

Bestiary Bugs

[The Aberdeen Bestiary](#) is an illustrated volume that describes various beasts. It was written and illuminated in England around 1200. Observations about each animal are accompanied by a moral lesson. It includes two references to insects – the ants and the bees.

Ants



ILLUSTRATION

Ants march in line carrying grain in their mouth. They collect the grain in two stores to reduce the chance of rain damage.

Bees



ILLUSTRATION

The bees, all identical in appearance, zoom into their hives in three orderly rows. The design emphasises their collective labours and orderliness. The skeps or beehives of coiled straw are accurate except for their fanciful colour.



Bees were thought to be born from rotten meat, like maggots – and to have a King Bee not an egg-laying Queen Bee (as we now know); their honey was a cure for sore throats and wounds. Bees both then and now are considered as hard-working and skilful in building their hexagonal honeycombs and making sweet and healthy honey. Although small and weak, bees were seen as 'strong in wisdom and love of excellence' and so loyal to their ruler that they would die for him.

Left: *Bees returning to their hives*, Aberdeen Bestiary, Aberdeen University Library, MS 24, fol. 23v, c. 1200.
Right: *Bees defending their hives*, Bestiary, The Hague, MMW 10 B 25, fol. 37v, Western France, c. 1450,



“De apibus, of bees.”



This image shows the industrious bees from the Aberdeen Bestiary. The bees here are seen going into hives known as skeps (from the Anglo Saxon, *skeppa*, for basket). These are made from woven straw or other plant fibre and require great skill on behalf of the beekeeper to harvest the honey and not destroy the bees.

The text here follows the teachings of Aristotle who famously wrote that the bees had a king and not a queen. The *Bestiary* devotes several pages to the bee, most of which is very fanciful. It does state that “Honey is not only a source of pleasure but of health; it soothes the throat and heals wounds,” proven true today.

The image opposite is from the *Hortus Sanitatus* or the ‘Garden of Health’ which is a fifteenth century herbal showing the gathering of honey from a comb with details of honey’s role in medicine below. The whole book is in Latin but is annotated with English words to guide the reader. Here the word ‘honye’ can be seen beside the illustration.



Ca. ccxii.

Quicenna: pma fen. quarti ca nonis cap. de hora cibatiois febricitantium q dicit q mel canne est zucca. Hoc similiter iuenies si leges ca. zucca. Nam inuenies q est zucca q si ppter sui pinguedine non indurat. Hoc si militet vult. Sal. viij. sim. far. dicēs zucca

Transcripts from The Aberdeen Bestiary, Of Ants and Of Bees

Ants

The ant has three characteristics. The first is that they march in line, each one carrying a grain of corn in its mouth. Those who have none, do not say to the others: 'Give us some of your grain', but follow the tracks of those who first went out, to the place where they find the corn and carry it off to their nest. Let this description serve to signify sensible men, who, like the ants, act in unity, as a result of which they will be rewarded in the future.

The ant's second characteristic is that when it stores grain in its nest, it divides its supply in two lest by chance it should be soaked in the winter rains, the seed germinate, and the ant die of hunger.

The ant's third characteristic is that, at harvest time, it walks through the crop and finds out by nibbling the ears whether it is barley or wheat. If the crop is barley, the ant goes to another ear and sniffs it, and if it smells wheat, it climbs to the top of the ear and carries off the grain to its nest ... For heresy is like barley, and should be cast away, because it shatters and destroys men's souls...

the Scriptures say: 'Go to the ant, thou sluggard, consider her ways and be wise' (Proverbs, 6:6). For the ant has no knowledge of cultivation; it has no-one to force it do anything; nor does it act under the direction of a master, telling it how to lay in a store of food. Yet it gathers in its harvest from *your* labours. And although *you* often go hungry, *it* lacks for nothing. It has no locked storehouses, no impenetrable security, no piles of supplies which cannot be touched ... They carry their booty in a black column across the fields, the paths swarming with the convoy as it passes; the grains that cannot be held in their narrow mouths in narrow parts are consigned to their shoulders. The owner of the harvest looks on and blushes with shame at the thought of denying such frugal gains won by such conscientious industry.

The ant has also learned to watch out for periods of fine weather. For if it sees that its supplies of corn are becoming wet, soaked by the rain, it carefully tests the air for signs of a mild spell, then it opens up its stores, and carries its supplies on its shoulders from its vaults underground out into the open, so that the corn can dry in the unbroken sunshine. Finally, you will never on any of those days see rain spouted from the clouds, unless the ant has first returned its supplies of corn to its stores.

Bees

Bees, apes, are so called either because they hold on to things with their feet, or because they are born without feet (the Latin word for 'foot' is pes). For afterwards they acquire both feet and wings. Expert in the task of making honey ... they construct their dwelling-places with indescribable skill, and store away honey from a variety of flowers. They fill their fortress, made from a network of wax, with countless offspring. Bees have an army and kings; they fight battles. They flee from smoke; they are irritated by noise.

Many are found to have been born from the corpses of oxen. To produce them, you beat the flesh of dead calves, so that worms come forth from the putrefying blood; these later become bees. Properly speaking, however, only the creatures that come from oxen are called bees; those that come from horses, are hornets; those from mules, drones; wasps, from asses.

The Greeks call the larger bees which are produced on the outer parts of the honeycomb 'castros'; some think they should be called 'kings' because they are leaders in the fortress.

Bees, alone among all the kinds of living things, raise their offspring communally, live in a single dwelling, are enclosed within a single homeland, and share their toil, their food, their tasks, the produce of their labour and their flight.

They choose their own king, they appoint themselves his people; but although they are subject to the king, they are nevertheless free. For they have the right of selecting him and of offering him their loyalty, because they love him as one whom they have chosen and honour him with such a responsibility. Moreover, the king is not chosen by lot, because in such cases the outcome is a matter of chance not judgement. And often, by the unpredictable chance of fate, the least suitable candidate is chosen over better ones. Among bees, the king has outstanding natural characteristics, standing forth by virtue of the size and appearance of his body. And, what is essential in a king - a merciful nature. For even if he has a sting, he does not use it for revenge, for there are laws of nature, unwritten but embedded in custom, that those who are endowed with the greatest power should be the more lenient in administering punishment. The bees who do not comply with the laws of the king, repent and punish themselves and die by their own sting.

Their devotion is such that no bees dare leave their living areas in search of food, unless the king has gone first and has claimed his place at the head of the flight. Their flight takes them over a scented landscape, where there are gardens of flowers, where a stream flows through meadows, where there are pleasant places on its banks. There young people play lively games, there men exercise in the fields, there you find release from care.

The bees' pleasant labours amid the flowers and sweet grasses provide the foundations of their fort. For what else is a honey-comb in the bee-hive but a kind of fortress? ...What four-cornered fort, however, could possibly have the skilled workmanship and elegance that there is in the honey-combs, in which tiny, round compartments are connected one to another for support? What master of construction taught the bees to construct six-sided

compartments, each side of the same, unvarying length; to hang between the walls of each living area fine beds of wax; to compress the honey-dew; and to fill their storehouses, woven from flowers, with a kind of nectar?

You can see how the bees all compete with each other in carrying out their duties: some keeping watch over those who are seeking food; some keeping a careful guard on the fort, that is, the hive; some keeping a look-out for rain, their eye on the massing clouds; some making wax from the flowers; some collecting in their mouth the dew poured from the flowers.

You can see too, however, that no bees lie in wait for other creatures, to take advantage of their toil; and none take a life by force. If only they themselves did not need to fear the ambushes of thieves! Nevertheless, they have their own weapon, the sting, and pour poison into the honey-dew if they are provoked; and when they inflict a wound in the heat of revenge, they lay down their lives in the act.

In recesses deep in its fortress, the hive, the bee pours out the dewy moisture, and gradually with the passage of time it is compressed into honey, although it was liquid to begin with; and by contact with the wax and the scent of flowers, it begins to glow with sweetness of honey. The Scripture might justifiably extol the bee as a good workman, as it does the ant, saying: 'Go to the bee and see how it works and imitate its way of working' (see Proverbs, 6:6). For the bee is engaged in a highly respected branch of industry; kings and commoners alike consume its product for the sake of their health; it is much sought-after and loved by all.

Hear what the prophet would say. It is a fact that God instructs you to follow the example of that little bee and imitate its way of working. See how industrious it is, how much it is loved; everyone longs for and seeks out its fruit of its labour; this is not kept for certain kinds of people only, but grows sweet in the mouths of kings and commoners, to the enjoyment of all without distinction.

Honey is not only a source of pleasure but of health; it soothes the throat and heals wounds; and it acts as a remedy for internal ulcers. Thus, although the bee may be weak in terms of physical strength, it is strong in terms of its vigorous good sense and love of virtue.

<https://www.abdn.ac.uk/bestiary/ms24/f63r>