Porcine Paradox

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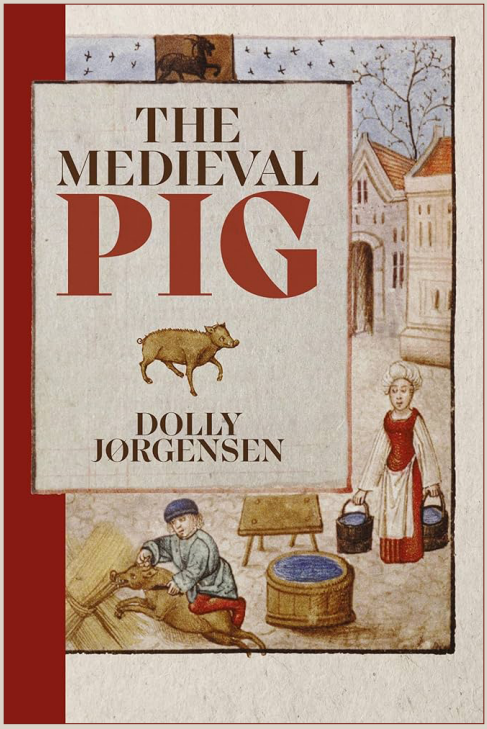

Review of:
Dolly Jørgensen, *The Medieval Pig*. Nature and Environment in the Middle Ages 9. Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2024. xii + 117 pp. 26 b/w illus. £19.99 (pb).

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Dolly Jørgensen is no stranger to medieval pigs. Over the last two decades she has written several pieces about them in relation to agriculture and forestry as well as sanitation and husbandry practices. In *The Medieval Pig*, Jørgensen uses this knowledge to present a short and accessible monograph that explores the lives of pigs in the Middle Ages. Placing pigs front and centre, Jørgensen draws on historical records and material culture, including toponymy, archeological data, art, and literature in order to consider closely how pigs and humans shaped one another's lives in western Europe between AD 500 and 1500. She argues that, in the Middle Ages, pigs were materially ubiquitous and ideologically paradoxical: emblems of saints but sinful in nature, a source of life-sustaining flesh but capable of murderous behaviour; an animal consumed by Christians and yet so closely associated with Jews.

In the first chapter Jørgensen makes clear that while the wild boar does make an appearance as a point of comparison, the domestic pig is the star of the show. The chapter also sets the tone for the book to come—clear and straightforward, with an approach that "involves looking at both [pigs] and ourselves" (1). Jørgensen stresses that the reader should not think of the role of the pig in the Middle Ages as unchanging despite the tremendous breadth of the geographic and temporal range covered. Human entanglement with pigs is the primary focus, and this chapter makes clear a fundamental fact upon which the rest of the book is built: pigs were ubiquitous, and most people had regular interactions with them. Additionally, Jørgensen introduces a recurring argument of the book, that pigs "embodie[d] paradoxes" (1). The pig turned garbage into food, creating precious calories to carry people through the winter, but was simultaneously a source of danger due to that same propensity for eating everything. Pigs were fattened up for human consumption, but that also meant that they could cause significant destruction. Pigs were both creatures created by God and suspected of doing the bidding of the Devil. Essentially, then, "most positive attributes of pigs could also be flipped over as a negative in a different situation" (10).

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The Medieval Pig explores the pig across four areas: in the countryside, in the city, on the plate, and in the mind. Chapter Two concerns the first of these, as Jørgensen focuses on how woodlands were shaped, literally and figuratively, by the presence of pigs. In England, for instance, the Domesday book calculated woodland size according to the needs of hypothetical foraging pigs. Forests were measured as "wood for *x* swine" (17), although Jørgensen reminds us that "just because a woodland *could* feed 90 pigs in a good year does not mean that there were 90 pigs feeding in it every year" (17). And those pigs that did frequent the forests were closely monitored. Professional swineherds made their living by keeping pigs out of harm's way and from causing harm themselves, driving herds from pasture to pasture and from feeding sites to market—although of course, all of this care was in service of delivering the hogs to the ultimate harm—slaughter. She notes that archaeologists have discovered physical remnants of the droveways taken by pigs and their human minders. The overall image conjured throughout the chapter is of pigs well-integrated into the lifeways and landscapes of the medieval countryside.

The third chapter turns to the place that swineherds and their pigs would often end up: the urbanizing cities of medieval Europe. Jørgensen explores the logistical problems inherent in keeping medium-sized omnivores in small spaces filled with many people. People built inconveniently-located sties and stalls, butchered pigs in unsanitary places, piled up their body parts in the corners of towns, and let their pigs wander freely, all in contravention of laws prohibiting or limiting such behaviour. The urban pig was everywhere—even if one could not actively see a pig at any particular moment, there was a good chance that one might smell them. And they were notorious, Jørgensen states, for their destructive behaviour, as they would root up bodies from cemeteries, maim fish and fowl, and even kill children. Jørgensen contends that there was "a standing concern in medieval urban areas about pigs grazing in the wrong areas" (35), but that it was the place of pigs on the plate that justified their continued presence in urban environments.

That role of pig as food animal is explored further in the following chapter, where Jørgensen presents patterns of pork consumption in the form of both fresh and preserved meat. Using archaeological data and medieval recipe collections to trace patterns of slaughter, storage, and consumption, Jørgensen notes that "pork was not the major part of the medieval diet, but most people ate it" (44). They consumed the blood of pigs, too, and boiled their bones, which may explain why "so few pig bones are typically found" (53) in places like trash heaps during archaeological excavations. Pigs, Jørgensen concludes, were thus extremely versatile as objects of consumption — but they were not eaten by Jews or Muslims, who are briefly mentioned in acknowledgement of the fact that pork was not a universal food.

Chapter Five ventures into the symbolic place of the pig in medieval minds. It is here, in this final — and indeed the longest — chapter of the book, that Jørgensen develops her claim that the pig is a paradoxical figure, both a blessing that offered meat for the winter and a representation of sin and debauchery. Pigs, she argues, were physically useful but symbolically difficult. Biblical stories involving pigs, like that of the Gadarene swine, formed the basis of Christian thought about these animals and their relation to humans, solidifying the role of pig as resource: "[T]hey become the home of demons and they are herded for potential meat" (59). These tales shaped much of the medieval narrative about the nature of pigs, and while wild boars signified virtues such as nobility and valour, the figure of the poor domestic pig instead embodied lust and gluttony (despite her positive connection to Saint Anthony). In folklore, pigs appeared as demonic or at least as servants of the devil, the "portent of bad things to come". In stories like the Middle Irish saga *Cath Maige Mucrime*, "magic pigs" "ascend from Hell" (60) and wreak havoc on fields for seven years. Later in the chapter, Jørgensen connects the negative traits assigned to pigs to racialized prejudice beliefs about the nature of Jewish people. Apocryphal tales, some of Jewish origin, explained why Jews did not eat pork but were also used to demonize them. Muslims once again make a brief appearance, including in a charming anecdote from a Muslim scholar regarding the

origin of pigs on Noah's ark. At the end of the chapter Jørgensen demonstrates how the pigs of the mind could impact the pigs of the flesh with a section on the role of pigs as legal persons who were punished for the murders of humans. Jørgensen argues that these criminal pigs were thought to have rationality and thus could take responsibility for the crimes they committed.

However, the vast scale of the book, while impressive for such a slim volume, does cause complications from time to time. Although Jørgensen warns the reader to beware the trap of considering the medieval pig as a single, static figure, the geographical and temporal scale of the book at times has a flattening effect. When *The Medieval Pig* presents information spanning multiple centuries and locations, such as the data about the age of pig slaughter, it risks conflating the disparate experiences of pigs in Albania, Norway, and England, thus establishing the very model of "the medieval pig" that it otherwise warns against. Additionally, despite the book's breadth, Jørgensen devotes little space to human–pig relations inherent in places with higher mixed-faith populations. Future research could build upon this and provide more points of view on the pig to deepen our understanding of how people of varying faiths perceived pigs. Another avenue for future research is the topic of unpaid labour involving pigs, such as the role of children in managing the pigs of individual households. Jørgensen spends time examining the roles of swineherds who were paid to mind pigs for large estates or cities, but spends relatively little time on those looking after smaller groups of pigs, including children whose families owned one or two pigs. The many examples of children killed or maimed by pigs mentioned in the book, especially at the end of chapter Five, make clear that children and pigs encountered one another with some regularity — the contexts in which that occurred would add an interesting dimension.

My primary quibble with Jørgensen's argument, though, arises from her claim that pigs were better controlled than previous scholars have assumed. Without citations to the previous arguments Jørgensen is refuting, it is difficult to know if her account contradicts itself, as the book is full of examples of uncontrolled pig behaviour.

She rightfully points out that potential swineherd sizes should not be mistaken for actual herd sizes, but just as herd sizes did not necessarily reach legal capacity, so too should we assume that adherence to pig vagrancy laws was imperfect. Between 1370 and 1374 the English town of Lynn litigated a whopping 675 cases of pig vagrancy (37)! One of the examples Jørgensen provides involves the pigs of Nottingham, who destroyed the walls of a garden while under the care of a swineherd. While a court found that the swineherd was not liable for the damages caused by the pigs, the destruction of the wall suggests that the pigs' activity was not entirely controlled by the human ostensibly in charge (35). While control over pigs was desired and sought, it was not always achieved. Throughout the book, Jørgensen brings up many problems caused by uncontrolled pigs such as the eating of corpses, destruction of property, and physical harm to humans and other animals. The deaths of numerous children (and the consumption of one communion wafer) do not paint a picture of pigs under perpetual human control. She notes that issues caused by free-roaming pigs—like those of the Order of Saint Anthony—and nuisance pigs were "systemic" (39). All of this demonstrates that while medieval pigs were certainly not entirely unmanaged, they were running amok with enough regularity to cause headaches and heartache for medieval communities.

Overall, though, *The Medieval Pig* convincingly argues for the central and paradoxical role of the pig in the Middle Ages. Jørgensen's primary argument—that the paradoxical pig had a central place in the world of the medieval West—is not a particularly flashy or groundbreaking one, but she does a remarkable job synthesizing the various aspects of the medieval pig into a coherent narrative. As such, the book will be an indispensable resource for students, chock full of fascinating facts and careful research, augmented by the extensive and thorough bibliography, while opening up a host of avenues for future research regarding the relationships between not just pigs and humans, but also pigs and their environments. Although we cannot know what medieval pigs thought about themselves, humans, or their place in the world, what Jørgensen's account shows above all is that they took up a lot of space. They were

central to the lives of the people around them because of their roles as consumers of garbage, cheap sources of food, domesticates who needed minding, and a host of other functions. It is also clear that pigs were good to think with — theologians like St. Augustine and philosophers like Albertus Magnus considered the pig as not just an animal, but as a symbol. Medieval thinkers linked porcine behaviours — wallowing in the mud, eating (ostensibly) indiscriminately — to human conceptions of morality, with one writer defining the pig as "a foul and gluttonous beast which runs in the muck as Aristotle says" (66). *The Medieval Pig* is a vivid and accessible introduction to the world of medieval pigs. I find myself wishing that similar books existed for other medieval creatures — perhaps future scholarship can follow this well-made blueprint.