrible time, and it's something that is not only represented by snails and famously by other things, including birds. In fact, in the Middle Ages, owls were not seen as a symbol of wisdom; they were seen as creatures of the night, the dark, therefore turning away from the light, like the Jews turned away from Jesus. And the whole stereotype of the hooked nose comes from owls' beaks that were used in medieval artwork, in the same way that the stereotype of bankers or greedy or money-grubbing comes from the fact that many Jews had to turn to usury or moneylending as their only form of income.

**Alie:** So, were these in some ways like political cartoons from a radical right kind of perspective? Were these like the Fox News of political cartoons?

**Evan:** Very good analogy. And yes, frankly. This was a lot of them. However, you do also have the left-wing perspective of that, in that there are people like John of Salisbury who wrote that the fear of snails is ridiculous. So, these are also just people. But in essence, most of it was very much a statement, a xenophobic statement, like a Fox News news report, on how immigrants were ruining the country.

This comes up quite a bit as well in terms of what's called the Lombard debacle, which is a whole, like, esoteric socio-political situation that happened around this time period that then translated into the Jewish debacle, but it was very much a thing of "These people are coming and they're here to get us and take our money and our jobs and our lives," and not life as in murder, but as in take their way of life. What happened from this is people started to get upset with the upper classes that they were not preventing this.

**Alie:** Oh, wow.

**Evan:** So, most of the artwork, instead of being fiercely anti-Lombard or antisemitic, which it still is, the message wasn't meant for them because they were also highly unlikely to be the ones to read it. The message was meant for the nobility, the merchants, all of those sorts of people, who would be the ones that could afford these manuscripts, who could have them commissioned, who could see them in libraries. So, the whole thing about the knight fighting a snail is that the knights are losing.

**Alie:** And the knights are the aristocracy?

**Evan:** Exactly.

**Alie:** Ahhh.

**Evan:** So, that whole idea of chivalry and nobility and all this idea that these people are greater, but they're losing against a snail.

**Aside:** I treated myself to a visual feast of knights in full armor hoisting blades towards snails that would be as big as a kitchen table. Sometimes, the drawings were crude, like something a very sad person might sketch on a hotel bar napkin. Others showed this beautiful depth in the fold of the mollusk's sort of undulating foot and the rounded whorls of the shell. Others have eye stalks as long as a human arm reaching around shields toward soldiers, while another popular motif involves a naked man fallen to his knees begging a snail for his life. Did the snails ever get time off, or were they always on the battlefield?

**Alie:** What other snail motifs do you see? What else are the snails doing in these manuscripts?

**Evan:** Some of them are just hanging out, which is the most ideal form of any illustration in medieval manuscripts. If I was in a medieval manuscript, I'd love to be just, like, a little frog on a strawberry. A lot of them are just hanging out.

**Alie:** Just chilling.

**Evan:** Yeah, exactly, just chilling. Me and my homies. So, like I said earlier, some of them were used just as decoration in terms of nature scenes, borders, decorative borders, things like that. I've written a paper on the snail and bird motif where a lot of birds of different types, usually what we call waders, are eating snails.

**Alie:** Oh!

**Evan:** And this could be seen... So, the snails are actually losing in this one, unfortunate for the snails. But this one probably had a much more literal interpretation because a lot of these monks and people who are writing these manuscripts, they only were able to survive because of agriculture and even monasteries, they grew their own food. So, one of the biggest things that they would deal with would be pests, including snails. So, it's still very much a negative connotation. Snails were never really seen as a good animal; they were cowardly, they hid away, and they were slimy. They're frankly just gross to a lot of people. I think a lot of people still share that sentiment, which is unfortunate. You should go outside and pet a snail, they're really cute. You can have snails as pets now as well, which is lovely.

**Aside:** Again, we have a Malacology episode about snails. But unless you're in East Africa, don't adopt a giant African land snail, which are casually called GALS, but can uncasually grow up to eight inches in length. And if released, they become like the *Jurassic Park* of invasive snail species. But from an allegorical medieval art perspective.

**Evan:** But yeah, sort of snails were a slow and steady invasion across all interpretations. As I'm sure you know, academia is pretty cutthroat, and one of my favorite things to do is disprove long-dead authors on their theories. [*Alie laughs*] They'll never know that I'm out here doing it, but it brings me satisfaction. So, one of the interpretations of snails that unfortunately persists is that snails in medieval art represented the resurrection, which is decidedly positive thing as opposed to all these negative connotations we've been going through.

**Aside:** This would be the resurrection of Jesus Christ as snail core.

**Evan:** And this was championed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by a man called the Comte de Bastard.

**Aside:** Ah yes, the Comte de Bastard, top-notch branding.

**Evan:** Incredible name, terrible academic writing. His only proof are two examples of snails drawn on the same page as a crucifixion scene.

**Alie:** ... That's it?

**Evan:** That's it.

**Alie:** Two pages?

**Evan:** Two pages.

**Alie:** Same book, different books?

**Evan:** Different books, thank god, otherwise, it would have been even more embarrassing.

**Alie:** *[laughs]* Does it hold any water? No.

**Evan:** Not really. I mean, a lot of people, hobbyists, generalists, and even some other medievalists, still kind of accept that as a reasonable interpretation, but it doesn't frankly make much sense to me. I've looked into it quite a bit; an entire chapter of my thesis is just disproving this man's claims. It's my favorite chapter, frankly. The entire chapter is "No." *[Alie laughs]*

It doesn't hold any water. There's no real interpretation of a snail representing the resurrection. I could understand butterflies with coming out of the chrysalis, or that stage from larvae to adults. That does represent resurrection, but snails have never really had that sort of stage in life, so it doesn't fit with the other ones. And because all of the literature about snails is so negative, it wouldn't make sense for them to just randomly throw in this one positive thing.

**Alie:** Yeah. Any idea what it was supposed to symbolize?

**Evan:** *[sighs]* I really... I really don't know. I would assume that, quite frankly, it's just decoration. And then Lillian MC Randall, who is the preeminent, unfortunately she passed away a while ago, but she was the preeminent expert on gothic marginalia. Her seminal article, "The Snail in Gothic Marginal Warfare," in 1969, basically called them all idiots. And frankly, I agree with her, and I wish she was still alive because I would love to shake her hand for that.

**Alie:** *[laughs]* Well, oh my god, I do have questions from listeners. Can I fire them off?

**Evan:** Yeah, of course. Let's go.

**Aside:** And this week, we're splitting it between two causes. Evan requested some of it go to a Palestinian refugee fund because they say "That is xenophobia in the same way that the antisemitism or anti-Lombard statement would have been at the time." So, we'll be donating to the World Central Kitchen, which operates in a war zone and "remains committed to serving Palestinian families, providing meals wherever and whenever possible," they say. In a blog post from last week, the World Central Kitchen writes, "Last week our team was able to cook at a field kitchen producing more than 52,000 meals." So, a donation will go to World Central Kitchen.

Evan also wanted to keep with the theme of deportations and immigration, and says that since we're talking about Jewish expulsion, they don't think that you should be ousting immigrants. So, we'll also donate to the American Civil Liberties Union, or ACLU, which helps fund strategic litigation, advocacy, and organizing needed to take on ICE and Border Patrol abuses and violations, and help pave a path to citizenship for thousands, as well as uphold all of our civil liberties. So, thank you to Evan for a heads-up on that. Now, a word from sponsors.

[Ad break]

All right, you have questions about medieval snail art, let's unpack.

**Alie:** Okay, great. Mish the Fish, Bridget Schraders, and Mouse Paxton want to know, Mish asked: Do people get tattoos of medieval snails? Bridget wants to know: Which medieval snails would make the best tattoo?

**Evan:** Ooh, okay. These are good questions, and considering that I am covered in tattoos, I would like to just present myself as an expert on this topic. People do get tattoos of medieval snails. There's actually this tattoo artist here based in London who I am desperately trying to set up an appointment with who does medieval woodcut tattoos.

**Aside:** Art of Gold. We will link his work on the webpage for this episode in case you need a tattoo to long for.

**Evan:** And I just... I *need* all of them. But people do get tattoos of medieval snails. And sometimes, frankly, in the same vein that I've seen, I've heard other people on this podcast talk about it, is sometimes I'm like, "Oh, you shouldn't have done that because it is an antisemitic statement." [Alie groans] But of course, people don't know, and it just looks like a funny little thing to them.

**Alie:** Do you think that the art transcends the meaning if it's not done with that intention, if people have no idea the history of it?

**Evan:** I'm very much a supporter of you cannot separate the art from the artist. But for most of these things, we don't actually know who the individual artist was. Enough time has passed, and I'm not saying it was an appropriate way of interpreting these animals or these people; it was not an okay theme. But I do think that it has sort of become a thing. And there are enough decorative and just weird medieval snails that don't necessarily mean anything, as far as we can tell, that are just there purely because they look cool.

So, I'd say do it. I mean, someone who knows a lot about them will sometimes internally cringe, but frankly, it's been long enough, and you don't have the same sort of association, and no one — other than perhaps me and now you and the listeners — will even know that there was originally a xenophobic connotation to these.

**Alie:** What about dietary? A lot of people, Emilie, Kristen, Brenda Graham, Lizzy, Sonjabird, Honeybee, Doxx, and Earl of Greymalkin, Doxx asked: So many cultures of the world enjoy snails. From French escargot to Nigerian peppered snails, it's all delicious. Did people eat these medieval snails, or were they just for decoration? But yeah, Lizzy wants to know: Are people eating snails back then? At what point did, especially in [with French accent] *Fronce*, did people go from fearing and despising snails to eating them up?

**Evan:** First, you have to call it [mimics French accent] *Fronce*, obviously.

**Alie:** *Fronce*. [laughs]

**Evan:** *Fronce*. In *Fronce*, where actually, this theme it was most predominant in *Fronce*, England, and Italy, so it could almost be seen as a way of getting one up on the Lombards if you eat them.

**Alie:** Ohhhh!

**Evan:** So, snails have been enjoyed— We have records of them being enjoyed in Greco-Roman times. We also know that they were farmed fairly early on. It really depends on the type of snail, but yes, they were eaten in the same way that birds were eaten. So, it doesn't necessarily have that distinct connection because we know that, for example, chickens would have been eaten, but chickens are also a form of cowardice, so that people wouldn't have been eating a chicken thinking, "Ha! Take that," the same way they wouldn't have been eating a snail going, "Ha! Take that, Lombards. Got

you back.” It was just a food type. I did actually look into this because I was curious if it did have any sort of bearing, and honestly, it doesn't. People will eat things that taste good, and snails with butter and garlic tasted good, so they ate them.

**Alie:** It also seems like if they are pests in your cabbage field...

**Evan:** It's free food.

**Alie:** Why not just... yeah. I think I talked about this in the snail episode, but my mom...

**Evan:** I love that episode, as you can tell.

**Alie:** I also love that one. But yeah, my mom's grandmother would send her to the graveyard with a burlap sack to go pick snails, and then she'd have to ride the subway back with this oozing burlap sack, and then they'd feed them cornmeal, and then they'd eat them.

**Evan:** Yeah, I mean, I could imagine the same thing was going down in medieval Europe. If you've got them anyways in your field and you have to get them out of the field, might as well cook them.

**Alie:** Yeah.

Oh my gosh. Okay. [*chuckles*] I really loved this question. When I say “the cool S,” do you know what I mean?

**Evan:** I do know what you mean because we all learned to draw that in school; it's ingrained in us. Yeah, I'm completely aware.

**Alie:** Chloe, Katie, and Alena Grilla want to know: Do you think the snail versus knight doodle back then was a similar trend to how we all drew the little S on school assignments? Is this like how we all drew that S in our notebooks in elementary school? Alena wants to know. Yeah, cool S's in the margins. What do you think of them?

**Evan:** Yes. So, first of all, I would like to ask these people if they would like to be my co-authors on my upcoming paper, [*Alie laughs*] because that is the best take that I have ever heard. The simple answer is, yeah. We have a lot of these marginalia are just essentially doodles that were added in by the monks. So, a lot of them, or actually the majority of marginalia, are, by definition, marginal means that it's on the margins. It doesn't have to do with the text.

**Aside:** Okay, so just a quick recap of definitions. An ‘illuminated’ manuscript means it has pictures and drawings and embellishment. A Book of Hours is like a fancy prayer book that some people owned. And the bottom-of-the-page illustrations were more serious and planned out, while the marginalia were sometimes funny, less formal drawings on the sides of the pages. So, marginalia was on the side, figuratively and literally.

**Evan:** So yeah, they were just doodles. A lot of them did have socioeconomical or political statements to them, like we've been going into. These snails did have a statement, but they weren't necessarily connected to the texts. So yeah, in a way, it was sort of like the cool S; it was just a lot more xenophobic.

**Alie:** [*hushed*] Wow.

It's Just Sarah wanted to know: Is it possible they just liked drawing snails? Susan Singley asked: Did medieval copyists just really like drawing snails and their tiny, coiled shells? Anya Marsalek Leveille, Mouse Paxton, first-time question-asker, Christi Farrar also wanted to know, Christi and their co-worker Anna wanted to know if it's possible that snails represented some sexual innuendo, or was it mundane with the spiral? But do you think snails were fun to draw at any point, or was it really more about the symbolism?

**Evan:** I think it depends on what the drawing is. I mentioned a bit, like, decorative borders. I think, in that case, yeah, they're fun to draw. I mean, it's a spiral, they're pretty easy, frankly, as opposed to animals with four legs. You don't really have to worry about that with a snail. Spirals look cool, shells look cool; they're really fun. I know people collect shells. It's just a thing that's fun to draw.

If there is a very particular scene playing out, I would say that, yes, that is a lot more symbolic. However, another thing that I didn't really get into, but does happen, is some of these medieval artists might not have known the symbolism and were simply copying earlier works. And they were like, "Oh, that scene looks sick. I'm going to draw it." [Alie laughs] So, ones that date from about 1270 to 1320, what I say is the height of this snail symbolism, especially in artwork, they would have been aware. It would have been drawing something that they would know. But if they were just drawing on a border and they just drew a snail, that's just because they wanted to add a snail.

In terms of the sexual connotation, that's a really interesting one because that one is something that came up, and it does come up a little bit in my research. That's actually somewhat of an earlier and a later interpretation. It's hard to say that medieval snails, even though I've said a lot about their symbolism and their xenophobia that was related to them, in general with medieval art, it's hard to pin down one exact thing for all of them. It is possible that in different places and different times, there were different interpretations that were put on them. Frankly, I can say that they were a symbol of the Lombards and the Jewish people because we have texts to support that. That doesn't mean that that was their entire thing. They had, like I said, they were also pests, but they were also things in nature.

**Alie:** Some people wanted to know about the process. Earl of Greymalkin, Dig, Erin White, Hadley, Lauren Allegra wanted to know, in Dig's words: Tyrion purple? Technically red? Whoudst ye olden snails have bee drawn using the colors from thyne owned shelles?? We'll unpack that in an aside.

**Aside:** Hadley also asked: Were these snails a hot topic because of their use for making a rich, purple dye? And yes, Dig wanted to know about this Tyrion purple, which is also called royal purple, imperial purple, or imperial dye. It is laboriously extracted from this sea snail, and it was so precious and expensive a dye that only royals were permitted to wear it. So, when Dig asked: Moreover, whoudst ye olden snails have been drawn using the colors from thyne owned shelles? I think they meant: Would you draw the snail from whence its very pigment came?

So, according to a 2009 blog post by the Metropolitan Museum of Art titled, "Pen and Parchment: Drawing in the Middle Ages," the artists had to make their own inks and pigments and usually concocted something with a plant binder, like sap, or they used animal-based glue and they colored it with clay or smashed up plant roots or oak galls, sometimes crushed bugs or mineral powder, like lapis lazuli, which I thought was [phonetic] laz-oo-li until I had to re-record this aside. Now, was this meditative to make these inks? Maybe. Was it tedious? Apparently. Which is why apprentices were usually assigned to it, like some sullen interns at a copy machine. Just in case that answers your question, Earl.

**Alie:** Earl asked: What was used for ink and pigments? Erin wants to know: Were there any artistic conventions that they had to follow? Like, the process of drawing? Can you give us any info on, like, were they using a quill and ink or paint or...? [*How did you make this?*]

**Evan:** In terms of art processes in the Middle Ages, because a lot of it was sort of symbolic or otherwise interpretive, you can see that it all sort of looks the same. So, the human faces on animals or this weirdness, as we would call it today, this sort of perceived weirdness.

**Aside:** The Mr. Burns of it all; the thin-limbed, cartoonish, awkward-bodied, uncanny valley, weird vibes.

**Evan:** It really is something that just was a trend, that just continued and continued and continued in the same way that Cubism was a trend or that the Renaissance, going back to classical motifs, was a trend. It was just what was popular at that time.

In terms of the process, most of these illustrations would have been made, like I said, by monks or nuns. Sometimes, there are people outside of that, but the majority would have been done in a monastery or a convent, and they would have been taught in a specific way. The same way that cartoonists for things like the *New York Times* have to have their comics be somewhat similar or understandable so that people can perceive what they're saying.

In terms of equipment, paint at that time, and ink, and all of that sort of thing... So, quills, yes, although quite frequently they would use a brush or a stylus instead, just for that fine control. Quills are great, but they can scratch, which I'm sure everyone knows that whole thing of the scratching of the quill. [*scratching of quill on surface*] So, if you're writing on very expensive vellum, cow skin, just to add that in, this was all done on skin, so it was a hugely expensive undertaking, and you did not want to mess that up. So, things that could cause issues, like quills that frequently scratched or could cause ink blots, you wanted to avoid that at all costs. So, the most common was usually a brush.

We do have some charcoal or pencil underdrawings of these things, so we know that they did sketch out a lot of these as well. But at that time, depending on how much training they had, if this was your whole life, you could get to the point where you could draw something without needing to sketch it out. So, people like Mr Doodle, you know how they can just immediately do that one drawing. Or the S; I don't need to sketch out the cool S anymore. I know exactly how to do it; I do the six lines and then the triangles, and then we do the slants. So yeah, very similar. It would have just been something they were able to do. Colors might have varied, but the overall base would have been the same.

**Aside:** Just a side note, I didn't know who Mr Doodle was, so I found out for us. He is a British man, real name Sam Cox, and his work described as "graffiti spaghetti" looks kind of like Keith Haring's with these thick lines and simple characters, a lot of movement, and not an inch spared without a drawing. He used to sell his work for a dollar, and now it auctions into the seven figures. Doodlin' for cash. Speaking of money...

**Evan:** Paints themselves would have been things like I've already mentioned gold leaf, which became quite popular, especially in certain things, especially as soon as people got richer, wanted more ornamentation, gold leaf was, like, a thing because it's shiny and glittery and it makes you look rich. So, a lot of Books of Hours of people of nobility or wealthy merchants would have gold leaf pretty much all over them.

**Aside:** And gold leaf, one should know, is *extremely* thin. I knew that, but I didn't know how thin. Apparently, it's 0.0001 millimeters or 0.1 micrometer. And a five-millimeter gold nugget can make five square feet of foil. Now, by contrast to that 0.1 micrometer, the average human hair is about 100 micrometers thick. So, gold leaf, one one-thousandth the thickness of a human hair. So yeah, you could use gold in your manuscripts, but if you didn't have the time or resources for gold beating, as it's called, there were other options.

**Evan:** Other pigments were made from a variety of things. So yes, shells, bugs. There was a red bug that I can't quite remember the name of, and they would essentially just smush it up into making red ink or red dye for paints.

**Alie:** Yeah, [ph.] ko-chi... I want to say.

**Evan:** Cocochi...?

**Alie:** We have them all over our cacti.

**Evan:** Yeah, no, those ones. So, they were incredibly popular for making dyes and paints out of. In fact, I think a lot of red clothes were dyed with them as well.

**Alie:** Yeah, it's still in lipstick.

**Evan:** It is, yeah!

**Aside:** So, this is called carmine dye or crimson lake, and it's made from cochineal insects. And I can tell you when you try to hose or scrape them off an infected cactus, it looks like a blood bath. It's full Tarantino cactus time.

But yeah, in lipsticks, you may see this bug-derived carmine dye listed as “natural red 4.” So, squishing bugs, it's not cruelty-free; neither was medieval manuscript paper, which was essentially leather. ‘Parchment’ refers to a writing surface that was made from skin, usually a very thin layer of sheepskin. But vellum is a type of parchment made only from calf skin. Sometimes, the calves were so young, they were stillborn. So, as an artist, if you did an oopsie, you weren't heading to Michael's for a restock.

**Alie:** Did they have erasers, do you think? Like, if you screwed up, could you go back? Was there Wite-Out?

**Evan:** [*laughs*] Was there Wite-Out. Sometimes I wish there was because I've read some really weird things in manuscripts, and sometimes I wish they had erased some stuff. Because it's vellum, you can't erase it in the same way; it sort of absorbs into the vellum. It sort of binds with the material in the same way that when you draw on your skin, it kind of bleeds a little bit. What you could do is you could lightly scrape the top layer off. However, it is a bit obvious. Some of the books that we have at work on vellum or things like that, but you can tell when something has been covered over because there's a little bit of a dip where they've essentially just removed a part of the layer of the vellum. Other times, they would just paint over it.

**Alie:** What about species? Jordan, Alex Ertman, Michele Smith, Earl, and Neal wanted to know, in Jordan's words: Do the snails in medieval art seem to be based on actual species of snails? Like, near where the manuscripts were created?

**Evan:** Okay. So, yes and no. The common understanding of a snail is a slug with a shell on it, in terms of how they look. And because most of these come from Europe, a lot of the snails do look pretty similar overall. In fact, in some of these illustrations, there were more fantastical colors used because a blue shell would look a lot cooler than just a brown and white shell. Snails that we know of from other places, like the African giant snail, probably weren't used simply because there wasn't as much knowledge on them.

And because medieval art and these snails weren't necessarily intended to represent specific types, unless it was a bestiary, it probably didn't matter that much. In bestiaries — which, of course, go over different types of animals — there would be specifics actually laid out. And you can see there's a couple from the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries where you can actually see it talks about different shell patterns and different coloration of the slime and skin that they leave behind, which is quite interesting. So, they were aware that there were different types and species, but it didn't necessarily play into these because they all look the same; they've got a shell and a slimy body. [*Hot.*]

**Alie:** What about when they went out of fashion? Mickakov, Vera Axelrod, Anastasia Press, Guido Ferri, Susan Singley, Olivewing, Lizzy Martinez wanted to know, *[laughs softly]* Lizzy said: Wow, okay, okay. This is so weird and cool. And my husband is also like, wow. So, my question: When or why do they stop including snails and artwork of the style? Did one year they retire snails, and that was it?

I just love that there's a lot of questions that are just like, "Wait, what? What?" We had a lot of questions that were just like, "Wait, why? What the fuck? What the fuck? My question is why? My question is also what the fuck? What? *[Evan laughs]* My main question is, what? One very important question: Huh? Huh?" So many questions that just say, "What?" But decline, let's talk about the decline real quick.

**Evan:** I mean, my immediate reaction before I started researching this was also "What the fuck?" and "Why?" which is how I got into it. I've had this for a lot of things. There are other things that I've always just been like, okay, I'm going to hyper-fixate on this now and find out everything about this. The snails was just one that happened to stick. *[Alie laughs]* Not sure why my family and friends all keep giving me snail-themed things. I'm wearing a snail shirt to today's session. They're not even my favorite animal, but everyone just thinks that once you write on snails, they will give you snail-related stuff for the rest of your life. *[Alie laughs]* I cannot escape.

The decline, I really wish the decline would come in terms of gifts that my family give me, but the decline, like I said, so the height of it was around 1270 to 1320. Unfortunately, the decline did come because of things like Jewish expulsions.

**Aside:** So, yes, this is not amusing at all. We discussed in the Genocidology episode, there have long been populations targeted, nearly eliminated, and wholly destroyed by forces that wanted their land or in no way welcomed them into their territory. And in that Genocidology episode with Dr. Dirk Moses, we also discuss the generational trauma and the cyclical nature of these expulsions, which have persisted through the ages, despite our horrified hindsight.

**Evan:** It's sort of very depressive to go into these negative things about what could otherwise be perceived as a very funny piece of art. So, it's not good humor, but it was a form of humor, a way of dealing out of it and poking fun at the nobility.

So, after the Jewish expulsion, particularly in England in 1290 and some concurrent ones that happened in places like France and Italy or separate city states, Jews, then when they were gone, it began to die down. So, we actually see between 1310 and 1320, when it starts to really decline, a lot of the snail motifs become a lot more fanciful, become a lot more decorative. So, they're slowly like, "Okay, we realize that this is still a thing, but it doesn't really matter anymore." Sort of how when memes become so distorted, you don't even know what the meme says anymore. And that decline essentially just kept going. There was a slight resurgence in the 1500s, which had to do with, again, antisemitic ideals, unfortunately.

**Alie:** Did anyone ever reclaim it as sort of an image of persecution, like, from populations that have triumphed over something? Or no? Is that just a big no? I was hoping that there could be some reclamation of snails in that way.

**Evan:** I think we should reclaim snails. 2025: reclaim snails. There wasn't really a reclaim by certain groups of people. I mean, this is also, like I say, this is over 500 years ago; this is almost a thousand years ago. In the case of the Lombard invasion, it's over a thousand years ago. It was only about a 50-year period each time, it wasn't that long. So, there wasn't really a necessity to reclaim them in the way that people do now. So, for example, reclaiming the word 'queer' has become a thing. It wasn't as widespread a notion at that time, that need to reclaim things. Honestly, a lot of people

forgot about it, and a lot of people who didn't have access to these things wouldn't have even known about it. It wasn't something that normal people would have known. So, reclaiming it wasn't really a thing.

Snails did come to mean different things in other cultures. An early Greco-Roman, I think it was particularly Greek Hesiod wrote about it, which was when you see snails climbing the stalks of your plants, it means it's harvest time; that was something that actually comes back in the early modern period. The whole idea of snails coming out after it rains because it's nice and wet, sort of like, good signs; snails in the spring, it means that the warmer weather is coming. But these are more things that have to do with nature than any symbolism.

**Aww:** Speaking of nature, last listener question, Susan Singley, Addie Cappello, wanted to know, Susan, a botanical question: How much weed did these monks grow and consume? Addie asked: Was someone high as a kite when drawing these pictures? Any idea how much drugs were involved?

**Evan:** There is a predominant theory...

**Alie:** Okay. *[laughs]* Lay it on me.

**Evan:** *[laughs]* There is a predominant theory, and it's one that is somewhat scoffed at but has still got enough tangential evidence that it *[hesitant tone]* could be true, at least in some cases, that musty old books produce a fungus that can cause hallucinations.

**Alie:** *[laughs]* Like an ergot?

**Evan:** Oh yeah, 100%. And a lot more cynical people have said, "Oh, that's why the Bible was written, they were hallucinating this figure of Jesus." So, it actually is something that is quite frequently scoffed at, but it is a theory. And yeah, they had recreational drugs back then; things like weed, in the same way that we use it now, didn't exist.

**Aside:** Okay, yeah. So, while humans have been using weed for the last 10,000 years, it hadn't made its way to Europe by the 1300s. And yeah, we do need a cannabis episode. I'm on it. I have an expert, but they are very, very busy. So, believe me, when it's done, we're going to be doing it right. But still, the monks could have been latered. They could have been faded.

**Evan:** But there was definitely herbal tonics that they would have consumed. Well, I can say that a lot of these things are weird and, honestly, you know what? If you want to believe that they were done by drug-induced monks, I will not dissuade you of that notion because that is hilarious, and I wish it were true.

**Alie:** Monks were making Bénédictines, they were making chartreuses. They were drinking alcohol, right?

**Evan:** Yeah. Living in Europe because I grew up in the Netherlands, some of our most famous beer from the Netherlands and Belgium famously come from monasteries because that's how they made money. So, they 100% were drinking and smoking. They were doing a lot of stuff. I 100% support that idea.

**Alie:** *[laughs]* I can't believe that I got to talk to you about this. This has been a joy. This is not an episode I ever thought that I would have the privilege of doing. But last questions I always ask: The hardest thing about your job as someone who studies medieval snails and manuscripts?

**Evan:** Oh... Augh, the hardest thing: finding a job. *[Alie laughs]* I go with the employment rate of medieval snail specialists is exceedingly low. *[Alie laughs]* I've had to gravitate towards, as you can tell, old books in general, paleography. I'm hoping to find funding for my PhD soon, which would be really

great. Unfortunately, they cost a lot. If there's anyone who wants to fund xenophobia in medieval manuscripts, please let me know.

**Alie:** Holler!

**Evan:** Yeah, exactly. Give me a shout, I'm on Instagram. Just let me know.

But I think the main thing other than the job sector is finding the sources. Because a lot of them are either gone or gibberish or we don't know. Finding the sources is hard because even though places like the British Library or where I was at Trinity College Dublin, they're digitizing a lot of their manuscripts, not all of them are digitized. So, when I was writing my thesis, I had to physically go to some of these libraries and just check the manuscripts to see if there were snails anywhere. Because they weren't digitized, so I couldn't look up if they were in the book because no one knew. So, I'd just sit there and I'd leaf through this 100-page manuscript. I'd just be like, "All right, that was worthless." And most of the time, unfortunately, they didn't have snails, and I would walk away really depressed. There was about three solid days where I was looking through manuscripts that didn't have any snails in them, and I kind of wanted to give up at that point.

**Alie:** [laughs] They don't let you bring coffee in those rooms, do they?

**Evan:** I don't drink coffee. I think if I did, I might have been able to survive a lot better. [Alie laughs] I was just trying to get super hopped up on sugar every hour or so, just so that I had the energy to keep going.

**Alie:** What about your favorite? Is there a moment of, like, leafing through books or discovering a motif that you were looking for? Like, what's the most joyous part of this?

**Evan:** I think the best part is finding ones that look terrible. Because I do, I said I have a bit of a pet peeve against the medieval memes and how people are like, "Oh, they were terrible at drawing." But sometimes there are ones that just don't look good. There's one that I have highlighted on my Instagram, which I have named them Neil and Patrick. I'm not entirely sure why, but I decided those were their names, and it's just an incredibly fat frog looking at an incredibly fat snail.

**Aside:** If you go to Evan's Instagram, you'll see their highlighted Reel titled simply "Him."

**Alie:** And other than the shell, there is no difference in their bodies whatsoever. [Alie laughs] It is glorious, and I desperately need artwork of it. And that is my favorite part because even though those are sometimes annoying when I'm actually doing research and trying to figure stuff out, it's a bit of joy in my life. If there's one thing when you're researching some slightly depressing parts of this, like we went over, it's always fun to find something that can make you laugh.

**Alie:** If someone did want to explore a medieval art tattoo, what motifs are good ones that might have meaning? [laughs]

**Evan:** [laughs] Don't get an owl. I'm going to say it right now: Do not get a medieval owl because that one is the *worst*. That's the one that is blatantly antisemitic in almost all interpretations. If there's just an owl that looks like just a biological owl, fine, leave it. But anything that looks even remotely human as a bird, just don't touch it; safer not to.

Pretty much all the ones of people are going to be fine. Unless you can blatantly tell that there's something wrong with them, they're going to be fine. Get one of the nuns harvesting a tree full of dicks. That one, I want myself. I think that would make an incredible ode to my own mother, who would honestly think it's funny. My father would die of a heart attack, [Alie laughs] but my mom would be thrilled. That would be my recommendation. Some of these funky animals, like the oyster

with the frowny face, highly recommend that. Anything from bestiaries is going to be fine because they're equally as funny, but they're not meant in a symbolic way, so that's always a safe bet.

**Alie:** You've got to find someone who can take your cat and make it into a medieval cat.

**Evan:** Yes.

**Alie:** A pet portrait in the medieval style is pretty baller.

**Evan:** If anyone wants to do a tortoiseshell cat with one of those half faces, if anyone wants to do that in a medieval style, I will pay you hundreds for that. [*Alie laughs*] I would paint it on my walls. You don't know how much I need that.

**Alie:** So, again, you're on Instagram. You're findable.

**Evan:** I am. I'm on Twitter, I'm on Instagram, I am on Tumblr because I'm embarrassingly of that age. I'm on TikTok, which is where I think a lot of people will know me from, talking about art history. Yeah.

**Alie:** Bluesky?

**Evan:** I'm not on Bluesky yet, but I need to be because my dad is, and he keeps telling me to be. I'm going to do that this weekend, you have spurred me into making one. So, I will, assume, be under the username @EvanPridmore or something along those lines. But as of this weekend, you'll be able to find me on Bluesky as well. [*laughs*]

**Alie:** Okay, good.

**Aside:** Great news. They did start one. We now follow each other on Bluesky, we'll link their account in the show notes. Tell them hello.

**Alie:** Thank you so much for doing this. I'm so glad we got to talk to you.

**Evan:** Just thank you for having me on. Thank you for this invite. I've been listening since, like, 2018.

**Alie:** No way! Really?

**Evan:** So, this was actually... Yeah! I'm an OG.

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So, ask informative people ignorant questions because it would be weird if everyone was an expert in medieval snails. Thank you so much, Evan, for their time and recording this and the passion it takes to specialize in it. You have changed our lives with this knowledge. For links to the ACLU and Evan's socials, you can see the show notes, which also has a link to the episode page on our website, which has more links to studies and photos and info.

We are @Ologies on Bluesky and Instagram. I'm @AlieWard on both and @Alie.Ologies on TikTok. We also have kid-safe, classroom-friendly, shortened versions of *Ologies* in their own feed wherever you get podcasts. Just look for *Smologies*, which are also linked in the show notes, as is our merch site, OlogiesMerch.com. Thank you, Erin Talbert, for admitting the *Ologies* Podcast Facebook group. Thank you, Aveline Malek, for making our professional transcripts. Kelly R. Dwyer does the website. Noel Dilworth is our golden scheduling producer. Susan Hale is our guiding light of a managing director. Jake Chaffee makes us look good as an editor. And lead editor, binding the episode together, is Mercedes Maitland of Maitland Audio. Nick Thorburn made the theme music.

And if you stick around to the very end, I share a secret. This week's is embarrassing, like they often are. But okay, I got a red plaid wool kilt at a thrift store when I was in high school. I wore it all the time, even through college. I remembered I still had it, and I unpacked it from a box in the garage.

And I was like, “Hoo, I missed this thing!” I started wearing it again, and I realized it literally had not been cleaned in decades, I think even when I got it, which is disgusting, no matter how gothy you were at the time. And yeah, in college, we did have a guy named Bug sleeping on our couch. But I soaked this kilt last night in a big bowl of OxiClean and water. Friends... That water looked like chocolate milk. It looked like the chocolate river in Willy Wonka. It was horrifying, but I loved it. So, we're okay; I soaked it a couple more times, I washed it on delicate in the machine, it's air drying now. I'm never getting rid of it. We've been through too much. I love it too much. But how disgusting? It must feel so good right now. I know it does. All right, berbye!

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[The Ordeal of Bread and Cheese: A Trial Like No Other](#)

[Nun Harvesting Phalluses from a Phallus Tree and a Monk and Nun Embracing](#)

[More sexy fruit : The penis tree and the medieval nun](#)

[Phallus tree: a 13th century mural](#)

[Medieval snail tattoos](#)

[London medieval woodcut tattoo artist, Yan Gold](#)

Reddit: [r/MedievalArtMemes](#)

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[“The relation of Alimentation and Disease” by James Salisbury](#)

[Book of Hours](#)

[The Book of Hours: A Medieval Bestseller](#)

[Medieval woodcut and snail tattoos](#) by Yan Gold aka [\\_art.of.gold](#)

[What the Hell Was That ‘S’ Thing Everyone Drew in School?](#)

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