



Charles Darwin *In Memoriam*

Evolutionary looks at the why of biological and cultural phenomena.

Pulmonate snails as marginalia in medieval and Renaissance manuscripts: a review of hypotheses

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ABSTRACT: Small drawings of armored knights fighting pulmonate snails have been found in several medieval and Renaissance manuscripts; and there are 26 hypothetical interpretations about what they mean. Manuscripts also depict fights between cartoonish humans, rabbits, monkeys, and several other real and imaginary animals, so they probably lack the deep meanings that many have imagined. More likely, these cartoons are simply comic relief based on the obvious similarity between humans and invertebrates that protect themselves with body armor.

KEYWORDS: armored knights, malacofauna, small drawings, battles, illustrators, marginal cartoons.

A number of medieval and Renaissance French, English, and Flemish manuscripts have, in their margins, small drawings of armored knights fighting pulmonate snails (Figure 1), but the only formally published study of this “manuscript malacofauna” was published over half a century ago by L. Randall, who suggested that they somehow represented the Germanic Lombards who invaded Italy 500 years earlier (Randal, 1962). However, the motif appears in so many variations, periods and regions, that many other interpretations of their meaning have been informally proposed in the Internet.



FIGURE 1. Knight and snail in *The Smithfield Decretals*, ca. 1340. British Library, Royal 10 E IV, fol. 107r (this and all other figures in this article are available as public domain images from <https://discardingimages.tumblr.com>).

Here I summarize all published interpretations from 1850 to 2019 (see References for the complete list of sources that I read to collect them) and suggest that a simpler, far more obvious explanation should also be considered.

This is the list of 26 interpretations or hypotheses about what these cartoons may represent:

1. A warning: the most dangerous foe is one who moves so slowly that you fail to prepare for it.
2. A word play for words now lost and thus impossible to solve.
3. An amulet to protect against real snails damaging the manuscript
4. An euphemism for masturbation.
5. Clash between the Christians (the warrior) and the Pagans (the snail).
6. Creeping death that slowly advances on everyone.
7. Critique of social climbers, who slowly advance up the social ladder.
8. Escape from boredom.
9. Fear of diseases transmitted by snails.
10. Fear of snails that damaged manuscripts.

11. Fear of the damage that snails produced in food in those days of frequent famine.
12. Female sexuality (the snail) and the knight battling his urges.
13. High clergy, hiding in their “shells” from problems of the church.
14. Humility (humble snails as antagonists to the pride of knights).
15. Illustration of a now lost fable or folk tale.
16. Insulation of the ruling class from the reality of the common people.
17. Invasion of Italian states by the Germanic Lombards.
18. “Just fun” (precise meaning unexplained).
19. Perpetual battle between the British and the French (snail eaters).
20. Resurrection, because in two manuscripts they were close to miniatures of the raising of Lazarus (and Psalm 58: “let them be like a snail which melts away as it goes”).
21. Ridicule, because snails move so slowly that knights would easily defeat them.
22. Satire of knights, so coward that they need armor.
23. Sloth, a deadly sin.
24. Slowness of time.
25. Snails as a pagan symbol.
26. Virtuous humility, as opposed to knightly pride.

Most —if not all of them— may be so wrong that they would mystify the illuminators who painted these snails and knights. Only one is supported by additional documentation: according to Ziolkowski (1993) there is a poem (12th century?) about a Lombard “readying himself to battle a snail”, and that poem might have inspired the illuminators. This is a viable option about the *origin* of the illustration, but not about its *meaning*.

Apparently, the simplest explanation has not been published: for illustrators living in that period, who were familiar with knights and their armors, it must have been obvious that the snail was an animal equivalent of the armored soldier. There is a short distance from there to a cartoon about them fighting, and like a meme today, the idea could have been copied or even reinvented several times.

Snails fighting knights should be understood in their context: many manuscripts also depict fights between cartoonish humans, rabbits, monkeys, and several other real and imaginary animals (Figure 2; and see Camille, 1992 for many more). There is even a late 13th century illustration of a man, armed with sword and shield, fighting a butterfly (Nazari, 2014: *Smithfield Decretals*, British Library, Royal MS 10 E IV, f. 91v).

Comic relief in the margins of texts did not end with the Renaissance: for example, in the twentieth century, *Mad Magazine*'s marginal cartoons by Sergio Aragonés were highly popular (Evanier, 2007).



FIGURE 2. Cartoon of real and imaginary animals jousting in the *Breviary of Renaud de Bar, Metz 1302-1303*. British Library, Yates Thompson 8, fol. 294r. Notice that one of the rabbits is riding a snail with a human head.

There are, additionally, at least two other snail motifs in manuscripts, the snail shell as a house (Figure 3) and a 16th century illustration of a snail besides another armored animal, the turtle (Figure 4). Unless some contemporary explanation about the meaning of snails and nights is found in the future, we can only guess about their meanings, but this is good because, as the above list shows, the human mind is fecund when inventing explanations that enrich our culture.



FIGURE 3 Snail shells as houses in *Le secret de l'histoire naturelle*, France, ca. 1480-1485 BnF, Français 22971, fol. 60v (main illustration, not marginal).



FIGURE 4. Two armored animals, the snail and the turtle. *Grandes Heures* of Anne of Brittany, BnF Latin 9474, fol. 232v.

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