

When the goose tried to bury the fox a newly discovered aspect of the goose-versus-fox motif

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Soon after the publication in 1999 of my comprehensive survey of visual Reynardian material in England, my attention was drawn to a remarkable wooden roof boss that has some truly intriguing features. At the time I was told about it (late January, 2000), this boss was in the possession of Mr David Bishop who was then living near Sudbury in the county of Suffolk. Providing me with a photograph of it, he asked if I could help him interpret the meaning of the scene depicted on it. He wrote: 'the figures appear to be those of a fox which has its muzzle inside a duck's beak, and of a duck which has a large spade through its neck.' At first sight this does indeed appear to be the case, especially if one views the boss so that both creatures are upright, the bird to the left, the animal to the right. However, since the boss has been detached from the ceiling of which it once formed part, it is possible that it was meant to be viewed so that the fox was seen to be lying on its back and the bird looking down on it.

The relative shortness of the bird's neck does indeed suggest that it is a duck, but to those of us who are familiar with medieval Reynardian motifs, it is more likely to be a relatively clumsy representation of a goose and to be another aspect of the common fox-versus-duck motif. Unfortunately this boss cannot be dated with any accuracy, but it is the opinion of the few medievalists who have seen it that it is either late fifteenth or early sixteenth century and most probably c.1520. Part of the problem is our ignorance of its origin, but the antiquarian who sold it to Mr Bishop in 1976 says that 'it came from a house in Suffolk'. When asked in 2000 to be more precise, he said he could not remember and had no record. Such a house would surely have been a manor house, a big house belonging to landed gentry – a house which would probably have had a great hall and a chapel in either of which the boss would have been placed. A tiny detail in this Suffolk carving suggests that it belonged to an aristocratic family. On the surface of the spade are two chevrons that go from side to side of its blade, the one above the other. Wondering if these might indicate to which family these

heraldic signs might have belonged, Mr Bishop approached Sir Conrad Swan who was Garter King of Arms. Sir Conrad was of the opinion that these two chevrons were deliberately placed there as part of a heraldic design. However, they often formed only part of a coat of arms and were linked with other features (such as animals, plants, patterns) which, together, identified the person to whom the arms were granted. Furthermore, these chevrons would normally have been coloured because their colour was also important in identifying the arms. There is no trace of colour on this boss but, as Sir Conrad pointed out, if it was mounted in the house of the owner of the coat of arms, colouring the chevrons would have been unnecessary. That the boss was indeed mounted is proved by the fact that it is fixed on to a circular piece of wood by two nails, and in this wood are four square holes each of which has a side which slopes inwards at an angle of forty-five degrees from an outer edge to the bottom of the hole. Clearly they were part of joints made to dovetail with others in the ceiling in order to hold the boss in place. The small hole which appears between the front and rear legs of the fox may also have been made to help fix it.

Before analysing the scene depicted here, it may be noted that the wood used is oak, and that the boss is approximately eighteen centimetres in diameter. Both the goose and the fox are, from head to webbed feet or brush, of nearly the same dimensions and equal to the diameter.

How to view the boss? I am inclined to think that it should be viewed with the fox lying on its back so that its outstretched paws point upwards, the forepaws resting on the goose's breast, the rear ones on the bird's outstretched right wing. (In passing one notes that the fox is given its characteristic pointed muzzle and thick, bushy brush, but not the sharply pointed ears which also characterise it in so many drawings and sculptures). However, if the fox is lying on its back, how to explain the fact that the goose's webbed feet, clearly visible below its outstretched right wing, are almost planted on the fox's brush and thereby suggesting that it is standing upright? The answer, I think, is that we have a 'telescoped' scene which attempts to show, perhaps clumsily, an upright goose standing by or leaning over a supine fox.

Mr Bishop kindly sent the boss to me so that I could examine it very carefully. I paid special attention to the way the spade had been carved. Though it does look as if it passes through the goose's neck when viewed from above

(below if one were looking at it from the floor when it was fixed to a ceiling!), it seems to me that the sculptor meant to depict a goose carrying it over its shoulder (if a goose can be said to have a shoulder!). All the Reynardian scenes I know in which an animal is equipped with a spade or spade-like tool are connected with stories of the fox's funeral. I therefore guess that this was part of a series of bosses depicting the fox's funeral. *This* goose is the gravedigger, and the fox is lying in or near to his grave. A grave-digging, burial scene associated with the fox's funeral may be seen in my Amsterdam University Press book, p.144, ill. 126. This depicts an episode in the story told by Branch XVII of the *Roman de Renart*. But there the gravedigger is a bear who seems to use a kind of scythe rather than a spade. However, there are many medieval visual accounts of the fox being attacked, hanged and carried off to his grave by geese as shown in Chapter Four of my Amsterdam University Press book (see especially illustrations 136 and 138-143).

But then, how does one explain the depiction of a fox with its muzzle inside a goose's open bill? This may be due to a fusing of Bestiary fox imagery with that of the common folklore kind which depicts the fox attacking geese then having the tables turned on him. Bestiary fox imagery is treated in Chapter Six of my Amsterdam book. Especially relevant are illustrations 160-163. Here the fox pretends to be dead, lying on his back and sticking his tongue out. Carrion birds settle on his 'dead' body and begin to peck at it. In Bestiary illustrations it is sometimes shown that one bird pecks at the fox's outstretched tongue, another at his penis. In this boss the bird seems to go for the fox's muzzle (compare especially illustrations 160 and 161), but no outstretched tongue is visible. One recalls that it seems to stand on the fox's brush. In my Nottingham Mediaeval Studies article *The Death and Resurrection of Reynard*...one may see (Plate IV) a parallel in the cockerel which stands on the 'dead' fox's brush. In the same article I reproduce (Plate VIb) two scenes of a cat's funeral carved on a capital in Tarragona cathedral where, in the first scene, one of the rats burying the cat carries a spade over its shoulder and in the second the cat (having feigned death) pounces upon this very rat. In this Suffolk boss the fox is definitely alive for its eyes are wide open. The depiction of the goose's *outstretched* wings may be intended to indicate that it is alarmed, that it has just perceived that the fox has been feigning death and, with his outstretched paws, has begun to launch his attack.



Roof boss, English, 1520 (?), depicting a fox and a goose

As I have written above, I think this boss may well have been one of a series of four or five bosses of which this is the penultimate one. After it there may have been a boss depicting the 'resurrected' fox grabbing the unwary goose; before it there may have been a carving of a fox-funeral procession like the one partially shown in mosaic in Ravenna (Plate Vb of *The Death and Resurrection of Reynard...*), or the one in the lower margin of a folio of the Smithfield Decretals (illustration 136 of my Amsterdam University Press book); and before that the geese hanging the fox; and before that, at the beginning, the fox attacking the geese.

Bibliography

All references in this essay are made to one or other of the following two publications of mine:

1. *Reynard, Renart, Reinaert and Other Foxes in Medieval England. The Iconographic Evidence*. Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 1999, 353 pp., 269 illustrations.
2. 'The Death and Resurrection of Reynard the Fox in Mediaeval Literature and Art' in *Nottingham Mediaeval Studies*, X (1966), 70-93.